

The Modiya Project

An Experiment in “Research-centered Pedagogy”

By Tal Halpern with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett & Jeffrey Shandler

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As libraries, museums, and archives offer more and more research materials online, scholars are being forced to respond. Rather than seeing themselves as merely using the Web to access materials that only a year ago were hard to obtain, some scholars here at NYU are reconsidering their entire relationship with digital content. In doing so, they are finding a need not only to use the Web, but also to take part in the development of web applications.

The Modiya project, a collaboration of the ITS Faculty Technology Center (FTC), the ITS Academic Computer Services (ACS) Humanities Computing Group, ITS eServices, the NYU Digital Library Team, and NYU’s Center for Religion and Media (funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts), is a case in point. The project is an experiment in customizing freely available digital library software for a community of scholars. The project began with a series of meetings among some 40 scholars—including graduate students from NYU and other universities—interested in mapping ways to study and teach a wide range of topics at the convergence of Jewish Studies, Media, and Religion.

Given the group’s broad and open-ended mandate, they dedicated their initial meetings to reconnaissance, that is, to a collaborative investigation of emer-

gent cultural phenomena—from the popularization of the Kabbalah and Internet Jewish matchmaking services to the Talmud on CD-ROM, Hasidic reggae, and *Schindler’s List* tours. As a result of these meetings, the group’s spokespersons, Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Department of Performance Studies, Tisch School of the Arts) and Professor Jeffrey Shandler (Department of Jewish Studies, Rutgers University), invited the ITS FTC and Humanities Computing Group to join the project.¹

In the months that followed, a series of conversations about using the Web to promote new research, teaching, and scholarly exchange led to the development of the *Modiya* (“messenger,” in Hebrew) online curriculum pilot, available at <http://modiya.nyu.edu>. This pilot transforms DSpace—a freely available software package developed by MIT Libraries and Hewlett-Packard (HP) for storing, indexing, preserving, and redistributing digital content—into a tool for collaborative authoring and teaching.²

The screenshot shows the Modiya website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'MODIYA' and links for 'about us | contact | help'. Below this is a breadcrumb trail: 'Home / Media / Religion / herald * announcer * messenger * correspondent * informant'. The main content area displays the item title 'Item: Avant-Garde Jewish Wedding' and a table of DC Field metadata. To the right of the table is a small image thumbnail labeled 'BrideText1_Small.jpg' with a size of '23kb JPEG'. On the left side of the page, there is a sidebar menu with categories like 'Units', 'General Resources', and 'search'.

DC Field	Value	Language
contributor.author	Shiff, Melissa	-
date.accessioned	2004-12-05T03:52:09Z	-
date.available	2004-12-05T03:52:09Z	-
date.issued	2004	-
identifier.uri	http://hdl.handle.net/1964/209	-
description.abstract	Installation artist Melissa Shiff and Louis Kaplan used video projection and other techniques in their wedding ceremony in Toronto in 2003. This avant-garde wedding was also a Huppah in the Sukkah, since the wedding took place during the holiday of Sukkoth.	en
format.extent	61343 bytes	-
format.mimetype	image/jpeg	-
language.iso	en_US	-
publisher	Melissa Shiff	en
subject	wedding	en
subject	artist	en
subject	Toronto	en
subject	video projection	-
title	Avant-Garde Jewish Wedding	en
type	Image	en

Appears in [Media artists and Jewish ritual Collections:](#)

Figure 1. Sample Modiya Metadata

1. Special thanks also to Nicola Monat-Jacobs (ITS eServices) and Joe Lee (ITS student employee).
2. <http://www.dspace.org/>

The screenshot shows the Modiya website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'About us', 'Contact', 'Help', and 'HAREDI JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL'. Below this is a header with the Modiya logo and the tagline 'JEWIS/ MEDIA/ RELIGION'. The main content area is titled 'Unit: Text and Textual Practices' and features a central image of a wedding ceremony. To the left is a vertical navigation menu with categories like 'Units', 'General Resources', and 'Text and Textual Practices'. To the right are sections for 'Unit Topics', 'Unit Resources', 'Browse Items By', and 'Comments'. The central text describes a wedding ceremony in Toronto, 2003, where sacred Hebrew texts were projected onto the bride and groom.

Figure 2. Modiya content is organized into adaptable units and topics.

In doing so, the pilot curriculum advocates a new way of thinking about producing content for the classroom. As the scholars involved with the project describe it, it's a way of working "inductively." Modiya members begin with the content and work up and out to construct the larger theoretical and methodological frameworks for research and instruction.

Sounds great, right? But how does Modiya work? First, scholars are granted membership in the Modiya community, which allows them to contribute digital content (anything from a video clip to a web page to an essay or collection of links). They are then asked to describe this content using a metadata protocol the Modiya community has developed in conversation with ITS and NYU Libraries staff. This metadata, which is particularly concerned with layers of remediation,³ helps guarantee the long-term preservation of the content produced, while also allowing this content to be displayed in a digital environment. Information about plug-ins needed to view a particular file format is included, along with more traditional bibliographic information such as the author of a work or the title of an image as well as

information about each remediation (see figure 1, p. 27).

Of course, even the process of establishing proper metadata has not been without its challenges. Who is the author of a website that combines multiple elements and changes over time? Does a website have a publisher? A publication date? How best to capture the idea that the digital image taken from an auction website for its content is also an artifact in its own right? How will capturing this data benefit not only archivists but also media scholars? As more and more content is submitted to the project, these questions fuel further discussions about how best to document media artifacts and how to make this documentation useful to present Modiya community members as well as future scholars and technologists.

Regardless of the challenges of describing digital content, Modiya ensures that once content is submitted to the project it becomes readily available to the Modiya community at large and can be used by any member to author new content. To do so, community members can create units (for example, on textual practices, religious travel, mediating ritual, film festivals, or Haredi media)

and specific topics within them (see figure 2). Topics, which generally take the form of case studies, can range from a discussion of a website, such as the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's web presence, to mediations of a single work, such as *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*.

These units and topics can then evolve as members of the community contribute new content to the Modiya project. For example, the topic of Anne Frank has now grown to include Broadway musicals and films, including Japanese anime, based on the *Diary*, the Anne Frank House, and artists' projects that explore the sacralization of Anne Frank. Once a topic is developed, it can be featured in a unit. Each unit includes an introduction, a curated section of scholarly resources, suggestions regarding how to teach the unit, possible research projects, and how the material might relate to other topics and units in the Modiya project.

Drawing on the project's content, any member of the Modiya community can create units and topics by using a series of interfaces designed by the FTC and ACS Humanities staff and accessible via the Web. In addition to these interfaces, ACS staff also developed a commenting system for the Modiya project that allows members to comment directly on a given topic or unit (comments can be read by anyone, but only Modiya members and subscribers may post them).

The result is a curated online space of ideas and resources—part archive, part classroom, part exhibition—that invites visitors to make their own connections among various topics and to contribute to them. Modiya project members call their initiative an example of "research-centered pedagogy" and feel that their efforts will not only inform how they teach but also what they teach and, more specifically, how they formulate their object of study.

An open source, collaborative approach not only to software development but also to scholarship and

3. <http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/6.1/reviews/blakesley/glossary.html#remediation>

teaching presents certain challenges. While software developers have long debated the pros and cons of open source or free software, questioning everything from the quality of code produced to the long-term commitment of individuals to any one community, researchers and instructors are just beginning to consider the issues at stake.

Often, when ideas about work processes are adapted from one context into another, new challenges arise, which force all those involved to reconsider their initial goals and objectives. As scholars see an ever greater need to develop their own technologies in support of their studies, what institutional resources will be required to create sustainable solutions? How will decisions get made? And who will be involved in the process? What impact will the process have on expectations surrounding scholarship as well as instruction? Who will guarantee the long-term upkeep of materials?

No doubt, customizing freely available digital library software such as DSpace encourages both scholars and technologists to think broadly about these questions, but no open source software has as yet provided a definitive solution. As evidenced from the experience of the Modiya project's participants, customizing nonproprietary software can, at best, serve as a point of departure for tackling the challenges facing research and teaching in an increasingly digital and networked university.

DISCUSSION

During the course of the Modiya Project, the author conducted a series of conversations with Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Professor Jeffrey Shandler about some of the less tangible aspects of developing the Modiya/DSpace online curriculum. We have provided excerpts from our conversations here in the hope that these reflections will prove of interest to anyone considering the development of an online curriculum.

Q ♦ *The term "open source" has come up numerous times during the course of this project, both when we discussed software solutions and when we searched for ways to characterize the group's desire to cultivate a new approach to scholarship and teaching. While I have a good sense of what the term "open source" means in the context of software development, I was wondering if you could speak to what "open source" means in the context of the Modiya project?*

A ♦ "Open source" means collective creation and openness to all who choose to participate. In the case of the Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion, this approach governs everything we do. It means sharing resources and working collaboratively. We place a premium on process as a mode of collective discovery. The group is diverse and the style is egalitarian, inclusive, and collegial. One of our members commented that our group "is a very nurturing place to think creatively." What better model for teaching and scholarship?

In an increasingly proprietary world, the open source ethos is all the more important. That ethos is relevant not only to technology, but to our entire way of working, which is why we have adopted the term "open source." The immediate benefits include access to unlimited and varied expertise and fostering of creative synergies to produce an accessible collective good. Short term, the open source model is a highly productive way of working. Long term, the open source model allows for the continued collective and incremental development of a project.

As for drawbacks, much depends on the self-organizing nature of the collective endeavor, which in our case starts with a lively face-to-face group that meets regularly, but which will, when Modiya is launched, open out to a wider network. Can we replicate in the online environment the kind of excitement we generate in our face-to-face meetings? As the network widens, issues of focus, quality, and control will arise.

The Modiya/DSpace curriculum experience has made us realize, first, that with the Faculty Technology Center's expert technical assistance, we can not only use open source software as we would a commercial package, but actually help in its development; and second, that the open source model can inspire the way that we work as scholars and teachers. This experience is perfectly suited to our commitment to a research-centered pedagogy within a field of emerging knowledge. We place a premium on developing research and teaching in tandem, and Modiya is designed to support this approach.

Q ♦ *Authorship has come up in many ways during the course of developing the DSpace model. Perhaps you could talk about some of the issues that you have encountered when thinking about producing digital content? How do these issues relate to your experience with teaching and scholarship in other media? How are they changing your experience (and expectations) in other media?*

A ♦ We are trying to strike a balance between our collective identity and individual authorship. First, several of our members were wary about putting so much effort into a digital project, which they consider intangible and ephemeral compared to a print publication. Second, those who are coming up for tenure or looking for academic positions were worried that this kind of project—digital and curricular—would not count towards tenure and that they should focus their energies on peer-reviewed print publications. Third, we felt it was important to acknowledge individual contributions to Modiya and for users to have confidence in the expertise that goes into particular units.

We are therefore asking the group to designate an editor for each unit so as to establish a point person. This will make it easier to coordinate the work as the project expands and more people are involved. It will also let users refer

their queries to one person, who can coordinate responses. We also hope that the editor designation will motivate members, particularly those concerned about tenure or getting hired, since they will be able to claim authorship. We are also stressing that the Modiya project is a strength in the case they make for their teaching.

Regarding digital authorship in relation to our experience in teaching and scholarship, several of us have co-authored publications and worked collaboratively on exhibitions, films, conferences, and other projects. What is different here is the open, incremental nature of Modiya, with the potential for a longer term and much larger collaborative network than anything we have done in the past.

Q ♦ *What types of community or scholarly networks do you see the DSpace module promoting? What types of exchanges do you foresee happening online and off as a result of the Modiya/DSpace curriculum?*

A ♦ We are hoping with Modiya to make an intervention within Jewish Studies, a field whose strengths are in the areas of text, Jewish thought, and history, by showing what Jews, Media, and Religion might offer as a subject for teaching and research and by providing curated resources to support those efforts. We are also hoping to contribute to other fields of study. Working inductively from particular case studies, our theoretical and methodological contributions arise from the cultural specificity of the Jewish phenomena we study, but our way of working is more widely applicable, and we encourage comparative approaches.

Q ♦ *Do you feel the Modiya/DSpace curriculum promotes new approaches to translating different language materials?*

A ♦ We would like to explore this topic. First, we want Modiya to be international and multilingual. Although the interface is currently only in English, we hope to

be able to accommodate submissions in other languages. A particular challenge is managing languages in other alphabets, notably Hebrew and Yiddish, especially when these languages appear on the same pages as English.

Q ♦ *Has developing the Modiya project caused you to think differently about how you get feedback, what feedback you want to encourage, and the relationship between feedback and your teaching and scholarship?*

A ♦ We are still trying to think this through, as is evident from the ongoing process of developing an effective commenting system. We have several goals with respect to feedback:

1. We want users to contribute to the site and help to build it. This process might start with comments and feedback and evolve into a more active role in creating part of the site.
2. Discussion among users, whether about the content or about teaching the content, would enrich the project and help to build networks and community.
3. We are hoping for feedback that would let us improve the site in relation to how it is actually being used by scholars, teachers, and students.
4. We are thinking about ways of managing feedback, comments, and discussion so that we can more easily convert some comments into elements of the site, monitor comments for relevance, and find a way of structuring the commenting area for effective retrieval.

Q ♦ *How has the Modiya/DSpace project allowed you to reconsider your role in preserving digital content? What new questions has it raised for you regarding the preservation of media materials and who should be involved in this process? Also, what are some of the issues concerning access and data loss that have arisen during the course of the project?*

A ♦ The ephemeral factor is a major concern, and not only for the

duration of Modiya. How long will it continue to be developed? What will be its post-development phase? Will it become a record of itself? And, if so, how long can it stay up and continue functioning without constant maintenance? This is the downside of an incremental networked project in a digital environment. There would seem to be a need for two levels of maintenance: active, for as long as the site continues to develop; and routine, for as long as the site continues to be accessed.

These questions are further complicated by the transitory nature of digital material we include on Modiya, the limited access of proprietary material, issues of intellectual property and fair use, and the status of electronic publication of original content. Not only do URLs change, requiring regular updating of the site, but also many online readings are accessible only through libraries that subscribe to particular journals or proprietary databases in which they are included. An issue for us is our role in creating a digital archive of websites we consider to be important cultural artifacts—either capturing them at a particular moment in their development or preserving them, knowing that they won't be there forever in any form. Books go out of print. Where do digital projects go?

Q ♦ *In your own description of the larger objectives of your working group on Jews, Media, and Religion, you indicated an interest in focusing not only on media artifacts, but also on the history of these artifacts' reception and exchange. How has the Modiya/DSpace project allowed you to do this?*

A ♦ To take but one example, which arose in our work on museums, we considered how museums extend beyond their buildings through websites that allow them not only to communicate with their audiences, but also to provide online access to collections and exhibitions. In some cases, a museum may only exist online, such as The Jewish Museum

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