

CIDOC 2014 in Dresden, Germany

Session B/1, Processes in Museum Documentation

Monday, 08.09.2014, 14:00-15:30

Kulturrathaus Dresden, Room 17

Use your head to save your feet. Strategies and guidelines for documentation applied by MusIS – The South-Western German Museum Network.

Dear colleagues!

My name is Jens Lill, since 2006 I'm working for MusIS – The South-Western German Museum Network in Konstanz supporting amongst others the State Museums of Baden-Wuerttemberg in all fields of museum documentation. I want to thank the organizers for the opportunity to present my talk on strategies and guidelines for documentation applied by MusIS. First of all, I want to give a really short introduction in the services we provide for the museums, before changing over to the main topic. (→slide 2)

MusIS functions as an application service provider for both archives and museums and hosts a wide range of services for museum documentation and management. The network serves as regional centre for museum professionals in matters of technical equipment, museum documentation and standards. Technical support comprises for example hosting and maintenance of the client/server system and the application software imdas pro, data migration as well as digital preservation. Documentation service includes for example the training in the application software and corresponding documentation issues, development and maintenance of controlled vocabularies or support for online presentations of digitized data. (→slide 3)

An important goal of the network is to create high quality documentation in a consistent form that can be used for multiple purposes inside and outside the participating museums.

In order to achieve this goal, MusIS established a set of strategies and guidelines for quality control in museum documentation. Some of them are of a general nature and can be applied regardless of the documentation system used.

Others are software specific using certain features of the system. The focus of this talk is on the general aspects of documentation. Before going into detail, I want to explain why we think it is necessary to apply strategies and guidelines in practical documentation work.

From our experience, this process is a demanding and exhausting task. However, it is worth the effort because it saves work and time in the long run as the resulting documentation is more consistent and of higher quality. Usually, errors in data or inconsistency of data is discovered only when data from the local database are either retrieved for internal purposes or delivered to cultural portals such as Europeana or the German Digital Library. The correction work requires a lot of time and effort – a lot more than when done at earlier stages during the data entry or migration. From this perspective, the proverb “use your head to save your feet” seems to be quite accurate to describe the following efforts to improve data quality. (→slide4)

1. Data migration – quality from the start

The struggle for documentation quality starts when data is migrated from one system to the other. At the outset, the current and the future data structures are analyzed, field mappings between the old and the new data are created, and the data is transferred in a way that structures the new data in the most efficient way for future use. This procedure also prevents the loss of information during the transfer process. The next step is the matching of master data and controlled vocabularies of the documentation system. In this way, high data quality is laid as a foundation for the future work with the database.

2. Consulting in documentation

MusIS offers to the participating museums support in all questions regarding practical issues of documentation and their technical implementation. One method is the training of museum staff in the application software and related documentation issues; another is a help desk for all questions related to museum documentation; a further is handouts and leaflets regarding specific aspects of documentation and technical issues.

To keep up with recent developments in the field of documentation, the MusIS staff participates in the different working groups of the special interest group Documentation of the German Museums Association.

3. Application of controlled vocabulary

A central part of the MusIS documentation strategy is to create and maintain a number of controlled vocabularies. MusIS provides thesauri such as for Object Names, Material Names, Epoch Names as well as names for Art movements, or Geographic Names in Germany.

An essential part of the MusIS thesaurus work is to cooperate with other institutions and incorporate existing vocabularies. For example, the terms of the Object Name Thesaurus are matched against the Integrated Authority File of the German National Library. An example for a cooperative thesaurus project in which MusIS takes part is the translation of the Art & Architecture Thesaurus into German language. In order to share the thesauri with other institutions, MusIS participates in the project “Vocabulary in Museum Documentation” (museumsvokabular.de). This initiative collects and shares different kinds of museum vocabulary on a central platform.

4. Rules for entering data from index cards or inventory catalogues

The object documentation system imdas pro offers a lot of flexibility in creating graphical user interfaces. This allows MusIS to design user interfaces fitting the specific needs of

individual institutions. Of course, this high level of adaptability requires detailed regulations and guidelines to guarantee the intended use of the different fields in order to create consistent data. These so called documentation guidelines describe in great detail what kind of information has to be entered in the intended field, as well as entering the data – focusing on features such as correct syntax, accurate orthography, and consistent structures – especially for free text fields. As the task of data entry is usually done by different staff members over a long period of time, it is important to process the information with a high level of consistency to achieve retrievable data of high quality. Therefore MusIS is taking active part in supporting the museums in establishing their own guidelines.

5. Revision of data and documentation

In order to improve the quality of museum documentation, it is necessary to carry out both revisions of data and documentation strategies in regular intervals. After Richard Light, the result can be either an “information check or shock” depending on the outcome. Regardless of the result of individual revision processes, this approach is essential for achieving high quality data and consistent documentation strategies. Especially the earlier mentioned documentation guidelines are an important tool for checking the overall data quality and revise the applied documentation strategies from bottom-up. So the crucial point is, that the revision process is not done in isolation but involves the whole documentation staff. (→slide 5)

So what is the **Conclusion?**

As mentioned in the beginning, establishing strategies and guidelines for documentation in museums is a demanding and exhausting task. But the result of these efforts is high quality data and documentation. In order to achieve this goal, you have to plan in advance and use your head. If you don't use your head, you have to use your feet to run after all the errors and inconsistencies that could have been avoided if you had done it right from the start – and like

every marathon this takes tremendous energy, strength, and endurance which could be used for the better...

Thank you very much! (→slide 6, contact information)