

Keeping it together - Educational heritage from technical academia

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Teaching practices in technical academia involves a lot of stuff. Teachers have devoted masses of time and effort to creating and assembling teaching material such as pictures, books, illustrations, instruments, bespoke equipment, samples and much more. Some of these collections go far back in time.

At the Technical University of Denmark (DTU) the heritage group decides which teaching material to keep for the future in the centralized historical collection of DTU. One solution is to keep a few examples, but this cherry-picking approach works against the meaning behind the subject specific collections. Often the educational value was in the variety and the number of objects. We have often used digital resources to hold on to the totality of teaching collections as well as the context, the stories, the places and the practices connected to the item. This paper will discuss some of the outcomes of this process focusing on the physics collection, the civil engineering image collection and the material science collections.

Working with teaching material, we have encountered many sticky points and faced many difficult choices. We have tried different strategies to ensure that information is accessible to others, who hopefully will use the information in the future.

One very sticky point is that material can have more than one story. For example, an item may have started in research and later was refurbished for teaching. This gives us several interesting threads for each item, which we try to keep together using our content management system. In registration and categorization we have tried different approaches to help future curators and researchers find the threads. The effect these approaches are becoming apparent, as new people are to starting use the central historical collection of DTU.

We also find that the material for teaching at a research institute face steep competition from stories of and objects from scientific discovery or technical innovation. It is difficult to argue for the preservation of teaching collection, which is associated with well-established knowledge. University researchers like to talk about scientific achievements, but have less time for teaching material. However, it is important that universities remember teaching and everyday practices to get a fuller understanding of the role of universities in society. The graduates from an institution are a very important part of the impact of that institution and the students learn more than theory and formulas. Education works on many levels and teaching practices have a normalizing effect, forming identities and providing patterns to repeat. To allow future researchers to dig deeper into the somewhat hidden effects of education, it is important to keep hold of the big picture and not just a few dispersed items.