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Review of Memory Lab Network Resources

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Memory Lab Network Resources
https://memorylabnetwork.github.io/resources.html

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Launched by the DC Public Library (DCPL) in 2017, the Memory Lab Network (MLN) is a digital preservation program designed to establish do-it-yourself digitization stations in public libraries nationwide. Each year, the MLN selects seven public libraries as project partners to receive assistance in building their own Memory Lab.[1] These labs allow patrons to learn about personal archiving and to digitize personal materials, such as VHS tapes, audiocassettes, and photographs. Supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the MLN offers mentorship and funding for public libraries to create their own digitization curricula, event programming, and labs. Upon selection, two ambassadors from each library are invited to attend a week-long bootcamp where they receive hands-on training in preservation theory and practices for analog and digital materials.[2] Since every public library is unique to the community they serve, bringing in a diverse cohort allows the MLN to respond to different needs and challenges together. Throughout the year, project partners continue their training virtually through a series of professional development webinars as they build their labs.

The Memory Lab Network Resources webpage is a collection of guidelines, training documents and videos, and project documentation made or used by the MLN. While the MLN primarily focuses on public libraries, the information is available to all individuals and institutions. The webpage is organized into eight sections, each linked to an array of further resources. Its introductory document, "A Deep Dive into Building a Memory Lab," offers users a glimpse into the work and preparation needed to successfully establish a digitization station. The document covers a range of topics, including policies, hardware and software installation, troubleshooting, donation, marketing, and staff training. Project documents, such as the MLN's project proposal and IMLS grant application, are publicly available for reference. Itineraries and materials created for the cohort bootcamp trainings are shared, with links to slide decks and classroom worksheets. Recorded webinars are accessible online for anyone to stream, with guest lecturers from the National Endowment for

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[1] "Memory Lab Network: IMLS National Leadership Grant project to bring digital preservation to public libraries," DC Public Library, accessed December 8, 2020, https://www.dclibrary.org/memorylabnetwork.

[2] "Memory Lab Network," https://www.dclibrary.org/memorylabnetwork.

the Humanities, New York University, Queens Public Library, XFR Collective, WITNESS, and the University of California.

Simplifying the interaction between people and technology is a significant challenge in developing a functional Memory Lab. Generally speaking, the audiovisual world too often shrouds itself in a level of convoluted obscurity. Technical jargon and mystifying vocabulary can dissuade anyone from finding the information and guidance they need. But the MLN Resources webpage and its creators have found a way to break down these barriers in their explanations and offer something tangible for both the technologically uninitiated and those with some experience in video production. By presenting resources in a variety of formats—from video tutorials and spreadsheets to webinars, zines, and blog posts—the resources support a range of learning styles and levels of interest. Over time, we would love to see the resources page evolve into a hub for firsthand case studies and lessons from participants in the IMLS-funded cohorts and other Memory Labs across the country.

At Queens College, City University of New York, the Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library is building a Memory Lab in partnership with the Queens Memory Project (a community archiving initiative jointly sponsored with the Queens Public Library) and the Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies. Because our Lab will be embedded in an academic setting, we expect students, faculty, and staff to be primary audiences for the lab. However, we will also offer educational workshops and scanning days open to the public, and plan to provide space and equipment to community groups for post-custodial archiving projects.

Plan drawing for Queens College Memory Lab, illustration by Carter R. Thompson.

The Queens College Memory Lab is supported by the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, which funded two Graduate Fellows (Tomasz Gubernat and Jeanie Pai) to assist the head of Special Collections and Archives (Annie Tummino) with lab development. Though Queens College is not part of the MLN (which is specifically for public libraries), we were able to attend the orientation on the first day of a Memory Lab Network Bootcamp in Washington, DC, in January 2020 as guests. Since attending the orientation, the MLN Resources have become our "one-stop shop" for answering questions, brainstorming ideas, and troubleshooting tricky A/V problems. From a technical standpoint, the resources have helped us to better understand equipment interoperability, and from a management standpoint, the resources have helped us craft useful policies and clear documentation, now available in a public LibGuide. Throughout our experience, the MLN Resources have been crucial to our progress.

As an academic library, our Memory Lab implementation differs from the public library model in a couple of key ways. First, our library is not open to the surrounding community; folks will not discover us from wandering in off the street. Despite this limitation, we strive to grapple with access issues and make our resources as widely available as possible. Second, we anticipate encountering obscure formats, such as Umatic and Betamax, that may have been used in administrative or classroom contexts in the past, in addition to the more popular

consumer formats such as VHS and cassette tapes. We hope the Memory Lab will encourage rediscovery of these materials, with potential to reuse them in the classroom, and/or transfer them to the archives for long-term preservation.

Computer station and digitization rack in the Benjamin S. Rosenthal Library, Queens College.

As the archival field increasingly grapples with issues of equity, inclusion, and power, the Memory Lab is a useful model for democratization of cultural heritage. As we move into the future, it is crucial that individuals, communities, activist groups, and small repositories are able to reformat and preserve obsolete media, not just large, better funded institutions. The Memory Lab Network Resources webpage does an admirable job of providing practical tools and information to help make this goal a reality.