

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONLINE RESOURCES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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### *Introduction*

This article was birthed at International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) conference in Izmir, Turkey November 2022 in a workshop about online resourcing. As the discussion developed, it became abundantly clear that little to no intentional thought or strategy had been given to online resourcing. What these educators knew was that there is an extreme shortage of resources, especially in the majority world. Their philosophy for solving the issue of resourcing the majority world boiled down to grab everything possible and throw it at the internet. Problem solved. While that approach would be an easy answer, it would not get to a satisfactory solution.

This article will pull from the development of the Wesleyan-Holiness Digital Library (WHDL.org) as a case study for considering a bigger picture foundational issues in providing online resources to a global community. WHDL.org is one of many models for online resources. This article will focus on the strategy in development rather than the conclusions. The hope is that by raising key questions for consideration other projects will move away from the throw it at the internet plan to intentional, effective development of online resourcing.

### *WHDL*

In October 2012 the first development team was gathered to answer the questions – Can we build a digital library? Should we build a digital library? How do we build a digital library? The team was comprised of educators, librarians, technology specialists, publishers, global literature specialists, and church leaders. In the wisdom of this team, they knew to begin with the even bigger philosophical questions. For most of a week of long days and evenings the team worked together to develop the philosophy behind the project. It has been this philosophy and accompanying mission that have driven the project forward for the past 11 years. Following are some of the big rocks that make up the philosophy behind the WHDL.org.

### *The End User*

The first and constant priority was and continues to be the end-user.

Who is the end-user?

Before starting to develop any project, it is vital to really know the end-users. Who are they? Where are they? What access issues will they have? Are there language or cultural considerations? Is orality a consideration?

For the WHDL.org team knowing the end-users was always at the forefront of discussions. The entire project was developed with a target end-user in mind. The team consistently advocated for end-users at the end of the internet, realizing for some the internet had not become accessible, but it would at some point in the future. WHDL.org was designed to be delivered over the lowest bandwidth possible. Taking this understanding a step further, systems were created for downloading all or parts of the library to be distributed on tablets, jump drives, and laptops for key leaders, educators, and libraries who could share the resources with their students, pastors, and churches. Even this process of sharing had to be simple and straightforward as many of those who would receive the loaded equipment would have limited technological experience.

### *Language Acquisition and Use*

The next big rock in the development of the philosophy behind WHDL.org involved the matter of languages. The library was being built for a global community. It would not serve that community to only have resources in English from Western cultures. The only way the team would be satisfied with the end result required a deep, complex integration of multilingual aspects in every level of the system. What developed was a system with language flexibility on the website itself for the end-user, the meta data for cataloguing, the backend for the uploaders, and of course in the actual resources. These four levels of the system proved critical to how the system works. By developing it with multilingual capacity at all four levels, the team was able to deliver something that would serve the global community. In reality, the complexity of the multilingual approach has been the greatest challenge. Initially, it wasn't being done anywhere. The software developer worked with the development team to create a new way of creating software. Several years later, technology caught part way up and new best practices developed. These were integrated into the system in 2022, but in reality, it is the cutting edge of the system and continues to be the greatest challenge. With the website now available in 22 different world languages, nearly 60% of the end-users are accessing the library in languages other than English.

### *Contextualization*

The development team did not believe it was not enough to have resources in the various languages. The team felt it was vital that resources be in the cultures of the contexts of the global community. For that contextualization to be possible, the team knew from the beginning this library would need global partners to collaborate in building the collection. From the beginning the process of loading documents into WHDL.org had to be user-friendly for librarians and other stewards of resources even if they had limited technical expertise.

With the rise of the value of institutional repositories across academia, the WHDL.org team found a way to highlight each partner institution or ministry with a portal to their own branded institutional repository as part of the larger WHDL.org collection. In this way each partner could build their institutional repository under their branding, while making the resources accessible to anyone using the WHDL.org system. Likewise, their end-users would have immediate access to all the resources added by any other member. The resources were gathered in one database and shared through the search engine. The only difference in results from one institutional repository to another was in the order of the results, with preference given to the repository the searcher is in at the time of their search.

### *Navigating Theology and Legal Concerns*

Two of the most important issues in developing a global resource for the church are the attention to theological matters and the care given to legal concerns, especially copyrights. In both cases, the WHDL.org team decided to put a great deal of trust in the uploaders. Since the institutions and ministries continue to own the resources, and their information is part of the metadata that anyone can see, the team was confident they would give careful consideration to what they put into the system.

Currently, no resource can be loaded into the system and published without a document assuring permission to publish in WHDL.org. Since WHDL doesn't own the material, but simply provides the platform, WHDL carries very little liability for things entered without the appropriate permissions. If a complaint is registered, the editorial team immediately unpublishes the item and

begin investigating. The item would not be republished without securing and producing appropriate permissions. This is the team's understanding of the legal requirements for a hosting platform of digital resources.

The theological concerns prove a little trickier because the team committed to creating an open access library that reflects the liberal arts institutions who would be uploading resources from across their areas of research. WHDL.org is not, and was never intended to be just a theological library. The hope was that by gathering research from across academia, a database would be created that would allow intersections between various areas of study. So, for example, a theology student studying ethics would be informed by papers on ethics from business, medicine, and science. Even other theological works would be allowed in the library as long as they are identified correctly. In this case, something that is identified as Wesleyan theologically, but is incongruent with Wesleyan theology would be marked for review. The sponsoring institution would be asked to review it. If they feel it is important to their research and represents their work, then the item will continue to be published with a note attached that it has been reviewed.

In theological matters, WHDL retains additional authority that if something is trying to be passed as Wesleyan theology, but clearly isn't it can be removed immediately. For example, *The Koran* could be uploaded to WHDL as a valuable resource to the study of world religions. However, if it was described as congruent with Wesleyan theology in any way, then it would need to be corrected or removed. That is a little clearer than the real experiences the team deals with, which primarily end up being cases which are sent back to the institution for review.

It is worth noting that in the 10 years since WHDL went live on the internet, there have only been a few items that were called into question for removal or review. Only once was the issue inadequate permissions and once theological coherence was questioned but determined to not be a real concern. In most cases, the process worked and items were addressed quickly to the satisfaction of both the team and church leadership.

#### *Open Access as a Free Resource*

Another big rock of the philosophy behind WHDL is the commitment to accessibility as a free, open access resource to the global community. Many amazing resources remain locked behind walls requiring membership, payment, or some other exclusive access. Because of WHDL's first commitment to end-users at the end of the internet, the team was also aware most researchers in the majority world do not have access to financial reserves, nor are they part of institutions which provide vital access to resources. With that commitment in mind, the only way WHDL could be designed was as an open access resource. As a result, resources from WHDL have been accessed in almost every country in the world. Nearly 60% of researchers interacting with WHDL content are outside the USA. For the WHDL team the commitment to resource a global community carries the responsibility to not place burden on the end-user, but instead effectively resource their research and academic success.

#### *Collaboration as the Genius of WHDL*

The final and most important rock in the on-going philosophy behind building and maintaining WHDL.org is the commitment to work collaboratively with institutions and ministries anywhere in the world. Perhaps if this project had an unending amount of financial resource, the team might have relied on paid staff to build the database of resources. That would have been a great disadvantage to the kind of collection the team was committed to build. While a paid staff might

have been more efficient and effective in creating consistency across the platform. The real soul of this project is in the collaborative relationship developed in the process of working on the system, training uploaders, and strategically sharing the workload. By inviting global partners to be collaborative partners, the WHDL database is richer in diversity and globally contextual resources. At this time, WHDL celebrates more than 16,000 published resources, with thousands more being processed. The resources are in a variety of languages, some in multiple languages, others in only one language. Totally there are resources in 95 world languages provided by 29 partners through their branded institutional repository. The commitment to collaboration is not only good for WHDL, it is a benefit to the partners, who gain a branded institutional repository at no cost to the institution, training, and access to a network of resource professionals, who are always willing to answer questions or search for additional resources to serve the collaborative team.

The team of librarians that has developed through this project is especially impressive. They are passionate, well-trained, committed, and simply one of the best groups of people willing to humbly work, problem solve, and create what many have said would be impossible. They have done this work as professional volunteers committed to serving the global church and education community. Every step of the way, the team has been strengthened by the willingness to learn, teach, and resource each other. Their work on WHDL has expanded into supporting and training international librarians through the development of Nazarene Library Network. Without a doubt, the greatest impact from WHDL is what the team is learning from the power of collaboration. While collaboration has become a buzzword in many circles, for the team the key to the powerful genius of the WHDL collaboration is in the unwritten pieces that come from the institutional culture of those who are creating the resource.

### *Conclusion*

There are other philosophical considerations when developing online resources, but these big rocks are the ones the WHDL team determined were not negotiable. Just 11 years into the project, the WHDL team is aware it remains in its infancy. There are many more resources to be located, negotiated into open access publishing agreements, and curated in the library. At the same time, writers must be developed to create new contextually grounded resources for future publication in WHDL. As members transition on and off the team, they are quickly acclimated to the WHDL philosophy which continues as a stable foundation of a rapidly growing resource serving the church and academic community even in times of great uncertainty. This team, guided by a clear philosophy gives great hope for the development of a digital library which will serve the next generation and beyond.