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Sharpening skills

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The purpose of documentation is to collect a variety of detailed information about a resource based on its real shape, and cultural relevance etc. in order to understand it. Ultimately, documentation gathers the evidence required to interpret a resources significance on a number of levels. Different methods of documentation reveal different kinds of information, and the methods applied depend on the resource itself, the purpose and focus of the documentation project, and the data sources available. We must document each and every source we use even if we restate it in our own words and even when we borrow not only content from a source but also even phrasing.

Most people seem to only use documentation when they want to submit some project in competition. This is where most people head off in the wrong direction. Many people often write their documentation as an 'obituary'. They start and finish a project, and then after the project is done, they attempt to "find documentation" and write it up. This method is a poor way of documenting. All the writing is done only after the project is dead, and it winds up being pretty cursory. Any accumulation of skills and knowledge has little or no relation to the Middle Ages (most of the research is done after the project is dead, connected to 'documentation'). If anything is found that describes a better way things could have been done, the focus often becomes glossing over the 'error' and ignoring it, rather than using it and learning from it. People often only do the research that will provide "documentation" for whatever it was they made. Additionally, projects rarely benefit from the effort put into research and documentation, and the documentation rarely gives an objective view of the project.

We should document our work and activities to help us plan and manage future project activities that will be relevant to the needs and situation of the stakeholders based on the findings recorded in the documents; demonstrate the success of project activities to stakeholders who will continue to support and participate in our activities; help the project improve its activities and increase its efficiency; keep evidence of project successes and help promote the project to others; present information about our project to donors and funding agencies when we seek financial support.

We can document all the events and activities of the project in various forms that will be useful for stakeholders and others. It is also important for project planning and management of future activities.

In order to raise awareness and increase the participation of stakeholders, as well as to demonstrate our success to visitors, we can keep or display the documents where people can access them easily. Some of them can be displayed on the walls of the project — for example, the area map and profiles etc., also: we first categorise the information and materials we collected according to different topics (e.g., history of the stakeholders, project programmes, learning outcomes); we then prepare files for these categories to store the appropriate information; we can call the result of our categorising and filing a database; if we have a computer, the database can be recorded electronically and we can update it regularly; if we do not have a computer, we have to manage with papers and file folders. Regardless of the method, if we store our materials systematically, it will be easy for us to find information whenever we need it.

The format and length of the documented material depends upon the audience for the information. Visual materials such as charts and graphs can deliver the key messages effectively. Summaries and highlights are useful. The documented material needs to be disseminated to the right people, in a form and manner that are simple and understandable, but convincing. The effective operation of programme activities requires a flow of information for the policy-making level and vice versa.