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ORIGINAL PAPER

Building archival knowledge and skills in the digital age

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Abstract On the basis of over 20-years' experience teaching in a master's level program of archival education in a North American university, the author reflects on the relationship between building knowledge of archives and the skills to carry out archival work. Using a report of the Society of American Archivists on the goals and priorities of the archival profession, he examines where and how skill building can become an integral part of archival education in the digital age. This article is little changed from the speech the author gave to open the Third Archival Educator's Forum held in Boston, Massachusetts on August 2, 2004.

Keywords Archival practice · Archival education

Education is generally recognized as knowledge building, where knowledge is equated with a theoretical or practical understanding of some focus of intellectual attention, such as literature, language, history, politics, some aspect of the physical world, or a realm of human endeavor. Knowledge building inevitably requires disciplined thinking, hence the notion of a discipline. Professional disciplines, although they have the character of building disciplined thinking, inevitably face the need to connect learning with the practical pursuit of the ends of the profession.

Most writers on archival education make the connection between theory, methods, and practice, and see it as a single body of knowledge. For instance, Luciana Duranti argues that archival knowledge ''dwells on the ideas about *what* archival material is and *how* to work with that material, and discusses their application in archival practice'' (Duranti 1993, 9). Archival educators and education guidelines, such as those of the Society of American Archivists (2002) and the Association of Canadian Archivists (1990) tend to concentrate on characterizing the intellectual content of this body of knowledge as best they can, given their situation, in curricula of study. The literature on archival education

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and investigations, like that of Jeannette Bastian and Beth Yakel (2006) on core archival knowledge, reveal that there is little agreement on what the architecture of the archival curriculum should be, so diverse are the circumstances of its delivery and the aims animating it.

Nonetheless, archival education has flowered in the academy in Canada and the United States over roughly the past 25 years. Debates from former times about its viability and proper place in the university have given way to concern on how to give it greater effect or bring it into line with current societal needs (Carbo 1993). Educators themselves have taken up the responsibility to expand archival knowledge in their research activities, and to feed the results into the knowledge building exercise of educating new entrants to the profession. This facet of their endeavor was the subject of a gathering of archival educators in 1999 and subsequently published as a special issue on education in the fall/winter 2000 issue of *American Archivist*.

The current situation is not what educators want it to be, as Richard Cox (2000) laments the slow progress of universities to live up to the guidelines issued by SAA, which itself continues to provide the most basic education (pp. 373–374). In fact, most of them see a large gap between the potential to employ archival knowledge in society and its actual employment in practice. Yakel notes that ''the low numbers working in the corporate sector, however, confirm Wallace's [earlier] findings concerning the low number of individuals interested in entering this particular sector'' (p. 312). Often those directing the affairs of organizations do not know they need someone with archival knowledge, particularly in the management of current records, and even in some places where it manifestly is needed it is still disparaged, if not openly and avowedly, at least instrumentally in hiring practices. Most educators live with the understanding that there will always be something of a disjunction between their perspective on knowledge building and employers' perspective on the skills required to accomplish specific jobs.

The literature on archival education says little directly about the skills students are expected to acquire, whether the skill is understood as a particular ability to think or a particular ability to do something in the world. Disciplined thinking, it is assumed, is the foundation of skill building, which, after all, takes place over the course of a working life. The role of education is to form the mind to the ways of thinking and awareness that will allow the learner to adapt to new circumstances and to consider what is being done in ways that are productive for the self growth of the skill at doing the work. Skill building smacks of training, which is seen as instruction and practice in doing specific tasks, something antithetical to education, a kind of reductio ad absurdum of true professional learning, a straightjacket for the mind.

Educators are understandably uncomfortable when asked about the skills graduates have. They see skills as founded on archival knowledge but coming out more or less naturally in the wash of practice. Employers are rightfully indignant if they have to expend time and resources to train graduates to do things their education ought to have prepared them to do. They expect graduates to slip into practice more or less effortlessly. Enough do that for both sides to relieve themselves of too great a concern. Both sides also recognize that personal talents beyond those honed during professional education, like the ability to get on with others or judge circumstances with acumen and plan work accordingly, go a long way to determining success on the job. So, we may comfortably take the view that many important skills needed for successful practice seem to be in the lap of the gods and in the hands of the practitioner to develop, perhaps with the assistance of the employer.

There is enough truth in all this to ward us off from talking too closely about building skills. The disjunction is there for good reason. It is foolhardy to try to square the circle of

knowledge and skills, so don't try, it's a waste of time, even dangerous to do. I have long shared this comfortable rationalization, but have begun to wonder about it, if only because, if there is a circle of archival knowledge and archival skills, there must be a responsive quality to their development. If archival knowledge informs skill building, as educators assume, cannot some understanding of the skills needed to perform the job inform knowledge building, as I think employers, practitioners, and students often hope it will? I ought to make one last acknowledgement. I am not saying that educators do not think about the skills students need to do the job. Reflection on the demands and strictures of practice and on what makes for success necessarily involves reflection on what needs to be done and therefore, implicitly at least, on the skills needed to do the job.

Much about skill building in the exercise of educating archivists goes on imaginatively or implicitly, and most students recognize the task at hand as being the mastery of understanding archives much as their professors do. My task is to try to be a little more explicit about it, with the hope of stimulating some thought and consideration of the matter of building archival knowledge and skills in our time. My hope is that, where we might not be able to agree on matters of curriculum, for obvious reasons of circumstance, we might be able to agree more readily on what we want our graduates to be able to do. My supposition is that we can then go on to assess the extent to which students' learning actually prepares them to be able to do the work.

The literature on archival education does not often speak explicitly about skills. The quite extensive effort of governments and employers to define the knowledge, skills, and abilities of various occupations is equally unsatisfactory for my purposes. It either assumes that the skill or ability is the capacity to apply knowledge, or it speaks of generic skills or abilities such as for planning, evaluating, and so on. So, I searched elsewhere for a text or texts to provide me some basis. In the end, I chose a single text: *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* from 1986. It is by no means the perfect document for my purposes, but it does make an effort to characterize fairly broadly the spheres of activity of the profession and what archivists specifically do or should be able to do, from which we can, I think, infer the kinds of skills practitioners should have.

The Task Force on Goals and Priorities, GAP as it called itself, set out three goals for the profession: (1) the identification and retention of records of enduring value; (2) the administration of archival programs to ensure the preservation of records of enduring value; and (3) the availability and use of records of enduring value. Today, many archival educators, however they might quibble about the statement of these goals, would say that one goal is missing. Many archival institutions or programs have responsibility to administer or facilitate the creation, maintenance, use, and disposition of the records of the organization to which they belong. A fourth goal, which becomes my first one, might be the cultivation of the creation of accurate, reliable, and authentic records and their effective and efficient maintenance, use, and disposition.

I do not want to get into arguments about the extent to which archivists should be involved in records management. Obviously, that differs greatly depending on the situation. I think we can agree that archivists have a deep interest in the facilitation of good recordkeeping practice, which is what I will call my *goal one*. In fact, the GAP report implicitly takes this position. I am going to discuss the kinds of skills archivists need to help realize each of these four goals.

The facilitation of good recordkeeping practice

Whether archivists have a role in administering records management programs or giving advice or setting standards, they have to be able to translate their knowledge of the nature of records and how they are generated, maintained and used into skilled behaviors. At its broadest, the skill needed is the skill to design recordkeeping systems. The skills at the core of management of active records are the skill to build an integrated system for classification and disposition of records. Building a recordkeeping system requires careful analysis of business functions, activities, procedures, and needs. These analytical skills, which we might call archival analysis, are in fact fundamental to almost all aspects of records and archival work. As applied to the design, implementation, and ongoing management of records in an organization, this skill also involves knowing the contextual factors that must be taken into account during the entire process. With electronic records, other skills, like the ability to design a metadata schema come into play.

The GAP report implicitly recognizes the need for skill in this area in two of the activities it lists in its first goal. It says that archivists must be able to analyze the creation, administration, and use of records by their creators, and to analyze the impact of technology on the ways in which information is created, captured, maintained and retrieved. The report ties the need of these skills to the archival interest in selection and management of records of enduring value; but in fact, good recordkeeping is essential to effective and efficient conduct of affairs, and accurate, reliable, and authentic records are the foundation of accountability and historical understanding. Whether you take the view of Margaret Cross Norton that historical use of records is ''so much velvet,'' or the GAP view that archivists ''should influence this process to assure an adequate historical record,'' archivists actually need the skills to build these fundamental features of recordkeeping systems (Mitchell 1975). Undoubtedly, applying these skills in the digital environment requires extensive understanding of information technology as well as the skill to assess which hardware, software, and storage media meet recordkeeping and archival requirements. Finally, archivists need to be able to devise management frameworks for records management, how to articulate the whole program or system of records management—whether they are doing it or advising those with that responsibility. The GAP report recognizes this when it says archivists need to ''participate in policy making about the creation and retention of records'' and ''promote legislation, regulations, and guidelines that encourage records preservation'' (Society of American Archivists 1986, pp. 12–13).

In organizations of all kinds the world over, there is an urgent need for records officers who have skills at the highest level to design, implement, and manage recordkeeping systems, particularly in the electronic environment. There is a great deficit of education to meet this need in society. The result is often that such work falls to others ill prepared to do the job at this high level, with adverse consequence for recordkeeping and the quality of archives. A major goal of archival education should be the chipping away at this societal deficit of recordkeeping expertise by making sure that graduates have the range of analytical skills they need in order to take part—however their circumstances allow—in design, implementation, and maintenance of recordkeeping systems. More and more this means systems for the management of electronic records and related databases and Web sites, which in turn means much more than the superficial understanding of the technological environment that most computer users in organizations have.

Identification and retention of records of enduring value

GAP's four objectives in this area are:

- Understand the characteristics and uses of records in order to guide the evaluation, selection and retention of records of enduring value;
- Develop and apply appraisal and documentation strategies to ensure preservation of historically important records;
- Influence records creators to accept responsibility for saving historically important records; and
- Obtain public support for the retention of archival records.

Arguably, no aspect of archival work has received more attention in the literature in recent years than has appraisal. When you peel away all the rhetoric around documentation strategy, functional analysis, and macro-appraisal, you will find widespread agreement that the archival analysis mentioned earlier is at the basis of all good appraisal, which, as GAP says, is the skill to analyze the creation, administration, and use of records by their creators. GAP also speaks of the ability to analyze secondary value, the relationship of records to other sources of documentary heritage, and the impact of technology on the ways in which information is created, captured, maintained and retrieved. It then speaks of the ability to formulate appraisal strategies and develop and coordinate acquisition policies among repositories, influence policies affecting records retention and disposal, and educate the public about the benefits of records preservation.

However, one might quibble with GAP's view in this area, it is difficult to disagree with its implicit proposition that appraisal for selection and acquisition in a records and information rich society is a tremendous challenge little understood in the wider world. The basic skill of analyzing records must be complemented by skills at formulating and assessing the effectiveness of policies, strategies, and procedures for conducting appraisal, selection, and acquisition, as well as by skills at acting as advocates for and educators about the proper regime for and benefits of retention of records of enduring value. In its own way GAP also put its finger on the contemporary difficulty of knowing ''when and how to intervene (where information systems are concerned) to obtain historically important information in usable formats,'' that is, to rise to the challenge of appraisal of trustworthy electronic records. GAP makes it clear that the skill needed is to ''analyze bureaucratic and industrial structures and the application of records and information management within these structures'' (Society of American Archivists 1986, p. 13). This is a great challenge for educators, particularly in the area of education about information technology and its application in business and personal activities. We have to blend knowledge of information technology and the skill at using it into the curriculum in a deep way to ensure that graduates can both analyze the environments in which they find themselves and move within them comfortably in order to associate with all the parties involved in records and information creation, maintenance and use. There is a heavy leaven of exhortation in the GAP report for the ability not only to understand theory and method in this area, but also to be able to articulate why and how it is implemented to serve organizational and societal ends.

We can do a great deal in helping students to develop skills in articulating ideas about appraisal and can show them how these ideas are employed in policies, strategies, and procedures. Most importantly, we can cultivate their skill at expressing these ideas in clear language that non-archivists can understand. I have taught appraisal for many years. The

more I teach it, the more I feel that it is a matter of allowing students a great range of opportunities to articulate ideas about the subject in all its facets both verbally and in writing. Students have to make these ideas their own, see how they are applied, and be able to explain them to people other than their classmates and professors.

The administration of archival programs to ensure the preservation of enduring value

The general tenor of the GAP report in this area is that much needs to be done to facilitate better management of institutions and programs. A graduate of our program at the University of British Columbia recently took a job to head a newly established archival program in a private university in the United States. After he had been on the job for a year, I asked him how it was going. He replied, ''You didn't tell me 90% of the job would be political.'' In this blunt way, he expressed his experience of crossing the threshold from the classroom to a management position. I think that we educators tend to think that the ability to manage the affairs of an archival institution or program is one of those things that will come out in the wash, and will depend more on the native savvy of the individual than on anything we can do. Or we may think, it is the task of organizations to provide management training and to cultivate the skills managers need.

This section of the GAP report exhorts the professional community to take part in developing archival knowledge, to set standards for archivists and archival repositories, to promote archival ends in society, to promote cooperation between the archival community and allied professions, and to develop skills in program planning, fund raising, and program advocacy. The report also strongly urges the archival community to develop research skills to support work in these areas. I suspect that, after a few years (often very few), most archivists are not only completely involved in these activities of administering archival programs, nurturing them, protecting them, promoting them, and seeing that they themselves or those they supervise remain up to date, but also in contributing to the development of their field through their work in professional associations or through developing the policies, procedures, and standards to discipline the workplace.

While educators further the work of administrators when they give them a sound foundation of archival knowledge and ways to extend it through scholarship and research, how do they see that graduates are prepared for the management roles that they will soon take on? A solid course on the foundations of management science is no doubt a *sine qua non*, but, I would also suggest that students need to be immersed in a practical setting before they come to consider management issues. We tend to look at practica or internships as an opportunity to arrange and describe records, perhaps take a hand in appraisal and reference service, but we miss a major facet of the exercise if students are not drawn into the wider running of the repository, the issues practitioners face, the management activities they do on a daily basis, and so on. This means drawing practitioners into the educational exercise, for they play the vital role of communicating understanding of their reality to the student.

Professional education in medicine, law, teaching, social work, engineering, architecture and many other fields requires extensive, closely monitored practical work. Medical education has been revolutionized in many quarters to emphasize learning of this kind. In my own school, we have, if anything, gone in the opposite direction, at least in the degree to which we closely monitor the exercise of practical learning. It is a problem for us, given the demands on our time, but skills we cannot teach in the classroom can be learned during practical fieldwork. Students who have had an extensive stint of practical work lasting

several months are quick to see, when they return to the class, the value of learning things to augment these kinds of management skills.

The availability and use of records of enduring value

The GAP report urges archivists to develop programs to encourage use of archival records, to disseminate information about holdings, to promote laws and policies that maximize access while protecting rights, to publicize innovative use of archives, and develop the inter-institutional means to increase accessibility of archives. Arguably, the knowledge to support the kinds of activities GAP speaks of here is one of the weakest areas of archival science. Obviously, there are enormous opportunities to facilitate access to and accessibility of archival material in the digital environment, so there is much that educators can do to prepare students with a solid understanding of information technology and its application to these archival processes. However, the archival field still has a very limited knowledge of user behavior, the ways best to present information. Archival literature of recent years is full of exhortation to remedy these lacunae in our knowledge, and we are beginning to see some progress, but, somehow, educators need to ramp up the capabilities in these areas such that archival graduates can fully realize the potential of the technology, avoid the tremendous potential for its foolish use, and truly benefit users. Good teaching in this area requires the instructor to have a solid mastery of the technology, but even more importantly to be able to explain its fundamentals to students so that they will understand the possibilities and the limitations of the tools at their command.

It almost goes without saying that instruction in the technological environment is vital for preparing archivists to work with electronic records, which graduates from now on will undoubtedly face during their careers. The GAP report looks very dated now because the technology has so invaded our lives, but it is not at all clear that prospective archivists are being instructed about the technology in as broad and deep a manner as practicing archivists need to be. At least in part, this is not happening because the archival field is not turning out the next generation of teachers equipped to meet these challenges. It is a neat trick to ramp up studies at the master's level in this area and simultaneously see that the necessary doctoral-level education and research is done to ensure that advanced instruction in archival science, as it is applied in the digital world, has real substance. It has to be done to ensure that we have a highly skilled workforce to deal with the challenge of electronic records and the delivery of archival services with the aid of information technology. I have little doubt that this is the central challenge of archival science for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

I base the observations in this article mainly on my twenty-three years' experience as an archival educator. In that time, our field has made great efforts to transform itself in step with changes in society, with many notable successes. However, I have the strong sense that we are mired in an old-fashioned pedagogy that too comfortably eschews skill building as a necessary part of professional education in our times, all the more so as we work in the digital environment. It is not a case of throwing out our careful effort to communicate basic concepts and methods as the bedrock foundation of archival education, or to abandon the humanistic foundation of the archival enterprise; it is a case of adding to it to meet the needs graduates will have and employers have a right to expect they will have fulfilled in their education.

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