Education for the profession: convergence or divergence in the digital world

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Abstract

As a profession we have spent a considerable amount of energy thinking and writing about professional education. This is no surprise given the rapidly changing landscape within which we work. Despite the extent of this discussion there still exists a wide divergence in what is seen as the essentials for an archival education. This paper considers some of the drivers behind the changing records and archives environment and the impact they may have on a university education program. It proposes more cooperation and collaboration across kindred sectors in order to develop a common base, then focus in on specific requirements which could be delivered through some form of consortia established for this purpose.

Introduction

So much has been written over the last 20 years or so about education for archives and records professionals that an outsider may have cause to question why so much agonising? When the whole information landscape is evolving at such a pace, what does so much attention being paid to this one factor say about us as a profession? Is there an element of uncertainty and perhaps insecurity about what we are doing? Or is it reasonable that, with such a vibrant, challenging and changing environment, it is appropriate to pay so much attention to professional education? Well maybe yes, because, as Anderson noted a few years ago, if university based programs disappear the implications for the profession are considerable - the very concept of a profession could well be seriously undermined (2007, p.103). And so another paper!

We debate education vs training; the disconnect between what educators see as a professional, degree level or higher education, and what practitioners seek when employing new graduates; the importance of research and how to inculcate such a culture in our graduates; the level to which generic studies (communication, management etc) figure in already crowded curriculums focused on what has traditionally been seen as core archival knowledge; and the role of professional bodies in establishing standards and requirements for any education program. This inward looking focus, while at times necessary, can also become limiting. The profession does not exist in a vacuum and has to acknowledge that there is competition out there which could see the archival role sidelined or subsumed, probably under an all-embracing IT banner. Alternatively we can look to collaboration, drawing on expertise from across the spectrum - IT to digital humanities; information studies to cultural heritage management; preservation to digital curation - to help inform the archival education agenda of the future. As the Council of Australasian Archives and Record Authorities (CAARA) report commented regarding digital records, “The Archives Domain is not the only domain with a vital interest in the long-term management, preservation of, and access to digital collections” (p.35)

Defining what constitutes an archive and the role of the archivist, and thus determining the knowledge and skills required to effectively operate and manage such an enterprise seems, in the

21st century, to be less clear that it may once have been. Largely, this has been driven by forces external to the archive, from fundamental changes in society to the growth and application of technology (Uhde, 2006). Thus the overwhelming impact of digitally created records produced using a plethora of software platforms; the diversity of such records and their sheer volume have been the most obvious change over the last 30 years or so. Related to this growth, the establishment of 'institutional repositories' (digital archives) by all major universities, research focused organisations and even some commercial enterprises has added new players to the field; and the continual backup/archiving undertaken by any organisation's IT department in the course of its normal daily routine has also created a parallel, if somewhat different archival enterprise. Beyond these institutionally focused collections, the growth of 'user generated' archives or collections, managed locally and often run on minimal budgets, where expert mediation or curation is dispensed with in favour of a more laissez-faire acceptance of material, have added diversity and a new energy to the field. Finally, the traditions and paradigm within which much archival work and thinking was conducted through the twentieth century has in recent years been opened up by a number of commentators taking a postmodernist approach to view the archive as a less clear cut, value-free institution, raising questions as to its role and meaning for its various publics in contemporary society. The context has changed – the power of archives is being more widely recognised in both positive and negative ways and raising public and government expectations for access and transparency, as well as actual participation in the archival enterprise, are impacting both on the nature of the archive itself as well as it processes and practices.

All of these factors or drivers are shaping the archival world of the 21st century and as such need to be acknowledged and better understood before they can be addressed by educational programs claiming to prepare a new generation of graduates for the profession.

The drivers

The impact of the transition to digital records as the predominant medium for record-creation can hardly be exaggerated; White and Gilliland describe it as the "archival implications of pervasive digitality" (2010, p.235). Without revisiting familiar territory, the proliferation of digital record-keeping standards, guidelines and fact sheets over the last two decades or so confirms the impact this technology has had for the profession. Cox and Larsen (2009, p. 314) discuss the need to produce graduates who are "intellectually engaged by the challenges digital technologies are bringing to records and information systems" and go on to outline a wide-ranging curriculum that fits comfortably into the i-School approach.

The CAARA report noted earlier also made the comment that "The belief that digital objects can be managed with the same methodologies developed over the years for physical objects is misconstrued" (p. 5). This does not mean that every traditional approach has to be turned on its head, but it does suggest that there needs to be a careful re-evaluation of such approaches to ensure their relevance in this emergent digital world. As Bailey (2007, p. 118) points out, the fact that the records are digital does not impinge on their relevance or significance, but it does add an additional level of complexity to the management task and Currall and Moss (2008, p.69) ponder on the impact on record-keepers and archivists if they no longer have a custodial role in a digital world managed by IT professionals. Apart from the technology, the sheer volume of records being created (Duranti (2010) comments that the first decade of the 21st century saw more records created than in

any other decade in human history) brings with it its own issues regarding appraisal, retention and long term preservation – all functions that are being reviewed and redefined in order to meet the functional needs of their various publics.

The move of universities and others into the field of institutional repositories, essentially digital archives for acquiring the research outputs of their staff and students, has seen a substantial new player enter the archival field. Such repositories undertake all of the functions of the longer established archive with the luxury of only having to manage digital collections – no legacy print materials and importantly, no traditions and practices associated with managing paper collections. This has enabled the repositories to focus on developing policies and practices solely concerned with their digital objects with the result that many have grown substantially in a very short space of time (see for instance the situation in Australia, described by Kennan and Kingsley, 2009). This network of repositories has also benefitted from having a shared focus or common ground, leading to substantial collaborative efforts, the availability of well developed open source software and opportunities to work together in tackling problems and evolving successful strategies (eg. the Repositories Support Project in the UK). Given the success of such archives in such a brief period of time (essentially the last decade), it would be useful to look more closely at how lessons learned here may or may not be relevant to the wider archival world.

Another form of archive, not usually considered in any professional education program for archivists, is that created by IT departments everywhere when they undertake their routine backup procedures of their organisation's activities. Seen as essential in order to ensure business continuity in the event of a disaster of some kind, these 'digital archives' have been in existence since the beginning of the IT industry. While generally not focused on long-term or permanent retention, and with a clearly proscribed user group, there are obvious differences to a public archive. However, the well established practices and procedures in place for managing such 'collections', which have a very high value for the organisation, could possibly inform the management of digital materials within the archival world more generally. A number of commercial, packaged backup and recovery (access) options are available, some tailored for specific situations (an example is docSTAR), again potentially offering guidance to help inform the debate outside of the IT arena.

The emergence of user-generated or maintained archives is another driver for change within the profession. Establishment of digital-only archives can be undertaken with very limited resources using a different model for defining collections and providing access. Usually subject based, such archives have grown in recent times driven by the Web 2.0 philosophy of user engagement – anyone can participate. An example of this approach is the 9/11 Archive established in December 2001 which encourages input of any material - as long as it is in digital form. Thus it may include photographs, stories, rants and raves, oral histories, poetry etc - there is no curation undertaken, no selection for permanent retention. This successful archive, holding well over 150,000 digital items, has been managed with minimal resourcing, very much reliant upon the 'crowd' for its content, description etc. It is very much a case of buyer beware - the traditional archival concerns of reliability and authenticity have no place here - the user has to determine such aspects for his or herself (Pymm, 2010). The long-term preservation of this archive has been 'contracted out' - the Library of Congress taking on this role given the lack of resources and expertise associated with the Archive itself.

Such a model has no space for traditional activities such as appraisal, the function of identifying records of permanent value based on their completeness and reliability, and their potential use as evidential, research, informational or historical materials which has long held sway as the key paradigm guiding the archival function. Thus Dearstyne quotes from the well known 1986 Society of American Archivists' report that "The selection of records of enduring value is the archivist's first responsibility" (1993, p.69) and Couture more recently confirmed appraisal as "the noblest function, the central core of contemporary archival practice" (2005, p.107). But is this focus predicated on an archive collection concerned primarily on government or business records, used to provide evidence of regulatory compliance? Does it have its roots in the past where for many, there was a confident, positivist view that a trained professional, in this case the archivist, could stand neutrally above the records and determine which were 'important' enough to survive, which could be consigned to oblivion? And was there a very practical impetus driving the need for appraisal in that the physical storage, description and later access to vast collections of paper material were simply beyond the resources of any organisation, thus leading to the need to reduce the size of the problem in order to manage it successfully?

Recent years, contemporaneous with the growth of digital records, have seen a growth in the discourse surrounding activities such as appraisal that draws on concepts from postmodernism with a recognition that actions are not value-free, but mediated by the environment and the individual's response to that environment. There has been a growing recognition of the power of archives, their relevance (or lack thereof) to marginalised groups in society and the need to acknowledge that power and the necessary corollary that goes with it – responsibility. Cook and Schwartz talk about the need to "internalize accountability until it becomes the script by which we act" (2002, p. 185) with a willingness for the archivist to be open, reflective practitioners while Cox ponders on whether the process of how records came to be in the archive may be just as interesting for a researcher as the records themselves (2002, p.309). Expanding on this viewpoint, Ketelaar talks of the record as being a "repository of meanings", with "different meanings being assigned to the same resource by different people at different times" (2011, np.) and Nesmith posits records as being "active agents in creating what we perceive, not passive carriers of objective facts" (2009, p.3). If this is indeed the case, then the traditional appraisal paradigm becomes more problematic.

Given the existence of these key drivers that are impacting upon the commonly held view of what constitutes an archive and how it should be run, this paper argues that education for the profession needs to take into account this broader view of the archival enterprise and how it affects curriculum content and delivery. And this at a time when increasingly, universities are becoming more and more business-like in their approach, looking at cost effectiveness and research income; moving away from the humanities and dropping courses with low enrolments and small faculties (see for instance Gelder, 2012; Stewart, 2012). Challenging indeed but at the same time, never has there been more need of thoughtful, reflective records and archives practitioners with an understanding of the context within which they work and the perspective to deal with the myriad types of records they will encounter, cope with rising public and government expectations of access and transparency, and capable of dealing effectively with the sheer volume of material to be handled.

Education

In a wide-ranging paper written in the mid 1990s, Robert Martin details the evolution of formal education programs for both the library and archival professions in the US. He concludes that, for a range of reasons, professional education programs for archivists had been piecemeal and poorly developed until the 1970s, commenting that the profession "had not (at that time) yet reached a consensus on what archivists needed to know, much less on where and how they would learn it" (1994, p. 556). Over ten years later, Bastian and Yakel undertook an in-depth examination of the North American situation, concluding that things had improved but noting that there was a wide disparity in the quantity and density of courses and a lack of a standardised curriculum (2006, p. 149). A review of the situation in Australia today, with four universities offering postgraduate qualifications recognised by the Australian Society of Archivists and RIM Professionals Australasia, shows some overlap in course requirements but also distinct differences, driven very much it is reasonable to speculate, by the placement of the specialisation within a specific School or Faculty with its own particular emphasis, and the interests of the teaching staff. Thus one School offers the specialisation within an overarching Masters of Business Information in a Faculty of Information Studies; another is situated in the School of Computer and Security Science; the remaining two sit within a School or Department of Information Studies. It seems the Australian situation too, has not completely settled on a universal core.

The challenge today in developing a curriculum to meet all needs is to fit in what has traditionally been seen as core archival knowledge (appraisal, arrangement and description, functional analysis etc.) as well as including generic skills covering business, project management and advocacy approaches; building a research capability and commitment; and doing all this within an umbrella understanding of the big picture and context within which archives operate. Oh, and ensure a considerable level of IT knowledge and understanding. A big ask. And at the same time trying to balance the big picture perspective expected of a university education ("Graduate education is about 'why' not 'how to' in any operational sense" (Nesmith 2009, p.10), together with the expectations of most students and future employers ("Educators sometimes face the criticism that their graduates do not arrive in the workplace able to just step in and start work" (Anderson 2007, p.99). This alone requires a challenging balancing act. But this crowded curricula and need for balance are not unique to the archives and records fields and while not everyone is going to be happy with the course content and balance proposed, increasing dialogue between educators and practitioners will at least help both sides understand the rationale behind revised curriculums and allow for two-way feedback with the profession. However this does raise the question which profession and which practitioners? Is it just those who call themselves archives or records managers? Or their representative professional associations? Or should this be expanded to include repository managers, collection managers of all types, related cultural heritage professionals, conservators, other information professionals and those involved with management of IT data more generally.

Any education for the professions today has to at the very least acknowledge some core generic skills and attributes which seem common across the spectrum. Most professional bodies representing these groups call for this basic knowledge to be included in any university program. A recent panel discussion from key educators and leaders in the archival field noted the need to produce graduates with strong communication skills who appreciated the need for transparency and accountability, as well as having the ability to take a big picture, multidisciplinary approach to their

work (ACA@UBC, 2009). Such core knowledge can be considered as the foundation for virtually any student aiming to enter into a profession – whether it is in the records, archives or other information fields or elsewhere. Thus there is an expectation that a recent graduate, particularly at the Masters level, will have some knowledge of management, in particular human resource management and project planning; have well developed communication skills; be able to demonstrate initiative and creativity; understand the need for research and have at least the foundation knowledge and skills for developing a research program; be aware of ethics and relevant codes and their implementation in practice; understand fundamental IT principles and practices; and increasingly, have a grounding in sociology (including in the Australian context, indigenous studies). For such subject areas, an intensive introductory program is necessary which serves as the essential framework, but is flexible enough to enable a level of 'tailoring' to help a specific cohort identify readily with the examples, case studies and readings. This idea of subjects shared across faculties or the university (and thus having a significant enrolment) is of course already established practice, particularly at the undergraduate level, and is very attractive to university administrators and also to busy Faculty who can then take a subject shell and tailor it according to their requirements, rather than create a new subject completely.

Moving up from these basic, generic subjects, there would seem to be a level of subjects which would be relevant to all the cultural heritage sector, broadly defined, and the information studies disciplines (including records and archives and IT). Data curation and digital preservation; traditional preservation; access and users; metadata and descriptive standards; copyright and related legals such as donation or loan agreements; more targeted IT knowledge covering digitisation, web presence and open standards etc. Such subjects start to focus in on the specific knowledge and skills required to be effective in the records and archives work place while still providing good coverage of the broader context and its applicability to the wider environment of the information and cultural heritage sectors. These subjects can also be offered outside these two sectors to the broader university population in an effort to build up numbers and viability. Thus at CSU subjects such as digital preservation and the traditional preservation subject taught out of the School of Information Studies have attracted students from other schools and faculties, helping to raise enrolment numbers.

Finally, the third tier focuses in on knowledge specific to the records and archives professions, providing the key components that differentiate our field from the other information or cultural heritage fields. This is also where options can be presented to students to enable them to have some choice in the professional or career trajectory they wish to undertake. This is also where the challenge lies to have enough faculty available, with the appropriate knowledge base, to develop and administer a range of subjects with inevitably small enrolments across potentially a wide range of topics. And perhaps this is an area where cooperation across the four schools in Australia and also further afield has some potential to provide the weight of numbers to enable a range of options to be offered students. The model of the WISE consortium, with which some of you may already be familiar, comprises a group of 15 LIS schools from Australia, New Zealand and the US that collaborate in making available to students from any participating university the possibility of undertaking one or two subjects offered by any of the schools involved, may work equally as well focused on the records and archives environment. Thus a CSU student may undertake a specialised subject offered by one of the other schools which is not available at CSU and the reverse also happens, with students from another institution taking a subject offered by us. There are no costs

involved and while there is some complexity particularly in regard to timings and assessment styles, it can be resolved, with benefits to all involved.

For the WISE model to function usefully though, given that students may be dispersed over a number of continents, the subjects do need to be offered in distance mode. Which raises the whole issue of distance education (DE) as an appropriate tool for building this knowledge. This is not the place to debate the merits or otherwise of DE except to acknowledge that it now seems firmly entrenched as an option for many information studies courses (including those focusing on archives and records). To this author, working solely with DE students, it does seem a suitable tool for delivering such an education and with the growth of the online environment generally, including classrooms in virtual worlds, the possibilities to enrich the DE experience today are significant. Assuming DE is acceptable then the opportunity exists under this model for collaboration and cooperation across institutions - locally and internationally - to the benefit of all concerned. Initial set up takes some time and organisation, and requires input from the relevant accrediting bodies to ensure they are happy with what is being offered, as well as working with university administration to facilitate cross-institutional recognition. But once this has been done and agreements are in place, there is real potential, especially for institutions in a small country such as Australia with inevitably low potential student numbers, to considerably enrich the program being offered, broadening its content and scope, with the possibility of attracting further enrolments because of this.

Conclusion

The profession has long worried about maintaining its identity through developing a distinct profession underpinned by a clear and targeted knowledge base. Given the 'blurring of the lines' in recent years between records, information, cultural heritage and IT, it is easy to see why the discussion has evolved and seems to be ongoing. For educators, there is an added dimension created by cash-strapped universities looking to rationalise offerings by moving away from 'boutique' courses with low enrolments and small faculties to those courses offering economies of scale and the potential to acquire serious research income. Combined, these factors do suggest a need to re-consider how archives education is offered in a country such as Australia with its limited numbers and dispersed student base. Identifying generic core subjects; working with others in the IT, cultural heritage and broader information studies to determine the cross-over and possible sharing of common subjects; then focusing in on specialisations and how a range of subjects can be offered through collaboration and cooperation across the sector are key steps in moving forward. Such developments need to be undertaken jointly with the relevant professional associations in order to ensure their requirements for accreditation are still met and to provide the basis for an ongoing dialogue on continuing professional development activities that are essential to support professionals in this rapidly changing environment. As Cox and Larsen (2008, p.315) conclude, “we need to immerse our students into a very large and deep ocean of interdisciplinary studies...” in order for such students to prosper and lead the profession forward into this new age.

Educators have a responsibility to their students to provide the best education possible, but they also have a wider responsibility to society more generally (Cox, 2006). And perhaps the kindred professional associations need to work closer together to identify common requirements (and divergence), encouraging educators to greater cooperation, in order to achieve this best education

that works for everyone - practitioner, educator, and importantly, our users and potential users - society more generally.

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