

## *Reforming the Archival Curriculum to Meet Contemporary Needs*

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The film director Stanley Kubrick once said, “if you can talk brilliantly about a problem, it can create the consoling illusion that it has been mastered.” There is no lack of talk about the problem of educating archivists, but it is hardly yet solved.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Australian educator Ann Pederson, though she sees recent improvements, considers the result of all the talk being “a deepening cycle of professional frustration, impotence, and finally [it may be?] occupational oblivion.”<sup>2</sup> Part of the problem is that it has been difficult to create appropriate circumstances for archival education, particularly in North America. But another part of the problem, the one I shall concentrate on, is that the expression of what the archival curriculum should be and how it can be packaged for delivery in a curriculum supposes a conjunction between what the student needs to know and what practitioners have to do. So long as archivists were educated to deal with records of a relatively remote past and to work in large, centralized repositories, a certain conjunction between the two existed, but that condition is changing. Many writers on archival education assume that archivists will have to possess new knowledge and do new things to survive in the information age. Speaking for the school where he teaches, Carol Couture says that “we are convinced it would be beneficial to train our students in an expanded archival science which opens a much broader and much more promising job market to them.”<sup>3</sup> This article surveys the past and present orientation of archival education, and makes some observations about how it can respond to contemporary needs. It relies heavily on the author’s experience teaching in the Master of Archival Studies Programme in the School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. It takes as its context primarily the scene in Canada and the United States, but looks broadly at aspects of curriculum in Europe in the past.

### *Lessons from the Past*

Archivists in Canada and the United States do not have much experience in building formal curricula of archival education. Most archivists currently working began to learn about archives after they took a job. Competence grew in the doing, and knowing grew by reflection on the doing. The deficiencies of making archivists in that way obviously informed recent efforts to devise a formal curriculum of pre-appointment education. Most of these efforts have tried to translate knowledge built up in the course of treatment of archives in the archival institutions established and developed over the last century or so. Because the experience of archival education is somewhat longer and richer in Europe, it is worth looking at for clues as we attempt to detect the needs of the future.

The first thing that can be said about the European experience of archival education is that it is anything but uniform, if we take archival education to presume formal instruction of a body of archival knowledge. In some countries, notably in Scandinavia, the situation is little different from our own. Even in countries where formal archival education is long established, the traditional curriculum is undergoing reform to take account of contemporary needs. The most important thing about that curriculum is that it featured a great deal more than archival science.

As Luciana Duranti has shown, the kernel of archival doctrine developed from diplomatics and was transformed beginning about the middle of the nineteenth century into an increasingly elaborated body of theory and method meant to guide the treatment of archives.<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Vittani, a professor in the archival school at Milan in the early part of this century, saw the outcome in these terms: "A graduate from a professional school must be armed to deal with problems, to compare situations with what he has learned, and to solve them."<sup>5</sup> Slowly archival doctrine (or archival science, if you like) became the central subject of the archivist's study, even if diplomatics, paleography, sigillography, languages, the history of institutions and law, and other subjects supported or complemented the exercise. Many of the arguments and hesitations about archival education this side of the Atlantic happened because these complementary subjects of support were either mistaken for its central substance or dismissed as being inapplicable because they were needed only to understand very old archives. So, because archival knowledge hereabouts grew in the doing, commentators on archival education were left either to tout complementary subjects like history and political science as the necessary substance of the intellectual preparation of archivists, to ride on the coat-tails of other, apparently related disciplines, or to suppose that there is not enough intellectual substance to be transmitted in pre-appointment education that could not be transmitted on the job. One or another of these perceptions was often behind the search to place archival education inside some supposedly congenial discipline, usually library science or history.

Archival science did not always dominate the intellectual formation of European archivists because the demands of complementary subjects often took most of the attention and effort. For instance, even today, this orientation is expressed in the goal and curriculum of the programme of studies of the Austrian Institute for Historical Research to educate archivists and other professionals in the heritage field. The programme aims to impart a profound knowledge of the auxiliary sciences of history.

The curriculum of the institute concentrates on the study of history, law, economics, archaeology and historical monuments, paleography, and diplomatics, but also includes the study of information science. The study of archival science and contemporary records takes up a minority of the students' time.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, post-appointment education in strictly archival subjects was, and still is, quite common in Europe, where in one fashion or another, always remembering that the qualifications for appointment may be very stringent in terms of the complementary knowledge needed, the archivist went and still goes to school after getting a job, as is the case in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, for example. Moreover, post-appointment, and often pre-appointment students, like those at the French *l'École nationale des Chartes*, receive state support for their professional education quite beyond the North American norm.

One other past pattern is revealed in the aims of *l'École nationale des Chartes*. The objectives of the archivist-paleographer course are first to dispense, for documents of all epochs and any nature, the fundamental knowledge, the multidisciplinary methods, and the experience of research which are indispensable to archivists in order to understand, criticize, interpret, exploit, preserve, and communicate the heritage that they will have to manage, and second to assure the pre-professional formation of such persons.<sup>7</sup> These objectives reflect a scholarly and disciplinary attitude quite foreign to most of the North American discourse about archival education until quite recently. They express the idea that intellectual formation of a very high order, emphasizing the study of the universal characteristics of archives, comes before and produces the foundation for practice. At *l'École nationale des Chartes* this formation is achieved through the study of complementary subjects such as law and economics, archaeology, the history of art, languages, literature, and library science, as well as archival doctrine, the history of archives, diplomatics, paleography, and the other so-called auxiliary sciences of history.

Lacking these traditions of deep study of complementary and auxiliary disciplines allied to archival science in a single articulated programme of study, and faced with a highly pragmatic tradition of forming archivists, North American archivists have had to build the intellectual substance of a formal curriculum from the ground up in an academic climate little inclined to support the autonomy and viability of archival science. They have had to reinvent for themselves the effects, if not the precise substance, of classical European archival education in pre-appointment, graduate programmes founded on a theoretical and scholarly perspective to build a discipline capable of meeting today's needs.

It is not without reason that archival education was built on a large dose of knowledge complementary to archival science. Every archivist must possess knowledge of the way society has functioned and functions today in order to understand the context in which archives past and present were generated. If students of archives come with no prescribed background in history, law, economics, political science, and aspects of the social sciences necessary to understanding this context, there are essentially two options to make up for the deficiency: either to send them off somewhere to study those subjects or to take up the task inside the archival curriculum.

The integrated route is not just preferable, it is essential. Archivists cannot leave so important a task of intellectual formation to others. In the traditional European curriculum, the study of complementary subjects and auxiliary sciences created the knowledge and skills necessary to understand the context of archives remote from the present. It also imparted knowledge of languages and scripts needed to read the documents. All this learning made archivists erudite scholars. Study of archival science or doctrine equipped them for their professional work. The task in North America has been to import an element of the necessary complementary and auxiliary studies into the scholarly pursuits of archivists, direct them exclusively to archival concerns, and otherwise advance archival science to meet contemporary needs.

The issue is: How does the archivist understand context? It seems unlikely that it will be found in the perspective of any other discipline. Therefore, it has to come from within the discipline as an essential part of it. Several elements of the classical curriculum contrived to inculcate knowledge of context. The history of archives facilitated comparison of how archives in various contexts came into being and existed; the history of law followed customs, constitutions, laws, regulations, legal procedures and the like as they cultivated a vital part of the context of archives; the history of organizations and their administration fleshed out another aspect even closer to home; diplomatics, with its perspective on persons and acts in a juridical system, provided a deep view of the context of the single archival document or record; and paleography illuminated writing as sign and signifier in social context.

It is worth noting that all these subjects were historical, but not at all in the sense of historiographical. They were not about historical writing or historical research as it is undertaken for the purposes of historiography. The objective, as l'École nationale des Chartes puts it, is "pour comprendre, critiquer, interpreter, exploiter, conserver et communiquer le patrimoine que [l'archiviste] aura a gérer." Archivists do not study historical subjects in some diffuse effort to comprehend past social contexts for their own sake, but rather to understand, critically interpret, exploit, preserve, and communicate the archival heritage in their charge. These historical studies, all of them with a place in the archival curriculum, are essentially auxiliary sciences of archives, if you like, each to be understood and used by archivists for their purposes, the overarching one being the cultivation of a deep sense of the symbiosis of archives with their context. This is what Hugh Taylor described as "the documentary context of the record ... set within the larger framework of society."<sup>8</sup> The problem is that, if students do not come to their archival studies with all the necessary background for understanding context, and if they cannot get it in any effective way once they are enrolled, they must still be given the intellectual tools to do it. In any event, even students who are well-prepared with the requisite knowledge of history, political science, and economics, for instance, will not necessarily be prepared to analyze Taylor's "documentary context of the record" in the proper archival terms.

A distinction must be made between studies of the social or juridical system, that is, of the broader functioning of society, and the disciplines usually called the auxiliary sciences of history. Diplomats, paleography, and the like cannot readily be incorporated into other archival subjects. They have their own literature, concepts, and terminology, and need to be instructed, of course with archival ends in mind, *separately as auxiliary subjects of archival science*. The same is not true for the

study of history, law, and administration. The aspects of history, law, and administration which matter to an understanding of how society functions and creates its archives can be instructed in a course or courses with that purpose in mind. This study of context serves two purposes: it sets the methods for understanding how all archives are a product of their social context *and* it cultivates very useful knowledge of how organizations operate which can be applied to understand the very organizations and institutions in which archivists work.

Study of this kind is rare indeed in the North American tradition. Rather, the North American curriculum has been built primarily on the study of what archivists in the repository do with the materials in their holdings, in subjects like arrangement and description, appraisal for acquisition and selection, reference service, and preservation. Of course every archives has its unique context, but how does the archivist look at it? What is the method of studying it? Where are the examples of the application of the method? One can find pieces of the puzzle in archival finding aids in the administrative-historical or biographical exposition of context, and some of the matter has come out in the effort to understand fonds and develop methods of arrangement and description, as might be expected. More to the point, a number of students in the University of British Columbia's Master of Archival Studies Programme (MAS) have written theses which have employed archival functional analysis to classes of organizations, such as municipalities, universities, churches, and school boards, and classes of persons, such as university professors and visual artists,<sup>9</sup> but the task of putting together the various elements of historical, constitutional, legal, and administrative studies in a single comprehensive view of how archivists go about studying context remains to be done. Without such a view, archivists will be unable to draw on the knowledge of how society operates developed by other disciplines, for they will have nothing substantial to judge it against or fit it into. They will also continue to be open to the claim that they must make complementary study of those same disciplines a dedicated part of our own curriculum. But worst of all, students will not be prepared with the intellectual equipment to analyze new contexts and circumstances and devise solutions to the record problems they encounter, which Vittani said should be the essential outcome of archival education.<sup>10</sup>

The essential elements of the archivist's contextual study have been combined in a single course in the Master of Archival Studies Programme entitled "The Juridical Context of Canadian Archives." The course has three objectives:

- to provide an overview of the constitutional, legal, and administrative foundations of Canadian government as they affect the creation, accumulation, use, and disposition of public and private archival documents;
- to examine the evolution of the structure, functions, and activities of public and private organizations in order to identify the kinds of information which are important to communicate about the context of archives; and
- to examine the juridical context as it affects the creation, accumulation, use, and disposition of personal archival documents.

These objectives are met as much by working out the terms and methods of studying archival context as they are by imparting certain knowledge of the actual subject matter of the course, which is described as follows:

- fundamental concepts of law forming the basis of the Canadian legal system: sources, classification, and hierarchy of law; rights and duties under the law; the delegation of powers;
- origins and evolution of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers of Canadian federal, provincial, and municipal government;
- structure, functions, activities, and procedures of Canadian public bodies as they affect the creation, accumulation, use, and disposition of archival documents; and
- the current Canadian legislative and regulatory environment as it affects the creation, accumulation, use, and disposition of archival documents: archival laws and regulations; access to information and privacy laws; copyright law; replevin; law governing export and import of cultural properties; tax law and donation of archival materials; legal principles and procedures relevant to the documentation process.

This study of context employs the diplomatic notion of the juridical system, but the substance of diplomatics is inculcated in a companion MAS course entitled “The Nature of Archival Materials.” In this course, the objectives are:

- to provide an understanding of the characteristics of archival material and mastery of fundamental archival terminology;
- to develop the intellectual framework for the systematic identification and critical evaluation of archival material;
- to give students the ability to analyze documents on the basis of their form, formation, and consequences;
- to familiarize students with archival aggregations of documents and their interrelationships; and
- to develop an appreciation of the nature, function, use, and value of documentary evidence of actions and transactions.

In effect, this course combines the concepts of diplomatics with fundamental archival concepts to elucidate the foundations of archival theory. The two courses on the nature of archives and their juridical context are intentionally complementary. They present the essential elements of diplomatic and archival theory together with the archival method of analyzing context. They are taught at the outset of the programme in order to provide a firm intellectual foundation for all other studies.

### ***Responding to Contemporary Needs***

On another aspect of what has traditionally been part of archival science, archivists have been slow to move. It was perhaps inevitable that, for North Americans, archival science looked mostly like the things that archivists do to records once they cross the threshold of the archival repository. In the traditional curriculum, the study of the

history of archives, the preparation for the detective work needed to understand how ancient archives came into being and were put together, and the study of the literature on record-keeping together instilled a keen understanding of everything bearing on records creation, classification, and control. Much about the making of good archives has therefore been left to others, who manifestly do not do a good job of it, to judge by the poorly-classified, ill-managed, and badly-controlled records that come into our care, to say nothing of the woefully inadequate texts on these subjects. Good archives are made of records which first effectively serve the purposes for which they were created and then are reduced to adequate memory of the activities which brought them into being.

If archivists are to be society's records experts, they have to bring the study of record creation, classification, and control into their ken in order to be able to cure the ills that cannot be repaired after the fact of record creation and organization. All subsequent use and disposition of records depend on how they are created, classified, handled, and controlled. A thoroughgoing knowledge of all records activities and how they are effectively performed is an essential part of the science of making good archives as adequate memory of the activities that generated them.

Today the elements of what is usually called records management cannot be instructed without reference to the generation of records in electronic or digital form. In fact, the study of the management of traditional and electronic records cannot be divorced, because in principle the two must be managed in an integrated fashion. With that end in mind, the MAS Programme has devised a course called "Records in Office Systems." Its objectives are:

- to provide basic knowledge of management theory as it applies to creating, controlling and maintaining, using, and disposing of records in contemporary offices;
- to provide the intellectual framework with which to evaluate record-keeping systems and advise administration about them; and
- to introduce students to the application of information technology to record-keeping in office systems.

Further study of the management of electronic records is available in a senior course whose objectives are:

- to familiarize students with the management processes of creating, maintaining, and controlling electronic records;
- to provide an understanding of relevant information technology standards; and
- to provide a forum for discussing the impact of information technology on society's creation, maintenance, and use of records in electronic form.

In time, questions of arrangement and description, appraisal, and reference as they apply to electronic records will have to be incorporated into courses which already exist on those subjects. For the time being, however, electronic records deserve a special course of their own.

Two other matters are perennially on the educational agenda these days: the need to prepare archivists to apply computer technology to their work and the need to educate them to be managers. The first of these issues is slowly being resolved. It is still necessary to provide a course on the application of computers to archival work, but this need is rapidly being overtaken by the introduction of computer applications into almost every facet of the curriculum. As well, each year students come with more knowledge of the use of computers. Currently, the MAS Programme offers a course on "Access and Retrieval Systems" which covers all the fundamentals of building archival information systems or databases, including those employed to control both active and inactive records. This course includes study of the search and retrieval tools available on the Internet. There are other elective courses available in the School on the subjects of on-line searching and design of textual databases. The overall goal in this area is clear. Archivists have to be experts in applying information technology to all aspects of their work. The current environment demands so in our field as in all others. When allied to the knowledge of archival theory, method, and practice, this knowledge can become a powerful tool in graduates' hands.

The question of management studies or how to equip archivists for their role in managing archival institutions and programmes is more thorny. As Michael Cook puts it:

... it is agreed that archivists should see themselves as managers, and that the services they provide should be evaluated in terms comparable with the evaluation of any other public service. They should be able to draw up strategic and tactical plans, assemble and deploy resources of money, personnel, and assess relative success or failure of programs. These operations demand the skills and outlook of people involved in management rather than those of people involved in the acquisition and passing on of research knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

He further notes that there are in fact two quite different needs: equipping beginning archivists with the knowledge and attitudes they will need to flourish at junior levels and equipping senior archivists with the specific management skills they need in their jobs. Pre-appointment training cannot obviously do the latter, but the former is definitely one of its tasks. The goal of the MAS course on management is "to prepare professional archivists to work effectively within a larger organization and to assume basic managerial responsibilities within their unit." There are also courses on personnel management and financial management available in the School. The goal in this area is to prepare graduates for the management environment of the 1990s and to impress upon them good principles of management, from which they can develop their skills through experience and continuing education.

### *Conclusion*

These observations on reforming the archival curriculum are not meant to obscure the continuing importance of learning about traditional subjects like arrangement and description, appraisal, reference service, and the like. In many ways, these subjects continue to be part of the fundamental core of professional knowledge. It is equally important to cultivate the kind of scholarly outlook championed by l'École nationale

des Chartes. Students do need to see themselves as learning a scholarly discipline and should look forward to a career in which they can pursue research interests to contribute to archival knowledge. All students in the MAS Programme must take a course on research methods, and every student must write either a thesis or a major essay. However, the broadened curriculum that Couture sees would seem to run along the lines suggested above, with room of course for variation in any particular curriculum. In a practical sense, the outcome of this reform should be to equip graduates to occupy a wide range of positions in which archival knowledge can be applied, from traditional posts in archival institutions to new ones involved in the design and administration of electronic record-keeping systems. Pederson's fear of occupational obliteration seems too pessimistic. This reform of the archival curriculum to meet contemporary needs should equip graduates to strengthen the profession and move it into new realms where archival expertise is needed.

### Notes

- \* This article bears faint resemblance to a paper delivered to the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists held in Regina, Saskatchewan in June 1995.
- 1 For two recent reviews of discussion of the question of archival education, one in the European and the other in the North American context, both dwelling particularly on the relation between archival theory and education, see Luciana Duranti, "The Archival Body of Knowledge: Archival Theory, Method, and Practice, and Graduate and Continuing Education," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 34 (Winter 1993), pp. 8-24 and Roy Schaeffer, "From Craft to Profession: The Evolution of Archival Education and Theory in North America," *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994), pp. 21-34.
- 2 Ann Pederson, "Development of Research Programs," *Archivum* 39 (1994), p. 317, where her remark is made under the heading "The Professional Knowledge Base: An Essential Resource."
- 3 Carol Couture, "The New Reality and Outlook for Development of Archival Science Issues in Teaching in Our Discipline," *Janus* (1995.2), p. 69.
- 4 Duranti, "Archival Body of Knowledge," passim.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 6 International Council on Archives, *Directory of Schools and Courses of Professional Training for Archivists* (Koblenz, 1992), pp. 26-28.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 8 Hugh Taylor, "Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), p. 35.
- 9 Bill Purver, "Function, Competence and the External Structure of Provenance: A Case Study of a Municipal Corporation," (MAS Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1995); Donna Humphries, "Canadian Universities: A Functional Analysis," (MAS Thesis, UBC, 1991); Blair Galston, "A Functional Analysis of Church Institutions," (MAS Thesis, UBC, 1994); Jay Gilbert, "An Investigation into the Functions of School Boards in British Columbia," (MAS Thesis, UBC, 1994); Frances Fournier, "Faculty Papers: Appraisal for Acquisition and Selection," (MAS Thesis, UBC, 1990); and Victoria Blinkhorn, "The Records of Visual Artists: Appraising for Acquisition and Selection," (MAS Thesis, UBC, 1988).
- 10 I take it that Tom Nesmith is arguing for roughly the same thing when he speaks of the importance of what he calls "provenance knowledge." See his article "Hugh Taylor's Contextual Idea for Archives and the Foundation of Graduate Education in Archival Studies," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 13-37.
- 11 Michael Cook, "The Development of Archival Education," *Janus* (1995.2), p. 59.