

Learning to Think Archivally: Thesis Research in the Archival Studies Program at the University of Manitoba

TOM NESMITH

RÉSUMÉ Cet article décrit le rôle des thèses dans l'enseignement de l'archivistique au sein du programme de maîtrise en études archivistiques de l'Université du Manitoba. L'auteur soutient que les thèses jouent un rôle important en apprenant aux étudiants à penser de façon archivistique ou en leur permettant d'identifier les problèmes significatifs, à conceptualiser leurs questions, à faire des recherches dans les sources appropriées, à analyser et rassembler les informations pertinentes et à partager les résultats avec les autres. Il fait valoir que cette capacité de recherche est vitale dans le monde de travail de plus en plus complexe des archivistes en ce XXI^e siècle.

ABSTRACT This article outlines the role of the thesis in the approach to archival education of the master's program in archival studies at the University of Manitoba. The article discusses the role of the thesis in educating students to think archivaly, or to enable them to identify significant work problems, conceptualize their issues, research the relevant sources, analyze and assemble the resulting information, and share it with others. The author maintains that this research ability is vital in the increasingly complex archival workplace of the twenty-first century.

The University of Manitoba's masters program in archival studies offers a research-based approach to the education of professional archivists. This approach draws on the Association of Canadian Archivists' guidelines for masters programs in archival studies, which recommend that a research thesis be part of the curriculum.¹ A compulsory thesis has been a key feature of the University of Manitoba curriculum since the program's first class met in 1991. The nineteen completed theses, whose abstracts are published in this issue of *Archivaria*, are the product to date of this research emphasis. Twenty-nine other theses are currently in progress.

This research emphasis has grown in relevance in recent years because

¹ The guidelines are published as "Guidelines for the Development of a Two-Year Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies Programme," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-90). The University of Manitoba archival studies program is part of the Joint Masters Program in History, which is administered by the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg.

archival work is becoming increasingly complex, due mainly to dramatic increases in the volume and variety of records and in the diversification of the social, cultural, and administrative roles of archives. In response to this development, Canadian and international archival literature overflows with contributions to agendas for advancing the field, through better knowledge of a great range of subjects: the history and current character of computerized and other media of records and records-keeping; archival history; new macro-appraisal strategies; the implications of postmodernism for understanding archival concepts, records, and functions; the distinctive complexities of personal archives; new web-based, richly contextual description and information retrieval possibilities; the emerging focus on the impact of public and information policy on archives; relationships between archives, other cultural institutions, and an array of allied professions; and the roles and often problematic images of archives in society.

At the University of Manitoba the primary focus of graduate professional education for archivists in this context is introducing students to the most complex and advanced aspects of archival work and the principal problems archivists face in tackling these difficult challenges, since these aspects of archival work cannot be readily learned on the job. Routine, straightforward practices can be learned on the job, in post-appointment workshops, and with the help of the program's compulsory three-month internship. Students at the University of Manitoba address the more significant intellectual demands of archival work in seminar discussions and research essays, the internship, and in a more extended manner in the thesis. The curriculum overall, and particularly the thesis, enables students to wrestle with the most advanced research in archival studies and relevant research in related disciplines. This teaches them to learn how they can help their future employers and the profession to meet these professional challenges, in part through the research they have learned to do. Mark Vajcner, a graduate of the program and now University Archivist at the University of Regina, recently observed that this is the most valuable outcome of archival education at the University of Manitoba. "What I remember most," he writes, "is the effort to teach us to *think* archivally [or provide] the intellectual tools to work our way through any situation, through any challenge, that may present itself."²

Above all then, the University of Manitoba program, capped by the thesis, teaches students *to learn* about archives. This is the critical purpose of graduate archival education because archivists are increasingly presented with a variety of complex new challenges, whether the challenges are in the forefront

2 Mark Vajcner, "Generation X Enters the Archives: Thoughts on Being an Archivist," an unpublished paper presented at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Winnipeg, 7 June 2001, p. 4 (emphasis original).

of the profession's agenda, or, encountered in adapting to a new workplace, or to new or more senior responsibilities in a current workplace. Since no one can know everything about archiving, especially given its rapidly expanding and changing knowledge base, archival work involves a career-long process of versatile adaptation, learning, and renewal. Archivists adapt by knowing how to learn about new archival problems and processes. For the most challenging and important ones, they adapt through knowledge of past experiences gained from the study of the history of records, archives, and societies, and of the best thinking on the most complex and significant contemporary archival records, functions, and issues.

Students at the University of Manitoba take three full graduate courses designed to cover these areas of knowledge: "History of Recorded Communication," which focuses on what an archivist needs to know about records creation, recording media, records-keeping and various types of records; "Selected Problems in Archival Studies," which covers both archival history and problems encountered in performing key contemporary archival functions, relying on the knowledge imparted in "History of Recorded Communication"; and a history course, usually in Canadian history, which enhances research skills, provides the broadest context for understanding the history of records and archives for Canadian archivists working in Canadian archives, and assists in locating and interpreting the informational content in the records. Students also do the internship under the supervision of an experienced professional archivist, with whom they can test and discuss ideas acquired in the classroom, explore possibilities for a thesis topic, and learn about the day-to-day operations of an archives. Over the history of the program the many supervising archivists have formed a valuable group of extended faculty.³ In addition to the internship, which has the weight of a half course, students take a further half course. Students have typically met this requirement by taking a course either in the Faculty of Management or in Computer Science. In 2001 the program introduced for this requirement a half course entitled "Archives and Public Policy Issues" taught by Gordon Dodds, the Archivist of Manitoba. This course allows further exploration of archival, access to information, privacy, ombudsman, and audit legislation, records management policies and procedures, and public administration functions such as budgeting, staffing, planning, and reporting.

3 For further information about where students have done internships as well as general information about the program, see the program Web site: <www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/history/archives>. The National Archives of Canada (now the Library and Archives of Canada), the Hudson's Bay Company Archives at the Archives of Manitoba, and the University of Manitoba Department of Archives and Special Collections have been particularly helpful in providing internships to University of Manitoba students over the years.

The thesis allows a student to explore in depth an archival topic identified in the course work and internship. In so doing, in addition to exploring some pertinent archival issue, students develop written and analytical skills of great value in day-to-day archival work. They acquire a set of learning and communication skills which will enable them to identify a significant work problem, conceptualize its issues, research the relevant sources, analyze and assemble the resulting information, and then share it with others. This research ability is an essential attribute that any archivist needs in order to be effective in analyzing and implementing the laws, policies, and procedures governing all archival functions, making difficult appraisal decisions, describing the multifaceted contextual provenance of records, fielding ever-changing research inquiries, and identifying and responding to the key societal and even political changes and challenges an archives faces, and reporting on them cogently for internal management and/or sharing this experience with the profession in a conference paper or publication. The thesis thus offers a rigorous preparation for the key professional activities that a successful archivist must be able to undertake in the increasingly-complex workplace of twenty-first-century archives. A student who completes this intellectual process with one major subject area in a thesis will have learned how to apply that ability to learn about any problem subsequently faced in the workplace.⁴

Thesis research at the University of Manitoba not only fosters the flexibility and adaptability a professional archivist needs, but also the broad range of expertise the profession as a whole requires. The thesis topics therefore vary quite widely – from studies of different types of records and media (including electronic records), archival history of various types of archives, and archival administrative history for use in descriptive work, to issues in other functions such as appraisal, preservation, public programming, and administering access to information and privacy laws. The results so far are promising. As but one way of measuring the effectiveness of the program's research emphasis, four major *Archivaria* articles based on thesis work have been published by gradu-

4 For further elaboration of these aims and approaches and the content of the curriculum of the University of Manitoba program, see the author's "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) and "'Professional Education in the Most Expansive Sense': What Will the Archivist Need to Know in the Twenty-First Century?" *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996). My faculty colleague in the archival studies program, Terry Cook, has written the most recent statement of the program's approach in his "'The Imperative of Challenging Absolutes' in Graduate Archival Education Programs: Issues for Educators and the Profession," *American Archivist* 63, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2000). Cook won the Society of American Archivists' Fellows Posner Award for this article. The award is given annually for the essay published in the *American Archivist* which is judged to be "outstanding" on an aspect of archival administration, history, theory, and/or methodology. For a short report on program activities, see Terry Cook, "Archival Studies at the University of Manitoba: Annual Update," *ACA Bulletin* 26, no. 5 (March 2002).

ates of the program.⁵ Other thesis research under way includes topics such as: the role of archives in the religious life of the Soeurs Grises (Grey Nuns) du Manitoba; archives and the memory of war; the interplay of culture, knowledge, and power in communications and records-keeping by the Oblats de Marie Immaculée of Manitoba, 1845–1960; photographic archives and post-modernism; the concept of “value” in archival appraisal; appraisal of personal archives; appraisal of social welfare records; archives and environmental research; the “new” genealogy and archives; organizational culture and appraisal; and records-keeping and archives for the engineering profession.

Thesis research and writing for the students, and their supervision by faculty, are demanding and time-consuming work. Theses are not always finished as quickly as students and advisors would like, due mainly to the students’ need to take employment opportunities and to life’s other demands and challenges. I am pleased that few students withdraw from the program despite the demands of doing a thesis, usually while working full time. (There have only been seven withdrawals among the 55 students admitted to the program since 1991.) Most students persevere, and report that seeing a thesis through to completion has been well worth the effort, as it focuses the various strands of the curriculum on a substantial professional issue, deepens their understanding of the field’s rich complexity, and proves to have been an effective culmination of their preparation for the workplace.

5 See Deidre Simmons, “The Archives of the Hudson’s Bay Company,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 68–78; Brian Masschaele, “Memos and Minutes: Arnold Heeney, the Cabinet War Committee, and the Establishment of the Canadian Cabinet Secretariat During the Second World War,” *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998), pp. 147–174; and Kathleen Epp, “Telling Stories Around the ‘Electronic Campfire’: The Use of Archives in Television Productions,” *Archivaria* 49 (Spring 2000), pp. 53–83 and “Television from the Trenches: An Archival Review of *No Price Too High*,” *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), pp. 125–138. These three program graduates won the Association for Manitoba Archives Thesis Prize, which is awarded to the author of the best archival studies thesis completed each calendar year in the University of Manitoba program. Other thesis prize winners over the years have been David Horky, Mark Vajcner, Martha McLeod, and Kara Quann.

