

# *Counterpoint*

## *A Forum for Archival Debate and Discussion*

### **Education and the Profession**

The training and professional status of archivists are once again hot issues in Canada, as may be attested by the session on education at the annual meeting of archivists in Edmonton in June 1975 and by the articles by Shirley Spragge and Edwin Welch in the 1974 issue of the *Canadian Archivist*. The Association of Canadian Archivists now has as its first president, Gordon Dodds, who has recorded his strong views favouring the establishment of a graduate programme of archival studies (see *Archives Bulletin*, April 1975). I take issue with the emphasis frequently placed in discussions of archival training on the development of a university course on archival science and management.

Canadians have great faith in their universities. As our lives grow in complexity, we turn to our universities. Simultaneously, universities, often prodded by governments, search for more ways to give people the schooling they demand. But we are beginning to understand that there is more to schooling than meets the eye.

Among the functions of all schooling, including university graduate programmes, are grading and certification. We, as archivists, are now pounding at the door, ready to tout our knowledge as worthy of certification. Most archivists have at least one university degree. We are in quest of another, or, as the case may be, demand another of future entrants to the profession. We have absorbed at least one of the basic lessons of what Ivan Illich calls the hidden curriculum of schools: that instruction leads to learning, that instruction must be packaged as curriculum, and that its consumption be duly graded and certified. In the process, the self-taught becomes suspect. Learning on the job, to take but one example, is widely disdained.

Schools and the bureaucracies in which we work are neatly meshed. Grades, courses and certificates confer promotion and status. Most of us, I suspect, are familiar in one way or another with the dispiriting process of

accepting yet more dreary and unsatisfactory schooling because it will at least lead to a certificate, and perhaps to a job or the required advancement. It is bad enough to make such a compromise. Worse yet, it seems to lock us into more of the same. Having been taught the need to be taught, we lose the incentive to grow in independence. We fit neatly into the bureaucratic structuring of work. We accept that learning on the job means learning how the job is presently done. We get lost in the everyday business of archives.

Archives can be more vibrant places for all workers only if they are institutions where the workers, all workers, are devoted to the conquest of the large and small problems inherent in getting on with the job. Learning, as we are constantly reminded by virtually every critic of institutionalized education, is best pursued in an atmosphere where peers are exercised by common problems. It is our willingness to abdicate our own intelligence and resources that disturbs me most, when we opt for five weeks, seven months or two years more school at the expense of an effort to make our institutions places of learning and growth. A large measure of what goes under the label "professional development" is not my personal development, and has a dubious relationship to the improvement of the archives in which I work. It is merely the gloss on the quest for status. I am convinced that we must resist the pressures to compete for professional status, for success and victory will be hollow. So long as training is seen and is promoted *as a means to* improved professional status, our working environment and lives will suffer. As archivists, we are in a fortunate position. We do not have the millstone of a university course around our neck. Let us make learning environments of our places of work. We might as well expect results from a crusade to create a better climate for learning within our archival institutions as from an effort concentrated on institutionalized schooling.

The creation of such a climate runs us headlong into the bureaucratic structuring of our work. We are bound to clash with traditional bureaucratic demands on our time. That is the point. That clash would be the first step in wresting some control of our institutions from remote bureaucrats, who are rarely the best judges of how we may best get on with the job. The very process of working to create an in-service learning environment stripped of the need to certify would break down the barriers among rankings. We might begin to trust ourselves and others more. It may be difficult to convince people that learning need not be backed by certification and promotion, but that is yet another distasteful aspect of the hidden message of the school/work continuum. The types of exploitation learned in school lead people to accept exploitation at work. In this, I might add, management and unions are frequently as one. Both reinforce the distinctions among workers based on certificates.

I do not have a blueprint for action. Dreamers rarely do. But I am prepared to suggest some directions, in the form of questions.

Who are the logical teachers in our field, a question surely to face the planners of a graduate programme? Certainly, the greatest fund of expertise resides in our senior working (and retired!) archivists, many of whom hold heavy administrative responsibilities. How do we make provision for those senior archivists to share their expertise, both within institutions and across institutional boundaries?

On an individual basis, given provision for study leave, what besides our fawning reliance on school prevents us from designing the research projects which will provide us with the tools we need and fill the gaps in our knowledge or improve practices found inadequate?

Why do we deprecate training programmes sponsored by national and regional associations? Are we more prepared to accept the wisdom of an anointed faculty of professors of archival science than the wisdom dispensed during short periods of exchange and exploration among working archivists?

Why do institutional training programmes for beginning archivists languish? Moreover, what prevents us from giving more rigour to the informal learning which goes on continually?

Why do we fear other experts? Is the only way of preventing their compromising our principles to meet them certificate for certificate? It is a bleak prospect to reflect on the quiescent surrender of archivists to information managers, to systems analysts or to other certified experts, even to a university-trained breed of archival managers.

The pressures on modern Canadian archives makes it enticing to think that a university graduate programme will solve our problems and exalt our status. Though in making my arguments forcefully I may have sounded anti-university, I do not deny the place of university courses designed for working or would-be archivists, so long as much needed improvement in this direction does not blind us to the great potential for training elsewhere in our working and professional lives. Some day I hope to write again in this journal outlining the great advances made in on-the-job learning where I work.

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