

Facing Reality: Implementing Descriptive Standards at the Archives of Ontario

by **HEATHER M. HEYWOOD***

Facing reality in any situation can be a daunting experience. However, the process of recognizing one's problems and identifying areas where change is required is the first crucial step towards improving one's situation. At the Archives of Ontario, we took that first step when we decided to implement descriptive standards. Staff were surprised by the scope of the changes that followed, since they were more profound than was originally anticipated, but most people have been pleased with the results.

The process of facing reality began at the Archives of Ontario around 1986, when the publication of *Toward Descriptive Standards*¹ prompted a number of archivists to ask, "Are we ready for descriptive standards at the Archives of Ontario? How will they fit into what we are doing here?" At the time there were few, if any, consistent policies and procedures in place at the Archives of Ontario, and the archivists themselves had widely varying backgrounds and experience. Individual archivists had developed their own approach to their work, and there was often little or no communication among archivists. Since this had been the situation for more than sixty years, the finding aids and other control documentation were an intimidating hotchpotch of "things that seemed like a good idea at the time." The reality was that descriptive rules, such as those prescribed by *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, would probably have had very little impact in such circumstances if indeed they could have been used at all.

Acting on this realization, the Archives of Ontario established a Task Force on Intellectual Controls in 1987 in order to prepare the institution for the introduction of descriptive rules. As the Task Force explored the issue, however, it became increasingly clear that in order to be effective, descriptive rules had to be implemented within a broad infrastructure of standard descriptive and archival practice. Descriptive rules are only one component of a larger "description programme," which in turn fits into the continuum of functions and processes that make up archival work. The success or strength of any one of the archival functions depends to a greater or lesser degree on the strength of the other functions. Description is one of the functions that is most dependent on the others. For example, if information is not recorded accurately and completely during accessioning, there may be nothing to put into various descriptive elements, such as custodial history or donor restrictions, at a later date when a formal description is done.

The Task Force therefore embarked on a project to revise a whole range of practices and procedures at the Archives of Ontario. Anyone who has ever renovated a room in his/her home will understand the situation which the Task Force faced: a simple project often grows into something much larger, forcing one to decide whether to pursue greater improvements or to stick to the original plans and original budget. The renovations at the Archives took three years and countless meetings, which involved nearly all the archivists. In 1990 the Task Force introduced an institutional manual of policy and procedure which covers appraisal, accessioning, arrangement and description — a whole range of archival practice. Among other things, the Manual outlines what types of information are to be documented throughout these various stages. For example, formats and data elements are specified for everything from the deed of gift and accession form to the final inventory and the chosen access points. The Manual therefore defines the role of descriptive standards within the broader framework of professional practice at the Archives of Ontario.

In the area of description *per se*, the Task Force focused on developing an efficient finding aid system, considering such questions as

- What types of finding aids will be produced?
 - How will they be interrelated?
 - What format is the most effective for each type?
 - What will be the minimum level of detail of description?
 - What kinds of access points will be provided?
 - Will a controlled vocabulary be used for those access points?
 - How will the finding aids be updated when accruals are received?
 - What is to be done with the products of past idiosyncratic practices?
 - What is to be done with the backlog of unprocessed material?
 - How will the institution cope with the quantity of new material received annually?
- Finally, and very importantly,
- How many changes should be implemented at one time?

After considering the last question, the Task Force decided that a new description programme had to be introduced as a whole. A format for inventories was established, incorporating data elements prescribed in *RAD* for all levels of description and all types of media. It was also decided that clear and consistent access points were needed to direct researchers to the new standardized inventories; name and subject authority control was therefore introduced at the same time. In addition, a standard and consistent set of filing rules was adopted for use with catalogue cards and inventories. All of these standards apply across the institution, regardless of medium or subject. It was a lot of change to introduce at once, but since description and its products have a profound impact on researchers, it is not really possible, or fair, to introduce changes in stages — one ends up with a variety of transitional products confusing to everybody. We also realized that we could not put things off, debating issues endlessly and waiting for the perfect solutions to present themselves. This was one of the most difficult lessons to learn: although

research, study and analysis are essential, at some point the institution must decide which ideas seem best and begin to implement them. No matter what decisions are implemented, revisions will be inevitable. In fact, there is only so much one can do in the abstract; new ideas can only be modified and improved after they have been put into practice and then revised in the cold light of experience. Therefore, the Task Force members took their courage firmly in hand and went “cold turkey” — a date was set for the implementation of the new descriptive system, and all old systems were considered closed as of that date.

Closing down the old systems brought us face-to-face with an unpleasant aspect of reality: resource limitations. As mentioned earlier, staff at the Archives of Ontario have sixty years of work behind them. It is unrealistic to think that we shall ever be able to retrofit or upgrade all of the existing inventories. The old inventories are therefore still available in the Reading Room, interfiled among the new, standardized inventories which have been produced in the past two years — clearly, we have not altogether achieved our goal of producing a set of consistent finding aids which researchers can use with little assistance. Another problem arises when accruals are received for series described in an old inventory. In most cases, the old inventories cannot be updated because of their format or because the reasons for the arrangement decisions that were made long ago are not clear. Since description follows arrangement, it can be difficult to craft coherent descriptions when the arrangement of the records does not make sense. We have therefore had to close these existing inventories, draft new descriptions for the accrued records, and try to provide cross-references between the two sets of descriptions.

Resource limitations also influenced our decision to close the old card catalogue. The access points and filing conventions used in the catalogue were so idiosyncratic that the catalogue could not be continued. A new catalogue was started which incorporates a controlled vocabulary, authorized name headings, consistent data elements and descriptive formats, and standard filing rules. As with the old inventories, however, most of the cards in the old catalogue will never be retrofitted, so researchers will always have to check both catalogues to ensure that they have found everything. Obviously, the ideal approach to integrating old and new systems has not been found. Since budgets compel hard decisions, however, we do not have much choice. If the institution hopes to deal with the backlog of undescribed records and keep pace with current acquisitions, then staff cannot spend time redoing old inventories and catalogue records. Until we can find a better solution, or some available funds, the institution will have to depend on its staff of reference archivists to guide researchers through the various concurrent systems.

On the bright side, the new descriptive system appears to be working well, although we have discovered that maintaining a system of standards in a large institution requires a great deal of time, money, and expertise. At the Archives of Ontario, there are forty archivists, physically dispersed over three large floors. Administratively, archivists are assigned to thematic groups of records (containing both government records and private papers) and report to one of three managers. There is also a separate unit of reference archivists. All of these physical and administrative divisions create numerous communication problems. The Task Force concluded, therefore, that a focal point was needed to coordinate the implementation and maintenance of standards. This focal point is provided in two ways at the Archives of Ontario: first, the old Task Force was converted to a permanent Standing Committee on Intellectual Controls, which is composed of archivists from all levels and all media material in the institution. The Committee

is responsible for setting and reviewing policies and procedures and for providing leadership and direction in various aspects of intellectual control. The second focal point is a full-time Descriptive Standards Officer, who ensures that everything works on a daily basis and who is available as a resource person to assist archivists in their use of descriptive standards.

At an institution the size of the Archives of Ontario, where everyone is working on different projects at different times, it is important to have a central position such as the Descriptive Standards Officer in order to ensure consistency and accuracy in the application of standards throughout the institution and to maintain certain databases which must be centrally available to all the archivists and must be updated regularly if they are to be of any use. A good example is the authority control system at the Archives of Ontario. Archivists are responsible for choosing access points and establishing the form of heading — for name headings they use Part II of *RAD*, while for subject headings *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)* and *Canadian Subject Headings (CSH)*. Headings are submitted to the Descriptive Standards Officer, who checks the headings for accuracy, form, and consistency with existing access points, and then adds the new headings to the master authority control file which is available to all the archivists. Because of the number of details that must be checked and the number of records that must be updated in an authority control system, it is more efficient and effective to assign responsibility for these tasks to one person who is familiar with the system, rather than to disperse the tasks among many busy archivists who have other responsibilities (and who may not be interested in the details of authority control).

The Descriptive Standards Officer is always available to archivists to answer questions relating to descriptive standards, to interpret rules, or to do the research necessary to find answers when they are not readily available. Solutions to new problems or exceptions to rules are documented and the information provided to other archivists. The focus provided by the Descriptive Standards Officer in this area enables the archivists to concentrate on their own work, helps to ensure that similar problems are solved in a similar manner and often prevents archivists from duplicating work done by others. The Descriptive Standards Officer has also been involved in providing in-house training to the archivists concerning institutional procedures, as well as descriptive standards and authority control. This training must be ongoing in order to meet the archivists' needs as they start new projects, and to keep them up-to-date with new developments.

Generally speaking, although much has been accomplished in the past few years, we recognize that there is much work still to be done. Once the new records management unit is settled, a cooperative effort must be made in order to get the same standards introduced into various types of records management documentation, so that the information received from government offices and records managers is consistent with archival needs and is in a usable form. Cooperation with the Access Unit is also required in order to see whether anything can be done during arrangement and description to facilitate the Unit's work in applying Ontario's *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, 1987. The Archives needs to explore ways to automate description (as well as other archival functions), and perhaps provide on-line access to the descriptive tools, both in the Reading Room and to researchers at a distance. Of course, archivists will need to keep up with *RAD* as new chapters are drafted and revisions are made. We must also, however, look at ways to educate our users about the changes being made to descriptive tools and ways to train them in how to use our new descriptive system.

The Archives should also look at what kinds of support its archivists need in order to keep up with new expectations. Archivists today are being overwhelmed with all sorts of new responsibilities; in addition to the traditional archival functions, archivists are expected to be conversant with descriptive standards, records management, FOI legislation and electronic records issues — to name but a few. Confronting such a wide variety of issues, most archivists have difficulty keeping track of technical details such as which punctuation to use in a new subject heading. Perhaps the Archives of Ontario should have someone similar to a cataloguer who would look after all the technical aspects of descriptive standards, such as formatting inventories and catalogue cards and establishing the required name and subject headings.²

Obviously, however, the Archives cannot pursue all these new directions at once. We need to set priorities — both within the descriptive standards programme and in relation to the projects and needs of other areas in the institution. There are always a variety of trade-offs to consider: more emphasis on implementing descriptive standards means less resources for developing an acquisitions strategy, for research into electronic records issues or for any number of other projects. On the other hand, delaying the development and implementation of descriptive standards merely puts off the inevitable while adding to the amount of work being done in idiosyncratic and perhaps time-consuming ways; no matter how long one waits, moreover, no time will ever be right for introducing systemic changes. Setting priorities for descriptive standards, therefore, involves cooperation among a range of people, not just the archivists doing descriptive work. It is something that has an impact on the whole institution, not just small, isolated segments of it.

Despite the many faces of reality which the Archives of Ontario has encountered, the institutional experience has been largely positive. Our finding aid system is greatly improved, and archivists are now comfortable with applying standards. We have a strong framework of procedures and standards which should allow us to update and adapt to future changes — whether they be changes in technology, information management or archival science. Implementing descriptive standards takes time, money and commitment from everyone in order to see it through, but we believe that the resulting benefits are worth the effort.

Notes

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1 *Toward Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1985).

2 For staff in small archives, where one or a few archivists are responsible for doing everything, a position such as Descriptive Standards Officer may seem a luxury. In large institutions, however, especially where various kinds of specialization have already been introduced, it should be recognized that not everybody is interested in, or has the skill to deal with, the technical aspects and administrative work involved in maintaining the consistent application of descriptive standards. Positions such as Descriptive Standards Officer and/or some type of archival “cataloguer” have a vital role to play in the development of improved descriptive systems.