Forming "Structures of Exquisite Beauty": Archivists and Education

by TIMOTHY L. ERICSON

Anticipating what future archivists will need to know is a time-honoured tradition in our profession. In the United States it began more than a century ago when concerned historians, acknowledging that archival work was different from their own, took the first tentative steps at defining what archivists of the twentieth century would need to know. At that time there was, of course, no archival profession as such in the United States and so the historians did what seemed logical. They looked northward to their Canadian colleagues and asked Dominion Archivist Douglas Brymner to speak on the subject of Canadian archives at the American Historical Association annual meeting in 1889. In so doing they began a tradition of looking northward to Canada for leadership and guidance in matters concerning archival education that continues even today.

Brymner portrayed in eloquent terms the importance of employing properly educated professionals. The archivist, he noted, "has to collect the rough material to be formed into structures of exquisite beauty in the hands of the skillful [worker]." The alternative, he cautioned, was to have archives "raised by the dishonest and incompetent into unsubstantial erections, which crumble into ruins before the first rude blast of adverse criticism."[1] The archivist would do well, he warned, to remember that "he is only the pioneer whose duty is to clear away obstructions; the cultivated fields would follow."[2] Brymner went on at length to describe how archives in Canada went about their work, highlighting the importance of such skills as the acquisition, classification, and arrangement of archival documents, the latter of which included the use of "tin boxes, each with four pigeon holes."[3] By all accounts Brymner's remarks were well received, and the concern of American historians for preserving archival records continued, resulting in the eventual establishment of the Historical Manuscripts Commission in 1896, and the Public Archives Commission in 1899.[4]

When the Second Annual Conference of Archivists met in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1910, their programme featured an extensive report from delegates who had attended the International Congress of Archivists in Brussels, Belgium. According to the record,

the discussion "concerning the training of archivists awakened unusual interest, [the] introductory remarks being followed by an animated discussion which centered itself around the question whether a legal or historical literary training should be preferred as a preparation for the career of archivist." Some points in the ensuing discussion elicited what was described as a "storm of protest" from delegates in attendance. Those who are familiar with academic parlance can well imagine what the session *really* was like! When the dust had cleared, delegates were able to agree upon endorsing the principle of provenance, the need to pay attention to "modern administrative records" as well as those that were already "historical," the need for more standardization of methodology, and the increased use of cooperation.[5]

At the Fourth Annual Conference of Archivists two years later, delegates were finally ready to accept Waldo Gifford Leland's notion that "the principles of archive economy evolved in European practice [were] applicable to American archives."[6] With the way thus cleared, New York State Historian Victor Hugo Paltsits, inspired by Muller, Feith, and Fruin's manual, enthusiastically proposed the production of a "Manual of Archival Economy for the Use of American Archivists" that would codify what archivists needed to know and serve as a guidebook for twentieth-century archivists. Characterizing the archival records of his day as "aged, worn, shriveled, maimed, mutilated, used and abused, faded and emaciated, neglected and rent asunder—in need of the restoratives, the surgical operations, and the sympathies of the modern archivist," Paltsits dramatized the need for action with a sense of urgency equal to that which archivists feel today as we gaze ahead to the developing Information Age.

And so it has continued. What *do* archivists need to know? Perhaps it is a sign of progress that we are now looking to the future rather than trying to catch up with the present. Even so, the debate may yet rival in intensity those of our professional forebears as we consider the importance of our humanistic roots, technology, and the other issues that will accompany another new century and the challenges it will bring.

In their respective articles, Terry Eastwood, Carol Couture, Tom Nesmith, and Barbara Craig raise important issues and perspectives. They seem to be in general agreement, as many others before them have been, that our basic core of theory and knowledge will serve archivists well during the Information Age. Even so, each notes attitudes, perspectives, and emphases that will shape our response to challenges of the next century.

Terry Eastwood sets forth a fine general framework archivists can use to think about our broad goals. He emphasizes the importance of teaching students "the wider context in which archives have come, and are coming into being in contemporary society" and of "the cultivation of a deep sense of the symbiosis of archives with their context." Eastwood recommends producing graduates who are flexible enough "to serve society in all kinds of employment beyond that of the familiar historical repository." He says that to do so we must undertake a "considerable shift in emphasis" from too much reliance upon the "traditional subjects like arrangement and description, and the rest." We need also to emphasize "how organizations function to create records, the requirements good records must meet, and controls on them that must be in place to protect them, and so on." He concludes that, "we have a good deal of this knowledge [already] but it is not well articulated and not so thoroughly understood as to give us confidence." That being so, one wonders initially how we

will make this "considerable shift in emphasis" he recommends. What strategies can we use to "better articulate" and gain the confidence necessary to affect the changes needed?[7]

Framed in the context of his seven observations, Carol Couture agrees with Eastwood about the need to "train our students in an expanded archival science which opens a much broader and much more promising job market to them." He argues for the further integration of archives and records management as a necessary building block in this new broader structure. The archivist Couture envisions is more proactive and is involved with records from the moment of their creation. This is certainly not a new idea, but one to which we must pay closer attention in order to end to what he terms "crisis archiving."

In his outlook for the development of our discipline, Couture, like Barbara Craig, emphasizes in particular the need for research. He reminds us both of how little research is presently conducted in the field of archival science and how important a part universities play in nurturing research. He concludes that "we teachers need...to make a greater effort to extend and improve our [own] research work, and to get our students interested in it." Few will argue with this proposition. Thus some day it would be interesting to have Couture elaborate as Craig has done, suggesting specific areas within archival science that should be priorities for research, as well as suggesting strategies teachers might use to "improve [their own] research" and pique the interest of their students.[8]

Tom Nesmith seems to offer a scenario for the future that is both pessimistic and optimistic, opting—wisely it seems—more toward the latter. He sees the electronic age as possibly "reducing one major structural problem archives have long faced, which is that records have been cumbersome to move, use, and store." His hope is that technological advances will enable archivists to "concentrate far more on the increasingly important intellectual aspects of our work, particularly in appraisal, description, and widening public understanding of archives and uses of archives." He believes that the "intellectual substance and social purpose of our work, however, will not change that much" but that "a great deal of hard thinking will be required to adapt our implementation" of core concepts into what he calls a "new archival practice." The key, Nesmith contends, is to impart to new archivists "a particular intellectual outlook" as opposed to "some well-established body of knowledge which we should aim to digest." This new outlook is "inquisitive, speculative, and open to what is valuable in both the new and the old." Students should be taught to "question and clarify concepts and techniques." Archival educators must, in other words, strive to integrate liberal, humanistic perspectives with the more technical dimensions of professional education. This is another idea that bears further elaboration. What strategies might archival educators employ to approach this transformation? What must we retain and what must we discard? Is the perspective Nesmith envisions really so radically different from what many educators have hoped to impart all along?[9]

Barbara Craig has chosen to focus her attention on clarifying "the role of archives research in education." She believes that society's reasons for creating records and the need for "credible documents of past activities" will remain constant. Craig calls for archivists to learn a variety of research methods—historical, statistical, survey,

and qualitative—and contends that these will enrich both our abilities and our literature. In particular, she calls for "joining research in the work place with formal teaching programmes" and elaborates at some length on this idea.

Craig contends that applied research, conducted by students in archival education programmes using archives as a laboratory, is a natural and mutually beneficial activity. It will help to bring archival theory and archival practice closer to one another without the "destructive tension" that sometimes accompanies their interaction. Such research will benefit students who learn research skills that can be applied throughout their careers. It will improve professional practice by facilitating the cooperation of experienced archivists and students in critically analyzing current assumptions and methods. The publication of the results of this research will contribute substantially to our meagre archival literature. Craig concludes by suggesting three areas—archives history, archives and technology, and practical case studies (starting with appraisal)—that, if not a research agenda, are likely first candidates for our attention.[10]

Together these four articles pose a number of intriguing ideas and perspectives. Perhaps most intriguing is the fact that none of the four has made even passing mention of the *Guidelines for the Development of a Two-year Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies* degree, a document that was drafted with widespread input from the Canadian archival community.

The authors have taken the right tone in not automatically viewing the future with the sense of despair that so often seems to permeate our discourse. Our fixation on the future as "problem" is largely the result of our not yet having given it adequate thought before coming to a conclusion—even though the generally low level of some listserv discussion, focusing on such vexing questions as paper clip removal and what to do with university publications, sometimes might nudge us in the direction of despondency. The electronic future may look "unmanageable," but it is too early for despair. Tom Nesmith mentions Frank Burke's "spectre of vast unmanageable computerized communications" but Barbara Craig reminds us of the *furor ex machina* that resulted from the typewriter, the photocopier, and other "old" technologies. Eastwood reminds us that, for archivists, confronting the question of electronic records is more than "understanding computers and their application...[i]t is [the familiar work of] understanding what is going on in organizations...and what is happening to records creation, classification, and control." Will the electronic future be any less manageable than the multi-media mountain with which we have been trying to deal today? Perhaps. But while the details may be different the problem has a familiar feel.

As with all such groundbreaking discussions, we are left hungering for more. Asking the question "What do archivists need to know?" is not enough. Implicit in each of their presentations is that the question "What do archivists need to know?" presents us with a moving target. It is not a question that can be answered and then forgotten; it is a question whose answer will change as the environment in which records are created, preserved, and used continues to evolve. It is also not a question with a single answer, but a single question with many answers. Archivists need to adapt to unforeseen change and to do this we must refine or deepen our understanding of theory in light of practice.

Perhaps the most encouraging aspect to their discussion is what it does *not* contain. First of all, it does not focus on our individual differences as archivists. At times it seems we are a profession prone to spend more time celebrating our differences rather than what we have in common. Some think of themselves as manuscript curators as opposed to archivists *per se* or vice versa. In the U.S. we have formed national associations not only for garden-variety archivists, but also for government archivists, moving image archivists, and no fewer than three species of archivists who administer religious collections. The Society of American Archivists has thirteen sections that cater to our individual differences.[11] To this we have added in recent years more than twenty roundtables for those who feel a further need to bond with kin related by such factors as the type or the form of the records they administer, or the brand of computer software they use in their work. To discuss the *common* knowledge that all archivists should have is a refreshing change from the individualistic perspective that frequently characterizes our discourse.

Second, "Bravo!" to the presenters for avoiding the tired old "where should it be" debate that traditionally pitted library schools against history departments. Perhaps this is not surprising given the similar Canadian and American guidelines that advocate Master of Archival Studies degree programmes, but old attitudes die hard and the Information Age offers us the opportunity to draw new combatants into the fray and it is encouraging to see that the four authors have resisted the temptation to do so.

Finally, Eastwood, Couture, Nesmith, and Craig have all aimed their remarks at the *substance* of what archivists need to know more than the *structure* in which that learning will take place. Perhaps this is an attribute more easily appreciated by an American coming from an environment in which we have only recently embraced the concept of MAS programmes, but not yet implemented any. Many American programmes are grappling primarily with issues of structure in an effort to wring the most value from a meagre menu of existing course work. Many programmes are still taught in part or *in toto* by part-time adjunct instructors who would have little influence in proposing and implementing the major curricular changes outlined here, even if they had the time or predilection to do so. Every year such programmes lag farther behind those with full-time instructors and as the gap between the two grows, a useful dialogue becomes more difficult to sustain. It will be unfortunate if this gap prevents representatives from all of the programmes, regardless of their state of development, from concentrating their attention on the same question regarding what future archivists will need to know.

So where does this leave us? The four articles are a good foundation on which to build, but build we must. The perspective of each is that of educators who inhabit the academy rather than the world into which graduates will find themselves cast. One wonders what these four articles and the commentary might look like had they had been written by non-academics.

In particular, how would the discussion have unfolded had the papers been written by recently-graduated professionals, newly employed in the "real world." What if we had heard instead from employers, or from those who develop and administer continuing education programmes? Doubtless there would have been areas of considerable agreement, but there likely would have been disagreement as well. As we continue our discussion we will benefit from hearing these other perspectives.

That "considerable shift in emphasis" Terry Eastwood says we need will benefit from input by a broad spectrum from the archival community, if for no other reason than to validate our conclusions with empirical evidence.

For example, graduates who have come through programmes and who now find themselves confronting the reality of the work-a-day world are well-suited on the basis of their experience to reflect on their education and discuss with educators both the areas in which we have effectively prepared them and the areas in which they find themselves deficient. Perhaps a greater emphasis on applied research such as Barbara Craig so convincingly argues will help us to undertake this, and perhaps one of the benefits will be to improve archival method as it applies to *education* as well as to records themselves.

At some point in our discussion we also need to hear from employers who hire our graduates either as archivists or for those "broader" types of positions to which Eastwood and Couture allude. Barbara Craig correctly concludes that the "indicator of success" for education programmes in the next century ought to be based on "the quality of the archives services we provide to society."[12] Who better to comment on the quality of these services or to recommend changes than those who are in a position to evaluate the competence of our alumni after they have left the university? Recently, one employer, commenting on candidates from several American archival education programmes, noted that those from one programme seemed in such a technological trance that they did not want to touch paper, while those from another were so traditional that they were not equipped either by training or by inclination even to consider the issue of records in electronic form. The comment suggests that we have something important to learn by listening to employers. The perspective of the person cited above is probably not unique and we would doubtless hear it from others if we asked. In so doing we might learn how to balance the needs of the twenty-first century with those of today.

Another valuable perspective is that of continuing education professionals. If, for example, as Tom Nesmith suggests, a more fully developed humanistic perspective is important, then it is important for new graduates and for the grizzled practitioners alike—especially if they are destined to work together on applied research projects and inhabit the same professional associations.

How will the graduate curriculum of the future mesh with the continuing education network that all archivists need in order to remain current with the changes they inevitably will encounter? In what ways will the latter need to adapt to or complement the former—particularly if, as Eastwood and Couture suggest, we ought to prepare graduates for new areas "beyond that of the familiar historical repository?"

Given that we need to change our graduate curricula in order to meet the needs of the coming century, how well will the outline of course work and subjects outlined in the *Guidelines for the Development of Post-Appointment and Continuing Education and Training Programmes*[13] stand the test of time? Is there a new role for universities delivering a reconfigured, longer term educational programme to be added to the chapter "Roles of Associations and Institutions?"[14]

If we accept the findings of such studies as the Alliance of Libraries, Archives, and Records Management (ALARM) report and its recommendations concerning "the need for the enhancement of life-long learning,"[15] and accept, as Couture and Craig suggest, a closer relationship between the academy and the work place through applied research, what changes must occur with respect to post-appointment and continuing education?

Some even suggest that in the future the distinction between formal university education and continuing education may blur. The late Paul Evan Peters wrote in 1995, "Being able to accommodate a larger (and more diverse) number of learners over a longer period of time...is a pressing national priority due to normal population pressures...and to the rapid change in the various job markets."[16] For these reasons, perhaps it is more important than in the past to consider the issue of graduate education and continuing education together rather than holding the latter in limbo while the former charts the course. It is the common base of knowledge that unites us as a profession and to fracture or lose this because we are mired in our devotion to a two-year educational programme that ends with a graduation ceremony would work to our detriment as we struggle to meet new challenges.

Although we must begin by concentrating on questions of substance, we cannot divorce these entirely from questions of structure. Education programmes exist within an academic programme and we cannot simply continue to add new material indefinitely. Eventually something else must be eliminated. For example, if, as Eastwood suggests, we need to shift our emphasis away from the "traditional subjects such as arrangement and description and the rest" how will we accomplish this? To what extent will we move away? We cannot continually sandwich new course content into an existing framework. Does such a move imply that we should consider a growing role for curricula such as the "Archives Technician" programme at Algonquin College that purports to teach its students to "organize, record, and preserve information?" Or do we not want to move so far from tradition just yet? Given that many archives associated with colleges and universities have much of this routine work done by student assistants, should arrangement and description become undergraduate-level work? If we want to retain both the new and the old, how will we work out the logistics of this?

Questions regarding the role of research also require further careful deliberation. We embrace this concept at the same time that graduate programmes have seemingly downgraded the role of research by making, for example, thesis work optional rather than mandatory, or developing programmes with no major research component. Others would argue that basing future research designs on past models is unwise. Paul Peters has suggested that "it is premature, even 'reckless' to draw strong conclusions about the life of the mind in the Information Age solely on the basis of researcher and research community experience to date with networks and networked information. We...still have more to learn about research itself in the Information Age than we have learned so far."[17]

It is true that applied research is a good means to reunite theory and practice. Given that a curriculum is developed in response to perceived need, it will also help to connect educators and practitioners in a useful way. In past years many have separated

the two in an effort to move programmes beyond the stage wherein students took a few courses and then learned by doing in a series of "hands-on" fieldwork assignments or internships. Perhaps it is time to close the gap a bit.

But an increased emphasis on research will require new levels of cooperation between the academy and the work place. Practising archivists, notable for feeling overworked and poorly supported, will need to make room in their schedules for this added responsibility. At least some anecdotal evidence from research-related projects suggests that this is not always easy to accomplish.[18]

What will archivists of the next century need to know? It is an interesting topic for further debate. The four articles in this issue of *Archivaria* are a good place to begin. The authors propose ideas whose implications need to be further explored and considered. But if we are to create the "structures of exquisite beauty" that Brymner envisioned just prior to the coming of the twentieth century, we need to hear from colleagues in other institutional settings and with other points of view. We need to move forward and welcome all to participate in the discussion.

Notes

1   Douglas Brymner, "Canadian Archives," *Papers of the American Historical Association* 3 (1889), pp. 151-63.
2   Ibid., p. 151.
3   Ibid., p. 156.
4   James M. O'Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago, 1990), p. 33.
5   "Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference of Archivists, Indianapolis, December 29, 1910," *Eleventh Report of the Public Archives Commission, Appendix A*, pp. 282-314.
6   Waldo Gifford Leland, "Some Practical Principles in Relation to Archives," *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference of Archivists, Boston, December 28, 1912*, p. 265.
7   Terry Eastwood, "Reforming the Archival Curriculum to meet Contemporary Needs," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 80-88. Quotations are from an earlier version of this article.
8   Carol Couture, "Today's Students, Tomorrow's Archivists: Present-Day Focus and Development as Determinants of Archival Science in the Twenty-First Century," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 95-104.
9   Tom Nesmith, "Professional Education in the Most Expansive Sense: What Will the Archivist Need to Know in the Twenty-First Century?" *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 89-94.
10 Barbara L. Craig, "Serving the Truth: The Importance of Fostering Archives Research in Education Programmes, Including a Modest Proposal for Partnerships with the Workplace," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 105-117.
11 They were originally called Professional Affinity Groups, or PAGs, an awkward name that resulted from the discomfort that some felt with the acronym that would have resulted had they been more logically termed Professional Interest Groups.
12 Craig, "Serving the Truth," p. 114.
13 Association of Canadian Archivists, *Guidelines for the Development of Post-Appointment and Continuing Education and Training Programmes* (Ottawa, 1991), pp. 8-38.
14 Ibid., pp. 43-45.
15 Canadian Library Association, *Towards a Strategy for Human Resource Development in Libraries, Archives and Records Management* (Interim Report of the Alliance of Libraries, Archives and Records Management) (December 1994), pp. 9-15.
16 Paul Evan Peters, "Our fascinating Journey, Just Begun." An address presented to the 1995 NASIG Conference (29 August 1995), p. 6.
17 Ibid., p. 3.
18 Several years ago archivists from the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area attempted to undertake a documentation strategy—research of sorts to test this framework as a better means to document the history of the metropolitan region. Even with grant funding and a full-time paid coordinator, individual archivists found it difficult to find the time necessary to complete the tasks related to the documentation in addition to their own normal work.