Viewpoint

What are we educating archivists for?

Michael Moss

A few years ago with Seamus Ross, then director of the Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute at the University of Glasgow, I published an article in the American *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* about our Information Management and Preservation MSc programme at Glasgow, in which I argued, echoing Nancy Van House and Stuart Sutton, 'that the balance of any program of study should be tilted firmly towards the professional knowledge base and away from the traditional "tools and service" model'.[1] Despite calls from some quarters of the profession to return to a 'tools and service' model, I remain more convinced than ever that the knowledge base is the only approach for meaningful professional education. The danger of the tools and service model is that it can easily become outdated particularly at a time of rapid technological change. Let me give you an example from the past. In the early nineteenth century when Martin Schrettinger revolutionised information science by replacing the medieval system of the organisation of a library with alphabetic ordering and cross-referencing, he was working with the flow of the Enlightenment knowledge base and not that of the accepted tools and services of monastic libraries.[2] The model that Schrettinger put in place served the analogue world well, but it is being challenged and overtaken in the digital by powerful search technologies and has been dismissed by one commentator as 'the haphazard historical gerrymandering of knowledge into institutional collections belonging to communities'.[3] Before you take offence, stop and remind yourself that resources, such as Google Books or the British Newspaper Archive or Google itself, or even our own online catalogues, enable users to locate very precise bits of information buried deep in text, quite often

1   M. Moss and S. Ross, 'Educating Information Management Professionals: The Glasgow Perspective', *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 48, no. 4 (Fall 2007), 294, and N. Van House and S. A. Sutton, 'Panda Syndrome: An Ecology of LIS Education', *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 37, no. 2 (Spring 1996), 131–47.
2   M. Schrettinger, *Versuch eines vollständigen Lehrbuchs der Bibliothek-Wissenschaft* (Munich, 1808–10).
3   C. A. Lynch, 'Colliding with the Real World: Heresies and Unexplored Questions about Audience, Economics, and Control of Digital Libraries', in (ed.) A. Bishop, B. Butterfield and N. Van House, *Digital Library Use: Social Practice in Design and Evaluation* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 191–216.

in unexpected places. We need to think of ways that such potential for resource discovery can be translated into the archival world and this will require us to rethink our cataloguing conventions.

At present cataloguing is largely a handicraft industry with mounting backlogs, inadequate descriptions that are sometimes just wrong and inevitably a lack of granularity. The dismal economic climate, combined with the expectation of those users who have experience of the power of resource discovery on the Internet, requires us radically to rethink cataloguing. Others have already been doing that for us. The astrophysicists with their zooniverse initiative have blazed a trail in 'crowd sourcing' catalogues that is being widely imitated in projects such as the Public Catalogue Foundation's 'Your Paintings' and the Bodleian Library's 'What's the Score'.[4] These depend in part, but not exclusively, on the availability of digitised content. As costs reduce the volume will grow, particularly as the business models of all the national institutions are predicated on taking advantage of the power of the Internet as a distribution channel to increase access and reduce the cost of search room production. The National Archives' new 'Discovery' search engine will allow users, whether accessing content remotely or in the search room, to upload content directly into the catalogue with little or no mediation.[5] This represents a radical departure and a recognition that the only way that improvements can realistically be made to the catalogue, particularly for legacy items (the bulk of the holdings) is to provide simple tools for users to upload content. The catalogue will be skewed by user interests, but then it already is. It is a price worth paying. To equip them to meet these challenges, students will need skills that differ markedly from those that we currently teach. They will need to understand how to manage what are, in effect, industrial-scale processes and supporting infrastructure to preserve and deliver digital content that may in all probability be provided by consortia, as envisaged by *Archives for the 21st Century*, or third parties.[6] At Glasgow we already place considerable emphasis on the preservation of both born digital and digitised content in what we teach.

Already we find that users, particularly family and local historians, are making extensive use of social media as a distribution channel for their research results. These are being harvested by private sector sites, such as Ancestry.com, Origins.net and TheGenealogist, that provide access to resources in partnership with the public archives. Some research projects are already leveraging such assets and large-scale online datasets, such as Google Books, the British Newspaper Archives and those used by family historians, to mimic 'big science' in the humanities. Others will follow both in the academy and amongst a whole

---

[4]   https://www.zooniverse.org/, http://www.thepcf.org.uk/your_paintings and http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/library/special/projects/whats-the-score.

[5]   http://labs.nationalarchives.gov.uk/wordpress/index.php/2011/03/the-discovery-service/#more-505.

[6]   http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/information-management/policies/archives-century.htm.

range of interest groups. We will need to encourage our students to understand the ways in which they can engage with such activities and help ensure that the outputs are sustainable and remain dynamic beyond the end of specific projects. Just as with core digital preservation, this will require information services to rebalance their budgets and develop new income streams to meet user expectations. We do not do enough to equip students to manage budgets in a competitive environment.

In my view, the biggest challenge that confronts archival education, however, is the relationship between archives and records management that is usually taken as a given – the one enables the other. With much of the records management literature predicated on a final archival expression, I have been convinced for some time that the only connection is the information itself. Within organisations, information management is now more a matter of organisational behaviour and knowledge management that leverages assets for business benefit and ensures compliance risks have been properly assessed. For most organisations there is no archival imperative unless a business case can be made, for example to support a brand. If this is the case, does the teaching of records management not more properly belong in business schools as part of a wider knowledge and information management agenda embedded in organisational behaviour programmes? If it is not, then records management as archivists understand it is in danger of being eclipsed. An example is Northumbria where records management is taught within the School of Engineering, Computing and Information Sciences. In common with other archive education programmes, at Glasgow we teach records management as a component along with archival theory. We do not have either the resources or the capacity to equip students with a grounding in organisational theory or an understanding of knowledge and information management, although we do make them aware of risk management in an organisational context. Perhaps the greatest weakness of what we offer is that we do not give students experience of working in teams with those from other disciplinary backgrounds as they will do in any organisational context. We could form an alliance with the Business School, but like other business schools in the United Kingdom there is a resistance to engage with anything that smacks of history, even if there is a shared body of underlying theory with the archival sciences.

The exception is the public sector where in democratic societies records need to be preserved to ensure the executive can be called to account, albeit in the court of history. This begs the question, however, of how much? Is it realistic to disentangle the key information used to create and implement policy from the detritus that swamps information systems in the digital environment and if it is, can the resulting archival expression be 'sensitively reviewed' cost effectively? Does government have a duty to preserve large quantities of personal data that will be closed for a hundred years to satisfy demands from family historians, or should that be paid for by taxing the current users of such data in the public domain? However, even here archivists cannot call the shots in the way in which much of the literature proposes. As in any

other organisation, information management must fulfil a business need and contribute to improving the quality of service. The resulting culture should match the archival expectation of records that can be used retrospectively to provide guarantees of accountability. As we are discovering, freedom of information legislation can militate against effective record keeping in the public sector. The relationship with records and information management in the public sector is key for those archivists working in that area, particularly as the digital environment evolves and ever more services are contracted out. We need to do more to equip students to understand the nuances of this relationship in a cost-constrained environment where simplistic and fashionable concepts of keeping records to guarantee accountability in the *longue durée* represent a tax on current business. We do provide a strong theoretical underpinning in what we teach at Glasgow, but less about what it means in practice or what solutions can be found in systems where documents exist as single instantiations linked together by metadata or sometimes simply by tacit knowledge within a file plan.

The stresses and strains that I have identified within what we do at Glasgow and by implication other programmes only serve to highlight the fragility of professional training. Across the whole of the United Kingdom and Ireland only a handful of staff are involved, some in information schools, as at Aberystwyth and University College London (UCL), and some in history departments, as at Liverpool and University College Dublin (UCD). It might be thought that location within larger departments might offer some security, but this is not a given. Information schools are urgently, but not very successfully, trying to identify a role for themselves in the changing digital landscape in much the same way that I have argued archival education needs to do. Moreover, the information sciences, including archives and records management, will be assessed in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) in a unit of assessment with media studies. It is easy to ridicule media studies, but at its best it is outstanding, with outputs that far exceed in number and quality those of the information sciences. Largely because archival and records management science has embraced theory, it is better placed to do well in the REF, but it is hardly likely to compensate for more general weakness in the information sciences. From a narrowly archival perspective, location in a history department might make sense, but it can become peripheral and disconnected from the challenges of the digital environment. The temptation will be to return staff in the history unit of assessment in the REF, as will happen at Liverpool, with obvious consequences for their research profile. UCD is making efforts to achieve greater integration in an extraordinarily tight funding environment. Where archival and records management science is vulnerable is in the lack of doctoral studies (a key REF indicator) that will provide the next generation of thinkers and educators. At Glasgow we were determined to build a doctoral programme from the outset and we now have some ten students from the UK and elsewhere, but funding is a major concern. In partnership with Aberystwyth, Loughborough, Cymal, The National Archives and the National Records of Scotland, we have recently bid for a block grant from the Arts and

Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in its next postgraduate funding round to remedy this situation.

Given these problems, it might be argued that training could be delivered on the job, but that would simply deliver a tools and services model that would hardly equip students to work in the complex environments that I have described. A more compelling approach would be greater co-operation and collaboration between programmes, taking advantage of the potential of new technology to deliver content. This is the model on which the block grant bid to the AHRC has been predicated. However, the mode of delivery is in some ways straightforward and must be based on a vigorous debate about the scope and content of programmes both for new entrants and at later stages in a career to which the professional bodies need to contribute in an open and non-partisan fashion. There is an urgent need for such a debate as the outcome should be a component in the revised *Archives for the 21ˢᵗ Century*, which is being revisited in the wake of the transfer of responsibilities from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council to the National Archives, and in the light of rapidly changing circumstances that, as I hope I have suggested, are not exclusively the result of the financial crisis.