SI 580 Understanding Records and Archives: Principles and Practices

Week 2 – Why Do Archives Exist?
Themes of this presentation

- Evolution and nature of written communication
- Evolution of archives and programs
- Users and uses of archives
- Accountability and ARM

“Recording information and finding ways to keep
And use it for long periods of time are very old problems
For human culture.” O’Toole and Cox, 2006.
Information Density vs. Life Expectancy
Throughout human history, orality has been the rule and literacy the exception.

Once introduced, literacy is not immediately adopted / legitimized.

“More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness.”
Literacy Restructures Society

Themes
- Written Communication
- Archives and Programs
- Users and Use
- Accountability and ARM

- Religious structures
  - Adaptive
  - Fixed

- Economic structures
  - Account keeping
  - Census and taxation

- Political structures
  - Centralized administration; bureaucracy
  - Depersonalization and rationalization

- Legal structures
  - Arbitrary
  - Fixed
  - Precedent and modification

Orality contrasted with Literacy

Orality
- Formulaic
- Social
- Situational/Subjective
- Fluid
- Internalized
- Localized access
- Relayer is alive
- Exists as sound
- Common language

Literacy
- Nonformulaic
- Solitary
- Abstract/Objective
- Fixed
- Externalized
- Globalized
- Relayer can be dead
- Exists as symbol
- No common language necessary

What are the different forms of literacy?
Why Do Archives Exist?

- Archives as collected content
- Archives as spaces
- Archives as programs
- Archives as a body of precedent

Themes
Written Communication
Archives and Programs
Users and Use
Accountability and ARM

Why Does Archival Content Exist?

- Creating, collecting, keeping
  - personal, social, economic, legal, instrumental, symbolic
- Accidental versus purposeful
- Purposes relate to value
  - What is value?
  - To whom are archives valuable?
  - Is value fixed or fluid?
  - Is value permanent?
Why Do Archival Spaces Exist?

Themes
- Symbolism
- Preservation
- Control
- Scale
- Efficiencies

Written Communication
Archives and Programs
Users and Use
Accountability and ARM
Why Do Archival Programs Exist?

- Evolving traditions
  - Historical manuscript tradition (circa 1791 onward)
  - Public archives tradition (circa 1900 onwards)
  - Records management tradition (circa 1940)
  - Cultural heritage tradition (circa 1995 onwards)

- Professional identity [organization]
- Professional control [education]
- Shared knowledge [literature]
Why Does Archival Knowledge Exist?

- Tied to literacy in general
- Scholarly communication cycle applies to archival theory
- Specialized practice mirrors specialized content
- Bottom line: professionalization
- 20th century professions
  - early years, 1930s, post-war, today
Uses of Archives

Primary value [initial use]
- Administrative uses
  - legal, social, economic, organizational
- Personal uses
  - social, familial, individual

Secondary value [after initial use]
- Administrative
- Personal
Users of Archives

- Motivation and need
- Experience and characteristics
- History or other?

![Figure 1: Research Purposes]

A Value Proposition

- Evidential value
  - Accountability
  - Protection of rights
  - Administrative continuity
  - Coping with current issues

- Informational Value
  - History/scholarship
  - Social memory
  - Place and identity (genealogy)
  - Education and enrichment
A Value Proposition

Themes
Written Communication
Archives and Programs
Users and Use
Accountability and ARM

- Symbolic value
  - Ceremony / Ritual / Culture
  - Representational
  - Wow factor

- Artifactual value
  - Hard evidence
  - Monetary value
  - Intangibles
The Concept of Accountability

- Oxford English Dictionary
  - liable to be called to account, or to answer for responsibilities and conduct; answerable, responsible. Chiefly of persons.

- Random House Dictionary
  - subject to the obligation to report, explain, or justify something; responsible, answerable
  - capable of being explained; explicable

- Wikipedia
  - "the willingness to stand up and be counted -- as part of a process, activity or game."
    http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accountability
Recordkeeping and Accountability: Threats

Themes
- Written Communication
- Archives and Programs
- Users and Use
- Accountability and ARM

- Destruction
- Tampering
- Improper removal
- Inadequate security
- Absence or non-enforcement of access and use policies
- Purposeful neglect in documenting
- Poor or negligent recordkeeping culture
- Over-emphasis on heritage and custody as ends in themselves
Recordkeeping and Accountability: Opportunities

- Catalog / publicize egregious incidents of poor or negligent recordkeeping and their consequences.

- Underscore need for recordkeeping regimes that integrate laws, rules, policies, direction, and procedures.

- Applying value proposition to inform what not to keep.

- Leverage professional ethics and values.
Accountable to whom? Accountability for whom?

- Records: a critical component of the chain of responsibility in a hierarchy
- Personal, organizational, societal
- Accountability and records are now a part of our common vocabulary.
I read it in the news today, oh boy.

New York Moves to Allow Residents to Change Their Gender on Documents  
*NY Times 11/07/06*

Eastern Europe Still Struggles to Purge Security Services  
*NY Times, 12/12/06*

Trove of Black History Gathered Over Lifetime Seeks a Museum  
*NY Times 12/14/06*

Nazi archive to be unsealed for scholars, victims, families

Small U-M library offers expansive view of brief presidency  
*Ann Arbor News, 01/02/07*

Sites Invite Online Mourning, But Don’t Speak Ill of the Dead  
*NY Times, 11/05/06*
Thank you!

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