SOAP AND EDUCATION: ARCHIVAL TRAINING, PUBLIC SERVICE AND THE PROFESSION—AN ESSAY

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Abstract: Although archival training programs have proliferated in the past ten years, a fundamental concept has been left out of them, namely, that of service to the client. Because service has been removed from training, it less and less appears in archival work. Professional recognition and support will be enhanced greatly if service to all of the profession's clients becomes a foundation of archival training programs and, therefore, archival work.

Soap and education, said Mark Twain, are not as sudden as a massacre, but they are more deadly. That's a mischievous view in America, where education is one of our socially acceptable addictions. I suspect that Mark Twain had in mind bad education, the kind that limits, rather than enlightens its victim, that aims at conforming the behavior of children to the convenience of adults, that seeks to diminish the perils of free ranging thought. We know that educational comstockery is alive and well in America today: in a nation where education is seen as the means to civic virtue, the nature of virtue can be anyone's to define.

But it is also the case that we try to train our children to become the kinds of adults we most value. This hope is at the heart of American public education; it also is the basis of our disappointment in it. Professional education, including archival education, born in its shadow, makes the same assumption. No matter where the archivist is trained or for how long, he or she assumes that what one learns is what one's work is, often in the same proportion and order. What is taught in our training programs becomes the core of archival work—in the light reflected by this content is seen the model archivist. What I am taught, I do. What I do, I am.

Let me comment on my own experience with archival education. I have taught in continuing education and degree programs for archivists, written about what should be included in archival training curricula, and developed courses about archives for the public. I now teach a workshop session in the Modern Archives Institute on the management of public programs. I have never taken an archival administration course. I came to this field 24 years ago when only a few short courses of any merit existed—and no degree programs.[1] No one

offered to send me to any of them, so I read Schellenberg like a novel and started running a university manuscript division. Although I am an educator by training and choice, my lack of formal archival training has left me with no loyalty to any particular program. I also have the prejudices of the self-educated. Having made that confession, let me make some observations about the training of archivists.

Some things don't change. Archival training, wherever it is found, is heavily skewed toward increasingly standardized skills of arrangement and description—a standardization aimed, I think, more at the convenience of archivists than of researchers and other clients. Lately one finds in these programs more emphasis on the management of newer record types, electronic records in particular, and on pouring old descriptive methods into the new bottles of computerized formulae. Other archival training preoccupations include management techniques and planning.

The length, frequency, and mobility of archival training programs have also increased. Archivists are expert workshop presenters—put your finger on the map of America at midday of any weekday, and you will find an archivist planning, presenting, or cleaning up after a workshop. Our professional meetings are flanked, fore and aft, by workshops. Workshop presenters are constantly on the road—expect to see emerging a generation of archives babies who spent their infancy like stage children, tucked up in dresser drawers for the night, later to join mom and dad in the act. Archival organizations, regional and national, reflect our belief in the efficacy of education, and also reveal the schisms of specialization. We have roundtables for everyone, a sign of our astonishing and recently acknowledged diversity: hackers, planners, describers, women, religious; archivists from the bureaucracies of government, libraries, universities, and business; archivists organized on the basis of color or sexual preference. And each is probably planning a workshop. Archival training is mobile, computer wise, energetic, invigorating, and ingenuous in its faith in the miracle of shared information.

What then is my concern? What's wrong with faster, more intense, more stylish education of the kind archivists have developed in the past few years? Just this: that the archivist who is being shaped by this training still looks inward. I see, in spite of changed times and needs, an archivist who avoids asking who uses our records, how they use them, and, most important, why they use them. I see an archivist who focuses on organizational rationality and not client needs; who still assumes that all researchers are, or ought to be, trained as he or she is trained, either with equivalent academic degrees or, lacking these, with extraordinary insight into how archives are organized and how archivists think; whose activities still reflect a preoccupation with records as objects, not as information developed in the context of time.

Taken one by one, the skills we teach in our archival training programs are useful and necessary, at least as basic instruction. Taken altogether, as a curriculum, as a design for shaping the model archivist, they are wanting. They reveal the outlines not of a well rounded professional but of a high class technician. The new natural sciences teach us that change and innovation can break out anywhere, at any point in the long crawl through time. So it is with education. I am not berating the inclusion of new topics and new skills. But no one appears to be asking the classic, lifegiving, first questions the educator must ask: Who is

the archivist we seek to develop? What impact upon society do we want the archivist to have? And, most important, do our educational programs produce this person? Only when we have considered these questions can we—the archivists who teach and those who are taught—decide what to teach and how to teach it.

We make scattered efforts to develop archivists who reach for the public; several of our regional archival organizations have appointed public relations officers, and public relations workshops are offered regularly in our national and regional conferences. One also finds some interest lately in studies of the users of records. This is a fifty-year-old profession, however, one that has surely had time to develop outreach programs. Yet these efforts are so few they almost literally can be counted on one's fingers, and they exist because a few people, working in relative isolation, have persisted in them.

There is evidence all around us of our disinterest in looking outward. Note the near absence in archival literature of articles on reference techniques, on studies of our clientele, or on public outreach programs, particularly as compared to articles on description, acquisition programs, or records management. (When the Academy of Certified Archivists was developing its testing program, I was asked to suggest questions on public programs, partly because the test developers, who were archivists, were unclear about the content of such questions and partly because too few articles existed, other than my own, to cite.) There are other clues to suggest that our eyes are not on the public. Recent surveys suggest that among regional archives the most popular form of outreach is the education of other archivists, not programs for the public. *Inreach,* to coin a new word; service to ourselves, not the public. According to the report of SAA's Committee on Goals and Priorities, completed in 1990, Goal III, The Availability and Use of Records of Enduring Value, generated the least activity of the three goals.[2] There are other signs, directly related to training. At its 1990 meeting in Seattle, the Society of American Archivists offered a preconference workshop on reference techniques. Only two people responded, the workshop was canceled, and although it has been made available regionally during 1991, no one has requested it. There has never been an SAA workshop on the management of public programs.[3]

I am not only suggesting that we add such training to our already rich training menu. There is a larger question, one that archivists can address wherever they gather. It is not that training in arrangement and description are unnecessary; of course they are necessary, at least for one's first job. The question is not so much what we include in our archival training but what we leave out. The question is one of emphasis. And what we leave out, what is not emphasized, indeed, often not even mentioned, is the client—the person upon whom our hope for recognition and continuation exists.

Looked at most critically, I would have to say that archival training is self-serving, not client-serving; records oriented, not information oriented; tradition and task oriented, not market oriented. By and large, archival training produces archivists who are mainly concerned with internal efficiency, not effectiveness with clientele; who supply only what they already produce, not produce what clients may need or want; who assume that clients turn up, like leaves blown by the wind, not that clients must be found. Generally speaking, the archivists we produce believe that their clientele must be content with the product they

offer—the body of records in the box accompanied by the standardized description, for example—not that they must have the skills to learn what the client needs and how to satisfy that need.

I use the term "market oriented," knowing that although it is increasingly used by archivists, it still offends many. There is another word, which we have almost ceased to use. That word is *service,* and service is a *déclassé* term these days. Service connotes powerlessness, and a sense of powerlessness lives only a pinprick away from the first layer of our archival skin. Service is what we get at McDonalds and Wendy's, at laundromats and car washes. It is provided by people who clean our houses or serve our fast food, by dropout teenagers, genteelly poor pensioners, and underemployed immigrants a minimum wage away from the welfare counter. Tom Peters and other management experts use the word continually, but I don't hear it among archivists. I am not aware of a single documentation strategy specialist or automation specialist or, for that matter, public programs specialist who talks about service. In ceasing to use the term, we may have lost the concept. And that loss affects archival training; for all our trendy specialties, I think we may be training ourselves away from service, and thus farther away than ever we have been from our clientele.

As a group, archivists seek recognition. Beyond the wish that not one more bank clerk will ask us what an archivist is or how to spell it is the need to be seen as socially necessary because we are useful. That need is not limited to recognition by other professions; we want the *public* to recognize us. Recognition comes in large part from quality performance. But the public perception of quality performance by both our research public and those with whom we may have more marginal contact will not be based on our expertise with computerized description of records (especially expertise that arises from ignorance of who uses those records and why they use them), or on the elaborateness of our acquisition strategies, or on the length of our planning documents. These are internal matters, and they do not affect the public except as they expedite use. Too often they are ends in themselves; process for the sake of process, not for the sake of a product.

Recognition will come from service, the partnership created between the user of records and the archivist acting not as a servant but as a collaborator, occasionally in pursuit of personal and cultural memory but more often seeking the answers to pressing, immediate, professional and personal questions. Recognition will come to the archivist or institution, for example, who offers the user descriptions of records that are convenient for him or her to use, possibly at his or her own desk, as well as in the archives;[4] who knows how to conduct a reference interview tailored to the needs of a particular user, one which leaves that user with a research strategy he or she did not have before coming to the archives; who supplies products and services to those groups who can use records but who are not necessarily researchers themselves, such as teachers or businessmen. Recognition will come to the archivist who seeks out clients, then provides them what they need.

Later in this essay I will suggest some training that might produce this kind of archivist, the archivist we are not now producing. But I would first like to pursue the question of service and recognition to another step, namely, its connection with a question that has vexed us for many years, our status as a profession. Admittedly, the question troubles us less than it once did, or perhaps

it has taken a new form. In recent years, the nature of professionalism, and what behavior characterizes a profession, has come under exquisite scrutiny by writers in our field and others. Gilbert and Sullivan's limited list of professions—the law, the Church and the Army—are long since out of date. Every group that organizes itself claims to be a profession, usually by the fact of having organized in the first place, and a few may indeed be professions. The result is widespread anxiety about status—again, as Gilbert and Sullivan put it, if everyone is somebody, then no one's anybody. The analyses I have read are interesting, but I am always reminded of the characteristics listed in 1915 by sociologist Abraham Flexner when he addressed the question of whether social work was a profession.[5] At the top of his list, his notion of the highest civic virtue for the professional and the unique characteristic of a profession, was altruism, which he described as the ability of a group to look beyond institutional and personal loyalties to the needs of the public and even to the society at large. This included not only keeping abreast of developments in one's field so as to provide correct information or judicious help to clients of the field, consonant with the Hippocratic injunction to "do no harm," but also actively reaching out to one's clientele. Altruism suggests service to others, not only to ourselves. When we consider other groups' claims to professionalism, we think first of the quality and significance of their service, not of their credentials. It is against this value, for example, that we have weighed lawyers as professionals and often found them wanting, no matter what their credentials. Our complaints about the medical profession bear increasingly on its overspecialization and lack of concern about the whole patient, its increasing attention to technology and profit at the price of service. Our dismay at the declining stature of legislators, presidential candidates and incumbents, and civil servants, arises from a sense that they focus on personal and parochial interests, not on universal service.

I suggest that until we are willing to focus our educational and, therefore, our workplace activities on our clientele, not on the sophistication of our computers or the elegance of our bureaucracies or the unassailability of traditional practices, we have not arrived as professionals. If public service is not a principal element in the training programs that shape the archivist, then we are not taking public service seriously. And if we do not take public service seriously, we are not a profession.

How we now define ourselves as archivists gives us a clue to how we might better define ourselves. Asked what archivists do, most of us say that we preserve records and make them available, sometimes adding "for use." First, that definition focuses on records and records skills only, entirely omitting people and purpose. It is an operational definition of technical work, not professional work. Second, it is almost entirely passive. One has a vision of well-preserved records lying on a table, like a fish at a smorgasbord, in a totally empty room. Third, it reveals no priorities; preservation in this definition is parallel to use rather than a precondition of it. A more purposeful, goal-oriented statement might be that archivists arrange, describe and preserve records so that they will be used.[6]

But if we were interested in a definition that focuses on the impact of archivists and archives on people and the social environment, a definition not in terms of records, but of changes that can be effected on people, we might consider something like this: Through the use of records, archivists help people

answer personal and professional questions. One might add for grandeur's sake: And, by learning about the past, inform the present. Now, working with that description or one with similar elements, how do we train an archivist who sees his or her work in these active, collaborative, result oriented, client oriented terms, and who can build an archival program based on these concepts?

I have written elsewhere about the kinds of training I would like to see archivists offered, so what I suggest here will be selective.[7] What follows are examples only; once one grasps the concept of client and product oriented training strategies for innovative curriculum development suggest themselves. Underlying these examples is the intention of changing the present focus of archival training from records and records skills to the needs of clients. Central to this new focus would be training that gives the archivist methods for learning about the many and varied uses of records, and the skills, habits, and perceptions of users of records. These include not only those clients who come into the research room and the exhibit area, but those who use records elsewhere or would use them if they were made available in convenient form.

The service-oriented professional archivist would learn how to analyze who his or her clientele is, how to obtain information from researchers and other clients—we love to give information but we almost never seek it—and how to structure an archival program with researchers and other clients in mind.

Let's consider some of the traditional archival functions, keeping in mind that training need not necessarily be organized functionally, that this is done largely out of tradition and habit, and that doing so tends to atomize, rather than connect, those functions.

First, the assumptions and the implications of provenance as they affect researchers would be examined. Appraisal standards and techniques, and documentation strategies would be examined and reordered in the light of information from a wide range of users. These would include not only the small percentage of historians and other academics who crowd our thinking but not our reference rooms, but also other professionals and avocationists.

Sessions on the reference process would be based on analysis of both successful and unsuccessful interviews and would focus on gathering and patterning information from the client, asking and hearing questions accurately, and helping the client to develop a research strategy.[8] Ideally, both archival trainees and clients would participate in this activity, and the trainee would be evaluated not on the basis of a written examination alone, but on his or her adeptness during increasingly complicated reference negotiations.

Training in descriptive techniques would distinguish between descriptions useful to the archivist and those useful to the client, since these differ. The archivist needs tools for retrieval and collection analysis; a spiral bound, traditional repository guide is useful to the archivist, for example. It is seldom useful to the client, who infrequently uses it outside the archives, either as a tool to draw him or her to the archives or to learn about particular collections. If used at all, it is as an index to a collection. The client needs descriptions that supply information about subject areas for which a given collection is useful, about collections useful in his or her subject area, and about links to other collections. Beyond these, clients need something to draw them to the archives in the first place. Training in descriptive techniques, then, might include formats that bring the client to the archives, such as inexpensive brochures and simple checklists

aimed either at specialized interest groups or at various levels of users within one interest group; exhibit catalogs and lists of archives products; formats that guide the researcher through collections appropriate to his or her interests; and products that help the client use records outside the archives, such as teaching packages for classrooms or genealogical groups, or catalogs of slides or images for publishers. Advice on the content, format, and distribution of these descriptions should come from users, and users should be asked to review them for clarity, direction, and convenience.

The purpose and management of public programs would be a major part of a new archival training curriculum, requiring the trainee to analyze his or her local situation in terms of institutional objectives, community needs, and time, money, and staff resources. Management sessions would center on ways to alter traditional archival functions to create the resources and the motivation to learn about users; to ascertain the cost, in terms of staff, time, and money, of greater and different service to users; to consider ways to reallocate staff, time, and money to achieve service; and to analyze staff talents in relation to a new focus. Fund-raising and public relations techniques—and why the archivist should undertake these—would also be included in this training.

Instructors for these sessions would not be archivists alone. They would include social scientists, educators, librarians (who know a great deal more than we about reference techniques and have written about them), management professionals, and public relations professionals. The archival prejudice that only archivists can teach other archivists, amounting to the view that no one can teach *us* anything, is insular and dangerous. It is particularly so in the decade of the 90s, when the capacity to change and to provide quality service will characterize those institutions and fields of interest that survive.

One can enjoy Mark Twain without agreeing with him. Cauliflower is not just cabbage with a college education. It has to be the *right education.* At present archival training is not, in my view, equipping us to understand and respond to client needs. Failing to do so renders us less than effective in the information field and less than professional in our own. Archives management is a small field in numbers of persons, but with enough men and women in it to bring change through reasonable discourse and experimentation. Both of these—discussion of innovative training and experiments in it—should happen soon.

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NOTES

1. In a stimulating article in the Summer 1990 issue of *American Archivist,* v. 53, no. 3, James M. O'Toole comments on the "workshop mentality" that characterizes archival training. This essay deals primarily with workshop training, which is the kind that most archivists receive and that to a large extent, as O'Toole notes, has shaped degree program content. Workshop agenda and degree-based programs reveal the same paucity of courses focused on use and client needs.
2. Report on Archival Activity in the United States Since Publication of *Planning for the Archival Profession,* June, 1990. Prepared by Victoria Irons Walch for SAA's Committee on Goals and Priorities. A narrative summary was transmitted to the council and executive committee 8 Feb. 1991 by Anne R. Kenney, chair.
3. Telephone conversation 22 April 1991 with Jane Kenamore, SAA's Education Officer.
4. One reviewer of this essay asked whether researchers want convenience. There have been a number of articles over the years on researchers' wants, but Margaret F. Steig in "The Information Needs of Historians," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (November 1981) reports that in her survey of 767 historians, half of whom responded, primary source formats were seen as the most inconvenient to use and were the least used for this reason. The same was true of the guides and other descriptions that the survey group did not use. The last is a well-known secret among archivists, but it has also been well documented in journal surveys and articles in the library field.
5. One of the most focused of these discussions in the archival field is Richard J. Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist* 49:3 (Summer 1986): 229-47. Cox cites Abraham Flexner, "Is Social Work a Profession?" *School and Society* 1 (26 June 1915). Much earlier I had cited Flexner in "Women in Archives: The Status of Women in the Academic Professions," *American Archivist* 36:2 (April 1973): 183-201.
6. Timothy Ericson discusses more productive ways to think about what our work is in "Preoccupied with Our Own Gardens," to be published in *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-1991), an article adapted from a paper presented 2 June 1990 at the Association of Canadian Archivists, Victoria, B.C. Ericson has also given a paper at the spring 1992 MARAC meeting, on the relation between archival training and archival needs, which is required reading for interested archivists.
7. See Elsie Freeman Freivogel, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47:2 (Spring 1984): 111-123.
8. Paul Conway, National Archives and Records Administration, is completing what is probably the most comprehensive and systematic study of users ever done in an archival institution in the United States. His recommendations about finding aids and reference systems will be instructive to us all.