Understanding the Archives: Experiences of Archivists and Librarians

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of a phenomenographic research study on experiences of archives funded in part by a 2014 CARL Research Grant. The research sought to uncover variations in collective experiences of librarians, archivists, and those with dual-roles (library and archival duties) and apply the results to facilitate communication and understanding. While archives are experienced in different ways, understanding these differences—as well as leveraging commonalities—may provide a way for increased collaborative efforts that may lead to archives becoming more visible and valued in of our current academic information environments.

Introduction

What do we talk about when we talk about our experiences of archives? While archives and libraries are allied professions, there is a lack of communication between the two that can inhibit potentially valuable collaborations. Although most archivists in the United States are now educated and trained in library schools, alongside librarians, no graduate programs appear to require an archives course unless the student declares an archival concentration. This puts the two professions in the strained position of being allied fields, having many of the same challenges and opportunities, but with little dialogue or cross-fertilization of ideas. This is a problem, not only for collaboration, but also for communicating value. Librarians and archivists must be able to communicate about archives in order to collaborate. And, of course, the first crucial ingredient for clear communication is understanding what we talk about when we talk about experiencing archives.

While both the archival and library professions have long histories in the United States, they currently function in relatively separate spheres (Marcum, 2014). There has been increasing interest in the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums) movement in recent years (Davis & Howard, 2013) that have resulted in collaborative projects, especially at the national level (Marcum, 2014). However, there still appears to be a gap between the librarians and archivists in the United States when it comes to understanding the archives, especially on the individual rather than national level. While similar issues face both professions, there is a lack of overlap in research published and read by both professions and disciplines, in conference attendance, and in collaborative projects. This is a disservice to both professions and inhibits both from leveraging their strengths in collaborations. Part of this lack of collaboration may come from the lack of understanding of archives and their role in the academic information landscape.

Two previous studies by the author have explored both librarians' and archivists' experiences of archives in order to illuminate differences and similarities (Wakimoto & Bruce, 2014; Wakimoto & Bruce, 2015). These studies were a first step in attempting to communicate collective experiences of archives with the possibility of using the results to increase

communication between the professions, at the level of individuals working together. This article reports on the continuation of these studies, specifically focusing on how the results show commonalities that can be used as conversation points to facilitate working together. Talking together should allow archivists and librarians to better demonstrate the value of archives as an integral part of the academic, information landscape alongside the library.

Methods

Phenomenography is concerned not with defining phenomena, such as the archives, but instead describing collective experiences of phenomena (Marton, 1981). When we describe the archives, we do it through our experiences instead of the abstract. And, while we are all unique individuals, phenomenography asserts, and research has shown, that there are only a limited number of ways of experiencing a phenomenon. This makes it ideal for research that seeks to explore variations in experiences, as well as describe these collective experiences to promote clearer communication. These different ways of experiencing a phenomenon, in this case the archives, are articulated via categories of description. Each category of description then describes the experience of, also known as ways of seeing, the phenomenon and points out the variation among these experiences. The goal of phenomenography is to describe these experiences. They are not used to define individuals.

Phenomenography began in the educational field in Sweden (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth, 1997); however, it has found traction in the library and information science (LIS) field, especially outside of the United States (Bruce, 1999; Yates, Partridge, & Bruce, 2012). The seminal work in information literacy, *The Seven Faces of Information Literacy* by Christine Bruce at Queensland University of Technology, used phenomenography to describe seven ways of experiencing information literacy (Bruce, 1997). Other studies in the LIS field have also been conducted (Maybee, Bruce, Lupton, & Rebmann, 2013), including two earlier studies by the author on experiences of archives by archivists and librarians (Wakimoto & Bruce, 2014; Wakimoto & Bruce, 2015). The research study that is the focus of this article is the continuation of these two studies that was made possible, in part, by a CARL Research Grant.

For this study, 24 individuals were interviewed who self-identified as librarians, archivists, or dual-role. Dual-role individuals had responsibilities of both librarians and archivists (Manning & Silva, 2012). After having the interviews transcribed, the transcripts were analyzed looking for variations in the experiences to create categories of description for each group. The categories of description among the three groups were then compared to find overlaps and differences in order to understand what is discussed when talking about experiences or ways of seeing archives. Through understanding these collective experiences, librarians and archivists should be able to better communicate the value of archives within and outside the university, especially through potential collaborations.

Results and Discussion

Through careful reading and analysis of the interview transcriptions, categories of description were created for librarians, archivists, and dual-roles. These categories differ in their foci with respect to viewing archives; however, there are overlaps which may prove useful in initiating conversation and collaboration among librarians and archivists. These results support the previous two studies findings (Wakimoto & Bruce, 2014; Wakimoto & Bruce, 2015), as well as provide a more nuanced understanding of the varying experiences of archives. This section

discusses the results with respect to applying findings to facilitate better communication for collaboration.

While there are obvious differences in how archives are experienced, there is also substantial overlap. These overlaps provide entries for opening communication and potentially even collaboration. There are overlaps in how: collections are viewed, the importance (in most categories) of the balance between preservation and access, the ability for people to connect to their histories through the archives, and the conviction that archives are political and have a place in social justice movements. Understanding and articulating both similarities and differences in how archives are collectively viewed is the first step to better, clearer communication.

Additionally, many of the same fears and frustrations are voiced by all three groups in regard to the work of the archives. These include: the need for a vision and strategic planning, the need for more support from the larger organization, the pressures of limited time, the continual fight against stereotypes of work and worth, and the deep desire to connect with colleagues across organizations and collections. These are not issues that are unique to the archives; the same issues are voiced by many librarians about librarianship. These are issues around which there is potential for working together instead of having separate initiatives. Through these collaborations, perhaps, both libraries and archives will emerge stronger. But the first step, of course, is communication.

Digging deeper into these similarities and differences, there is the articulation of that which seems to unite and to divide the line between archivist and librarian. While there is substantial overlap seen in reference work and overall goals in wanting to provide access to information, there were also frustrations voiced that there are misunderstandings of what constitutes archival work and why it is important. As one interviewee noted when told that the research was looking into understanding experiences of archives in hopes of better communication, "It is a noble project." There is a feeling that more communication is needed so the professions can work together to show value of archives not only as repositories, but as connected to the wider campus community. There is the desire to not discount the archives as some dusty shoebox that has no relevance or importance in the larger information landscape except for a few historians. Understanding and working together will allow librarians and archivists to leverage resources and knowledge to provide value to each other and to the campus community.

Conclusions

Librarians and archivists must understand that while there are varying ways of viewing and experiencing archives, none of them relegate archives to an auxiliary position. Each way of viewing and experiencing the archives is valid and valuable. Now is the time to talk with each other, to work together to showcase and support each other's work, and to understand the archives' place within the academic information landscape. Archives have value and are valuable through their collections, the work of those in the archives, and the use of the archives by others to find their history and recreate their stories. If there are no records, there is no history. It is time to start communicating so we have the chance to work together to showcase libraries' and archives' value and importance in the academic information landscape.

Acknowledgements

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