Review Article

Texts, Frameworks and Electronic Records

Barbara Reed＊

- I. Penn, G. Pennix and J. Coulson, *Records Management Handbook*, 2nd edition, Gower, London, 1994.

- J. Kennedy and C. Schauder, *Records Management. A Guide for Students and Practitioners of Records Management*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1994.

- E. Yakel, *Starting an Archives*, Society of American Archivists and the Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ and London, 1994.

- J. Ellis (ed.), *Keeping Archives*, 2nd edition, D. W. Thorpe in association with the Australian Society of Archivists Inc, Melbourne, 1993.

We finally have a choice in text books for archives and records management! This is in marked contrast to the situation of fifteen years ago when the field was almost completely empty except for the classic Muller Feith and Fruin, Jenkinson, Schellenberg and a selection of how-to-do-it books aimed at non professionals, claiming to be records management texts. Now we can choose to use archives or records management texts, Australian or American texts. Are we finally satisfied? Well, no. We are still confined to reading records management texts and separate archives management texts (or vice versa). What we cannot yet do is to find a text which satisfactorily addresses the management of the records continuum, nor do we yet have a text which

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articulates the particular professional perspective which recordkeepers can uniquely if possible contribute to the players in the information spectrum.

The last fifteen years has seen the publication of the SAA Basic Manual Series (1977–1988), its extensive revision and re-emergence as the Archival Fundamental Series from 1990 onwards; the Australian *Keeping Archives* in 1987 and its revision in 1993; significant revisions to Robek, Brown and Maedke's *Information and Records Management* in 1987 and again in 1995, the publication by Penn et al. of *Records Management Handbook* in 1989 and its 1994 revision, and the (Australian) publication of Kennedy and Schauder's *Records Management* in 1994, amongst others.[1]

These texts all share a basic goal, to provide practical guidance on the tasks of either archives or records management. The texts are in general aimed at the practitioner and as a secondary goal aimed at the student. This rush to publish good quality, everyday, basic or fundamental practical manuals was fuelled by their almost complete absence in the English language literature prior to the 1980s. All practitioners bemoaned their absence. When needing an authoritative reference point on a practical matter, Jenkinson or Schellenberg were not much immediate help, nor were instructions written to demean the task of records management into a purely clerical function.

The books (or their constituent individual parts) published during the 1980s share common characteristics. They reflected a stable, and perhaps with hindsight a somewhat complacent, view of the records industry. Archives were happily on one side of the divide and records managers were operating on the other. Records management was to be justified in terms of cost benefits, and formulae for convincing management of the need for efficient paper records management were put forward. Archivists were the custodians of the past, keepers of the permanently valuable, backed by professional status, tertiary education and respect. The texts show few points of ideological or theoretical conflict. What we have represented in these publications is a picture of a recordkeeping industry when the answers were clear and when practice was able to be definitively stated. The paper world could be brought under control, all activities could be clearly articulated into stages and it was clear who should be doing what. Authors were able to set forth clear guideposts to newcomers, novices and experienced practitioners alike.

None of these publications had much time for articulating the theory underlying the practice. The emphasis was on guidance, statements of methodology and practice. In fact it seemed as if the practice was in some senses elevated to theory, leading in some quarters to a rejection of records

management as a discipline suited to university level education, one at best only to be taught at a para-professional level.

This secure, cosy and certain world which could be articulated as practice was to some extent backed up by the view of the profession/s to be found in professional journals. The professional journals are reflections of the professional discourse, the discussion of professional issues of concern, exploration of theory and reporting of best practice.[2] During the 1980s (and from the hindsight of the mid 1990s) with a few notable, often Canadian, exceptions, the archival journals from America, Canada and Australia, were not strong on discussion of theory. Rather their contents were issues based or describe practices within various archival or records management work places. Records management journals have never been strong on theory, a comment which applies as much today as for the 1980s. Records management has relied on the theory from other disciplines (mainly archives administration in Australia and librarianship in America) which led to claims of it being an interdisciplinary profession.

This is not to underrate the achievements of these texts. Rather, it is an attempt to put them into a perspective from which future developments can be viewed. Perhaps we can regard the 1980s as watershed years. The 1970s in Australia had been noted for the efforts to establish and consolidate professional associations of archivists and also of records managers. During this time, the first tertiary course was established in archives administration at the University of NSW and TAFE based courses in records management were established and growing in popularity. The 1980s were perhaps a time to consolidate on gains achieved to date. The expression of current practice as manuals and texts can be seen as a way of consolidating such achievements.

Above this superficial impression that all was well with the world of records and archives, storm clouds were gathering. Continual tension between the roles of archivists and records managers is revealed in the literature.[3] The growing ubiquity of information technology, the development of information resources management initiatives, and a fear for the role archivists and records managers in the electronic future were lurking as problems for all practitioners.

The first part of the 1990s has seen almost all of the complacent assumptions about recordkeeping reflected in the 1980s texts blown away. Electronic recordkeeping can no longer be ignored. Nor are its products amenable to treatment as physical objects to be managed. The theoretical writings have strengthened immeasurably. Canadian, American and Australian

professionals have grappled with and articulated new methodologies, new ways of thinking about problems and outlined new strategies to cope in the electronic world.

It is electronic records and their implications for our profession/s which by the early 1990s precipitated the significant questioning of the safe secure practices of the 1980s. While individuals had previously been active in such questioning,[4] the critical mass of concern was palpable within the profession/s in the first half of this decade. The physical approaches to archives and records management no longer work. When stripped of the methodologies outlined with confidence in the 1980s, the profession/s have been found in poor shape with little theoretical knowledge to fall back on. This lack of theory and the almost disrespect for theory within the archives and management field has had severe consequences, one of which is the disarray and despair of the profession/s during the first few years of the 1990s. Electronic records have forced us to confront the inadequacies of practice, to redefine, reassert and reshape our theoretical base and to rearticulate the unity of the recordkeeping profession. From where we are at present, this process is strengthening the recordkeeping profession (or those of the profession who will engage), outlining a constantly changing but bright future and expanding opportunities to work with other professions to achieve our basic aim—capturing and managing evidence.

Aligned with the rethinking of our processes to cope with electronic recordkeeping has come increasingly more consistent calls for the rethinking of professional roles. Old definitions of roles are again being questioned and challenged, but with alternative structures and roles being forcefully presented. The articulation of the recordkeeping continuum has been ably undertaken by Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward[5] and the essential similarities in archives and records work has been accepted in projects such as the development of competency standards for the records industry and the development of records management standards. Such an integration into a larger disciplinary body with subsets of specialisation, reintegrates records management into the archival theory which forms so much of its base.[6]

Our educational courses are also reflecting these changes, with integrated archives and records courses offered at graduate diploma and higher degree levels.[7] Graduates of such courses will ideally be able to work across the spectrum of jobs available in archives and records management. With a solid theoretical base, they will be able to look out to other related professions and find similarities in methodology and strategy to achieve recordkeeping purposes.

If these are the changes which the past few years have brought to the profession/s, how has this affected the texts which are available for us to teach with? It is unfair to expect that text books, which are often a year or two in preparation, will reflect the most current thought prevalent in the profession. New concepts, ideas or ways of thinking take time to articulate, develop and then become accepted as professional practice. The pace of change, however, has been reflected in the revision of texts. Of those cited in the opening paragraphs, the period between editions seems to be about five years. While this may be the normal revision period for texts, the extent of the revisions seems unusually great indicating significant shift in professional practice and methods of articulation. Thus the second edition of *Keeping Archives* is a very different book to the original 1987 edition and the second edition of the *Records Management Handbook* is a very different book to the first edition.

The theoretical bases of the books in question provides an interesting analysis. The second edition of *Keeping Archives*, it has been noted,[8] in parts moves away from the straightforward basic manual format, to include a greater articulation of the theory. This, combined with the presentation of some of the shifting ground or very recent thinking which was, at the time of writing, looking to challenge accepted practice, resulted in a book which was something of a hybrid—not a work of theory, yet not only a practice based text.

The *Records Management Handbook*, now authored entirely by Americans, exhibits a very shaky conceptual and almost non existent theoretical framework. Written by four authors, some of the problems with the text and its consistency can be put down to this fact, although rigorous editing should have eliminated this. Records are defined as 'recorded information', 'any information captured in reproducible form that is required for conducting business' (p. 3) and the definition is then refined to emphasise that records are 'generated or received by a business enterprise as evidence of its organisation, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, and internal or external transactions and valuable because of the information it contains' (p. 3–4). This definition is useful and encompasses many of the concerns at issue in the current professional debates. The text further draws a distinction between data processing and records management as subsets of information management, focusing on differences based on physical form, evidence and value. While taking issue with the 'value' argument in defining a record, there is, in the first chapters of this book, interesting material on distinguishing records from information using the compelling feature of evidence. However, sentences such as 'the ability of these computerised

systems instantly to make available full documents or custom iterations of data, may someday render obsolete the distinction between data and records' (p. 5) muddy the waters to the extent that one wonders how the previously articulated evidence emphasis can be reconciled with such an approach. Similarly, the focus on evidence falls away in the practical chapters of the book, only to re-emerge with considerations of document imaging systems in order to justify the need to maintain authenticated documents.

The conceptual base of the book is the life cycle model. Explained in detail in Chapter Two, 'The Information Life Cycle', the authors make much of the interrelated nature of the stages of the cycle—that 'disposition' needs to be considered at creation, that maintenance and use issues must be considered prior to the creation of records etc. Such blurring of the edges of the distinct stage, with their inherent professional roles sitting quietly in the background, adds fuel to the argument that the model is inadequate to cope with the complexity of modern records. The life cycle is also used as the basis for the arrangement of the chapters of the book. Yet interestingly, we find that considerations of appraisal (thankfully separated from destruction and transfer) is the first of the records processes to be addressed—a structure not consistent with the life cycle model at all.

Starting from a reformulated argument in its first chapters which expand the boundaries of records management and articulate concerns relating to evidence, flagging the intention of the book to seriously address electronic records, the remainder of the book retreats into the old frameworks, muddling information and records badly in chapters dealing with electronic systems, and slipping back into the physical mindset of the earlier edition. Thus the book must be treated with some caution and its assertion that 'applying the principles and precepts espoused in this book will ensure that organisations have a solid foundation on which to build as they enter the twenty-first century (p. 11) taken with a grain of salt. This is particularly so when the book is also arrogant enough not to include any footnoting, citations or references to other professional literature or thought.

Kennedy and Schauder's *Records Management* is almost completely silent on the subject of theory, using the life cycle model as a conceptual basis for the book, using and referring to library theory for classification and indexing. This book focuses on methodology and practice with little attempt to deal with theoretical issues, although making a concerted effort to connect to some of the most recent professional discourse through citations to journal literature. Again, although the life cycle is used as the conceptual model, the ordering

of the processes reflected in chapter headings does not use that model. As its 'Introduction' states, the book 'takes as its framework the scenario in which an organisation has appointed a records manager or records management consultant to set up a comprehensive records management program. It presents the steps involved in establishing such a program' (p. x). Again the inability of the life cycle model to cope with practice, let alone theory, is obvious.

It is hard to find anything constructive to say about Yakel's *Starting an Archives*, but its theoretical base certainly is not a strong point on which to start. This text might explain some of the 'how' questions, albeit superficially as befits an overview publication, but it fails dismally to explain the 'why'. In a text aimed at convincing 'administrators, resource allocators, and archivists in the initial stage of developing an archival program' of the worth of archives programs, this seems an overwhelming omission. If I were an administrator or resource allocator reading this publication, I would, having read it, still be asking for considerable justification as to why *any* organisation should undertake an archives program.

The very lack of theoretical framework provides clues to one of the major weaknesses of the text. Coming from a strong theoretical framework, the 'why' questions would be easy to address convincingly. Their absence produces a wishy-washy text. To provide one substantial example, the text engenders confusion about whether an archives is to be established within an organisation to serve that organisation or to collect external records. While both types of archives exist, their focus, roles and rationale are quite different and have different emphases. One presumes that such a blurring is deliberate in order to produce an inclusive text, but the absence of the distinction considerably weakens this book.

How then do the texts cope with electronic records? To be fair to all texts concerned, I concede up front the fact that some 90 per cent of records are still in paper form. However, this proportion is diminishing rapidly and books launched onto the market aimed at practitioners and student which do not seriously address electronic recordkeeping issues, do their audience substantial disservice.

Penn et al. claim in their Preface 'What's new?' . . . 'Almost everything!'. For many years, literature on the subject of records management has dealt exclusively with the management of paper records. For the second edition of the *Records Management Handbook* the authors have brought a multimedia perspective to the subject . . . 'this approach recognises the steady trend in

records management towards the use of machine-readable media for storage and retrieval of records. . .'(p. xiii). The ensuing text itself is, however, something of a disappointment in relation to electronic records. While strongly advocating a proactive role for the records manager, pushing out of the 'cosy niche of tending the inactive records' (p. 209), there is at times a tinge of despair and fear in some of the treatment of electronic records. Statements such as 'Organisations which make a wholesale commitment to electronic media may find themselves archiving machines and spare parts as well as records, or investing in massive media conversion efforts in order to eliminate the equipment dependency' (p. 18) do not assist the practitioner or student. Inventorying computer files (an interesting concept) focuses on interviewing data processing manager and focusing on inputs and outputs (p. 99).

Appraisal of electronic records discusses underlying similarities with appraisal of other records and suggests the tools proposed for paper appraisal, which have some relation to functions, are appropriate but then focuses on scheduling data advocating the need to show some benefit of the records manager's involvement ('this could involve a range of activities from sharing in the responsibility for the establishment of an archival management function in the organisation's tape library to arranging for off-site storage facilities' p. 127). Scheduling of electronic records from personal computers is dealt with by listing some of the problems, proposing sensibly that the classification schemes might provide some assistance in scheduling, but moving quickly on to backups and the need for policy directives on the importance of this information to the organisation (p. 128).

A separate chapter is included on the pitfalls of technology, stating that there is a significant change to the way information is being conceptualised and used due to the impact of technology: 'It must all be brought together for only then can the information which flows through computers, telephones, periodicals, files and the mail room be managed as a single resource' (p. 273). Perhaps a better emphasis here would be on an organisation wide retrieval tool, with appropriate security controls, rather than one way of managing such disparate elements of the large information pool. Published information, unpublished information and records cannot be adequately managed within one unified system as they are fundamentally different things.

For aspiring records managers, the suggested strategy is to convince their organisation that computer assisted records management is the way to go, and therefore steer the organisation away from leaping into on-line storage and retrieval unprepared (p. 274). Apart from being somewhat unrealistic advice, this still evades the question of what assistance the records perspective

can provide. The notions of evidence and transaction, the fundamentals of what constitutes a record, are lost within a consideration of the importance of a records management contribution to indexing on-line information. The treatment of document imaging systems addresses issues such as evidence and authority in a focused way, but does not extend the discussion beyond systems which reproduce paper.

Kennedy and Schauder, far more modest in their claims, address the technology issue somewhat better. Although this might be a reflection of a comfort zone with Australian developments and expression, this book assumes a greater degree of technological literacy than the American text. It deals creditably with the need to keep up with technological change and workplace reform, with appraisal of electronic records (citing primarily the work of Australian archivists), with computer assisted records management packages and their selection criteria. Various technologies are covered at an overview level including EDI, e-mail, developments such as CALS and digital imaging. This book provides little guidance on how to capture records from these electronic systems, rather highlighting their relevance to records managers. Methodologies for managing the physical records are obviously not appropriate to these systems, and the book is left hanging between a world which is paper and electronic, but looking forward to electronic systems with openness rather than trepidation.

Kennedy and Schauder, like Penn et al., address some issues relating to the creation of records, which will become increasingly important in the understanding, capture and management of electronic records. Issues such as the design of records (templates etc.), the need to discriminate between types of records and their handling, and points of capture of records regain validity in dealing with electronic recordkeeping. However, in neither text are these issues dealt with in relation to electronic records, but are rather addressed in the traditional fashion of forms design, correspondence management, reports management and policy and procedure management. In Kennedy and Schauder, these form the last, weak chapter and follow the American precedent which sits awkwardly in the Australian context.

The second edition of *Keeping Archives* has been rightly criticised for treating electronic records as a species of exotica,[9] separating out the concerns of electronic records into a separate chapter which is focused on the archival management processes, with an excursion into document image processing, which deals in passing with non-archival applications. In most other chapters the problems of dealing with records captured and managed in electronic form have been ignored, an omission which is from a 1995 perspective glaring.

Yakel's *Starting an Archives* deals similarly with the problem—it does not exist. In a text issued in 1994 aimed at positioning archival programs, this is a serious omission. As the SAA itself recognises, every archivist by the year 2 000 should be familiar with and seeking to advise on electronic records issues.[10] Yet positioned as described in this publication, the archivist will have very limited opportunity for doing so. Computers are mentioned as aids in the archival processes and the bibliographic essay included as the last chapter to provide further sources to explore for more detail does include some further reading on electronic records.

Space does not permit an analysis of many of the practices recommended in the texts. The dreadful treatment of classification and indexing, and arrangement and description (essentially related processes) in all of the texts deserves far greater comment as it is amazing that one of our professional cornerstones can be written about so consistently badly. At the same time, some of the strengths of the texts are overlooked in an analysis such as this. Penn et al. have some interesting chapters on management analysis, which, with some additional focusing along functional lines, could be developed as a core professional skill. Similarly, buried in 'developing retention schedules' is a useful section on regulatory impact reporting and analysis. Taken together, these two features, tweaked to become something slightly different, would provide the organisation wide analytic framework we need to work effectively with records of all types, whether current or older material.

What value is there in text books with no theoretical base? The practice and methodology, so useful for application in a particular workplace at a particular time, will inevitably be rendered obsolete with changing technology, changing workplace dynamics and structures and shifting business priorities. Without a strong basis in theory, all practitioners will wallow when the specific practice articulated in texts ceases to be relevant.

Of the texts discussed above, parts of both *Keeping Archives* and the *Records Management Handbook* provide unconnected glimpses of a theoretical underpinning which will provide the basis for a recordkeeping continuum approach, uniting the archivists and records managers within one theoretical base. Some of these glimpses include the development of organisation wide perspectives, contextual knowledge, an evidence focus and ways of expressing concepts that transcend the purely physical attributes of paper records. None of these texts yet reflects a required focus on determining what should be captured as an accountable record, on recordkeeping systems or articulates the fundamental similarity of all recordkeeping activities applied with different emphasis in current or 'archival' contexts.

So my conclusions on an overview of these texts is that we do indeed have a choice of texts for records management and archives, but we do not yet have one which is able to articulate the theoretical basis from which we can derive practice as it suits the organisational circumstances facing the individual professional in the changing workplace. We do not yet have a textbook which serves the recordkeeping profession.

Endnotes

1. For completeness, I should note that Kennedy and Schauder previously wrote, with Maryann Rosenthal, *Records Management: An introduction to Principles and Practices with case studies and exercises*, RMIT, 1991. Also worthy of note are the following American texts: James Bradsher (ed.), *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989; Richard Cox, *Managing Institutional Archives: Foundational Principles and Practices*, Greenwood Press, New York, 1992; and Bruce Dearstyne, *The Archival Enterprise: Modern Archival Principles, Practices and Management Techniques*, ALA, Chicago, 1992.

2. See the various papers brought together under the heading 'Editor's Special Forum on Needs in Archival Research and Publication', *American Archivist*, vol. 57, Spring 1994.

3. For example: Jay Atherton, 'From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management—Archives Relationship', *Archivaria*, no. 21, Winter 1985–6; Glenda Acland, 'Archivist—Keeper, Undertaker or Auditor', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 19, no. 1, May 1991; and Robert L. Sanders, 'Archivists and Records Managers: Another Marriage in Trouble?', *Records Management Quarterly*, January 1993.

4. E.g. Margaret Hedstrom, David Bearman, John McDonald, Frank Upward, and Terry Cook.

5. Sue McKemmish, 'Core Knowledge and Skills for Information Professionals—Converging or Diverging: The Implications of Diverse World Views' in *Proceedings of the 9th National Convention of the Records Management Association of Australia*, RMAA, Sydney, 1992; Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward, 'The Archival Document: A Submission to the Inquiry into Australia as an Information Society', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 19, May 1991; Sue McKemmish, 'Educating Recordkeeping Professionals for the 21st century—Issues and Challenges', presented to the RMAA annual conference, September 1995; and Sue McKemmish, 'Background Notes on Competency Standards' presented to the Archival Educators Forum, July 1995.

6. Luciana Duranti, 'The Odyssey of Records Managers' Pts 1 & 2, *Records Management Quarterly*, vol. 23, nos 3 and 4, 1989; Livia Iacovino, 'Education and Training: Future Directions in Archives and Records Education at Monash University', *Archives in the Tropics. Proceedings of the Australian Society of Archivists Conference*, ASA, 1995.

7. Michael Piggott, 'Educating for Recordkeeping and Information Management', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 23, no. 1, May 1995.

8. See for example reviews by Richard Cox (*Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 21, November 1993, pp. 265–9) and Robert G. Sherer (*The Southwestern Archivist*, vol. XVII, Summer 1993, pp. 36–7).

9. Richard Cox, ibid.

10. The Society of American Archivists, 'Position Statement on Archival Issues Raised by Information Stored in Electronic Form', March 1995.