

Integrating Archival Programs into the Core Business of the Independent School

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Jan Riley works as an archivist in two independent schools in Perth, All Saints' College and Perth College, where her role and responsibilities embrace a range of recordkeeping programs aimed at capturing and preserving the memory and culture of these institutions. Building on a career in librarianship and archive administration, Jan has recently completed an MA (Archives & Records) at Monash University. She is actively involved at committee level with the WA branch of the ASA and the Schools Special Interest Group, and is pursuing an interest in developing software for the management of archival processes in schools and other organisations.

This article is based on case studies of archival practice and the role of archives in four independent schools undertaken as part of a Master's program at Monash University. It analyses the extent to which the archival programs support the schools' business needs, reports on the one-dimensional views held by members of the school community about the role of the programs, and concludes that they tend to be marginal to the core business of educating students. Taking the records continuum as its conceptual framework¹, the article argues that the future viability of archival programs in independent schools will depend on their relevance to the schools' business functions, and that school and archival goals will best be achieved by integrating archival programs with business and current recordkeeping processes. It suggests strategic directions for the reengineering and marketing of school archival programs in order that recordkeeping in schools can better support transactional, evidence, accountability and memory purposes contemporaneously and over time².

Background

Independent schools are business organisations, some with multi-million dollar operating budgets. They therefore require effective management of resources and good marketing strategies to remain competitive in the face of increased consumer scrutiny with regard to their core business of educating students. They are non-government institutions, jealous of their autonomy and freedom to govern themselves through independent boards, or councils, and to conduct their own affairs. They are not publicly accountable or subject to government statutes in matters of recordkeeping.

There are interesting parallels between changes in the independent school management style caused by a need to be responsive to market imperatives, and the paradigm shift occurring in archival theory and best practice resulting from technological change and dissatisfaction with outdated theoretical models and methodologies. Changes in the operating environment of independent schools have provided impetus within such schools for a proactive approach to business efficiency; a shift from a purely educational focus to a customer focus; and the establishment and marketing of the distinctive advantages of their educational programs compared with those of their competitors. Independent schools are having to acknowledge that they may have to be responsive to customers as stakeholders in the educational process and provide the means for scrutinising the services offered. Herein lies a window of opportunity for redefining the role of school archival programs in support of the school's business functions.

In the research undertaken by the author, the archival programs in four independent schools were analysed to determine the extent to which they met business needs. Archivists, principals, business managers, development officers, former students, teaching staff and school historians were interviewed as to their perceptions of the archives and the role of archival programs. The study found that in general the programs were marginal to the core business of educating the student. There was little involvement by the archivist in current recordkeeping, a general lack of standard and consistent recordkeeping practices, a lack of recordkeeping policy and an absence of assigned responsibilities for recordkeeping. The study went on to explore strategic directions for archival programs that can enrich the curriculum; provide for administrative efficiency and foster effective marketing of the school; deliver evidence of business activity and a particular school culture; and provide a process-centred learning experience for students by involving them in the archival activity of documenting the school and its achievements.

In order to pursue such goals, the study argued that school archivists need to integrate management of archives with business activity and recordkeeping processes which document such activity. In this way, archival goals and school business needs will be better aligned and the archival role will be seen as integral to, rather than apart from, normal business processes.

The relevance of archival programs to the business needs of the independent school

The study found that there were several barriers to archival programs achieving their full potential in the terms outlined above in the four schools. One of the greatest of these was the sense that it was not relevant for archivists to be involved in current recordkeeping or for archives to be considered as a means of providing accountability and managing risk.

Principals commonly held a view that the primary role and purpose of the archives was one of custody of the history and traditions of the school. This was seen as being more important than a role in providing an authoritative source of information to satisfy the needs of the administration. Principals felt that there were business advantages in the archives' role of preserving the culture of the school. They believed that former students would feel valued through display of items which established links between them and the past culture of the school and that this would encourage them to be philanthropic towards the school. However principals saw no link between archival programs and current recordkeeping, nor did they see a role for the archivist in managing current records for use within the school to support an internal need for administrative efficiency and accountability. The concept of archives as records which document business activity and are of continuing value to the school as evidence, as well as a source of corporate memory of decision-making relating to its business functions, did not form part of the principals' understanding of the significance of the archival program for business purposes.

The archivists' views on the role of archival programs within their schools were more diverse. At two schools, a cultural continuity role was expressed as a major role, although the archivist in one of these considered a more appropriate role was in support of the administration. At the other two schools the archivists saw the role of the archives primarily as an information resource. The archivists perceived their role as having a strong records focus. They expressed their role in terms of facilitating use of the collections by implementing and maintaining systems

to organise and promote access to records. There was common concern with the tension caused by limited time and resources, their commitment to processing records, and an awareness of the need to be more proactive.

Barriers to achieving program potential with regard to administrative and accountability purposes

Barriers within the schools which have contributed to the lack of effective exploitation of archival programs for administrative and accountability purposes derive from:

- a lack of understanding by key staff in the school of the nature of archives and archival programs, and their potential in relation to supporting administrative needs for information and evidence, as well as providing for cultural continuity;
- an independent school culture in which there is:
 - a lack of concern for administrative and organisational accountability; and
 - a lack of emphasis on recordkeeping, and a consequent lack of responsibility for policies and systems in this area;
- a predominantly custodial model of school archival practice which has resulted in:
 - a general expectation that the archival role is limited to processing records after transfer to archival custody rather than providing access to evidence of school activity by ensuring records of such activity are captured and preserved;
 - a focus on describing records rather than documenting school business activity; and
 - a loss of linkages between archives and the business activity from which they derive.

As a result, archivists are constrained from actively intervening to ensure records are being created and captured in recordkeeping systems in ways which will ensure their long term accessibility. Furthermore, archival activity has not been seen to be central to the business functions of the school because archives are not connected with business activity.

Barriers to curriculum related programs

Despite a potential for archival programs to enrich curricular and co-curricular activities, and the student learning process, comments by the archivists revealed a lack of engagement between teaching and archival programs. While there was some co-curricular and curricular involvement with students by the archivist at two schools, there was no evidence of collaboration between archivists and teachers to exploit use of archives as a curriculum resource or to engage students in documentary projects.

The failure of teaching staff to use archives as a curriculum or learning resource can be attributed to the following factors:

- the teachers' lack of interest in, and understanding of, the nature of archives, compounded by school cultures in which the archival role is strongly linked to the preservation and housing of the traditions and culture of the school;
- the archivists' view that an educational role for archives was peripheral to the main custodial and records processing role and that education is the province of the teaching staff;
- the archivists' particular abilities and strengths;
- the relative inaccessibility of the archives contributed to by lack of space to house class groups, difficulty in reconciling timetable restraints and the archivists' part-time hours, and the lack of public access to comprehensive finding aids such as might be found in a library;
- the nature of archives, particularly their confidential nature and physical fragility; and
- the effort and time required by teachers and archivists to integrate the use of archives into the teaching program to meet the needs of differing ages and abilities and to be relevant to the curriculum.

New strategic directions: reengineering and marketing the archival mission

There is a well-acknowledged need for archivists to communicate an understanding

of their role beyond the boundaries of their profession. Currently this is a difficult task for archivists, who first need to redefine their role to themselves as a consequence of what has been termed a major paradigm shift. It is even more difficult for independent school archivists operating very much within a custodial model.

Archives are a multi-faceted resource with a number of roles and purposes. While aspects of the cultural dimension of archives appear to be appreciated in independent schools, their role as an information resource and as evidence of business activity is not well known to staff other than the business managers, and an accountability role is almost non-existent. Archives are exploited within the schools insofar as they are symbols of the school ethos and values, for example in displays for marketing and fund-raising, but there is a limited perception of archives as meeting the internal needs of the school administration or supporting accountability to students, parents, teachers, alumni and benefactors as customers and stakeholders.

Promoting archival programs as having outcomes related to effective decision making, administrative continuity, risk management and accountability, will help develop awareness of archives as the corporate assets they are. If the school community understands the value of such assets, a role which ensures their continuing accessibility must be seen as integral to the functioning of the school.

While the problem of a limited view of archives is one for the profession as a whole, if school archivists can communicate a multi-dimensional understanding of archives to students, parents, teachers, school council or board members, and other stakeholders, they can play a significant part in publicising their role within and beyond the school community.

The orientation in the policies of the four schools studied was one focused on records, and the archival activity involved in making records available for use, rather than on identifying the outcomes of archival programs in terms of the benefits and relevance to targeted school functional areas. The custodial model of archival activity reflected in the policies located such activity considerably 'downstream', and removed from, the business context in which records are created. By emphasising a custodial role, the volume of business activity which is recorded in a virtual format is ignored and there is no involvement by the archivist in providing access to evidence of such activity. It is difficult for archivists to have an authoritative input in the area of electronic recordkeeping if the archival role is focused at the 'dead end' rather than the front, or 'live' end, of such activity. In

order to play a part in locating evidence of business activity in electronic systems, archivists need to engineer and market a role for themselves in developing and implementing standards for the creation, care and use of business records; as well as continuing and enhancing their role in relation to the use of archives for research or promotional purposes.

Pro-active role and increased visibility as a means of asserting professional identity

If archivists in schools are going to be acknowledged for their professional skills and speak with authority in the area of electronic recordkeeping, they need to move out from what is a reactive role of processing records transferred to the archives, and into the area where records are created and managed in their functional context. This will cause conflict for archivists who maintain they are fully occupied processing records in the archives, but if the cost of this preoccupation is the potential loss of evidence of business functions, archivists will have to reassess their role³.

Recordkeeping in schools is management by default. Archivists whose role is to maintain access to records as evidence of school activity, particularly with reference to electronic records, should be involved in recordkeeping systems design and maintenance in a consultative or advisory role, setting standards and monitoring performance. The recent publication of the Australian Standard for Records Management (AS 4390) is particularly useful for archivists in the private sector who need to develop standards and procedures in this area.

Archivists should seek representation on committees responsible for policy making and discussing issues in the records area, particularly with respect to the management of electronic recordkeeping and communication. Not only will they have an opportunity to participate in decision making affecting their role, they will establish credibility as having specialised knowledge.

As electronic records become more prevalent in schools, archivists should be using technology to their advantage to develop locator systems for records which, because of their form, will remain in the computer system in which they were generated. Other records which are required in their operating area, irrespective of form, might also be documented by the archivist as to their location and function.

Reinventing school archives as customer-driven archives may prove a winning strategy in the current independent schools environment. For school archivists, this includes collaborating with teaching staff to define possible uses of records and documentation projects in curriculum or extra-curricular programs with students. Archival advisory committees can also provide the school community with a sense of ownership of the archives, an opportunity to participate in the reinvention process, and a vested interest in the successful implementation of new programs.

Where to begin?

Evidence from all four schools showed a lack of clarity on the part of principals as to where the archives fitted in to the school. As a first priority, archivists need to communicate to principals a reengineered archives' mission, the goals and objectives of archival programs, and strategies for achieving them. By identifying and outlining current and long-term archival program goals linked to the school's core business functions, the role and purpose of the archives and its contribution to specific school goals can be better communicated to the principal. Policies and procedures for the archives can be directly related to their multiple purposes. This would provide the opportunity for archivists, in collaboration with principals, to plan the archival program based on a common understanding of the archival role.

By communicating in terms of business outcomes to principals, the archivist can change the archives' image from that of a 'cultural frill', or 'extra-curricular' activity, into that of a 'mainstream' program central to the school's key objectives.

Evidence of a culture

A starting point might be the principal's already well-developed understanding of the business role of archives in preserving the school's culture and their significance in terms of marketing the school to its own community and to its potential clients. It is possible to build on this understanding to reconnect archiving to other business processes, and to extend awareness of the 'great richness of archives as a multi-faceted resource'⁴.

In school archives there are many records which have significance as cultural symbols. They are valued for what they represent symbolically or for the activity

which generated them, rather than as records in their own right⁵. While age might confer talisman status on such records, it is often the particular record form and their provenance, their association with a particular person or event, which vests them with symbolic significance. Records such as graduation certificates of students who have gone on to achieve prominence in later life, the account of the first day of the new school recorded by the founder in his diary, and photographs of students in the uniforms of a bygone era, or celebrating the end of examinations with an excursion to a favourite swimming spot, are such examples.

For alumni or staff associated with such records, they provide, in the words of Sue McKemmish, 'a kind of witnessing'⁶. Records displayed in a school foyer can serve to define alumni or staff in terms of their relationships with others and establish their identity within the school culture. In school archives where there is a collecting role, the memory and culture of school 'life' is preserved and enhanced by accepting and keeping donations from former students and staff. In this way school archives play a role in 'transforming "evidence of *me*" into evidence of *us*'⁷.

As expressed by one school archivist, 'archives seen as preserving the history and traditions of the school [are] undoubtedly a marketable commodity in both private and public schools'⁸. They communicate a particular school culture and values to 'all its communities and to the community at large'⁹. The principals and development officers in the schools studied clearly perceived this to be so, and saw a strong marketing business purpose for the archives.

At least three of the archivists interviewed as part of the study were uneasy with this view. The unease, I suspect, stems in part from a questioning of the validity of the 'recordness' of some of the materials which they have in their 'collections', especially some of the most 'prized' for display purposes.

Archivists can build on understandings of the symbolic significance of archives and the role they play in marketing to portray the archives as a business asset because they provide evidence for individual and collective identity. The role of the archivist can be represented as a cultural transmitter to future generations of the school. Archivists in schools where the role, as defined by the principal and the school culture, inhibits an involvement with current recordkeeping, might be more at ease with conceptualising their role within the new records continuum model as specialists in historical recordkeeping, preserving cultural identity, ensuring an authoritative transfer of corporate culture, and providing for cultural

and historical accountability and continuity. Reinterpreting their role as historical recordkeepers with reference to an historical and cultural accountability mandate may help to link it to the complementary role of current recordkeeper charged with a legal and administrative accountability mandate.

Documentation strategies

The findings of the study also support a need for a 'total archives' approach to documenting the achievements of the school. This suggests another strategy for archivists to pursue.

Documenting all of the functions of a school requires a proactive role in supplementing the existing record. Involving students in the documentary process can closely integrate the archival role with the core business function of educating the student. Involvement in projects to photograph the building program in the school, video taping games that students play in the grounds, or recording activities in the classroom can contribute to a more comprehensive documentary record of the school which goes beyond traditional notions of what records should be captured and preserved. It also exposes students to experiences and skills-based learning outside the normal range. As Samuels suggests, 'both official and non-official materials are required to achieve an adequate documentation of an institution', and a broad understanding of the breadth of its activities¹⁰. At the same time, as Samuels' article elsewhere in this issue demonstrates, such activity locates the archivist 'upstream' in the midst of one of the main business processes in the school - teaching and learning. And it provides a vehicle for raising awareness amongst students and staff of the nature of recordkeeping and its multiple purposes.

Conclusion

Of great importance is the need for the archivist in the independent school to ensure that archives programs are structured to achieve business outcomes and that they are marketed as relevant to a range of school functions, including the core business of teaching and learning.

The strategic directions outlined above derive from new ways of thinking about archival management implicit in the postcustodial paradigm and give opportunity for expression of those ideas. By communicating their mission to school principals

in terms of outcomes such as providing continued access to reliable evidence of school activity for a variety of purposes, archivists will be able to promote an archival vision which includes support for a range of business needs and accountability, as well as a cultural role. Forming alliances with those who are stakeholders in effective capture and management of records of business activity will enable archivists to promote a more strategic role in defence of the record, rather than one limited to possession or custody. Such a role will see the archivist move beyond repository walls to areas closer to the capture of the record, enabling more effective documentation of institutional activity and the incorporation of recordkeeping perspectives into the work processes of other professionals involved in information management. Empowering others and directing, rather than 'doing', will enable the archivist to more effectively concentrate on achieving outcomes which can be measured in terms of quality rather than quantity. There will be potential for the archivist to establish a nexus between documentation of organisational activity and continued access to authoritative manifestations of such activity for effective use in the present and the future, whether in serving business needs at the micro-institutional level or serving social purposes at the macro-societal level.

Endnotes

- 1 Frank Upward, 'Structuring The Records Continuum. Part One: Post-custodial Principles and Properties', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 2, November 1996, pp. 275-6.
- 2 The study was conducted as part of the author's Master's program within Monash University's Department of Librarianship, Archives and Records and is the subject of her thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts (Archives & Records). The thesis is too long to be adequately summarised and commented on in an article such as this. I have chosen, therefore, to focus on a few key issues.
- 3 David Bearman & Margaret Hedstrom, 'Reinventing Archives for Electronic Records: Alternative Service Delivery Options' in *Electronic Records Management Program Strategies, Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report*, 18, Archives & Museum Informatics, 1993, p. 82. My statement derives from Bearman and Hedstrom's comment that 'archives are failing to accomplish their purpose' if 'the evidence of important events and decisions in the organisations served by the archives remain undocumented'. This article has provided a useful framework for my discussion of a number of issues related to archival practice.
- 4 Pederson, 'Unlocking Hidden Treasures Through Description', *Archivaria*, Spring 1994, p. 56.
- 5 James O'Toole, 'The Symbolic Significance of Archives', *American Archivist*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1993, pp. 234-55.

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- 6 Sue McKemish, 'Evidence of Me . . .', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 1, May 1996, p. 29.
 - 7 Ibid. p. 38
 - 8 Anne Cooke, 'What Do I Do with the Rowing Oar? The Role of Memorabilia in School Archives', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 19, no. 1, May 1991, p. 57.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Helen Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities*, The Society of American Archivists, Metuchen, N.J., 1992, p. 7.