Educating for the digital domain: some issues for archival educators

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Good morning. My topic is archival education in the digital domain. I'd like to begin by reminding you of some of the issues, or dilemmas, that archival educators face:

We need to attract new entrants of suitable calibre; to provide for the learning needs of students with different backgrounds and abilities and at different stages in their careers; and to be responsive to the requirements of employers and the fluctuating job market.

Our students need teaching staff with an appropriate range of skills and up-to-date knowledge.

Although we never have enough time to cover everything, we still need to achieve an appropriate balance between theory and practice; between the expectations of students and employers; and between vocational training and the expectations of the academy.

At first sight, none of these issues are new in the digital environment. Broadly speaking, they have faced educators, and the wider profession, ever since needs for archival education were first identified and the first educational courses established.

But many – though not all – of them become more complex, or more demanding, in the digital world. My colleagues will have more to say about this, but I will select just one example.
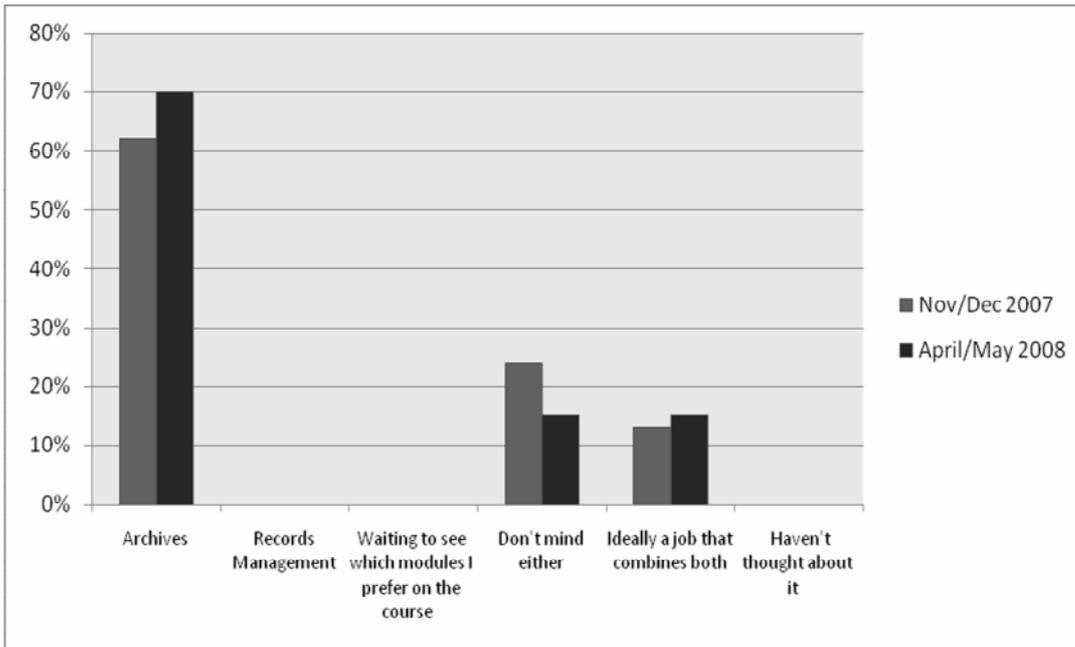
This chart[1] shows some of the results of a recent survey of future professionals studying in London and Liverpool. When asked about their preferences for future employment, some had no strong views but, of those who had a clear preference, between 60 and 70% wanted to work in archives and about 15% wanted a post that embraced both archives and records management; none wanted a job in records management alone. We also tested their reactions to job advertisements, and again found that the vacancies that appealed to the largest number of students were in organisations with long histories or collections of older archives.

I don't know how far this applies elsewhere in Europe, but a few years ago David Wallace found a similar trend in North America, where 60% of students wanted a career in traditional archives.

In itself, this is nothing new. Every year as long as I can remember, most of my students have been interested primarily in archives rather than records management. But what is new, I would suggest, is that our profession can no longer sustain this approach.

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[1] See Geoffrey Yeo and Erica Ander, '"My First Professional Post": students' expectations of the job market in archives and records management in the United Kingdom', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 29 (2008), pp.171-91.

In the past, archivists could (and often did) operate independently of records management. Of course, well-managed current records were thought to be a good thing, but at a practical level not essential for the operation of archival services; since one of the skills of the archivist was to know how to make the best of records that arrived in disorder.

I'm sure everyone in this audience understands why this approach is not viable in the digital world, where records must be managed from the time of creation if they are to survive at all. Archivists no longer have the luxury of ignoring records management, and archival education programmes no longer have the luxury of teaching archival skills independently of records management. As future digital professionals, almost all my students are interested in using technology to promote access to conventional archives (through online catalogues, or Web 2.0 interfaces); but far fewer are enthusiastic about working with born-digital records.

The records continuum, then, is not just an interesting theoretical construct. In preparing graduates for the digital future it is a reality that archival educators, and students, have to take into account.

And it is here, at the intersection between theory and practice, that I suggest that major implications of the digital revolution are to be found.

Some other examples: it's largely as a result of the digital revolution that archivists have chosen, or been obliged, to revisit their older ideas about the nature of records and archives. We are no longer so sure that a record is merely a document created in the course of business, or that archives are physical accumulations of such records to which some kind of value is attached. The boundaries of these concepts, which once seemed clear and unproblematic, become much more nebulous in a digital environment. Some people claim that the digital era has removed any distinction between records and other "digital resources"; certainly it has given rise to questions about the need for such distinctions and about relationships between different sectors, questions that we could often ignore in pre-digital days.

All kinds of questions about the meanings of records and the purposes of recordkeeping, about interpretations of provenance and original order, and about relations between records, evidence, information and memory, accountability and cultural heritage, have acquired a new acuteness in the digital domain.

These new understandings inevitably affect the ways in which we teach. They also give rise to some additional dilemmas that archival educators did not have to face in the days when archival principles seemed stable and uncontroversial. Which paradigm or paradigms should we adopt in our teaching? Should we explore them all? Should we encourage students to investigate these controversies for themselves? From a developmental point of view the answer to these questions must surely be 'yes'. Archival education must encourage future professionals to think about the 'why' of archives as well as the 'what' and 'how', and to look critically at every aspect of our discipline.

But the conceptual questions the digital revolution has highlighted reinforce older arguments about how far the role of archival education is to teach future professionals "how to do the job" and how far it should have broader objectives. The time available on courses is limited, and employers may feel that exploration of conceptual issues should not be a priority. Some will probably agree with Kelvin Smith. In his book on recordkeeping he tells his readers that there is 'little point in dwelling on questions such as *what is a record?*'; the important thing is 'to get on and undertake records management'. Such emphasis on pragmatism may have particular appeal in the digital world, which brings a need to learn new skills and competencies in the use of particular technological tools, that can only add to an already crowded curriculum. Yet it seems unlikely that digital recordkeeping can be successful unless its practitioners understand their materials, and thoughtful employers will value a reflective workforce that brings critical judgement to its work.

But I'm already treading on the territory of our next speaker, Pat Whatley. I'll now hand over to Pat to continue our presentation. Thank you.