



'We think, not I think' Harnessing collaborative creativity to archival practice; implications of user participation for archival theory and practice.

**Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded PhD studentship
Collaborative Doctoral Award to be held jointly by UCL and The National Archives
(TNA), 2010-2013**

In recent years technological changes, in particular developments in the web and participatory software, have been accompanied by a cultural shift which has resulted in challenges to the authority of the expert. These changes have combined to create an environment in which user-generated content has flourished, sometimes at the expense of more traditional professional or expert voices. These trends have been apparent in the heritage sector, including archives, where there have been a number of initiatives which encourage greater user participation in professional archival activities and seek to unlock user knowledge for the benefit of the archive service and all its users.

Although projects which seek to involve a range of stakeholders in the performance of professional duties are not necessarily dependent on technology, much interest has focussed on the impact of the application of Web 2.0 and participatory technologies on archive description and cataloguing. Access to archives depends to a large extent on appropriate descriptions and effective catalogues, traditionally created by professional archivists. However, in some cases these descriptions and catalogues may be inadequate or incomplete, and are in any case rarely updated to reflect new information, interests or perspectives. As such catalogues may act as much as a barrier as an enabler of access. A number of initiatives including the UK National Archives' *Your Archives* and the Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections project at the University of Michigan have sought to utilise social or collaborative software in order to unlock the knowledge of different user communities and supplement traditional archival catalogues with 'thick' description. Similar innovative experiments are being conducted by a number of museums and libraries including, for example, the Victoria and Albert Museum and Picture Australia using Flickr to generate content and comment from visitors. Some of the most interesting adoptions of collaborative technologies for the purpose of shared heritage have occurred outside the formal heritage sector, with online communities of interest creating and sharing content amongst themselves without professional mediation. Some community archive sites operate entirely in this environment, receiving digital material, descriptions and further commentary from all over the world.

Despite the growing number of these projects, there have been few attempts in the archive sector systematically to evaluate the overall success or otherwise of these efforts to harness what Charles Leadbetter has referred to as *We-Think* and the power of 'collaborative creativity'. Furthermore, despite much argument between advocates of the 'crowd' and the 'expert', there is no real understanding of what moves to allow a multiplicity of voices to supplement or even supplant the single, authoritative professional voice might mean for notions of professional archival theory and practice. Whilst some archive and heritage professionals experimenting with user participation have sought to keep such content separate from 'pure' professional description, others such as Jennifer Trant argue that cultural institutions and the professionals that run them will only remain relevant by acknowledging and utilising 'the contribution of others to the development of knowledge'. These are all important questions which merit serious research to assess the implications and impact on the archive and heritage professions, and broadly it is these questions which this collaborative doctorate will seek to address.

Aims and objectives

This project will seek to explore and chart a course through these new developments. Despite the growing number of user participation initiatives in the archive and heritage sector, there is little agreement over their potential impact or worth and there have been few if any attempts to evaluate systematically the overall success or otherwise of such efforts. Thus this research will investigate the potential and limits of collaborative creativity

and user participation in the archive sector and beyond, explore the reality behind claims made regarding experts and crowds, the challenges to authority and professional practice and suggest what might be the impacts of such developments on professional thinking, training, and practice in the 21st century.

The project will explore these issues in a UK context but it will also give priority to examining developments elsewhere, and consequently have a relevance and applicability worldwide. The collaboration with the TNA will allow the doctorate student to observe these developments at first hand, at an institution which is a world-leader in trialling these approaches and also offer the opportunity to contribute to the transformation of professional practice at the TNA and elsewhere. Emerging from this research context, and building upon the established research interests of TNA and UCL:DIS, the objectives of this project are:

- to distinguish between and evaluate different approaches to user engagement with the professional world,
- to identify attributes which enable 'success' or lead to 'failure' in user participation in archival activities,
- to develop a conceptual model of user collaboration in archives,
- to understand better the implications in terms of resources, technology and professional practice of seeking to implement successful models of user interaction with archive services,
- to evaluate whether, in this light, user contribution has a role within the formal process for archival description determined by the international standard ISAD(G).

Probable research questions include:

1. To what extent are these collaborative developments substantially new phenomena and to what extent are they similar to previous 'analogue' attempts to engage with wider communities and encourage greater participation?
2. How can we evaluate and identify which of these different collaborative applications works best, with what results and in what contexts or circumstances?
3. Do these collaborative technologies and participatory methodologies impact on notions of professionalism and professional practice, and if so in what ways?
4. To what extent might the international standard for archival description, ISAD(G), make provision for the incorporation of user contribution?
5. What is the impact of these technologies and approaches on archive and heritage initiatives outside the mainstream sector?
6. What are the potential benefits of successfully utilising these methodologies for a) the archive service; b) existing users; c) new users and broader society?
7. What resources (training, conceptual understanding, technological infrastructure, expertise and financial resources) are necessary for an archive service to fully exploit these possibilities? Are these scalable to allow for utilisation by a small or independent archive as well as larger, national institutions?

If you are interested in applying, please submit your application by email (letter of application, CV plus names of two referees) to Dr Flinn (a.flinn@ucl.ac.uk) at DIS, before the closing date of **5 November 2009**, making clear that you are applying for the **Collaborative Doctoral Award**. Applications received after this date will **not** be considered. Further details of the AHRC's collaborative doctoral award scheme, including eligibility requirements can be found out at <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/CollaborativeDoctoralAwards.aspx>.

Your letter of application should explain why you are interested in and qualified to research in this subject, what benefits you see in the collaborative nature of the award, and how you would plan the research methodology. Interviews will be held at UCL in the week beginning **16 November 2009**. For further information and more details about the proposed research please contact Dr Andrew Flinn, a.flinn@ucl.ac.uk, Department of Information Studies, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT