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David Tredinnick is currently employed as the Collections Coordinator at Deakin University Archives. As part of his duties, he is responsible for the development and implementation of archival teaching and learning programs across the University, as well as the creation of online and physical exhibitions using archival collections. After a long career in the performing arts, during which he performed, wrote, directed, taught and researched Australian theatre, he completed a Graduate Diploma in Recordkeeping and Archives in 2015. He hopes to utilise skills built up during his previous professional life to actively promote archival collections and the importance of archival practice itself.

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Confronting the Athenians: university archives in the third space

David Tredinnick

Abstract

Archives contribute to a civilised society by not only preserving memory and identity, but also by holding individuals and institutions to account. University archives are particularly well-placed to achieve these goals through rigorous collaborations with academic and professional staff both on-and across-campuses. Moreover, they can pass on archival values and skillsets by embedding themselves within teaching and learning programs across all disciplines. There are many university archives around Australia that are already actively engaged in innovative student-centred projects, many of whom are both passionately committed to spearheading change in the collaborative workspace as well as encouraging students to take a more hands-on approach to knowledge-making. If they are to continue to act as agents of change and accountability, university archives of the future may need to develop more courageous methods of applying their institution’s records in the teaching and learning space.

Keywords: archives; third space; archival literacy; teaching and learning

Introduction

In early 2010 Tony Judt, historian and public intellectual, invoked the spectre of Marx to help close his final written work, a work that was completed under ‘unusual circumstances’ (Judt 2010, pp. xiii-xiv). ‘Philosophers, it was famously observed, have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’ (Judt, p. 237). The ‘unusual circumstances’ to which he referred were produced in part by the damage incurred to the body politic via the Global Financial Crisis, and almost wholly due to the greater devastation visited on Judt’s physical body by Lou Gehrig’s Disease. He died five months later, further disabling a world desperately in need of sage and rational counsel. Time’s untroubled tidal eddies have eroded Judt’s wisdom from public debate at a point when our own ‘unusual circumstances’ are in dire need of such philosopher-activists. The dustbin of history doesn’t discriminate. And yet there are wilful repositories of reaction still in existence that work tirelessly to conserve the record of our past triumphs and follies. Closing the Australian Society of Archivist’s 2016 Conference, ‘Forging Links’, Canadian archivist Dr Laura Millar reminded those gathered that archives and archivists are duty-bound to behave in a manner that helps ‘support and foster three pillars of a civilised society: accountability, identity and memory’ (Dr Laura Millar – on the crest of a wave: transforming the archival future 2016). This paper will seek to describe how the archive, and the university archive in particular, can uphold these pillars by not only preserving the work of philosophers and change-makers, but also by acting as an agent of change.

It is doubtful whether Tony Judt ever came across the work of Australian philosopher and intellectual, Max Charlesworth (1925-2014); if he had, it may have caused him to reconsider that final line of his. Charlesworth changed the face of philosophy as it was taught in this country, and in so doing also changed the face of public education. After struggling for years at the University of Melbourne to have the Philosophy Department recognise Existentialism and Religion as valid topics of discourse, he jumped at the chance to co-found a new University that was to be built in the middle of a paddock in Waurn Ponds. The evolution of Charlesworth’s influence on the humanities as it is taught at Victoria’s Deakin University can be traced back through course books, unit guides and academic board meetings. Deakin University Archives has added further meat to these artefactual bones with the acquisition of Max Charlesworth’s professional papers. The Archives has acknowledged the importance of Charlesworth’s legacy to Deakin, and to Australian society more generally, by entering his papers as the first series in its new collection database. Charlesworth himself has been entered as the first ‘Agency’, telling proof that, more than two years after his death, the professor is still an agent for change.
The Third Space

This paper will champion the change-making potential of collaboration, today’s buzz-word for what once used to be touted as ‘collegiality’. Soberingly, in 1993 Charlesworth reflected on the nostalgic mutterings of those mourning the loss of ‘collegial spirit’ in an article on the current state of Australian universities in the post-Dawkins era. He purported that what his colleagues fondly referred to as collegiality was in effect ‘scholarly and administrative amateurism’ (Charlesworth, 1993, p. 10). Perhaps we should be mindful of the philosopher’s warning when discussing the virtues of the ‘Third Space’, the physical and psychological arena where, as Celia Whitchurch has defined it, academic and professional staff can work together across the traditional binary divide (Whitchurch 2008). Charlesworth may well have flinched at this borderless, semi-utopian working environment being defined as ‘a collegial [my italics] space where university professional staff and academic staff work collaboratively on complex and multifaceted projects’ (Veles & Carter, 2016. p. 520). However, the notion of the ‘Third Space’ provides an opening for archivists employed in the tertiary sector to argue for an academic guernsey in the teaching and learning game, despite the fact that Whitchurch deliberately excluded information services staff from her seminal 2008 research (Whitchurch 2008, p. 380).

Of course, professional staff have always collaborated with academics on course material creation and delivery; the academic/professional staff binary has even been dismissed as a myth by Macfarlane (2015), who pointed to the mounting administrative functions expected of academics as evidence. Tellingly, he failed to acknowledge the various roles played by ‘non-academic’ staff in teaching and learning programs (Macfarlane, pp. 107-108). This omission, and Whitchurch’s silence regarding information professionals, suggests that the current and potential contribution of archival staff in Third Space, student-centred collaborations remains underexplored and underappreciated.

Archival Literacy

Although not extensive, there exists a small body of academic research on archival literacy and the role of archives in teaching and learning programs. Scholarly work has been undertaken on the unique information literacy requirements of undergraduate researchers working with primary materials in an archival setting (Carini 2009 & 2016), the positive effect on critical thinking faculties (Marcus 2001), and the challenges faced by university archivists forced to weigh up ‘business as usual’ tasks against access and outreach activities (Chute 2002). Documentation regarding the success or failure of archival programs for university students remains scattered and largely anecdotal: learning outcomes of individual programs have been measured, but there have been no significant broad-ranging or longitudinal studies (Krause 2010, pp. 526-527). Much of the research to date has been channelled into the creation of a website called teacharchives.org. The site is based on a three-year funded project led by the Brooklyn Historical Society, and dedicated to providing archivists and educators with resource material (Teaching effectively with primary sources 2016). While these predominantly US-based studies and resources provide a solid overview of current practice and together can serve as something of a guide for those starting to develop archival teaching and learning activities on campus, none reflect on the Australian experience. Consequently, the following account of Australian practice is based on conversations and emails with university archivists in the field.

Current Practice: the Australian Perspective

Many university archives around Australia have been involved with on-campus teaching and learning activities, while others are just beginning to dip their dusty toes in the water. The focus is often on the practice of archival research, with the university’s collections as the primary focus. For example, ANU Archives runs an on-demand short course for second and third year History students, using material from the Noel Butlin Archives and University Archives to explain archival concepts and how to ‘read’ primary sources (Australian National University Archives 2016). Archives staff have also tailored the course for Pacific Studies, Music and Museum Studies students, again using the collection for hands-on learning (M Shapley, email, 13 December 2016). In 2015, the University of Wollongong Archives launched their History Archives Portal (https://hap.uow.edu.au), ostensibly to draw attention to online archival collections around the world, but with an emphasis on the University’s archival offerings; the portal was included as part of ‘a number of subjects’ in 2015, and was also used as the foundation
of some assessment tasks (K Ross, email, 10 January 2017). A relative newcomer to the teaching and learning space, Deakin University Archives is currently developing two modules in collaboration with Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies. One module will explore the impact of the digital archival database on archival practice and research, making available its recently-created archival dataset in TRIM Records Manager for student exercises; another online module, which may be rolled out to other courses in the future, will use the archives staff and collections to introduce archival principles and archival research techniques.

Well-developed and nuanced programs run by university archives are often due to the combined efforts of enthusiastic archival staff and academics who not only appreciate the importance of primary source material in student learning but are also actively seeking innovative practices to spark student engagement. Such fruitful collaborations have been described as ‘a sort of dance’, a tentative, querulous shimmy backwards and forwards between the academic’s ‘what do you have?’ and the archivist’s ‘what do you want?’ (Golia & Katz 2016, para. 3). University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) has long been a player in the teaching and learning space, and actively promotes its collections to academic staff and students. Since 2012, aside from ongoing collaborations with the Department of History and the provision of on-demand archival research advice, UMA has used its collection to assist with coursework in a range of disciplines, including French Language and Society, Aboriginal Studies, Architecture, Legal Studies and Creative Writing (University of Melbourne Archives 2016; K Wood, email, 24 January 2017). Katie Wood, UMA’s access and outreach archivist, is assisted in her role by the University’s recent promotion of Object-Based Learning (OBL). OBL is a teaching trend that contrasts sharply with the cloud-based approaches of many tertiary institutions, privileging ‘active learning’ using objects and artefacts in teaching spaces dedicated to hands-on analysis in small groups (University of Melbourne Library, 2016). The bulk of the literature devoted to OBL in universities tends to focus on gallery and museum studies, stressing either the importance of good handling and connoisseurship or improved memory retention and student engagement (Georgaki 2015; Quave & Meister 2017, pp. 5-6). Archival documents provide similar outcomes, but can also offer a slightly different learning experience for students in the OBL environment: students are more likely to interpret records via context and connection with associated records, rather than through deep engagement with a single artefact.

As well as being the custodian of the University’s institutional memory, UMA is a collecting archive, home to a rich assortment of Victorian business and labour records and personal collections such as the Germaine Greer collection. They are thus well-placed to teach into courses across the University’s faculties and schools. Inspired by hybrid repositories like UMA, Deakin University Archive is transitioning into a collecting institution; we are currently acquiring collections that have a direct relevance to Deakin’s teaching and research interests. For example, in 2016 the Football Federation of Victoria records were accepted as a permanent transfer in acknowledgement of Deakin’s teaching strengths in Sports Management and Sports History.

Like UMA, The University of New England Archives has a long collecting history stretching back to the 1950s. Given the University’s geographical distance from the State Archives and State Library in Sydney, the decision was made to retain on campus all primary source material relating to ‘the historical, economic and social development of Northern New South Wales from the earliest European settlement until recent times’ for the benefit of students and local researchers (W Oates, email, 12 December 2016). Students are encouraged to enhance their assignments by accessing archival resources, seek additional credit by working in the various heritage, museum and archival spaces, and create small onsite exhibitions to highlight aspects of the collection. In the digital arena, a PhD in Computer Science was awarded to a student who researched the software requirements for digitising and viewing the archive’s extensive photographic collection (W Oates, email, 12 December 2016). Archivist Gionni Di Gravio at the University of Newcastle AUCHmuty Library is also exploring digital possibilities in 2017, embarking on a pilot project with the University’s GLAMx Living Histories Digitisation Lab which aims to employ augmented reality and 3D digitisation techniques to allow virtual interaction with 6500-year-old Aboriginal artefacts (A Hardy, email, 20 January 2017). This and other projects, including placements and cadetships for Aboriginal students, grew out of Di Gravio’s involvement with a course offering called ‘Sex and Scandal’ in 2016. Along with Ann Hardy, an historian and colleague in the Library’s cultural Collections Services, Di Gravio’s archival teaching and learning programs are part of a larger campaign to have archival and cultural heritage skills form the basis of a national apprenticeship training package (G Di Gravio, email, 21 December 2016).
Going Forward: Pitfalls and Passion

There are obstacles, of course. ‘Business as usual’ always takes precedence over access and outreach activities, especially when there are staffing and budgetary constraints. Bruce Ibsen is the University of Queensland Archives – the ‘lone arranger’, in archival parlance – and so has been unable to commit to a teaching program; however, he is open to the possibility should extra staff come on board (B Ibsen, email, 13 December 2016). Poor student uptake can also threaten the future of teaching and learning programs. The University of Adelaide Archives ran a project with the School of Architecture over a number of years, where first-year students were encouraged to research a University building with the aid of building documents held by Archives. Unfortunately, lack of thorough student engagement with the records led to the project’s eventual demise (S Coppin, email, 12 December 2016). Poor visibility on campus, budgetary and staffing pressures, or fears about future survival in an increasingly corporatised tertiary marketplace can often be the strategic impetus for considering a teaching and learning program, and yet these motivations can also mitigate against successful ‘tactical’ positioning. Sometimes it takes an initial burst of passion to overcome these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, or perhaps the inspirational example of others in the field. Laura Baldwin, Assistant University Archivist from the University of New South Wales, is pursuing teaching and learning collaborations with faculties and schools across the institution after hearing the University of Newcastle’s Gionni Di Gravio outline his vision for upcoming on-campus archival integrations (L Baldwin, email, 12 December 2016).

The future of well-resourced, well-staffed and well-frequented university archives is dependent upon them taking up permanent residence in the Third Space. Passion and persistence are key, as is constant innovation. The successful teaching and learning programs and pilot projects listed above are testament to the ingenuity and survival skills of many university archivists around the country. However, it is imperative that tertiary archives continue to adapt to the ever-changing economic, political, educational and industrial landscapes. Collections need to remain relevant to an institution’s teaching and research strengths. Archivists must abandon their traditionally passive role and actively develop and promote archival teaching opportunities to time-poor academic staff. Ongoing collaborations in the Third Space with both professional and academic work units are essential to embed archival staff and collections – and, by association, institutional memory itself – across all sectors of the University. In addition, there is a growing appetite within the tertiary archival community to work across institutions, to reach beyond campus confines in order to share resources and knowledge, and also to potentially collaborate on future cross-campus projects in the teaching and learning space. These alliances have the potential to trouble the boundaries of not only the Third Space, but institution boundaries as well. Finally, while respecting privacy, governance and legislative provisions, university archivists could be much braver in promoting the university’s institutional records for scrutiny by researchers and students.

Conclusion

At the end of his 1993 article on the future of Australian Universities, Charlesworth reflected upon the Socratic challenge. During his trial, Socrates asked the judges whether it was his duty ‘to confront the Athenians’, or ‘do you want me to be their servant and tell them what pleases them?’ Speaking out from Series One of the Deakin University Archives, Charlesworth insists that

> it is the business of universities to confront their Athenians and to play, in their own proper way, the part of social diagnostican and physician. And it is the part of anyone with a university education to do the same to his or her own discipline or profession or sub-culture (Charlesworth 1993, p. 17).

As many universities around the world become more like Potemkin villages, masking market-driven economic imperatives behind the façade of student-centred learning, there has never been a greater need for the official record. In an era of ‘alternative facts’, the wisdom of the likes of Judt, Charlesworth, and Socrates must remain accessible. Similarly, university archives have an important role to play in the Third Space, and in campus-based teaching and learning programs. Moreover, by encouraging the University’s academic community to turn inwards, to use the University’s own records to fuel pedagogical outcomes, the university archive has the opportunity to strengthen institutional memory and identity while also upholding that third pillar of civilised society – accountability.

*Confronting the Athenians: university archives in the third space*
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