

NFACE Commentator

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## **Commenting from the perspective of an individual experienced in developing and providing continuing education to archivists**

Opening Remarks, Friday, April 28, 2000

Being here today gives me a certain sense of sense of *deja vu*. In another sense, it makes me feel like the "Ghost of Christmas Past." Thirteen years ago I had just been hired as SAA Education Officer and I was just down the road a bit in Savannah for what was called by some an "SAA Education Summit." We had gathered with the support of the NHPRC to address the same concern that brings us to Decatur today: continuing education.

In 1987 it was a smaller group that convened—only thirty-six archivists representing different constituencies within the SAA. I was there to receive my "marching orders" or perhaps more properly, since archivists tend not to be very assertive, my "marching suggestions." We were concerned with many of the same issues, although there were some different assumptions and some different approaches.

Our agenda consisted of:

- ◆ an analysis of a survey of educational needs that had recently been completed
- ◆ an overview of regional education priorities and activities reported by representatives from regional archival associations
- ◆ plenary papers on continuing education priorities, and the resources needed to implement them
- ◆ the traditional lamenting of the confusion between what constitutes "basic" versus "advanced" education
- ◆ everyone agreeing that there was a great need for continuing education in many subject areas and that cooperation seemed logical.

During the course of our deliberation, one speaker warned us against using continuing education to make up for deficiencies in pre-appointment that archivists had received along the way. We were told that archivists were, to a large degree, technicians and for this reason very little continuing education for archivists can be conducted within the four walls of a classroom. We were urged to develop active partnerships with archival institutions that could serve as laboratories in which archivists could develop their technical knowledge (an interesting suggestion that we never exploited very well).

Some of the foregoing might sound familiar to a number of those in the audience who, like me, have been involved in continuing education over the years.

But even though we were gathered to address the problems of continuing education, our world today is a much different place than it was in 1987.

- ◆ At the Savannah conference the SAA Committee of Education and Professional Development was meeting to put the finishing touches on a revision to the "Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs" that had been adopted a decade earlier. The Master of Archival Studies scenario would not come up for serious discussion for several years. In her plenary session at Savannah Mary Jo Pugh described the situation particularly well when she observed that, "even the best trained new archivists...have only a handful of courses cobbled onto a library science or history curriculum, typically taught by an adjunct member of the host department, [who has] little or no say in the shaping of development of the curriculum." The situation has changed considerably during the intervening thirteen years!
- ◆ In 1987, the SAA did not have any continuing education guidelines, although, in retrospect, coming a decade after the Savannah meeting, the current PACE Guidelines have surprisingly little to say about cooperation.
- ◆ Only weeks after the end of the Savannah conference the SAA Council gave the go-ahead for a program to certify individual archivists—an event that many thought would be a positive force in archival education. This was an initiative in which I found myself heavily involved during the "birthing" process, in addition to my primary responsibilities of cranking out "x" number of workshops and seminars that were driven by the education grant's work plan.
- ◆ The 1987 conference was much more narrowly focused than today. We were only archivists in attendance and we thought we were "reaching out" because we had different kinds of archivists—even Canadians and archival educators.
- ◆ Within the archival community we thought that having SAA reach out to and work with regional archival associations in continuing education was a novel, a bit controversial, and even a daring idea.
- ◆ The idea that regional associations should take the primary responsibility for providing basic entry-level education was considered by many to be insulting to regional archival associations. Today this is a notion that many now believe makes a good deal of sense given the limitations on resources and time that many requiring basic education archivists are faced with.
- ◆ Nobody anticipated the powerful new means of delivering continuing education through the World Wide Web. Few of us, I think, had even seen a color photocopier.

At the time, the SAA was using a word processing system in which one still had to do a "carriage return" at the end of each line and four keystrokes to insert a capital letter!

- ◆ In 1987 we all took a more casual attitude toward planning. I recall that when I first started to attempt scheduling SAA workshops with regional associations, the biggest problem was that the extremely short planning time line that characterized the planning efforts of many regionals did not permit me to recruit instructors and distribute publicity.
- ◆ Another significant change, although we do not often think of it in discussions of continuing education, has come with the growth of our body of professional literature. Using the SAA as a measure, archival literature has become far more extensive now than it was in 1987. At that time the list of publications numbered only around sixty titles. Today the current publications list numbers 160 title. Of these, only seventeen had been published in at the time of the Savannah conference. The impact of this is difficult to overestimate. The increased body of literature is, in itself, an important means through which many receive continuing education. The titles also constitute an important resource upon which instructors of continuing education can draw in the workshops, seminars, and institutes they offer.

But still we face some of the same problems and concerns in the year 2000 as we did in 1987. As we begin our work here in Decatur, I believe we need to think about eight factors that influence cooperation in continuing education.

1. Cooperation in continuing education is like world peace. Everyone can agree to it in principle but when it comes right down to doing what needs to be done, self-interest rears its head and makes it difficult for us to accomplish the goal. **In other words, I think we need to rigorously and critically define our real incentives for cooperation and then concentrate on these.**
2. In my experience, much of our past attention concerning continuing education has defaulted directly toward delivery. It is to our detriment that we have been less interested in the building blocks that should precede delivery. I would define these as:

Planning

Gathering support

Training

Evaluating

It is clear to me that some of our past continuing education efforts have suffered because of this. A successful ongoing program requires that we first build a

- foundation by taking advantage of the opportunity to learn about such topics as adult learners and curriculum development. I take it as a good sign that both of these topics, and others as well, are on the agenda for this meeting. Only then should we begin thinking about delivery methods.
3. In a similar way, I think we will need to stop defaulting to workshops and seminars as synonyms for continuing education. This is a time-honored tradition with archivists. We do it out of habit. Workshops are fun and we feel comfortable with them. They appeal somehow to our missionary zeal. But workshops and seminars are, in fact, very expensive to deliver and take advantage of. In many cases they are not the most cost-effective approach and maybe some of our problems have resulted from trying to shoehorn every continuing education effort into a workshop or seminar format.
  4. The next obvious point is that, when it comes time to consider delivery methods, we need to look at alternate means. Interactive online curricular material is an obvious example. There is a great interest in distance education and support mechanisms needed to employ this means are easier and less expensive than ever to use. There is also the possibility of such imaginative approaches as a mentoring program that links trained professionals with institutions needing assistance, similar to that which is being developed in Wisconsin. Such pro bono work stands to benefit all those participate. Institutions needing help will have the services of a trained professional without having to bear the high costs of hiring a consultant who is there and gone in a few months. We think the program will be a great public relations boon for institutions with archivists who participate in the program. Anyone who has taught knows how teaching helps to sharpen their own skills and develop their own knowledge and archivists will benefit from this.
  5. I think that many of our efforts have been held back because archivists have committed the same sin that we accuse others of committing against us. On the one hand, we scoff at those who think one can just read a book, and then apply logic and good sense in order to become a qualified archivist. On the other hand, when it comes to conducting needs surveys or creating adult curricular materials or evaluation instruments, we craft them ourselves, instead of working with professionals. In other words, we "read a book" and forge ahead, secure in the assurance that our vast knowledge of archives and our experience, will carry the day.
  6. We must also take a realistic look at where continuing education really falls on our list of priorities? We are in Decatur to consider cooperation in continuing education, but we all have other priorities as well. It is O.K. to concentrate on continuing education while we are in Decatur, but we need to remember those other priorities that await us when we return home. In other words, when everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. We cannot do everything at once. I do not have much to add to this—the point is pretty self-evident. The world is full of good ideas but there is only so much time, energy, and resources.

7. In one respect, at least, cooperation in continuing education seems to be like a documentation strategy. For those who may not be familiar with the term, a documentation strategy was an idea that many archivists embraced as a more effective means of preserving historical records. The point here is that although it might have been a good idea, some criticized the documentation strategy because the only way archivists seemed to be able to undertake one was with massive infusions of cash from an outside funding agency. So it has been with continuing education. Few have found ways to make it self-supporting.

I am not thinking about this conference, although it is, in fact, dependent on outside funding. I am thinking about the 1987 Savannah conference; I am thinking about the dozens of grant applications I have reviewed wherein applicants have come with hat in hand saying that they needed to develop a new framework and new curricular materials (with workshops, of course!). They always contend that their problems were unique and continuing education plans developed in other regions and by other professions just did not work for them. Ironically, they then promise to develop a model that everyone else will be able to use. They promise to sustain the program after the grant money had ended. Then two years later they are back asking for more money to support the project for a bit longer. And again, and again.

We need to find a way to make our cooperation and our continuing education programs self-sustaining.

8. There are areas for potential cooperation that seem obvious at first glance, but which we never have seemed ready or willing or able to exploit. I have been a member of the Wisconsin State Historical Records Advisory Board for years and a member of the Midwest Archives Conference and the Society of American Archivists for even longer. I am surprised at how seldom my life as a board member has intersected with my life as a professional association member. And yet all the organizations are vitally interested in continuing education. In a similar way, I am sometimes surprised at how seldom my life as a member of the Wisconsin board has intersected with the Minnesota Board. Or the Illinois Board. Yet we are all vitally interested in continuing education.

So we begin our work with hearts in the right place, but it is a question of resources, as much as desire. It seems to me that the challenge of this conference will be to

- a. weave so many different threads together into a tapestry
- b. define our incentives for cooperation
- c. find the resources to sustain what we have started
- d. try new approaches

- e. broaden our attention to include planning, support, delivery, and evaluation.

In his closing remarks at the 1987 Savannah meeting, Donn Neal, then the new Executive Director of the SAA made several observations that were, I think unappreciated at the time—probably because they came at the end of the conference. He said that cooperation was not simply something that happens. It must be planned, with clearly and explicitly stated goals, and with genuine incentives for participating institutions or groups. Cooperation frequently succeeds best when it is taken in incremental steps. He suggested that a cooperative relationship should develop in four successive stages:

1. Knowledge of our potential partners
2. Respect for individual or program differences
3. Trust in one's cooperative partners.
4. Collaboration in achieving common goals

In retrospect, his remarks were probably what we should have focused upon rather than thinking about what workshops to offer at the next annual meeting, or whether to partner for MARAC or MAC first.

From what I have seen and heard thus far, we begin our work on an encouraging note. But by the end of our time together we still need to address the three questions that were posed in 1987:

1. Where do we go from here?
2. What can we accomplish together better than what we might accomplish separately?
3. Where do we begin?

Were I permitted to propose one suggestion, it would be that one of our first cooperative ventures ought to be learning together some of the topics that are on our agenda for this conference—subjects like "How Adults Learn," or "Effective Curriculum Development," or "Delivery Methods" rather than do as we always have done—jump right in and begin teaching workshops. It would be an approach we have not tried before, and one that would be the best long-term investment.