

**Learning to Love Our Users:
A Challenge to the Profession and a Model for Practice¹**

Helen R. Tibbo

School of Information and Library Science

201 Manning Hall CB# 3360

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27599-3360

919.962.8062; Fax: 919.962.8071

tibbo@ils.unc.edu

Learning to Love Our Users: A Challenge to the Profession and a Model for Practice

In a keynote address in 1999 at a National Preservation Office conference in London, Seamus Ross held out a wonderful vision for the future of scholarship in the digital age. He proffered that “*digital archives combined with new technologies*” would “*liberalise scholarship.*” He went on to predict that they would “*enable simultaneous access to a range of sources (both local and distant) and facilitate the use of research methods not possible with conventionally printed or hand written records.*”²

Much of the remainder of his paper discussed the barriers to this grand future due to the fragility of digital data and media and our meager achievements to date in the area of digital preservation. Many others from around the globe warn of the dangers to our cultural heritage and scientific data store that the evanescent nature of digital objects poses.³ Yet, physical and intellectual preservation of digital materials are but the most obvious impediments to the long-term and ubiquitous use of archived digital data. The gap of understanding, the lack of “common ground” between user and archivist, that Beth Yake⁴ has discussed, especially as electronic materials become part and parcel of the repository landscape, will inhibit the provision of effective, user-oriented access to primary resource materials even when these objects retain all their bits and bytes in the original order and are certified as authentic records of the past. Brenda Dervin⁵ and Carol Kuhlthau⁶ have written extensively on the nature and process of sense-making and information seeking. They have emphasized the role information gaps have in influencing user behavior and how information professionals can assist individuals in fulfilling their information needs.

Exploring user information needs and information seeking-behaviors and closing the gap of understanding between users and archivists concerning archival purpose and practice are inextricably linked to both the provision of access and long-term preservation in the digital world. Paul Conway, an expert in user studies, provides what may be the most thought-provoking discussion of the relationship between *digital preservation* and *access* to date. He states, “In the digital world, preservation is the creation of digital products worth maintaining over time.”⁷ Here he argues, “preservation is a reality and not merely a metaphor for or symbol of access.”⁸ He goes on to trace the evolution of the relationship of preservation and access over the last fifty years, explaining how librarians and archivists once saw preservation and access as mutually exclusive activities. With digital information, however, these activities are compatible and have merged into “the act of preserving access” to digital objects.⁹ Cornell University’s Preservation Department, while not claiming digitization to be preservation, nonetheless strongly argues for the creation of rich digital masters for imaging projects so that these can be used to generate “use” copies.¹⁰ Here preservation is facilitating long-term access.

Angelika Menne-Haritz, Director of the Archives School of Marburg, Germany, goes a step further in observing that “access” signals “the reformulation of an archival paradigm.”¹¹ “Access” she argues, is “the key that allows archives to acquire a profile as service oriented competent professionally managed institutions.” More fundamentally, access changes “the views of archival thinking and supports the shift from the difference between past and future to the new difference of closed or available which roots the archival profession definitely in the present.”¹² This paradigm shift is manifest in all archivists do. Menne-Haritz concludes

that “every archival function can be conceived in a new way that makes it even better . . . if it is subordinated to the aim of making the holdings available.”¹³

Access, often an archival afterthought is coming to the fore and there is a growing recognition “that preservation and access are intricately entwined in the digital world.”¹⁴ Preservation is only half of the story; access and use are equally important and require our attention if digital materials are to have long and useful lives. Indeed, access and use are the *raison d’être* of all repositories, digital or otherwise. No matter how precious archivists believe their unique holdings to be, if no one were to ever use them they would be worthless. Value accrues out of use or the likelihood for use. Elsie Freeman Finch stresses that “Use is our reason for being” in *Advocating Archives*.¹⁵ Thus, all archivists do in their daily work, from acquiring collections, to digitizing materials, to creating finding aids, to providing reference service, must support access and the potential thereof. As Conway argues, this relationship becomes stronger in the digital arena. Here use validates and *becomes* preservation because repositories will only take the necessary effort to physically and intellectually preserve those materials that are used over time.¹⁶

So, what does all this have to do with the title of this article; with archivists learning to love their users? Very simply, optimized provision of access, and thus preservation of assets in the digital environment, lies at the nexus of a keen knowledge of both archival materials and archival users. It is built on a user- and materials-informed set of standards, practices, and repository functions including collection development, appraisal, description, reference service, user education, and outreach. In the new digital paradigm, users need access and materials need users if they are to survive any extended length of time.

Archivists and librarians have a long history of focusing on materials. Both types of repositories, as well as museums, describe their collections in terms of volumes or number of items, collections, or linear feet. Donors and distinguished guests are always shown the collection treasures. More fundamentally, everyday institutional practices revolve around collections. Descriptive tools, such as archival finding aids and Library of Congress Subject Headings, are built around materials. The former around what is typically found in archival collections; the latter around works held within the Library of Congress starting over a century ago. Either of these tools are user-oriented only in a casual, haphazard way because knowledge of user behaviors, preferences, and practices has not been explicitly built into their design. Access policies, including registration forms at archives, are built around ensuring security of the collection rather than explicitly providing access to it.

In order to provide optimized access to collections, archivists must know more about their users and gain this information in a more systematic and scientific way. In his 2000 SAA presidential address Thomas Hickerson presented ten challenges for the archival profession, among them, making holdings more accessible and usable. He argued that “Focusing on our users implies that we acknowledge the primacy of their needs and respond by utilizing methods that address those needs.”¹⁷ In order to learn more about users, archivists must take the time and expend the resources to conduct user studies. For this to happen consistently, archivists must come to respect, value, and yes, “love” their repository’s users at least as much as the materials they curate. This respect and love will then be manifest in a reallocation of resources from curating objects and records, toward listening to and learning about users and their information needs, discovery strategies, and use behaviors.

While the gap between user and archivist has always impeded scholarship and information seeking as Yakel has revealed in her respondents' lack of a clear understand of what an archives is let alone a finding aid,¹⁸ the required reference interview within physical repositories has helped to facilitate discovery of materials and has established something of a common framework of policies and procedures.¹⁹ Yet, the reference interview, the primary means by which archivists have come to know their users, is a very limited knowledge elicitation technique with all but the most skilled reference staff. In a 1930 textbook on library reference, James Wyer wrote that the reference "cross examination" was tantamount to "library mindreading" and that it was the librarian's job "to know how to give people what they do not know they want!"²⁰ In 1968, Robert Taylor in an article on question negotiation and information seeking, described the reference interview as "one of the most complex acts of human communication," for in this act "one person tries to describe for another person not something he knows, but rather something he does not know."²¹

As limited as the common understanding and framework that the in-house reference interview may establish, we can assume that this groundwork will be less well developed when end users query repositories through remote reference services²² and perhaps totally missing when users search for and interpret materials on their own from their desktops.²³ Because most users of archives as demonstrated by the Yakel study, and especially those who chance upon repositories and materials on the Web, are likely to have poorly articulated mental models of the archival environment and culture, it is fair to surmise that the mindreading act, both on the part of the archivist and the user, is more difficult when the user does not visit the repository. Lacking any sort of reference exchange, the archival web site will, of necessity, function as the archivist

and the mindreading must be represented in instructional and informational content and design and navigation tools that anticipate the user's needs and behaviors.

While the potential for the facilitation of worldwide, interactive, interconnected scholarship is today far greater than at any previous time in history, the roles both archivists and scholars must play in this scenario are more challenging and more complex than ever before. If scholarship and discovery and use of primary resources are to flourish in the digital environment, archivists and curators must embrace their users – learning more about their information needs and seeking behaviors and incorporate this knowledge into the design of their websites and digital products, especially user instruction materials. Happily, the demands for explicit relationship building in the digital arena where archivist and user may never see one another should also inform and improve the relationships that archivists have with those individuals who venture into their repositories.

Although both Yakel and Southwell²⁴ are able to cite literature printed during the last 20 years that has discussed the importance of user studies and users, one has to look fairly hard to find it. Yakel notes “examinations of users have been a theme in the archival literature for decades.” While there have been calls for doing user studies, especially Conway’s now classic 1986 “Facts and Frameworks” article in the *American Archivist*,²⁵ William Maher’s and Roy Turnbaugh’s discussions of the use and significance of user studies for archives published in *The Midwestern Archivist*, also in 1986,²⁶ and Bruce Dearstyne’s challenge to the profession to determine the use of archives in 1987,²⁷ there have been very few reports of actual user studies.²⁸ Significantly, only one study listed in Yakel’s paper predates Conway’s theoretical consideration of why and how we should do user studies and that is Michael Stevens article in *Georgia Archive* on the “Historian and the Archival Finding Aid” in 1977.²⁹ In interviews

conducted with archivists last summer concerning how historians find primary resources and how archives are providing remote resources and services, I found only one out of thirty repositories had conducted a user study in recent memory. It is only now with work such as that from Yakel and Southwell, along with a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill – University of Glasgow study of historians’ information seeking behaviors,³⁰ and other studies by Wendy Duff and colleagues at the University of Toronto,³¹ that user studies – at the conceptual, design, and implementation levels – at individual repositories and at the national and even international levels are being conducted in any discernable number. One has also had to search hard to find the sessions at conferences reporting on user studies among the myriad of presentations on descriptive practices and standards, but this is starting to change as well.³²

There seems to be a recognition that we should know more about users – that this is a good thing in the abstract – but, given the number and variety of both users and archives, very little implementation of this recognition within repositories is evident. This fact leads to a series of questions, the answers to which could significantly change our understanding of our users and archival practice. These questions are followed by discussion of a model that builds on Yakel’s call for more and better user education and a challenge to the profession. The model places the archival user in a new relationship with the repository; a new relationship that demands new roles, attitudes, knowledge, and skills for both archivists and users if cultural institutions are to support the liberalized scholarship of which Seamus Ross speaks.

1. Why have archivists paid relatively little attention to users, being satisfied with anecdotal and casual evidence regarding them and their information-seeking behaviors?

Many archivists might respond that they simply do not have the time to conduct user studies. Others would argue that they already “know” their repository’s users quite well as they talk with them every day and that anecdotal evidence is sufficient. Others would admit that they have never done a systematic user study and that they fear it would be difficult and time consuming and probably involve a lot of statistics and number crunching.

Yakel and Southwell all reveal that archivists do not know their users very well through casual, if intensive, reference interactions. These are not the same as carefully conducted user studies designed to elicit specific types of information about users that archivists can subsequently employ to improve practice and products. The myth is that conducting such studies is hard – perhaps impossible for anyone who has not taken a class in statistics; is very time consuming; and it is probably a waste of time that could otherwise be spent processing collections. The reality is that knowing more about users will yield significant improvements and benefits on many fronts, including cultivation of potential donors.

Asking people about what they are doing, how satisfied they are with the product and process, and how improvements might be made is an excellent way of telling them the repository cares about them and the quality of service it provides. Moreover, this data, if analyzed and used to inform change, has the potential to improve all aspects of archival practice.

Interestingly, most repositories already collect a good deal of information concerning their users through signed user agreements. These forms are often employed as a security device – to know who clients are and how to contact them, but they also frequently ask about the purpose of the visit and the materials requested. Repositories also have in-house

users fill in call slips and the like to keep track of each item requested, used, and reshelfed. To date, very few repositories do much with this data besides possibly generating annual report statistics on matters such as total numbers of users, how many come from the home institution, how many are faculty members, how many are from the general public, etc. For those repositories with very little staff, analysis of this existing data with possible redesign of these forms to collect more useful information more efficiently would not represent a large resource investment. Sharing of well-designed forms could go far toward facilitating collection of this data. Baker presented a comprehensive user assessment system for the Manuscript Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill involving a revised reader registration form, research room daily log, an on-site patron materials use form, and a user satisfaction survey. Data from all these collection tools is to be kept in an integrated database.³³ Megan Phillips and Shayera Tangri provide related information on how users identify manuscript department holdings.³⁴

For repositories with more resources, conducting a focused user survey with a limited number of questions or interviewing users either individually or in focus groups is quite feasible. Several good texts can help the archivist with question writing and administration of the data collection tools.³⁵ Again, sharing of study design and findings broadly across repositories and within the archival literature will make these tasks much easier and produce a body of results from which broader generalizations can be drawn.

2. *Why have archivists paid more attention to their materials than to their users?*

The archives world, and certainly the library world too, have long had love affairs with materials, with collections, with their “treasures.” In archives, this romance has resulted in

policies and practices that serve to preserve materials, both in terms of security considerations and daily wear-and-tear. White gloves are worn with some materials; only pencils and laptop computers are allowed in reading rooms; some materials require the use of special stands and supports to be viewed; reading rooms are often monitored by closed circuit cameras to prevent theft. Access has long been seen to be the enemy and antipathy of preservation. While the argument that “users cannot be served if collections are not preserved,” is fundamentally sound, its effects have reached far beyond issues of physical preservation to all manner of repository policy and procedures.

This reverence for materials has also resulted in repository workflows designed to maximize the amount of materials processed. Many archivists argue that they cannot conduct more outreach or provide more user education elements on their repository web pages because they would be taking time from their main task of processing collections. The reality is, of course, that a bit more time spent in education or outreach could reap enormous benefits for all users, and increase the number of users and quality of use of the myriad of collections already processed.

Perhaps most importantly, especially in this day of networked access wherein users locate materials by searching the full text of electronic finding aids, this love affair has produced materials-oriented descriptive tools designed to capture the essence of the object of the archivist’s affection, that is, the collections. Two elements of description are particularly salient here – the form and structure of the descriptive tool and the content, the actual words and phrases, used within that container. Yakel’s study provides ample evidence that archivists have made many false assumptions as to how users view, understand, and use finding aids. While Duff and Johnson have found that historians use and highly value

finding aids,³⁶ they also had respondents tell them that finding aids were often complex and did not facilitate research.³⁷ Archivists simply have taken it for granted that the finding aid is as transparent a tool for their users as it is for them. With just one small study we are seeing that the gap between archivists' understanding of a finding aid and its usefulness and the perceptions of users can be quite significant. Undoubtedly, this gap will be larger with a typical sample of remote users than with individuals who come to repositories. It is time, with more and more varied user input, to assess the form of the archival finding aid and to potentially redesign it or at least provide educational tools and explanations for users of all levels who encounter them in both repositories and on the Web.

The second element of description that needs analysis, is the actual content that populates archival finding aids, MARC records, and other descriptive tools. Optimized description must flow from knowledge about users as well as from the materials repositories collect. Many archivists and librarians will argue that descriptive tools must be true to the materials they describe, and that they must do this as objectively as possible – describing what is there among the papers, files, tapes, photographs; what is there in the repository. While this is partially true, there is no such thing as objective description. No such thing as an objective surrogate for an original object, especially when the original is considerably longer and more detailed than the representation. Representations, condensations, and abstracts, by nature are subjective and abstractions. This subjective nature comes from the processor's vision of the collection and his or her interpretation of the collection. While the archivist's expert knowledge (often the processing archivist will be the world's expert in the material of the collection) is invaluable in the descriptive process, it is only part of the picture. How that interpretation and representation are

expressed may have a profound impact on how users view the collection and, moreover, with networked resources, their ability to locate materials at all.³⁸ How can we optimize descriptive practice without knowing about users as well as our materials?

It is axiomatic in the world of user-centered design that products and services should be built around users and not make potential and actual customers, clients, and other users bend to the will of the system, product or service. Understanding user information needs and behaviors is essential to creating optimized information products and services. Gould, Boies, and Lewis detail a usability design process that involves four elements: early focus on users; integrated design; early – and continual – user testing; and iterative design. They point out “several lines of evidence indicate that this usability design process leads to systems, applications, and products that are easy to learn, contain the right functions, are well liked, and safe. The process is now well known; nearly all human factors people endorse it...”³⁹ Thomas Sheridan, in *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, argues that design of complex technologies should be seen as being “of, by, and for people.” He notes that

With regard to the for preposition, it should be evident to any thinking, feeling human being that technology is applied *for* the benefit of people. It should also be evident that effort to elicit and accommodate the preferences of various affected parties will support this ideal.⁴⁰

We all know of products that are hard to use – such as a stove with corrugated chrome on the back part where the burner knobs are located. No one who ever cleaned the top of a stove after frying something would ever design it this way, yet they have been in the marketplace. More relevant to this discussion, no one who ever asked anyone who had used a stove for frying would ever have designed it this way. All the designer had to do

was ask... We can also think of the elementary school library reference counter that was installed at full adult height for clients who were ages six through eleven. Ultimately, a ramp installed in front of the counter solved the problem, but all the architect had to do was examine some fairly basic and easy to predict data about the potential users, their typical height. It is now time that archivists look to their users to improve the profession's descriptive practices and provide better access to the precious materials. As noted above, in the digital age, use may very well be preservation.

3. How can archivists embrace new technologies without first understanding user needs and behaviors?

Another object of affection for some archivists, and perhaps an object of fear for others, is technology. While archivists espouse the notion that distributed access is the primary driver behind creating electronic finding aids and implementing Encoded Archival Description (EAD), much of the attraction is with technology itself, both in the form of an almost fetishistic celebration of it and a fear of being left behind and being called a Luddite. Repositories are presently spending large amounts of time, energy, financial resources, and angst to create and maintain a virtual presence.⁴¹ Many are doing this with unquestioned belief in the form, function, and utility of the finding aid and in the value of technology.⁴² Where does the user fit into this? Does it not seem prudent to find out more about users, including how they perceive and employ finding aids and how they might like to see these improved before embarking on expensive technology projects?

Southwell's report on the user study she conducted at the Western Historical Collection (WHC) notes that the WHC rejected doing a large-scale EAD project as it was deemed to be too costly. Profession-wide studies might tell us that users do not employ EAD

capabilities or indeed, a study of EAD use might tell us the expense really would be justified, even at the WHC. Perhaps, because many of the WHC's users are still employing an outdated collection guide, resources should be directed toward updating this tool, or perhaps they should be directed toward other outreach and educational activities that would help users and potential users find collection materials.

4. "Why don't archivists seek to understand users in a way that could truly facilitate their research?"

Perhaps because they are imperfect and at times difficult and cranky, and often ask questions for which archivists have no answers, we seem to hold our users, the true reason for repositories' being, I would argue, in relatively low regard. We know and document little about them, their information-seeking and use patterns, their preparation and training to use electronic finding tools, and even their perceived success and failure in our institutions. In discussing outreach and user practices with thirty archivists during the summer of 2001, I discovered only one repository had conducted a user study in recent memory. This finding points to the importance and rarity of studies such as the one that the Western Historical Collection conducted.

Beyond the "We don't have time" and "we don't know how to do user studies" reasons that archivists give for not collecting user data, there probably lies the belief that they are simply not necessary. The digital revolution and unmediated access to finding guides and materials, however, makes user information essential and a centerpiece of repository knowledge if archivists are to effect optimized discovery, retrieval, evaluation, and use of archival materials.

A Model for Reference, Outreach, and User Education in the 21st Century Repository.

Both the user's and archivist's roles must evolve if the 21st century repository is to fulfill the promise of liberalizing scholarship and research. Because the user will often be physically removed from the repository at least at the point of searching for information; and because the curator/archivist/librarian may no longer directly mediate the reference/ research transaction; and because the repository is now a digital publisher exerting time, effort, and significant financial resources in creating digital objects; the model for reference service changes. The archivist must know more about the potential user before the user ever finds the archives and both parties must exert more effort in the equation to facilitate and accomplish high quality research. In the traditional library/archives reference scenario, the researcher discovered the archives (through citations, word or mouth, repository guides, etc.) and posed queries and requests for materials to the archivist who mediated between the user and the collection. (See Figure 1) The user, be it a scholar or a school child, had to contact the repository for access to materials, whether the request came in person, over the phone, through a fax, or more recently through electronic mail.

In each of these scenarios, the archivist is there, interceding on behalf of both the user (providing access to the collection) and the collection (ensuring preservation and security). In this model and in all the various of ways the user can contact the repository, the archivist is always at hand to help clarify, retrieve, and educate on the spot. This is the model Schellenberg articulated in 1965 when he observed, "No matter how well finding aids are prepared, they cannot impart all the knowledge that is in the head of the well-informed archivist."⁴³ In 1982, Mary Jo Pugh took exception with this traditional approach, stating that the "myth of the immortal, omniscient, indispensable reference archivist" had to be examined.

Arguing for improved descriptive and reference practice, she went on to note, “Current practice relies too heavily on the subject knowledge and memory of the individual archivist, and is too dependent on the personalities of the researcher and the archivist.”⁴⁴ Much more of the collection information that made the archivist a gatekeeper and an integral part of the archives reference process, whether the results were successful or not, needed to be stored in finding tools better oriented to users’ needs.

While the traditional model in which the archivist mediates directly between the user and the collection will exist as long as there are paper-based original records in archives to which users must travel, the emerging virtual archives environment demands that the archivist, ironically, become more omniscient than either Schellenberg or Pugh imagined. The archivist must now know a great deal about the repository’s users as well as collections and become an expert at document surrogation and information retrieval. To make matters more challenging, this omniscience must now be anticipatory.

Networked access to finding aids and actual collection materials, housed on extensive repository web sites demands a new archival reference model. In Figure 2 we see a wide range of users with disparate backgrounds, questions, and experiences searching for information. Some will know precisely where to search – looking either for known items of information or known repositories. Others will cast their queries to web search engines that will return hits from archival web sites. Still others will stumble across repository web sites in their trips to parent institutions or jumping from link to link in reference lists. Regardless of their path, people will encounter archives from many directions, most with an information need, be it specific or vague. The top triangle in the model represents the diversity of users who will discovery archival materials, culminating in the lower point that is their query. The

lower triangle represents the repository with its wealth of collections, only a small portion of which may be clearly visible through finding guides and instructional material at the apex of the triangle. The most successful version of this diagram is when the two triangles overlap as much as possible and the archivist is fully aware of the user's information needs and search behaviors and the user is able to access the full richness of the collection and the repository's services as seen in Figure 3.

In this model the user must become:

- The raison d'être for the repository.
- A more independent researcher.
- A more adept searcher & linguist.
- A skilled computer user.
- An adept question asker.
- The focus for system interface and services.
- The focus for selection & collection development.
- A recipient of anticipatory user instruction.

In this model the archivist must become:

- A researcher of user needs and information-seeking behaviors.
- A skilled indexer and abstractor, designing finding tools that reflect holdings in a way that facilitate resource discovery and use.
- An expert online searcher who can assist remote users with this task.
- An educator, designing learning materials that researchers will encounter on the repository web site without ever going to the repository.
- A web designer, or at least someone who can evaluate web design and specify requirements to a designer.
- A keen evaluator of repository services and user success.

In this model, archivists spend a good deal of time devising user education tools, be they "how-to" guides on websites, frequently asked question lists (FAQs), lists of related repositories, or just more clear finding aids. Along with being collection managers, archivists

become educators who know and provide for their clientele through well-designed web sites anticipating user needs and containing instructional elements that archivists once could impart to their clients only when they came to the repository. A large portion of this education will of necessity be directed at helping researcher learn to find primary resources. This will involve preparing finding tools that capture the essence of collections in a range of well constructed finding tools that speak the language of users and their needs and becoming expert searchers of digital information so that they can pass these skills on to their clients.

In a study of web-based user education, Jill Katte found that most archival repository web sites are woefully lacking in instructional materials. Significantly for new archives users finding materials on the web she notes, “The least implemented user education information type is finding aid interpretation information. Only one institution of the thirty in the sample offers any kind of help for users who may not understand what a finding aid is or how to use it to navigate a collection.”⁴⁵ She goes on to offer a model for web-based archival user education involving a matrix of resource and information types for inclusion. This type of study is extremely important for the 21st century archives and clearly illustrates the need for more and better user studies upon which to build repository services.

A Challenge to the Archival Profession.

We have all heard the argument, and may have even made it, “we just don’t have the time and staff resources to do user studies.” I challenge the archival profession to rethink this statement. What is it that archivists wouldn’t be doing if they conducted a study of their users? Mostly likely, they would be processing another collection or converting old finding aids to an electronic format. Again, the profession has long prioritized the processing and describing of materials above knowing users. Let’s think again. If archivists at each

repository took the time required to process one collection during the next year and rather, spent that time on a study that told them who their users are, how they search for information, from what types of user education they would most benefit, and how archivists could design future finding tools to best facilitate research, would this not lay the foundation for significantly improved policies and practices at each repository? Would this not be more valuable than processing one more collection?

Let's extend this idea just a bit. What if archivists did these studies, took a bit more time to write them up, and shared them with the profession as a whole? Would the potential effects not be enormous? Academics such as Yakel, Duff, Johnson, and Tibbo cannot do all these studies. While we may be able to design model studies or conduct collaborative, national, and international research, every repository should be studying its own users for itself and sharing the findings with the larger archival community, distributing the effort to build this knowledge base across the profession.

Conclusions.

In many respects, archivists have taken users for granted in the research/resource equation. Without rigorous and varied user studies, knowledge of users of archival materials has been, while at sometimes intense and personal, anecdotal and often superficial. As a profession, we have little idea as to searching behaviors, use of language – a growing concern with electronic searching – or even the usefulness of something we hold as fundamental as a finding aid. It is quite telling that when EAD was being designed no one asked the very basic question – is the finding aid an ideal retrieval and descriptive tool? – before launching into all the work of figuring out how to encode it.⁴⁶ This should give archivists some pause, particularly as many institutions are plunging headlong into expensive encoding projects. This is not to say that

finding aids and especially electronic finding aids are not useful, but again, close analysis of how people use them and how they might like to augment or alter them should inform the production of even better discovery tools.

Yakel starts off her discussion with the notion of “common ground.” While similar disciplinary training and expertise often lead to a shared knowledge base and perspectives – i.e., historians or chemists, at least within disciplinary subfields and specialties, know a lot of the same facts - that does not mean that they do their work in the same way; does not mean that they know the historical or chemical landscape in the same fashion; does not mean that they use the same research methodologies, approaches, or tools; and certainly does not mean that they would universally know much about how to use archival or library tools for information discovery and evaluation. Needless to say, the more diverse a user population, and that is exactly what archivists are seeing with those who come to repositories virtually (including the general public, K-12 students and teachers, genealogists, and scholars), the less we know about their backgrounds, how they will approach and view the archival experience, and what their native information seeking and analysis behaviors are. Thus, the less well prepared archivists are to facilitate their information seeking, evaluation, and use.

If there is to be common ground between archivists and this array of users, we must come to know more about them and prepare learning aids as well as finding aids. As Yakel points out, if there is to be common ground and common understanding, archivists must be the ones to take the lead in this dance, asking questions and providing information proactively. We know that most library and archives users are reticent to ask questions or don't ask very good questions. That is, they don't always ask the questions that are most helpful in finding the information they need. Yakel's work shows us many archival clients, even those who come into the repository physically, do not even have a clear or deep understanding of what an archives is, nor what a finding aid is, or how or why it is structured as it is. In this age of the unmediated search, archivists must assume a role as educators as well as curators;

they must come to love their users as they have long loved their collections. The first step in this romance is to make the user study as ubiquitous as the repository guide.



Figure 1

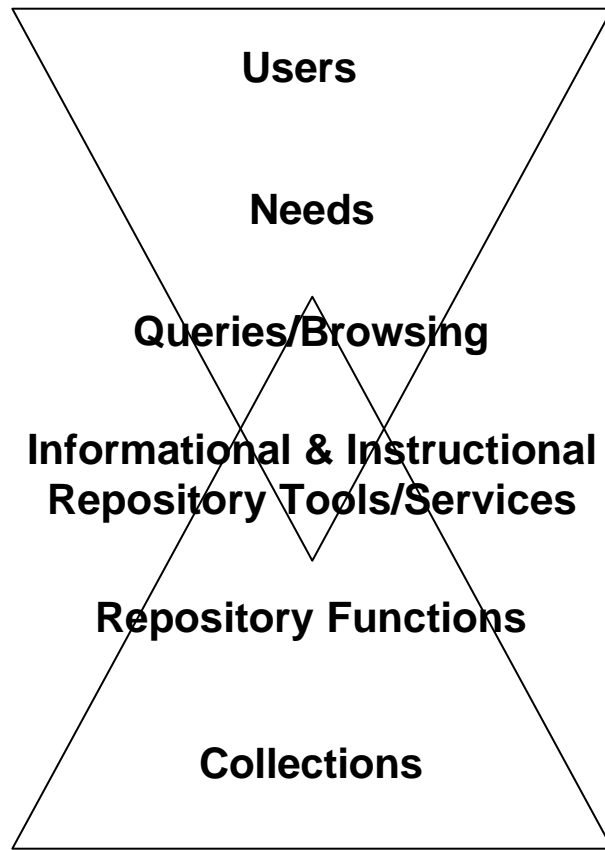


Figure 2

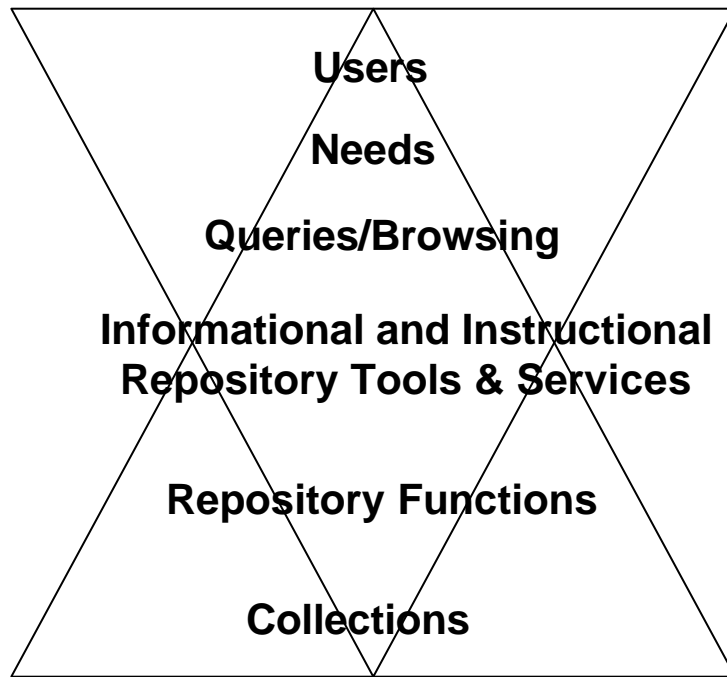


Figure 3

Notes.

¹ Based on a paper delivered at the Midwest Archives Conference meeting, Minneapolis, MN, May 4, 2002.

² Seamus Ross, *Changing Trains at Wigan: Digital Preservation and the Future of Scholarship*. NPO Preservation Guidance Occasional Papers (London: National Preservation Office, 2000): 12.

³ See for example: Hilary Berthon & Colin Webb, "The Moving Frontier: Archiving, Preservation and Tomorrow's Digital Heritage" www.nla.gov.au/nla/staffpaper/hberthon2.html; Mary Feeney, ed., *Digital Culture: Maximising the Nation's Investment: A Synthesis of JISC/NPO Studies on the Preservation of Electronic Materials* (London: British Library, 1999)

<http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/services/elib/papers/other/jisc-npo-dig/intro.html> ; Margaret Hedstrom,

"Digital Preservation: A Time Bomb for Digital Libraries" *Computers and the Humanities* 31/3 (1998): 189-202. <http://www.uky.edu/~7Ekiernan/DL/hedstrom.html>; David M. Levy, "Heroic

Measures: Reflections on the Possibility and Purpose of Digital Preservation." *Proceedings of the Third ACM Conference on Digital Libraries*, Pittsburgh, PA, 1998, 152-161

<http://www.acm.org/pubs/citations/proceedings/dl/276675/p152-levy/>; Peter Lyman, "Digital

Documents and the Future of the Academic Community," Mellon Scholarly Communication and

Technology Conference, April 24-25, 1997 <http://arl.cni.org/scomm/scat/lyman.html>; Peter Lyman

and Howard Besser, "Defining the Problem of our Vanishing Memory: Background, Current Status,

Models for Resolution," in Margaret MacLean and Ben H. Davis, eds., *Time & Bits: Managing Digital Continuity*, pp. 11-20 (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Trust, 1998)

http://www.longnow.com/10klibrary/TimeBits_Disc/tbpaper.html; Clifford A. Lynch, "The Uncertain

Future for Digital Visual Collections in the University," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11 (1997):

5-13; and Jeffrey Rothenberg, *Avoiding Technological Quicksand* (Washington, DC: CLIR, 1999)

<http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/rothenberg/contents.html>.

⁴ Elizabeth Yakel, "Listening to Users," (paper presented at the spring meeting of the Midwestern Archives Conference, Minneapolis, MN, May 4, 2002).

⁵ Brenda Dervin, "An Overview of Sense-Making Research: Concepts, Methods, and Results" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, Dallas, TX., May 1983), available at <http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/art/artdervin83.html>; "On Studying Information Seeking Methodologically: The Implications of Connecting Metatheory to Method," *Information Processing & Management* 35/6 (1999): 727-750. "Useful Theory for Librarianship: Communication, Not Information," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 13/3 (July 1977) 16-32; Brenda Dervin and Michael Nilan, "Information Needs and Uses," *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, volume 21, ed. by Martha E. Williams (New York: Knowledge Industry Publications, Inc. for American Society for Information Science, 1986) 3-33.

⁶ Carol Collier Kuhlthau, *Sense Making. A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. (Norwood: N.J.: Ablex Publishing, 1993); "Inside the Search Process: Information Seeking from the User's Perspective," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42 (June 1991): 361-371.

⁷ Paul Conway, "Overview: Rational for Digitization and Preservation," in *Handbook for Digital Projects: A Management Tool for Preservation and Access* (Andover, MA: NEDCC, 2000). Also available online: <http://www.nedcc.prg/digital/II.html> (page 4 of this chapter online).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, (page 10 of this chapter online).

¹⁰ Anne R. Kenny & Oya Rieger. *Moving Theory into Practice*. (Mountain View, CA: RLG, 2000).

¹¹ Angelika Menne-Haritz, "Access – The Reformulation of an Archival Paradigm," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 57-82.

¹² Ibid., 59.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Editors' Note," *RLG DigiNews* 2/2 (April 15, 1998) [Online] available

<http://www.rlg.org/preserv/diginews/diginews22.html>.

¹⁵ Elsie Freeman Finch, ed., *Advocating Archives: An Introduction to Public Relations for Archivists* (Metuchen, N.J.: SAA and Scarecrow Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁶ Paul Conway, "Digital Preservation: Theory and Reality," (paper presented at Digitization for Cultural Heritage Information Professionals, Chapel Hill, NC, March 13, 2002).

¹⁷ H. Thomas Hickerson, "Ten Challenges for the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* 61/1 (Spring/Summer 2001): 11.

¹⁸ Yakel, "Listening to Users."

¹⁹ See: Linda L. Long, "Question Negotiation in the Archival Setting: The Use of Interpersonal Communication Techniques in the Reference Interview," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 40-51; Susan Malbin, "The Reference Interview in Archival Literature," *College and Research Libraries* 58 (January 1997); Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992).

²⁰ James I. Wyer, *Reference Work* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1930), 101.

²¹ Robert S. Taylor, "Question Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries," *College and Research Libraries* 29 (May 1968): 180.

²² Helen R. Tibbo, "Interviewing Techniques for Remote Reference: Electronic Versus Traditional Environments," *American Archivist* 58 (Summer 1995): 294-310.

²³ This is an area that demands extensive research. The author is currently conducting an international study of how historians locate primary resources, including their use of the Web and what they are teaching their users, but all archival users should be studied as to how they locate, interpret, and use digitally available primary materials.

²⁴Kristina L. Southwell, "How Researchers Learn of Manuscript Resources at the Western History Collections," (paper presented at the spring meeting of the Midwestern Archives Conference, Minneapolis, MN, May 4, 2002). Forthcoming, *Archival Issues*.

²⁵ Paul Conway, "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 393-407.

²⁶ William J. Maher, "The Use of User Studies," *The Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 15-25; Roy C. Turnbaugh. "Archival Mission and User Studies," *The Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 27-33.

²⁷ Bruce W. Dearstyne, "What Is the Use of Archives: A Challenge for the Profession," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 76-87.

²⁸ Articles reporting on the findings of archival user studies include: Diane L. Beattie, "An Archival User Study: Researchers in the Field of Women's History," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-1990): 33-50; Paul Conway, *Partners in Research: Improving Access to the Nation's Archive: User Studies at the National Archives and Records Administration* (Pittsburgh: Archives and Museum Informatics, 1994).

²⁹ Michael Stevens, "Historian and the Archival Finding Aid," *Georgia Archive* (1977).

³⁰ Helen R. Tibbo, "Primarily History: Historians and the Search for Primary Source Materials," *Proceedings of the ACM/IEEE Joint Conference on Digital Libraries*. Portland, OR, July 14-18, 2002 (NY: ACM, 2002), 1-10.

³¹ Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, "A Virtual Expression of Need: An Analysis of E-mail Reference Questions," *American Archivist* 64/1 (Spring/Summer 2001): 43-60.

³² For example, at the 2000 SAA conference there was Session 7 on "User Studies in the Digital Age," and Session 29: "Real Research on Real Users." In 2001, SAA had one session specifically devoted to users' information-seeking behaviors, 56. "Seek and Ye Shall Find? Information Seeking Behavior and the Archives." and one on learning about users, 46. "Crossing Doors and Boundaries: Researchers and What We Know of Them in Different National Settings." The 2002 program includes a first ever SAA workshop on conducting user studies.

³³ Donna Baker, “Frameworks Revisited: Comprehensive User Agreement System for the Manuscript Department of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001).

³⁴ Megan Phillips, “Usage Patterns for Holdings Information Sources at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Manuscripts Department” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997); Shayera D. Tangri, “Evaluating Changes in the Methods by Which Users of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Manuscript Department Learn of the Holdings of the Department” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000).

³⁵ See, for example: Michael Bloor et al., *Focus Groups in Social Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Pubs, 2001); Don A. Dillman, *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: J. Wiley, 2000); Bill Gillham, *The Research Interview* (London, New York: Continuum, 2000); Jaber F. Gubrium & James A. Holstein, eds., *Handbook of Interview Research: Context & Method* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Pubs., 2002);

³⁶ Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A Johnson, “Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information Seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives,” *Library Quarterly* Forthcoming. Mss. pg. 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, mss. p. 19.

³⁸ Helen R. Tibbo and Lokman I. Meho, “Finding Finding Aids on the World Wide Web,” *American Archivist* 64/1 (Spring/Summer 2001); 61-77.

³⁹ John D. Gould, Stephen J. Boies, and Clayton Lewis, “Making Usable, Useful, Productivity-Enhancing Computer Applications,” *Communications of the ACM* 34/1 (January 1991): 75.

⁴⁰ Thomas B. Sheridan, “Designing Complex Technology: Understanding It as of, by, and for People,” *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 36 (1989): 91.

⁴¹ Archivists and curators have reported such perspectives to the author as part of the UNC-Glasgow project.

⁴² Jill M. Tatem, "EAD: Obstacles to Implementation, Opportunities for Understanding," *Archival Issues* 23/2 (1998): 155-69.

⁴³ T.R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 109.

⁴⁴ Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist." *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 33-44.

⁴⁵ Jill Katte, "Reaching Out to Researchers: A Model for Web-Based User Education for Archives and Manuscript Collections" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002), 25.

⁴⁶ Tatem, "EAD."