ABSTRACT: Because the archives and history professions are closely related, it is logical that archivists create history education outreach programs and services. Archivists provide educators with access to primary sources and assist teachers in utilizing these sources in their classrooms to foster critical thinking and historical reasoning skills in students. In recent years, archivists have heeded the call to serve teachers, K-12 students, and undergraduates, in addition to academic historians and graduate students. Most, however, have missed a valuable opportunity to reach out to the community at large with education programs similar to services they may already provide to teachers and students. This article presents an argument for history and archival education programs directed at adult users.

Introduction

Archivists have done an admirable job providing educational programs and services to teachers and students, but the profession may be overlooking an important audience for educational outreach programs: adult users, including community historians, retirees, and life-long learners. Given rapidly increasing on-line access to archival collections and the popularity of historical films, books, and television programs, archives should find receptive adult audiences in their communities. Because adult consumers of popular history face many of the same challenges as do their younger history student counterparts—especially if they have been away from the academic environment for a long period of time—archivists could easily adapt existing education programs for adult users.

While archives traditionally have reached out to non-academic adult users such as genealogists and historic home researchers, less attention has been paid to an audience consisting of consumers of popular history books, documentaries, movies, and television programs. It may be possible to reach these potential users through public libraries, local community education and recreation programs, or community colleges.
Archivists could also consider offering education programs geared toward adults returning to school or to recently retired individuals.

Because the potential adult users may have little interaction with professional educators, archivists are in an ideal position to address historical research and critical thinking skills in outreach programs. The critical thinking skills used in historical research are the same skills used by active, engaged citizens in a democratic society to make sense of current events and world affairs. Some older users may not have been exposed to current methods of historical analysis in school and may view history as little more than a series of objective dates and facts. Educational outreach to these users creates opportunities for archives to be more socially responsive; educate the citizenry; increase transparency in the practice of history; help users to create their own histories; enhance the enjoyment and understanding of popular history and on-line primary sources; and create potential for collaboration among archives and public historians, museums, local historical societies, and community education and recreation departments.

**Outreach and Public Programming in Archives**

For nearly three decades, outreach and public programming have been widely discussed in the archival profession, and most archivists accept that outreach and public programs are essential aspects of operations. Arguments in favor of archival outreach programs include increasing the use of archives, improving the image of archives, creating support for funding archives, and increasing awareness of the importance of archives. Archival outreach typically is discussed in terms of users and audiences. Mary Jo Pugh has defined a number of potential user groups, including colleagues of an archives’ parent institution, scholars, students, college professors, K-12 teachers, and such “avocational users” as genealogists, historians, and hobbyists. When devising outreach programs, archivists are encouraged to focus on specific user groups, determine users’ needs, and tailor programs to meet those needs. Typical outreach programs in the United States include lectures, tours, exhibits, and teacher resources and workshops. In his 2000 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, Leon J. Stout pointed out that archives exist to facilitate research, and archivists do not necessarily have to exhibit interesting documents to bring new users into their reading rooms. Outreach programs that focus on educating users in history research techniques would do both.

**Archives, Archivists, and History Education**

From the 1980s on, archivists began to reach beyond the traditional uses by scholars to include the K-12 and undergraduate educational communities for a multitude of reasons. Marcus C. Robyns perhaps best summarized the benefit of education-oriented programs by asserting that working with students can “have an empowering effect on students and can improve the quality of research in reading rooms.” When students
are taught historical research skills, they are more likely to be fully engaged in the research process and produce superior original research. When adult audiences and learners are taught these skills, the quality of discourse on history in society may rise. However, archivists have paid less attention in their educational outreach efforts to adult audiences from outside the history profession.

**Historical Background**

The skills required and challenges faced by K-12 and undergraduate students and teachers when using archival materials to construct history have been well-documented in both education and archival literature. Foremost among these skills are discerning multiple levels of meaning in documents and texts; understanding creators’ biases and points of view; and coming to terms with interpretation, argument, and the problem of incomplete evidence from which to reconstruct events. Students also must read and comprehend potentially unfamiliar language, see patterns and themes in primary sources, be able to revise theories and hypotheses as new information becomes available, and use multiple sources to corroborate or disprove accounts of events. These concepts may run counter to many students’ understanding of history as a series of facts and events linked in a positivistic series of causes and effects. Todd Estes, for example, has reflected that he often has to “push against—as we probably all do—the assumption that students often have is that there is only one ‘correct’ interpretation or view and that their job is simply to discover what it is and learn it.” This assumption is likely to be just as prevalent among adults in the general public.

In addition to the intellectual challenges inherent in history education, both teachers and their students face obstacles related to locating, using, and understanding the nature of archival materials. Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres argue that many novice users have obtained the skills needed for interpretation of primary sources within their respective disciplines, but they lack “archival intelligence,” defined as “knowledge of archival theory, practices, and procedures; strategies for reducing uncertainty and ambiguity when unstructured problems and ill-defined solutions are the norm; and intellective skills.” Archival intelligence can be seen, for example, when expert archives users are able to structure their search strategies around provenance rather than subject. Users also must gain a sense of “archival literacy,” which extends beyond traditional notions of information literacy. Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland and her colleagues have defined archival literacy as “users’ consciousness of their documentary heritage and the role that records play in establishing and protecting their rights and in recording and communicating their heritage.” Archival outreach programs aimed at adult audiences would likely need to include instruction in both primary source interpretation and archival research skills, as well.

Archivists have addressed many of the aforementioned challenges history teachers face when using primary sources in the classroom. Several case studies and research projects have tied history education theory to potential or actual archival outreach projects. Few of these projects, however, have involved adult learners. Most of these projects have advocated collaborating with teachers rather than working directly with students to teach historical reasoning skills.
Ken Osborne, in a 1986 article on archival outreach to students and teachers, described a number of ways archivists have served this audience based on education theory related to the investigative and analytical aspects of history. Osborne surveyed programs in place across Canada at the time and identified components of effective educational outreach programs, such as involving students in solving problems; working closely with teachers, teacher training programs, and curriculum developers; and taking steps to ensure that programs go beyond simply highlighting interesting documents. For adult educational programs, problem-solving and moving beyond merely exhibiting documents should be emphasized. Osborne did draw attention to the potential to use student programs with adults, but did not elaborate on what such a program would entail.

In more recent years, others have expanded on Osborne’s ideas in their explorations of archival outreach to the history education community. Sharon Anne Cook argued in favor of archives providing primary sources for classroom use without attaching pedagogical strategies to them; working with teachers to determine what they need and how best to fill those needs; and involving pre-service teachers in the program development process. Gilliland-Swetland examined the potential for archives to meet educational users’ needs when planning digitization projects, and encouraged archivists to seek user feedback. She argued that digitization projects should include collections that can be copied freely; that are well described; that contain material with exemplary value, visual appeal, local interest, or documentation of advancements in knowledge; and that are supplemented by a large quantity of existing secondary source background information. These considerations also would apply to material used in adult education programs. Julia Hendry has examined literature from the education field and has found that archives have missed opportunities to work with K-12 teachers to incorporate primary sources and archival literacy in their lesson plans.

**Current Practice**

History education outreach programs take several forms in current archival practice and are mostly geared toward K-12 students and teachers. Numerous archival institutions have assembled sets of primary sources (in digital or hard-copy format) accompanied by lesson plans. These programs are designed to assist teachers, but do not involve archivists directly with teaching critical thinking and historical reasoning. One prominent example is the Library of Congress’ Primary Source Sets, which include primary sources in multiple formats related to a particular topic, teacher guides, and links to primary source analysis tool worksheets. The teacher guides include background information on each topic, suggestions for classroom activities and discussion, and citations to secondary sources. Many smaller archives and historical societies offer similar resources for teachers or participate in collaborative programs with other cultural institutions. Archival repositories also serve the education community by participating in local history fair or National History Day activities, where students conduct original primary and secondary source research related to a history theme and interpret the results of their research. These programs allow archivists to work directly with both teachers and their students who use archives to research their projects. Many academic archives offer instructional programs for undergraduate
students. Typically, these programs are related to a specific course or assignment and are designed to familiarize students with archival research skills, access tools, and descriptive practices.21

Why Extend History Education Outreach Programs to Adults?

Arguments can be made for reaching out to potential new adult users by expanding educational programs already presented to younger audiences. These programs can create new audiences for and supporters of archives, provide context for on-line primary sources, allow archives to be socially responsible and increase transparency in the profession, and create potential for collaboration with other cultural institutions and education professionals.

New Audiences

History-related books, movies, and television shows have piqued adults’ interest in history, creating a new potential audience for archival outreach programs. One of the most extensive studies of how American adults interact with history found that participants expressed a strong desire to access primary sources and experience the past in an unfiltered manner.22 At the same time, advances in technology have increased the availability of and interest in on-line primary sources. Greater access to archival materials certainly is a desirable and admirable goal, but increased access does not necessarily lead to increased understanding. Obviously, libraries and archives make on-line research guides available for students, seasoned researchers, and budding historians alike, but the archival profession should also assume some responsibility for explaining how to analyze critically the archival resources that are now becoming available to potential new researchers and avocational historians. Archivists should not, of course, interpret such materials, but creating instructional programs for adults that demonstrate how to conduct historical interpretation is a reasonable way to improve the quality of access to digital archives. Such programs would also be a step toward ensuring that digital collections are more than just displays of interesting documents.

Social Responsibility and Transparency

While increasing visibility and awareness of archives is important to the profession, archivists should move beyond the goal of greater awareness to create outreach programs that also benefit participants and perhaps even society at large. In an address to the National Council on Public History, Robert Weible asserted that “historians have leadership responsibilities” to “help people understand what’s real about history so that we can all do a better job of making it.”23 It is time for archivists to embrace this responsibility as well. Educating adult users about the process of constructing history could have a positive impact on social memory. Randall Jimerson argues that “social memory all too often is based on myth or simplistic stereotypes, rather than thoughtful analysis and evaluation of the historical record.”24 Social memory often falls prey to nostalgia and a desire to forget unpleasant or controversial aspects of the past. Andrew Flinn further argues that community histories “can be as exclusionary
as mainstream history in that they may marginalize or exclude other groups (on the
basis of class, gender, sexual orientation or transgression from community orthodox-
ies). Educational outreach that instructs about techniques of historical analysis may
not end these problems entirely, but it could at least help individuals recognize them
when they occur, and consider their implications. Concerns about transparency in
archival practice should also be addressed when facilitating historical analysis among
adults. In addition to explaining document creators’ perspectives and potential biases,
archivists could explain their role as mediators between documents and researchers,
the subjectivity of language used in archival description, and the documentation gaps
that exist in archives, all of which are important considerations when constructing
history from primary sources.  

Collaboration with Related Professions

Educational outreach programs for adult users can provide archivists opportunities
to collaborate with and provide service to professionals in related fields. A team of
academic historians and archivists prepared a report in 1992 arguing for increased
cooperation between the two professions. Archivists could similarly cooperate with
public historians through outreach work with adult audiences. Public historians often
undertake projects to help members of a community create their own history through
books, plays, oral histories, and exhibitions. The quality of these products can be un-
even, sometimes falling into the traps of sentimentality, nostalgia, or lack of focus. But it is unreasonable to expect participants in community history projects to produce
rigorous, critical histories unless historians and archivists educate them about how to
do so using primary sources. Archivists can assist historians by using their collections
to provide training to participants in historical analysis and critical thinking. Potential
for collaboration with museum professionals exists as well. If a museum undertakes an
exhibit involving a controversial or challenging interpretation, local archivists could
organize a workshop on the process of constructing history to help potential visitors
understand the scholarly underpinnings of the interpretation. Such collaborative pro-
grams would benefit archives by illustrating their value to historians, cultural institu-
tions, and citizens. Program participants would also benefit from enhanced enjoyment
and understanding of history, both in their communities and in popular culture.

Implementing History Education Outreach Programs for Adults

Adapting Existing Programs

Educational outreach programming already in place at many archival institutions
could be adapted for adults. For example, in a program for undergraduate students at
Northern Michigan University, archivist Marcus C. Robyns provided instruction related
to “the definition and meaning of historical research, primary sources, and critical
thinking, including the topics of verification, reliability, and inference” by walking
participants through the analysis of sample documents. He also demonstrated the
concept of provenance by reviewing a finding aid “with emphasis on the biographical
Students were then given a set of primary sources from the university’s archival collections and a thesis associated with the sources. Students took the copies of documents home, selected what they thought to be the most credible sources to support their thesis, and returned the next day for a seminar-style discussion of their analyses. Robyns created a program that provides instruction in both historical reasoning and archival literacy skills. Similar programs (that could occur in one day rather than two) could be conducted for adult audiences in archival repositories rather than with more traditional lectures, collection showcases, and tours. Already existing resource sets and teacher guides could be used as a basis for these seminars. It may even be possible for such programs to be focused on a currently popular history-related movie or book.

The Harry S. Truman Library and Museum offers an example of a program for students that has successfully been adapted for adults. In the White House Decision Center program, groups of students in grades 8-12 examine primary sources related to major decisions in the Truman administration, act out the decision-making process, and answer questions at a mock press conference. The program challenges the notion of “a linear perspective of history where conclusions are given after the fact.” Students are exposed to a series of classroom lessons on such topics as decision making, primary source interpretation, and role-playing before they arrive for the on-site activities. According to Tom Heuertz, associate education coordinator at the Truman Library and Museum, the school program was easily transformed into a three-and-one-half hour experience for adults. Truman Library staff use a guide with pages excerpted from the school program manual. Adult groups enter without prior instruction on document interpretation and analysis, but they are given background information and context for the historical figures they will play. Several hundred adults, including military personnel, church groups, corporate executives, and ElderHostel groups go through the program each year. While historical analysis and critical thinking skills are not taught directly in the adult version of the Truman Library program, archivists wishing to adapt this program model could include these skills to enhance their version.

Program Elements

Archives or history-related educational programs for adults could take numerous forms, but a seminar or group discussion format may be the most practical to implement. Archivists could explain how historians analyze and interpret documents and other archival material using samples from their repository’s collections. Important elements to address would include an individual document’s relationship to the rest of the collection, ways in which a document may tell multiple stories, how historians frame questions when working with archival material, and how authorship and perspective can affect a primary source’s validity and reliability. Archivists’ role as mediators also should be discussed here. To illustrate how historians use consensus in interpreting events, archivists might use copies of primary sources in small or large group discussions. Material related to local history or politics, controversial issues, or topics of recent popular history books, movies, or television documentaries would help maintain user interest and spark discussion. Such examples are abundant, including...
the Smithsonian’s *Enola Gay* exhibit, Oliver Stone’s historical “docudramas,” and allegations of inaccuracies and fabrications in popular history books. If an archives lacks staff resources to produce such programming on its own, it could adapt material provided by institutions like the Library of Congress and National Archives or collaborate with another repository in the area to divide the workload. Programs of this type can be run multiple times for greater return on time invested.

**Conclusion**

Archivists have done much to enhance education for K-12 and undergraduate students and educators, and should now extend these services to include often overlooked adult audiences. The time is right for innovative programming that capitalizes on an increased presence of history in popular culture and greater public access to primary sources through digitization. Archivists should step up to the challenge and embrace this unique opportunity for public service that has the potential not only to promote archives and their role in society, but also to serve related professions, audiences, and the community at large.

Benefits of history education outreach programs for adult users are political, personal, and institutional. Politically, such programs would allow archives to embrace a more activist role in society, prepare citizens to participate more fully in democracy, and encourage the public to engage in reasoned debates on current affairs. Personally, audiences will come away with an enhanced understanding of and appreciation for history that they can carry with them when they visit other cultural institutions, consume popular history movies, books, and television programs, and use the increasing volume of on-line primary source material. For archivists, the interactive nature of the program could provide opportunities to learn from participants, as much as for participants to learn from archivists. Institutionally, adult education programs provide archives with opportunities to become more engaged with the communities they serve and to collaborate with professionals in related disciplines. Together, these benefits help instill in archivists pride about their work and provide definitive evidence of their worth to society.

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NOTES


11. Ibid., 70.


17. Hendry, “Primary Sources in K-12 Education,” 125.


30. Ibid.


32. Tom Heuertz, telephone interview by author, 2 December 2009, notes in possession of author.