Instructor: Mark Greene….

Appraisal has been called “the most significant archival function.” The decisions—active or passive—that determine which material is selected for long-term preservation determine what tiny sliver of human documentary production will actually become “archives” and thus part of society’s documentary heritage. Appraisal is, arguably, the most intellectually demanding of archival functions; indisputably it is the area of archival work which has seen the most controversy and debate within the profession.

This reading list will help ground you in the evolution of professional thinking about appraisal from the 1920s to the present. The readings begin with the elemental questions which underlie much appraisal theory: what is the nature and purpose of archives? From that foundation, six sections take a generally chronological tour through the discourse on appraisal during the past 70 years. The next three sections provide introductory coverage of sampling as an appraisal tool, appraisal of non-textual material, appraisal of electronic records, reappraisal and deaccessioning, case studies in appraisal of specific topical areas. The final section looks at the transition between appraisal and actually acquiring the material selected for long-term preservation, the ethics of collection development and donor relations, and the role of appraisal in other archival functions.

The goal of these readings is to provide a thorough knowledge of the basic theories, strategies, and professional practices concerning appraisal and an orientation to doing this job well as working archivists. The readings will ensure that you are familiar with all the seminal works in the field, have been exposed to appraisal writing from the US, Canada, and Australia, and have a sense of the way in which appraisal discourse has changed over time.
READEINGS

1) The Prior Questions—What Are Archives and Why Do We Keep Them?
Terry Cook, one of the foremost writers on appraisal, has posited a strict distinction between archival theory and appraisal theory. “Archival theory is derived from the characteristics of records…. Such classic archival theory has no direct relevance, however, to appraisal theory, which concerns the value of records…. The inherent nature of records does not help determine which records… actually have long-term, enduring, or archival value.” This course, however, assumes that theories about the nature of archives are very relevant to theories about the value of records. This session will explore that inter-relationship.

Readings:
William L. Joyce, “Archivists and Research Use,” American Archivist 47 (Spring 1984), 124-33

2) The Stubborn Paradigms of Archival Appraisal—Jenkinson and Schellenberg
Several attempts in the past 25 years to pronounce the writings of Hilary Jenkinson and Theodore Schellenberg passe or worse have not succeeded in diminishing their resonance and, many would argue, relevance. Jenkinson’s “moral defence of archives” was an anti-appraisal jeremiad and a manifesto for a certain fundamental archival theory. He lived long enough to see both his archival and appraisal theory largely overthrown in the US by Schellenberg who, while challenged during his lifetime, died before the major assaults on his theories.

Readings:
3) **Other Early Voices and Perspectives**

Despite the subsequent dominance of Jenkinson and Schellenberg in archival discourse on appraisal, the 1940s and 50s produced other important voices. Two of Schellenberg’s colleagues in the National Archives both influenced and contradicted him. Margaret Norton, a pioneer women archivist in the US, is often viewed as an American Jenkinson, though this is a gross simplification. Writing on appraisal in the US was almost completely moribund during the 1960s, and interest began to revive only at the end of that decade.

**Readings**

Philip Brooks, "The Selection of Records for Preservation," *American Archivist* 3 (October 1940)


4) **Activism, Edges, and the Dawning of the Post-Custodial Era**

Inside of ten years, Gerry Ham (State Historical Society of Wisconsin) issued a challenge to the profession to improve appraisal, helped define (and gave name to) an era of energetic collection development, and limned the threads of many of the methods and arguments that dominated the late 1980s and 1990s. Whether active collecting by archivists is synonymous with “activist” collecting, first debated in the mid-1970s, continues to have echoes today. Just as all this ferment was about to start bubbling, SAA attempted to codify appraisal practice—though the “edge” of archival discourse bypassed the 1977 manual almost immediately, many archivists in the trenches learned from this slim volume.

**Readings**


5) **The Black Box, Social Values, Australian Perspectives**

The “black box,” one of the first responses to Ham’s demand for better appraisal, sought to give additional depth and complexity to Schellenberg’s taxonomy of appraisal values—it remains the most influential treatment of “micro” appraisal since the 1950s. The major debates, however, would concern “macro” appraisal. The publication in English of a 1972 German essay, suggesting a form of appraisal
socialism, and the success that same year of an Australian archival manual, marked the beginning of a widening discourse—US appraisal discussion could no longer exist in splendid isolation.

**Readings**


Terry Eastwood, "How Goes it with Appraisal?"*Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), 111-21


**6) Total Archives: Collection Development**

US appraisal thinking owes a special debt, however, to Canadian archivists. The 1980s concept of “total archives” has resonated less explicitly in the US than the theory of “macro appraisal” in the 90s, threads of total archives are visible in US writings on collecting policies, documentation strategy and electronic records. If non-governmental archives were to avoid becoming vacuum cleaners sucking up old stuff, they too needed to clearly articulate what it was they wanted and to live by those limits—improving collection analysis and collecting policies (concepts borrowed from library science) became two means of improving selection.

**Readings**


**7) Documentation Strategy**

Whether collection development sufficiently supported archival appraisal was a matter of some debate—documentation strategy argued that single institutional plans were inadequate, that archivists must develop an inter-institutional plan “to assure the adequate documentation of an on-going issue, activity, function, or subject.” Documentation strategy commanded archival attention for many years, produced grants, controversy, many conference sessions, and a wealth of articles. It also fed a growing discontent among many archivists over the disjunction of archival theory from their daily work—was a theory that didn’t seem to work in practice still significant?

**Readings**

Helen Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?" *American Archivist* 49, no.2 (Spring 1986).

8) **The Role of Use and Users in Appraisal; Archival Methods**

The role of use in appraisal theory has been particularly controversial. Terry Cook has argued that while archivists appraise records for use by researchers, they don’t do this by appraising records or considering use. This paradox reflects one side of a conceptual divide over both archival and appraisal theory. At the close of the 1980s, David Bearman, who was not an archivist, issued a formidable challenge to the previous 15 years of writing and activity.

**Readings**


9) **Functional Analysis; Macro Appraisal**

Functional analysis posited that by understanding what functions were performed by each part of an organization the archivist could think through selection. The archivist could determine core functions—that is, what the organization most fundamentally sought to accomplish—and what forms of documentation was needed to document these functions. Macro appraisal, too, urged that the appraisal process start by evaluating record creators rather than records. The goal was to identify not the functional results of creators’ actions but the purposes and intents of the creator. For macro appraisal both function and structure were important to identifying records of enduring value. The best records, however, were those that showed the creators’ interactions with clients.

**Readings**

Though archival writing on electronic records dates to the mid-1970s, not until computer technology settled on every organizational desktop in the late 1980s did the discussion enter the professional mainstream. For some archivists, electronic records demanded a “paradigm shift” in archival thinking—either toward totally new theories or a return to abandoned traditions; for others electronic records represented only new formats for the same old challenges of the last 50 years. Discussion about what archivists should be appraising, when they should be appraising it, and even whether archives as a physical place remained relevant, came front and center. Once again the very role and purpose of archives seemed to intertwine with appraisal debates.

Readings


“In the Agora,” Archives and Manuscripts 25:1 (1997), 88-103 [excerpts from an Australian Archives list discussion concerning the place of appraisal in the records continuum].

Electronic records are not the only materials which have seemingly demanded special appraisal consideration. The concept of “total archives” notwithstanding, moving images, photos, and sound recordings have often been treated as completely distinct from traditional textual records. Most often, however, such material comes to archives as part of a body of mixed formats—should they be treated as part or apart?
Readings
Joan Schwartz, "We make our tools and our tools make us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995).

12) Sampling; Reappraisal
Though not itself an appraisal approach, sampling is an important tool for implementing certain appraisal decisions—there is an important difference, however, between true sampling and the selection of examples. Looked at one way reappraisal is simply the retrospective application of appraisal; but reassessing material that once passed archival muster has been so controversial that it has been called “the word never uttered aloud” in our profession.

Readings
Terry Cook, "Many are called but few are chosen': Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 25-50.
13) Records Management, Fieldwork, Ethics, and Appraisal as a Part of Processing and Preservation

No discussion of appraisal would really be complete without considering how archivists actually get their hands (literally or virtually) on the material they appraise—usually through records management (institutional archives) or through donor relations and fieldwork (collecting repositories). Donor relations, particularly, require attention to ethical issues. Finally, appraisal is not solely a front end activity; properly understood it has implications for (and can be used in conjunction with) other aspects of archives administration.

Readings
Megan Floyd Desnoyers, "When Is A Collection Processed?" Midwestern Archivist 7, no. 1 (1982): 5-23