

# Sussex Research

## Combining teaching and library work: the Hybrid Academic

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**Combining teaching and library work:  
the hybrid academic**

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## **I Introduction**

This paper focuses on some of the issues raised when professional library staff combine archive management with an active teaching role, drawing on my own experience as an archivist in the University of Sussex Library. There are of course many archivists who are also teachers on professional training courses for prospective archivists but my concern here is teaching in higher education in subject areas other than library, archive and information sciences while using archival resources.

There are several key developments which provide a context for my own experience:

### **1. The call for partnerships**

In terms of the relationships between academics and librarians in the past, there are some dispiriting discussions in the literature which describe some of the tensions which have been experienced historically (see Biggs 1981). More recent literature calls for positive initiatives to develop partnerships between librarians and academics and for the valuing of different but complementary forms of expertise in the creation and diffusion of knowledge (see Carpenter 1997). In the UK as elsewhere, the funding agencies encourage and reward initiatives which seek and exploit partnerships; these partnerships extend across sectors, across professions and across communities and countries.

### **2. Increased flexibility**

Calls for increased flexibility on the part of library and information professionals are now also made with greater frequency (Walton & Edwards 2001). We are required to adapt to new situations, new kinds of students, new curricula and new forms of delivery in teaching and learning including new technologies; in addition we are also compelled to address substantial changes in the needs and demands of students, teachers and researchers.

### **3. The blurring of categories between different kinds of academics**

This has been underlined in the UK by a number of policy statements from national bodies: a major government initiated enquiry, the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report 1997) predicted that distinctions between staff groups are destined to become increasingly irrelevant in the future. The Association of University Teachers, the professional body which includes in its membership academic librarians, published a policy document shortly

after the Dearing Report appeared called “Building the academic team” which also talked of the erosion of historic staff categories in higher education and of the distinction between academic and “support” staff. The Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) was recently established in the UK (see <http://www.ilt.ac.uk>). Its aims are to enhance the status of teaching in higher education, to improve the experience of teaching and to support innovation in teaching methods. Part of its remit is to accredit training courses for teachers in higher education. It encourages staff who are defined as “learning facilitators” (as opposed to the more traditionally defined university lecturers) to apply for membership under the scheme thereby providing recognition and professional support for teaching for those not in formal teaching roles. A few librarians have already applied under the ILT criteria as teachers and been accepted as members.

It is still clearly the demands of teaching “information literacy” that inspire some of the most dynamic partnerships now being established in academic institutions world-wide. For example, in an article about “instruction-librarians” and collaborations in the USA, Susan Deese-Roberts (2000) describes a series of effective partnership schemes in which librarians are central to the design, planning and delivery of courses. Oberg & Henri (2002) talk of the “teacher-librarian” and describe the proliferation of collaborative partnerships in Canada and Australia. In a survey of partnerships between library instruction units and campus teaching centres, Trudi Jacobson (2001) provides substantial evidence of a commitment to promoting excellence in teaching which is shared by information professionals and academics across the US.

By comparison with the attention to the sharing of teaching in information literacy, there is little attention paid to other kinds of teaching and scholarship. The editorial of the March 1998 issue of the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* suggests that a “knowledge of scholarly communication and an appreciation of the value of scholarship” is an important asset for the head of a library or information resource but does not extend this discussion to other members of the information profession. I was gratified to find, therefore, that Eckhart Franz (1995) ascribes the success of his own archive, the Hessian State Archive in Darmstadt, to the strong emphasis on outreach and partnerships with academics. In an article entitled “What makes an archive successful?” he reports on the cooperation between archive services and the history departments of universities.

A growing number of archivists are engaged as honorary professors or part-time lecturers to teach courses in auxiliary sciences and in regional history which will serve to familiarise students with archival sources. In many universities, group visits and/or introductory lectures in the State or City archives are a regular feature of the history curriculum. As a member of the faculty the archivist may and will play a significant role in the direction and evaluation of research projects, doctoral and masters theses in the field of regional history, in function of the available source material. Surveys of research in progress are published in archives newsletters (Franz 1995:74).

## **II Teaching at the University of Sussex**

Until the early eighties, my experience of teaching had been limited to contexts outside my main employment as an archivist in the University of Sussex Library. The first attempt to work with groups within the University grew out of "open days", a common feature of many archives' "outreach" policies when doors are opened to members of the general public, displays are laid out of archival material and short introductions to their holdings are given. In my archive, these sessions attracted a mixed audience of some students and academics but mostly interested members of the local community. In response to demand, these occasions developed into longer "study days" where the emphasis was less on people looking a displays of material and more on a structured programme including talks and discussions which used selected materials as prompts for developing ideas and debates.

Until 2000, my main responsibility was for a small social history archive known as the Mass-Observation Archive (M-O A) which had independent status as a charitable trust and has been entrusted to the care of the University of Sussex. The M-OA comprises the papers generated by a social research organisation which pioneered the use of anthropological methods to document the everyday lives of people living in Britain from the 1930s onwards. As a result the Archive constitutes a vast collection of information about the minutiae of everyday life including a unique set of personal diaries written by people from all parts of the country. The catalogue is available on-line (as are all the catalogues for our collections at Sussex). For further information, see our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs>.

Such an archive has obvious attractions for teaching, especially since the bulk of the material relates to the years of the Second World War. The fact that so much of it is about ordinary people makes it especially appealing to non-academic audiences and novice researchers. Over the years since the Archive has been open (it was established at the University as a public resource in the early 1970s), it has also appealed to a newer, post 1960s' generation of historians and other scholars interested to find alternative, non-élite, accounts of this period of British history, and it has also proved to be an extraordinarily valuable resource in the recent scholarly turn towards the biographic methods in social research. There has been a burgeoning of interest in the use of life stories, oral history, personal narrative, letters and diaries in the task of understanding the links between the way an individual navigates his or her life and the wider sweeps of political, cultural and economic history. It is in this area that my own academic interest and development has taken root and has come to provide the basis for my teaching and research (see the Centre for Life History Research at [www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/clhr](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/clhr)).

The combination of the specific qualities of the M-OA, then, plus my own developing interest and expertise in some of the issues raised by use of the collection gradually led to my involvement in teaching. The day schools became accredited evening courses, part of the University's provision for life long learning in the local area. Soon after these courses were established and in response to demand within the University itself, I became involved in the planning and delivery of fully-fledged undergraduate and postgraduate courses which were wholly or partly based on the M-OA. The Archive could not be the *only* resource for a course in history, but it could certainly provide the raw materials for generating debates about, for example, the role of women in war, the propaganda of war, the nature of the diary as historical evidence, ethical issues in research and the whole issue of methodologies in social science, in particular, qualitative analysis and interpretation. It also provided the basis for discussions about issues raised in the *re-analysis* of historical sociological data which is a new area of concern in particular for social scientists in the UK. The courses emerging from the Archive, some of which I taught in partnership with my academic colleagues in history and anthropology, ranged across the disciplines, and across levels. Whereas some of them still contained elements of the "guided tour" or basic introduction to the *content* of the Archive, most of them were operating within a substantive academic framework, combining the theoretical and analytical with the practical hands-on activities which teaching within the Archive made possible.

There were other drivers apart from my own enthusiasm: when I started teaching the Archive was underused and not well known. It was not in a secure position in the University and its survival depended, sometimes rather precariously, on the goodwill of the University Librarian who of course had wider responsibilities and other priorities. It was an advantage for me to be able to promote and advertise what we held through teaching; in return the income generated by the courses could be fed back into the Archive. The research and publishing which I was also able to undertake also achieved some of the same results: generating income and publicity as well as creating secondary source material for my own and others' teaching.

Since 2000, my responsibility in the University of Sussex Library has been extended to include all the archives and mss collections (see <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/speccoll>) several of these are literary rather than social historical, and it is now part of my remit to explore ways, in collaboration with colleagues in the Library who are responsible for liaison with teaching faculty, that the courses in my home institution can be enriched by their access to and use of the full range of our archival holdings. Indeed I would argue that it is the obligation of the university archivist to contribute to learning and teaching by participating in the development and delivery of such courses.

### **III The drawbacks and benefits of teaching**

There are reasons to be cautious about advocating the close involvement of library staff in teaching:

#### **1. Greater wear and tear on precious materials:**

Increasing use by less experienced scholars (eg students, members of the public new to archives) will subject the materials to a degree of physical damage. This can be mitigated by the archivist herself being present to supervise and guide use and advise on appropriate handling. This can also be alleviated by the copying of some documents or the development of imaginative projects to create virtual archives and teaching resources without damaging the originals and in order to accommodate larger numbers of users.

**2. A slightly increased security risk during group sessions:**

As above, the archivist's presence can protect against this to a large extent. She can integrate a respect for the collection and for the need to preserve material for future users into her teaching. As before, paper or digital copies could be used to complement use of the original materials.

**3. Draining resources from the "core" service:**

The drawing away of the archivist from core archival work (eg cataloguing, conservation, funding applications, managing the search room) through her teaching and research may create management problems for the service as a whole and set up resentment from other colleagues who have to carry the responsibility for perhaps less prestigious and less public tasks. Special collections departments in UK university libraries tend to be quite small units with modest budgets. Any drain on staff time may result in difficulties in providing other core services and could be seen as detrimental to the service as a whole.

**4. Strain on the teacher/archivist/librarian:**

The working patterns for the archivist or librarian in UK university libraries are less conducive to research and teaching than those of our academic colleagues. Most of us are required to be present in our place of work everyday during "regular" working hours. There is less scope for "working at home" or at least away from the routine demands of a busy service which would allow the quiet study and reflection that is necessary for scholarly work. We do not normally enjoy the long academic vacations which permit teaching faculty to refresh their subject knowledge, plan for the term ahead, develop their courses and, importantly, use the library and archive services. In theory, the employment contracts of library staff in my institution and in other UK higher education institutions are "academic related" and allow for flexibility. We are entitled to research leave and neither our working hours nor our annual leave entitlements are fixed. It would therefore be possible to allocate time for research and teaching preparation. In practice, however, in my own library I am the only member of library staff to have taken advantage of this facility in recent years. This reluctance by archivists and librarians to take advantage of research leave even when they have the entitlement is confirmed by the experience in other libraries including in North America (see Carpenter 1997).

The arguments against combining teaching with archive or library work need to be taken seriously but the case *for* teaching, in my view is much more compelling. Teaching by library/archive staff can result in....

**1. Supporting fuller and more creative use of the collections:**

The teaching context offers the opportunity for the archivist not only to bring both lesser known collections to people's attention but also to suggest new approaches and new uses which might otherwise not have been considered. The archivist is well-placed to see the variety of approaches taken by other users and to relay this information to new users. She is also in a position to know what collections are under-used and to recommend their exploitation. So often users come to archives with one very narrow and specific research question. Normally, the archivist is obliged to satisfy that need as defined by the researcher. In a teaching situation, there is a greater openness to thinking more laterally about the potential of collections while research plans are still unformed. In my experience even when there are very full handlists available on the website, talking about collections or parts of collections with enthusiasm can trigger research ideas which result in those collections being used. In this sense the teaching context both promotes the collections and develops the skills and knowledge of the user.

**2. Bringing the collections to the attention of a wider public, including a wider academic public and thereby increasing access:**

Classes of students or groups of visitors to special collections will almost certainly include individuals who would not otherwise venture into an academic library, let alone an archive and who might feel intimidated or alienated by what is often perceived as an élite and rather exclusive preserve. The teaching context can become a vehicle for improving the confidence of potential users, and by convincing those users that there may be something of interest for them. Again this promotes use of the collections; it also significantly promotes the whole institution. The treasures of a special collections department can serve as a showcase for a university and provide points of access for very young students and for the less traditional university applicant. In the UK, the drive to widen participation in higher education, together with the pressure for universities to be more accountable and accessible to the local community, is paramount. In addition, UK universities need to marshal all their resources towards attracting and retaining students. The establishment of structured courses and the availability of study days in the archive using the archivist as a teacher supports this role.

**3. Gaining insights into the student perspective:**

Getting involved in the design and subsequent delivery of courses has a number of advantages for the archivist as a professional. Contact with students in a more prolonged and pastoral role provides the opportunity to engage with issues in learning and teaching first-hand and to understand in a more comprehensive fashion some of the problems students encounter as well as some of the rewards. Information professionals spend increasing amounts of time improving the *quantity* of information which can be made available to a student, and ensuring that this can be delivered speedily and simply. Less time is devoted to evaluating the *quality* of the information and the ways in which students handle what they find. The advantage of gaining access to the student perspective is described at some length in relation to similar initiatives in the USA by Kimberley Donnelly in her article “Reflections on what happens when librarians become teachers” (Donnelly 2000). Access to the student perspective can inform not only the way the archival service is managed but also to the way the wider university library is managed. At an interpersonal level it breaks down the “us” and “them” attitude, and at a professional level it confronts the archivist with genuine pedagogic challenges.

**4. Enriching the quality of the archival service:**

In addition to gaining access to the student perspective, teaching also offers an opportunity to think about and refine the services we offer to all our users. An understanding of how the service operates from the user point of view can inform the policies and practices of the resource itself. Apart from facilitating a general appreciation of users' needs for routine support in their use of the collections, it can also provide essential information to feed into more substantial decisions about, for example, conservation priorities, web design, image capture and digitisation initiatives.

**5. Opportunity to engage in the activities within the wider institution and to be involved in shaping policies and practices of that institution:**

The increased visibility of the archivist/teacher within her institution which is made possible by teaching and teaching partnerships provides the impetus for being invited to participate in activities beyond the library and provides a context to meet and discuss issues with senior members of the institution, both administrators and academics. In my case, after receiving one of the annual awards from my home institution for "excellence in teaching" in 1997, I was invited to be part of the ongoing teaching awards panel and this provides me with a basis for making a contribution to teaching and learning policies and practices in the University. For example, there is a continuing debate on whether skills courses should be separate from or integral to "content-based" courses in social sciences and the humanities and as a tutor who specialises in teaching research skills (and believes they should be taught within a broader context and not marginalized), I can contribute more knowledgeably to that debate.

**6. Earning much needed income:**

Arrangements in different universities may vary; in my own case, the contribution I make to teaching which includes contact hours as well as examining and assessment are reimbursed financially, not to me personally but to my unit. As a result, some of the attrition caused by my teaching commitments can be ameliorated. The income earned can be used to support the costs of employing more junior staff to compensate the unit for the temporary redeployment of the archivist.

## 7. Developing creative and mutually beneficial partnerships with teaching colleagues:

Relationships with academic (ie teaching and research) colleagues can be improved and enriched by working together on the development and the delivery of courses. The impact goes beyond the classroom to influence all liaison with teaching faculty and has the potential to work both ways. It provides a tutor's perspective on the one hand, and this can be helpful in discussions with one's fellow archival or librarian colleagues when planning and implementing services. It also improves professional relationships, raising the status of the archive professional and giving credibility to her point of view.

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