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Archiving critically: exploring the communication of cultural biases

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Abstract

In public perception, and professional practice, archives are often perceived as neutral spaces which hold the 'truth' about a society or happening. However, the practices of archival work not only allow, but can actively encourage, an archivist or institution to reflect upon personal and cultural attitudes and experiences. This permits the conveyance of cultural biases, which can further occur through the use of the archive in pedagogical practice. This article seeks to consider the bias of the archive, and to present pedagogy as a solution rather than a symptom.

Keywords

archives; learning; decanonisation; archival bias; pedagogy; collections

Introduction

When the collection and preservation of textual and/or material objects is institutionalised, it is typically referred to as an archive, museum or library. Broadly, these institutions signify what a society has deemed 'worthy' of preserving, with an emphasis on the objects as providing substantiation of a person, place or event. Within this cultural understanding is also an expectation that these institutions support pedagogical practice. Increasingly, the primary focus of the work of archivists, curators and librarians is seen as one that will support teaching and learning. This is especially pronounced in an education environment, such as with the archive collections held across the six colleges of the University of the Arts London (UAL). Also significant to UAL's collections, is the position of the archive within contemporary cultural discourse. Amongst the most significant recent developments in the arts, particularly literary and visual, has been what is described as a 'turn' to the archive.

The archive has become central in visual culture's investigations of history, memory and identity, as 'concepts of the archive have been defined, examined, contested and reinvented by artists and cultural observers' (Merewether, 2006, p.10). When utilised within arts pedagogy together with theoretical teaching, there is potential for archival objects to become reinterpreted through artistic practice. The use of archival and historical material in teaching and learning should be considered alongside a critical approach to the archive. This would challenge the limited extent to which current archival practice represents a diverse range of social groups and world views.

A key consideration is cultural bias, meaning the way in which phenomena are interpreted and judged according to standards inherent to an individual's own culture. Whilst the archive has historically been understood as an impartial place which represents 'truth', the emerging critical methodologies discussed in this article seek to acknowledge and address the biases inherent in archival practice. This is a way of challenging cultural understanding of whether objects are 'worth' preserving, as well as how this preservation is performed. When considered alongside pedagogical practice these decisions become especially significant, as biases may be unconsciously communicated when the archive is used for knowledge exchange and learning.

The archive and bias

A common feature of most archival collections is that they are preserving items which record human experience, thoughts and activity. Inherent in this process is the emergence of cultural biases, meaning that inequalities which exist in human societies are reflected in the holdings of the institution that keeps them. This is far reaching and unfortunately predictable. Experiences that are un- or under documented in archival holdings often relate to: gender identity; socio-economic class; Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds; disability; neurodiversity; sexual orientation; religion, belief and faith. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather represents something of the current cultural consensus on groups which are under-represented in traditional archival holdings, and therefore comes in itself from a place of potential bias. This understanding should therefore continue to be challenged and developed, especially by archivists who are recording, preserving and communicating information, as well as those using this information in teaching. In the same way that scholastic institutions teach critical thinking skills to students, in order to develop their work and learning, these same skills would enable those delivering and facilitating teaching to identify points of bias and presumption in their respective practices. Using examples from the above list, we can begin to consider the archive's non-representational holdings by exploring these already-identified biases, thus facilitating a discussion which is crucial to the wider development of cultural awareness. Using these examples of bias, a critical look at archival practice brings us to two key areas, which I will briefly introduce; absence and interpretation.

'Absence' describes the gaps that exist in archival holdings, for example when records of certain groups are excluded. An illustration of this is in gender identity, with male-centric records being one of the most inherent inequalities of representation generated by the bias of the archive. As Schwartz and Cook observe, 'since their very origins in the ancient world, [archives] have systemically excluded records about or by women from their holdings' (2002, p.16). The patriarchal structures that exist in society have resulted in the absence of women from archives. If they are present, women are often recorded only by their relation to 'important men' (Webster, 2001), absencing their true identity and narrative. This absence applies to an even greater extent with the records of those who identify as transgender or gender non-binary.

As well as acknowledging these societal inequalities, it is possible to look at how they inform the structure of archival practice. In 2016, The National Archives (UK) recorded that London repositories accessioned new records at a ratio of 5:1 in favour of records relating to men over women (TNA, 2017, pp.23-24). Accessions relating to other gender identities were not quantified in this report. These structural biases may be understood by studying the establishment of today's archival practices and principles, which began with the so-called 'professional historian' of the nineteenth century. This emerging canon of exclusively white, male professionals saw value primarily in recording the activities of male-dominated sectors, leaving behind a legacy of non-inclusive collecting policies and gender-biased material (Smith, 2000). Even today, the archives sector recruits low numbers of professionals who identify as coming from marginalised groups. In 2015 the Archives and Records Association recorded just 1% of their members as coming from a BAME background (ARA, 2015, p.2). In working almost exclusively with the views and values of one group, 'certain views and ideas about society will in turn be privileged and others marginalised' (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p.14). Recognising these absences forces us to acknowledge that, currently, archival holdings almost never provide a representative account of the subject they are recording, due to the many groups whose stories have been excluded.

This interpretation of material as encompassing subjective and cultural presumption, can be considered in relation to two of the core principles of archival practice, appraisal and cataloguing. Appraisal requires the archivist to determine whether a record has value to their institution and if it should be accepted into a collection. This is one of the first activities in which an archivist needs to be aware of their own bias. Their interpretation of the meaning and value of a record will shape the

narrative that is being preserved, even when working within institutional policy, as this in itself reflects the structural biases of the institution. The 'act of appraising a record as archival does something to that record that no other act can do, and this certainly relates both to the power within records and the transferal of some of that power to the records professionals' (Cox, 2004, p.35). Decisions here will affect the holdings of those institutions, which ultimately make up the record of society as a whole; assuming knowledge to be objective and neutral will only conceal unjust social relations (Hardiman, 2014).

In cataloguing, the structure and relationships between materials is considered; it is this which creates the narrative and navigability of the collection. Jennifer Meehan argues that archivists 'can no longer think of arrangement as merely a process of identifying the meaningful relationships between and among records [...] the process is really one of creating the relationships' (2010, p.37). In this way, the structure of archiving also determines the structure of the content. This process can be seen to produce as much as it records (Derrida, 1995). As the archivist brings their own experiences into this process, the supposed passivity of this practice is undermined. It can be seen that every time an archivist makes a decision they are carrying out a philosophical act, which arises from a cultural context and has cultural implications (Pearce, 1992).

The archive and pedagogy

According to the cultural presuppositions and structures explored thus far in this article, 'truth' and 'history' can be seen as constructs created by the archivist. Through the 'selection of items from the written, visual and material objects that circulate in our society [...] collecting institutions award a social value to specific objects and thus prescribe historical consciousness' (Darian-Smith and Hamilton, 1994, p.4). Archival material should therefore be carefully navigated when used in pedagogical practice, where it is often utilised specifically because of the canon with which that archive is associated and which, in some cases, it has created.

Archives and museums often facilitate teaching through object-based activities, which encourage learning through physical encounter with an artefact. When engaging in object-based learning it is important to consider the way in which the item came to be used in that environment and who made these decisions on its use. The archive determines not only what material is available for teaching and learning, but also the way in which those resources are presented and understood. If the 'methods of transmitting information shape the nature of the knowledge that can be produced' (Manoff, 2004, p.16) we might ask – is the archive perpetuating bias through teaching?

However, rejecting the use of archival material in pedagogical practice is not necessarily the answer, particularly when we consider that cultural institutions increasingly face pressure to provide and measure learning (Hooper-Greenhill, 2004). The use of object-based learning, which combines skills-based teaching with a student-centred experience, is overwhelmingly seen as a positive development in professional theory of archival practice. Pedagogical practice could therefore be seen as a method through which archives and collections can confront issues surrounding social inclusion. For example, object reading groups and research workshops can be used to facilitate critical discussion. Teaching with archival materials creates a space to critique collections and the attitudes of the archive, enabling inclusive approaches to pedagogical and artistic practices, as well as provoking discussion of the archival process.

Conclusion

This article has discussed turning the critical thinking skills taught to students as part of their education upon the institutions and materials performing this teaching, involving both students and teachers in this action. This creates a symbiotic relationship, with the concepts and materials that are used in teaching themselves being challenged through pedagogic practice. In the same way that the

archive can inform and enrich teaching practices, so too can teaching and learning inform archival practice.

In developing archival pedagogies that facilitate critical learning, as well as a critique of the archive itself, it is important to acknowledge that there are notions this approach would seek to redefine. As shifting societal constructs, concepts of 'truth' and 'history' are subject to complex cultural biases. Any process seeking to widen and diversify holdings should be aware of this, and open in this discourse. In this way, encouraging analytical engagement with archive material can be conducted in a way that supports efforts to address inequalities.

The exploration of how biases are reflected in and by the archive, discussed in this article through ideas of absence and interpretation, is a key part of the conversations which seek to redress canonisation. This allows us to question existing principles of archival practice, such as appraisal and cataloguing, as well as enabling pedagogic practice to develop critical understandings of source material. At a time when many academic institutions are working toward diversifying their curriculum, collaborating with archives to discover new ways to teach and interpret material is crucial, building upon current movements to critique how histories are taught and represented.

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Biography

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