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An Exploration of K-12 User Needs for Digital Primary Source Materials

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Digital primary source materials are a relatively untapped wealth of knowledge that could provide tremendous educational potential for K-12 teachers and students. In her paper, *An Exploration of K-12 User Needs for Digital Primary Source Materials*, Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland examines various aspects of K-12 user needs including current pedagogy and curriculum that could incorporate primary source materials as well as the knowledge base currently employed by archival repositories to effectively reach all users, but in particular, K-12 teachers and students. In addition, Gilliland-Swetland discusses current research that explores what primary source information is needed, how better to access the information, and finally, how to utilize this information for productive curricular interaction. The use of Encoded Archival Description, with the ability to provide descriptive infrastructure through the use of a multimedia archival information system (137), appears to be a powerful tool that Gilliland-Swetland asserts has the potential to link primary sources of information found in archives with school children everywhere.

This three-part article enables the reader to dissect a multifaceted endeavor whose success depends on clear communication, education, and money. Part I of this article: *The Changing World of K-12—Curricular Innovation* answers the question that ultimately

drives the purpose and research of this article, which is: Why are primary source materials important for K-12 teachers and students? Gilliland-Swetland states that:

Addressing the educational needs of K-12 communities represents an unparalleled opportunity for archivists to a) expand the relevance of archival repositories within society; b) begin to grow a “records literate” as well as “information literate” audience that is aware of the importance, relevance, and complexities of records as bureaucratic, social, political, and cultural evidence; c) promote the role of archivists as active participants in the communication of cultural heritage; d) take advantage of the technological and financial resources that are being allocated nationally for the application of information technology in the classroom and for educational reform; and even e) promote archival education as a possible college choice. (137)

The need and benefit to both the K-12 user and the archival community is not simply apparent, but quite obvious. Unfortunately, as with many great educational opportunities presented to K-12 education committees, there is a lack of understanding on the part of “non-educators” as to what is possible when charged with 20-plus students. As Gilliland-Swetland so appropriately points out, “...schools are struggling with the realities of insufficient availability of equipment; inequity of access, even between students in individual classes; and teachers who are lacking in technological skills” (138). Another issue not mentioned in this article that currently affects all public school teachers is the “No Child Left Behind Act”. While the premise of this act has positive intentions, it leaves many in the public schools stifled, with no opportunity to be creative with their teaching. Many are left teaching to the tests required for funding, rather than embarking on innovative ideas such as digital primary source materials. Fortunately, educational reform is not at a standstill. The Knowledge Express Project, an example discussed in this article, implements innovative ideas that emphasize not only the subject matter but the learning process as well. The project appeared to open doors and allow for students to take on new challenges. Another project called “We Connect” has students collaborating, directing their

learning, and utilizing network technology to communicate with others, guide research, and incorporate pictures, text, graphics, and music (140). Many states, including Hawaii, are following this same path and using educational standards to justify the incorporation of students' active participation in the learning process using technology as a research tool (140).

While understanding that K-12 educational initiatives are important, it is also only one of the ingredients required to meet educational needs for digital primary source materials. Part II: *The Archival Knowledge Base* outlines a profession that is struggling with how best to circulate archival information, while at the same time maintaining provenance and integrity. After reading this article, it appears as though digitizing is a certainty, but several questions surround this inevitability such as: What digital format should be used that would satisfy user needs? How do users become more "records literate" so as to understand what they are accessing? and, Are archivists ready for mass digital use? The Encoded Archival Description (EAD) is being developed for use as a standardized data structure, through the World Wide Web (WWW), that will hopefully be a long-term answer to the aforementioned questions. This improved finding aid is purposeful in helping to guide the user in a consistent and comprehensive way to specific areas of interest (155). While the WWW has the ability to reach diverse new audiences (142), it leaves archivists questioning "how to ensure that the evidential value of materials is not diminished because those materials have been taken out of context, have been transformed into new data or metadata structures, or have been delivered without any validation mechanisms" (142-143). It is logical that archive literature will follow in the steps of library and information science

literature (142) and information will be made available to a wide range of users, but issues concerning preservation and accurate interpretation must be addressed first.

Another important issue that is generally overlooked until after a great deal of money has been spent is whether EAD, as an infrastructure for on-line access environments (155) will be appealing to K-12 students? The question is relevant considering the lack of enthusiasm and understanding towards online databases that is felt by both educators and students.

Studies, if there have been any, as to the use of archival information by K-12 teachers and/or students, have not been documented (145). It is therefore exciting to read Gilliland-Swetland's report on the current research being conducted at UCLA. This report encompasses Part III of her article: *Exploring K-12 Needs for Primary Sources and Archival Systems Design*. The research is focused on "building archival knowledge of the potential value and use of archival materials by one specific user community, K-12 teachers and students, and factoring this into the design of prototype digital access systems for archival materials" (147). Surveys of historical repositories digital access and reviews of current educational literature established what was available and how it could be implemented or improved. In addition, teachers experienced in using digital primary source materials were interviewed and then cross-referenced with materials selected by archivists' to be digitized (147). The results of the five part exploratory study appeared to be successful in that it provided a base line upon which future research can be conducted. It has also brought together two separate groups that collectively are able to provide an exceptional educational service to young people. One such service that might be of interest for students would be the relationship of primary sources to their local community (153). It is noted however that throughout this entire research process there was no mention made of

interviewing or surveying the K-12 students which is an unfortunate, and all too common, mistake among researchers who are not familiar or comfortable communicating with this age group. This, it would seem, could potentially have the greatest impact on what or what not to do and could possibly eliminate costly educational initiatives that are unnecessary.

In conclusion, the article established thoughtful recommendations that addressed the needs of a specific group of users. The author, Anne J. Gilliland-Swetland, professor and chair at UCLA Department of Information Studies (Anne J. Gilliland, <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/swetland/> , August 1, 2005), made these recommendations as a possible strategy to increase the instance and effectiveness of K-12 teacher's and student's interactions with digital primary source materials (156). She wrote this article as a result of her participation in the Research Fellowship Programs for the Study of Modern Archives, and while her recommendations would springboard the use of digital primary sources to the forefront of curricular K-12 educational programs, its realistic outcome is questionable-questionable in that time constraints on today's teachers is overwhelming. Small group studies to further develop a finished program that can, in turn, be presented to educators and implemented in classrooms might encourage the use of digital primary source materials and spark a wider level of enthusiasm.