

Beyond the Textbook: The Tension between Theory and Practice in Archival Work in  
*Understanding Archives & Manuscripts* and “Finding Balance between Archival Principles and  
Real-Life Practices in an Institutional Repository”

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In *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts*, James O' Toole and Richard J. Cox introduce readers to the archives profession through a combination of theory and practical application. After providing historical background, they turn to educating readers on the key archival responsibilities: planning, gathering records, organizing, preservation, and making the archives accessible. In "Finding Balance between Archival Principles and Real-Life Practices in an Institutional Repository," Erin O'Meara and Meg Tuomala extract the theories that O'Toole and Cox introduce and apply them to the creation of a digital repository at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. O'Meara and Tuomala's article reiterates one of the central themes in the introductory O'Toole and Cox text: the tension between theory and practice as societal needs evolve.

To grasp this underlying tension, one should first be educated about the basic theories of archival studies. Archivists need to have an understanding "of the organizations and individuals that produce records; of the nature of the records themselves; and of the possible uses of records..." as well as "knowledge of the principles best suited to organizing and managing those records."<sup>1</sup> Being familiar with these principles will be essential for success in their work. O'Meara and Tuomala share how the practical application can stray from theory by limitations such as organizational structure, staff changes, differing views of staff members, and a limited budget.<sup>2</sup> O'Toole and Cox acknowledge these realistic challenges and recommend rectifying the potential issue through planning.

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1. Richard J. Cox and James M. O'Toole, *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), 100.

2. Erin O'Meara and Meg Tuomala, "Finding Balance between Archival Principles and Real-Life Practices in an Institutional Repository," *Archivaria* 73 (Spring 2012): 92, <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13385>.

Although O’Meara and Tuomala focus their article around one collection—the digital repository at UNC—this example symbolizes the tension in the entire archives profession. The article cites a new concern raised in the 1990’s with the increase in technology: “the nature of electronic records requires archivists to adapt new ideas over changing traditional archives.”<sup>3</sup> However, O’Meara and Tuomala use other sources to dispute this statement. They argue that while they may have to adapt to a changing society, traditional archival theories still apply. The central focus of the digital repository at UNC was to keep records preserved for the future, accessible to students, unalterable, and an illustration of the university’s academic mission “as a trusted steward of information.”<sup>4</sup> While the digital repository differentiates from traditional archival settings because many of the records originate in digital form, the goals here mirror those that O’Toole and Cox identify for all archives.

O’Toole and Cox also respond to this prediction of irrelevance for early archival theory by stating, “We had these same predictions two and three decades ago, and archives and archivists are still here.”<sup>5</sup> The basic principles still exist—preservation, accessibility, and organization, for example—as we see in the digital repository at UNC. However, O’Toole and Cox realize that without adaptation, archivists will face becoming obsolete. To continue the archives profession, archivists may acclimatize their interpretation according to technological advances, revising their practice as needed.

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3. O’Meara and Tuomala. “Finding Balance,” 86.

4. O’Meara and Tuomala. “Finding Balance,” 96.

5. Cox and O’Toole, *Understanding Archives*, 81.

One such change is the movement from centralizing the archives around the records themselves to the users who will access these records. Originally, the profession emerged with preservation as a central focus, but this has shifted towards accessibility with the changing demands of society.<sup>6</sup> O'Toole and Cox contend that users can easily bypass the archives if they are difficult to access and use because the internet is such a convenient tool. To solve this dilemma, archivists must work both with several other disciplines, use common terms and arrangement methods, and to keep the nontraditional user in mind. In the digital repository at UNC, O'Meara and Tuomala state that the archival theories were directly applied to the arrangement of records. By having universal methods of arrangement and common vocabularies, archivists can attain a "collaborative environment" for users, archivists, and other employees.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, practice may never fully adhere to the theories laid out in textbooks, although it can closely follow them. O'Toole and Cox recommend learning from "a variety of disciplines for insights into records and recordkeeping systems" to solve this.<sup>8</sup> Diverse perspectives will give archivists insight into the needs of users. O'Meara and Tuomala encountered this struggle and recommended that future archivists aim for compromise and refrain from "perfection or unattainable goals."<sup>9</sup> As technology changes the role of archivists, O'Toole and Cox, as well as O'Meara and Tuomala, remind archivists to balance the two by compromising, having a willingness to adapt, being proactive, and keeping the significant archival theories in mind.

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6. Cox and O'Toole, *Understanding Archives*, 61.

7. O'Meara and Tuomala. "Finding Balance," 93.

8. Cox and O'Toole, *Understanding Archives*, 81.

9. O'Meara and Tuomala. "Finding Balance," 102.

## Bibliography

Cox, Richard J., and James M. O'Toole. *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006.

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