Perspective

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Appraisal: The Process of Choice

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Abstract: In 1987 the manuscripts and archives staff of the New York Public Library participated in the field testing of the "Black Box" appraisal model developed by Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young. Based on this experience, the author evaluates the Boles and Young model in light of its taxonomic function, its usefulness for staff training, and its contribution for furthering the development of appraisal theory. The discussion is extended to consider other recent developments such as cooperative appraisal projects and documentation strategies. The article concludes by emphasizing the value to archivists of documenting and sharing their appraisal decisions.

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ONE PREMISE AMONG ARCHIVISTS that goes largely unexamined (even unstated) is the assumption that the profession shares a universal theory of appraisal. I am not arguing here against the need for theory, but rather against the concept that the archival profession currently has a single appraisal theory to guide archivists in making acquisition and disposition decisions.

Those who would argue that a universal appraisal theory exists must demonstrate a theory useful to the full range of the archival profession. This theory must apply to the National Archives, which operates in the context of a federal government that disposed of 120 million cubic feet of records between 1950 and 1985,[1] and at the same time meet the needs of small manuscript repositories which often retain fragments of history because of their potential significance within a narrow documentation area. Such a theory should also apply to paper, electronic, and other non-textual formats. Is a broadly applicable theory possible? Perhaps, but I doubt that we can agree on any such universal theory at this stage. It is far more important, given the state of our knowledge today, to agree on a universal appraisal *process*. If we can reach consensus on the questions to be asked of a collection or record series, and if we can agree on the process followed to arrive at our decisions, then we can begin to build on shared experiences. A universal theory cannot emerge until the archival profession engages in more speculative work, until we conduct more experiments to explore appraisal methodology, or until archivists routinely share information about selection decisions throughout the varied world of archival repositories. Thus, a focus on the process of making appraisal decisions is a precursor for the development of a broadly applicable appraisal theory for the profession.

The last five years have seen some very promising developments relating to issues of appraisal within the archival profession. A major breakthrough occurred with the so-called "Black Box" devised by Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young. In addition, archivists have begun to push forward with cooperative appraisal efforts on several fronts. The 1987-88 experience of the New York Public Library's manuscripts and archives staff in testing Boles and Young's approach provides the basis for the following perspective on the nature of the appraisal process.

Applying The Black Box

Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young proposed a new analysis of appraisal in their 1985 article, "Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records."[2] Based on their experience appraising University of Michigan records, Boles and Young proposed three modules to assist in evaluating records and making the appraisal decision. The three modules they developed were value-of-information, costs-of-retention, and implications-of-the-appraisal-recommendation. Within each of these modules, Boles and Young delineated various components essential for an appraisal decision. For example, the costs-of-retention module had components for assessing the costs associated with the storage, processing, conservation, and reference use of the records being appraised.

Boles and Young subsequently received a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to field

[1]James Gregory Bradsher, "An Administrative History of the Disposal of Federal Records, 1950-1985," *Provenance* 4 (Fall 1986):49.

[2]Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, "Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records," *American Archivist* 48 (Spring 1985): 121-40. Their approach will be developed more fully in Boles and Young, *Ultimate Choices: Selecting Material for Archives and Libraries* (New York: Neal-Schumann, forthcoming).

test their model in a variety of archival settings. They developed thirty-eight appraisal questions and a methodology for rating the answers on a numerical scale. To account for different repository policies and situations, they also developed a system for weighing individual questions depending upon the relevance in a particular archival setting.

Boles and Young selected a group of varied repositories to participate in the NHPRC project field test. Each repository agreed to make a series of appraisal decisions using the questions and numerical scales. The numerical results were sent to Boles and Young for analysis of the effectiveness of the questions and for a study of the various weights the repositories gave to the questions.

One of the test sites selected was the New York Public Library (N.Y.P.L.), which contains a total of about 22,000 linear feet of manuscripts and 1,500 feet of the library's institutional archives. The manuscript collections include a broad range of organizational records and personal papers—both large and small—with a primary emphasis on political, social, literary, and economic history from the colonial period to the present. Among the special strengths are the American Revolution, writers and publishers, social reform organizations, and the papers of individuals in New York City and organizations headquartered in New York. The N.Y.P.L. Archives cares for the official records of the library and its predecessor organizations, such as the Astor and Lenox Libraries, the Tilden Trust, and the free circulating libraries of New York City. The N.Y.P.L. situation is probably typical of the majority of archives in that it does not have a separate appraisal unit—most of the fourteen staff members appraise records to one degree or another. Any staff member working on a collection may make appraisal recommendations that are then reviewed by the appropriate supervisor.

The experiment at the library commenced in the fall of 1987 after a training session conducted by Boles and Young. The first requirement was to determine how much weight on a numerical scale to assign each of the thirty-eight appraisal questions. Three of the supervising staff (the curator of manuscripts; the head of our NEH-funded accessioning project; and the archivist/records manager) thrashed out the issues of weights. High weights were assigned to issues such as continuing legal value and scarcity. However, the availability of a well-equipped conservation division within the library made preservation costs a minor consideration, and this issue was therefore assigned a low weight.

Once the weights were set, the supervisory staff trained six more staff members in applying the modules and making specific calculations. Each staff member then chose a collection, filled out a worksheet, and completed the numerical calculations required for the experiment. In this way staff applied the module questions to a range of the library's holdings, including the records of the Lenox Library and the National Council of Women, the papers of Truman Capote, as well as to one potential acquisition. The worksheets and scores were then turned over to Boles and Young.

In evaluating the experiment, it can be safely stated that most of the staff hated the experience. They disliked assigning numbers to manuscript collections, and they questioned the relevance of the final "score" that resulted from the calculations. In part this response originated from a feeling that the numbers were imposed upon them from above, but it also reflected the basic humanistic orientation of the staff. The requirements of the experiment ran counter to what had attracted them (and many others in the archival profession) to working with manuscripts in the first place. Furthermore, it is indicative of a common archival assumption (too often unexamined) that so much of what archivists do is in-

tuitive and good common sense. Proponents of this viewpoint argue strongly that archival work cannot be quantified and, in perhaps even stronger terms, that it should not be quantified. At times in the past this attitude may have given strength to our work. But it also imposes many limitations, holds us back from conducting important research that needs to be done, and has been used to justify idiosyncratic practices. One accomplishment of Boles and Young has been to prod archivists to examine their judgments in an objective way.

In retrospect, supervisory staff should have taken the time necessary to involve the staff in debating the weights assigned to the thirty-eight questions. This would have served as an excellent training opportunity within the unit. The unit would have benefitted by a thorough discussion, among ourselves and separate from the needs of the experiment, of the factors that contribute to making an appraisal decision.

A discussion of factors such as use, costs, and political implications would have highlighted areas of high consensus in making appraisal decisions and, more importantly, would have highlighted those areas of high deviation within the unit. Even if this had been the only result of participating in the Boles and Young experiment, it could have proven very valuable in terms of staff training. The Black Box experiment offered a ready-made training tool that was overlooked.

In any case, Boles and Young clearly have moved the archival profession forward by proposing a system for assessing appraisal decisions. Their work has been unusually constructive in four ways.

First, the Black Box serves a valuable taxonomic function by designating, in a logical way, most of the elements that should comprise an appraisal decision. Even if we quibble about the meaning of some questions in the modules or develop additional questions to be considered, this in itself is a valuable contribution.

Second, the questions that comprise the modules force us to consider very fundamental archival issues such as the importance of "timespan" or "uniqueness" in records. More importantly, Boles and Young raise again the issue of applying cost considerations to appraisal decisions.[3] Even if archivists increasingly agree that cost is an appropriate consideration, there may be differences in the application of the concept. For instance, one Black Box question assigns a negative value to records which are frequently used and therefore have high reference costs. Since high use certainly should not be considered negative in a modern archives, this may not be an accurate way to measure value. Despite certain criticisms of the Black Box model we should acknowledge its role in getting us to examine such basic archival questions.

Third, as hinted at previously, Boles and Young have given us a valuable training tool—one that can calibrate staff decisions and thus make our appraisal conclusions more consistent within a repository. I regret our failure to fully utilize it three years ago, but I have since included it in some staff training. Through their modules, Boles and Young provide a structure that facilitates teaching of appraisal. This aspect of the Black Box in particular deserves emphasis because of its importance to further studies and future cooperative efforts.

Fourth, the Boles and Young concept also supports the view of appraisal as a progressive process. Assigning questions to modules pertaining to content, costs, and policy helps place these modules in relation to each other; it aids our ability to view them as coming into play at different times during our custody of the records. The Boles and Young process, in effect, progresses

[3]For an early statement on the role of costs in making appraisal decisions see G. Philip Bauer, *The Appraisal of Current and Recent Records, Staff Information Paper #13* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1946), especially pages 3-5.

from the most common archival questions (those concerning research value or content) to costs and then to policy implications. But these questions also have more or less importance at different stages of the appraisal process. At what stage should archivists assess costs-of-retention? Do costs loom larger during acquisitions than during re-appraisal? Assessing the value-of-information certainly gets more detailed as we move from the record group to the series or sub-series level. However, do the policy implications of a decision change over time? These are issues which require much more thought and study.

One necessary step toward a universal theory is the clear articulation of the fact that appraisal is not a single action to be applied to a group of records at a single point of time.[4] The appraisal process is progressive. It takes place throughout our custody of records, and we ask different questions at different times in the process. We now accept that archival description involves progressive levels of work—brief during accessioning, more detailed later with an inventory, and even more detailed still later to improve access to a heavily used series. In description we go back and do more work on the richest series, but, in a reversal of this approach, a progressive appraisal process implies that we go back to re-appraise the least rich and the least used series.

As we move to broaden the appraisal process, we need first to make certain that our decisions are consistent within the repository. Staff decisions must be calibrated internally. Only then can we begin to share information with subject specialists in other institutions—such as those working with environmental records, case files, or state government records, to cite a few examples. This is a necessary precursor to cooperation on a national level. The Black Box model raises important issues and helps us begin to resolve them.

Other Projects

We are at an interesting time, a time of flux, in terms of appraisal issues. The Black Box experiment has proven useful. Other developments are challenging the view of appraisal as merely a repository-based activity. We are beginning to see the larger context: appraisal is a process that can be shared, and it is one that should involve both record creators and users. Two current appraisal-related developments offer much promise to our profession.

The first is the path-breaking work of the Seven States Project.[5] This group of seven state archives cooperated in sharing appraisal information on series of similar records. Their premise was that many state government records have similar functions even if series titles differ, as often happens, or even if they were created in a variety of government agencies. By sharing information about the appraisal decision—or process—among states, archivists can hope to (1) improve appraisal decisions, and (2) reach such decisions more rapidly by avoiding reinvention of the process in each locale.

This is quite breathtaking. A decade ago most archivists would have considered it foolish to talk about cooperative appraisal. Were not all of our holdings unique, after all? The Seven States project, however, implemented a procedure to share information and, just as significantly, moved the appraisal theory forward by emphasizing the commonalities—primarily data content and

[4]For a good statement on this issue, see Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143-50.

[5]For a description of the Seven States Project, although focused more on description than appraisal, see David Bearman, "Archives and Manuscript Control with Bibliographic Utilities: Challenges and Opportunities," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 26-39.

function of the office—that unite similar record series. The project refocused the emphasis from unique items to similar series.

Documentation strategy is the other trend with an impact on appraisal. Here the focus is extra-repository, beyond our own walls, but this strategy must rest on agreement about the appraisal process.[6] It is difficult to imagine how a documentation strategy could succeed if the participants are not able to reach common understanding, at least about the process of appraisal if not the particulars of any given decision. Therefore, archivists must work at articulating and documenting the appraisal processes. Articulation and documentation are two prerequisites for cooperating on appraisal and for creating viable documentation strategies.

As these examples of recent developments emphasize, it is imperative to reach a common consensus on the appraisal process. However, such a consensus is useful only if it is written and can be shared with other archivists. Boles and Young have also helped us in this regard.

Documenting the Appraisal Process

The documentation of the appraisal process is a crucial aspect of improving appraisal practice and, ultimately, appraisal theory. In effect Boles and Young created a process that relied upon documentation of the decision. This effort towards documentation should be extended for three reasons: cooperation, education, and protection.

Documentation of appraisal is an absolute prerequisite for cooperation in appraisal. As already mentioned, cooperation will be most feasible in circumstances where the cooperating institutions can explain their appraisal processes and decisions cogently. This information must be written and ultimately should be in an electronic format to facilitate exchange.

Graduate archival education will also benefit from documentation of the appraisal process. Education programs can use written appraisal decisions, serious research projects, and cooperative proposals as readings, case studies, and guides for student research projects. The same applies to staff training in general.

Finally, and most ominously, archivists need to be able to document appraisal decisions in order to protect themselves and their institutions. On the one hand, the profession has never been particularly good at describing its work to the rest of the world. And yet, archivists are becoming targets of "malpractice" suits, thus putting us in the position of having to prove that our actions were rational, well-thought out, and in the public good. These thoughts are triggered in particular by the FBI appraisal lawsuit and the current litigation initiated by historians protesting the White House decision to destroy Reagan-era National Security Agency messages created on the PROFS system made infamous by the Iran-Contra-gate scandal.[7] Although these lawsuits involve federal records, it takes little

[6]For the growing literature on documentation strategy see F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 11-22; Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 12-47; Philip N. Alexander and Helen W. Samuels, "The Roots of 128: A Hypothetical Documentation Strategy," *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987): 518-31; and Richard J. Cox and Helen W. Samuels, "The Archivist's First Responsibility: A Research Agenda to Improve the Identification and Retention of Records of Enduring Value," *American Archivist* 51 (Winter and Spring 1988): 28-42.

[7]For the FBI appraisal project see Susan D. Steinwall, "Appraisal and the FBI Files Case: For Whom Do Archivists Retain Records?" *American Archivist* 49 (Winter 1986): 52-63; and James Gregory Bradsher, "The FBI Records Appraisal," *Midwestern Archivist* 13 (1988): 51-66. For the National Security Agency lawsuit see Page Putnam Miller, "Capitol Commentary," *OAH Newsletter* (May 1989): 11.

imagination to foresee similar future litigation in other contexts.

Apart from purchasing malpractice insurance, we can better defend ourselves by developing documentation to prove that we followed standard procedures in making an appraisal decision and to demonstrate that there is a standard process followed by all professional archivists. Such a strategy must rest on proper documentation of these decisions.

Conclusion

Looking at recent archival progress, the 1970s can be viewed as the age of collection building. Many new archival programs were established; new directions in collecting trends were initiated; and archivists increasingly began to accept the "new" formats such as photographs, audio, and other non-paper-based records.

The 1980s were the years of archival description. Automation certainly was the driving force that facilitated the creation of a national database of archival holdings. Even more importantly, the decade ushered in a long-overdue era of description standards.

The 1990s may well be the decade of archival appraisal. SAA's Committee on Goals and Priorities has highlighted the importance of appraisal by arguing that all "archival activities hinge on the ability to select wisely."[8] Appraisal theory certainly has long needed a period of wise and effective examination.

Perhaps changes in appraisal over the next decade will follow a course similar, or even parallel, to that of description. The advent of archival automation radically changed descriptive practices by permitting information sharing and the creation of a national database. In regard to appraisal, the use of a national electronic hook-up is in its infancy. But the efficient sharing and comparing of information among seven state archives via RLIN is encouraging. Documentation strategies may someday be able to utilize a national database of appraisal decisions in order to study the context in which records are created. As with descriptive practices, archivists can look forward to a lessening of idiosyncratic appraisal practices, to more information sharing, and to enhanced professional appraisal standards.

Developments such as the Black Box and the Seven States Project have set the stage for the profession to move forward in this very important area. They have certainly set us on the right track, but as Will Rogers noted, "It's not enough to be on the right track. If you just sit there, you're going to get run over." It is up to the profession to move ahead of events. We need to delineate the elements of appraisal, the proper process to follow, and how we make our selection decisions. We need to share information about specific decisions and evaluate a variety of approaches. We need to develop a solid process and work toward a universal theory.

[8]SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities, *Planning for the Archival Profession* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), 8.