

Methodological Considerations

The user study conducted at the National Archives during 1990 and 1991 was grounded in a decade or more of compelling arguments in the published literature of the archival profession and the equally compelling lessons of decades of user studies conducted in libraries in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. This chapter consists of two sections that together provide the context within which the study was designed, implemented, and reported. The first section of the chapter draws out the key themes of the "classic" readings on studying the use of archives and counterposes these themes to important conclusions of library use studies and the critics who have reviewed them. The chapter's second section describes the design and implementation of the overall study and the methodologies of the individual research projects.

Research Influences

Since the mid-1970s, archivists have described why a more systematic approach to understanding users and use is needed. Elsie Freeman, Mary Jo Pugh, Bruce Dearstyne, Paul Conway, Lawrence Dowler, and Richard Cox especially have been in the forefront urging the archival profession to give as much administrative weight to the users of archival materials as to the materials themselves. They argue that recognizing and responding to the information needs of users is central to the wider use of historical information in contemporary problem solving, central to the proper documentation of society, and central to the viability of a profession buffeted by rapid technological change. "Use of archival records is the ultimate purpose of identification and administration," declared the final report of the Society of American Archivists' Task Force on Goals and Priorities in 1986. By the late 1980s, archivists had begun to consider high quality research on users an essential means toward this goal.¹

¹ *Planning for the Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986).

Elsie Freeman, in her now-classic article on the administration of archives from the user's point of view, sounded the clearest call for undertaking systematic user studies. She put forward a simple proposition for turning administrative, descriptive, reference, and training practices upside down. "The identity and research habits of our users--who they are, how they think, how they learn, how they assemble information, to what uses they put it--must become as familiar a part of our thinking as the rules of order and practice that now govern the acquisition, processing, description, and servicing of records."² After pointing out four false assumptions about archival reference work--that archivists are oriented toward users because they like reference work, that they know who uses archival material, that archivists understand the research process, and that they provide practical, even sufficient, help in doing it--she outlined in some detail the parameters of systematic user studies. Freeman was not the first and has not been the last person to urge the archival profession to undertake research on the characteristics of users and archival research. In 1980, Mary Jo Pugh presented a catalog of possible research questions that if answered would shed light on the ways in which researchers approach the historical record.³ Her focus was principally on understanding how historians and other scholars use subject headings and personal or corporate names to gain access to archival collections through traditional finding aids and card catalogs. She drew her inspiration, in part, from a handful of studies undertaken in the 1970s, of which the most significant were those by Richard Lytle.⁴

Lytle's small experimental study contrasted the efficacy of access by provenance (linking subject queries with information on function and structure) with access by content analysis (linking subject queries to index terms). Lytle's study did not consider researcher characteristics to be relevant variables. Pugh began to suggest that issues such as previous experience, type of information need, and research topic may be important. "The relationship between the type of research project and the modes of access also needs to be studied," wrote Pugh at a time when new fields of historical inquiry and new waves of historically curious individuals were finding their way to archives and historical societies nationwide.

The decade of the 1980s might be called the era of the research agenda. If Pugh's list of possible research topics kicked off the period, Richard Cox established the most wide-ranging framework for the archival profession in 1992. Cox reviewed much of the relevant recent writings on archival reference and organized the underlying research questions into a four-part framework: research about use in archival repositories; research about the accuracy and effectiveness of archival refer-

2 Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 117.

3 Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 33-44.

4 Richard H. Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 64-75; Lytle "Intellectual Access to Archives: II. Report of an Experiment Comparing Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 191-207.

