Recognition, Internalization, Growth:
Intuitive Design for Archival Representation

Jaime Ganzel
Degree Candidate
M.A. in History, Archives, and Records Management
Western Washington University

April 20, 2017

Abstract

Although there is a pressing need for archival description and access systems to be more intuitive and user-friendly, the uniqueness of archival records presents significant barriers to establishing simplistic and standardized conventions for the representation of archival materials. Indecipherable finding aids and access tools prevent new and inexperienced researchers from accessing the unique information and documentation held in archives. This article aims to help open the archival record to new and non-traditional archival users, support individual development of archival literacy skills, and cultivate a greater level of archival awareness in our society by developing a usable model for archivists to evaluate and improve the intuitiveness of their repository's online access tools.

This work presents a definition of 'intuitive' archival representation which delineates an archival description and access system that is easily navigable and presents information in a way which users can comprehend and internalize. Importantly, under this new definition, an 'intuitive' system includes scaffolded functionality which supports users' development of archival literacy skills as opposed to simply accommodating users at varying skill levels. The interdisciplinary research presented in this work borrows from research in human-computer interaction and web design, constructivist learning theory, and language acquisition theory to construct a set of criteria for evaluating intuitiveness. The article concludes with an appraisal of the representation methods predominantly employed by current archival institutions and uses the criteria described above to evaluate the intuitiveness of each method.