

# Artefactual literacy-related abilities for historians' effective seeking and use of primary resources

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** *This study explored historians' archival search behaviour from Yakel and Torres' User Expertise in Archives (UEA) model. The model contained three types of knowledge that influence archival researchers' information seeking: domain knowledge, artefactual literacy, and archival intelligence. This paper reported on the artefactual literacy-related abilities and behaviour.*

**Methods.** *A naturalistic inquiry approach was adopted to study twelve history master's students' thesis research behaviour. In-depth interviewing was used to collect narratives of archival search experiences. The inductive constant comparisons and open/axial coding were used in the analysis.*

**Results.** *Artefactual literacy related abilities and behaviour were categorized into external criticism-related and internal criticism-related. The former included three abilities: understanding the production context of primary sources, the ability to differentiate between intentional and unintentional sources, and the ability to cope with language limitations. The latter included two abilities: putting oneself in the shoe of the historical figure understudy, and comparing documents with different perspectives.*

**Conclusions.** *UEA is a powerful analytic model for studying archive users' information behaviour. Archivists should care about how domain knowledge and artefactual literacy influenced archival search decisions and actions.*

**Keywords:** *archival information seeking, archival research, artefactual literacy*

## Introduction

Archives and libraries are both important information sources for academic research. However, archives differ from libraries in the collected materials and the ways information artefacts are organized. To articulate the competencies required for using archives effectively, Yakel and Torres (2003) proposed a model of user expertise in archives (UEA). Three forms of knowledge are required for archival research. First, domain knowledge is the understanding of the research topic; it is the foundation for the inquiry and archives use. Second, artefactual literacy is '*the ability to identify the value of primary sources as evidence for further interpreting the records to support research discourse*'; it is the ability to understand, decipher, choose, and use the primary sources to develop a convincing historical analysis. Third, archival intelligence is the understanding of general archival theories and practices as well as the command of specific archival institutions, collections, and tools.

Effective use of domain-specific information resources often requires a multitude of knowledge beyond general search skills. For example, in the field of nursing, expertise in source evaluation and command of the technical-administrative principles of nursing research tools constitutes critical abilities (Sundin, Limberg & Lundh, 2008). Similarly, the UEA model serves as a framework to inform multi-dimensional archival literacy education (Yakel, 2005). However, their discussion had focused on archival intelligence only. We, however, believe the three pillars of competencies are intertwined and mutually supportive. The domain knowledge and artefactual literacy-related abilities should also be articulated so that user education can be context-rich and domain-specialized.

As such, we are interested in articulating the workings of domain knowledge and artefactual literacy in archival search. In this short paper, we focus on findings related to artefactual literacy. We referenced Robyns (2001) and Noll's (2014) explanations of artefactual literacy to guide the analysis. Artefactual literacy involves two critical thinking skills: external and internal criticism. The former is to ascertain '*the process of authentication and verification of authorship*', which requires an understanding of the production context of the documents. The latter is '*the process of evaluation and interpretation of the content*'.

## Methodology

We adopted a naturalist inquiry approach to examine the influences of artefactual literacy in archival search. Although guided by an existing model and preexisting conceptualization, our investigation was open and employed constant comparisons as introduced in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was used to collect participant narratives about their archives use experiences. The participants were 12 history-majored master's students who had just completed their degree theses in the previous three years in Taiwan. They were chosen because historians represent the major expert user group of primary sources (Rhee, 2012). Completing the master's thesis was considered a successful transition from a novice to an expert in historical research. Participants were asked to recall their research behaviour and archives' uses. Emphasis was placed on how they acquired the three-pillared abilities and their actions associated with the three sets of expertise.

Each interview lasted 60-120 minutes. All of the participants were able to offer rich and vivid accounts of their archival search experiences. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed with Atlas.ti. Open coding and axial coding were adopted to analyze the data. Quotes in the following section were translated by the authors as the original interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese.

## Findings

Following Robyns (2001), we now report artefactual literacy abilities along with the external and internal criticism division. Some cases showed the intertwining working of domain knowledge and artefactual literacy, and they are noted in brackets in the quotes.

## External Criticism-Related Abilities

External criticism is about understanding of context of the primary sources to determine the evidential value of the documents. Three sets of abilities emerged during our coding process.

### (1) Understanding of the production context of the primary sources

The production contexts of primary sources, such as the time, space, conditions and situations, and reasons for creating the documents, provide the basis for judging if a document is relevant and may serve as strong evidence for the research inquiry. Researchers need to know why and how the documents were produced to choose what to look at and read beyond the texts.

*I used “zòuzhè,” a report document handed to the emperors. I needed to understand the formats and the evolving conventions of it (domain knowledge). With that understanding, I was then able to identify which zòuzhés were handed directly to the emperor and had bypassed the middle officials (Participant L, Researcher of the Qing Dynasty of China)*

*I looked for the archived images of the public buildings and also the possibly existent memos accompanying them. I knew architects of that period were often required to explain why they designed public buildings in those ways when they bid for the cases (domain knowledge). Most of the architects had focused on explaining the aesthetics of the designs, but some would provide first-hand explanations of the purposes and functionalities of the design (Participant A, Researcher of the German Public Architectures of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century)*

### (2) Ability to differentiate between intentional and unintentional documents

Intentions of a document influence the credibility of the information reported in it, and some participants reported how they made the judgments.

*Take Chiang Kai-Shek’s diaries, for example. He probably did not intend his diaries to be seen. In contrast, many people now consider Hu Shih’s diary as highly intentional. It is believed that he had a strong intention to influence how the upcoming generations see him through his diary (domain knowledge). He knew he was going to become someone great and people would read his diary, so you cannot take everything said in that as truth. That’s also why I do not fully believe what I read in the archives, particularly with government archives [because they could possibly mask things] (Participant D, Researcher of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese diplomacy)*

*I read a diary of a British man who often mentioned prayers and churches in them, so I thought of him as a very religious person. But later, I was reminded by my professor that the mentioning of prayers or God might simply be a common writing habit of that period (domain knowledge), not necessarily indicating one’s devotion to religion [and that changed my interpretation of his motivation] (Participant A).*

### (3) Abilities to address and cope with language limitations

The inability to understand other languages or the legibility of handwritten documents constituted challenges to history researchers. Participants mentioned strategies related to language constraints. The first is to ascertain the extent of understandable/legible primary sources and build a strong justification for using only those sources.

*Whether a document was in typesetting or handwriting did influence my use of them. I had to give up some illegible handwritten documents (Participant A).*

*I was studying a French missionary who came to China in the Qing Dynasty. I've seen related documents written in the Manchu language, which I don't read. I've also seen very illegible archival documents in handwritten French. But I used only primary sources written in Chinese. My argument is that I was interested in the missionary's living experiences in China. What I cared about was the China he saw during his missionary tour, so I considered Chinese materials sufficient for my study (Participant D)*

Arguing for excluding the unreadable documents also occurred; for instance, Participant D also de-emphasized documents she could not read.

*I do not read the Manchu language. But I'm okay with not using those. In the Qing Dynasty, most of the zòuzhès and other official communications were written in Chinese unless they concerned Manchuria issues (domain knowledge). That was irrelevant for my study. (Participant D)*

The third is to employ reference tools to enhance one's ability in using documents written in foreign languages. Beyond the apparent use of dictionaries and other translation tools, Participant D described an interesting case in which she employed a full-text database of the Bible as language assistance:

*That foreign missionary often referenced the Bible in his record, but the bible quotes were in Latin, which I don't understand. I knew a little French, though, so I know a little about the linguistic inflexion in Latin. There was an online Latin Bible database, and I took words from the archival documents and looked them up in the database to see what the missionary had referenced (Participant D)*

### **Internal Criticism-Related Abilities**

Internal criticism-related abilities are about skills for understanding and interpreting the information and messages as recorded in the primary sources (Robyns, 2001). Two internal criticism-related abilities emerged in our analysis.

#### **(1) Putting oneself in the shoes of the historical figure understudy**

Several participants mentioned that, in reading and interpreting the primary source documents, one has to put him/herself in the shoes of the person who created the record. Participant B gave two different examples:

*I had served in the army, so I quite know the mindset of the bureaucrats and authorities who create and keep records. Most of the government officials will try their best to avoid trouble, so what got hidden or masked in the documents can very possibly be things that mattered (Participant B, Researcher of the city development issues in Modern China)*

*I was unable to relate to that particular city development problem as presented in the documents. But when I actually visited the city, saw the geographical surroundings and envisioned the layout of the city in that period, I got to realize that the central problem to the city's development could not have been one of commerce as described in the official papers. It must have been something else. I began to compare what the Mao government papers said about the problem and how the local documents said differently (Participant B)*

Another participant described how she put herself in the shoes of the documentee and assessed whether the comments made sense, i.e., whether the information and comments were logical and acceptable.

*The missionary that I studied was accused of being homosexual. But intuitively, I did not accept that statement. Being homosexual was against the morals of his religion, and I considered the missionary as a very sincere person as I read along with his records. It didn't*

*convince me that a person so sincere could violate his commitment to his God and the religious norms, so I was doubtful of the information (Participant D)*

## (2) Comparing documents with different perspectives

Documents always carry the perspectives of the persons who created them. With that in mind, one participant described how he tried to interpret the mainstream government documents from a minority's perspective.

*In the records produced by the Han Chinese, many aboriginal women were described as if they were like the Han Chinese women, i.e., obedient and constrained in the family. They were described that way because that was how Han Chinese men viewed women. However, we know that many aboriginal societies were matriarchic. The Han women were not allowed to inherit their fathers' lands, but most of the aboriginal tribes allowed that (domain knowledge). We cannot take it for granted with the Han documents. I compare the official [Chinese] documents with documents about the aboriginal cultures to detect the possible distortions (Participant L, Researcher of the Chinese-Taiwan aboriginal relations)*

Another participant talked about the importance of comparing judgments and criticism about a person from different sources or different viewing angles.

*People often thought of Chiang Kei-Shek's troops of secret agents intuitively as a means to reinforce his autocratic ruling. However, recent emerging documents such as his newly released diary and other stuff began to indicate otherwise. It seemed that he did that mainly to further unite the KMT as a highly concentrated party rather than to oppress the opponents. He saw Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy and envied the mightiness and concreteness of the political parties they created, so he pretty much imitated what they had done... Another example is about this political figure, Hsu. His subordinate and other people viewed him very differently. It's like you saw the different faces of that figure, but you have to think about the viewpoints of the critics and compare and contrast to see what holds (Participant H, Researcher of the Modern Chinese Politics)*

## Conclusion

The cultivation of domain knowledge and artefactual literacy is often viewed as the responsibility of history education rather than the archives use education (Gordon, 1992). The division of labour might continue to hold as the user education in archives will never replace the teaching from history professors. The former, however, should incorporate more than archival intelligence. Systematic observations and articulation of skills and techniques of artefactual literacy as presented above may help expand and enhance archival literacy education.

Recent developments in the archival literacy standards also call for studies like ours. For example, Carini (2016) emphasized the importance of artefactual literacy so that the users will be able to 'know' the existence and inter-relations of primary sources and to reasonably 'interpret' them within the study contexts. The joint statement Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy by the Society of American Archivists and the Association of College and Research Libraries also signified the importance of the artefactual literacy skills (ACRL RBMS-SAA Joint Task Force, 2018). Our findings empirically confirmed the point raised in the Guidelines that 'historical empathy, curiosity and appreciation' constitute the foundation of artefactual literacy. Several participants had put themselves in the historical figures' shoes to critically reflect on archival records. Shifting perspectives between the creators, audiences, and people involved in the power matrix also informed the participants' critical assessment of the records.

Future research should continue to include more experienced history researchers, particularly history professors who had rich student advising experiences. We believed the advisor role would alert the history faculty to the frequently seen shortcomings and training needs in artefactual literacy – this

makes them great informants. Given the limited subjects of this exploratory study, we arrived at a conclusion that may sound mundane at first glance, but we found it fundamental. We considered artefactual literacy as an assessment requiring both an understanding of historical situations and the understanding of humanity. Domain knowledge enables us to know how it worked in the past, but why things worked in certain ways was often the result of humanity.

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