Embracing the Diversity: Teaching Recordkeeping Concepts to Students from Different Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds

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Abstract. When teaching to students from diverse backgrounds, it is important to explain to them the meaning of the key concepts in the discipline and to discuss examples that they can easily relate to. The terms records and recordkeeping, which are key concepts in archival science, have their roots in national archival traditions and have specific meanings that may confuse students because these meanings are different from the ways the terms are commonly used in everyday language or in other English-speaking countries and because equivalent concepts may not exist in their first language. The linguistic misunderstandings that may ensue may then impact on the students’ understanding of the whole course content, affecting their understanding of the role played by records in society and of the issues involved in their preservation. By discussing with the students the translations of these terms and simple examples in their cultural and linguistic contexts, we are embracing the diversity of students’ backgrounds and experiences and engaging in a dialogue with them that enriches their experience and makes the course more relevant to them.

Keywords: Archival education · Cultural context · Languages · Translation · Records continuum · Personal recordkeeping · Digital preservation

1 Introduction

Understanding of a discipline is linked to an understanding of its key concepts. This is particularly true in archival science where the key concepts are rooted in national traditions. Eric Ketelaar wrote that “There are many … terms in the professional archival terminology which are only understandable in another language when one knows and fully understands the professional, cultural, legal, historical, and sometimes political background of the term” [1]. In an article published in 1985, “Archives in the Tower of Babel”, French archivist Michel Duchein asserted that because professional practices and methods vary from one country to another, translations of archival texts can only be approximative [2]. Ketelaar [1] argued that simple translations are not sufficient if a concept does not exist in another country and that the concept must be defined and
explained in the technical language of that country. However, if students not only come from a different linguistic background, but also from a different discipline and are not familiar with the archival language of their own country, it becomes necessary to explain the terminology in simple non-technical terms that they can easily understand and relate to their personal experience.

In this paper, I discuss my experience teaching recordkeeping concepts in a multicultural and multidisciplinary environment in an Australian university. Developing materials to teach to students from different backgrounds made me realize how much the concepts that we use are rooted in a specific culture and, therefore, may not make much sense for people from other cultures, and led me to look for new ways to explain those concepts, to rethink the models that we use and to re-assess the course’s priorities. I have been teaching at Monash University since 2015 and during that time we have experienced a dramatic shift in the student population enrolled in the postgraduate recordkeeping subjects. On the one hand, we have experienced a decline in the number of postgraduate students who enrolled with the intention of completing a specialization in archives and recordkeeping. On the other hand, a massive increase in the number of international students at the university led to an exponential increase in the number of students enrolling in the two recordkeeping subjects as electives, with the assumption that they were “easy” subjects. These students are studying various degrees in the Faculty of Information Technology, including Masters in Information Technology, Business Information Systems and Data Science, and in the Faculty of Business. The combination of these factors resulted in a shift from teaching to small classes of students (18 in the first semester of 2016), the majority of whom were intending to qualify as archivists and record managers, to very large classes of students (180 students in the first semester of 2019 and 142 in the first semester of 2020), most of whom had no previous understandings of records and archives and no intention of working in that area after graduating, with a very small minority of students still interested in working as information professionals. The vast majority of the students enrolled in one of these two subjects, the digital continuity subject taught every year in the first semester, are international students, mostly from China (68%), with a substantial group from India (17%), and a few from a variety of other countries, mostly in Asia (including Bangladesh, Vietnam, Thailand, and Saudi Arabia), and only 5% of Australian residents (based on Semester 1, 2019 enrolment data).

Therefore, we need to teach archival and digital preservation concepts to students who come from other disciplines and from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is a challenge, but also an opportunity to try new ways of communicating content and raise awareness about recordkeeping and digital preservation issues among students who will go and work in other fields, particularly students who will work in information technology and will develop information systems that may contain records. The focus of the unit is on digital continuity, that is how we can make sure that the information we need will remain available for as long as we need it [3]. Most students come to the unit with no understanding of the fragility of digital information and many of them hold the misconception that digital records are more robust and last longer than paper records. A misunderstanding of the meaning of records may lead them to focus on data, rather than on the evidential characteristics of records and on recordkeeping processes, and to
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neglect the multiple interests that various stakeholders may have in those records and the issues associated with their long-term preservation.

The theory that underpins teaching of recordkeeping concepts in Australia (and that also influenced international records management standards) is the Continuum theory [4] and the model that is used as a framework for the subjects is the Records Continuum Model. The Records Continuum Model [5, 6] was developed as a teaching tool to represent the contexts of records creation, management and use over time and space. Its four dimensions, Create, Capture, Organize and Pluralize provide a way of mapping the creation of documents, their capture in recordkeeping systems, their organization into archives and their pluralization to meet the needs of various stakeholders. Contrary to the stages in the life cycle model, the dimensions are seen as happening simultaneously and enabling the representation of multiple perspectives of multiple actors [7].

The shift in the students’ backgrounds and interests drove me to review the way I teach recordkeeping concepts to make them more relevant to the students’ experiences. In this paper, I discuss how I explain the meaning of the key concepts and illustrate them through simple examples and how we engage in discussions with students from diverse backgrounds, thereby enriching their experience and the teaching material for the next cohort of students. The examples I use are grounded in a Records Continuum framework. However, many issues relating to language and terminology would also arise, albeit somewhat differently, if we used a life cycle framework.

2 Teaching Key Concepts

Records are defined in the International Records Management Standard ISO15489 as “information created, received and maintained as evidence and as an asset by an organization or person, in pursuit of legal obligations or in the transaction of business” [8]. However, many European archival traditions do not have a word equivalent to the English concept of “record”. They use “archives” as a broader, more encompassing term and can have several translations for the word “record” depending on the context. For example, the French definition of archives is: “all the documents, whatever their date, their form and their material support, created or received by a natural or legal person, or by a department or agency, public or private, in the course of their activities” [9]. Archives are considered to be archives from the time they are created. There is no exact translation for the word “record”. The translation used in the first edition of ISO 15489, adopted in 2001, “document d’archives”, literally a document from the archives, is one of the most commonly used. However, the updated version of the standard adopted in 2016 used “document d’activité”, literally “activity document” instead [10]. This translation was the subject of many controversies [11] and, in practice, is only used in official documents. The translation “documents d’archives” is still the most commonly used in the public sector where government institutions have long-standing archives and where public servants understand that the important documents that they create will one day get transferred to the archives. On the other hand, in the private sector, archives are perceived as old stuff and people prefer to refer to their records as “documents” or “records” using the English terminology. Archivists, for their part, prefer to make a distinction between the “archives courantes et intermediaires” (current and semi-current
records) that are used to support current business needs and the “archives définitives” (permanent records) that are kept in archival repositories for their historical and cultural value. However, they find the concept of records being maintained as evidence problematic because this implies a selection among the documents created (since not all of them need to be kept as evidence), and this selection is done when the records are still in active use whereas in the French system, it is done when records no longer meet current business needs [12–14].

Similar translation issues occur in other European languages, including Dutch, German, Italian and Spanish. Other translation issues arise with Asian languages as I discovered in the process of teaching recordkeeping concepts to international students. The translation problems in some of the languages spoken by students have important implications for their understanding of the course material and therefore need to be discussed right from the start. Discussions with students have revealed that in several languages, the word “record” is used in English rather than vernacular terms that archivists may use, but that ordinary people are not familiar with. This is the case in Bangla, Urdu and several Indian and African languages, a legacy of British colonial influence in those countries. On the other hand, in Indonesian, like in Dutch, there is no word for record, but the words “dokumen” (document) and “arsip” (archives) are used. In other languages, the terms used by records managers and archivists may be different from the terms used by people who do not work in that field. Discussions with Chinese students also revealed that there was no agreement on how to translate the word “record” in Chinese. In Chinese, the common translation of record is jì lù, but that is not the term that records managers use, preferring wén jiàn, while dàng’àn is used for archives.

To further complicate the issue, the way the words “records” and “recordkeeping” are commonly used in Australia to encompass both records and archives is different from the way they are used in the rest of the English-speaking world. In Continuum theory, anything can be a record. The concept is not restricted to specific formats. It encompasses “oral and written records, literature, landscape, dance, art, the built environment, and artefacts” [15]. All records have the potential to become archives and should be viewed as such from the time of their creation. Recordkeeping encompasses both records management and archives management and all the processes from the setting up of recordkeeping systems to the design of access to archives to meet the needs of a variety of stakeholders throughout the lifespan of the records [16]. This is different from the life cycle perspective adopted in Europe and in North America, which is based on strict separations between current records and archives and between the roles played by records managers and archivists [17, 18]. The specific meaning of the term “recordkeeping” must therefore be clearly explained, and reiterated throughout the course, and it must be clearly distinguished from the spelling “record keeping” or “record-keeping”, which are used in other English-speaking countries to refer to narrower understandings of the management of records to meet current business needs. It is a term that is difficult to translate in any language and is best kept in English to keep the specific connotations associated with it.

The word “continuum” also has a specific meaning in Continuum theory, which may cause confusion, but which may be less obvious to students and to researchers alike. The word implies a continuity, a sequence of actions that follow one another over
time, as expressed in the Oxford Dictionary definition: “a continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, but the extremes are quite distinct” [19]. Applied to the management of records and archives, it can mean that there is a continuity between records and archives, that records and archives are managed smoothly in an integrated way over time, without there being strict distinctions between different stages in their life cycle that correspond to different ways of managing them. This is how the Canadian archivist Jay Atherton, who was the first to talk of a continuum of records and archives, intended it [20]. Although different from the life cycle model, this interpretation of a continuum is a linear approach. However, in the Continuum theory developed in Australia and in the Records Continuum Model, the word “continuum” means something more than a smooth progression over time. The Records Continuum is not linear, it is multi-dimensional. The four dimensions are happening at the same time. Processes taking place in one dimension impact on what is happening in the other dimensions [21]. The use of the word continuum may therefore be confusing.

A comparison that I have found useful to explain the concept is that of a rainbow. The analogy with a rainbow helps to explain the smooth transition between dimensions and how they can blend into one another. A rainbow may be represented by seven curved lines of seven distinct colors, but the colors of a natural rainbow actually blend into each other. The colors are created by the refraction and dispersion of light and are blending into each other without clear separations between them. For example, green is not clearly distinct from blue and yellow, but is a mix of the two. The analogy also helps to explain the simultaneity of the four dimensions of the Records Continuum. In a drawing, the colored stripes are drawn one at a time, but the colors of the rainbow do not appear one after the other. One part of the rainbow may be clearer than another, but it is due to the position of the observer. The seven colors are present at the same time. Similarly, the four dimensions of the Records Continuum Model exist at the same time even if one (or several) of them may seem to be more prominent at a particular time or one (or several) of them may appear to be hidden for a while.

The recordkeeping terminology and its translation is discussed with students in the first week through a discussion of personal recordkeeping activities (which will be described in the next section), then again when explaining the Records Continuum Model, and later in the semester when we look at translations of the Universal Declaration on Archives, which has been translated into 42 languages [22], to reinforce students’ understanding of the concepts. Experience has shown that a translation activity works best if it is combined with a discussion of examples of records and their evidential characteristics. If students are asked to think of translations of the word “record” in their language, they may come up with a translation that may or may not be equivalent to the meaning of records discussed in the course. However, if the discussion of translation is combined with a discussion of examples, students may come up with several translations, and the conversation can then progress to dissecting the meaning of each one and comparing them with the English concept, which can result in a better understanding of the concept and of cultural differences. We were fortunate in 2019 to be able to involve a visiting Chinese academic, Associate Professor Jian Chen from Shandong University, and a visiting Chinese PhD student in archival science, Wenting Lyu from Nanjing
University, who attended classes every week and with their experience of archival terminology and archival institutions in China helped build a bridge to Chinese students from other disciplinary backgrounds.

3 Personal Recordkeeping

Simple examples and personal recordkeeping examples are used in the course to illustrate the concepts taught. Students can easily relate personal recordkeeping examples to their personal experience and to their cultural background, which makes it easier for them to understand the concepts. Focusing on personal recordkeeping helps students who come from different backgrounds (culturally or professionally) to relate the material taught in the course with examples from their cultural background. Personal recordkeeping examples are discussed in the first tutorials. Students are asked to think of the roles that they play in society and of the records that they keep as part of those roles; then to pick one of these roles and think of the records that they keep as part of that role. They are asked to reflect on whether or not they can still access all the records that have been created in relation with that role or with an event and they are encouraged to reflect on how they could keep their records to ensure that the records remain available to them when they may want to access them in the future. When I did that activity with students face-to-face (before the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to online teaching), I made students pick a coin out of a bag and asked them to think of records associated with an event in their lives that occurred in the year the coin was minted, thereby encouraging them to think of older records, some of which may have been in analog formats. These activities are open-ended and allow students to reflect on records from their personal and cultural contexts that are important to them. They help them to understand the important role that some records play in their lives and the need to be proactive in preserving them. Many times, students have commented at the end of the activity that they would then go home and back up some important records.

A personal recordkeeping example, with a family photograph, is also used for teaching the Records Continuum Model. Since 2015, I have been using the example of a family photograph to teach the model and to discuss possible reuses of the photograph. Examples of the application of the Records Continuum Model, such as those described by McKemmish [15] and Reed [23], are useful for teaching purposes, but they may be perceived as too complex by students who are not familiar with the cultural contexts in which they are grounded. Using simple examples from everyday life and discussing the societal context of the creation and use of records [24, 25] can help make the model more accessible for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. In particular, the use of photographs can be very effective. Photographs are powerful teaching tools because they are easy to relate to and can provoke an emotive reaction. It is also easy to show that they can be meaningless without metadata, and thereby to illustrate the role played by metadata in capturing and preserving the evidential characteristics of records.

The photograph that I commonly use is an ordinary photograph of a family wedding. It was taken in 1996 with an analog camera. No names, place or date were written on the back of it, and I kept it in a plain envelope with other photographs of the wedding. We can assume that many photographs had been taken at that wedding and that some of these
photographs were printed several times and distributed among friends and relatives. We can therefore discuss different uses for those photographs and different recordkeeping trails that they may have followed while being kept in different recordkeeping systems (frame, photo album, scrapbook, etc.). Over the years, students have suggested reuses such as being of interest to people who are collecting photographs about wedding fashion in the 1990s, hats or hairstyles, being used as an alibi for one of the people in the photograph, as well as being used in the lecture slides as an example to teach the Records Continuum Model. Many of those examples could not have been predicted when the photograph was taken. The discussion of reuses of photographs can also be combined with a discussion of the cultural factors that are reflected in photographs (e.g. setting, clothing) or that impact on the way photographs can be preserved and used over time (e.g. privacy concerns). This helps students to understand that each society has laws, regulations, customs and expectations that impact on the way records are created, managed and used in that society; and that what is consider an appropriate way, or the best way, to create, manage, preserve and use records is largely cultural and may vary over time and from one country to another [24]. Recordkeeping systems can take many different forms (from a simple box to an electronic records management system) that are influenced by the culture in which they are developed. The format of a photograph is the product of the technology used to produce it. Its content is impacted by the societal context in which it was taken and the socio-economic status of the people who figure in it. The fact that it exists is, in itself, a reflection of the value accorded to capturing pictures of some events in that society, the technology in existence and its affordability. Pictures may be kept for memory purposes or as evidence. In either case, they need to be captured and organized in a recordkeeping system and metadata added to them to locate them in their contexts, particularly if they are to be shared with people outside the immediate circle of family and friends, who may not be aware of that context. Steps need to be taken to preserve the photographs; these will be dependent on the technology available, the legislation in place and the social and cultural expectations, and they will require actions to be taken to ensure that the photographs will be preserved for as long as they may be needed [24].

4 Impact

Embracing the diversity in the students’ backgrounds and languages and adjusting the course content to include discussion of linguistic differences and simple personal recordkeeping examples make the concepts taught easier for all students to understand and more relevant to their cultural contexts. A lack of material relevant to the personal, cultural and professional contexts of the students’ may result in students dismissing the material taught to them as irrelevant to them (something they have to learn to graduate, but can quickly forget about if they do not plan to work as archivists or records managers), or as “Australian” theories and practices that are not relevant to their contexts. Moreover, a misunderstanding of the key concepts stemming from the students’ inability to relate them to a familiar context is likely to result in a lack of understanding of important issues discussed in the course. For example, a confusion between record and data results in a lack of understanding of the processes that must be applied to preserve records as authentic evidence and of the characteristics that recordkeeping systems must have to
preserve records. Coupled with a lack of understanding of the fragility of digital records, this may lead students to overlook the preemptive actions that should be taken to ensure that records will survive for as long as they will be needed. On the other hand, discussing translation and cultural issues can result in a better understanding of the key concepts, which will result in a better understanding of the key issues affecting the preservation of digital information and may get students interested in tackling some of those issues in their future professional lives.

In addition, teaching recordkeeping concepts to students who will not work as record-keeping professionals, but in IT jobs is an opportunity to address the communication problems that often hinder digital preservation projects [26] by sensitizing the students to recordkeeping issues and equipping them with an understanding of the terminology used by the recordkeeping professionals with whom they may one day collaborate to develop systems to preserve digital records.

5 Conclusion

Teaching to foreign students forces us to reflect on how to adjust our teaching practices to explain to people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds recordkeeping concepts that may not have a direct equivalent in their languages and to develop examples that are culturally appropriate. Embracing the diversity and engaging in dialogues with the students improve their understanding of the concepts and issues and enriches the course material and the experience for all students. Students who will work as recordkeeping professionals will gain an understanding of different archival traditions and will be better equipped to collaborate with colleagues from other cultural backgrounds, while those who will work in IT will be able to speak the same language as recordkeeping professionals and will be able to collaborate in designing systems that incorporate recordkeeping functionalities to preserve records that meet the needs of various stakeholders in the short, medium and long terms.

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