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Making Documentary Heritage Accessible to Schools

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Abstract:

Library and Archives Canada is beginning development of a complementary virtual and real learning programme designed to make library and archival collections accessible to schools. The programme will focus on primary sources selected for their engaging content and relevance to educational curricula. Library and Archives Canada will work with other library, archival and educational institutions to build a national, on-line repository of primary sources and related educational resources, and as well to provide access to originals in local institutions.

I am very pleased to be speaking to you on behalf of Library and Archives Canada. In May 2004 the Canadian government created our institution from the former National Library of Canada and National Archives of Canada. Our ambitious goal is not merely to merge these two organizations but to create a new knowledge institution. Such a transformation must be based on innovation and driven by a commitment to meet the needs of Canadians: their access, use and understanding of our resources will be the primary driver of Library and Archives Canada. Our new institution will be rooted in the emerging opportunities provided by the digital information world in the 21st century. We intend to work with the library and archival communities and other stakeholders to build and make known a national documentary heritage collection. Most importantly Library and Archives Canada will be a learning destination, helping Canadians better understand their country's culture and heritage.

One key aspect of this learning agenda will include a programme of making the national collection accessible for learning in primary and secondary schools (that is, for students 5 to 17 years of age). Such a programme in itself requires transformation since neither the National Library nor the National Archives had many services for schools. In part, this lack of involvement with the educational sector reflected Canadian constitutional realities. In Canada, the constitution assigns responsibility for educational matters to the ten provincial and three territorial governments. This exclusive jurisdiction not only limits federal involvement in education but it also complicates any efforts to develop resources for schools since there have been thirteen, relatively distinct curricula. In recent years, federal policy initiatives targeting youth encouraged both organizations to begin building virtual learning resources. Two factors, however, really pushed us into targeting learning for schools: our desire to make Canada's documentary heritage widely accessible and our belief that teachers were our best allies in reaching youth.

In seeking to make documentary heritage accessible to schools, Library and Archives Canada faces a number of structural and environmental challenges. The first of these is the constitutional division of powers: we are of course sensitive to provincial authority in education and we hope to collaborate with ministries and teachers to create resources for schools. Second, Canada is a very large country with a population scattered in cities extending 5000 kilometres from Atlantic to Pacific, with small rural communities between cities and stretching north 2000 kilometres. Clearly, students from northern Manitoba, Halifax on the Atlantic or Calgary beside the Rocky Mountains cannot physically access Library and Archives staff and services which are located in Ottawa. Third, Canada has two official languages, English and French; federal institutions are required by law to provide service and publish equally in both languages. In addition aboriginal communities are increasingly attempting to weave the transmission of memory and language into school programmes. Finally, the interests of the Internet generation, who assume on-line access to information and inter-active ways of using it, are compelling cultural institutions to adopt innovative approaches to the development of learning resources.

We believe that we are on route to meeting these complex challenges with the line of development that has been proposed for our learning programme. Our response includes five distinct policy elements that I will list and expand on in turn. First, the focus of our school products and services will be our documentary heritage collection and the knowledge of our staff which both derives from and helps create that collection. Second, we will select significant elements of that collection -- primary sources -- and make them accessible to schools in two ways: directly and through educational resources. Third, we will conceptualize and deliver a seamless and complementary virtual and physical programme. Fourth, we will offer aggregated access to primary sources selected for their relevance to education from institutions across Canada. Fifth, we will work with educators at all levels to develop educational resources and to support their use in the classroom.

The first policy element underpinning the learning programme of Library and Archives Canada is a belief that its collections and staff expertise are the key asset which it can offer schools. Many other organizations use our collections, of course, in creating virtual and published educational resources, but we have the most direct access to and extensive knowledge of our library and archival collections. In fact, this provides our competitive advantage.

The value of our collections for teachers became clear during a national consultation of educators held in 2003. We covered seven large tables with the most engaging of our primary source material and invited thirty-five primary and secondary teachers, ministry officials and education faculty to explore this extraordinary content. They heard a first person account of an inspection of Buchenwald in April 1945, read the illustrated diary kept by a thirteen-year old girl in England and Canada in 1838 and picked out the detail of a map drawn from aboriginal knowledge of northern Alberta. There were government publications, letters, paintings, posters, music, newspapers and photo albums, all of which spoke in a direct and engaging manner of Canada and the experience of Canadians. For those of us who work with collections every day, the emotional impact – the delight – that educators felt on seeing this material was rewarding. And even more so was the fact that all participants in the consultation agreed that direct access to this type of material was a priority for them as educators.

The second policy element includes the development of a virtual repository - called Evidence Web - of primary sources, selected for their rich content and relevance to curricula. We have defined primary sources rather broadly as “voices of particular moments in time, capturing the ideas, actions, emotions or opinions of the period in which they were created.” This definition is inclusive both of library and of archival material. Evidence Web will make primary sources directly accessible to educators as they requested during our consultation. In addition together with educators we are building virtual educational resources that incorporate primary sources found in the on-line repository. Evidence Web has the strategic advantage of making content available in a manner that easily permits re-purposing. Anyone – our staff, provincial ministries of education or individual teachers – can select copyright cleared material from Evidence Web for use in a lesson plan or web product. Well-chosen primary sources have the potential to be used in many different ways. And when any of the thirteen Canadian curricula changes, outdated educational resources can be dropped, but the primary sources they contain can be re-purposed.

This direct access to well-chosen primary sources is in line with recent pedagogical trends. At a basic level most ministries of education in Canada require students to make use of primary sources during their school programme. More significantly ministries of education now require teachers to explore different perspectives on events, including regional comparisons, and to ensure that not one, but many voices are heard from past and present. Primary sources offer an obvious means to accomplish this goal and also provide an opportunity for the exercise of the higher level thinking skills emphasized in modern educational theory. Most significantly the current pedagogical shift from learning about history to doing history makes a repository of primary sources like Evidence Web a most timely product.

The creation of a single, complementary virtual and real learning programme is the third policy element adopted by Library and Archives Canada. On the one hand, web based resources are the only way in which our institution can serve Canada’s widely dispersed population. In addition, since primary sources are often unique or rare items which are too fragile or valuable to travel, making these available on-line dramatically increases accessibility. On the other hand, the learning potential of actually holding or seeing an original letter or sketch is quite extraordinary. Educators told us clearly that they wanted their students to be able to touch items created thirty or one hundred years before their birth for the power of that material to trigger understanding of the difference and the reality of the past. We will therefore attempt to work with library and archival partners across Canada to open our own and other special collections and archives to student

researchers, while making material from one region of Canada accessible on the Internet in other regions.

Working with other institutions to provide aggregated access to Canada's documentary heritage is the fourth policy element underlying Library and Archives Canada's education programme. Alone, our collections provide amazing documentation on Canada – they are particularly good at the national level, but are also quite frequently relevant for individuals and communities. However, we do not possess the most engaging primary sources for every period, every region or every subject in the study of Canada. Local, provincial, university and special interest institutions hold collections that complement our own. We therefore propose that Evidence Web serve as an aggregated access point for primary sources selected for education. Library and archival material from across Canada will be accessible through this site.

Partnerships with educators stand as the fifth policy element underlying our programme. Library and Archives Canada does not possess nor could it acquire sufficient pedagogical expertise to develop an extensive set of educational resources. And beyond this capacity issue is the constitutional reality: provincial governments are uneasy with federal involvement even in the creation of educational products. We therefore propose to work closely with individual teachers, local school boards, ministries of education, and the national Council of Ministers of Education. Our strength lies in our collections and staff experts who can teach content developers and classroom teachers how to use and interpret primary source materials. Working with teachers, we ourselves will build some innovative learning content, but the primary sources found in Evidence Web will be available to educators and students to use or re-purpose in whatever fashion they choose.

Beyond these five policy elements, there are at least two additional questions that Library and Archives Canada must address if we are to increase substantially the use of primary sources in the classroom. To date primary sources have often been presented simply as illustrations, or with little in the way of description, context or citation. Can we ensure that primary sources are made available to students with most of their evidentiary value intact? I think we can, but this will require careful selection of content, the presentation of different points of view and demonstration of the authenticity of the source through description and contextual citation. For archival items I believe that we need to identify clearly the relationship between the item and the fonds, including the creator of each. This work done, we would enable students to exercise higher level thinking skills and encourage pedagogical innovation with primary sources.

The second question facing us is how to make primary sources truly accessible to users who have little experience with such material. Some steps seem obvious. Each description of an item should answer the questions who created it, when and where was it created, and what is the item about; description should indicate the range of information which the item contains. New users also need contextual information so that they can read a primary source knowing what time period and set of events or issues in the past the source is connected with. Our writing style will be equally important in providing access and will need to be lively and direct. How successful steps such as these will be in enabling students and teachers to locate relevant primary sources and use them effectively remains to be tested, and improved, in practice.

Conclusion

I have presented an ambitious agenda for making key parts of Canada's documentary heritage accessible to schools. There will be significant challenges ahead for Library and Archives Canada as it implements this part of its learning mandate. The programme that I have outlined will require negotiation, collaboration and a substantial investment of resources. Since it is a new model, evaluation must be built into our on-going development to determine whether these proposals meet the needs of teachers and students and how successful they are at enabling pedagogical innovation.

There is a lot of work in front of us. Yet I simply have to remember the spontaneous and enthusiastic learning that occurred when educators at our national consultation were exposed to primary sources to know that the rewards of making library and archival collections accessible to schools will be very great indeed.