Product, Process, People, Praxis: Indigenous and Community Archives against MPLP

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Abstract

Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner's "More Product, Less Process" called for archives to reallocate resources in order to better serve their users. Articulated originally as a challenge to archival tradition, MPLP is now part of the profession's conventional wisdom. Recently, however, new objections to MPLP have arisen from archivists working with Indigenous and community archives, characterizing MPLP as "neoliberal" or "Taylorist", part of the system they call on archives to resist. Are these criticisms of MPLP valid, or only a reflection of Greene's vocal opposition to social justice archivy? Are the principles of MPLP as applicable to Indigenous and community archives as they appear? I will argue that in fact MPLP is, at minimum, easily adapted to serve Taylorist or neoliberal ends; that Greene and Meissner's conception of a "user-centered approach" to archiving is too narrow to accommodate a liberatory, decolonial vision of the archive; that community archives have little to learn from MPLP about resource allocation; and that MPLP's measures of efficiency have little relevance to decolonial archival praxis. While MPLP is not without value in its proper context, it has less to teach Indigenous and community archives than mainstream archives have to learn from them.

Introduction: product and process

Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner's 2005 call for "more product, less process" articulated a desire to make archives better serve their users—to redress what they saw as the imbalance in resources and priorities between preservation and access ("MPLP" 232). Initial reception of the article was broadly positive, with objections, largely from traditional archives, focusing on fears of losing item-level control, on possible legal and ethical vulnerabilities, and on perceived threats to the social and intellectual status of the archival profession ("MALA" 175, 200, 204, 211). In the UK, where quantifiable archival processing metrics were relatively uncommon, the borders between processing and reference archivists more porous, and a focus on collection-level description already common practice, MPLP quickly became incorporated into archival accreditation

standards (Anchor 162, 164, 159-60). Even critics of MPLP noted that many institutions had in fact already been applying the practices recommended by Greene and Meissner for years or even decades before the publication of the article (van Ness 130). Today MPLP is listed as a 'milestone' on the SAA website, and its implementation is an SAA continuing education course ("Milestones"; "Implementing"). Once presented as "revolutionary" (van Ness 131), MPLP would appear to have become part of the archival establishment.

In recent years, however, a new kind of objection to MPLP has arisen. Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, drawing on the decolonial work of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang and the community archives work of Michelle Caswell (among others) in their 2019 article "Toward Slow Archives," call for a rethinking of archival practices and priorities, emphasizing relationships and collaboration, centering Indigenous sensibilities and, in particular, Indigenous temporalities: "Slowing down creates a necessary space for emphasizing how knowledge is produced, circulated, contextualized, and exchanged through a series of relationships. Slowing down is about focusing differently, listening carefully, and acting ethically" (90). In their article, Christen and Anderson push back against the idea of archival "products"—"be they records, metadata or finding aids"—in favor of "relationships with communities of origin" (107). Indeed, the ethos of slow archives is to a significant extent a valorization of "process" over "product", albeit with "process" defined rather differently, and more holistically, than in Greene and Meissner, encompassing not only the processes of archival accession, arrangement, description, and conservation but also the processes of collaboration, care, and reciprocity: "the process was not only about reaching an end—the digitization or return of archival materials; but instead it was focused on a structural shift in the ways that archival materials are managed, curated, cataloged, accessed, and preserved" (110-111). Michelle Caswell, citing Christen and Anderson, refers to MPLP's "Taylorist demands" (*Urgent Archives*, 99); Christen and Anderson themselves, while acknowledging that MPLP is not in itself the originator of "product" as an archival value, nonetheless cite Greene and Meissner as symbolically representative of such a value system, and, along with "neoliberal paradigms emphasizing scale and disaggregation", one of the chief antagonists of their "slow archives" proposal (110).

Resource constraints and user orientation in indigenous and community archives

At first glance, this characterization, and its underlying hostility, seem unfair, even counterproductive. MPLP, according to Greene and Meissner, is "about resource management: about prioritizing institutional goals, about achieving high-level program

objectives… to make [processing] sensitive to available resource levels" ("MALA" 176). The Indigenous archives with which Christen and Anderson are concerned, and the community archives that are the focus of Caswell's work, are highly resource constrained. Indigenous archives face ongoing funding challenges (O'Neal 8, 11, 17); even mainstream archives containing Indigenous materials are often, in Christine DeLucia's words, "severely under-resourced" (87). Community archives are perennially under-funded (Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 105); volunteer-led "DIY" community archives in particular often face uncertain futures, constrained not only in regard to finance and facilities but to staffing and technology, by their nature often lacking professional archival expertise (Cantillon et al. 43-44). Such institutions and those who value them would seem to be the ideal adopters of a methodology that proposes a more efficient use of limited resources, and indeed, Cait McKinney characterizes community archives as effectively practicing MPLP by default (234).

MPLP's ethic of user service would likewise seem to be a natural fit for community or, in Isto Huvila's phrasing, "participatory" archives. Indeed, Huvila, who Caswell cites approvingly (*Urgent Archives*, 90), calls for a "radical user orientation," that the archive be "oriented and reoriented to its users all the time" (25). Similarly, Caswell's emphasis on making use of archival materials "*in the now*" rather than simply preserving them for "some vague future" (*Urgent Archives*, 38) would seem in line with MPLP's shifting of priorities from preservation to access. Christen and Anderson's call to rethink policies that limit access to physical materials, to make space for those materials to be "held, touched, and listened to" (112-13) may go farther than would Greene and Meissner, but seems inarguably in the spirit of what they propose as archivists' "real objective: making materials accessible to users" ("MPLP", 234).

Resistance to MPLP: substantive, political, or personal?

What is the source of these apparent contradictions? One possibility is that the disagreements are in fact more political, or even personal, than substantive. Greene has been a prominent and vocal opponent of the social justice archivy espoused by Caswell, who he accuses of "tension, confusion, paradox, or flat-out contradiction" in arguing both for archivists to resist injustice and for the value of archival evidence in pursuing accountability for that injustice (Greene 305). He has also been a critic of community archives, one of those Caswell describes as calling community archival practice "amateurish, symbolic of the erosion of archival professionalism" ("Survivor-Centered Approach", 310). Community archives, according to Greene, are "far too often located in rented space, staffed solely by volunteers, open for uncertain hours, and equipped with

dubious at best storage conditions" (qtd. in Light 106). Greene is similarly hostile to the values of Indigenous sovereignty espoused by Christen and Anderson, criticizing the 2006 *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* as calling for "a cultural hegemony by indigenous people at least as objectionable as the hegemony once exercised by European-descended archivists": a phrasing not only at complete odds with Christen and Anderson's goals of allowing Indigenous communities to control their own cultural materials, but one that situates such control as potentially *more* objectionable than control by mainstream archives—and one that situates the "cultural hegemony" of mainstream archives and of white archivists as safely in the past, rather than an ongoing harm in the present.[1]

Neoliberalism and Taylorism

It would not be surprising if Greene's politics were to color the perception of Greene and Meissner's arguments by Greene's political opponents. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the disagreements of Christen and Anderson and of Caswell with MPLP are only political. First, we should ask whether their characterizations of MPLP as "neoliberal" or "Taylorist" are in fact unfair.

Neoliberalism, according to Peter McDonald, "subordinates all control of our civic spaces, from local governments to universities, to the interests of market-driven models of efficiencies and profit-taking" (129). It is worth noting that the rhetoric, at least, of Greene and Meissner in defending MPLP is very much taken from the market and from the private sector. MPLP is about "maximizing return on investment (ROI)" ("MALP" 176). Archivists "are, first and foremost, managers" (203). Successful managers are those who "accept the unavoidability of risk as a normal part of their business environment." Archives should adopt a "business cost model" that requires users "to share somewhat more of the cost" of keeping archival collections (210). Jarrett Drake has connected such commercial metaphors and "neoliberal language" to the disempowering of archival users, their reduction to the role of "consumer" (276); whether or not one agrees, it is certainly a very different framing of archival work from that of Christen and Anderson, in which "[w]hat becomes central… is relationships with communities of origin" (107).

The meaning of "Taylorism" in a cultural heritage context is somewhat less concrete; "efficiency and economy" have been watchwords for library managers since the earliest days of the ALA, while scholars have at least as long been concerned that management expertise not displace scholarship (Casey 267). More recent critics, in an argument focused on the UK but applicable to many US contexts as well, have linked Taylor's work

and particularly its focus on performance metrics to the commodification and de-skilling of intellectual labor (Dominelli and Hoogvelt 78-9). Greene and Meissner are inarguably concerned with metrics, devoting to processing metrics several pages of their original paper ("MPLP" 222-27),[2] while decrying in the rarity of such metrics in their follow-up article five years later:

> what we find truly disturbing is that so few ARL repositories pay much attention to processing rates in the first place, or seem to make any attempt to either account for or analyze their presumably considerable investment in processing. If anything is calculated to confirm our belief in the importance of the entire MPLP approach, it is this apparently cavalier attitude toward processing statistics and accountability. ("MALP" 188)

It is thus easy to understand how MPLP could be seen as part of what J.Z. Muller calls "the tyranny of metrics"—summarized by reviewer Christopher Newfield as "a shift away from the proverbial knowledge worker and towards the knowledge manager [that] has demoted self-governed professional expertise and promoted arms-length control of that expertise" (1092).

In fairness to Greene and Meissner, they are nowhere calling explicitly for metrics to be applied *by* funding agencies or archival administrators *to* archivists. Arguably, they are calling for what Newfield proposes as the only use of metrics that can "causally improve performance"—the application of metrics not by (people) managers but by the professionals who do the work, empowered to exercise their own professional judgment, in the interest of delivering better service (1093). Nonetheless, in the years since, archival productivity metrics in general and processing metrics in particular have come to be seen as part of "a professional and institutional culture of toxic ambition" (Arroyo-Ramírez et al., 2-3), with harmful modes of "productivity, at any cost and expense", and a "product-over-people" mentality, in which people are "replaceable", "dehumanized", valued only "by what they contribute" (7). Greene and Meissner's intentions may not have been Taylorist, as such, but the metrics they have promulgated could certainly be abused by Taylorist managers.

Who is the archive for?

One could nonetheless argue that these objections to MPLP are, if not political, then still ideological. If we were to therefore set those objections aside, we should then next ask whether the resistance to MPLP is in fact counterproductive; whether the apparent value that we perceived for Indigenous and community archives in MPLP's user-centric ethos and its attention to resource constraints does, in fact, exist.

When Greene and Meissner imagine a "user," they have in mind a researcher, most likely an academic historian ("MALP" 178-9). Even MPLP critic Carl van Ness, in his concern for the user-archivist relationship, frames the user as a "researcher" or "professional historian"—though van Ness also points out that corporate and academic archivists are also their own institutional historians and hence their own users (140-1). When moving beyond the idea of "user" to that of "stakeholder", Greene and Meissner's conception is still quite narrow, identifying as stakeholders only "donor, researcher, and archivist" ("MALP" 206). Caswell's user, by contrast, is a member of the community the archive serves, and so is Caswell's archivist; in Caswell's model collection, description, and access decisions "are most often made by community members themselves" ("Survivor-Centered Approach" 311). Caswell's archivists are not concerned with "preserving traces of the past in the present for the future" (*Urgent Archives* 20); Caswell's users want to make use of materials today, "for discrete political action in the present", "to interrupt and change cycles of oppression in the now" (64, 21).

Christen and Anderson, for their part, are barely concerned with "users" at all. In contrast to MPLP's user-centric, access-centric modality, their more urgent concern is preventing *mis*use of archival materials by outsiders, prioritizing the needs and perspectives of communities of origin and breaking the pattern of appropriation of Indigenous cultural materials by outsiders and the state (104, 105, 97): what DeLucia describes as a history of collection "predicated on logics of dispossession, appropriation, and repossession" in which knowledge is uprooted from communities, heritage is claimed and overwritten by "entrepreneurial outsiders", and Indigenous community members are physically disconnected from "the still-vital materials created by their ancestors" (80). Indeed, as Christen and Anderson document, the kind of academic researcher that Greene, Meissner, and van Ness imagine as an archival user has often been the adversary against whom Indigenous communities struggle to preserve their own heritage, when settler systems of property and copyright law come into conflict with Indigenous cultural protocols and values—as, in fact, have cultural heritage institutions themselves (103-104); and even well-meaning mainstream institutions have a poor track record of adhering to agreements with Indigenous stakeholders once made (DeLucia 86). Making more materials more accessible to users, in Christen and Anderson's view, is much less important than ensuring that those materials are made accessible in a way that respects Indigenous protocols; in the absence of that respect, not only is access not a normative good in itself, it can be actively harmful (101-2).

This is at odds with what Vesa Suominen calls "the logic of user-orientation", the idea that information systems and institutions are *for users* and should be analyzed and justified on that basis; it could even be seen as an extension to archives of Suominen's

call to conceive of libraries not only as information resources but as "heritage", as "part of social and cultural reality", with political and perhaps emancipatory dimensions (Suominen). It is also in the spirit of Huvila's participatory archive, which while it may include a "radical user orientation," places an equal importance on "decentralized curation," such that "curatorial responsibilities are shared between archivists (or information managers) and the participants in an archive," and on "contextualization of both records and the entire archival process", acknowledging "the importance of other than archival and organisational contexts of records, such as those of their originators, curators and users" (25).

Do Indigenous and community archives need MPLP?

On the question of resource constraints, it is worth reiterating that Indigenous and community archives have always operated in a resource-constrained environment. They have, both by necessity and as a matter of principle, developed their own ways of preserving materials and making them accessible in a way that respects the needs and values of their communities of interest (Cantillon et al. 53). Where community archives are concerned, far from needing to be convinced to shift resources from preservation to access, many of them have always put access first. Travis Wagner and Bobbie Bischoff have documented how rural community archives in South Carolina prioritize "making materials available as immediately as possible, often knowingly sidestepping more traditional processing practices" (166); Zelmarie Cantillon and her collaborators relate how community-based queer and feminist DIY archives strive to make materials "immediately available for use", with long-term preservation at best a secondary concern (52). In short, these archives simply do not have and have never had the compulsion to refolder and rebox every item, the "obsession to remove every metal fastener", that Greene and Meissner diagnose as the driver of archival backlogs ("MPLP", 221). Rather, they fall into the category of those archives for whom, as van Ness points out, "many of [Greene and Meissner's] recommendations have been accepted practice for decades" (130).[3]

It is also worth questioning the fundamental assumption in Greene and Meissner that time is a finite resource to be spent, consumed, invested, or saved ("MPLP"), or at least the universal applicability of that assumption. Christen and Anderson's "slow archives" might be taken as a rebuke to the idea of time as a resource; they call for time not to be saved but to be given, extended; for those who interact with materials to be allowed more time with those materials; for archivists not to make their processes more efficient but to do the "hard, slow, and steady work" of building relationships and of

dismantling colonialist systems (112-13). It is a truism among today's intellectual heirs to Taylor's "scientific management" that "you get what you measure";[4] Greene and Meissner's chosen measurements, of processing time spent and cubic feet of materials processed, are neither of them relevant to an archival praxis centered on engagement and "relationships of mutuality" (Christen and Anderson 113). Similarly, while Caswell takes the very title of her work from what she calls a "temporality of urgency," what is urgent for her is not the reduction of an archival backlog but the dismantling of white supremacy, a task rather less amenable to quantification (*Urgent Archives* 64, 99).

Conclusion: the limitations of MPLP, and the limits of archival vision

It is critical not to conceive of the relation between community or Indigenous archives and mainstream archives as strictly hierarchical, to categorize them according to binary oppositions such as naive/sophisticated or amateur/professional—to think of Indigenous and community archives as a distant, backward hinterland that has yet to take on the advances in theory and practice, such as MPLP, adopted by the metropolitan mainstream. Rather, as Caswell notes, mainstream archives have much to learn from the strategies that community archives have evolved to live with their constraints, "to survive without generous parent organizations and wealthy donors" (*Urgent Archives* 106). And beyond the strictly practical, community-based archival praxis has valuable conceptual lessons for the mainstream as well, as Terry Cook argues: from it archivists can learn to "think differently" about ownership, tradition, evidence, memory, and identity, as well as colonialism and the ethics of power, status, and control (116)—a reconception necessary if they are to build, as Christen and Anderson put it, an archival future that moves toward "archival justice that is reparative, reflective, accountable, and restorative" (92).

That "More Product, Less Process" had value to its original audience, at the time of its publication, seems undeniable. It is still advice worth keeping in mind by any archivist in danger of losing sight of the forest of greater archival imperatives for the trees of description and conservation. What is critical, however, is not to take the archival imperatives articulated by Greene and Meissner as normative. Colleen McFarland notes that for Greene and Meissner, reducing backlogs "is not an end in and of itself," merely a necessary part of efficient and effective archival management, and "a step towards 'professional maturity'" (qtd. in "MALP", 184). But professionalism alone is not sufficient; professionalism, as Howard Zinn warned archivists almost a half-century ago, can be "a powerful form of social control… maintaining things as they are, preserving traditional arrangements, preventing any sharp change in how the society

distributes wealth and power" (Zinn 15-16). We must not limit ourselves to a narrow conception of the role of archives and archivy, one that relegates archivy to, as Ramirez puts it, "a state of banality where archivists function solely as 'servants' to their public and profession, and stop asking more of themselves and their work" (346). We must focus not only on how we do what we do, but why and for whom. In the neoliberal language of the market, before we invest in producing "more product", we should make sure that the product we produce is one that adds value.

Notes

[1] It is an argument that needs, as Caswell might put it, a stronger power analysis (*Urgent Archives* 38, 42); one that, as Mario H. Ramirez says in his response to Greene's "A Critique of Social Justice," resists interrogating "the role and complicity of archivists in structural inequalities" (346).

[2] As well as the paper's last words: "Processing 400 feet per processor per year (or more) is not a theoretical goal; it is achievable. Let's get on with it" ("MPLP" 256).

[3] Or at any rate for years—some of these institutions having not yet reached their second decade.

[4] The earliest occurrence I could find of this phrase was in a 1970 *Bell Telephone Magazine* article by Henry M. Boettinger , in which it was already placed in scare quotes and described as "a management aphorism" (24).

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