Interview with Wendy Duff

Wendy Duff is associate professor at the Faculty of Information, teaching coursework in archives and digitization of records. She is a founding member of AX-SNET, an evolving international team of researchers interested in facilitating access to primary materials. Her current research interests focus on the development of generic user-based evaluation tools, the information seeking behaviour of archival users, and archival reference.

Jonathan Lofft: Thank you Professor Duff. So, how does the shift to the iSchool model affect your research?

Wendy Duff: I’m very interested in the area where archives, libraries and museums come together. I’m also interested in archives as instruments of social justice and accountability. I think that if you look within the world of critical information-making you’ll find a lot of people in similar areas. This is interesting, because if you’re speaking of social privacy and surveillance then you’re talking about records. Most of the research I do really looks at making records more accessible. Always in archives, though, access is qualified. So I’m interested in that balance.

If you compare our program at Toronto with that at UBC prior to iSchool, then you see we have a common foundation. I’m interested in locating areas in which we can work together and learn from each other and also areas where we have different ways of doing things. Take metadata: archivists, librarians and curators all describe things very differently, and with good reason. So how do we create an interface where those differences cease to be barriers while still respecting reasonable differences? How do we understand where we diverge and converge?

I’m not certain I embrace the iSchool label just because it’s sexy. I come from an interest in cultural heritage, whereas many of the iSchool's re-brand themselves as a part of their marketing.

JL: As ‘Tomorrow’s Information Professionals’?

WD: That’s right. And archivists aren’t just about information, we’re also about evidence, which is different. Of course there is information in archives, but evidence demands its own unique metadata and understanding. Now we’re an iSchool with a complimentary Masters and if that’s a benefit to students that’s fine, but I feel it's important we know why we're doing it and how it affects our foundation. I don’t want to be in a place where we don’t share and appreciate the knowledge we have. There’s no one outside the archives world who will have the same depth of understanding as Heather MacNeil (a recently hired faculty). We have the potential to gain a unique perspective that can inform and be informed because of our diversity. Together we can form this really powerful unit, and also celebrate our differences. Maybe, like Canada, each culture at its best will help to form this amazing whole. That’s what I hope for our Faculty.

JL: A very optimistic view. How does this shift affect course content? Have you already brought or been asked to bring in new material? Any thoughts for the future of your teaching role?

WD: I would suggest it's premature. They changed the name. In fact, it was only a week or so
ago we changed the degree finally. I was there on education council. But we don’t have a new curriculum, so none of the students we have here are learning anything that has changed. They are developing a new curriculum, but I’m not on that committee.

Once that’s in place then ‘how will existing courses be changed?’ What I’d like to teach, that I haven’t before, is a basic introduction to archives for non-archives students, as much because of the merger at LAC (Library and Archives Canada) as the iSchool shift. They’ve just merged these institutions in Ireland: archives, library and museums. All those things happened before iSchool.

I teach courses related to a professional education and I imagine I will continue to do that. I think that one change we will see with the iSchool will be the introduction of other types of students, that is to say non-professional students.

JL: While we’re speculating wildly about the future, do you see an even larger scale shift toward amalgamation where we might see something like ‘Information Canada’ down the road, or do you see traditional boundaries being preserved?

WD: In BC the archive reports to the museum - huge problems! - the two just don’t work in the same way. In Quebec, the archives and the library have joined forces, but have preserved autonomy for their day-to-day operations. At the national level, what Ian Wilson (Librarian and Archivist of Canada) will tell you is that they have transformed the organization. There is also the information management aspect; a lot of archives people go on to run those centres. When talking to people in the Privy Council Office, what they say is ‘oh, in those head jobs librarians can only move so far because you need to have a much broader base of understanding’. However, quite often people do come up from records management and archives.

I think there are a lot of players in the world when it comes to information, because everything’s information. You have auditors; look at how the treasury board has a big role in what happens with the web! Library and Archives Canada is responsible for documentary heritage, not all information, and in fact I'd suggest they’ve done a fairly poor job managing government assets of information. I would like to go and study the competencies of librarians and archivists, to compare and contrast them. What’s been done in the past is superficial. Records aren’t designed like books, with different primary uses. You have to describe them and fill in a lot of information. They’re both creative and analytical descriptions, yet are still different. We call a certain body of information and skills the competencies of an archivist, but different competencies can bring a much deeper knowledge. I think the knowledge of an archivist will be needed in the future. I think it will be needed more.

JL: Good news.