Archives in the Classroom: Reaching Out to Younger Canadians Through Archival Documents

by Heather Pitcher

Archivists and archives until very recently have ignored school classrooms – students and teachers – as a potential audience. History and Social Studies teachers in both elementary and high-school classrooms are constantly searching for ways to impart knowledge to their students in innovative ways and to make learning exciting. By examining the relationship between school teachers and the archive, two sets of needs can be met: teachers will have access to primary sources and the engaging stories that they tell, while archives will have the opportunity to connect with a new audience, thereby further justifying their existence to sponsors. This thesis explores the issues of public programming by archives for schools, and offers an example of a concrete solution by designing an original curriculum tool in Manitoba at the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives.

After examining relevant archival and educational literature on the use of primary sources in the History or Social Studies classroom, the thesis traces the historical development of this practice in the twentieth century. These textbooks brought primary sources to the classroom in transcript form without communicating context or material characteristics. The shift from rote learning of facts to inquiry-based learning in the history and social studies curriculum witnessed the appearance of the Jackdaw Kits of the 1960s and 1970s, and more recently, with the improvement of reproduction capabilities, the visually appealing resource kits of the 1990s. As computer technology emerged on the education scene, educational resources were produced in CD-ROM format, creating a self-contained, portable tool that was readily available to computer-equipped classrooms. As the Internet gained popularity, “virtual” resources appeared as educational components on existing websites, or were established as independent sites.

The implementation of a new Social Studies curriculum in Manitoba calls for new classroom resources. The Hudson’s Bay Company Archives is answering that call with the development of a new educational kit based upon a selection of records that mesh with curriculum objectives, highlighting Aboriginal contributions to the fur trade and early development of Canada as a nation. Key to the successful development of this kit was teacher participation, evaluation, and follow up. The positive response from educators indicates that teachers want these types of tools, and their evaluation provides valuable information on how archives can go about improving relationships with the education community.