DIRECTOR’S BRIEF: PARTICIPATORY ARCHIVES

Vincente Gutierrez
INFO 287
Fall 2019
OBJECTIVE OR TOPIC:

To present the Dean of Libraries at California State University, Bakersfield with information on participatory archives and how it will benefit the Walter W. Stiern Library’s archive and the creative writing community of California’s Kern County.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Walter W. Stiern Library’s Historical Research Center (HRC) is a student and faculty developed resource that examines a historical topic and brings attention to that topic on the campus. Past topics have centered on topics relevant to Kern County, such as World War I, Immigration and Naturalization in the US, and the Delano Grape Strike. Most of these topics center on primary source materials that the archive has in its collection. One area that archive lacks is materials from Kern County writers and poets (creative writers). This service will bring creative writers into the archive to contribute their material to the archive for future generations.

INTRODUCTION

The Walter W. Stiern Library at California State University, Bakersfield has an archive with a wide range of collections but doesn’t have many archival collections centering on poets and writers located in the valley. Two of the goals of the library center on “providing the best educational resources to CSUB students and other library patrons” and delivering “engaging, complex ideas in a variety of ways to the widest possible” (p. 1-2). This participatory service will help fulfill both goals. “Kern Creative Writers in the Archive” will draw on Kate Theimer’s concept of “Archive 2.0,” Sofia Becerra-Licha’s overview of participatory and post-custodial archives, Caribe Sur’s Roots Archive, and Stephen Urgola and Carolyn Runyon’s chapter on participatory archives at the American University in Cairo. “Kern Creative Writers in the Archive” would utilize participatory services to: 1) bolster the libraries’ archival material within this subject, 2) bring attention to and become a document of creative writers in Kern, an underrepresented group, 3) draw public attention to the archival resources, and 4) break down barriers and allow for the community to become a participant in developing the library’s archival collection. Events will invite the community to submit original writings, manuscripts, and oral histories into the archive. The archive itself will welcome these submissions as well.
What is Archive 2.0?

Archive 2.0 approaches archives with “openness and flexibility” and emphasizes the user and uses in technology that will share collections, be interactive, and be internally efficient (Theimer, 2011, p. 60). She also states that this isn’t a practice of the future, but what archivists are doing already. One aspect of this is the archivist and archive as a facilitator and utilizing and inviting user contributions and descriptions and collaborative archives (p. 61). This is where participatory archives enters. Other principles encourage transparency, utilizing technology, sharing standards with other archives, being open to change and innovation, and flexibility.

What about participatory archives?

Participatory archives utilize concepts of Archive 2.0. It focuses on the user as opposed to the gatekeeper. It emphasizes “opening up” the archive and using crowdsourcing techniques for the collection and the description of materials. An open digital environment often breaks down these barriers and calls upon community users to submit materials and have active control over what is shared and levels of access (Beck, 2016, What is participatory archiving section).

Origins

Archive 2.0 is a term that was developed and defined by Kate Theimer in 2008 to describe practices that have been emerging and will continue to be emerging in library archives. Michael Casey’s Library 2.0 is cited as an inspiration of for Archive 2.0 and uses similar concepts and principles.

The origins of participatory archiving aren’t completely clear, but it became more prevalent as a result of the proliferation of the internet and technology which allowed for accessibility, collaborative projects, and ease of access. Becerra-Licha (2017) states that digital archiving “invites archivists to revisit core assumptions about authorship and authority, about context and hierarchy, and about advocacy versus agency” (para. 5). Participatory archives puts digitization in the hands of those that the materials are centered upon. This empowers those users and may give them a sense of community.

Global Impact

For marginalized communities participatory archives allows for those groups to be active in sharing, have control over what they share, and shape their histories. It can show the importance, identity, and contributions of that community in the context of history, such as the
communities in Caribe Sur, where rapid change has not allowed “meaningful documentation about the community’s history, identity and rights” (Beck, 2016). The South Caribe Roots Archive’s mission is to

create a replicable model of community based human rights advocacy that uses storytelling and digital archiving to foster community resilience, empower citizen engagement, and increase access to information so that local communities may have a meaningful state in their history and their future. (Beck, 2016)

Archive 2.0 and participatory archiving has also been utilized at the American University in Cairo to document the January 25 Revolution. The library utilized materials from participants in the revolution to collect and digitize materials including artifacts (such as tear gas canisters, flags, stickers), oral interviews, and videos related to the revolution. This made the project an active document of Egyptian history to be used by future historians. These two descriptions of participatory archives were essential to the planning of this participatory service.

AREAS OF BENEFIT AND CONCERN

The benefits of these programs are that they shed light on underrepresented groups. It allows these groups to control what they share, how they share it, and allow them to be an active member in the creation of their histories. Kern creative writers don’t have an outlet or method
for this currently. In looking at the benefits to this specific group in relation to this service, it
could improve and encourage members of this group to see the library as a support for creative
works, a safe place to create. It would also bolster the primary source materials available to the
archive for future researchers. Dr. Michael Stephens (2016) also states that “participatory
spaces are where learning will occur” (p. 81). Participating community users, authors, poets,
students, faculty, librarians, archivists will all gain knowledge from the service through the
sharing and classifying of materials.

Since there isn’t any documentation on developing a participatory archive for this group, it will
need some of experimentation. Archive 2.0 calls for “iterative products, not ‘perfect’ products”
(Theimer, p. 63). This project will be an effort in that. Another issue that could emerge is
copyright. Some publishers may take issue if a work is placed into an archive before it is
published. This is an area that may need to be clarified by archivists before a donor decides to
publish. This area may take extensive research or necessitate the advice a copyright expert.

“Kern Creative Writers in the Archive” will utilize archive 2.0 principles and participatory
archives to bolster its collection in this area. It will call upon poets and authors to contribute
their works to the archive to document their impact and record their history in the valley. The
event and service will ask for original writings, drafts, and oral histories in documenting this
community. Several events should be planned to accept materials. Poet and author “write-ins”
could be established to collect oral histories and creative original works from participants.
Archives can also become a direct source of materials for creative writers. Writers could be
invited to explore the archive and utilize the archive for material on works. This is outlined by
Emily Lonie in her blog post “Fonds or Fiction? Archives as Inspiration for Creative Writing”:
“For fiction writers, archives can be of great use.”

**IMPACTS**

Users of participatory archives have more control over their own histories, thus are empowered
through this control. The archive becomes a place of power, a safe place, a place of community.
Beck (2016) describes the following benefits to the South Caribe Roots archive users:

- The identification, collection and use of historical sources to document histories
  perceived to be ignored or misrepresented.
- Active engagement in the construction of history rather than passive or disinterested
curation.
- History-making as a participative practice - as heritage activism.
- Embodiment of DIY cultural and political engagement (i.e., without the aid of
  “professionals”).
- Making the past “useful” - community-based archiving as social movement activism and
  mobilization.
- Community-based history-making and archiving for education and identity formation.
• Creating spaces of aspiration and possibility.
• Community-based archives as community-owned space (place of safety, place of resistance, as monument to presence)

These benefits highlight the importance of participatory archives and how they can change the community and outsiders’ perceptions of that community. For creative writers in Kern, implementing this participatory archive could have similar impacts, such as empowering them and their works, inspiring them in their creations, and bring a sense of identity to the community.

SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

Successful implementation depends on archivists giving up some control, but not their standards and principles. This is a movement from a passive, waiting repository to an archive active in today’s events and people. It also depends on contributors becoming willing to share and donate their works and voices to the project. A partnership with the Writers of Kern will help in this regard. Technological demands may be another issue, though the Walter W. Stiern Library is well-equipped with digitization materials and an expanding archive space. The library has an oral history center, high quality scanners, and the newly allocated archive space. Other libraries may have difficulty in this area if they lack the technology to implement such procedures.

CONCLUSION

Kern Creative Writers in the Archive utilizes concepts of Archive 2.0 and participatory archives to allow this community to participate in the creation of its history. This idea draws from Beck’s examination of the South Caribe Roots Archive and Urgola and Runyon’s exploration of American University in Cairo’s University on the Square project. Theimer’s concept of Archive 2.0 and Stephens’ idea of participatory services also informed this project. While there may be some difficulties in terms of exploring this new service, the overall benefit will be that this underrepresented group can participate in building its own history and allow future researchers to investigate this group in Kern County. While Kern County may be a distant entity in the literary world, these voices matter and participatory archives will aid in amplifying that voice from here and into the future.
REFERENCES


Image credits:
