

SAA Presentation Notes

Slide One: Title/Introduction

Thank you, Sierra! And thanks to all of you for being here with us this morning. My name is Bridget Malley – I am currently an online MLIS student at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and a lifelong resident of western Pennsylvania. Over the past several months I've had the honor and privilege of working with the Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action Consortium as their preservation scholar – meaning I help manage the inventory, research and write newsletters, conduct outreach, and more.

From a practical standpoint, the work the Consortium does is important because – as my colleagues have shared – these records are simultaneously plentiful and scarce. Plentiful because activists, advocates, organizations, and institutions have generated a wide variety of records spanning the last century. Scarce, because these records are often scattered in many places, not readily available to the public, and – compared to the records of other groups throughout history – greatly underdocumented.

That's why it's been wonderful to be a student and work with the Consortium at the same time – I get to ask 'What if?' questions about real situations and daydream a little. It did make the research process easier when writing papers!

So today, as my small contribution, I've picked out some takeaways about elements of DS that have, unplanned, arisen in the

Consortium, and how DS might best be applied to documenting underrepresented groups.

Slide Two: Defining Documentation Strategy

As a refresher, here are two definitions of documentation strategy, as proposed by two of its earliest proponents:

“...archivists have no choice than to conduct their appraisal according to the emphasis and weight placed on events of the time by contemporaries.”

–Hans Booms, ‘Überlieferungsbildung: Keeping Archives as a Social and Political Activity,’ 1992

“A documentation strategy is a plan formulated to assure the documentation of an ongoing issue, activity, or geographic area [...] ordinarily designed, promoted, and in part implemented by an ongoing mechanism involving records creators, administrators (including archivists), and users.”

–Helen Willa Samuels, ‘Who Controls the Past,’ 1986

The general idea, then, is to ensure documentation of a given topic through collaboration with records creators and users, utilizing subject knowledge to make this happen.

Slide Three: Hans Booms

Hans Booms first began thinking about the need for documentation strategy when his own experience in 70's in Germany led him to witness how, over time, archivists' approaches to appraisal were often either based traditional values – we've always kept these sorts of records, so we'll keep keeping them – or subjective values, the idea that one 'just knows' when something is of archival value to future generations; or, in extreme circumstances, based on what the cultural consensus of the present moment demands be kept. Booms posited that in order for truly ethical and adequate appraisal to take place, archivists had to educate themselves on the events that proved to be culturally significant in the past, as viewed by contemporaries of that time. Critics of DS have pointed out that this sort of knowledge takes years to build, and so isn't it rather impractical?

For the Consortium, this knowledge comes from subject experts – the members of the committee, as Sierra mentioned earlier. Many of them are parent advocates and self-advocates who have been involved in disability-related fields for decades. They are able to provide readily available insight into their own records and identify records that may be of interest.

So, simple suggestion: Get out into the community you're documenting and, if you can, put together a committee.

Slide Four: Helen Willa Samuels

Helen Samuels also notes the usefulness of documentation strategy in the face of an abundance of records, though she comes from a strictly institutional approach and favors using functional analysis to implement documentation strategy – makes sense, you can look at an institution’s history and its structure and get a sense of what is important to keep. However, disability history records are – as I said – fewer in number and more widely dispersed than most. How is an archivist to gain an in-depth knowledge of the history and values of every individual and organization within the disability movement, including those who are gone? In this case, documentation strategy actually becomes a useful tool when faced with a lack of abundance – actively seeking collaboration during appraisal makes gaining meaningful context easier than it would be otherwise. It also makes learning of the existence of records in the first place possible.

Now, in Samuels’ definition of DS, ‘Promoted’ and ‘in part’ are the words that caught my eye. One of the often-cited concerns about documentation strategy is that it’s difficult to sustain, that it drains resources – I think this comes from an effort to apply it in full, beginning to end. It’s better suited as a framework – the map, not the journey itself. Just as the Heinz History Center has been able to create more accessible exhibits one by one, so too can DS improve the documentation of a particular subject – if carefully and gradually applied. My mom’s favorite saying is ‘just hit the target,’ meaning you don’t have to have a bulls eye every time. Enough is good enough.

A little bit of a personal analogy as I look at suggestions gleaned from Samuels' work: I'm used to being the only deaf person in a classroom. Often, I have to teach my teachers how to make their material accessible. In an ideal world, all their material would already be accessible – however, because I was there, that's one more set of course materials that have been made accessible.

Even if you don't have a committee put together, it can be helpful to have just one person appointed as a liaison who can spot opportunities for documenting the underdocumented or – shameless plug here – opportunities for making records more accessible, bit by bit.

Slide Five: Doris J. Malkmus

Doris Malkmus takes a rather pragmatic approach to DS. In reviewing efforts to implement DS, she noted that those initiatives that failed tended to lack clearly defined topics and/or regions.

Of course, part of **what makes the collaboration between the Consortium and the History Center so strong is the fact that our missions – to document WPA history and a particular subsection of that – overlap. For the Consortium, we are limited both geographically and topically. If disability records were more abundant we might still have some issues, but scarcity actually makes the collecting process a bit easier.**

So, the takeaway is that **DS is best applied in limited circumstances**. If you as a lone arranger or as an institutional archivist are interested in utilizing DS to document an underrepresented population or topic, great! Just **be very clear what you're documenting, make sure it's within your existing scope, and don't overextend**. If a collecting effort already exists and you'd like to be part of it, lend your resources and your support.

Slide Six: Jennifer A. Marshall

Jennifer Marshall, one of the newer – relatively speaking – voices in documentation strategy – also takes a pragmatic approach and **notes that documentation strategy can be a drain on resources compared with other appraisal strategies and methodologies**. Moreover – and depending on your theoretical standpoint, this could be good or bad – **DS often influences records creation since you're involving the records creators themselves in the process. However, encouraging records creators within underdocumented groups to create more records can be a way to target and close gaps in the historical record.**

The Consortium is doing this through conducting oral histories, aiming to record and preserve the stories of individuals with and without disabilities in a time when you might only ever see one disabled individual in your lifetime. We also put on twice-yearly events, both educating the public and demonstrating to records creators that their work is of value.

As for sustainability, I can't speak from much experience yet but it seems to me that the Consortium being able to seek out and contribute its own funds for disability records identification and preservation has helped greatly. *

Slide Seven: Takeaways

So, here are the final takeaways I've gleaned from working with the Consortium and falling down the wormhole of DS literature:

- ↻ Build knowledge alongside community partners
- ↻ Use projects to make disability history visible and to gradually increase access
- ↻ Know and clearly define your limits; lend support if you can
- ↻ Something is better than nothing

Slide Eight: Resources