Review of Putting Descriptive Standards to Work

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Review of *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work*

Edited by Kris Kiesling and Christopher J. Prom. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2017. 362 pp. Softcover. ISBN: 978-0-931828-99-7

"Description," Kris Kiesling writes, "is the foundation of archival work." With that in mind, she provides an outline of the history of descriptive practice through the lens of standards creation and development efforts. Kiesling, herself involved in standards development and promulgation, and currently a fellow of the Society of American Archivists is uniquely qualified to talk about description. She attributes the shift toward new ways of sharing and linking data in the archival profession to a variety of factors—including the new ways items are discovered. She states that these new ways of sharing and linking data have served to emphasize the importance of standards. The first volume in the Society of American Archivists' Trends and Archives Practice series, *Archival Arrangement and Description*, "summarized standards for describing archival materials, processing digital records, and designing descriptive and access systems. *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work* takes a deeper dive into the tools of the trade" (p. 5). Far from serving as an optional component to the essential volume on archival arrangement and description, this volume, the seventh in the series, illustrates how standards are applied. It provides a necessary and realistic context for implementation of standards.

The first of the four modules comprises the bulk of the volume with 142 pages dedicated to providing what Cory L. Nimer, University Archivist at Brigham Young University, envisioned as an "illustrated guide" to using the *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS) manual. The module aims to help readers develop detailed planning documentation so that they can consistently implement DACS in their institutions. Nimer acknowledges that the shift towards using a content standard may sometimes be seen as reductive to the more comprehensive nature of established institutional descriptive practices, but posits that standards adoption brings undeniable benefits. These include the fact that searching across institutions can become more cohesive for the user and archives work can then support the "exchange and reuse of archival descriptions within this wider community" (preface, p. 12). This argument highlights a central tension in standards implementation: that both extended accommodation for the institution's practices and adoption of shared community standards are often in conflict. The module argues that the main aim of any standards implementation plan is to ensure an institution successfully meets patron needs as well as its own.

A discussion of each element within larger implementation planning concerns is headed by questions surrounding its use and a list of *Resource Description and Access* (RDA) considerations. Nimer adapted to changes to the newest edition of DACS by offering Encoded Archival Description (EAD) and Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC) encoding examples to replace those removed from the DACS manual. These rule-by-rule contextual aids are preceded by an introduction to the history of the standard's development, and succeeded by thoughts of possible future changes, putting any implementation plans in long-term context.

Kelcy Shepherd opens the next module, *Using EAD3*, with an introduction that explains her focus on "decision points, overarching process, and management" (p. 160). Neither the basics or details of XML, nor hierarchical, multilevel archival description concepts are part of this module, although some helpful XML resources are listed in further reading in the appendix. Shepherd defines EAD, explains its emergence and importance, while taking a comprehensive view of the collaborative activities involved in implementing EAD. The presentation of criticisms of EAD within a strong case for the standard can help orient those new to implementation. Decisions to be made in moving from EAD 2002 to EAD3 are outlined. She also describes the new opportunities presented in EAD3 for more granularity, discussing dates of the materials and controlled subjects and names, all with options for different directions depending on implementation goals.

She covers processes and aspects of planning and creating, and concludes with recommendations for those considering implementing and updating EAD encoding. Appendices include case studies, further reading, and 34 pages of code examples from various institutions. The case studies in this module are written summaries of the implementation process from three institutions, all valuable demonstrations of decisions uniquely shaped by the goals and circumstances of their initiatives. Shepherd maintains that the success of an archives collection management system, even when encoding becomes a byproduct of the description process in the way Nimer describes in the future considerations in his module, depends on understanding how structured data moves between systems.

Katherine M. Wisser, the author of the module *Introducing EAC-CPF*, is an associate professor at the School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, where she teaches courses on archival description and metadata. She led the group that formalized Encoded Archival Context—Corporations, Persons, and Families (EAC-CPF) and continues to work to maintain archival encoding standards through SAA. This module presents a detailed introduction and justification for EAC-CPF and is more theoretical than the previous two modules. It traces the particular issues of context control within descriptive practices. Tools offered in this module are simple charts of schema structure, examples of code to illustrate insights into the design of the schema, and illustrations of identities that relate to one entity, and then later, appendices for further reading, crosswalks, and a detailed case study authored by co-editor Christopher J. Prom that includes figures showing how the University of

Illinois Archives EAC-CPF implementation displayed in a webpage, and the code and process behind it.

Though EAD and EAC-CPF share some elements, the difference between EAD and EAC-CPF are found in what they describe: EAD concerns unique materials and EAC-CPF agents (the creators, users, and those associated with the materials). Describing agents puts EAC-CPF in a position to connect the work of archives with the potential for sharing and preventing duplicate work across institutions. Wisser shows how this potential expands as EAC-CPF is combined with complementary standards. Her examples show how combined standards use results in richer descriptions. Regardless of an institution's intentions for EAC-CPF adoption, Wisser points out that pulling out and standardizing agent descriptions toward context control can make data within an institution more structurally sound and readied for future developments in metadata standards. The module captures the possibilities the standard presents while underlining its relevance for any archive. Wisser admits "The greatest impact of a standard like EAC-CPF is that it forces us to reexamine our understanding of archival description and the ways that that description interacts with systems" (p.277).

Aaron Rubenstein, university and digital archivist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and author of the last module *Sharing Archival Data*, like Wisser, helped develop and maintain EAC-CPF. He also teaches at Simmons College. Rubenstein covers standards in the interest of moving toward sharing data, so this module, unlike the others, is not meant to be used with any one standard. He looks at the full environment for sharing data both in and "outside the realm of archives" (p. 301) in explaining foundational concepts in structured data standards to support his discussion of best practices in sharing data. Viewing archives metadata as data is encouraged and enabled with an accessible discussion of serializations, systems archives use to manage data, data modeling as it relates to choosing a standard, and the possibility of archives metadata as a platform.

Rubenstein offers a list of practical, accessible ways to move toward sharing data that "doesn't require a team of programmers" (p. 328), based on a ratings system meant to prompt improvements regardless of the current state of an institution's data policies. The module concludes with two case studies, one a simple practical solution to what one institution noticed was a lack of findability of their online finding aids, and the other a sophisticated example of a philosophy of openness in technical design of institutional data.

Reading printed pages of code and navigating an overabundance of acronyms are only a few of the difficulties of presenting technical aspects of the work and tools of archival description. The text does all it can to mitigate this problem, most importantly by careful approach, but also by streamlined book design. Bits of code serve as illustrations explaining important concepts in the text, preventing them from the problems of isolation on the printed page. Rubenstein in particular presents his

discussion of sharing and linking data with an inclusive and democratic tone. Both are examples of the successful way this volume actively addresses the problem of what Prom calls an "intractable literature."

Ultimately, *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work* aims to become a tool for information professionals connected to archives description and metadata work. The modules, best read together, collectively demonstrate the ways content and structure standards initiatives benefit from a holistic and coordinated approach. The volume presents a cohesive view of what it takes to bring these standards to effective use within an organization, and serves as a compelling invitation to information professionals connected to archives work to participate in living description standards—which, as Wisser points out, can provide input to inform standard maintenance (p. 245)—and share what Rubenstein termed a "gold mine" of description metadata archives are already creating.

While few will ultimately participate in standards development, a volume that provides detail of the work involved in using standards emphasizes the necessary collective nature of such an endeavor. Those in the profession would never argue with Kiesling's characterization of the foundational nature of description and so might stop with the first volume in the series, but the challenges systems bring to standards work when they change the way people work and ask them to adapt, when systems become subject to individual interpretation and influence, when the theoretical and ideal submit to the practical, call for precisely this volume as a guide. Seeing what implementation looks like also encourages us to capture those decisions in the design of systems that may have been unknowingly left to default, and in this way reading about the implementation experiences of others may even lead to better solutions. The practical problem solving benefits from the added experience a community of practice offers make this volume vital for those interested in implementation of standards, but just as useful for those already using the standards by offering an idea of the varied landscape of systems connecting the work of the information professions. A student, archivist, digital preservationist, special collections librarian, or any other interested party, need not wait until a career's worth of experience is amassed before understanding what this landscape looks like—the experiences of the authors of this volume have captured it before it changes again.

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