
**Putting Descriptive Standards to Work:
Modules 17-20 in Trends in Archives Practice**

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The Society of American Archivists' *Trends in Archives Practice* is an open-ended series of modules intended to fill significant gaps in archival literature. The focus of the modules is practical management in the digital age. Though each module addresses a discrete topic (and can be individually purchased in electronic format), modules are grouped together within broad subject areas for the purpose of print and electronic book publication. Those included in *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work* (modules 17-20) are concerned with the implementation of the USA's national content standard DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard), EAD3 (Encoded Archival Description Version 3), EAC-CPF (Encoded Archival Context – Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families), and with the challenge of sharing archival metadata.

Module 17 – 'Implementing DACS: A Guide to the Archival Content Standard', authored by Cory L. Nimer – is focused largely on providing guidance for making decisions about the content of each data element in the DACS archival model. The introduction to this module begins with a brief and wide-ranging discussion of the purpose and nature of archival description, then outlines the evolution of national and international standards relevant to United States practice, reflects on archival description within the cultural heritage community, and concludes by discussing the administrative issues that arise from the flexibility of interpretation and implementation DACS has been designed to accommodate. In discussing the cultural heritage community, the author's focus is very much on the library community's MARC (Machine Readable Cataloguing) and RDA (Resource Description and Access) rather than on museum practices and standards. Following this brief introduction, the module is laid out as a manual for practice, with each DACS element individually discussed. A standardised format is followed: a cross-reference to DACS, a note on whether the element is required or optional (the latter being further subdivided as "added value" or "optimum"), questions archivists should ask in making decisions about the nature of the content to be included in the element, consideration of whether equivalent elements exist in RDA, discussion of the various types and forms of content that can be entered into the element (in

each case emphasizing that archival organisations should develop their own implementation guides in order to ensure consistent practice), and examples of how that content would be expressed in EAD and MARC. The module concludes with a very brief discussion of future trends and a lengthy list of further readings relevant to descriptive practice. Given its manual-like structure and relatively light discussion of the archives domain's evolving and contended descriptive practices, Module 17 will be of interest primarily to users of DACS and others striving to standardise relatively traditional hierarchical descriptive practice in their own organisations.

Modules 18 to 20, on the other hand, deal with topics of international importance in adequate depth and breadth to be used by both students and practitioners as good introductory texts. Module 18 – 'Using EAD3' by Kelcy Shepherd – begins by briefly outlining the development of EAD, discussing reasons for using it, and explaining its relationship with other descriptive standards. This is followed by an introduction to EAD3's overarching structure and discussion of EAD3 schemas, aspects of EAD3 that are new (the ability to capture more granular data, to encode multilingual descriptions, and ways of using EAD3 to make archival data ready to be expressed as Linked Open Data), and migration of data from previous versions. Thereafter issues relating to the implementation of EAD are discussed: preparation and planning, ways of creating EAD, transforming EAD3 for display and other uses, publishing and exchanging EAD, and usability. The module concludes with recommendations for archivists considering implementing or updating to EAD3 and with appendices listing further reading, describing implementation case studies, and providing code examples.

Module 19 – 'Introducing EAC-CPF' by Katherine M. Wisser – begins with a more extensive discussion of the development and nature of archival description than was provided in the introduction to Module 18. Australian practice, which began with Peter Scott's 1966 challenge to the traditional record group and which is now articulated in the Australian Society of Archivists' *Describing Archives in Context*, is acknowledged as "one of the most influential changes to archival description" since the publication of Muller, Feith, and Fruin's 1898 manual. Acceptance of Scott's claim that record group classification represents the provenance of archives in "incomplete and misleading" ways is positioned as a driver for the development of EAC-CPF. Accordingly, the late twentieth century North American tendency to submerge context control within the concept of authority control gives way, in this module, to explicit discussion of "a

fundamental mental shift” from the traditional one-to-one relationships between records and a creator to an entity-relationship model which enables many-to-many relationships. Context control is now seen as inclusive of authority control rather than as being nothing more than authority control. After this introduction to archival description, EAC-CPF becomes the focus of attention. The process whereby it was developed is described and also its relationship to other standards, namely ISAR-CPF (International Standard Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families), DACS 2nd edition, and the library standards RDA and FRAD (Functional Requirements for Authority Data). Next, the structure of EAD-CPF is described, including the flexibility and extensibility it has been designed to enable. Following this there is a brief discussion of other metadata initiatives deemed relevant to EAC-CPF and a longer discussion of implementations and uses of EAD-CPF. The module concludes with a discussion of the impact of EAC-CPF on descriptive practices and with appendices listing further readings, describing case studies, and tables showing crosswalks between FRAD, RDA, DACS, ISAAR(CPF), MARC authority, and EAC-CPF.

The final module – ‘Sharing Archival Metadata’ by Aaron Rubinstein – is the one I found most interesting. In this module Rubinstein moves from a historical overview of the development of standards for sharing digital data to a very full and easily comprehended introduction to the practices and technologies supporting linked open data: structured data, serializations, data modelling, APIs (Application Programming Interfaces), RDF (Resource Description Framework), and SPARQL (the standard query language and protocol for linked open data expressed in RDF). In arguing the case for greater attention to structured open data capable of linking with other data on the Web (rather than the implied closure associated with the concept of metadata), Rubenstein draws attention to changes that have been occurring in the nature of the Web; to the usability of archival descriptions, especially by members of the emerging digital humanities community; and to potential economies of scale, especially by means of linking to descriptions of contextual entities previously created and made open by other organizations. The module goes on to suggest practical approaches to expressing existing archival (meta)data as linked open data and concludes with appendices that list further readings and describe case studies.

Although each of the four modules in *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work* stands alone in most respects, a sequential reading is interesting in that it takes one from relatively traditional document-like approaches

to description through to discussion of the desirability and technological possibility for more granular and more structured data. This being the case, it is disappointing that the book's future-focused discussions do not engage with archival science's ever-growing body of critical literature and the suggestions critical theorists have made for enriching archival data by documenting and providing access to the viewpoints of those whose presence in the archive has typically been sidelined or ignored by archival descriptive practice. The focus is very much on the largely reactive standards that dominate the world of practice rather than the potential character of anticipatory standards that could move the profession closer to achieving the "liberatory" standard Wendy Duff and Verne Harris imagined nearly two decades ago. In linked open data, the technological means of achieving liberatory description may finally be within reach. However, to fully realise the potential of the technology, archivists need to give more than lip service to the fact that the concept of provenance need not be limited to corporate bodies, persons, families, and functions related to records in merely a few ways. They also need to recognise that multiple provenance can, as Chris Hurley has repeatedly argued, be simultaneous as well as sequential. Because of these limitations *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work* cannot be recommended as a fully-rounded introduction to archival science's evolving descriptive practices and standards. It is nevertheless a very good introduction to those standards which are dominant in practice today and to contemporary technologies capable of supporting even richer archival description.

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