

Always becoming: Practicing theory and the theory of practice in the messy reality of recordkeeping

Climate science; YouTube participants; indigenous communities; interoperable systems; pre-school children; animal rights activists; children in out-of-home care and displaced people: what do these have in common? All are impacted by the decisions made by recordkeepers, and all are involved in research by the Records Continuum Research Group (RCRG). Recordkeeping plays a significant role in the lives of people in every community, and it is essential that recordkeeping professionals understand the wider impact of their actions on others, as explored and described in the work of researchers. At the same time, recordkeeping researchers need to understand the many challenges facing recordkeeping professionals working with records and people in multiple, complex communities every day. A continuum perspective looks at research and practice in terms of the entire, real-world context in which they are embedded, encouraging inclusive research designs and collaborative projects which take into account the multiple perspectives of those affected.

The Records Continuum Model (RCM) was designed by Frank Upward at Monash University in the 1990s, with input from his colleagues, including Sue McKemmish, Livia Iacovino and others. The RCM is used as an aid for understanding and exploration of the processes of recordkeeping in relation to multiple contexts over space and time. Sue McKemmish has noted that “the record is always in the process of becoming”, as it moves through time and space developing new contextual and documentary relationships. Recordkeeping professionals, whether practitioners or theorists, “need to ensure our frameworks and systems preserve and make accessible accurate, complete, reliable and authentic records and archives” (McKemmish 2005), and to do this, we need to understand and reflect the complex contexts in which they exist.

This presentation will describe projects, past, present and future, of members of the multi-national RCRG, which investigates archival theory and practice from a continuum perspective as well as the social and practical impacts of such an approach on communities, individuals and organisations. The RCRG has been involved in recordkeeping research and education since the early 1990s, developing educational curriculum which highlights the significance of recordkeeping in data and information management and governance, and taking part in projects which bring continuum thinking into practice.

Members of the RCRG belong to a range of academic, community and professional backgrounds, and this is reflected in the diverse projects and publications it produces, including ground-breaking and societally impactful projects such as the SPIRT Recordkeeping Metadata Project (1999-2002), the Clever Recordkeeping Metadata Project (2003-2006), the Trust and Technology Project (2004-2008) and the Connecting the Disconnected Research Program (2015-2018). Members of the RCRG have also played key roles in developing national and international recordkeeping, metadata and archival standards. This presentation for RAILS will describe and outline several of the new projects, initiatives, and currents of RCRG members’ work, and the relationship and relevance to both researchers and practitioners. This description of the work of the RCRG will illustrate ways in which theorists and practitioners can collaborate to create fit-for-purpose theory and practice.

McKemmish, S. (2005). Traces: Document, record, archive, archives. In S. McKemmish, M. Piggott, B. Reed, & F. Upward (Eds.), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* (pp. 1–20). Wagga Wagga: Charles Sturt University. Centre for Information Studies.