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ArchivesSpace Collection Access Report

After my initial interview with University Archivist Caitlin Stamm, I chose to continue with the St. Louis University (SLU) Archives for my case study on archival description. The reason I decided to continue working with Ms. Stamm was for two reasons: the volume of unprocessed collections to choose from, and the experience of doing archival description work for a university archive. With my current experience as an Archives Technician, I have a limited idea of how description works for a federal institution like the National Archives and what to be mindful of. However, academic archives provide an opportunity to work with a wider variety of researchers and standards.

However, due to time constraints and the focus of this assignment being primarily on description, we decided to work on a collection that was in the process of being completely digitized, and would still provide me with a level of challenge due to the sheer size of the collection. The collection I ended up working on was the Walter J. Oda Collection, more specifically, I was able to provide descriptions for five items found in one of many sub-series from the General Files series for this collection.

SLU Archives & their Description Policies

As I learned from my previous research into the SLU Archives, their core mission is to preserve and make accessible the materials produced by SLU's staff, faculty, and students". This mission has shaped their appraisal policies on what type of material they

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are willing to accept into the archives, but also reminds them of who they collect the materials for. It is because the archive provides services to not just students and faculty on campus, but to researchers all over the world, that the archive lists access and use the top core value on their website. In Caitlin's words, "making collections accessible and usable is what makes having an archive useful in the first place. The collections we have are meant to be of use to everyone, and not just those here at the University." (personal communication, October 6, 2020).

With improved technology, and a growing number of requests for materials, and an ever-growing backlog of collections needing to be processed, the SLU Archives realized that like many other institutions, in order for their collections to be of use they needed to develop finding aids and catalogs that would help make their collections accessible online through digitization. Yet, digitization and processing can be lengthy, and so the archive has to be selective in what collections they put online. According to Stamm, "since we're not at the stage where we can upload each and every item. We have to prioritize what gets digitized and made available online. So far, only material that is in high demand is where we focus most of our efforts" (personal communication, October 6, 2020). It is because the St. Louis Archives is focused on digitizing works in high demand, that I was given limited access to the Walter J. Ong collection to practice my description with for this access report.

About the Walter J. Ong Manuscript Collection

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The Walter J. Ong Manuscript Collection, is the archives most inquired about collection. Father Walter J. Ong, S.J., is considered to be one of the most prominent and intellectual scholars of the 20th century, having published well over 450 works and consulted worldwide by scholars in other various fields, primarily those of English literature and humanities. Ong realized quite a bit into his career as a professor at St. Louis University that researchers and scholars all over the world would want to see his works, and upon his death had his collection donated to the Society of Jesus located on SLU campus. However, the Society decided “that the collections would be better served and protected with the St. Louis University Archives” (personal communication, October 6, 2020) and donated the entire collection to the SLU Archives in 2008.

When SLU took ownership of the collection, they found that Ong had a fairly well-organized system for his files, which made going through the 90 feet of boxes easier on the Archivist who was appraising the collection. The collection being so large, it was important to the archivist at the time who originally accessioned the collection to maintain the original order of the records as best as they could. In this case, maintaining original order of files is “key to understanding how a document was used and when it came into the creator’s possession” (personal communication, October 6, 2020). There was also the added benefit that arrangement and description would be easier when it came time to creating a finding aid for the collection, as a majority of the boxes and files had already been labeled by Ong himself.

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However, for my particular assignment, I was given a folder labeled *English, Miscellaneous: 152-600, The Origins and Study of Literature, 1938 -88*. This folder is actual one of many sub-sub folders located in the *General Files* series. In initially looking for a folder to work with, I found that the General Files series had been broken down into smaller sub divisions called *Filed General Files* and *Unfiled General files* as depicted in figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Image of the collection organization of the Walter J. Ong Manuscript Collection showing how General Files series is

broken down further into filed general files and unfiled general files. Retrieved from

https://archives.slu.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/22456.

When asked about this, Caitlin Stamm said that “the University Archivist at the time decided to basically add sub-series separating the files that had been filed, from those that had been unfiled. There was no way to tell if those unlabeled folders were

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intended to be part of one of the filed folders or not, and so it was best to simply create a new sub-series and name them according to what the majority of the contents were” (personal communication, October 6, 2020).

In this case, while the majority of the items were related to a class that Walter Ong had taught, I had chosen the following five items for description to attempt to describe: A student’s final exam paper from when he last taught the course, a grouping of thirty-two course evaluation slips from 1982, two letters of correspondence between Ong and Reverend Peter J. Fleming about creating the first English master’s course in Sojang University, a copy of Harold Fisch’s article *Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History*, and finally one of Ong’s own work titled *Beyond Objectivity: The Reader-Writer Transaction as an Altered State of Consciousness*. My thought in doing this was to think about it as if I were going to make these items available in the online catalog, and I wanted to be able to show how these five items were related to each other while also showing how they related to the main folder I pulled them from.

The Challenges of Description Work in ArchivesSpace

As my collection was comprised of text-based documents, a lot of the description work such as describing the extent, dates, and physical condition of the documents were fairly straight forward for me. I was working with what I could directly see and that helped me in the initial steps to creating an accession record, but I hit one of my first snags while coming up with identifier numbers. For the collection as a whole, the

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identifier for it is “DOC MS 64”, and should one follow along on the public interface for SLU’s ArchivesSpace page, you can see how the further into the collection you go, the identifier changed to say things like “series 2”, “subseries 1”, “file 111”. Opening the folder that I selected my items from, I found a notecard with the identifier properly written out as “DOC MS 064 002 001 001 111.” This helped me to see where the identifier number came from as well as how to format my own identifier for my descriptions for my chosen five items.

As depicted below in figure 2, I have provided an example of how I chose to format the identifier. In ArchivesSpace, you only have four blocks to create an identifier number, but that did not leave me enough room to fill out the complete identifier for my item. What I chose to do to fix this, was write “DOC” and “MSS” in two separate blocks, and in the third one wrote out the rest of the numbers needed for labeling where Ong’s *Beyond Objectivity* article was exactly located.

Basic Information	
Title	"Beyond Objectivity: The Reader-Writer Transaction as an Altered State of Consciousness"
Identifier	DOC MSS 64.2.1.1.0111.4
Accession Date	2020-10-24
Content Description	Eight (8) page article written by Walter J. Ong and published in volume 40, issue number 1 of "The CEA Critic".

Figure 2. Screenshot depicting unique identifier created for a new accession.

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Written out it reads “DOC MS 64.2.1.1.111.15”, and this neatly breaks down from box to item level where to find this document. 64 refers to the number of the collection, 2 refers to Series 2 for General Files, 1 in reference to the first sub-series in the General files labeled “General Files sub-series”, the next 1 for Filed General Files, 111 for the folder, and finally 15 for the exact placement in which the document was found in the folder.

What this revealed to me was why this particular collection, or any collection at SLU, does down not go down to accessioning at the item level. In consulting with Stamm, she agreed that creating an identifier for items for the purpose of my report was fine, but said that “if an item was important enough to warrant an identifier, I would put it in its own folder, rather than number the items within the folder” (personal communication, October 23, 2020). For her, she would only describe a collection down to the folder level, as they issue records out at to researchers at that level.

Even from a practical standpoint, I can see the appeal of not providing an identifier for items when the identifier can grow to be pretty big the more granular one goes into describing a collection. While ArchivesSpace takes long identifier labels into account, it can be confusing to researchers to try and request materials with an identifier like this. Especially true if there is no explanation noted on the website about how to request records down to the item level if SLU offered that option.

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The next step in creating an accession record in ArchivesSpace that was challenging was creating agents. Walter Ong kept a lot of research material that he referenced for his work, and so he had a lot of articles or papers that were given to or acquired by him that he was not the original creator of. This became a challenge to deal with, because when dealing with published works and trying to keep track of all the creators who had a hand in creating that document, it could be difficult to describe the relationship of the agents to the work. For example, Walter Ong received a copy directly from the author of the article *Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History*, and that work was originally published by Brill. So how do you show the proper relationship between Fisch, the Publisher, and Ong?

One feature ArchivesSpace has that was useful in helping me figure out what to do here, was that if you hovered over the name for the fields, a pop up box opens up that explains to you how to fill it out and even references to DACS in order to help you figure out how to name agents. Once I got started, Fisch and the publisher were easy enough to create agent links for because I was given the option to note them as Publisher and author. However, since Ong played no part in the creation of this article and could not be listed as a creator. Yet, it is a part of his collection, so I wondered if I should list him as a “Compiler” in one of the options for Relator terms offered to me from ArchivesSpace. In the end, I chose to leave him off because as far as the creation of this particular item was concerned, he did not make it and only included it in his collection.

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Next came to dealing with creating the subject headings. Subjects are important in helping researchers find the information they are looking when conducting a search online for records. They are essentially the common keywords one would use to find what they need online, so in order for a collection to be accessible the subject terms used help improve ease of access. That being said, the variety of material I found in my folder made this challenging. According to the folder, the documents contained were related to Ong's English 152-600 course between 1938 and 1988. I had a hard time deciding what terms to use to best classify all of the documents. I knew one of my subject terms was going to "English Literature" because the items in that folder relate to his course on English literature in some way, and one of the sub-headings would obviously be the date range for the collection. My problem was that the variety of the material inside made it hard to come up with decent subject headings that encompassed all of it enough. Wracking my brain to try and figure that out on my own, for an individual whose work I am not familiar with and a topic I have not touched in years was a hard. Referencing the Library of Congress subject headings, was helpful for some parts, but for someone not accustomed to description at all it was a bit overwhelming to try and figure out the proper structure. Nor could I find a term fitting enough that covered the items I'd chosen to create accession records for. In the end, I settled for the following subject heading: *English Literature—Reference materials—1938 -1988*. I chose the term "Academic Research" as a sub-subject because I came to the conclusion that majority of the contents in that folder was reference material for how

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he taught his “Origins and Study of English Literature” course. While not perfect, I find it a much better alternative term than “miscellaneous” because all of these items served some kind of purpose.

Lastly, the biggest issue I had with describing this collection in ArchivesSpace was showing the relationship between the items and how they fit into the overall collection. The folder I had been given to pick five items for description from, was just one folder of many bigger folders. When Stamm first offered this collection to me she explained that this collection “was organized to where you would open a box, pull out a folder, and you’d pull out another, and then another, and then another. All of them were organized in this way” (personal communication, October 6, 2020). So, I took on the challenge of figuring out how ArchivesSpace could help me show that relationship between the different levels in the collection, so that researchers could have a better idea of where to find what they needed and what identifier number they needed to give to request access to the item. When creating an accession, one is able to enter in “related accessions” and “related resources”. This is how archivists are able to show how things relate to each other within a collection.

To show how my five items fit into the folder I was given, I first created an Accession File for just that folder. I made sure to provide a scope note, the provenance, the condition of the folder, and the number of items exactly inside that folder. I then went and created another five more accessions for each individual item I described, and

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in the “Related Accession” module, indicated that all of these items were in a “Part of Relationship” with the folder as evidenced in figure 3 pictured below.

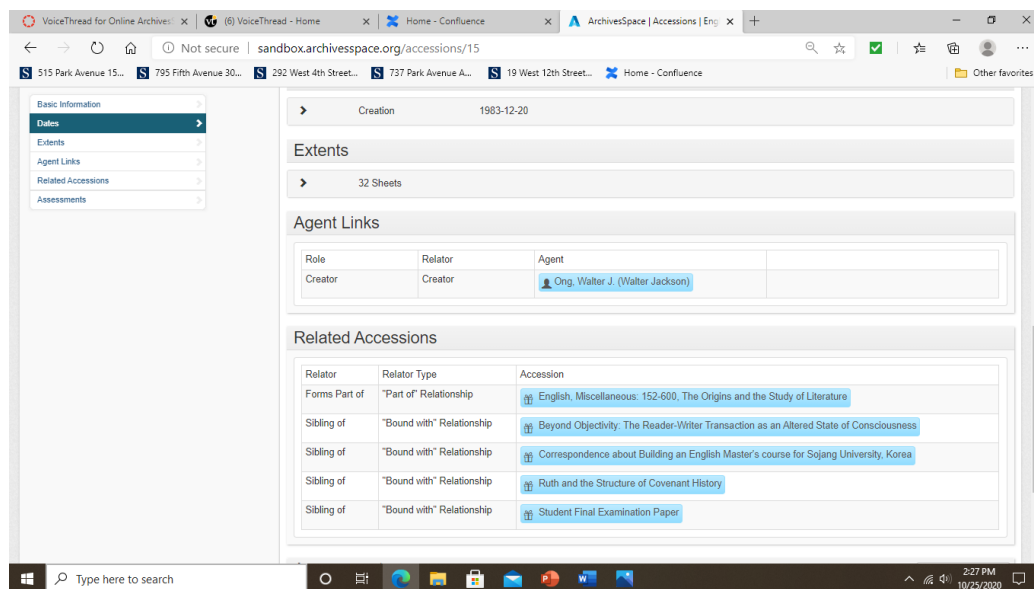


Figure 3. Screenshot depicting the related accessions for a folder using ArchivesSpace.

I then went to each individual accession created for the items I had selected and in the “Related Accession” module, indicated that that the records were in a “Part of Relationship” with the main folder, and in a “Sibling Relationship” with the other items. This way, the researcher would be able to see that all of these items were related to each other, because they were all a part of the *English Miscellaneous* folder.

While this was enough to demonstrate what I was intended to achieve for this report on a small scale, I wanted to have a bit more of the same experience Ms. Stamm herself was experiencing working on a big collection and developing a finding aid for

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this collection, and decided to basically make a finding aid that started with the overall collection and worked its way down to the item level.

What I learned was that I was basically able to recreate the same finding aid that St. Louis University Archives were using by creating “Resource” instead of an accession. Creating a resource allows for an archivist to do multi-level description, and provides a visual diagram of how what you are creating falls under each other. As evidenced in Figure 4 below, you can now see how the collection is organized in a much better format than simply saying in the “Related Accessions” or “Related Resources” modules that these accessions are related, and it’s much faster to use the “Add Child” and “Add Sibling” buttons to create those relationships.

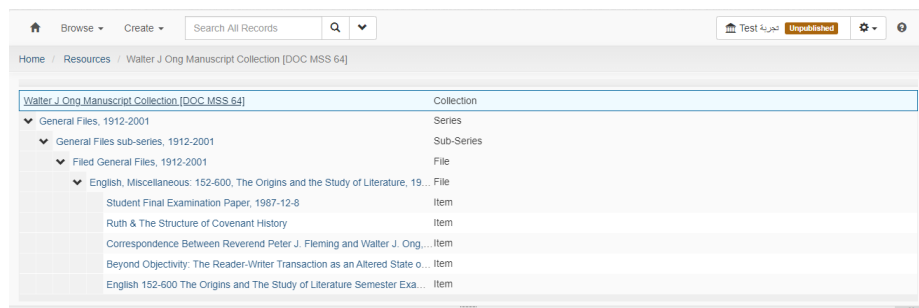


Figure 4. Screenshot depicting organization of the entire collection down to item level using ArchivesSpace.

The only downside is that when you get down to the item level, things like provenance, content condition, and a few other things common in the accession are lost here. What I had hoped to accomplish was to be able to add those item level accessions to the last sub-folder I had created, but there is no option to do that because

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when you click on “Add Child” or “Add Sibling” to create the next level of description, ArchivesSpace creates it as an “Archival Object” which requires much less information than if I were creating an accession. However, I feel this works incredibly well for developing a finding aid down to the item level. This can be really helpful for archivists dealing with small sized collections, but not ideal to for large collections like for Walter J. Ong. It explains why when searching through their collections online all you see is a finding aid down to at least the folder level. Everything else is just extremely time consuming, but also defeats the purpose of “More Product, Less Process” (MPLP).

Conclusion

Overall, when it comes to utilizing ArchivesSpace for description I feel that it does a fairly decent job of it once you are acclimated to it. There is definitely a learning curve that is there if you have never done any kind of description work before, but even a novice with enough basic instruction (and time) can figure out how to use the program. Building a finding aid essentially from the ground up really brings into perspective just how time-consuming description can be, and if it took me so long just to work out how to describe the folder of items that I had I can only imagine how much time was spent on processing collections prior to MPLP. One can really get caught up in trying to capture every little thing about an item or collection, but archivists have to utilize their best judgement on figuring out when they have provided enough information, and in how far they are willing to go to describe an entire collection. I certainly learned that despite my efforts to keep it simple, I probably still complicated things by getting caught up in those

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details. Yet, the overall experience of doing this work has led to an appreciation and better understanding of why archivists do things the way that they do.

It is no wonder archival institutions choose to prioritize what collections they get around to processing based on level of demand. Even for a mostly processed collection like this one, it's going to take years for a small staff to tackle and make it completely available digitally online. I feel that the approach they are taking works best in letting researchers know that the materials are there and available at the very least.

However, something I would do that they have not done yet so far, is that once they start digitizing materials for the collection instead of creating a new resource description or accession for an item like I had done they can upload digitized item files as an "instance" for accession record for the folder. This option allows for the archivist to insert digital objects into the accession or resource record created in ArchivesSpace, and this way they can avoid creating unique identifiers for each and every item.