

## **A future for the past? Grassroots archives, people's history, and Connexions**

### ***Some thoughts for the Connexions Advisory Committee***

As our statement of values says, Connexions works to preserve and share histories of grassroots movements for social justice.

The terms 'grassroots' and 'social justice' are broad and vague – inescapably so. The intent of saying 'grassroots' is to convey that we are primarily focused on the activities of small groups, the kind that typically may not have an office or paid staff, or at most a small office and a handful of paid staff. This is in distinction to larger NGOs, which have a more substantial and enduring organizational presence.

An important consideration is that larger organizations have more capacity to preserve their own archives, and to make arrangements for placing their records with an official archive if they eventually cease operations. Small organizations typically are more transient, with a shorter life-span – though there are examples of small grassroots projects which have survived and carried on their work for a remarkably long time. Connexions itself arguably fits into that category: it was founded in 1975, which means we are closing in on our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Connexions' focus as an archive has primarily been on the histories of small groups, both because their document collections are more at risk of disappearing, and also quite simply because Connexions itself is a small project which doesn't have the capacity to deal with the large collections of documents accumulated by larger organizations.

The other term in our mandate – 'social justice' – is even more difficult to pin down. As I understand it, the founding members of the Connexions collective, and those who followed them through the years, developed their vision of what social justice is through practice, that is, by selecting materials which they believed were rooted in action and values that reflected a commitment to justice. Naturally, there were thoughtful discussions, and sometimes vigorous disagreements, about what should be included and what should not. For example, there was a time in the early years when the Connexions publication included both pro-choice and 'pro-life' resources; a reflection of sharp disagreements within the collective on the issue of abortion. Eventually the decision was made that 'pro-life' materials would no longer be included.

However, the approach of including differing and sometimes conflicting views on the same issue has remained an important aspect of Connexions' practice. We have always employed a broad definition of the term 'social justice' and the related terms 'progressive' and 'left,' which we have also used in describing our mandate. Of course, it is always necessary to draw the line somewhere, but we have aimed for a wide diversity of views within the broad spectrum of the 'left.' One might say that where there has been a choice between including and excluding, Connexions' tendency has been to include.

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No matter how inclusive archives may seek to be, they are always surrounded by an invisible constellation of dark matter: history which has disappeared, materials which never became part of any archive. What is preserved, and what is not, is partly a matter of chance. It is also often a matter of access to resources. In a world where power and resources are distributed unequally, the work of some people – and the groups, projects, artefacts and documents they create – never make it into any archive. They disappear.

It is in this realm that grassroots archives play an invaluable role. Certainly institutional archives – for example, Library and Archives Canada, Archives of Ontario, City of Toronto Archives, Thomas Fisher Rare Books and other university archives – are tremendous cultural resources, often staffed by extremely dedicated and knowledgeable people. But their scope is vast, and their resources are inadequate to carry out all the responsibilities they are tasked with.

There are also dangers in centralization. Institutional archives have a level of stability that small independent archives cannot match, but in all-too-many instances, especially in these days of funding cutbacks, donated collections disappear into storage, often without even being catalogued. The materials are preserved from physical destruction, but no one sees them or uses them for research.

Grassroots archives, and people's history projects generally, often make up in commitment and passion what they lack in resources. Focused as they usually are on a particular cause or group, they bring in-depth knowledge, living historical memory, and a determination to preserve fragments of history which they think are important. They have a commitment to *sharing* as well as to *preserving*. I would like to see us work to help preserve these projects, and to share knowledge of their resources. To adapt an old slogan: 'One, two, three, many grassroots archives!'

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As we consider ideas for Connexions' own future, I think a worthwhile project to undertake would be to seek out and initiate contact with other grassroots archiving projects and people's history projects. One goal would simply be to find out what they are doing. Beyond that, we could explore whether there are opportunities for co-operation or collaboration.

In addition to 'projects', I would also suggest that we reach out to individuals who have, by choice or by accident, become de-facto custodians of collections of documents coming out of the history of social justice movements and the left. A number of years ago, Connexions organized a couple of meetings, and a display of materials from the Connexions Archive, at Beit Zatoun, which we advertised under the title "Is that an archive in your basement... or are you just hoarding?" The events were well attended, and also led to ongoing contact with a number of individuals who did in fact have an archive in their basements, or attics, or in a storage locker. Some of those materials eventually found their way into the Connexions Archive. Others ended up in other places, thanks in part to connections that arose out of these meetings.

In suggesting that we reach out to individuals and other projects, I am not suggesting that it should be a primary goal to seek donations of materials to add to the Connexions Archive. Our capacity is limited, and our own future is uncertain, given that we will have to leave our space at 95 St. Joseph, perhaps in 2024. As it is, Connexions is approached several times a year by individuals who are looking for a home for their collection of social justice

materials. We have some room for expansion in our current space, and we have been able to accept some donations of materials, but in some cases we have also worked to suggest other options. The goal is to ensure the survival of the collections of grassroots archives, in whatever setting is best suited.

In seeking out other archives and people's history projects, we would not be starting from scratch. Already on the Connexions website we have lists of such projects. (See the Connexions Archive home page: [www.connexions.org/CxArchive.html](http://www.connexions.org/CxArchive.html) and scroll down to the purple banner headed "External Archives." Another similar list is at [www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs2/SelectedArchives.htm](http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs2/SelectedArchives.htm).

And here is information about archives under threat:

[www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/CaseforGrassrootsArchives.htm#ArchivesUnderThreatLinks](http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/CaseforGrassrootsArchives.htm#ArchivesUnderThreatLinks)

I think that having information, the more detailed the better, about particular archives and people's history projects is a valuable asset for people using the Connexions website. The Connexions website certainly lists materials which are available in the Connexions Archive itself, but it also lists many resources which are available elsewhere. Many of these materials are individual documents, but we also list more than 1,000 groups and organizations, including a number of people's history projects and archives. I think it would be valuable to expand this part of the Connexions website by adding information about more projects and archives that our users might find valuable, and expanding the information about projects we already list.

One of the strengths of the Connexions website is that it provides a number of ways of searching and browsing the information on the site, including: Title Index, Author Index, Chronological Index, Format Index, Subject Index, and a Search tool. One of our guiding principles in developing the algorithm for the Connexions Search has been that it should guide users not only to what they are looking for, but related relevant materials which they didn't necessarily know they were looking for. We have also worked hard on search engine optimization, that is, on designing the site to optimize its ranking in Google and other search engine results. As a result, Connexions is a well-used site, with visitors ranging from scholars to junior-high students (the latter far outnumbering the former!) as well as activists of all stripes.

Including more grassroots archives and people's history projects, appropriately indexed, could add additional depth to the Connexions site, and so make it even more useful to the many people who use Connexions.org.

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What I suggest:

- 1) We share ideas among ourselves (i.e. among the members of the Connexions Advisory Committee and Board) about which projects and individuals we might get in touch with. This might include projects we already list but have no ongoing relationship with, projects we have never contacted, and also individuals who have accumulated personal archives related to social justice.
- 2) One of us contacts them to find out more about them, what they are working on, and what their collection contains. Perhaps we could even interview some of them about their project. I could imagine an oral history project growing out of this.
- 3) We add information about them to the Connexions database/Connexions website. (This would be for groups/projects but probably not individuals who have personal collections.)
- 4) We explore whether there is room for collaboration. This might perhaps including shared cataloguing, joint projects, and – who knows, perhaps openings for more extensive organizational collaboration, perhaps even sharing space.

In addition to the above, I suggest we, i.e. the members of the Advisory Committee, should also give thought to:

- (a) Possible sources of funding, both to pay fixed expenses like rent and Internet, and also project funding for digitization, cataloguing and website improvements.
- (b) The future of Connexions – both the physical archive and the website/digital archive – as the time approaches when we have to leave 95 St. Joseph.  
As Yogi Berra said, it's tough to make predictions, especially about the future. I don't think we can predict Connexions' long-term future, but I think we should aim to remain independent and active as long as possible, to work hard at cataloguing and digitizing as much of the collection as possible, and to work at making Connexions more widely known.

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This document is also online as an HTML page (with links to additional resources) at [www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs2/WES2246-GrassrootsArchives.htm](http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs2/WES2246-GrassrootsArchives.htm).  
It's also available as a PDF: [www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs2/WES2246-GrassrootsArchives.pdf](http://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs2/WES2246-GrassrootsArchives.pdf)