
Guest editorial: Festschrift for Michael Buckland

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When Michael Buckland came across cabinets full of dead birds at the University of California, Berkeley, he could not have imagined how the episode would change him. It was inside the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, through a little door shrouded within the mammoth Life Sciences Building, and it was open for one day only – and for the first time in 75 years.

Passing through the museum, Buckland saw the skeletons and pelts of animals he'd never heard of. But what caught his attention most was a set of flat file cabinets, the kind that usually store artwork and maps. But inside these particular cabinets were birds.

You open a drawer, and there laid in rows were dead woodpeckers and dead sapsuckers, with little tags tied to their feet. I gazed at this, and I had the unworthy thought: the campus is so short of space, they are using prime campus space for dead birds! I mean, really! It is true. At Berkeley space is more difficult to get than either staff or money. (Buckland, 2023, p. 36)

Buckland recalled something Russell Ackoff (in our field, now perhaps best known for the DIKW pyramid) had told him when they met that if something seems irrational, it probably means you just don't know the rationale yet.

So what might the rationale be for storing dead birds like documents in beautiful cabinets inside a museum at a university? Buckland recalls:

I thought to myself, well, it probably has something to do with the University mission and possibly they are research material for researchers to work on to discover what was not known or was known but they did not know it was known. Or it could be instructional material so that students could learn. Either way it has to do with learning and if you accept that proposition, as a librarian, it is clear: It is a dead bird lending library—or, rather, non-lending library. Functionally, in terms of the university's mission, it is no different from the books on the library shelves. It is just a different kind of document. (Buckland, 2023, p. 36)

After that epiphany, Buckland would talk dead birds with “anybody who could not run away fast enough.” One person who didn't run away was Buckland's friend, Boyd Rayward. Instead, Rayward handed over a photocopy of a page in French written forty years earlier by an obscure librarian named Suzanne Briet, explaining how an antelope could be a document. “Yet again my best idea had already been had by somebody else!” Buckland recalls. But Briet had been all but forgotten, and applying this insight to the contemporary context of information services was still going to be a challenge. Buckland got to work.

All this found its way into Buckland's next major publication, *Information and Information Systems* (Buckland, 1991a) and perhaps all his work since.

Finding the birds was a serendipitous discovery, but at the same time, it was something Buckland had been looking for all along. He had been trained and worked as a librarian, and he wrote several publications about library service, but all along he had the inkling that there was a more generalized way to think about such issues – a way that might also encompass museums and organizational records, for example.

This insight – and more generally, his endless, engaged curiosity – has colored Buckland's scholarship as well as his partnerships and mentorship. He has worked on practical issues in library service as well as library theory, document theory, and the history of information science. His full bibliography has well over 400 items (see <https://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/>)



[~buckland/](#) for a list and <https://escholarship.org> for depositions of Buckland's most important works). Buckland's service CV is just as ample, as we outline below.

It is all this that we wish to celebrate with this special issue of the *Journal of Documentation*, a festschrift for Michael Buckland. The articles published in this issue combine personal reflections with scholarly contributions, showing how Buckland has influenced each author through both his work and his encouragement. At the end of the issue, we include a coda written by Michael Buckland reflecting on the articles in this issue.

In this introduction, we would like to offer our own memories of Michael Buckland's influence. But to begin, it is worth summarizing some of Michael Buckland's accomplishments. A fuller account can be found in his oral history interview ([Buckland, 2023](#)).

A short introduction to Michael Buckland's life and works

Michael Keeble Buckland was born in 1941 in Wantage, England, about 70 miles west of London, near Oxford, the middle of three children. His father was educated at Oxford and became an Anglican priest. His mother's family owned paper mills, and she had traveled internationally. They were both active in Moral Re-Armament, an international moral and spiritual movement. His family lived in London, but during the Second World War, the infant Michael was evacuated to the countryside to avoid the bombings. The family later moved to rural Staffordshire, then to the industrial region of Stoke-on-Trent. In high school, he studied, particularly, Latin, French, English and history. Later, he attended Oxford University and studied history.

In 1963, Buckland became a trainee in Oxford's Bodleian library, before being admitted to the new library school at Sheffield University, where he later received his Ph.D. In 1965, Buckland joined the University of Lancaster as a librarian, and for five years, researched quantitative library planning. In 1972, he left to become Assistant Director for Technical Services at Purdue University Libraries, and in 1976, he was hired as Dean of the School of Library and Information Studies (now the School of Information) at the University of California, Berkeley. He served as dean for eight years until becoming Assistant Vice President for Library Plans and Policies in the Office of the President, the University of California's system-wide administration. In 1988, he returned to the school as a professor, assuming emeritus status in 2004.

Michael Buckland is exceptional in the extent to which he has alternated and combined research and professional practice. His research spans many topics and methods: the use of operational research in libraries, historical research (especially recuperating the work of forgotten pioneers in information science and documentation, notably Suzanne Briet, Emanuel Goldberg, Lodewyk Bendikson, and Robert Pagès), bibliographies (and assisting others in their bibliographies), and many theoretical pieces.

Buckland is a central figure in Neo-Documentation, and with Niels Windfeld Lund and others, he founded the informal Document Academy, which continues actively after a quarter of a century. He has served as president of the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) and has been active in ASIS&T's Special Interest Group in the History and Foundations of Information Science and in the Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative. He has received many large grants for search support and metadata studies, has mentored many doctoral students and master's students, and has been a visiting professor and lecturer throughout the world.

Among his numerous publications, Michael Buckland is best known for two related papers, "Information as Thing" ([Buckland, 1991b](#)) and "What is a Document?" ([Buckland, 1997](#)), which are among the most cited papers in library and information science.

His work has been summarized in a series of books: Library operational research studies in *Book Availability and the Library User* ([Buckland, 1975](#)); librarianship in *Library Services in*

Theory and Context (Buckland, 1983) and *Redesigning Library Services* (Buckland, 1992); information science in *Information and Information Systems* (Buckland, 1991a, b) and *Information and Society* (Buckland, 2017) and two detailed historical studies, *Emanuel Goldberg and his Knowledge Machine* (Buckland, 2006) and *Ideology and Libraries: California, Diplomacy, and Occupied Japan, 1945–1952* (Buckland, 2020).

He has remained active in retirement, continuing to co-chair with Clifford Lynch a weekly seminar that has now been running for over thirty years.

What should be done (Ron Day)

Tim asked each of the editors of this issue to write about how we were influenced by Michael Buckland's works. This is a difficult question for me, from the aspect of both the meaning of "influence" and that of "work." As an academic, Michael has been both an administrator and a researcher. And from my view, his "works" are part and parcel of a life – which can be glimpsed by reading the oral history interview with him (see Buckland, 2023).

I was already a post-Ph.D. student when I met Michael as an MLIS student in the School of Library and Information Science at UC Berkeley in 1993. When I was in my first semester at Berkeley, I was in a Reference Services class that I barely attended, and the instructor suggested we read Buckland's recent book *Information Systems in Theory and Practice*. I did, and then I told the instructor that Buckland had something wrong with it. She replied along the lines of, "Well, if you think that you're so smart, you go tell him that." And so, I did this when I saw Michael in the hallway of the school in South Hall. His response was, "Machlup said the same thing," and that I should come and talk to him about it.

That was the beginning. Later, at the end of my last semester, I gave Michael a 60- page final paper for our class in cultural heritage, entitled, "Animal Songs: Translation, Community, The Question of the 'Animal': In-formation." Though it was quite a quirky and long paper, Michael's response was an enthusiastic, "More should be done like this!"

I share these little vignettes because they tell the reader much about Michael Buckland and his works, as well as his influence on my own work and life and on those of others. He took seriously and mentored this ex-student in comparative literature and contemporary poetics, who was now a rather destitute and hopeless young master's-level student in a library education program. Michael has been a true teacher and mentor ever since, one who teaches for the lifetime of the student, both formally and informally.

There are not many people who would do this for another person or would have the right attitude and capability for it. But there are not many academics who would want their lives measured by the greatness of their works, either. Michael did theory when theory wasn't acceptable in the field. He returned to the notion of the "document" when others thought it was done. He published research on the foundations of information science when the field was not particularly interested in history or theory. He argued that library science and information science are innately linked. He has recovered the works of previous researchers and practitioners so that they will not be forgotten and so that others can build on their work. He has broadly examined information science while also valuing libraries, all while promoting what he believes "should be done."

I think that the reader of Buckland's works needs to see behind them a very moral endeavor, one where research, teaching, service and administration contribute to doing *what should be done*. His works are very well prepared and clear, so as to be offered for *public consideration*. His works (in all senses) recover and make possible *worlds* of knowledge and action. Ludwig Wittgenstein said that ethics were shown, not merely said. One can see this in Buckland's works. Buckland's works show an extraordinary commitment to knowledge and to service (both within academic life and beyond such), which makes such a festschrift as this volume timely and very much due.

A token of a type (Kiersten F. Latham)

While working on my doctorate in Kansas (2004–2009), I found myself the odd one out as a museologist in a library program – I thought it made perfect sense, but others did not, and I was consistently asked why I was getting an LIS degree. Because of this, I endeavored to find my place in the field by seeking the *one thing* that connected these fields (at the time, LIS in the United States of America did not easily make the link with museum studies). Like Michael before he found the Dead Birds, I too had an “inkling” that there was something more out there that would weave the tapestry across many disciplines. I found that *one thing* one day while reading a single paper that opened the floodgates: “Information as Thing” (Buckland, 1991b).

I remember the day vividly. I had just settled into a cozy spot at the local café. Sitting at a window table, I pulled out my stack of recently printed articles (yes, printed) I intended to read for the day. I never made it to the others. Every sentence spoke to me. At each one, I had to stop and absorb and pinch myself – is this the key? Is this what I’ve been seeking? It’s as if I was seeking the lost treasure, and here was the map! The pages of the paper were filled with pink highlights and colorful annotations, sketches and exclamation points. I still have that particular paper with all my notes; it marks an important moment in my academic journey. Funnily enough, in Michael’s parlance, that paper has become “a token of a type.” I wonder how many others in document studies have that original version, too, where they first encountered “information as thing”?

This paper led me to read every single published work by Michael, and even one of my doctoral exams was on the topic. Little did I know at the time how deeply and broadly this paper would affect my career. It was true; I had found the treasure map. I was encouraged to publish that doctoral exam, which became “Museum Object as Document” (Latham, 2012), my first published paper in LIS. Shortly after, I received an email from Michael – out of nowhere – congratulating me on publishing the paper. (He was so kind; today I see the naiveté of the paper but very much appreciate all who were involved in it getting to press.) It was as if a famous movie star had just written to me; I was awestruck and also a bit reassured that I was on the right track.

Michael’s kind outreach fanned the already hot flames of my desire to dig into the document studies world. I immediately worked to connect with myself through the Document Academy (DOCAM). Although life got in the way of the first two meetings I was supposed to attend (2008–9), I finally met my DOCAM community in 2011 when I was invited to be the keynote speaker in Sweden. It was very early in my role as an assistant professor, and I found out later that it was Michael’s suggestion to ask me to speak. This demonstrates a key characteristic of Michael’s mentoring – he takes chances and believes in you. It’s as if he sees the seed, even when you don’t, and opens the window to give it sunshine. He took more chances on me, inviting me to speak with him on panels, connecting me with others. My goodness, was I terrified at these? Who was I to speak as an expert in any area, especially next to such a wise sage? But Michael took a chance on me. All these years later, I know that this was Michael’s way. He is endlessly giving, honestly curious and practices great humility.

My own discovery of *information as thing* led to *museum object as document*, which led to all subsequent research journeys I have taken, from phenomenological experiences of museum objects to explorations of what the “real thing” means to museum visitors to building an entire suite of courses in museum studies around the notion of objects as documents and museums as document institutions. It led me to the wonderfully accepting people of DOCAM to entrust me with facilitating our annual meetings each year (for the past 10 years) and building lasting and meaningful relationships with its members.

That single paper, innocently opened on a quiet day in a small-town café, led me to find a community and gave me a language, a lens and permission. Michael did more than publish a paper. He followed his curiosity, shared his thoughts and built a community around an idea.

His role as an always humble mentor creates openings, allowing all who know him to grow and thrive. I aspire to live my life as Michael Buckland has, to see everything as a learning opportunity and bring everyone along with him for the ride toward discovery.

Simply interesting (Tim Gorichanaz)

I'm the youngest of the editors of this Festschrift, and to be honest, I still feel like a student, but suddenly I look at the calendar, and it turns out I'm already in my sixth year as a faculty member. More and more, I find myself in the shoes of a mentor for my own students, and now I understand what a special person Michael Buckland has been in my academic life and the power of small moments of mentorship.

Michael and I began crossing paths at the annual meetings of the Document Academy and ASIS&T. When we first met, I was starstruck, still being at the age when you don't quite consider published authors to be real flesh-and-blood people, all the more in Michael's case because I had done a seminar presentation on his works in my first year as a doctoral student – an embarrassing thing to have to admit. (That work was folded into my later article, "Minting the Obverse" (Gorichanaz, 2017)).

The first time we talked, Michael swiftly turned the conversation toward what I was interested in and working on. I don't know exactly what I said, but it was certainly something bumbling about documents, format and experience and probably even the Bible and Japanese gardens. (Now that I am in the mentor's shoes, I can see how extraordinary Michael really is. For me, it can take great effort and patience to sit as a doctoral student sifts through molasses. But I never got the sense that Michael was strained or impatient. He seemed, well, simply interested in what I was saying – an attentive listener with a penchant for asking just the right question that will open a door you didn't know was there.)

At the time, I had just completed a project on documentation at a Japanese garden in Philadelphia, which became my first paper presented at ASIS&T. As it happened, Michael and I had corresponded about that paper before its official peer review; at the time, ASIS&T had a program where you could submit a paper early for feedback and mentorship from a senior scholar. After that, I remember, Michael began making connections for me with others working on similar issues and sharing other ideas about research in landscape gardens.

As it happened, my scholarly interests shifted and evolved – perhaps more than most, perhaps not – and my conversations with Michael a few times a year were like periodic blossoms on a growing branch.

One time, I shared with Michael my anxieties about choosing a topic for my doctoral dissertation. A piece of advice I had been given was to strategically choose a topic to predict trends in the academic job market. But Michael maintained that the best course of action was to do a project that was, in his words, simply interesting. Follow your scholarly interests – why make it more complicated than that? Trust your curiosity, and you'll discover interesting things. And what else are we here for, in the end? (I would later learn that Michael made this argument more fully in a 1996 plenary talk at the second conference on Conceptions of Library and Information Science (Buckland, 1996), after which Michael Buckland and Boyd Rayward met Niels Windfeld Lund, as Niels discusses in his paper in this issue. Michael discussed these ideas again in a plenary address to the Association for Library and Information Science Education (Buckland, 2001)).

I've taken Michael's advice to heart. And truth be told, my career has not followed the path I had imagined while I was a Ph.D. student – and nor has my life more generally. But those are stories for another time. For now, let it suffice to say that these days, I often think I fell backwards into my dream job. And now every day I get to do what's simply interesting.

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