A memory is fragile. It can be lost, distorted or forgotten. However, through a pilot film contest, Unesco Bangkok is urging students to plant their memory seeds for future generations to use.

Fifty students at Phramae Manee Prakharong School, in Bangkok, recently took part in a week-long short-film production workshop held as part of Unesco’s Memory of the World (MOW) programme.

The students produced short video clips relating to memory in an effort to raise awareness of the importance of memory and document heritage.

"[Before the workshop] I did not see any value in document heritage," said 15-year-old Navaporn Aksornsingchai. "It was not part of my life," she said.

The MOW programme was launched in 1992 to safeguard, protect and facilitate access to documentary heritage, especially heritage content that is rare and endangered.

"A considerable proportion of the world's documentary heritage disappears through natural causes, such as acidified paper that crumbles to dust, or leather, parchments, films or magnetic tapes that are ruined by light, heat, humidity or dust," said Dr Susanne Ornager, regional adviser of Communication and Information in Asia and the Pacific, Unesco Bangkok.

"Floods, fires, hurricanes, storms and earthquakes make up a partial list of such disasters that are difficult to guard against.

"There is no escape from the destructive forces of nature. You cannot stop an earthquake or a flood, but it is a sad reflection that the most grievous losses have generally been the result of human action, whether through neglect or wilful destruction," she added.

During the five-day workshop, students were trained in short-film production techniques, including scriptwriting, editing and sound recording.

They also visited the National Film Archive of Thailand to watch archived films and to learn about the significance of film heritage.

Chalida Uabumrungjit of the Thai Film Foundation organised the workshop and said: "Before we can make students understand the significance of world document heritage preservation, we must first make them aware of the importance of keeping their own personal memories.

"They need to understand that every minor detail counts, and that today's personal collections may become tomorrow's historical heritage," she said.

Thirteen-year-old Phiphat Mansuthi said that as a result of attending this workshop, he missed the first robot toy that his mother bought for him seven years ago.

"It's too late now as it has broken into pieces. I never realised how valuable the toy was, and I don't know why I didn't pay attention to it or take care of my things before they were gone," he said.

This year, royal archive documents on King Chulalongkorn's transformation of Siam, between 1868 and 1910, have been added to Unesco's MOW register.

King Ramkhamhaeng's First Inscriptions was registered on the World Register in 2003, and the 200-year-old inscriptions that catalogue the development of traditional Thai yoga at Wat Pho were added to the Regional Register in 2008.

The importance of archived documents is recognised by archivists and historians, but they also have a great significance for society at large.

Dr MR Rujaya Abhakorn, MOW Goodwill Patron and Thai National MOW committee member, said: "People may want to hide their historical origins and throw away memories in order to succeed in the present-day social environment.

"They want to go into the future without the encumbrances of the past that may be too painful. This is understandable, but a proper study of history, with an exercise in drawing away from one's self, can overcome this difficulty.

"Without the recognition of a document's relevancy to one's own life as a person or community, and its linkage to the past, present and future, preservation will not be sustained because as soon as monetary rewards, or recognition by the MOW programme, cease, preservation will also end.

"Therefore, raising awareness and education about history are essential," he added.

The films by students will be screened at an awards ceremony at Unesco Bangkok on Nov 20. These will also be made available for viewing on the Unesco website.

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