The Teaching of Reference in American Library Schools

FRANCES NEEL CHENEY

MISS HARRIS has admirably set forth the present state of reference service and the needs and shortcomings in present-day training of reference librarians. Her moving account of the increasing amount of telephone reference service moves me to assure her that I take the matter of For Whom the Telephone Bell Rings almost as seriously as the matter of For Whom the Bell Tolls. Also, for the record, I am not scared of automation, I am grateful for it. For one thing, what would we do without the telephone?

Now I propose to present a much more superficial view of what we are teaching in the 32 American Library Association accredited graduate library schools, trying to answer three questions:

1. Who is teaching reference?
2. What is being taught?
3. How is it being taught?

Numbers, not names, must suffice for the answer to "Who." Some of us have been around a long time. I had a fire in my house last fall and all sorts of things boiled up, including a letter from Louis Shores, written in the mid-thirties, in which he said, "I try to teach a few titles well." In the same batch of disarranged papers I found an old freshman theme of mine on the evils of girls' smoking, piously written in a round, childish hand, with nary a footnote. If I had researched the subject back there in 1924, I might not have concluded so positively that these girls always wound up in a house of ill fame. Times have changed.

Now I share Wallace J. Bonk's belief that "sensible and calm discus-

sion, coupled with patient effort and a determination to produce the best possible kind of reference and bibliography course, would result in something more professionally desirable than this present state of affairs."[1]

But who are these people who will gather for sensible and calm discussion? Who are teaching these reference courses?

That meeting in Cleveland in April, 1962, sponsored by the Library Services Branch of the U.S. Office of Education and Western Reserve University to consider the future of library education got me all stirred up. Having read the two issues of *Library Trends* on the "Future of Library Service: Demographic Aspects and Implications,"[2] stuffed to the gills with figures on people, their geographic distribution, their doomed cities, their Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas, their age structure, their baby boom, the attending librarians and library school representatives considered the types of competence required to fill the library's changed or changing role. With these in mind, they turned to types and levels of library school faculties, to admission requirements, to the curriculum, teaching methods, interdisciplinary instruction, and research.

The great value of the meeting was not so much the original thinking which came out of it, but the opportunity to say out loud to one another what had been said before by other voices in other rooms. For no one expects brilliant, original thinking to take place at an institute. This usually occurs in the silence of a lonely room. And if the recommendations incorporated much already observed in Ernest J. Reece's 1936 study of the curriculum in library schools,[3] it should be observed that this was another group saying it.

If this seems to be getting a bit off the track, it is only to remind you that the institute began with the people to be served. And I want to begin with the people who are teaching the increasing number of library school students who will serve those people, particularly the increasing number of college graduates, the increasing number of graduate students, of school children, of specialists.

The number of reference instructors increased from 87 to 145 between 1958[4] and 1961.[5] These were not all full-time faculty, for the same period saw a greater increase in part-time instructors, from 30 in 1958 to 74 in 1961. Nor were all of the 87 persons teaching reference in 1958 still in harness in 1961—only 53. New names in the 1961 roster numbered 92, about two-thirds of the total. This is a lot of fresh meat and we expect to gain strength from it. I made no effort

to discover their ages, though we know that age is a important factor. I cast a fishy eye on the oft-quoted, "Age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety."

But if this rapid turnover continues, together with an increase in the number of part-time faculty, opportunity for that sensible and calm discussion, so eagerly desired by Bonk and a lot of others, is going to have to be snatched on the run.

To pursue the demographic approach further, we find a change in the sex ratio of the faculty teaching reference. In 1958, a bit more than half, 54.1 per cent, were women. By 1961, nearly three-fifths, 57.9 per cent, were men. What effect this may have on the teaching of reference, I do not know, but I can hazard a guess.

I believe men teachers are more apt to emphasize the administrative aspects of reference service—the organization of reference departments, cooperation with other departments, larger areas of service. These are very important in these days of developing regional reference centers, subject departmentalization in large university and public libraries, and of greater emphasis on newer methods of information retrieval. The young man teacher is less apt to wax reminiscent about his days on the reference desk, not having had any. Women teachers are more apt to emphasize empathy, the importance of a sympathetic effort to understand the reader's request. Since these are random observations, arrived at by unscientific methods, they must be viewed with suspicion and made the subject of further research.

More important than sex, I suspect, is the educational background of the two groups, 1958 and 1961, but having had neither time nor inclination to compile this information, I must quote a more general source:

> Faculties probably have grown in competence. Harold Lancour, who is closer to the personnel of the faculties in the various library schools than most of us are, expresses belief that much improvement has occurred, and cites as one bit of evidence the spread of higher degrees among those in teaching positions. Another indication may be the level of thinking shown at the workshop on the core of education for librarianship held at the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago as long ago as 1953—a level which hardly could have been attained many years before that.[6]

But this superficial review of who is teaching was made *sans questionnaire,* and thus is sans validity. I did not have the nerve to query by mail the full-time and part-time faculty, though I thought of send-

ing some of my colleagues a post-card asking them what they were teaching best, and what they were teaching worst. Instead, I asked only one full-time teacher, hurriedly, as we passed from one seminar to another at the Cleveland institute. The reply came fast. "I teach dictionaries and encyclopedias best. I teach 60 students in one class worst."

Let us now turn to what is being taught. The necessity of separate courses devoted to reference was recognized early in the development of library school curricula[7] and is still reflected in the 1962 catalogs of the 32 accredited library schools. Nearly 200 courses, 175 to be exact, were being offered, at least four courses in most schools, with the highest number in one school being 13.[8] These included courses with various names: reference materials and methods; literature of the humanities, social sciences, science and technology; government publications; reference services; as well as specialized courses such as medical bibliography, legal literature, and theatre literature. Allowing for differences in terminology, there appear to be 28 separate courses in science and technology; 15 in the social sciences; 14 in the humanities; nine in the humanities and social sciences combined; one in the social sciences and sciences combined; 22 in government publications; and six in medical bibliography. These figures do not include those specialized courses not specifically naming individual subject fields, since it is intended to show that more than half of the courses include in their course names a specific subject field or type of publication. This, we all know, is a well-recognized trend. There is evidence that it will continue and that these specialized courses in the literature of a subject will increasingly be taught by subject specialists.

This raw, rough numerical approach does not tell us anything we did not already know. We must be more specific, so we look at the course descriptions. What do they say?

Let us begin with the "basic" reference course, variously called Introduction to Reference, Bibliography and Reference Materials, Introduction to Bibliography, Reference Services, Basic Information Sources, etc. Most of us have been moved by Bonk's rather startling discovery that there was so wide a variety of titles listed in the syllabi of the 25 schools included in his study. That 47 per cent of the 1,202 titles were listed by only one school, and that only five titles were agreed on by all 25 schools, will certainly make us stir our stumps to decide whether this state of affairs should continue. This leads us to look over our shoulder at the basic reference course itself. And taking

our text from the old sea chanty, "What shall we do with the drunken sailor," this course which has imbibed too freely from the heady brew of 1,202 of the simplest forms of information storage?

The answer comes loud and strong, "Put him in the scuppers with a hose-pipe on him," which translated into basic library language means that some of those titles must be washed out.

But before that there must be some general agreement on whether or not we should put this drunken sailor ashore, where he may be scalped by a bloody Indian. We are familiar with the argument that reference and book selection, both aspects of the same thing, might well be combined in a single course, and certainly this is the approach in courses in bibliography of the various subject fields.

It is significant that when teachers of undergraduate and graduate library science programs sat down in Knoxville's October weather to consider course content, those teachers concerned with reference materials decided soberly that the beginning course should be called "Introduction to Reference Materials and Services." They modestly proposed to "begin the development in the student of the knowledge of reference materials: their content, evaluation, organization and use." And they fell back on the well-known types of reference sources: dictionaries, and other work books, encyclopedias, yearbooks, handbooks, bibliographic sources, indexes, guides to reference materials, biographical directories, atlases and gazetteers, and the card catalog, shored up with an introduction which would define reference service, describe the kinds of reference service and reference questions, the forms of reference tools, their selection and evaluation.[9]

I do not know how many of those present at that October meeting were aware that Andrew H. Horn, in April of that same year, 1961, after careful re-examination of the course offerings of all the accredited library schools, and in consultation with others concerned, wrote that at the University of California at Los Angeles, "The heart of reference instruction is given in a one-year course entitled 'Reference Service and Materials'—history of reference service, reference functions, selection and evaluation, national and trade bibliography, . . . materials by type (word books, encyclopedias, indexes, serials with their bibliography and indexing, biographical sources, maps and other nonbook reference materials, audio-visual, etc.) reference work in history and geography, government publications, humanities, social sciences, physical and life sciences."[10]

The first part of this course bears a strong resemblance to the one

drawn up by the Southeastern library science teachers in Knoxville and I am willing to abide by it. I believe this long-established corpus of information, these earlier developed types of information retrieval will continue to serve in all types of libraries and at all levels, though with varying degrees of usefulness in specific instances.

But after our modest beginning course, where do we go? More than half the reference courses now being offered bear the name of a specific subject field or type of publication. From their course descriptions, they attempt to include the historical development, terminology, and current trends in each field, with a survey of the reference materials and important current titles. This is a large order, but teachers of reference appear to show the grim determination of John Henry who vowed, "Before I let that steam drill get me down, I'll die with the hammer in my hand."

This hammer weighs more than John Henry's nine-pounder, which he swung from his hips on down, and we have known it for a long, long time. Reece, nearly three decades ago, observed that the view of information service as a routine matter, using a conventional list of tools was dead as a dodo, though he did not use quite this phrase. He did point out, however, that:

> So long as the work was centered in the reference rooms of small public libraries there was ground for such a view, but it is passing with the rise of specialized collections and of the demand they reflect for exhaustive information in restricted fields. Examples of such collections appear in the sections of public libraries devoted to economics and technology; in the libraries maintained by universities for their schools of medicine and law; and, conspicuously, in the libraries supported for the use of corporations, research laboratories, and professional societies. It is unreasonable to suppose that adequate service can be rendered in such situations by persons not versed in the subjects concerned and in the methods of searching applicable to them, however adept they may be in manipulating manuals, handbooks, encyclopedias, and indexes. If in these circumstances a librarian is to be more than a caretaker and a purveyor, he must assemble material which he cannot know, uncover data he cannot recognize, and organize facts he cannot interpret, except he is himself something of an expert of the field. Unless they bring under their command, the bodies of knowledge which their books and other material represent, librarians increasingly must affect functions for which they are unequipped.[11]

Reece's statement is just as true today, only more so. The prolifera-

tion of special libraries and services, the subject departmentalization of reference services in university libraries, the ground swell of regional reference centers reflect a widespread recognition of the need to know the subject fields.

These developments demand a breed of librarians with both breadth and depth. And we might as well face it, the first year courses in the literature of the subject fields—social sciences, humanities, science and technology—can only begin the education of future specialists in these areas, or more specific disciplines within these areas. If we say we are trying to cover the historical development, terminology, and current trends in each field, together with a survey of the reference materials in each, within the confines of a single course, we must say it with a full realization of the superficiality with which each individual field is covered. Our approach is cyclopedic, with all the strong and weak points of the cyclopedia, its synthesis, and its static qualities.

The Bonk bomb burst on those courses offered in the social sciences and the humanities, and when the smoke cleared, we faced the grim statistics—of the 1,500 titles listed in the humanities syllabi, 53.6 per cent were listed by only one school, with half or more of the syllabi agreeing on 7 per cent. Of the 2,000 titles listed in the social sciences, 57.7 per cent were listed only once, with half or more agreeing on only 5 per cent. Bonk pointed out, "I am aware, of course, that unanimity in selection of titles is an unrealizable goal, for many quite valid reasons. A given title may be selected only as an example of a type—and any of three or four other titles would do equally well. . . . Taking all these factors into account, however, I am still surprised and somewhat disquieted by these results." [12]

I suspect that other surprised and disquieted teachers of reference courses have reviewed their syllabi in the light of Bonk's evidence and have quietly added some titles and dropped others, not in an effort to conform blindly, but because of the cross-fertilization they received from these composite lists.

At this point, texts should be mentioned. The value of Winchell, Shores, Hutchins, and more recently Walford, is established by their long and continued use by students and teachers. To these should be added Barton's small and frequently revised guide, prepared for use at Enoch Pratt but having much wider usefulness.

Do we need more texts? At a time when articulation of the graduate and undergraduate programs of library education is uppermost in our minds, the need for a general text, with a limited number of titles

fully treated, which could be used in introductory courses might well be investigated. Perhaps Bonk will have something in mind after completing his current study of the usefulness of 352 basic reference titles as determined by 1,750 reference librarians in college, university, public, and high school libraries.

The growing number of guides to the literature of specific subject fields, *e.g.,* Blanchard and Ostvald's *Literature of Agricultural Research,* have made our problem less serious than it was 25 years ago, though there are still areas not covered.

In passing we should also note the increasing use of audio-visual materials in the teaching of reference.

More exact information is needed on how reference courses are being taught though there is evidence of lack of satisfaction with the state of the art, if the teaching of reference is an art. For we find among the 101 recommendations of the Cleveland Conference that:

> It is recommended that deans and directors of library schools re-examine and strengthen teaching methodology, taking advantage of all current developments in teaching methods.
>
> Library schools should be encouraged to offer instruction to students in other schools and faculties on the role of the library in that particular profession or area of study, and to collaborate with other professional groups in their programs of continuing education.
>
> Use of faculty members from other disciplines, integrating work with other areas, *e.g.,* public administration, industrial engineering, etc.[13]

More specifically, there is a growing conviction that the title-centered course is no longer feasible, that is, proceeding from a specific title to the kinds of questions which can be answered from it. Whether individual titles are described in glowing and informed terms by the instructor or by students' oral reports, we have found from experience that the result is apt to be both boring and confusing. One alternative is to emphasize *types* of reference materials rather than individual titles. Class discussion of the characteristics of these types and their relative importance in answering various kinds of questions for various kinds of readers is intended to develop in the student: (1) Discrimination in the selection of proper sources of information; (2) Consideration for the individual reader. It also affords an opportunity to generalize on the changing forms of bibliographical control. But this method does not go far enough. It bears within it the danger of windy generalizations, of further superficiality.

Teachers have continued to assign specific questions to be answered from specific sources. This we have viewed as a kind of practice work, but the little question has too often stood naked in the students' eyes, with no belly, no bowels, only consonants and vowels. The belly and bowels are the individual reader and the individual library in which the naked question must be answered.

Thus we turn to the case study method and I would like to ask Thomas Galvin, of Simmons, to briefly state the case for the case study method. [Here Galvin made his presentation. His article "The Case Technique in Education for Reference Service" will appear in the Spring issue of the *Journal of Education for Librarianship.*]

In conclusion, at this meeting, sponsored by R.S.D./AALS/L.E.D., it seems appropriate to recommend that these divisions, working together, immediately establish committees to develop specific syllabi in introductory reference, bibliography of the social sciences, bibliography of the humanities, and bibliography of science and technology. With representation of the best people from individual subject fields, as well as practicing reference librarians and instructors, these committees should further consider methods of teaching as well as subject matter.

Who will do it? I will close with a few stanzas from Allen Tate's "Ode to Our Young Pro-Consuls of the Air."

Once more the country calls
From sleep, as from his doom,
  Each citizen to take
  His modest stake
Where the sky falls
With a Pacific boom.

. . . . . .

Sad day at Oahu
When the Jap beetle hit!
  Our Proustian retort
  Was Kimmel and Short,
Old women in blue,
And then the beetle bit.

. . . . . .

Young men, Americans!
You go to win the world
  With zeal pro-consular

From our whole star-
You partisans
Of liberty unfurled!

O animal excellence,
Take pterodactyl flight
Fire-winged into the air
And find your lair
With cunning sense
On some Arabian bight
.....
Take off, O gentle youth,
And coasting India
Scale crusty Everest
Whose mythic crest
Resists your truth;
And spying far away

Upon the Tibetan plain
A limping caravan,
Dive, and exterminate
The Lama, late
Survival of old pain.
Go kill the dying swan.[14]

References

1. Bonk, W. J.: Core Curriculum and the Reference and Bibliography Courses. *Journal of Education for Librarianship,* 2:33, Summer 1961.

2. Schick, F. L., ed.: The Future of Library Service. *Library Trends,* 10:3-286, July and Oct., 1961.

3. Reece, E. J.: *The Curriculum in Library Schools.* New York, Columbia University Press, 1936.

4. Association of American Library Schools: *Directory . . . 1958.* 4th ed. Urbana, The Association, 1958.

5. Directory of the Association of American Library Schools. *Journal of Education for Librarianship,* 2:77-102, Fall 1961.

6. Reece, E. J.: Are Library Schools Educating for Librarianship? Remarks on the Future of Education for Librarianship. *Journal of Education for Librarianship,* 2:17, Summer 1961.

7. Vann, Sarah K.: *Training for Librarianship Before 1923.* Chicago, American Library Association, 1961, p. 134.

8. From tabulation made by the author.

9. Proceedings of the Institute on Library Education in the Southeast. *Southeastern Librarian,* 12:33, Spring 1962.

10. Horn, A. H.: Planning the Course in Reference and Bibliography. *Library Journal,* 86:1538, April 15, 1961.

11. Reece, ref. 3, pp. 21-22.

12. Bonk, *op. cit.,* pp. 29-30.

13. Preliminary recommendations distributed in mimeographed form at last meeting of the conference.

14. Tate, Allen: *Poems.* New York, Scribner's, 1960, pp. 95-100.