

# Who, what and how? Commentary on Cheney, F. N. (1963) The teaching of reference in American Library Schools.

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Cheney's paper was the first major article on this subject (Gleaves & Tucker, 1983, p. x). Its author, Frances Neel Cheney, had been teaching at the Peabody School of Library Science in Nashville since 1945. As a past president of the Association of American Library Schools (1956–1957) and the Reference Services Division of the American Library Association (1960–1961), she was well positioned to address three questions:

1. Who is teaching reference?
2. What is being taught?
3. How is it being taught? (Cheney, 1963, p. 188)

The paper was based on a presentation made June 21, 1962, as part of a session on the training of reference librarians at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Miami Beach (Armstrong, 1963). As such, the paper reads more like a conference talk than a formal journal article.

As Richardson (1992), himself a student of Cheney, documented in a thorough analysis of the first hundred years of reference instruction from 1890–1990, reference has long been a core course in library school curricula. The questions used to frame Cheney's discussion remain relevant today. What has changed is the pervasive impact of technology that has affected who is teaching, what is taught, and how it is taught. Cheney (1963, p. 188) observed

that “I am not scared of automation, I am grateful for it. For one thing, what would we do without the telephone?” Of course, in 1963 libraries were only beginning to explore the potential of computers (for example, the first Clinic on Library Applications of Data Processing was held at the University of Illinois in spring 1963). But even though Cheney continued to teach until 1975, Gleaves (1983) reports that “Most of her work came before the computer revolution and she was never enamored of technology. She neither taught, spoke, nor wrote about the more technical aspects of librarianship, and certainly she did not stray into the emerging high technology of library automation or computer-based information systems” (p. 13).

So how has the teaching of reference changed in the more than 50 years since Cheney offered her assessment of the state of the field in 1963? She focused on the 32 library schools with ALA-accredited programs; that number has grown to 58, several of which also identify as Information Schools (“iSchools”).

## *Who is teaching reference?*

Cheney noted that those teaching reference included both full-time and part-time faculty and more men than women. She also noted the increase of doctoral degree holders among those holding full-time faculty positions. While aggregated data profiling who is currently teaching reference

are not available, the teaching of courses in the traditional core has certainly been impacted by overall trends in the composition of faculty. Tenure-track positions are reserved for those holding the Ph.D. in a growing variety of disciplines; other full-time faculty may have titles such as lecturer, clinical faculty, or professors of practice with a focus on teaching. As student enrollments have outpaced increases in full-time faculty, more part-time/adjunct faculty have been hired. With the growth in online education, those part-time faculty can be located anywhere, so efforts must be made to coordinate instruction by a distributed group of faculty teaching reference.

### ***What is being taught?***

Cheney focused on both the basic course, an introduction to reference materials and services, and the proliferating range of more specialized courses dealing with particular subject fields (e.g., science and technology, humanities, social sciences, law, medicine) or publication types (e.g., government publications). The basic reference course included coverage of reference materials—their content, evaluation, organization, and use. There was a consensus on types (e.g., dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks) but not specific titles to be taught. The course also considered the kinds of reference service and reference questions. Cheney spoke to the need for “a general text, with a limited number of titles fully treated, which could be used in introductory courses” (1963, pp. 194–195). This need was soon met by Katz (1969), a text giving equal attention to reference sources and services. While specialized courses continue to be taught, they compete for space in the curriculum with other topics important to contemporary practice. The basic reference course continues to adapt. Reference source types and evaluation, the reference interview, and search strategy continue to be emphasized, but “technology and users and user contexts are now very visible components

of the curriculum” and “reference instructors are overwhelmed with trying to cover more aspects of theory and practice than ever” (O’Connor, 2011, p. 334).

### ***How is it being taught?***

In the physical classroom the mode of instruction was lecture and discussion with practice questions used to gain experience in the use of reference materials. Cheney voiced concern about the use of “the naked question” without the context of the person asking the question and the library where it was asked (1963, p. 196). Introduction of the case study method by Galvin (1965) was designed to provide more realistic practice. The current approach to instruction has been shaped by multiple factors: the “transition from a time when information was scarce and precious to today when information is vast, readily available, and mostly free” (Radford, 2012, p. 11); the rapid increase in online courses reaching students in distributed locations with variable access to physical libraries (Robbins, 2012); and ongoing efforts to find ways to build in experiential learning (Currin, 2011). One response to all of these trends is teaching with ipl2 (<http://www.ipl.org/div/about/teachWipl.html>), enabling students to gain skills in virtual reference by using freely available web-based resources to answer questions submitted to the Internet Public Library by users from around the world.

In conclusion, it is apparent that “the teaching of reference in American library schools” has changed and will continue to change due to factors both external and internal to the schools. Just two years after Cheney published her article, Licklider published *Libraries of the Future* in which he envisioned “procognitive systems” that would “facilitate man’s interaction with transformable information” and “reject the schema of the physical library—the arrangement of shelves, card indexes, check-out desks, reading rooms, and so forth” (1965, p. 6). Yet the ability to reach

“a human librarian” for guidance if needed was still part of his vision (p. 127). The contexts for reference services and the roles of reference librarians will continue to evolve (VanScoy, 2012), and the teaching of reference must keep pace.

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