

A Course in Bibliography for Freshmen At Asheville-Biltmore College

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Editor's note: Upon learning last year that Asheville-Biltmore College had instituted a compulsory course in bibliography carrying academic credit hours and taught by librarians, we were anxious to hear more of this approach. We do not know of any other institution in the state which has a similar plan, i.e., instructors who are librarians and academic credit hours granted. We would like to know whether there are others.

Mr. Gore's article offers some interesting avenues to controversy. We would welcome reactions from readers.

For each dollar that college libraries spend on books nowadays, they are spending a dollar and eighty-three cents on the salaries of librarians.¹ The severe economic strain that this distribution of funds imposes on library budgets reveals itself in the wretched condition of the book collection in most college libraries: less than half of those in the United States have collections that meet even the dubious minimum standard of 50,000 volumes established by the American Library Association.²

Librarians are fond of speaking of the services that they "give" to their patrons, but the fact is that patrons pay, and pay dearly for all services they receive, in terms of reduction in the value of the book collection exactly equal to the cost of the services rendered. This being the case, and the general inferiority of college library collections being an established fact, one may well question the propriety of spending nearly twice as much money on librarians as is spent on books.

The question has been a particularly urgent one for the library of Asheville-Biltmore College, which last year was elevated to senior college status at a time when the total book stock was only 10,000 volumes. The only possibility of building rapidly an adequate collection seemed to lie in the direction of drastic reduction of the salary portion of the total library funds that were likely to be available, thereby increasing the portion that could be spent on books. By rigorously excising all services that were not demonstrably necessary, we achieved a book fund-to-salary ratio of 1.00 to 0.47, the salary portion being about one fourth what it is in the average college library. The result is that, given the same total operating funds as other college libraries, we can build a book collection approximately twice the size that is usually possible. Our extremely low salary ratio was accomplished not by trimming any salaries, but by reducing the total number of positions on the staff, both clerical and professional, and by assuring that all clerical work is done exclusively by clerks.

One position that we eliminated was that of the reference librarian. Our motives for doing this were pedagogical as well as economic. The great aim of all teaching is to make the student successfully independent of his teachers, and eventually to liberate him from the special support of his elders. But the aim of the reference librarian, his *raison d'être*, in fact, is to render special support to the student, who, having never been taught to deal with any of the problems of practical bibliography, must perforce remain

1 The Bowker Annual of Library and Book Trade Information, 1964, p. 29. College libraries are currently spending sixty million dollars a year on books, and a hundred and ten million dollars a year on librarians: hence the ratio of 1.00 to 1.83.

2 Ibid., p. 6.

dependent upon the costly services of the reference librarian. If it is proper for reference librarians to solve bibliographical problems for students, it is hard to see why, for example, mathematics should not be taught by having students come to the mathematics professor's office and have him solve each of their problems for them. Insofar as it abets and even encourages student dependency, the library's policy of offering reference service appears to be incompatible with the general educational aims of the larger institution of which the library is a part.

Now if the reference librarian is omitted from the staff, provision of some kind must still be made for remedying the bibliographical ineptitude of students. The obvious solution to this problem is simply to provide formal instruction in bibliography to the entire student body. To do this would resolve the peculiar conflict that usually exists between library policy and the educational goals of the college. It would also remove from the library's budget the entire cost of a reference staff, since the cost of instruction could be assigned to the regular instructional budget of the college, and the money thus saved could be spent on books.

Last year we submitted to our curriculum committee a proposal for a course in bibliography to be required of all students at Asheville-Biltmore College.³ It was adopted unanimously and with evident enthusiasm. This favorable reception can be easily understood in the light of the College's general policy of promoting independent study among the students, and discouraging the conventional text-book approach to education. The faculty place heavy emphasis on the writing of research papers and the active use of library materials, so the students' facility in working with those materials becomes a matter of paramount importance. The logic of a course in bibliography in such an institutional context as ours is inescapable. It might be less compelling, however, in a more conventional college program.

By committee action the course was assigned one semester-hour credit, and all students are required to take it at some time during their freshman year. The course is taught by the library's professional staff, without the participation or assistance of any other faculty. It has only been presented for two terms, so we have much still to learn about it ourselves.

The chief problem in teaching the course was to provide a suitable manual for the students to work with. All of those that we have seen in print suffer from the twin vices of dullness and undue length. They treat extensively matters not directly related to the problems of a literature search, often failing to drive to the heart of the complexities of practical bibliography, and usually degenerating into interminable annotated bibliographies that dismay and repel with their formidable scope. It is not easy to tell precisely what audience these manuals were intended for, but they are clearly too prolix for a freshman reader. Confronted with this situation, we had no choice but to write our own manual, and produced one which, while it may not escape the censure of dullness, has at least the merit of brevity.

The topics covered in the manual are these: (1) Descriptive bibliography, including the techniques of making formal citations to books and periodical articles; (2) Access to book-length materials through the subject catalogs; (3) Arrangement of entries in the author-title and subject catalogs; (4) Principles and problems of corporate-name entries; (5) Access to materials in less-than-book-length form; (6) Structure and use of classification systems; (7) The reference and bibliography collections.

³ A supporting paper for the proposal was subsequently published in the *Library Journal* (April 15, 1964, pp. 1688-92) under the title "Anachronistic Wizard: The College Reference Librarian."

Some people believe that formal lectures do not necessarily interfere with the learning process, but we suspect that they may in the case of subjects such as bibliography, which are admittedly deficient in inherent interest. It is possible to talk for hours about any of the topics listed above, and library school professors do just that. But we were never able to listen to any of them that long, and we doubt that the ordinary freshman has any greater capacity for attention in this area than we had as graduate students. Practical bibliography is undeniably a subject that rarely excites anyone's imagination, and is probably no more capable of being brightened up than a brickbat is of being polished. But what it lacks in Horace's *dulce* it assuredly makes up for in his *utile*, and so deserves to be both taught and learned.

Our solution to this problem was to construct the course manual in such a fashion that much of the students' work can be done independently of the instructor. For each of the seven topics discussed in the manual there is a corresponding set of practical exercises designed both to clarify the discussions and to give the student some experience in the problems of literature searching and bibliographical description. As each group of exercises is completed, the student brings his work in and the instructor reviews it with him individually, to ensure that he actually understands all of the things that he has done, and has not dashed through an exercise with the sole object of completing it with dispatch.

By following the tutorial system, and presenting the student a series of exercises that make active demands upon his understanding, ingenuity, and perseverance, we have managed to hold formal classroom instruction down to a total of about eight hours, and the students seem well contented with this arrangement. Most of them will spend between thirty and forty hours executing the assignments in the manual. In addition, they are required to read carefully the first ten chapters of McMurtrie's *The Book*, to acquaint themselves with some of the materials of historical bibliography, and this probably takes another ten hours of their time. A few students have complained that the quantity of work is excessive, but no one has protested that the exercises are dull or tedious; a few have confessed to a sense of enjoyment in the process of discovery that the exercises lead them into, and everyone appears to gain some real facility in using the complex bibliographical instrument that the modern library has become.

To teach this course once is to experience a revelation. The bibliographical confusion of college students reaches depths that librarians cannot easily fathom who have not made the descent with them. Their ignorance of search strategy, of the use of the catalog and other bibliographies, of the arrangement and general contents of the reference collection, and of the uses of shelf classification may best be described as comprehensive. Worst of all, in their innocence they do not even suspect that they are incompetent to make adequate use of the library until they discover, as the course progresses, that they are unable to solve the problems presented in the exercise without a certain amount of instruction, reflection, and industry. It is a fair supposition that if our students were not given instruction in bibliographical procedure, they would conclude in every instance of an abortive information search that it was the library, not themselves, that failed to produce. This points up another serious shortcoming of the reference librarian's service: often a student will not even realize that he is in need of expert help, and the questions that he does not think to ask the reference librarian may well be more

important than the ones he does. If he is not told, how is the student to know that a failed search is more likely to be his fault than the library's?

It is still too early to state precisely what results have been achieved through the teaching of the bibliography course. One may fairly presume that a person who has been taught to use a complex instrument will use it more efficiently than one who has not, but we have no objective data to confirm this proposition in relation to the bibliography course. We do not know that our students become more adept bibliographers through being taught the elements of bibliographical procedure, but common sense suggests that this does happen often enough to make the course worthwhile. Probably no one student develops expertise in all search techniques; but since all students are required to take the course, a common fund of bibliographical knowledge should eventually develop within the student body which will enable them to help not only themselves, but each other, in the solution of the various problems they will encounter.

"Knowledge is of two kinds," said the redoubtable Doctor Johnson. "We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information on it." As the possessors of this latter kind of knowledge grow more numerous on our campus, it seems reasonable to expect that possession of the former half will also grow more common. And when our students leave our campus as bachelors of arts—that is, as *candidates* for the learning that they have only begun to acquire as undergraduates—they should be far better equipped to continue their studies in any field than students who have not been introduced to Johnson's second kind of knowledge. We have here only inference or fact can be adduced in opposition to it.

The one thing we are reasonably certain of is the economic consequences of teaching bibliography instead of offering conventional reference service. We have noted above that the entire cost of instruction can be deducted from the library's budget and assigned to the instructional budget. This statement may invite the rejoinder that here the savings are illusory, since from the standpoint of the whole institution we have merely transferred an expense from one department to another without any net gain taking place. But this is not the case: to teach the bibliography course to our entire freshman class during an academic year requires only a fourth of one professional librarian's entire efforts; whereas one and perhaps two full-time professionals would be required to offer reference service during all the hours when the library is open. This constitutes a genuine gain both to the college and to the library, since substantial sums of money that would have been devoted to the salaries of librarians are freed for the purchase of books. And the true university is a collection of books, not a collection of librarians: library budgets being always of finite size, it follows that the fewer librarians a library requires, the larger the collection of books can be.

The joint force of the economic and pedagogical reasons for discontinuing reference service and installing a bibliography course compels us to believe that our practice at Asheville-Biltmore College will bear good fruit both for the library and the student it serves. We will certainly have a better collection, and we believe that we will also have better students.