News from the Schools: The Robert Gordon University

Teaching 'reference work' in Aberdeen: a personal perspective

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Abstract. Changes in the teaching of 'reference work' in the U.K. are discussed preliminary to a description of the current situation at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. The content of both the undergraduate and postgraduate courses are considered, together with an indication of the methods employed in teaching this subject area. The advent of BAILER offers the opportunity for the establishment of a special-interest group.

1. Introduction

As members of the relevant subject team, we have been involved on the periphery of some research, currently being undertaken by a student on our Postgraduate Diploma/ linked Masters course, into the teaching of 'reference work' in the schools of librarianship in the U.K. She found a dearth of literature on the subject: what research had been conducted and reported in the professional press was almost exclusively American in origin[1] and this, together with the fact that her research did not permit the detailed investigation of how courses were taught, prompted the belief that there was scope for a greater exchange of information in this area. This paper is offered, therefore, in the hope that it might provoke a response from colleagues in other schools and thereby provide those of us teaching in this area with a broader perspective.

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[1] A brief seach of LISA via Dialog retrieved 40 items on the teaching of reference/information work. Of these, 19 emanated from the U.S.A.; three from each of India and Nigeria; two from Australia; one from each of Brazil, Denmark, Eire, Germany and the Philippines. Six were of indeterminate origin but, given the source, probably related to practice in the U.S.A. Only two related specifically to the U.K. and these dated from 1971 and 1972. This appears to confirm the findings of our student's far more rigorous literature search. The dearth of British material is disappointing, although it must be stressed that much of the above literature would be of interest and/or relevance in a British context.

2. Terminology

Our research student found that the once widely used terms 'reference' work and 'reference' service were rapidly disappearing and being replaced by the all-pervasive 'information'. This is certainly reflected in our own courses where modules, in both the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, have titles such as *Information Sources* and *Information Services*. Within these, however, individual topic titles continue to reflect their historical origins, 'the reference interview' being a notable example.

We suspect that this widespread development is due quite simply to the fact that the term 'reference' tends to have a public library connotation – academic libraries tend to have 'reader advisory' or 'information points' rather than 'reference departments' – and also a variety of usages, as in the distinction between 'lending' and 'reference' stock. In an environment in which schools will naturally be educating students for work in the widest possible range of potential employment opportunities, it is inevitable that the all-encompassing 'information' will be preferred to a narrower alternative.

Additionally, the point must be made that there is a distinct difference in tradition between the U.K. and the U.S.A., whereby in the latter there continues to be a much more widespread use of terms such as 'reference work' and 'reference service' to denote the broader concept of information provision. This is, perhaps, particularly noticeable in the field of professional journals, where titles such as *Reference Quarterly*, *Reference Service Review* and *Reference Librarian* have a long history and continue to provide a focused forum for the interchange of ideas and developments.

3. Content

Teaching to a postgraduate programme, with the obvious constraints on time, leads to a concentration on what is seen by a subject team as the essential elements. Our programme for the Diploma in Librarianship and Information Studies consists of two formally-taught modules – *Information Sources* and *Information Services* – and one student-centred module, *The Information Enquiry*. (The first- and last-named are common to the Diploma in Information Analysis, but students on this course have a separate taught module on *Business and Public Sector Information Services*.)

Information Sources covers monograph and journal bibliography, including indexing and abstracting services; grey literature; dictionaries, encyclopaedias and databooks; technical literature and government publications. *Information Services* looks at collection management, including preservation and conservation issues; current awareness services; the impact of automation; bibliographic instruction; local studies, which is used as an exemplar of a category of service which often acts as a microcosm of the library service as a whole. Each of these modules occupies one term and they are taught consecutively. *The Information Enquiry* runs concurrently over the two terms; while much of the time is devoted to student-centred work and individual tutorials, taught elements include user needs; search strategy; the reference interview; end-user

searching; the preparation and presentation of findings. Postgraduate programmes within the School are assessed solely on coursework; there are no formal examinations.

The undergraduate programme also includes the above elements, but the additional time available enables the addition of other desirable elements. In year 1, *Bibliographic Control* and *Information Sources I* runs concurrently with a student-centred module on *Bibliography Compilation*, in which students are required to compile a bibliography of approximately 100 items on a topic of their choice and to impose an appropriate subject arrangement. The taught modules cover the areas contained in the postgraduate module on *Information Sources*, with the addition of A/V materials, biographical, statistical, topographical and current affairs information.

In year 2, *Information Sources II* is user-group orientated, covering business, community and public sector information. This is followed by a module on *Collection Management* – stock selection, stock maintenance and budgeting, records management – and an associated Core Collection Project.

Year 3 reflects the postgraduate programme, consisting of *Information Services* and *The Information Enquiry*, although additional teaching time enables us to cover in greater depth in the former such aspects as the economic factors underlying information services and their evaluation.

The assessment for modules in the undergraduate programme varies in accordance with their aims and objectives; some are assessed solely on coursework, others on an aggregation of coursework and module examinations.

Although note explicitly reflected in the above module titles, we feel that the reference process is integral to any kind of information work, being the output upon which information services will be evaluated by users: sources of information have value only in so far as they become the means whereby the needs of clients are satisfied. It is, therefore, essential that knowledge of sources and services be underpinned by both an understanding of the theories which have developed in relation to such areas as the reference interview, and also by the opportunity to practice the skills necessary to ensure the delivery of a quality service.

4. Teaching methods

The traditional method of teaching 'reference work', whereby students were expected to memorise lengthy lists of titles and their contents, has long been discredited as being both sterile and of limited value, given that collections in the workplace will vary enormously in respect both to size and subject orientation. As will be seen from the above, our teaching of information sources is based on the 'type of material' approach and uses the conventional lecture to deal with basic principles, supported by seminars and tutorials.

This is, however, an area of the syllabus which lends itself to a wide variety of teaching approaches. These, in their turn, have increasingly needed to take account of the growing variety of formats in which information may be supplied. Both online access to

remote databases and, more recently, the advent of CD-ROM technology have necessitated innovation in the way in which the subject is taught. Our solution has been to follow the lectures on monograph and journal bibliography at the beginning of the first term with small-group sessions which introduce students to a variety of sources in hard-copy, online and CD-ROM formats. The experience has been that, when students are then required to access the materials to satisfy their own information needs, in this and other areas of the syllabus, they do so with more confidence and are better prepared to explore a range of titles. Thanks to the generosity of online hosts and CD-ROM publishers, they are able to access a wide range of discs in the School's collection, as well as those held by the library, and to undertake online searches as the need arises. All students are required to conduct an online search in support of their information enquiry.

The 'case-study' approach is also used to enable students to combine the essential elements required to answer an enquiry – identify the precise need through interaction with the user, formulate an appropriate search strategy, conduct the search, present the findings and evaluate the results. When first introduced, Grogan's excellent series of published case studies [1–3] provided an invaluable source of inspiration; more recently, however, questions have been elicited from postgraduate students for presentation to their undergraduate colleagues and *vice versa*. These form the basis of assessed exercises in which students are required to 'script' an imaginary reference interview, formulate a strategy, conduct the search and present their findings, both in writing and orally. Having immediate access only to a comparatively small site library, students gain experience in working in an under-resourced environment and often need to utilise other libraries in order to execute an efficient search. Students are expected to work to precise time limits in order to simulate more closely the real working environment. Equally, as the questions are solicited in an unstructured manner and allocated randomly, they mirror the unpredictability of user demands and enforce the lesson of query formulation in non-standard ways.

The same broad principle underlies the major piece of coursework conducted by third-year and postgraduate students, the Information Enquiry. This has been an integral part of the syllabus for the past twenty years and, in our view, continues to fulfil its intended purpose of providing students with an opportunity to display their ability to put into practice the crucial elements of the enquiry process outlined above.

Before the start of each session, all academic staff and research students within the University are circulated to solicit topics for the exercise. (In order to include a broader coverage of the Humanities, colleagues at the University of Aberdeen are also contacted.) Potential enquirers are advised that the end-product will normally take the form of a 'state-of-the-art' literature review; other formats are possible, although requests for simple enumerative bibliographies will not be acceptable. This exercise provides us with a pool of enquiries from which topics are allocated to individual students on an *ad hoc* basis. Students are then expected to make contact with their enquirer, conduct an in-depth reference interview, formulate a search strategy, execute the search and present their findings in a form which will be of maximum benefit to the enquirer. All these tasks are performed with tutorial guidance and, on submission of the completed exer-

cise, students make an oral presentation to the subject team at which they are required to defend their actions.

This major exercise will normally require students to work in a subject discipline in which they have little or no previous experience, to access a wide variety of source material in hard-copy, online and CD-ROM formats, to use the facilities of a number of different institutions and, if necessary, the inter-library loan system. The administrative task of soliciting enquiries is minimal compared with the perceived benefits: students gain considerable experience within a reasonable simulation of the work environment; they greatly appreciate the fact that they are attempting to satisfy a genuine information need and are thereby providing a service for a member of staff outwith the School; the enquirers are generally highly appreciative of the students' efforts on their behalf and the profile of the School is enhanced.

In all these 'real' exercises, because student experience will vary, they are brought together periodically in groups to evaluate their progress and learn from the experiences of others.

5. Conclusions

The above is intended as descriptive rather than a prescriptive model. As in any school, modification to the content and delivery of the syllabus is an ongoing element of quality control, essential both to widen the variety of student experience and to reflect current professional practice. The advent of BAILER has increased the possibility of meetings to bring together staff with a common interest. Despite the inevitable problems of geography and finance, BAILER is prepared to support both the establishment of special-interest groups and attendance at their meetings. To date, these groups have tended to be associated with developing areas of interest such as 'Information Policy' and 'Records Management'. However, as with all areas of the curriculum, the speed of development and change presents a great challenge to those of us involved with teaching 'reference work' and we believe that there are benefits to be gained from establishing a forum to discuss such matters as the enormity of the task of covering the growing variety of sources while continuing to ensure that this is underpinned by a sound knowledge of the underlying principles. Such a forum could establish the guidelines and exchange best practice to further the achievement of these aims.

References

1. Denis Grogan. *Case studies in reference work.* Bingley, 1967.
2. Denis Grogan. *More case studies in reference work.* Bingley, 1972.
3. Denis Grogan. *Case studies in reference work.* 6 vols. Bingley, 1987.