

Why the I-900 Plan to Consolidate Multiple Reading
Rooms
Should Not be Implemented
In Light of
Best Practices for Reference Service
At the Library of Congress

A Series of Papers

Paper #3
Subject Expertise of Reference Librarians

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Paper #3

Subject Expertise of Reference Librarians

In the case of “Humor in the New Testament,” (**Paper #2**) the reader specifically asked me if my “specialty” was Religion. I told her, honestly, “No.” What I didn’t say is that I did not need to be a subject specialist myself for the kind of overview-provision I provided *if I have a “deep” reference collection immediately at hand that was itself formed by people who are subject specialists.*

Staff expertise is itself dependent on quality of reference collections: psychology example

Apparently this is not understood by the I-900 proponents, and yet it remains true: *reference expertise in librarians is heavily dependent on extensive corresponding specialized reference collections to support it.*

It is by monitoring, selecting, ordering, and examining subject-specific reference sources that we increase our own subject expertise—sources that the other specialists are *not* looking for. Close examination of these sources brings to our own attention an awareness of the range, depth, and specificity of the questions that they are capable of answering—an awareness that would not otherwise be available to us (and that is certainly not available to non-librarian researchers). Who would think, for example, that the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has substantive articles on “Artistic Forgery,” “Bodily Sensations,” “Colour, Theories,” “Electrodynamics,” “Film, Aesthetics of,” “Optics,” “Poetry,” and “Slavophilism”? *We learn more of the extent and depth of our own subjects through the printed reference sources we work with.* (This hands-on familiarity with specific disciplinary reference sources simply cannot be conveyed in any “cross-training” classes.)

Another implication is obvious from the same example: while use of our reference collections serves as a primary mechanism for stretching our own subject knowledge, that stretching cannot be extended to the point that we simply know everything in those reference collections. They will always contain material we are not immediately aware of ourselves; but when the reference sources are immediately present in clusters that we are familiar with, then the important discoveries can still be readily made.

Subject expertise is not simply “all in our heads”—we *depend on the specialized reference collections* that we have put together to support and increase *our own* subject-awareness.

One brief example: I recently received an email inquiry asking for books that would provide overviews of the theories of major figures in the history of Psychology. Of course I mentioned the existence of a number of specialized Psychology encyclopedias likely to be available at the requester’s local academic library. But I also

knew that monographic treatments exist (e.g., *Pioneers of Psychology*, *Key Thinkers in Psychology*, *The Great Psychologists*, and the 2-volume *Psychologists and Their Theories for Students*). But at the time I did not remember any of these specific titles—the “answer” was not in my head but it was immediately available *on the shelves of the MRR reference collection*, where I had previously assigned all of these volumes. Without that specialized reference collection I could not have functioned as the Psychology expert—i.e., handling the question quickly and efficiently.

Best use of reference collections is in turn dependent on staff expertise: acid rain example

A colleague from Science provides another example: a scholar from the British Society of the History of Science was recently researching the history of acid rain, especially in the U.S. He had very limited time, but the librarian could quickly show him the 5-volume *Beacham's Guide to Environmental Issues & Sources*, immediately in the reference collection, which she knew to be “one of the best places for an environmental historian to start his research.” Its chapter on acid rain quickly provided a wealth of information. When the scholar returned to the U.K. he sent a thank-you email saying that the librarian’s drawing his attention to that source was “invaluable.”

Knowledge of either a particularly good source or of which specific class area to look in is not something that is conveyable via “cross training classes.” It takes real subject expertise—especially since, in this case, the *Beacham's* set was dated 1993 but the librarian knew that its coverage of environmental history was outstanding. A non-expert might well have disregarded a 20-year-old source as “out of date”; further, a requirement to seriously weed the Science reference collection to make it “fit” in the Center for Knowledge might also put undue weight on retaining only the most recent material.

It is a general rule: the more of the relevant disciplinary material we have readily at hand in the reference collection, the more we also have effectively “in our heads”—because in our heads we know immediately *where to look*—i.e., in which specific “silo” areas of the classification scheme—for an answer even (as in the Psychology example) if we do not know in advance which specific sources will provide it.

Good reference collections provide some measure of subject expertise to anyone

A related fact is also apparently not understood by the I-900 proponents: a good, *specialized* reference collection gives *every librarian* more and deeper subject expertise *outside their own areas* to bring to quickly bear than would be possible if the “duplicative” or foreign-language sources were sent to the closed stacks: e.g., I superficially know where the Religion reference sources are in the BR and BS Alcove area, without knowing their specific titles or ranges of coverage—and so, even without real expertise in Religion I could provide high quality service to the lady in the example in **Paper #2**. While I am not as good in using them as our religion Recommending Officer is—searching by scriptural chapter and verse is beyond me—I could nonetheless

provide help, quickly and easily, that was way beyond the reader's expectations precisely because of the overlapping and duplicative range of reference sources immediately at hand—an overlapping deliberately created by the real subject expert. (The same can be said of the Montague grammar example with its *several* unanticipated linguistics sources in the P29 area.)

There is an important qualification here, however: a simple increase in the number of subject areas covered by a reference collection is no substitute for real subject expertise within particular areas. Had the British scholar found me at the reference desk rather than my Science colleague, I would never have known to go directly to the *Beacham's* set. I would have done an OPAC search on the subject heading **Acid rain** limited to sources in the reference collection—and that would have steered me to the classification areas QC, TD, and Z—nowhere near GE115 where the *Beacham's* set resides. Simply putting reference books on more subjects in one place does not mean that non-experts can *find* the right—or the very *best*—class areas to begin with. It takes *subject expertise* to know *which* classes look in; that's *why* we've divided up the class-emphases into specialized reading rooms in the first place. Again, this is not something that can be conveyed by cross-training classes. It is something that is learned by *experience*.

What is so distressing about I-900 is that it is utterly oblivious to any understanding of the professional “savvy” that goes into reference work. It is based on a bumper-sticker level of thinking that if we just put ‘more subjects together in one place’ then good results will somehow automatically eventuate—even if the subject specialists themselves who know best how to get readers *to* the best sources *within* the huge reference collection will not be simultaneously at the one reference desk,. “Cross training” will bring everyone “up to snuff.”

This is nonsense.

Changing format from paper to online also changes access—and not all advantages accrue to online version

Yet another fact is being disregarded by I-900: that *changing the format* of reference sources also *changes access* to them. In practical terms, this means that it is not automatically a good idea—as cavalierly assumed by I-900—that ‘if a reference set is available online then the paper set can simply be weeded to make more room in MRR.’

In reality it's just not that simple. Having the 61-volume printed set of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* readily at hand in the MRR Biography collection makes access extraordinarily fast and easy; helping readers with the online version generally means walking with them across the hall to the Computer Catalog Center to find a terminal with a printer, showing them how to find the database list, and how then to select the *ODNB*. In some cases it even entails doing the search for them, especially if the goal is to simply point out the bibliography at the end of the article that identifies where the biographee's papers are located (a frequent question that is not always

answerable via *ArchiveFinder* or OCLC).

With the printed set, in contrast, we can put our hands *immediately* on the desired volume and simply open it to the right page and simply point to the bibliography. The reader can skim the whole article quickly, or make a free copy with his digital camera; with the online version he'll probably print the whole article—and since we will soon be charging for that, the result will either diminish access entirely or else significantly increase the time that researchers spend at the CCC terminals, doing more reading *there* of what they'd otherwise print or read in the MRR. (The same can be said of the large *Dictionary of Literary Biography* and *Literature Criticism Online* sets—while the latter makes it easier to find the very long literary criticism excerpts in the several sets [sometime more than a hundred pages], its unusually klunky online interface *also* makes it much harder to *read* or even *skim* the articles. With the printed sets the reference librarians can simply point out the index volumes, and the readers can judge how much they want to look at from *a quick recognition of the thickness of the relevant set of pages* involved. For Shakespeare's *Macbeth* alone the online version delivers 1700 pages; but it's much easier to sort through, and select from, such a volume of material through the capacity to skim physical volumes than it is to laboriously page through individual pages online.)

Again: *changing format changes access*—and while the indexing capability of the online versions is indeed wonderful, the online version also creates new problems of access—more staff time to show the sources to begin with, and more researchers' time spent at the CCC reading online what they could otherwise skim through quickly in paper format. Emailing the article to one's self introduces an even greater problem: for example, a search for "Potawatomi" in the huge *Literature Criticism Online* database turns up a 129-page article on "Nineteenth-Century Native American Autobiography" from the set *Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism*. Our *onsite* screen display of this article shows a drop-down box listing the exact pages on which the word "Potawatomi" appears within the article, and next to it a "Go to page" feature that enables one to jump immediately to those pages. And on those exact pages the word appears highlighted in color. But the result is very different with the version of the same article that appears in one's email in-box: there, the "Relevant Pages" menu has vanished entirely and the desired word is not highlighted on any of the emailed pages. The offsite reader would have to *carefully read the entire 129 page article to find the (only) three pages on which the word appears*. That facilely-alleged "convenience" of being able to email an article simply vanishes for anyone who has to *actually use the results*.

The same serious problem shows up with *Dictionary of Literary Biography*—another large paper set that is all too quickly being readied for removal from MRR "because it's now online." The people who are saying "it can go" evidently have little experience in using the database version. There are real trade-offs involved; the best solution would be to have both online and print versions readily available.

I-900 eliminates the best solution

This is the solution that we have right now, already in place. I-900 will once again eliminate an existing solution and create a problem that has already been solved under our current configuration of specialized reading rooms.

Paper sets—unlike online versions—also provide recognition access to related resources shelved nearby

A related fact is also being ignored in cavalierly dismissing the continued importance of printed sets: the presence of any such set in a reference collection will draw attention not only to itself but to the related material shelved in its immediate classification area—which material is often of great use (as was specifically the case with “Humor in the New Testament” and “Montague grammar”). *Physical reference volumes shelved in classified order enable easy recognition of important related sources nearby that cannot be specified in advance in any online search.* This is yet another technicality of reference service that gets overlooked at our peril, in the cavalier assumption that “if it’s online then it doesn’t have to be present in paper.” We lose *recognition access* to what cannot be specified in advance—which is one of the greatest strengths of our reference collections to begin with.

Reference collections preserve some subject expertise of retired colleagues

Still another fact is evidently not understood, either, by I-900 proponents: the reference collections now in place embody in many—too many—instances *the residual subject expertise of specialists who have now retired and never been replaced.* The MRR Alcove collection, for example, contains a full set of the 300+ volumes of the Greek and Latin *Loeb Classical Library*. Our Classics specialist Phoebe Peacock, who just retired in December, told me over the phone that “it took forever to get them all together”; from my own experience I can say it has been very useful on many occasions to have them all immediately at hand. (One of our current readers, a Professor Emeritus from Catholic University, uses them with some frequency for the book he is writing on Christian martyrdom.) Dr. Peacock is also responsible for the hard work of filling out MRR’s 60 vol. set of the German *Real Pauly Encyclopädie*—the standard work in its field—and also assigning the “inadequate” 16 vol. English translation, *Brill’s New Pauly* to MRR. Those of us who remain can (and do) refer Classics scholars to all of these sets even when we have no subject or language expertise in this area ourselves.¹

Justified fears

All of these concerns again raise some of our greatest fears:

¹ In a consolidated reading room it is not unlikely that either of the major Classics sets now in MRR—*Loeb* or *Real Pauly*—would be squeezed out, especially when there is no longer a specialist in MRR who will stand up for them. The *Loeb* volumes at the American U. Library are scattered in the stacks; most of those at GWU’s Gelman Library are offsite in remote storage. The Mullan Library at Catholic U. and the Woodstock Library at Georgetown have sets shelved together; but it would be asking a great deal of LC’s readers to make them travel to these facilities. The Principle of Least Effort obtains: if a source is immediately at hand, it gets used; if not, people give up in pursuing their inquiries even when the missing source would have answered their questions (**Paper #6**).

- 1) that a consolidated reading room, for the sake of meeting the ideological goal of providing *something* on *all* subjects in a “transdisciplinary” way, will squeeze out highly specialized and overlapping *disciplinary* sources that are now readily accessible in our separate reading rooms; and/or
- 2) that a consolidation of reference collections will *greatly dilute* the *peculiar strengths* they have *as separate* collections—e.g., merging all of the “E” (American history) and “F” (American local histories) reference sources from the current Local History & Genealogy (LH&G) reference collection into the extensive E and F reference areas currently in MRR Alc would be disastrous for researchers because it will become much harder for users to pick out through simple recognition the genealogical resources mixed indiscriminately in with so much *other* material on American history that does not have the genealogy *focus*.

The converse is equally true: the Main Reading Room currently has a very large collection of “E” reference sources on American history in general. Merging LH&G resources in the same sequence would *bury* these vital reference sources within scores of multi-volume genealogy sets that are of no cross-disciplinary interest to non-genealogists—e.g., *Germans to America* (67 vols.), *Roster of Union soldiers* (33 vols.), and scores of multi-volume lists of Revolutionary and Civil War soldiers, volunteers, casualties, payrolls and pensions. Similarly, LH&G has scores of sets in “F” that are of immense interest to genealogists and local historians but not to the more generalist American historians: *Vital Records of Rhode Island* (20 vols.), *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (58 vols.), *West Virginia History* (59 vols.) and on and on.² Those of us who do not work with these thousands of specialized sources will not be “brought up to speed” simply by being required to take “cross-training classes.” We invite anyone who questions this to come down from the 30,000 foot theoretically level and *actually look at* the LH&G reference collection.

For the one Library that is supposed to have the most comprehensive collections on American history, the quality of reference service for this subject in particular would be greatly diminished by forcing a merger of MRR and LH&G. The only people who could even suggest such a merger are appalling naïve about the *technicalities* of reference service in these two very different disciplinary areas.

- 3) A particularly great fear—the main concern of this paper—even apart from the consolidation of reference collections themselves is the proposed sharing of the same reference desk by so large a new pool of *specialists* in so many different subjects. This will inevitably mean that experts in all of the various areas cannot be simultaneously present (**Paper #6**).

² The same problem will occur with any dispersal of our hundreds of *quotation books* into the general Alcoves reference collection—they will be less findable themselves when they are not immediately grouped together; and their presence will also dilute all of the B through V classes they get sent to.

It beggars credibility that specialists in Humanities, Social Sciences, Science, Business, Genealogy, Newspapers and Government Documents will all be at the same desk at once.

If LC's *Law* Library were staffed only intermittently by legal specialists, and instead had half (two-thirds?) of its desk time staffed by Humanities, Business, Science, or Genealogy librarians—would researchers (including Congressional) in that subject be as well served as they are now?

Given the unparalleled size and complexity of LC's collections, Science, Business, Genealogy, et al., *require just as much reference specialization as does Law*. Even within Humanities, the area of Art alone—there are whole museums and Ph.D. programs devoted to this—requires real specialization that cannot be conveyed by any “cross training” classes.

The inadequacy of cross-training classes as a substitute for experience

That simplistic “solution” of “cross-training classes” for staff is so naïve as to be ludicrous. One does not become *expert*—especially given 24 million books in 500 languages and 130 million other things—through attending superficial overview classes. *It takes years of experience with hundreds of readers asking real, specialized questions with our responding at their point of need*—not the easy questions we might want them to ask, such that providing merely “something” would be adequate.

It also takes years of hands-on *use and development* of highly specialized reference collections.

Further, it takes particular study and first-hand *use* of highly specialized databases and websites (**Paper #6**). “Cross training classes” may sound good as a “wave of the magic wand” solution to those who have never done any actual reference work in specialized areas—Science, Business, Genealogy/Heraldry, Humanities, Social Sciences, Newspapers, Government Documents—but the depths and ranges of these disciplines cannot be conveyed without real specialization and long experience in working with the peculiarities of the varied collections *applied to real point-of-use questions*.

One of the very biggest dangers to the Library is that I-900 seems very much to be working from an unarticulated but extraordinarily naïve assumption: that all reference librarians are essentially “interchangeable spark plugs,” and that anyone—with a few classes—can simply substitute for anyone else.³

This is utter nonsense. Having written all three editions of *The Oxford Guide to Library Research* (Oxford University Press)—with a completed 560-page manuscript of a fourth edition—I think I can say that I'm probably as good a generalist as anyone else in the Library. But I *routinely* have to refer patrons—and especially telephone calls—to my

³ Its results are showing up already in the cavalier treatment of Digital Reference librarians as “utility players” who can just fill in wherever and whenever a warm body is needed.

colleagues (with their own specialized and nearby reference collections) in the many other specialized reading rooms. That's a major reason for the book's having a whole chapter on "People Sources"—*no one* can handle all questions on all subjects by him- or herself. **We reference librarians all rely *not* on the "transdisciplinary capabilities" of each other but rather on our *subject specializations*. The latter, themselves, require access to extensive reference collections having multiple overlapping sources within the same subject areas—not merely "something" on all subjects.**

There is no way around it (least of all "cross training classes"): consolidation of reading rooms will undercut not only readers' ready access to subject specialists, but in the long run will undercut subject specialization itself—which is more necessary at the largest library in the world than it is at any other. (See also **Paper #6**.)

If the Library of Congress makes its major plans for reference service based on the assumption that "transdisciplinary" connections are more important than subject expertise—with *real specialization* in both reference collections and staff responsibilities—then reference service at the world's greatest library will quickly degenerate into the view that our simply providing "something" in any subject area is all that our readers require—as long, of course, as they can get it in *one* physical location.