
Staff Training for Preservation*

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THE management of the preservation of materials for use, like so many aspects of library work, impinges on far more members of staff than those who are directly involved in it. The materials contain the information resource without which a library cannot perform its primary function of providing books and information for users. It follows therefore that the preservation of that resource is a usable condition is an integral part of library work at all levels. Hence some training in preservation is essential for all staff, although objectives and methods vary.

Inevitably, different levels of knowledge and skill are required of differ-

ent employees for the effective management and administration of a preservation programme. The staff can therefore be divided, for these purposes, into three broad categories:

- 1) Those *managerial staff* who will design and monitor the programme;
- 2) The *technical staff* who are responsible for carrying out specific tasks within the programme;
- 3) The *non-specialist staff* who are not directly involved, but who need to be aware of the significance of preservation to their own work in the library.

Professional training and education

The managerial staff will normally, of course, be professional li-

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brarians, and their knowledge base will be derived or developed from what they have learned during their professional education. Therein lies the first problem. Preservation (more often called by its older name of «conservation») was until recently a declining subject area in most library and information science curricula.

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Moreover, when it was taught at all, it was generally found in the context of courses on rare books librarianship, manuscript and archives studies and other esoterica which are comparatively remote from the day-to-day interests of the great majority of professionals even in academic libraries. The decline of these courses, as they were squeezed out of the curriculum by the urgent demands of other subjects, had led to the almost total abandonment on preservation in British professional education by the late 1970s[1,2].

The Ratcliffe Report indicated that virtually no serious teaching of preservation was taking place in British library schools in the early 1980s, although there was a slight, if pardonable, exaggeration in Ratcliffe's description of this aspect in his find-

ings. Subsequent improvements were partly a consequence of the greater prominence on preservation as a professional issue which was itself a direct consequence of Ratcliffe's work[2, pp. 131-2]. These changes were also, however, a reflection of the changed understanding of preservation as a professional activity, and of its relationship with collection management[3]. The effective management of collections has inevitably become a more prominent issue in librarianship as acquisition budgets have fallen while the output of publications has continued to increase. The need to select for acquisitions has been linked with the need to preserve what is selected, and thereby to prevent the unnecessary diminution of a library's limited information resource. The revival of the teaching of preservation in library and information science schools has been largely in the context of collection management, resource management and similar topics.

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It seems to be the case that most schools now include at least basic preservation awareness in their curricula, and a few offer specialised

optional courses[4]. There has been much debate about the contents of both general and detailed courses[5-8], but there is now an emerging consensus on the core professional knowledge in this field, at least so far as a general preservation awareness programme is concerned. This includes a broad understanding of why preservation is a problem at all, its place in the wider context of professional activities, a general knowledge of preservation techniques and an understanding of major policy issues such as disaster preparedness planning and substitution for information preservation. It has been argued that a general knowledge of these topics can be acquired in two or three hours of class time supplemented by reading in the already extensive and continuously growing literature[9].

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That, however, is only the starting-point. Because preservation is a comparatively new subject in the form in which it is now presented, there is a generation of librarians who know little about it, and perhaps care less, associating it with some of the more tedious parts of

their own professional education in (long-abandoned) courses on book-binding, reprographics and the like. Awareness raising among senior managers was one of the principal recommendations of the Ratcliffe Report [1, pp. 68-9], and has similarly been a principal part of the mission of IFLA's Preservation and Conservation (PAC) Core Programme[10]. There is still some residual doubt about the «relevance» of preservation in particular contexts[11], but there is a growing understanding of its general importance in all branches of the profession. Conferences, short courses, and other continuing education activities have been widespread in the last five years[12] and seem set fair to continue. Indeed, they are essential, for, while the technology and the philosophy of preservation are developing rapidly, there is still a worldwide shortfall in knowledge, skills and educational provision[13].

Technical training

Preservation needs more than managerial support and a general awareness of the existence of a problem. It requires specific technical skills such as those of the bookbinder and the camera operator. These skills are, quite rightly, not taught to professional librarians or library school students, but are the province of technicians, some but by no means

all of whom may work in libraries. The training of technicians in various aspects of preservation work is, nevertheless, crucial to the effective implementation of preservation programmes. Historically, libraries which had in-house binderies trained apprentices in craft binding, but there have been significant changes in the last three decades. Although some libraries do indeed retain their own binderies, an increasing number make use of the services of commercial binderies even for so-called «conservation» work on older materials.

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Budgetary cuts, and the difficulty of recruiting school-leavers to lengthy and illpaid apprenticeships, have seriously disrupted the older patterns of work and training. Some colleges offer courses in bookbinding and related techniques, but there is no centralised validation or control of standards[14]. Indeed many of these courses seem to be little more than evening classes for amateurs learning a craft skill as they might learn needlework or pottery.

Increasingly it is the commercial binderies which dominate the field and they have now become the prin-

cipal source of trained men and women. Even here, however, there is a problem. A worker trained in the techniques of contemporary case-binding, such as is used for binding virtually all hardback books at the time of production and publication, has few of the skills needed for library binding. A library binding, whether it is on a volume of a periodical, or a paperback to be strengthened, or the rebinding or repair of a damaged volume, is by definition an individual job which involves the exercise of some traditional handcraft skills, even if these are supplemented or partly replaced by mechanised operations. Only a few firms can undertake such work and they train the staff whom they need. They are often able to offer better wages than most libraries, but they too have a recruitment problem. Despite these difficulties, however, the tradition of craftbinding is not dead in Britain and the skills, which are needed, although scarce, are available[15].

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In other aspects of preservation work technical skills are also learned by apprenticeship, whether formal or informal. Paper repair is the principal requirement of most archivists.

This is a skill which is less often needed in libraries, the major exception being those with manuscript collections. Some of the commercial conservation companies are able to undertake such work. Training in paper repair has long been catered for by programmes run by the Society of Archivists, the Public Record Office and other organisations within the archive profession itself[16-18]. A suggestion that librarians should follow the example of the archivists and arrange for the training of craft-binders has not apparently found general acceptance[19].

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Skills in photographic operations, both in the studio and in the dark-room, are available in most large libraries with research materials. Users have long been offered reprographic services of various kinds. Large-scale substitution programmes, however, require a quite different level of activity. Heavy capital investment may be needed, especially if microfiche is the preferred format. Consequently, many libraries have associated their substitution pro-

grammes with the publication of copies of the films thus created. In such cases, commercial publishers are usually involved, and it is their staff and equipment (and indeed often their capital) which are used for the programme.

General staff training

The third, and arguably the most important, area of staff training for preservation is that which has also been the most neglected. All staff are involved in preservation if they are in some way involved in the handling and storage of library materials. It is essential that staff induction programmes at every level should include basic preservation awareness, but especially so when such programmes are intended for non-professionals with no previous experience of library work. There is, however, little evidence for this in the training literature[20]. Even one of the few studies of training in the conservation field has nothing to say on general awareness among staff[21]. Indeed, the Education Panel of the National Preservation Advisory Committee has identified the training of non-professional staff as a priority area for the next phase of its work and hopes to be able to produce an appropriate package to assist trainers in developing programmes suitable for both new and existing staff.

Although all staff are involved with materials, it is usually the most junior who are involved in day-to-day handling. There are a number of matters in which a few basic instructions are essential. If books are not shelved properly, they will be damaged without even being touched. To maintain tidy shelves, and to ensure that they are neither too tightly nor too loosely packed, is an essential requirement, and a skill which is so easily taught and learned that failing to teach it is inexcusable. Similarly, all staff need to be taught that book-trolleys should not be overloaded, and that they should be moved with care. They should be taught that certain materials, especially audio-visual and electronic media, need to be handled with special care, and that the equipment used for consulting them should also be treated properly.

Training for preservation has to take place at many different levels

Staff on the circulation desk have a special responsibility. It is they who see books as they are returned, and can intercept those which are clearly in need of attention. A little basic training can soon enable them to distinguish between books which would benefit and those which would not. Of course, all of this has to be seen within the broader context of a managerially determined policy

on preservation and conservation, but it is the junior staff who are in the front line, and they therefore need to be trained in basic awareness and a few basic skills. The practical literature on preservation rightly emphasises some of the more menial tasks involved [22,23]. These begin with the proper care of materials on the shelves, and include dusting and cleaning as well as careful handling by staff and users. Junior staff should never be allowed to forget how much they can achieve by example, and to remember to make sure that the example is good. Minor repairs can also be carried out with minimal training, and it seems appropriate that the junior staff should be encouraged to do this under supervision and in carefully predetermined circumstances.

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Summary and conclusions

Training for preservation, like preservation itself, has to take place at many different levels. At the professional level, the need for preservation awareness to be an integral part of first professional qualification courses is paramount. That is now accepted at least in theory by most educators, and is beginning to be

reflected in the curricula of library schools in Britain and elsewhere. The longterm objective must be that some understanding of preservation should be regarded as core professional knowledge for all librarians, as it always has been for archivists. Awareness raising among existing practitioners, and especially among the senior managers who play the key role in policy determination and

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fund allocation, is perhaps a more difficult task because the constituency is more diffuse than the comparatively captive audience of the library schools. Nevertheless, the activities of the National Preservation Office, the Library Association and other bodies in the UK, of similar bodies in other countries, and of IFLA internationally, have gone some considerable way towards raising the profile of preservation in the profession. It has been presented as a managerial issue of broad general concern and interest, an approach which has begun to make significant inroads into the thinking of managers in academic and public libraries alike.

The preservation problem in most british libraries has not yet reached the crisis level

The training of bench-workers, the technicians who actually carry out the various tasks involved in the implementation of conservation and repair programmes, is even more problematic. It is largely out of our hands as a profession. Bookbinding is not an attractive job in terms of financial reward or social status, and it seems probable that in Britain it is going to become even more concentrated in the few companies who can provide specialist services to libraries and archives. The very high-level skills, such as paper repair or the repair of older bookbindings, are those which libraries and archives will have to support and develop within their own organisations, since there is little commercial demand for them and they might otherwise be lost, with disastrous consequences for historic research collections.

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Finally, the third level of training and action is among all library staff, where an awareness of the preservation issue should inform every activity which involves the handling of materials. Such awareness is best instilled through initial training pro-

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grammes, and should be regarded by trainers as being an important part of their brief.

The preservation problem in most British libraries has not yet reached the crisis level which it long since attained in many of the most important libraries in North America. With proper awareness and a proper response, by training as well as in other ways, that crisis may yet be avoided or ameliorated. A proper understanding of preservation, and staff properly trained and educated to appreciate its importance, will maximise the useful life of our information resources, and thus help to release funding for their expansion and development.

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