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The Hardest Choices: Money & Space

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When it comes to managing the Reference collection, it’s not just a question of money. Like many libraries today, we are running out of shelf space, and the fastest-growing part of our collection is the Literary Criticism section, in particular, our standing orders from the Gale Group. One of my collection responsibilities is Literatures in English and, earlier this year, our Reference team started a major collection management project. Prior to our team’s arrival, certain decisions had been made, impacting on this part of the Reference collection. By virtue of our membership in a consortium, we’ve had access to the Literature Resource Center (LRC), an outstanding online resource, since Fall 1998. Upon gaining access to this resource, in order to save both money and shelf space, our standing orders to Contemporary Authors (CA), Contemporary Authors New Revision Series (CANR), and Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC) had been cancelled. We were now faced with several choices:

1. maintaining the status quo
2. resuming one, two, or all three standing orders
3. resuming the standing orders as well as filling in the missing volumes

It was my charge to determine whether the Gale Literature Resource Center adequately replaced the following print titles from Gale: CA, CANR, and CLC and to make recommendations to our Reference team.

The Literature Resource Center is designed for undergraduate students, our main constituency; Gale describes the Literature Resource Center as follows:

The database provides excellent Help documentation including search tips and a “Guide to Conducting Literary Research.” The search engine is flexible enough to accommodate author searches that start with the author’s first name as well as his/her last name. Additional features include the ability to e-mail your results and to format for printing.

The complexity of my assessment grew upon considering the conflicting needs of our constituency. Increasingly, our undergraduate students and faculty prefer online sources that can be accessed from off campus. However, even though we are a private university, we service community patrons including public school teachers and students from local high schools and community colleges, who are not eligible to use our online resources due to vendor agreements. While our faculty appreciate the convenience of remote access, that doesn’t mean they are willing to relinquish valuable print resources for their own research and that of their students. In addition, as librarians, we are ever cognizant of our responsibility to teach our students how and when to use the best reference tools for their information needs.

Listserv and Reviews

Within these pages, I will share with you my decision-making process as well as the recommendations made to our team of Reference librarians. I started my journey by seeking counsel from my colleagues. I am very grateful to be a member of this profession at a time of unsurpassed communication opportunities. Not long ago, soliciting feedback from more than a handful of colleagues would have been prohibitive in terms of both time and money. By posting a message on the following lists: COLLIB-L, COLDV-L, and DIG_REFL, I received helpful advice from fifteen of my colleagues, most within a day of my original request for feedback. [At the recent ALA Conference in Chicago (my first ALA Conference), I became aware of the English-American Literature (now Literatures in English) Section Discussion List and solicited feedback from them as well for this article.] See Sidebar for a valuable tip that came via the listserv replies, on taking full advantage of your print resources from Gale.

My first discovery, upon reading the listserv replies, was that we were not alone; most of the respondents had either gone through the same process or were about to, due to dwindling budgets and lack of shelf space.

The overwhelming response from the listservs concerned the print titles currently in their collections. Some libraries had removed their print volumes to storage upon subscribing to the LRC and regretted the fact that they had lost ready access to such valuable resources. An important caveat: the LRC is not a complete substitute for existing print volumes. Those libraries which had not stored their print titles found that they had to fill the gaps in the LRC via their retrospective collections, supplemented by such resources as the MLA Bibliography and the Humanities Index, used in conjunction with a good Inter-Library Loan service.

Specifically concerning CLC, another respondent had learned from his Gale representative that roughly 85% of the literary criticism articles from CLC are currently available via the LRC; the missing 15% reflect articles for which Gale was unable to obtain copyright clearance, including many from the earliest volumes of CLC. He emphasized that, while 85% of this massive...
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resource is quite an impressive database. It is certainly not the equivalent of the print series.

However, most reports indicated that the transition had gone very well, with undergraduate students and public library patrons appreciating the ease of use and remote access provided by the LRC, one untenable specifically mentioned that there had been no criticism from their English Department.

(Additional key responses reflected the fact that local Gale representatives had been very helpful so, if you're using the Literature Resource Center (LRC) or considering it, do ask your local Gale representative to send you comparison information. If taken with a grain of salt, information provided by the publisher can be helpful in clarifying choices. Free trials are available.)

Seeking additional critiques of the Literature Resource Center, I found reviews from CHOICE, Library Journal, and The Booklist, all from 1999. The positive comments reflected my own experience teaching our students how to use this powerful research tool. Mary Ellen Quinn agrees:

LRC is one of the most user-friendly resources of its kind. The ability to search across so many of the Gale lines with one search engine is by itself a major selling point. Access to the many other pieces of information, including Internet resources and full-text journal articles, makes the product even more useful.

Ed Tallent, writing in Library Journal, underscores the versatility of the search features:

This generous search capability provides for a marvelous approach to literature. If you know exactly what you're looking for, you can be satisfied easily, but if you are also "casting about" for authors from the Harlem Renaissance, or Black Mountain Poets, or writers of ballads, gothic novels, film scripts, or detective fiction, this source will still serve you well.

All three reviews emphasize the advantages of the LRC for our type of library. R. H. Kieft's review in CHOICE states that "the blessings of Gale's reference sets are many, and new, small, or distance education libraries will want this fast-growing, multidimensional LRC version. For large, well-established libraries, however, the choice may not be obvious, if only because they will have to reinvest in all this content. That said the certain advantage of LRC over an equally large array of synoptic and periodical works on the shelf is that LRC finesse the packaging problem inherent in print."

In The Booklist review, Mary Ellen Quinn emphasizes: "Libraries that cater to undergraduate researchers, in particular, would be remiss not to add this to their electronic database collections." And for Tallent: "The Bottom Line: This site is ideally suited for its target audience: high school and undergraduate students. It offers manageable doses of information, good references to other writers, solid secondary sources, and a useful literary dictionary: Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedi of Literature (Merriam-Webster, 1995). Highly recommended for public and academic libraries."

Recent changes and modifications

It appears that the Gale Group is listening to reviewers and/or subscribers as some of the negatives contained within the 1999 reviews have been addressed: Tallent pointed out that "some things need work." His complaint about the lack of documentation of updates has been addressed for living authors; when you access an author entry from CA for authors alive today, there is a prominent Entry Updated notation at the top. However, for Sylvia Plath, Dylan Thomas and James Joyce, there is no clue as to when the entry was last updated. Another criticism from Tallent: when he "looked up the Irish author Colm Toibin, the CA entry did not list his most recent novel, published in 1996, but there were two full-text book reviews for it." I looked up the same author with similar results: while there is already a book review for his latest novel, The Blackwater Lightship, expected publication date: August 2000, his online CA entry was updated 12/08/1999 so there is no mention of his latest book. Another of his concerns has not yet been addressed: "George Orwell is cross-referenced from Eric Blair, but Frank O'Connor is listed under O'Donovan with no cross-reference."

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Quinn also addressed the pros and cons of the Custom Search feature: "It is in Custom Search mode that the researcher can combine all of the above searching modes with each other and with other categories, such as Nationality, Ethnicity, and Year of Birth. Some of these added categories are not complete. For example, Portuguese is not listed on the Nationality menu, so that a researcher would not be able to do a Nationality search to find Jose Saramago, the 1998 Portuguese Nobel Laureate for Literature." My findings: Portuguese is now available on the Nationality menu.

Kief asserts "LRC is currently not very useful for literary criticism/theory topics. The search for 'criticism' retrieves a mixed lot of public domain, current journal, and Gale-commissioned texts; much of the public domain material will amaze teachers reading student papers." My findings: the Literary Criticism area is still a mixed bag; I'll address this area in more depth below.

The electronic database versus the print
Biographical Sources:

Now it was my turn to investigate and compare the print versions of Gale's Contemporary Authors (CA), Contemporary Authors New Revision (CANR), and Contemporary Literature Criticism (CLC) to the Gale Literature Resource Center (LRC). In order to do this, I selected three key authors, frequently requested by students, with distinctly different styles, backgrounds, and time-frames: Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison and Oscar Hijuelos. An additional criterion was that all selected authors have entries in CA, CANR and CLC titles.

I performed an in-depth, word-for-word comparison of relevant CA, CANR, and CLC entries with the corresponding entries in the LRC. When I searched the LRC for biographies of Sylvia Plath, I retrieved seven entries, among them three extensive treatments from three separate volumes of the Dictionary of Literary Biography, plus essays from American Writers and Modern American Writers (none of which are part of our collection). Comparing the LRC version of the CA biography with CANR (1991), the most current volume to include Plath, a major omission is no mention in the online biography of Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems (1992) and a section on Media Adaptations are only available in the online product. In addition, the online version includes a significant section on Letters Home plus, additional Biographical/Critical Sources have been added under Further Readings about the Author.

I discovered similar results comparing the print biographies for Toni Morrison with the LRC. The LRC contained eight separate entries, two from LRC: Contemporary Authors Online and the LRC version of Contemporary Literary Criticism, and the rest from a variety of print sources; including African American Writers, American Writers, Modern American Women Writers, and Dictionary of Literary Biography. The online CA entry included a notation, Entry Updated: 06/08/2000, and was more up-to-date than the corresponding print entry. In addition, there was an extensive treatment of Paradise and three additional periodical citations under Further Readings About The Author.

With the biography of Oscar Hijuelos, the LRC offers three documents, the CA version showing that the entry was updated 10/01/1999. Considering that the latest print edition, CANR 75, was published in May 1999, the two versions are nearly identical, although the LRC version includes the fact that he is currently professor of English at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, with his office address included. Additional biographies are from CLC-Select (part of LRC) and Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 145: Modern Latin-American Fiction Writers.

Criticism Sources:

Selecting the link for Criticism of Works by Sylvia Plath, I found thirty-one documents. Our LRC subscription includes Macmillan Reference's Scribner Writers Series and Twayne's Authors Series and the first seven documents are individual chapters from Twayne's United States Authors, again a resource not available in our print collection.

Twelve volumes of CLC contain criticism of Plath; altogether, there are one hundred and twenty-nine reviews. Six volumes contain reviews not replicated in the LRC. In the remaining half, in CLC 2, containing twelve reviews, only one, by Maloff, appears in the LRC; however, the LRC version is full-text, while the print version contains an excerpt, roughly one-third of the review. In CLC 3, out of six reviews, only the Gates review is a duplicate.

In CLC 14, out of three reviews, one by Oberg 1 is a replicate. In CLC 51, out of eleven reviews, only the Perlitt review is a duplicate. In CLC 62, out of thirteen reviews, two are duplicates: Perlitt and Wagner. It is interesting to note that with the most recent volume, CLC 111, the LRC improves its coverage. Out of thirteen reviews, ten are duplicates: word-for-word in the LRC and an excerpt, an excerpt in the LRC, appeared word-for-word in CLC 62. This is consistent with what Gale advertises:

Contemporary Literary Criticism Select, Featuring entries on all authors appearing in CLC since vol. 95 of the print series

and complete profiles of 266 most studied authors from editions prior to vol. 95... Still the LRC coverage is not complete. It looks like the Gale Group wants to ensure that LRC subscribers will continue to purchase CLC in print.

The link, Criticism of Works by Toni Morrison, presents twenty-three documents, seven from Twayne's United States Authors, of the six articles in CLC 4, the four in CLC 10, the nine in CLC 22, the nineteen in CLC 55, none are reproduced in the LRC. Out of eleven essays in CLC 87, the most current volume, two are reproduced word for word: Deborah Horvitz's "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in Beloved" and Clarence Major's "In the Name of Memory."

While CLC 81, Yearbook 1993 features Toni Morrison, the Overview heading in the yearbook doesn't correspond to even one document under LRC's Overviews of Works by This Author. However, out of eight Reviews in the yearbook, two (out of twenty-three) match word-for-word reviews found in LRC's Criticism of the Author's Works: Richard Eder's "Those Nights on the Harlem Roofops" and Michael Wood's "Life Studies." In addition, the yearbook contains a lengthy interview with Ms. Morrison and an essay on her Nobel Lecture.

The link, Criticism of Works by Oscar Hijuelos, provides thirteen documents, one of which, Grace Edwards-Yearwood's "Dancing to the Cuban Beat, " is word-for-word as it appears in CLC 65, Yearbook 1990. Another, Jefferson's New York Times book review, is very nearly word-for-word in the LRC when compared to the original in the New York Times, while the print version is limited to excerpts from the original. However, a quality control issue arises here as the LRC review is missing part of the last line; it should read:

Still and all, you finish feeling as Cesar's first music teacher in Cuba told him audiences should feel when a song ends - ready to throw up your arms and cry, 'Qué bueno es!' Mr. Hijuelos is writing music of the heart, not the heart of flesh and blood that stops beating, 'but this other heart filled with light and music... a world of pure affection, before torment, before loss, before awareness.'

The yearbook also includes three additional articles, not available in the LRC, as well as an excerpt from his prize-winning book, The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love.

Does the LRC replace CA, CANR, and CLC?

My findings:

The LRC is a valuable, exceptionally user-friendly resource, providing a surfeit of information on every aspect of literary studies.

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
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While particularly useful for high school students and undergraduates, its convenience, ease of use, and credible resources will be appreciated by graduate students and faculty as well. However, it certainly would be of interest to discover how Gale selects and deselects material for both CLC and the LRC, what they mean by the terms “selected” and “most studied” (who selects and decides?), and how much of the missing criticism is due to copyright restrictions. In addition, do they plan to update the LRC with CLC entries prior to Volume 95?

CA & CANR Series:

While we have acknowledged that there is definitely some information in the print editions omitted from the LRC, the overwhelming evidence is that the online resource provides sufficient in-depth and up-to-date coverage (often more up-to-date than the corresponding print versions, for obvious reasons). My recommendation was to use the LRC to replace the CA & CANR series. However, unlike some of the listers we replied, we won’t put our existing sets in storage.

CLC:

It’s a totally different story with CLC. While the LRC contains significant literary criticism articles and even offers additional reviews, not available in the print version, it cannot replace the CLC. The print version is especially important as it relates to prize-winning authors, as the yearbook editions offer lengthy articles, for the most part, not available online. My recommendation, which was accepted by our Reference team, was to reinstate our standing order for CLC as well as fill in the missing volumes.

You may be surprised or appalled by my recommendation to relinquish our subscriptions to CA and CANR. Please keep in mind that these recommendations reflect our need for juggling valuable resources with a severe space problem. In the best of all possible worlds, we wouldn’t have to make such a choice.

Endnotes


17. See HYPERLINK “http://www.galenet.com/servlet/LitRC/about/aboutb=LRC&c=DocTitle&f=description”


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To address one of the problems in the area of electronic resources for libraries, the Association of Research Libraries, under the auspices of its New Measures Initiative, has begun a study to determine how to develop statistics and performance measures that address the delivery of networked information resources and services. Charles R. McClure and Wonsik “Jeff” Shim, Information Use Management and Policy Institute, Florida State University, will direct the e-metrics study, which includes the participation of 23 ARL member libraries. “ARL libraries have become increasingly interested in finding ways to gather consistent and comparable data to evaluate our electronic information services. This project will help administrators make better decisions regarding the purchase and deployment of these new resources that are taking a greater share of our budgets,” said Ruth Miller, University Librarian and Director, University Library System, University of Pittsburgh. Miller and Sherrie Schmidt, Dean of University Libraries, Arizona State University, serve as co-chairs of the project for ARL. The e-metrics project will be conducted in three phases. Phase one (May-October 2000) will gather a systematic way information about current ARL libraries’ best practices in statistics, measures, processes, and activities that pertain to networked resources and services. The resulting inventory and analysis will serve as a basis for the second phase of the project, to be conducted November 2000-June 2001. During that time, a methodology will be developed and tested to assess the degree to which such data collection is possible and collected data are comparable among member libraries. During the project’s third and final phase (July 2001-December 2001), a set of refined measures will be proposed to ARL, complete with data descriptions, and guidelines for data collection, analysis, and use. The

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