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Random Ramblings — Have Recent Trends in Collection Development Unfairly Penalized Foreign Literature Research?



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I have been responsible for selecting materials for French literature, plus sometimes Spanish and Italian, since 1980 to my retirement in 2015, first at the **University of Utah** and then at **Wayne State University**. I also have a PhD in French literature from **Yale University** (1971) and worked in that library from 1971-1980. I believe that the current trends in collection development, brought about mostly by budget reductions, have hit faculty and doctoral students in modern foreign literatures particularly hard.

I see three principal structural reasons why supporting modern language programs is difficult in the current climate of reduced resources. Some of these factors may apply to other disciplines, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences; but I doubt that the “triple whammy” described below applies to many of them:

Language: By definition, all the primary texts, many secondary texts, and most digital resources will be in the foreign language. French authors write in French. French academics produce much of the scholarship needed by American researchers. Faculty and doctoral students require access to these foreign language texts to produce credible scholarship, even if their research is written in English. English language texts are important but not sufficient for competent research. On the other hand, materials in foreign languages are much less likely to be used by scholars in other disciplines who don’t know the language even if the content would be relevant to their research.

Number of faculty: Only a small number of faculty teach and produce research in each foreign literature, even at larger schools, compared with other Humanities disciplines like English and History. As the number of teaching positions available to PhD graduates has declined, universities have admitted fewer students to doctoral programs, which has further reduced the number of faculty positions.

The silo effect: Except for faculty and doctoral students who choose to research broad areas or perhaps major authors, support for faculty and doctoral students means making available specialized materials that are likely to be of interest to only the one person who has requested the item. The silo effect is increased when scholarship in the foreign language is produced by different linguistic communities. Spanish may

be the best example with the separation between peninsular and Latin American literature, but the same is true for French with three European countries (France, Belgium, and Switzerland), Quebec, and African and Caribbean literatures.

The remainder of this column will examine how these three factors have implications for collection development in libraries where the university has graduate faculty and doctoral programs in modern foreign literatures.

General Considerations — Library Operations

Foreign literature programs pose some special challenges for libraries. Even in the largest universities, I doubt that selectors/bibliographers have the needed linguistic abilities to cover all the languages that the library collects. Literatures in non-Roman script present an even greater problem for obvious reasons. Even with competent language skills, the selector will have stronger subject expertise in some areas; but this is a general challenge for most subject disciplines where selectors, especially in smaller universities, may not have a deep subject background in certain assigned areas. These language issues can pose similar problems for the internal processing of orders, especially for non-Roman scripts. The reduction in funds for monographic collection development may have lessened some of these problems because individual item selection has become less important.

Databases and Library Catalogs: Discovery versus Access

Discovery of relevant research materials has become more efficient for most faculty and doctoral students in universities of sufficient size to offer doctoral programs in various modern languages. Free resources include *Google Scholar*, *Project Gutenberg*, and many library catalogs including those of the national and university libraries in the countries where the language is spoken. Similarly, these libraries may also have purchased access to general resources such as *WorldCat*, *JSTOR*, *Project Muse*, and the *HathiTrust Digital Library*. The *MLA Bibliography* provides indexing to all types of resources in multiple languages though the indexing is more comprehensive for materials in English.

The issue for researchers then becomes access to these resources. Databases with access to full text exist in French and, I would assume, for the other major foreign languages. The problem is that subscribing to these databases is difficult to justify for a small number of faculty and doctoral students but may occur

in universities with particular strengths in the language and relatively good funding. Access may also be more easily available for materials out of copyright where it is legal for the organization or the library to share materials. *Project Gutenberg* is prime example of a way to obtain older primary source materials though doing so does not satisfy many needs of modern language literature scholars.

Researchers in other academic subject areas are more likely to have direct access to full text resources due to the greater number of faculty and doctoral students as well as the fact that many of these disciplines can be mainly supported with English language resources. For example, *Library Literature & Information Science Full Text* makes research much easier for me as a library science professor.

Resource Sharing

Before talking about materials in the library, I will discuss resource sharing since this service has become more important as collections have shrunk and the buying power of budgets has fallen. To make a key point, resource sharing through interlibrary loan (ILL) requires successful prior discovery. That is, the faculty member or doctoral student must have identified the materials that they need. Success through serendipitous discovery is limited. Another issue that affects all users is that researchers may not be sure from the limited information available whether they are requesting useful materials. While just-in-time purchase of ILL requests can make sense, I have had faculty tell me that some materials were ultimately not pertinent to their research. Other factors that affect all resource sharing are restrictions on lending electronic materials imposed by the vendors — up to and including a contractual prohibition of ILL. On the other hand, the ability to send digital journal articles in some circumstances is a plus because their distribution is more efficient and requester can use key word searching.

A fundamental issue for modern literature research that also applies to many other disciplines in the Humanities and some Social Sciences is the dependence upon monographs. Most often, the university library can find such materials via ILL; but they sometimes arrive with limited availability and must be returned quickly. For extended research projects including doctoral dissertations, the user may need to have frequent access that suggests that the library should purchase the most important materials for the collection once faculty and doctoral students determine that they are essential for their research. The increased availabil-

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ity of monographs in the out-of-print market has made purchase more feasible and often at an acceptable cost. A second very specific limitation for modern literature researchers is that some materials may be available only from libraries in foreign countries. ILL may not be possible or may have additional restrictions or higher costs. Finally, some libraries may favor faculty requests and discourage doctoral candidates who wish to have access to large quantities of materials.

The Library Collection

Serials — Modern language collections may fare the best in this category because collection development strategies have changed less. Even if “big deals” have taken an increasing amount of funding away from individual serial selection and do not include many serials in support of foreign literature research, reductions across the board most frequently give similar targets to all areas. The modern language area will lose subscriptions but will likely still retain an essential core. Any cuts will generally follow the same guidelines as applied in other subject areas with an attempt to keep the titles most important for teaching and research. One difference may be the decision to eliminate or reduce popular publications that would provide information about events at home for foreign students, general cultural awareness for faculty, and more accessible texts for undergraduates. Internet resources would most likely provide acceptable substitutes in these areas.

Monograph Resources — The major shift in collection development budgets over the last fifty years has been from monographs to serials and databases. The old budget rule, 60% for serials and 40% for monographs, is no longer valid as funding for monographs has often shrunk to 10% or less of the collection development budget. For disciplines like modern language literatures, this shift has drastically reduced the availability of resources. In addition to resource sharing as described above, libraries have replaced the principle of anticipating monographs needed by their users (just-in-case) with the new model of “just-in-time.” I do not disagree in principle with this model. Much research supports higher circulation of monographs purchased this way. My own personal experience was a quick and dirty examination of a very reputable but also very expensive monographic series where only about 20% of the volumes had ever circulated. The older model, however, allowed researchers to browse the area in the stacks where they were most likely able to find needed materials, though the effectiveness of this strategy depends upon the library classification scheme and collection development experts have often questioned the usefulness of browsing. The increased importance of eBooks has made browsing much less effective even if the eBooks in the collection can be arranged in a call number sort.

Implementing the “just-in-time” model depends upon promising to honor purchase requests quickly and perhaps ordering some

ILL submissions as indicated above. The other major strategy is to add eBooks records to the catalog for items that the library does not own. Authorized users can have immediate access to these items at which point the library pays a loan fee or purchases the item from the vendor. The obvious advantage of this strategy is that the library offers a much larger pool of access that is in some ways similar to the “just-in-case” model but at a lower cost. Unfortunately, the items available via this model are usually almost exclusively in English. While modern literature faculty and doctoral students will find useful items in English, most often from university presses, they will not come across materials in their foreign languages. Once again, eBook collections in foreign languages are available, at least for the major languages; but it is again hard for the library to justify making them available for such a small number of faculty and doctoral students.

Final Comments and Suggestions

Somehow, despite the challenges discussed above, language faculty manage to produce research sufficient to gain tenure, promotion, and merit increments. Doctoral students also find ways to complete their dissertations. First, some of the larger universities still provide adequate support for foreign literature studies though there is evidence that even the largest libraries do not provide the comprehensive coverage that they did fifty years ago. I suspect that more libraries honor faculty requests than doctoral student suggestions. Second, faculty and doctoral students are creative. One key decision is to evaluate available library resources to discover areas where research is better supported. Major authors and genres are more likely to have materials available than is the case for secondary authors and niche subjects. As stated above, ILL works better for journal articles than for monographs so that “hot topics” in the journal literature should be more easily available. Faculty and doctoral students can also choose to live closer to a major library, travel to visit such libraries, and perhaps spend their summers in countries where the language is that of the literature that they study. Finally, they may decide to purchase the key monographs for their research. Humanities primary and secondary texts tend to be less expensive than those in other disciplines.

On the other hand, I still contend that these researchers are getting the short end of the stick

from their libraries. The support taken away from the monograph purchases that they need in their language of study are funding data bases, serials packages, and “just-in-time” eBook collections that don’t contain much of what they require in any language other than English. I will allow that discovery tools are much more comprehensive and easier to use, a fact that has a positive effect on their research. Less time spent on discovery provides more time for researchers to obtain the needed texts.

For mid-size libraries without many doctoral students, I have a few suggestions. The “just-in-time” library still needs to collect major primary sources including new scholarly editions of the most important authors. The *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* is an example of a key resource for French. Perhaps the library should also acquire a few of the most important monographic series; or, at least, the subject specialist should monitor them for important contributions. The library should also commit resources to supporting faculty research by purchasing needed monographs for their research within fairly wide boundaries even if the faculty member is the only person who will ever use them. To the extent possible, these requests should be honored throughout the calendar year so as not to impede research efforts. I recommend that doctoral students be given a small allocation, perhaps \$500-1,000, to purchase key works for dissertation research. If the university can spend vast sums of money for laboratories and expensive serials in STEM areas, such support is pocket change or a rounding error. Finally, the library’s ILL system needs efficiently to deliver needed research materials.

I hope that what I have said in this column makes sense. I would welcome a study that asks foreign literature faculty and doctoral students about their use of libraries. Perhaps they don’t share my sense that library support for them has diminished. Perhaps they have found effective ways to cope. Perhaps they aren’t missing what they never had. In my reasonably extensive readings in both library and higher education literature, I haven’t encountered many complaints. In fact, I actually hope that I’m wrong and that recent library decisions haven’t critically hindered their ability to complete and publish their research. If, however, their research efforts are compromised, the library should take greater responsibility to support this overlooked group that has been penalized, perhaps inadvertently, by recent trends in collection development. 🐷

Rumors

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The survey results help to quantify the extent to which researchers are moving beyond the traditional dissemination ecosystem provided by publishers and libraries, and expanding their use of SCNs. It emphasizes the need for publishers to make it easier for authors to maximize the audience for their work, while protecting copyright and ensuring that the total usage of a work can be counted when reporting to institutions and funders.

After all this survey seriousness, I was hungry! How about a pocket-sized snack? In 2008, the European Union gave **Melton Mowbray’s pork pies “protected geographical indication” (PGI)** — the same elite status as Champagne. The **Melton Carnegie Museum** explains how the pies from this Norman market town developed such fame: pigs in particular had a taste for the whey left over from making the equally-renowned local Stilton cheese, leading to many local farmers keeping — and eating — the animals. This resulted in the chopped pork which was put

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