ALA Library Schools and Subject Reference Coursework: A Short Communication

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Reference librarians are exposed to the literature of different disciplines in a number of ways including advanced degrees, on the job training, and intellectual inquisitiveness. As students, many reference librarians were also exposed to library science programs offering coursework specializing in information sources and research within other disciplines. A brief study of current library science programs in the United States reveals that approximately half of these programs offer specialized reference coursework in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Comparing these results to a previous study, one finds that humanities and social sciences courses have proportionately diminished while medical and health sciences courses have increased. These changes have implications for LIS educators preparing students for reference work.

Keywords: LIS education, MLIS curricula, subject disciplines, reference librarians, subject knowledge

Introduction

Providing information is a key role of librarians. This information provision is often referred to as "reference work". The current definition of reference work provided by Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) states that it "includes reference transactions and other activities that involve the creation, management, and assessment of information or research resources, tools, and services" (RUSA, 2015). What is not delineated in this definition is the nature of the research resources, tools and services available within the many disciplines. The variety of resources can be problematic for reference librarians. For example, is it realistic to assume that reference librarians know how to interpret business ratios, decipher patent applications, or calculate boiling points of compounds? The knowledge attained by reference librarians varies depending on aptitude, interests, and opportunity.

By nature librarians tend to be inquisitive; additionally they also tend to be heavy readers with an eagerness to engage in continuous learning (Ulrich, Hechlik, & Roeber, 1966). As a result, by their own explorative nature, many librarians may begin their professional careers with working knowledge of several different disciplines. Even during their professional preparation and careers, librarians are exposed to different disciplines through the curricula, advanced degrees, and on-the-job training.

As library science students they may have had opportunities to enroll in specialized reference courses covering the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Also, many librarians have attained advanced degrees beyond their LIS programs providing them occasions to delve into the literature within various disciplines. Additionally, on the job training also provides numerous opportunities for librarians to explore the literature within different arenas. For instance, librarians can peruse reference collections, delve into the library's subscription databases, become members of various listservs, read a variety of professional journals, and explore collaboration with subject experts by partaking in interdisciplinary research (Knapp, 2010).

Library Schools and Subject Discipline Coursework

Let's take a step back and focus on the development stage—library science students. Do library schools expose students to the literature within the humanities, social sciences, and sciences as well as and other disciplines? While students may enter library school with a working knowledge of some disciplines, they may recognize that a specialized reference course will hone their knowledge and prepare them to collaborate as partners with teaching faculty and researchers within the academic setting.

Examination of MLIS Curricula in the USA

Researchers have scrutinized MLIS curricula by polling library school students, reviewing course syllabi, or perusing college catalogs. Before the advent of the Internet, Cheney (1963) examined library school catalogs in relation to reference education preparation and found that reference courses were widespread throughout the programs. In 1962 she inspected course content of 32 ALA accredited programs and found that a total of 175 reference courses were offered. Many courses were listed under the course headings of reference services; government publications; literature of the humanities, social sciences, or sciences; medical bibliography, and legal literature. A majority of the library schools offered four reference courses, and one school provided over 13 reference courses (Cheney, 1963). See Table 1 for a breakdown of coursework (Cheney, 1963, 191).

These results indicate that these library schools placed a great value on educating librarians in various subject disciplines, however, over 50 years later, is this assumption true today? Smith & Oliva (2010) distributed a survey through various listservs to seek academic librarians and determine their attitudes towards sub-

Table 1. Number of Discipline Specific Courses Offered in 32 Library Schools in the USA in 1962.

Discipline	Number
Humanities	14
Social Sciences	15
Humanities & Social Sciences combined	9
Science & Technology	28
Medicine	6
Government Publications	22

ject specialization. The authors found that 78% of the respondents agreed with the statement, "a reference librarian should have a strength in one particular subject area" (p. 131). Best practices for staying up-to-date included participating in self-education, perusing newspapers for current events, attending conferences, reading professional journals, attending in-house training from subject experts, and participating in informal cross training at the reference desk (Smith & Oliva, 2010).

Health librarians also maintain subject expertise in similar ways including obtaining membership within professional organizations, enrolling in continuing education courses, reading departmental newsletters, and attending departmental social events (Cataldo, Tennant, Sherwill-Navarro, & Jesano, 2006).

Current Study

In 1962 a majority of MLIS programs in the USA offered advanced reference coursework in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. To what extent do MLIS programs today offer coursework in specific disciplines today? Are library schools in the USA still providing students coursework in which they can explore the structure of literature in various disciplines through specialized reference courses in these areas?

Fifty-eight ALA accredited library

school websites in North America were examined to determine whether the library school curricula contained coursework covering the literature of the humanities, social sciences, sciences, business, health sciences, law, and music as well as the subject area of government documents. Many of these courses were listed with obvious titles such as *Humanities Information Sources or Resources for Science and Technology*, however, not all courses were listed in this manner. At times I needed to peruse course descriptions to confirm that discipline coverage was included. Because of this ambiguity and the fact that course descriptions were not available on all of the schools' websites, some errors may have been made in determining whether the subject material was covered. Also, in some cases, these courses were offered regularly while, in other instances, they were offered sporadically.

Results indicate that courses within the humanities, social sciences, and sciences are still being offered but not at the same frequency as before (Table 2).

Percent is determined by the number of schools offering courses within each discipline divided by 58. Many schools provide more than one of these discipline courses.

When comparing these findings to those by Cheney (1963), the availability of advanced subject information coursework, especially within the humanities and social sciences, has decreased over time. For example, she found 23 courses in the humanities (by adding the humanities with the combined humanities and social sciences courses) within 32 schools, whereas I found a proportionally lower number of 33 humanities courses humanities (by adding the humanities with the combined humanities and social sciences courses) within 58 schools. Titles of some of these 33 courses (*Digital Humanities, E-Humanities*) indicate that not only humanities sources are discussed but also digital aspects as well. A similar trend exists in the social sciences courses.

Additionally, coursework in the sci-

Table 2. Number and Percent of Library Schools Offering Discipline Specific Coursework, *n* = 58.

Discipline	Number	Percent
Humanities	23	40%
Social Sciences	23	40%
Humanities & Social Sciences combination	10	17%
Sciences	31	53%
Sciences in combination with other disciplines	5	9%
Health Sciences or Medicine	47	81%
Government Publications	44	76%
Business or Economics	37	64%
Law	35	60%
Music	15	26%

ences has also decreased. Cheney (1963) discovered that there were 28 science courses offered within 32 library school programs, while I found 36 courses within 58 programs. Most of the current science courses are called *Science & Technology Resources* or similar.

While the traditional three subject areas have seen a decline in course offerings for library school students, coursework in health sciences and medicine has increased. Cheney (1963) found that there were only six courses taught within the 32 library school programs, however, I found that 47 of the 58 library school programs offered a specialized course in this subject discipline. Some of these course titles are *Health Information Sources* and *Digital Health*.

Regarding reference coursework overall, Cheney (1963) found that majority of the library schools offered four reference courses. This finding differs from the current study whereby a couple of library school programs offer only one reference course.

While specialized reference courses are still being offered in some ALA accredited programs, several schools have moved away from this traditional model and are

replacing it with information science specializations such as those available from the University of Michigan, Master of Science in Information program. These new areas of study include human computer interaction, information analysis and retrieval, preservation of information, and information economics for management (University of Michigan, 2014).

Conclusion

Within library schools in North America, a majority offer discipline specific coursework within the humanities, social sciences, and science reference coursework though this pattern appears to be diminishing. The only subject discipline which increased over time was coursework in health sciences and medicine. Perhaps this is because a more technologically based set of skills is needed for academic librarians today, and this shift is being reflected in library and information science course offerings. This transformation may continue as librarians evaluate their roles within the academic setting.

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