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Plans to Weed: An investigation into the state of North American reference collections supporting art and design

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the state of the Reference Collection in post-secondary Art and Design libraries. Recent trends indicate that the availability of electronic research tools is a factor in institutions dismantling their print collections; however, others have argued for retaining them for their convenience, low cost, and even for their value as training tools. This research seeks to determine what types of reference collections art and design libraries are maintaining, how they are using and promoting them, and what considerations go into their removal.

Keywords

Reference collections, ready reference, weeding, collection development, art and design libraries

When the COVID-19 pandemic caused libraries to close their physical spaces to their users, many seized on this period to reflect on their management of collections. In their 2022 report, *Top trends in academic libraries*, the ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee noted how the pandemic closures resulted in libraries “rethinking long-held paradigms” (p. 243) including their approaches to collections in response to trends in use, funding, and space (p. 245). At our institution, an art and design school library (ADSL) supporting Canada’s largest and oldest postsecondary art and design institution, we were no exception. Upon reopening our doors in the wake of the pandemic closure we too reflected upon the state of our collections, including one in particular, the print “Quick Reference” monographs. Quick Reference is a designation we use for monographs that are separated from the general stacks. They are traditionally non-circulating because they are intended for use on the reference desk. Two challenges we identified early on in this work was one, recent library restructuring and subsequent staff turnover meant that we had limited knowledge about the maintenance of the collection and its state of currency and two, we had a lack of information about what other ADSLs were doing. For example, were print reference materials still widely in use? How much of our reference material was duplicated online? How, especially for online collections that had no physical space, were these materials advertised to the campus community? For those institutions that might, like us, be weeding their collections, who was involved in the process and what were the considerations? And finally, we wanted to hear from librarians what their five most indispensable reference items were in both print and electronic formats and what were some out-of-reach resources they wish they could provide? This research aims to provide data on current ADSL practice relating to a specific type of resource: the reference collection.

Literature Review

The American Library Association's (ALA) Reference & User Services Association (RUSA) (2007) recommends that both print and electronic reference collections be continually evaluated for three things: relevance, utility, and appropriateness. While much is written in the library and information science (LIS) literature of higher education about dismantling the print reference collection in favour of electronic substitutes (Davis, 2021; Johnson et al., 2015), ADSLs are unique in that they are still heavily reliant on print. A 2021 survey of ADSLs by the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) found that "art and design school libraries are still very print-oriented, no matter what their budgets are" (Coxe et al., 2022, p. 8). This posed a particular challenge during the pandemic lockdown when print materials were more restricted. Orcutt et al. (2021) in their reflection on the plight of architecture libraries during the pandemic noted, "what was once a quick reference query became cumbersome. Core architecture books are often unavailable online" (p. 126). Even those print titles that did exist online, were sometimes less than adequate: Mayhew and Welte (2021) observed that "digital versions...may not be a complete replica of the print version" as "copyright restrictions may prevent images from appearing in a full-text entry, making an argument for prioritizing the print version" (p. 100). The ARLIS/NA survey points to another anxiety among ADSLs with respect to print: "multiple respondents were concerned that administrators and students increasingly undervalued and under-used print collections, which could impact how space and funding are allocated" (Coxe et al., 2022, p. 14). One limitation of the ARLIS/NA survey is that it classifies print reference materials along with artists' books as a single category, noting that 77% of ADSLs surveyed maintain these collections (Coxe et al., 2022, p. 9). This research aims to narrow this focus to reference collections supporting art and design exclusively since their use differs from artists' books.

Materials and Methods

Our sample included two types of institutions: art and design school libraries in both Canada and the US and art and design programs within comprehensive postsecondary institutions in Canada. Participants were recruited from institutions listed in the Association of Independent Colleges of Art & Design (AICAD) and the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC). While the focus was on postsecondary education, a limited number of Canadian museums and galleries were included. The reason for excluding art and design programs in comprehensive colleges and universities in the United States was twofold: first, its sheer size would dwarf the more immediately relatable ADSLs and second, the comprehensive institutions from Canada belong to many of the same organizations such as the Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN) and the Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL). Many collections are supplied through consortial agreements through these organizations making them more relevant to our circumstances compared with US counterparts. After excluding institutions that did not appear to have libraries, as well as some institutions with less-than-functional library websites, there were a total of 57 libraries in our sample, including two that were referrals from initial contacts. Library responses were sorted by size using the American Council on Education size classification based on full-time enrollment (FTE): small, <5000 FTE; medium, 5,000-15,000 FTE; large, 15,000+ FTE. The survey used the definition of “Reference book” found in ODLIS: Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science:

A book designed to be consulted when authoritative information is needed, rather than read cover to cover. Reference books often consist of a series of signed or unsigned "entries" listed alphabetically under headwords or headings, or in some other arrangement (classified, numeric, etc.). The category includes almanacs, atlases, bibliographies, biographical sources, catalogs, concordances, dictionaries,

directories, discographies and filmographies, encyclopedias, glossaries, handbooks, indexes, manuals, research guides, union lists, yearbooks, etc., whether published commercially or as government documents. Long reference works may be issued in multivolume sets, with any indexes in the last volume. Reference works that require continuous updating may be published serially, sometimes as loose-leaf services. In libraries, reference books are shelved in a separate section called the reference stacks and are not allowed to circulate because they are needed to answer questions at the reference desk (Reitz, 2013).

Our survey instrument contained four demographic questions and seven questions related to collections in both print and electronic formats (see Appendix A).

Results and Discussion

There were 24 respondents out of 57 surveyed for a response rate of 42%. Half ($n=12$) came from small institutions with another quarter ($n=6$) from large institutions, and the remaining respondents from medium sized institutions ($n=3$) and non-post secondary institutions such as a museum or gallery or research centre ($n=3$).

Print reference

In response to the first question of our survey, “Does your institution maintain a print reference collection?” (see Appendix A) a total of 83% of respondents indicated that they still maintained print reference collections. Interestingly, out of the 4 institutions that reported that they did not have a print reference collection, all were small AICAD institutions and half of them had dismantled their print reference collection in the last year. Most institutions who had dismantled their print collections, 3 out of the 4, were privately funded ADSLs. A fifth institution, a small ADSL, reported that they never had a print reference collection.

When it came to advertising print reference collections responses were distributed somewhat evenly across strategies: 10 respondents indicated research guides, 11 signage, and 12 instructional sessions. Of the 3 institutions that indicated “other,” respondents stressed that they did not really advertise the collection and, for one respondent, “print reference” was more a status for items that were for in-house use only, not print reference based on the definition supplied in which specified collections are shelved in a separate section of the library.

For those institutions who had dismantled their print reference collections, question 5 asked who was involved in the decision-making. The 4 respondents whom this question applied to, while not large enough to generalize with statistical significance, provided responses worth reflecting on. For all 4, dismantling their collections involved the input of liaison librarians, collections managers, and management in their decision making. Only 1 institution indicated that it involved departments outside the library in the process. A large institution whose collection is related to a faculty or department in an Art or Design discipline noted that a Public Service Council was involved in the dismantling of the collection.

While a small number of respondents reported on decisions related to weeding, they nonetheless yielded interesting insights related to practice. One respondent was from an institution that did not dismantle their print reference collection but, like us, heavily weeded it. They shared that in their large institution where the collection was related to a faculty or department in an Art or Design discipline rather than a standalone ADSL, “collections librarians did an initial pass and asked liaison librarians to check their areas” and that being new to their role “contacted some faculty to ask for their help in checking over resources I was unsure of.” For this institution, the availability of digital alternatives was the primary factor in weeding the print reference collection. This, however, was not reported at all by the handful of institutions

that had completely dismantled their collections, or those more who had heavily weeded them ($n=2$), who relied instead on usage statistics ($n=3$) or space ($n=2$).

Our survey affirmed indications in the literature that ADSLs and Art and Design disciplines are reliant on print. We asked respondents which print resources that they relied on the most. Reviewing the responses, which were provided in free text form, there was no single general reference resource that prevailed. Most cited, by 7 out of 20 respondents (35%), were dictionaries and encyclopedias about symbols and iconography in art. They included *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (James Hall, 2008), *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography* (Helene E. Roberts, 1998), *The Dictionary of Symbols in Western Art* (Sarah Carr-Gomm, 1995) and the *Getty's Guide to Imagery* series.

Electronic Reference

When asked “Does your institution license digital reference resources?” 91.5%, all but two respondents from the Museum and Gallery sector, indicated they did. “We have been e-preferred for about 10 years,” wrote one participant, “so our print collection is less important than it once was.”

Compared with print, signage was used less frequently for advertising electronic reference with most approaches utilizing a combination of research guides (86%) and instructional sessions (81%). Additional methods of promoting electronic reference sources were reported including referring to them during reference consultations, in email updates to faculty, in brochures, on social media, or as a part of staff instruction.

Unlike what was reported for print reference materials, there was one single resource that participants reported that they relied upon the most above the others: 59% indicated Oxford Art

Online, the online reference platform that combines the *Grove Dictionary of Art* the *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, was their most used. Additional tools reported included *ArtStor* (18%), *Bloomsbury* (18%), and *Credo Reference* (18%).

Implications for Practice

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced classes to go virtual, our users carried on their research without access to print. At the time our library reopened, we had recently undergone a reorganization. The resulting changeover in staff meant a loss of institutional knowledge about our reference collection and therefore an appropriate occasion for reflection. Our weeding project was completed before the results of this research were available, but it serves as a basis for comparison. Our Quick Reference collection of over 300 items was reduced to 18 with 177 books discarded, 94 moved to the stacks, 13 *Oxford English Dictionary* volumes already separated out, and one item of institutional historical relevance transferred to the archives. We discovered many titles were out of date with more recent editions and/or ebook versions available.

Like the four respondents who had dismantled their collection, our weeding project involved library management and liaison librarians (our institution does not have a dedicated collections manager). During our Quick Reference weeding project, liaisons communicated via spreadsheet regarding which titles ought to be kept, moved to the stacks, or weeded. Some titles were identified as older editions that could be updated (*Gray's Anatomy*), some were discovered to be otherwise available via an electronic license (*The Dictionary of Art*), and some were found to be low use and were either migrated to the stacks or weeded (*The Penguin Dictionary of Decorative Arts* or *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

The preference for print and its practical advantages expressed in the literature review was reflected in our own experience in our Quick Reference weeding project. For example, we declined to part with our bound volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, even though its content was available through Oxford Reference, because we found the online interface cumbersome compared with consulting the print. Of the 18 titles that we kept, one was in common with what our survey respondents reported they relied upon heavily: the *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (James Hall, 2008).

Conclusion

While limitations of the sample size prevent statistical significance, this purposive sampling points to general trends in ADSLs and provides directions for future investigation. As mentioned in the introduction, when we embarked on a weeding project we had limited knowledge about what current practice looked like regarding print and electronic reference collections supporting art and design. The COVID-19 lockdown added to this sense of disconnection as we were all in various states of gradual reopening. The data indicates that print is still very much alive and that it appears to have a special role in answering research questions related to symbols and iconography. At the same time, it is hard to shake the concern that was reported in the ARLIS/NA survey that print collections were undervalued by administrators and students alike. “As of completing this survey,” one respondent wrote, “our print Reference (sic) section still exists, but we have plans to weed it substantially this summer.” Add to this the fact that two ADSLs reported that their print reference collection had been removed within the past year, suggests the concerns uncovered by the ARLIS/NA survey were not unfounded.

This research attempted to learn more about current practice in North American ADSLs (and some Canadian liaison librarians servicing art and design programs). While responses

indicated that many institutions are a lot like us in that they still utilize print, the trend is still toward reserving less space for dedicated print reference. It would be interesting if, rather than simply asking how many ADSLs removed their print reference collections and how long ago, we also asked how many, like us, *substantially weeded* them and when. Such research would indicate whether COVID-19 library closures and gradual reopening had a hastening effect on weeding and dismantling these collections.

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Declaration of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Demographics

1. Size of institution
 - a. small, <5000 Fulltime Enrollment (FTE)
 - b. medium, 5,000-15,000 FTE
 - c. large, 15,000+ FTE
 - d. Non-Postsecondary
2. Institution funding type
 - a. Private
 - b. Public
 - c. Other
3. What degrees are granted at your institution (select all that apply)
 - a. BFA
 - b. MFA
 - c. BDes
 - d. MDes
4. Type of institution
 - a. Dedicated Art and Design institution (AICAD or other)
 - b. Faculty or Department in the creative disciplines with dedicated library space
 - c. Museum or Gallery
 - d. Other _____

Collections

1. Does your institution maintain a print reference collection?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. How is the print reference collection advertised?
 - i. Research Guides
 - ii. Signage
 - iii. Workshops or orientations
 - iv. Other
3. Does your institution license digital reference resources?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. How is the digital reference collection advertised?
 - i. Research Guides
 - ii. Signage
 - iii. Workshops or orientations
 - iv. Other
5. If your institution does *not* have a print reference collection
 - a. How long ago was it removed?
 - b. Who was involved in the decision making?
 - i. Liaison librarian
 - ii. Collection manager

- iii. Management
- iv. Other campus departments
- v. Users
- vi. Other _____

- c. If other campus departments or users were engaged, could you tell us more about the process?
 - d. What were the considerations in deciding to remove the print collections (please place in order of importance from highest to lowest)
 - i. Cost
 - ii. Usage Statistics
 - iii. Space
 - iv. Availability of digital alternatives
 - v. Other _____
6. Could you share up to five reference sources that you rely on the most (they need not be art or design specific)?
- a. Print
 - i. _____
 - ii. _____
 - iii. _____
 - iv. _____
 - v. _____
 - b. Electronic
 - i. _____
 - ii. _____
 - iii. _____
 - iv. _____
 - v. _____
7. Which reference resource do you wish you had access to?
_____.
8. Can we contact you for a short (30 min) semi-structured interview?
- a. Yes
 - b. No