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Autor: Cabral, Maria Luísa

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Kontakt/Contact

[Digizeitschriften e.V.](#)
SUB Göttingen
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 1
37073 Göttingen

✉ info@digizeitschriften.de

Preservation Education for Users and/or Non-Preservation Staff¹

MARIA LUISA CABRAL
National Library, Lisbon

1. Introduction

The notes which support this paper represent the way in which I perceive a society where libraries neither have reached a high level of technical development, nor managed to be well integrated into society. I am therefore at risk that some of my statements may seem very obvious to those professionals working and living in very different environments where libraries have already reached the adult age. I would not have been able to do it otherwise. Furthermore, I must say that hints and ideas referred to in the current paper correspond to our own situation and echo thoughts which we are intending to apply in a structured way at the National Library.

2. The National Library's responsibility

The Programme of Preservation and Conservation at the National Library is in its infancy. Like an infant, it is learning how

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to keep itself upright. In this context, one of the very first things the National Library wants to implement within the Programme of

Preservation and Conservation is related to its external image as a repository library, a library with responsibilities for Portuguese history and culture. Even if other libraries hold copies of those same books, even if other libraries have richer collections in some subjects than the National Library, that does not award them a similar status. But this status has costs attached: its services are considered as a "public service", funded by the State, and the National Library is supposed to open its doors to everybody; to lend its documents to whomever requests them; to allow access to every citizen. Among this broad indistinct public there are many university students of all levels for whom the National Library appears to be the last resort, since academic libraries have scarce means. For a restricted number of readers, and for the library staff, this scenario is dramatic. Now and then conflicts arise, and it then becomes urgent to establish a dialogue, making clear what a repository library is. At the same time, there are some institutions exerting pressure to modify the National Library's policy according to their own aims. For those institutions the National Library exists to support their activities, whether exhibitions, or publishing. Thousands of transparencies and photographs are ordered, showing little concern for the National Library's worries. It has therefore become a main target, particularly for staff within the Preservation and Conservation Programme, to make clear for both students and institutions, that the National Library has its own identity, scope and activities. This is when our activity to promote awareness starts.

3. Rules and Principles

For those who want to use the Library and its collections, it is important to explain how microfilms, transparencies and

photocopying orders work. Users need to understand that their request is only another one in a long queue of requests, sometimes for the same image or book. Beyond the notion of what a repository library is, users need to be told that, because the Library wants to keep serving hundreds of users, rules must be followed, and the Library must act within certain limits regardless of their popularity or acceptance.

Just a few weeks ago, the National Library called a completely open Users Meeting. There was a certain fear among users, as well as some criticism, caused by the recently published Regulation for Document Reproduction. The content of the Regulation itself is not that different from ongoing regulations in other national libraries; the problem arose because it has been the first time in the Library's history that a regulation has been implemented throughout the whole library at the same time, conveying the viewpoints of all departments. Readers were frightened and threatened the Library with a campaign in the newspapers. As this would have been negative publicity for the Library, the Director decided to call the Users Meeting. The meeting was carefully prepared: librarians spent quite some time imagining the arguments which could be put forward and some time was also spent preparing the right answers. As the meeting took place, it became clear very quickly that the main complaint had to do with limitations of photocopying. Once the Library's reasons for these limitations were put openly on the table; once the correlation between those reasons and the Library's objectives were described, criticism started to diminish. Criticism continued to diminish when users were told that photocopying from originals would largely be replaced by producing photocopies from microfilms. Users were still sceptic about time scales and costs. Both aspects are now under observation: time taken to produce a microfilm is being monitored, and costs are being revised. On the whole, with this meeting we have managed to get the users' critical collaboration, and one thing we have learnt: this

collaboration can be taken even further by asking the users' help to call the staff's attention to damaged books or to poor quality microfilms.

4. Consistency, confidence and quality

Consistency of procedures within the institution is another issue requiring our attention within the Preservation and Conservation Programme. Regardless of any alterations or differences, solutions to be adopted must be always the same throughout the institution. For instance, if the photocopying of newspapers is no longer allowed, I cannot change this regulation just to please a reader who happens to be one of the Director's students at the University. Not even do I dare to bring the newspaper to my department where it could be photocopied far from indiscreet eyes. My behaviour would then be inconsistent, and I would be causing huge scepticism about the implementation of any decision. What would then be the value of those principles? For end users a consistent procedure is a sign of quality, but for the staff firm behaviour is even more meaningful. In the recent past, the National Library staff got used to seeing a very permissive interpretation of regulations. This attitude has raised many doubts about the aims of the policy to be implemented, and above all about its validity, usefulness, and feasibility. Unfortunately for staff members, practice somehow contradicted existing regulations for years. The lack of balance between existing regulations and their enforcement caused complete discredit of any policy for Preservation and Conservation. Another aspect of utmost importance is to take Preservation and Conservation as a single consistent action. We cannot proceed with a Preservation and Conservation policy on a piecemeal basis. That is, we cannot have one practice in the newspaper reading room, and an opposite one in the newspaper store. The same applies to the photocopying policy: the policy in force in the

general collections reading room cannot contradict the ongoing policy in the newspaper department. Some differences are understandable in practice but the underlying philosophy must be the same. So it seems that a Programme of Preservation and Conservation demands a strategic intervention, involving both details and broad aspects, pointing out the answers and solutions required, but always doing so in the same overall direction. Any Preservation and Conservation programme stretches out, like a large blanket, covering every inch of the library. If, in order to cover some departments, a programme neglects a few others, then such a programme does not deserve the name.

5. Preparing regulations for Preservation and Conservation

If our intention is to change the Library's policy, it becomes absolutely necessary to make this public. Gossip about change is bad enough, and readers seem to have a special scent for changes that are about to be introduced. If change is to occur, there is no option but to prepare straightforward regulations which must be widely and quickly distributed. The same applies for new price lists if these are to undergo changes. And everything should be planned well in advance because users are entitled to have some time to adapt themselves to the new rules. On the other hand, regulations cannot be an authoritarian list of "do it" and "don't do it". To be more easily understood and accepted, regulations must be written down in a clear way including two or three paragraphs explaining the reasons for the regulations themselves, and also for the Programme of Preservation and Conservation. The National Library has had some authoritarian regulations in the past, and the result was not brilliant. This time, when we were in the process of writing down the new regulations we made an effort to adopt a more open style. More democratic one may call it. The style of the current regulations has proved to be above any

criticism. As a matter of fact, we succeeded to write in a "friendly" style.

6. "Selling Preservation"

Once regulations have been approved, we can then launch a campaign to "sell preservation". Posters, various leaflets, panels, instructional bookmarks, "live" training sessions, or video viewing sessions, or just taking advantage of book trucks or reader cards, everything can be done, or used in order to grasp the attention of both end user and staff members not directly involved with the Preservation and Conservation department for this campaign to "sell preservation". Assuming that all this is not boring, but lively and interesting, straightforward and carefully produced, it will show its advantage. Far more successful are exhibitions displaying badly deteriorated books and documents. Recently the National Library organized a small exhibition with only three showcases containing books in a very poor physical state due both to mechanical and chemical reasons. We made sure the readers would be able to understand why certain books cannot be lent, and why our photocopying policy has become so firm. As librarians it is neither our pleasure to make the readers' life a hard one, nor are regulations the products of a librarian's imagination. Readers have to be sure that deteriorated books are a real problem not a virtual one, and unless precautions are taken the library will become unquestionably a virtual library. This is for sure a familiar terminology for all users. Each book displayed in the exhibition had a label explaining the disease that caused the book pain. Although the text was correct from a scientific point of view, it was a vernacular text taking into account our readers' humanities and social sciences background. We were very much in favour of simplified labels as long as they would contain all the necessary data.

I have no doubt about the good results of the exhibition: during three weeks the showcases were in the General Catalogue area, close to the Main Reading Room. Readers stood looking at them attentively, and their faces could not hide their surprise. Even here, one image is worth a thousand words.

To raise awareness among readers is a hard task because much of what has to be done is against their immediate interest. Even the best campaign for promoting awareness will not turn librarians into "persona grata" for end users. In this particular context users may make an effort to pretend they understand us, but as long as they come to the library as users, librarians will remain their best enemies. Following the same line of thought, to raise awareness among staff not directly involved with Preservation and Conservation is not a minor task either. In order to succeed we will have to rely on strong convictions and masses of psychology. We are trying to instil a new attitude and this is the hardest thing one may attempt to achieve.

The first step is to make it obvious that we have on our hands a problem affecting the whole library. It does not matter whether one works in the administrative department, in acquisitions, or in the cataloguing department: it is always a library-wide problem, and if this is not self evident, there is no choice but to talk to people showing their own responsibility. It is worth trying to involve, for instance, the administrative department: the administrative department is responsible for the budget, and they know the budget allocated to Preservation and Conservation; they are also always involved with all sorts of tenders and acquisitions. If we manage to make them understand the complexity of our specifications, we might succeed in having them on our side and becoming excellent marketing officers on our behalf.

In the specific situation of the acquisitions department, if there is a connection with the bindery workshop, the acquisitions staff will understand the advantage of binding books before they

reach the stores, or the circulation desk, in order to prevent further damage, and then the programme of Preservation and Conservation would be getting into the department itself. Each book has a certain cost but beyond this, each book gathers a few other characteristics, due to its fragility and predictable use. Acquisitions staff know by heart which books will be more popular and therefore they can predict their risk of deterioration. More often than not, there will be no miscalculations, and the staff's advice will prevent bigger problems at a later stage.

It is also the acquisitions department's responsibility to evaluate gifts and acquisitions, but what about selection? Should the library buy everything even if the materials are too brittle, or have some other conservation problem? How much will that gift or acquisition really cost the library? Does the acquisitions staff take proper care about the way books are lined up while in the bibliographic processing department? Is this their problem?

The cataloguing department can collaborate when processing valuable documents, full of historic evidence. Taking into account they are irreplaceable and deserve special care, it would not seem inappropriate to include in the book (or in the box) a note calling the reader's attention to their value.

A similar situation applies to loans for exhibitions. Staff dealing with books know very well that after an exhibition books need extra care, and they can collaborate closely with the Preservation and Conservation department. If there is no other record, the staff working in the stores can call the bindery's or the conservation laboratory's attention, they may even call the head's attention to small damages caused by the last exhibition, and it is then up to the Head of the Preservation and Conservation department to act either by involving other departments within the library, or by involving the institution which benefited from the loan. Staff members should be encouraged to evaluate books each time they are holding them, either in the stores or at the circulation desk. It is not just good enough to control the number

of books returned; books need to be browsed in order to be checked inside. To shelve books or to receive books at the circulation desk cannot be considered as minor tasks or repetitive ones. A "robot" cannot perform these tasks properly because shelving books is not exclusively arranging them according to a given call number. To handle books properly requires attention and care, preservation awareness and specific training. Of course it is delicate to teach how to handle books, or how to put books on a truck to people who for years have been used to perform that task, people well convinced that they have nothing else to learn. Eventually the best way to call their attention is through role play in the working place, not in a classroom. A videocassette session can be very useful but it may recall a school lesson and become useless. One has to avoid comments such as "here they come with the video again!"

7. Identifying the problems

Preservation training is not easy, but it is even more difficult to teach staff to apply the same definitions to the same problems, day after day, year after year. What is a minor problem? What is a major problem? When does a book need repair, and when does a book need restoration? What prevents a book from going into the reading room? If those differences are not understood by the staff working in the storage areas it may very well happen that decisions taken there will suddenly affect readers, and once the librarian is called to intervene it will become clear that there was some sort of exaggeration, and that criteria may have been wrongly applied. So, in these training sessions problems have to be identified, put in some sort of order and defined, and people have to learn to identify them. This procedure can then be applied in a consistent way throughout the library: a book with broken corners will always be a book with broken corners, whether it is in the General Collections

department or in the Music department; an acidic book will always be a book in danger of disappearing, whether in the Rare Books department or in the Maps department: problems are more or less complex according to a hierarchy not according to a department. It is my belief then that to organize an hierarchical list of problems can help us to survey and get to know our collections. One could perhaps call it standardization. Another aspect which becomes crucial has to do with cleaning books. Cleaning books or other ornaments may seem to be the same thing, but ask staff members to show you how they dust books at home, and differences will become apparent immediately. The way you handle books, the care they deserve, using a brush or a vacuum cleaner and the direction in which such instruments are used are all different and staff need to pick up these ideas. It is not easy to explain that neither pieces of paper nor memorabilia should be kept inside the books. If you have to use bookmarks choose neutral paper, if you have to stamp books, be careful - do not stamp over the illustration or the text. If you have to write a control number, write it down carefully, choose an endpaper or the back of the front page. And why is all this necessary? Simply because the books of today will have a distinct value in the future, and libraries after all are the sum of generations of books.

So far, we have tried to instil a new attitude around the idea that the book is a fragile object regardless of its robust aspect. But we need to teach something about the book and the materials it is made of. What can be done about yellowing paper, acidic paper, the effects of ink and light. Some problems are difficult to stop and require much more than our care, like acidic paper or iron-gall ink; some others, such as light, are within our reach, and we need to know how to deal with them. Staff members need to realize their share of responsibility in what concerns the future. By far and large, the future of libraries is in the hands of the library staff.

We had an interesting experience at the National Library which had to do with the modernisation of the Bindery Workshop. In Portugal "buckram" is not available on the market: it has to be imported and very few people know what "buckram" is. It is mentioned in specialist catalogues and some people interested in library binding bring the good news from abroad. This is exactly what happened: we saw how it was used abroad, and once its specifications were explained to us, we thought it would be wise to import it to have it used on our books. Binders may have thought this change was just another idea. In their opinion, the tissues that were used before were just as good and therefore there was no need to change. We had to explain the advantages from the point of view of the preservation of the books, how stable, strong, and water-proof the new material was, not to mention the advantage that it has no grain. We started the change with books coming from the General Reference Room, and so far nobody has complained about the "new look". Comparing books bound with materials used hitherto and books bound with "buckram", binders are beginning to understand that they also have a share in what concerns the books' future.

8. Keeping everybody happy

Technical aspects are not the worst problem in training and promotion of awareness, nor is money an unsurmountable problem, since preventative conservation does not require huge amounts of money. The most difficult problem is the daily relationship with staff members. Staff members are nice enough to agree with our Preservation and Conservation work plans, but the core of the problem remains their anxiety. Suddenly, library members are more alert to preservation and conservation problems, but they do not seem able to cope with more delays caused by concerns for the deterioration of the collections: either because the books are not properly protected, or because some

books are always needed for exhibitions, or because the number of orders for photographs and transparencies is exponential. For the first time in the library there is a department exclusively dedicated to preservation and conservation, and to satisfy everybody became virtually impossible. It is hard to stick to our list of priorities. We do not want clashes between departments and we have to make sure that we are not being pushed into a direction we do not want to go. In our daily practice, we act very much like an octopus: preservation and conservation are everywhere, either because it was decided to approach a specific department or because a specific department requires our intervention. The true nightmare is to keep the balance between our plans and those moments of anxiety that now and then occur in different library departments.

As a matter of fact, for a successful performance of a Programme of Preservation and Conservation three things seem essential. First of all, *promotion of awareness* through words, through evidence and through training. Secondly, *communication*. It is vital to promote communication among people and among departments. Once a problem has been identified, it has to be transmitted to the person in charge and to the department that has the responsibility. One cannot adopt a "wait and see" approach with preservation and conservation problems. A small problem can be easily overcome; a big problem will be difficult to stop. Lastly, *action*. Everybody is responsible, and there is no way to postpone action. In a library environment nobody can ignore a situation that has arisen and the adoption of this new attitude is, somehow, the key to many of our problems. To educate is an endless task indeed.

[The book *Promoting preservation awareness in libraries: a sourcebook for academic, public, school, and special collections*, edited by Jeanne M. Drewes and Julie A. Page (Greenwood Press, 1997) proved to be very useful when preparing the current paper specially this last paragraph.]