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FROM BOTH SIDES NOW:  
A RECENTLY-HIRED LIBRARIAN AND A LIBRARY VETERAN  
RESPOND TO THE LOSS OF A FAVORITE DATABASE

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**Abstract**

The recent economic downturn has disrupted libraries no less than it has other sectors, causing cutbacks in funding which have resulted in hiring freezes and layoffs, reduced operating hours and services, and smaller acquisitions budgets for both print and electronic materials. These cutbacks have been most acutely felt by library acquisitions departments and collection development librarians, but the public services areas -- especially instruction librarians -- feel the blow too and must adapt their practices to the reductions in resources. This paper details the response of two instruction librarians -- one a veteran of some two decades' service and the other a fairly recent hire -- to the loss of a favorite database.

**Introduction**

The last three decades, and especially the last fifteen years, have seen an expansion in the formats in which library materials are available, as electronic resources have joined the traditional print offerings produced by library suppliers. More and more, the electronic resource is becoming the first stop "go-to" information source, a predominance which can be confirmed by the number of reference and other sources which have shifted from print to electronic format or, not making the change, have simply ceased to exist.

This paradigm shift has affected acquisitions departments and collection development librarians, particularly in academic libraries, as they now must budget for both formats. Academic reference and instruction librarians also have had to adjust their habits in response to the increasing reliance on electronic resources. When, because of state budget cutbacks, an entire system loses its database consortium, as has happened this decade with the Texas Library Connection (TLC: <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/technology/tlc/index.html>) or South Carolina's PASCAL (<http://pascalsc.org/>), the result can justly be described as a catastrophe. When the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL: <http://www.ache.state.al.us/NAAL/>) recently canceled one database in the Alabama Virtual Library, the loss was not a catastrophe. But it was a calamity to the instruction librarians at Jacksonville State University's Houston Cole Library and JSU's English Department (and corresponding libraries and departments on high school and college campuses all over the state) for whom the database was central. What follows describes two librarians' responses to the database loss and their efforts to compensate for it.

### **Literature Review**

Considered from the perspective of collection development and electronic resources, there is an abundance of professional literature available regarding electronic databases. A search of the EBSCOhost database *Library, Information Science, and Technology Abstracts* yields a results list of 364 hits (search performed on 9 October 2010); the same search in HW Wilson's *Library Literature and Information Science Full*

*Text* produces 135 hits. Aside from reviews of databases when they first reach the market and comparisons of databases with similar scopes, these articles principally address developing trends in electronic resources, collection development and management of these resources, use studies which help determine collection development policies, and concerns about funding which could result in the loss of these resources. Ruth H. Miller's "Electronic Resources and Academic Libraries" (2000) provides an overview of its topic which is both retrospective and predictive and at the same time is itself an excellent literature review. Andrew Richard Albanese's cover story for *Library Journal* (2002) records a round table interview with spokespersons representing aggregator database providers ProQuest, Igenta, EBSCOhost, LexisNexis, and Gale Group (now Gale/Cengage) in which the participants discussed the information vista as it appeared at that time.

As library systems gained access to databases through state-funded consortia or other means, collection development policies had to be modified to include electronic as well as print resources, taking into consideration the addition or cancellation of titles in both formats; and, once both formats were firmly established in library collections, use studies of print versus electronic journals began appearing in the literature. Newsome, Ellen, and Bullington's "Looking a Gift Horse in the Mouth" (2000) is representative of the former type of study, while Steve Black's "Impact of Full Text on Print Journal Use at a Liberal Arts College" (2005) typifies the latter. Articles addressing the loss of databases appeared in the literature as present economic realities began to hit home.

Tom Sanville, in the journal *Collection Management* (2008) discusses the connection between economic factors and electronic resource assessment and retention at the library consortium level, while “S. C. Schools May Lose Shared Databases” (2009) and Rick Moul’s and Mark Y. Herring’s “Save Our Databases” (2008) detail the tribulations of South Carolina’s PASCAL consortium.

But cracks in the edifice began appearing years earlier. Mary Ann Bell’s 2005 article articulates the risks to state-funded informational databases and stresses their importance while offering suggestions to keep them from being lost; she also provides a table of “State-Funded Informational Databases for K-12 Students.” Later that same year appeared an article by Gerri Foudy and Alesia McManus which describes how the main campus of the University of Maryland system dealt with the possibility of having to reduce their electronic resources subscriptions by twenty-five per cent. So, to judge from the body of literature which the above-referenced sources represent, the circle has been closed. The library world has gone from anticipating the arrival of electronic resources in the 1980s to accepting their likely reduction in the present.

What is conspicuously absent from the literature, even if one expands the search beyond library databases to business and other databases, is information reflecting librarians’ responses to the loss of a database group or individual database. Searching “database loss” or “database cancellation” returns almost a null set. Ruth H. Miller writes that “Electronic resources have applications for acquisitions and cataloging as well as for reference and serials and interlibrary lending” (Miller, 659). To this list could be added instruction librarians. The published literature provides a window into the macro

world of the providers: database vendors, library consortia, and acquisitions departments of individual libraries. Not represented are viewpoints from the micro world, the practitioner reference and instruction librarians most immediately affected by database cancellation. This paper offers viewpoints on this subject from two academic instruction librarians.

### **A recently-hired librarian's perspective**

The problem began in October 2008, when our state's "virtual library," the Alabama Virtual Library or AVL, decided not to renew our subscription to EBSCOhost's *Literary Reference Center* database. According to an article published in 2006 in *Advanced Technology Libraries*,

"*Literary Reference Center* is the result of over two years of work by a dedicated team of professionals at EBSCO Publishing. Importantly, as part of our development process, we interviewed and surveyed over 1400 librarians to help ensure that we were focused on the literary content and features that are most important to customers" (*Advanced Technology Libraries* 3).

For the Language and Literature librarians at Jacksonville State University's Houston Cole Library this was all too evident. EBSCOhost had spent time and money to create a formidable database, and we and our students now faced missing out on it. Our

university library paid the fee to keep *LRC* for another year; but now it is gone, and what we have left doesn't come close to what we had.

## The Problem

The bulk of our instruction load as Language and Literature librarians is made up of Freshman English composition classes. Many of these classes are required to write essays based on literature. One popular assignment involves writing an essay on the William Faulkner short story, "A Rose for Emily." The English professors encourage the students to pick a literary theme for their discussion, and then expand upon it as a part of their research. For example, "foreshadowing" is one major aspect of "A Rose for Emily." The indexing in *Literary Reference Center* could pick up the keywords "rose," "Emily," and "foreshadowing" and bring back some detailed and relevant articles on Faulkner's short story. The literature database we still have access to as part of the AVL, *Literature Resources from Gale*, cannot bring back a single result for the same search. Even searching "Faulkner" and "foreshadowing" returns a null set. Because of this lack, several librarians have returned to the stacks to find books which provide similar information to what was erstwhile available online. Luckily, for the humanities, books do not become irrelevant as quickly as they might in the sciences and social sciences. Literary criticism from the 1970s can be just as viable as that of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a citation study from 2007, it was found that "Books constitute 75.8 percent of all citations, journal articles 19.8 percent, and other types of material 4.4 percent" (Heinzkill, 142). Therefore the loss of a literary database isn't as dramatic as would be the removal of one

from the sciences. However, the loss forces librarians in the humanities to go back and reevaluate the search strategies and techniques for locating books in our Online Public Access Catalog or OPAC, which can pose problems for both students and librarians.

### Shifting Strategies

Unlike the easy-searching days of *Literary Reference Center*, finding books with the OPAC is a bit more involved and less immediate. One usually begins with a subject search for “Faulkner, William” or a keyword search with “Faulkner” and “criticism.” Our library has an extensive literature collection so the results of such a search can be bountiful, but teaching students to understand the differences between keyword searching and subject searching can be difficult.

”[U]sers of this online catalog search more often by keyword than any other type of search, their keyword searches fail more often than not, and a majority of these users do not understand how the system processes their keyword searches”

(Gross and Taylor, 215).

This quotation from Gross and Taylor’s article on keyword searching illustrates the need for showing our students how to execute subject searches. Under the LC Subject Heading “Faulkner, William, 1897-1962 -- Criticism and interpretation,” our catalog shows 77 titles. More results can be retrieved under various other LC Subject Headings such as “Faulkner, William, 1897-1962 -- Correspondence” and “Faulkner, William, 1897-1962 - - Dictionaries”. Once the search has been narrowed down by subject heading, it is then necessary to take a closer look at each bibliographic record to examine the “Detailed” and

“Table of Contents” links. One unfortunate aspect of the indexing in the OPAC is its lack of deep structure. It is inconceivable that results can be found using a search with the keywords “rose,” “Faulkner,” and “foreshadowing.” However, the OPAC does retrieve useful results for the search “Rose for Emily,” “Faulkner,” and “criticism.” The above quote from Gross and Taylor’s article on keyword searching doesn’t just highlight a need for teaching students how to use subject headings. It also underscores the need for supplementing our resources with EBSCO’s *Literary Reference Center*, and shows why the OPAC is no substitute for access to online, full-text articles. It is fortunate that the humanities can rely on books, but the 21<sup>st</sup> century emphasis on teaching students how to research is based on their understanding of databases and electronic resources. Some have argued that by learning to cope without a particular database, we would be able to live without it. Perhaps, but the educational process benefits by having it. This article merely is meant to show the possibilities of surviving economic-restrictive times by relying on alternate resources.

#### Changes in Latitude, Changes in Attitudes

Not only does the return to the stacks put greater responsibility on the students, but it also puts a greater emphasis on collection development and the librarian’s responsibility to collect. If there is a lack of quality book selection or perhaps a dearth of communication between the faculty and librarians, a library can easily lose focus and fail to collect important resources. Often, professors are reticent to request books, and when

they do their enthusiasm can get in the way of a relevant selection. Losing a database like *Literary Reference Center* has forced us to reevaluate our collection development practices, and has also put more pressure on us to make good selections. If and when the need for certain resources falls short, there still are Inter-Library Loan and Consortia agreements between public and university libraries to fall back upon.

Since the cancellation of *Literary Reference Center*, a lot of adaptations have been made by our reference and instruction librarians, especially those who oversee the English and Language collections. The ways in which we locate and find information has caused us to change our old habits and acquire new ones, and has given us the responsibility to share these techniques with our students. It is easy to cry at the thought of not having the resources we once had, but it is more constructive to move forward and look back at the resources we may have forgotten.

### **A library veteran's perspective**

The axiom “Those who live by the sword shall perish by the sword” applies not only to soldiers or heads of state but also those in other professions, including public service librarians who become too fond of a particular reference tool or information source. Prime examples of this can be found in the electronic revolution in libraries. Many librarians like me, who were educated and trained during the print era, experienced the “Four Stages of Transition” towards the new order, as first our card catalogs went online and then were supplemented by professionally-vended electronic databases: initially we were skeptical of the new technology, then accepting of it, became fluent

with it and then dependent on it. And when, for budgetary or other reasons, we lost these databases, we found ourselves in a place we would have preferred not to be. This describes my situation when my library lost access to EBSCOhost's *Literary Reference Center* database.

### Instruction at Houston Cole Library

The Houston Cole Library of Jacksonville State University in Jacksonville, Alabama houses a collection of 709,686 volumes and subscribes to 194 electronic databases. A tower library, Houston Cole comprises twelve stories plus a basement, with the collection being housed on eight of the twelve floors. The building determines the collection arrangement, which in turn influences the staffing pattern. Because each floor houses the part of the collection which pertains to a particular academic discipline or disciplines, the Houston Cole Library's custom has been not to use generalist librarians in its public services faculty but instead employ subject specialists who have experience or credentials in the academic disciplines whose part of the overall library collection is housed on the floor on which they work. In addition to reference services and developing and maintaining their part of the collection, these librarians also are responsible for presenting instruction sessions for classes in their specialist disciplines. As on many campuses, these instruction sessions usually take the form of a "one-shot lecture," although time is set aside towards the end of each session for the students to practice electronic search strategies and techniques which the librarian has just demonstrated.

As the literature subject specialist at Houston Cole Library, I make instruction presentations to students enrolled in English classes at Jacksonville State University -- mostly undergraduates, and among these, primarily those enrolled in EH102, which is the second semester freshman composition class and which usually requires the students to complete a research paper on a literary topic as one of the course requirements. For each of the past three years I have done more than thirty instruction sessions, and each year the number has grown from that of the previous year. I was delighted when, thanks to the creation of the Alabama Virtual Library (AVL <http://www.avl.lib.al.us/>) by our state legislature in 1998, Houston Cole Library was able to add Thomson-Gale's (now Gale/Cengage) *Literature Resource Center* to its subscription databases; and even more pleased when, around 2006, EBSCOhost's *Literary Reference Center* also became available to us. I found the two databases complemented each other nicely, in that an author who received sparse coverage in one database often received coverage in the other sufficient to support a freshman term paper, and often a higher level of research. However, a semester or two of use persuaded me that, for Jacksonville State University's purposes, the *Literary Reference Center* was better; and it became the "workhorse" database, thereby receiving a greater share of attention in my instruction sessions.

#### Banished from Eden

Alabama's equivalent consortium to TLC and PASCAL is the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries, or NAAL. NAAL's "common denominator" database bundle -- to which its member libraries can add individual databases from their own

funds -- is the Alabama Virtual Library (AVL). In the fall of 2008, for budgetary reasons (pro-ration mandated by the Alabama State Constitution) the AVL dropped the *Literary Reference Center*. The justification was stability for the AVL database bundle as a whole: by sacrificing this one database in the fall, the AVL would not have to cancel any more databases should there be a second call for pro-ration in January of 2009. Since the database cancelled was central to the largest demographic in the AVL clientele, English teachers employed on high school, college, and university campuses, the damage done was considerable; and the protest was vociferous . . . but ultimately, futile. By dipping into its own acquisitions budget Houston Cole Library was able to keep its subscription to *LRC* going for the 2008-2009 academic year, but eventually we too lost access to the database.

This loss is not on the same scale as what happened to TLC or PASCAL. By obtaining funding from other sources than the South Carolina legislature, PASCAL has been able to continue (<http://pascalsc.org/content/view/39/57/>); TLC has not. On the system level the disappearance of the *Literary Reference Center* was not a catastrophe; but on the personal/professional level it was a calamity, and “dismay” does not begin to describe my feelings regarding this loss since, to give slightly different meanings to Tom Sanville’s terms, my instruction efforts were now diminished in both efficiency and effectiveness (Sanville, pp. 2-3). Without the *LRC* my instruction presentations had become less efficient in that I had to work harder to achieve the same ends and, because the *LRC* database contained some features which were unique to it, the lack of those features made my work as both an instruction and reference librarian less effective. I had become too fond of the *Literary Reference Center*, too dependent on it, and had given it

too central a role in my instruction presentations. Now it was gone, but I could not dwell on the loss; I had to try to minimize the damage resulting from it.

### Triage and Beyond

I could revise my handouts as an adjustment to the now-missing database and also alter my instruction presentations by giving more emphasis to resources and strategies which previously I had too little time for, such as cross-searching multiple databases by provider (as opposed to searching a single database just by subject or title) and by spotlighting Gale titles which Houston Cole Library did not have electronic access to but had in print, such as *Poetry Criticism* and *Short Story Criticism*. I believed that the small amount of full text available in the *MLA International Bibliography Online* would be more a cause of frustration than a help to freshman students, so rather than make a one-for-one substitution of the *MLA* for the *Literary Reference Center* I chose to instruct students in how to cross-search Gale/Cengage, EBSCOhost, and Wilson Web databases.

These were the easy fixes. Of more concern was how to make up for the content lost with the *Literary Reference Center*. After all, I did still have our online catalog, or OPAC, and the other 193 databases available through Houston Cole Library. Upon considering the sources and tools I still had at my disposal I decided to try to “reverse engineer” the *Literary Reference Center*, as much as possible replacing its content from other sources. This would mean that JSU students and faculty might have to actually come to the library rather than do research exclusively from their dorms or offices; but

ultimately access trumps expedience, and my goal was to provide access to what had been lost with the subscription termination to the *Literary Reference Center*.

I knew that the essays commissioned specially for the database were beyond recovery, but I counted on the 193 electronic databases my library still provided to compensate for the lost journal content from the *Literary Reference Center*. Not everything could be recovered I knew, but not everything had to be. The *LRC* is, after all, primarily an undergraduate database and as such is not held to the same standard as a database used mostly by faculty or university upperclassmen for research in their fields; and if we lost a journal that was unique to the *LRC* but was vital to the research of one of our department faculty members, I knew I could count on our library's acquisitions department to provide access to that journal via another path.

Of more concern to me was replacing the book content lost with the *Literary Reference Center*. The Houston Cole Library's literature reference collection includes such *LRC* staples as Merriam-Webster's *Encyclopedia of Literature* and the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* as well as many similar titles; but these sorts of reference materials are used more by junior, senior, and graduate English majors and rarely by students in our freshman composition classes. What these students did use, and what I needed to replace or find substitutes for, were the information sources which came up under the "Literary Criticism" and "Plot Summary" tabs in the *LRC*.

Here I got a break from my colleagues. Although none of the librarians who are stewards of the floors which house the humanities collection at Houston Cole Library can be described as Luddites, we do give the impression we might all be from Missouri: we like to be shown first. When electronic research tools became available to us we

recognized their benefits and made full use of them when appropriate, but we also held onto our print. We adopted a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” mindset. Therefore, Houston Cole Library kept its Magill/Salem Press sets -- its *Surveys* and *Critical Surveys*, its *Masterplots* and *Masterplots II*; and it also kept the print copies of Gale reference titles, both those included in the *Literature Resource Center* and several that are not. The “Plot Summaries” tab of the *Literary Reference Center* was covered.

Replacing the content listed in search results under the *Literary Reference Center*’s “Literary Criticism” tab required a more proactive approach. Chelsea House Publisher’s series of essay anthologies edited by Harold Bloom is well-represented in the *Literary Reference Center*, and Houston Cole Library, on a selective basis, had been acquiring these titles for years. We already had several volumes in the Chelsea House series Modern Critical Views, Modern Critical Interpretations, and Major Literary Characters; and since the more recent titles in each series have their tables of contents available in our catalog displays, students have a more detailed level of information provided them than just secondary subject headings. Although not as precise or flexible as the Keyword and All Text searches one might perform in the *Literary Reference Center*, this still was an improvement over the much broader searching the catalog by subject under the subheading “-- Criticism and Interpretation.”

The decision was made to build on what we already had. While many librarians leave day-to-day physical operations such as stack maintenance to staff or student workers, I have always reserved certain of these tasks for myself. One of these is queuing returned books in call number order onto book trucks for re-shelving, and not only because this gets my books back onto the shelves more quickly than if student

workers had to do both the queuing and the shelving. It is an aid to collection development: identifying patterns in the returned books gives me some insight into the research assignments made by Jacksonville State University's Department of English and tells me which authors are receiving heavy use, thereby suggesting areas where I might want to strengthen the collection.

I applied this knowledge to the problem of filling the void created by the loss of the *Literary Reference Center*, and once again I enlisted the aid of my library's acquisitions department. To the reference and anthology series we already owned we added Chelsea House's *Infobase eBooks* and select titles in Salem Press's *Critical Insights* series. Because I had noticed the assignment patterns suggested by my returned books I knew which authors (all firmly within the literary canon) to include in my list of select titles. As more writers fall into the "heavy use" category more titles will be added to the "select" list. To further benefit the end-user, we made sure that each series could be keyword searched in our catalog as a series, and sorted by title.

### Keep on Keeping On

Were we able to replace the *Literary Reference Center*? No, and we could never do so completely. Even if we could replace all the content, we still would not have the speed and efficiency of the Keyword and All Text searching available in the *LRC*. But for what is primarily a college underclassman database we were able to replace enough content, and it will not hurt freshmen to learn to perform the more laborious OPAC and print search techniques they will have to master farther along in their educational careers.

In order to succeed, a venture of this nature requires a collaboration so taken for granted that it is rarely mentioned and is virtually invisible in the professional literature. This is the necessary collaboration between public services (instruction) and technical services (acquisitions/cataloging) within a library. This is more than just routine collection development; it is targeted collection building to shore up a sudden weakness. Without the instruction librarian's familiarity with the content of the lost database and understanding of curriculum assignment patterns the collection building has no target. Without the cooperation of the library acquisitions department the needed replacement titles cannot be added quickly to the collection, and without the assistance of cataloging the OPAC records might not contain the maximum possible amount of information that would assist freshman searchers. The loss of the *Literary Reference Center* database thrust Houston Cole Library into damage-control mode for a brief time, but we chose a proactive approach to what is essentially a reactive situation; and, in doing so, we reduced what could have been a real hardship into just a phantom pain.

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