

San Jose State University

From the Selected Works of Mantra Roy

2017

Cooperation Between University Librarians and Faculty Writers and Poets

Mantra Roy, *San Jose State University*
Erin Vonnahme



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/mantra-roy/10/>

Cooperation Between University Librarians and Faculty Writers and Poets

MANTRA ROY *and* ERIN VONNAHME

Outreach librarians address the points of need in their liaison departments in order to successfully integrate library resources and services in faculty research and teaching. In this essay, we draw upon outreach agendas in our respective institutions to illustrate how we collaborate with faculty to develop creative writing collections. As recently hired Humanities Librarians at the University of Rochester, New York (Mantra Roy), and Miami University, Ohio, (Erin Vonnahme), we offer a study of the strategies, challenges, and successes we have encountered while working with Poetry and Creative Writing faculty members to build our institutions' collections in these areas. At the fore of our writing and planning strategies remains the core belief that collections serve as responsive, dynamic points of outreach, facilitating conversations beyond any single author or trend. As a flexible resource, the collection is a practical expression of librarians supporting scholarship, craft, and creativity.

We started our positions in the summer of 2015. We were friends from our MLIS program and our similar appointments have helped us identify overlapping trends, responsibilities, and possibilities in our current roles. Discussing and understanding the specific needs of the faculty members with regard to their crafts as practitioners and teachers was becoming an important part of our daily schedules. That is when we began sharing notes about our engagement with faculty members. This essay provides us with an excellent platform to discuss the strategies we employed (and continue to employ) in order to create collections that faculty members will find especially suited to the practice of their crafts.

Conversations with faculty have revealed the competing needs faced by creative writers and poets who are also teachers: what an artist seeks from a library collection and what a teacher requires may not always be the same. Meaningful, useful materials in the writing arts likely take different forms—from a more traditional anthology of a poet's collected works, for example, to technical craft manuals—especially if the needs of a writer's teaching load demand as much as his or her creative output. By beginning resource-based outreach conversations, we hope to build dynamic collections valuable to our users specifically and helpful and illustrative to other humanities librarians broadly.

In her article "Outreach Activities for Library Liaisons," Isabel Silver highlights many reasons why a liaison librarian today must engage with an "outreach-centered paradigm" including budget cuts, wider availability of e-resources, and a perceived sense of not requiring the library or a subject specialist (9). According to a 2013 Association of Research Libraries report, "engagement" is a core function of the evolving role of a liaison librarian's outreach model today. An essential aspect of engagement pertains to building strong relationships with students and faculty in order to employ a "user-centered" service model with an "outward focus" (Silver 9). The two critical features of the outreach model include empowering students with user-centered services and supporting scholarly productivity by understanding the needs of faculty members. Communication is key in the above processes so that students and faculty members become aware of the library resources and services that can aid their research and teaching. Silver lists collection development as an important aspect of the outreach workflow.

Becoming familiar with faculty members' research and teaching interests is an essential part of an outreach librarian's role because only then can the librarian understand what the library needs to procure (resources) and which services (workshops, library sessions, online tutorials) it needs to create and provide. Developing or building collections that respond to faculty members' interests will ensure their use. Outreach librarians should engage faculty members in two-way communication channels such that they hear directly from the faculty members about what they would like the library to purchase for their research. Creating an opportunity for faculty members to address their expectations from the library's collection is a primary responsibility of the outreach librarian.

As much as our respective job descriptions christen us "subject specialists," implying perhaps a solitary, deep-dive focus into our given field, we are also, out of necessity and preference, responsive and multidisciplinary collaborators. We want to share with and learn from our peers, faculty and librarians alike. Like Silver notes, the verbiage used to describe librarian liaisons (itself yet another term du jour) is fluid and recognizes the contextual nature of our positions (8). At Miami University, for example, undergraduate education takes the fore; as we recount conversations with Miami faculty and writer, Margaret Luongo, our focus turns toward a collection built to reflect instruction and learning goals. When we discuss poetry collection development at the University of Rochester, we highlight the specific scholarly needs of the faculty members as it is a research institution. Our conversational focus with these poets is the wide and deep collections they need to access in order to invest in their art form as well as to provide a rich collection of the best poetry written in English (and translation), from the earliest lyrics to contemporary times, for students to immerse themselves in the art form as a craft.

Likewise, in our meetings with the faculty members in our respective institutions, both of us have learned even more about the cycle of an English Department's needs in light of its own curricular, co-curricular, scholarly, and programming goals. In every conversation, whether meeting new faculty or supporting a speaker series, we ask a version of "Where are the Libraries in all of this?" Thankfully, we discovered in our conversations, we already are supporting our communities through established collections and services. Still, as our new collaborations reveal, each of us has fresh, site-specific ways we can further connect our collections to the work of poets and creative writers.

Here, and as we develop collections and relationships with our constituents, we consider questions of

- institutional focus and environment
- anticipated use considering, among other things, creative trends and location-specific plans (speaker series and the like)
- explicit requests (reactive) vs. proactive purchasing

In the following pages, we will present separate sections of individual projects before moving onto a third section, in which we share lessons learned from our own and each other's collection development strategies.

Poetry Collection and River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester

Drawing upon Peggy Johnson's book *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management* and my conversations with my Head of Collections, I recognize that the essence of collection development is "choice" (135). However, it is arguable, that the faculty's teaching and creative needs inform the choice of titles so that I can build relevant, dynamic, and usable collections. Understanding the craft-based and teaching needs through regular conversations and interviews ensures an efficient way of doing outreach.

As a leading private research university, the University of Rochester hosts award-winning artists as faculty members in the English department. The historic Rush Rhees Library, as the main campus library, deems it a primary service to meet the research needs of faculty members. As such, it behooves the Humanities librarian to learn firsthand the perceptible gaps in the collection that need to be met to fulfill the research needs of the faculty members.

As part of my introduction to the English department, I made appointments with the two resident poets, Jennifer Grotz and James Longenbach during my first month at the University of Rochester. Professor Jennifer Grotz has published several collections of poetry. She is the recipient of the Pushcart Prize; the Translation Award, American Translators Association; a Writing Fellowship at the Camargo Foundation, Cassis, France; and the 2015 NEA Fellowship in Translation, among others. James Longenbach, the Joseph Henry Gilmore Professor of English, has published several collections of poetry and critical works such as *The Art of the Poetic Line* and *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*. He is also the recipient of an Award in Literature, American Academy of Arts and Letters; a Guggenheim Fellowship; a Mellon Fellowship; and a National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Fellowship, among others.

During my meetings I realized that certain gaps in our impressive poetry collection needed to be filled to meet their various artistic and teaching needs. I began with an open-ended question—what do you need from the library? The first round of conversations illustrated to me that engaging in longer subsequent discussions will be required to receive a more in-depth perspective of their ideal poetry collection. On returning to my desk I reviewed their responses and recognized that while the most noted publishers and poets were automatically listed in our library's Gobi profile, there were significant gaps. I followed up with the faculty members by seeking another set of individual appointments. Owing to her book tours and workshops in the semester, most of my correspondence with Professor Grotz was through email. But I was able to meet with Professor Longenbach.

Prior to meeting them (via email and in person) I researched several annual literary

awards and winners for the last two decades and shared a detailed spreadsheet with Professor Grotz. She reverted with a positive response and suggested a list of publishers that should be essential candidates in our collection of poetry. I went through the list of publishers suggested by Grotz and Longenbach, agreed with all, and added some more to her list. Both poets emphasized the fact that while Prize winners must be included in the collection, it was equally important to buy titles from all the renowned publishers of poetry many of whom are very small independent houses. I developed a list of the significant publishers of poetry. In Gobi, I created separate folders for each publisher. An advanced search with each publisher's name revealed long lists of titles. I checked all titles Gobi listed against my library catalog and ordered the ones our collection was missing. As I continue to build this strategy of focusing on the publishers and acquiring their titles, I share the list of titles received with the faculty members periodically. This communication in essence is doing outreach because I keep the faculty members apprised of additions to a collection that matters most to them. Similarly, I have created another folder for the Prize winners and follow the same workflow of finding the titles we don't have, placing orders, and sharing the list of latest acquisitions with the faculty members. One of my follow-up questions to Professor Grotz involved the kinds of books that she had received through Interlibrary Loan. She sent me a record of her ILL orders. Perusing a list of titles that she had requested from consortia libraries indicated the books she required as an artist teaching her craft which we needed to make available through our collection. Once again, I followed (and still follow) the previously mentioned workflow to acquire books of poetry.

As a librarian I realize that for a genre like poetry I should figure out the best resources for poetry news. Based on Professor Grotz's response that "the best resource to track contemporary poetry is the Poetry Daily website (poems.com)" and that Publishers Weekly and Library Journal "acknowledge significant new books of poetry as well," I track these venues regularly to get the latest updates on new titles (Interview).

Professor Longenbach in an interview added that it is important to learn from the past—"the past (is) more important than the present" and therefore the "best, most up-to-date" editions of all major poets must be included in a world class poetry collection in an academic library. One can't "disregard" the contemporary poets but counts on the "structures of the poetic and publishing community. The "dependable" way to acquire poetry titles is to check the "reputable" poetry publishers or "finest presses" (discussed above) because they publish the best poetry being written. When I asked him about how the library can support his craft, he said that reading the stalwarts, such as Shakespeare and Yeats, is essential, for both his practice of the art as well as for his students. "You read other poets to learn how the greatest manipulators of the medium of language have made patterns" that one can learn from. Longenbach doesn't want to "diminish the importance of the present." Just as the present will hold little meaning if not experienced in relationship with the past, the past will hold no meaning if the art is not continued. We need both of these in a collection; it will "maintain that synergy" between the "history and the ongoing fact of the art."

While discussing the different ways the library can support the various poet and creative writer visits that the English department hosts every year, it emerged that a "thoughtful" collaboration would include availability of resources that have informed the visiting artists in close conjunction with the rigorous exposure to their work in classes in the English department.

My conversation with Longenbach eventually veered toward the possibility of making the library space an intellectually inviting environment where students, faculty, and staff can attend workshop sessions where practicing poets like Longenbach and Grotz can demonstrate the nuances of the art form by drawing on the library collection. It is a project I will be pursuing shortly.

Ultimately, learning from my constituencies what they need from the library's collection is key to successful outreach. The act of doing outreach, including making appointments with faculty members, listening to their library and research needs, their perceptions of library materials, and going back and forth with titles and suggestions, seamlessly blends with the collection building work of actually responding to users' library needs by purchasing the materials and updating the faculty members about the acquisitions.

Creative Writing and the Miami University Libraries

Founded in 1809, Miami University is a public university located in Oxford, Ohio. Since its inception, Miami has cultivated its environment to be one of stellar undergraduate education institutions. Because of Miami's institutional focus, any conversations regarding the Libraries find their way around to the goal of supporting instruction. The conversations that creative writer and faculty member, Margaret Luongo, and I shared were no different. Winner of the Pushcart Prize among other awards and a working writer and teacher for almost two decades, Luongo has been with Miami University since 2004. Here, she teaches undergraduate and graduate-level fiction writing workshops as well as seminars in contemporary fiction and American literature. Her forthcoming collection, *History of Art*, will be published in 2016 by LSU Press.

Professor Luongo and I met in December, both of us ready to enter a period of relative calm after a term full of teaching and creative output. At the local indie coffee house, we chatted about collections and craft, undergraduates and engagement. Before the day's conversation, I had worked with Professor Luongo and her classes already, building workshops to highlight library-based research skills and familiarity with Miami's holdings. Graciously (and thankfully), when I asked her what she thought about building library time into her courses, she responded instantly: "I think it's worth it." "Today we work here," she says to her students who visit. "The classroom" she recognizes, isn't always a creative space, but the library is a change of venue that is supportive and welcoming, conducive to creativity and critical thinking at once. I ask how the collection—the materials themselves and not just the physical space—fits into this creative and constructive paradigm. She replied that the collections could serve as a reminder of the permanence of research in our users' lives. Together, our resources can work alongside faculty and librarians in "convincing [students] that this [research] is not something they cross off their list and get done" once and for all, a necessary hurdle to suffer on their way to a semester's grade. Rather, research is a perennial presence, just as our collections will be, regardless of its specific shape or focus.

Yet, as librarians who cultivate literature-heavy collections, we know we must advocate for holdings that may look and feel different than other parts of what the library has to offer. As of academic year 2015–2016, the Literatures in English (LES) section of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) has articulated this larger idea—

that literary collections age and grow differently than others—into specific professional guidelines. According to the “Guidelines for Deselecting Literatures in English Collections in Academic Libraries” recently proposed by ACRL-LES, the group “does not endorse ... a strictly quantitative approach” to building or weeding a literature-centric collection. Raw circulation numbers and other “data-driven decision-making” criteria cannot reveal the whole story of such collections because sometimes, something from the 18th century is just as illustrative and contemporary as the hot new voice in fiction.

Plus sometimes a reader must stumble into something surprising, publication date aside. Repeatedly during our conversations, Professor Luongo and I considered the role of such serendipity and exploration. “The library is a space where [we] can expand on these little assignments,” Luongo said, to build scholarship but also to provoke curiosity and creativity. The value of browsing in a supportive space can “give [students] some kind of grounding to immerse themselves” (and at this point, we joked about the juxtaposition of concepts like “immersion” and “finding ground,” laughing and christening the idea “controlled drowning”). Luongo continues, in research sometimes “you stumble around. That’s part of the fun.” Careening into the collection is “all part of the creative process.” My hope, as steward of the collection, is that such careening is joyful, well-supported, surprising, and provocative.

For creative writers like Professor Luongo and her students, then, an ideal collection could look like a sea of resources that supports craft and intellectual growth but also facilitates browsing and unexpected discovery (the serendipity factor). I recognize collections must evolve in content as much as they evolve over time, so my goal is to facilitate such experiences in both print and digital formats; in this way I can prioritize stability and agility. Certainly browsing physical stacks differs from browsing digital repositories. However, I can lead users into productive engagement with our materials despite impediments like format learning curves or technology fears. Miami’s collection of literary journals, for example, is part analog, part digital. When I meet with Professor Luongo and her classes, I frame our sessions as discovery-centered, reassuring them that format is only one piece of a larger, layered learning process. This interactivity allows me to learn as much as I teach; every term there are new items to share and also new students, each with different interests and perspectives. Their ideas and questions offer me information about gaps in the collection. Their user behavior shows me what content seems to fare better in which format. Part of my own growth and fulfillment in my position at Miami has been this two-pronged approach to collection promotion: as I work with faculty and their students to navigate the collection, I learn how to develop it.

Likewise, a vibrant creative writing collection should support a writer-professor’s twin goals: honing craft and teaching it. To that end, the collection needs to offer context-specific content—materials explicitly connected to class assignments and a given semester’s author visits, for example—and to provide consistent access to relevant writers, whether canonical or avant-garde. Again, stability and agility are key. For example, Professor Luongo suggested building collections to offer users a broad look at authors for a better sense of how the trajectory of a writing career can form manifold shapes. She elaborates, “I would love for [students] to pick a writer they love with some history ... somebody who’s had a good long career,” so they can “do the research in between on [selected writers’] lives, their writing career, what they’ve written about writing, if anything, their philosophy and how that’s changed, just to get a sense of how it works.”

Considering “how it works”—a writing process, a writing life, a sustained career—

forces librarians to recognize that there is no single way to showcase these phenomena. What we can do, however, is use our collections to support a chorus of voices. Our holdings can offer the expected canonical writers, to be sure, but they should also prioritize the work of independent publishers and writers to create space for exciting new contributions. Our writing arts collection development should demonstrate a concerted effort to educate ourselves about the vast communities into which we are encouraging the writers on our campus to contribute.

Yet we must not expect to remain aware of this vast chorus on our own. Instead, we need to rely on our outreach and public service savvy. We talk. We listen. We read. As our conversation turned toward contemporary creative writing movements and trends, Professor Luongo shared with me that she, too, relies on collaboration to keep in the know. Certainly we must avoid an echo chamber that might keep us myopic and ignorant of voices different than our own, but that is why we must cultivate community across disciplinary and professional boundaries, like Professor Luongo, that is, like Margaret and I are doing over coffee.

In the end, Margaret's biggest hope was a version of my own: more of the last two hours. "I would love to have more of this," she said, "just making connections," talking about how we can work together as professionals to create cross-departmental relationships, as community members to support creative and intellectual curiosity, and as library users dedicated to voracious thinking, primed for discovery.

Converse, Collaborate, Collect and Repeat

As librarians who both build collections and do active outreach, we are in an enviable position today to advocate for effective and efficient use of our resources by engaging in conversations with users who shape the intellectual direction on an academic campus, our faculty members. An important lesson learned from our projects is that conversations with faculty members are key to finding out what they need from the collections for their research and teaching. Mantra heard from her faculty members that regular connection with the librarian helps them engage with collections more actively; Erin heard much of the same. Both of us heard the call for our collections to be part of an active and supportive library ecosystem.

As collections should serve scholarly and creative expectations, so, too, should they serve the fluctuating needs of an academic year and its instruction and programming? Since our creative writing faculty members necessarily engage with visiting speakers, for example, whose crafts in practice demonstrate the techniques and nuances of living art forms, we librarians realize that our collections should reflect the invited speakers' works. Thus our collections should speak both to the courses being taught and the overall terrain of a genre in current focus. What's more, our working closely with faculty is not just a lofty goal or hopeful ideal. Rather it is a pragmatic approach to building responsive collections while growing and cultivating creative scholarship. The professional relationship that Erin and Margaret have fostered speaks to the meaningful instructional collaboration that can spring from a handful of conversations just as Mantra's upcoming goals for creative outreach emerge directly from chats with Longenbach and Grotz. Ultimately, one-on-one conversations and regular communication with creative writing faculty are key to successful building of collections that will cover a wide and deep range of resources they need for their research and teaching.

WORKS CITED

- Association for College & Research Libraries, Literatures in English Section. 2015. "Guidelines for Deselecting Literatures in English Collections in Academic Libraries." Accessed February 4, 2016. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/les/GuidelinesforDeselectingLESCollectionsinAcademicLibraries-final.pdf>.
- Johnson, Peggy. 2014. *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management*. London: ALA.
- Silver, Isabel D. "Outreach Activities for Librarian Liaisons." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 54.2 (2014): 8-14. ProQuest. Web. 22 Dec. 2015.