



Preservation training : a priority for the Bibliothèque nationale de France/BnF ; two examples of successful trainings

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200 — Empowering staff through preservation training! How your library and users will reap the benefits — Preservation and Conservation with Education and Training

Abstract:

For about 15 years BnF has significantly increased its programs of initial and continuing preservation training, because it is really one of the priorities in its global preservation strategy. Preservation training is mostly managed by a specialized team of the Conservation Department. A large range of complementary training courses has been set up to address the various needs of the library staff and the number of sessions is decided each year after an accurate assessment of the needs. Several preservation courses are now obligatory part of the training cursus of people who reach BnF to work in link with cultural heritage collections. Despite current difficulties due to increasing lack of staff and budget, the global results are clearly positive : most of the trainings have proved their effectiveness, and people are very satisfied with them.

This paper describes two examples of successful training programs which obviously improve BnF preservation practices : training of “magasiniers” (storage staff) in minor repairs and documents cleaning, which made possible to set up a very effective workshop ; and training of the whole crew of the Legal Deposit Department/DDL in taking into account preservation of documents in each stage of the chain of its activities.

1) A short overview of preservation training in the BnF

During the conception and the building of the *Très Grande Bibliothèque*, the new and huge French national Library in the Nineties, BnF preservation strategy was thoroughly rethought and preservation became progressively the first priority, reinforced by the current cuts in the budgets. Because of this preventive strategy of conservation, consciousness-raising, and initial and continuing training of the

crews are now very important, and BnF has significantly increased its preservation programs during the last decade.

Since 2002, preservation training is managed by a specialized team (3 people) of the Conservation Department/DSC, which works in collaboration with the service coordinating all the training in the library, and with departments which manage collections, information systems, buildings, all of them playing a significant part in the preservation strategy.

A large range of complementary training courses has been previously set up to address the various needs of the library staff, which can be basic or more specialized according to the different tasks and responsibilities in the crews :

<http://intranotes/BnF/stages.nsf/0/3224D01E2EEE185EC1256E190055913D?OpenDocument>

Every year, an accurate assessment of the needs is performed thanks to the interview between each member of the staff and his/her chief. Then the DSC Training Team synthesizes the demands in the conservation field, which become a part of the DSC annual training program. For each kind of training, the number of sessions is decided according to the number of demands.

Every year, a lot of people have naturally to be trained in preservation, because BnF staff is very numerous and a part of it has to be regularly replaced ; moreover, BnF is also commissioned to a national cooperation task, and some sessions are dedicated to people coming from other libraries. 124 of the 438 people who were trained in preservation during the year 2011 belonged to other institutions. Nowadays, it is generally admitted that preservation is a common responsibility of the whole staff, and several basic preservation courses (emergency plan, physical assessment of collections condition, for examples) are an obligatory part of the training program of people who reach BnF to work in link with cultural heritage collections, whatever their positions are. Training is particularly focused on prevention : we try to train all the *magasiniers* (storage people), in order that they become able to assess the condition of documents and to decide if they can be transmitted to users, or if they must be selected for conservation treatments ; in order that they also know how to correctly handle and carry documents when they have to be sent to users, and that they can effectively watch the behaviour of the public in reading rooms.

Training courses are more or less suited to all activities linked to paper collections (delivery, marking, fitting of new documents, exhibitions...) and nowadays we work to adapt them quickly to new practices of the digital era ; for example with a course related to “How to correctly select and handle documents for and during digitization”.

We conceive some specialized preservation courses for curators and collections managers, in order that they can prevent and identify pests and moulds, control and manage climate in storage rooms, or set up conservation programs by sorting documents according to their condition between the different kinds of treatment.

Several new training units are created each year according to the needs expressed by the staff. All training sessions are finally assessed by the trainees, and their content are modified as often as necessary.

Of course, the immediate benefit of the trainings for collection preservation is sometimes quite low, due to the fact that we have to fight against strong and permanent trends : routine, and necessity to work quickly because of the huge quantity of documents which have to be managed daily at every stage of their treatment ; lack of time, of staff, of budget which increased during the last years due to current economic crisis and to French Government policy.

But nevertheless the global results are very positive : In the last 15 years, several thousands of people have been trained in preservation once at least, and therefore knowledge and sensitivity to preservation issues have greatly increased among all categories of staff members working in link with collections

and users (from those who receive the new entries to those who send them to users, and manage and watch the reading rooms, or organize exhibitions ; the rate of people satisfied by trainings is always very high, sessions are usually completely full, and it is never difficult to find very motivated people to train their colleagues coming from other departments or specialized in other fields. Actually these trainings are very useful to exchange professional knowledge and experiences between people who often don't even know each other in such a huge library.

2) Two examples of successful trainings

A - Training *magasiniers* to collections maintenance

Basic cleaning and minor repairs are among the most effective treatments for preservation of library materials : to repair slight damages, to strengthen brittle parts of documents are both activities which don't take a long time and which allow to prevent more serious deteriorations and to spare long and complex treatments. Those simple operations don't require the high level of skill only possessed by restorers, but nevertheless an effective training and appropriate working places and tools which don't exist in BnF collections departments.

Because it became obvious that the restoration teams were not as numerous as it would be necessary to treat all the library materials which needed minor repairs, excepted by reducing the number of complex restoration treatments, the Conservation department organized in 2004 a two-days training program about *Cleaning and slight repairs of printed documents*, in cooperation with collections departments. This training is managed by the DSC Training Team and DSC restorers, and is specially dedicated to *magasiniers* (storage staff) from collections departments, who are trained to realize only minor repairs and treatments (*i.e.* treatments which can be completed in less than 3 hours for each document), and easy to do : for example mending little tears, pasting loosed leaves, inserting errata sheets, flattening creased leaves, repairing cardboard corners and head bands ; or sewing together leaves of brochures to replace staples, removing barcodes or bookmarks without damages, dusting, erasing, application of leather dressing, etc. Storage people are also made aware of global preservation issues.

The main point is that this training, which is in fact only proposed to volunteers, is directly linked to a special workshop : In the largest BnF site (François-Mitterrand), in the DSC premises, a space has been fitted out with workbenches, where storage people, after their training, can come and repair, or clean, slightly damaged documents belonging to their departments, that they carry with them. During all this time, they are supervised by a DSC restorer (a volunteer too), who gives them help and advices. This "Minor repairs workshop" is open six times of half a day every week, and each time four people can come and work (a fifth bench is kept for the supervisor, who can help and watch storage people without stopping completely his/her own restoration work. Even if some *magasiniers* can't come very often, because a major and increasing part of their time is devoted to users service tasks, all of them use more or less regularly the knowledge they got from the training, and they progressively become more skilful and efficient. The number of trained people is greater than the one of the open places (34 people are currently working in the workshop) ; even if most places are pre-reserved regularly by the collections departments, all people have to reserve every time their own place in a weekly schedule ; every Friday, the places remaining free for the next week are indicated and proposed to volunteers, whatever the department they belong to.

After 8 years of working, I can write without any doubt that this activity is obviously and completely successful :

- We regularly receive demands for the "minor repairs" training, and at least one session is organized each year to replace trained people who have left BnF ; collections departments which send people to training and workshop are more and more numerous (currently 9, among them the Printed Books Reserve and the legal Deposit Departments) ; people are always satisfied with training and supervisors, which allow them to make quick progress. Training

and maintenance make them much more involved in library materials preservation, and in turn they influence their colleagues in this way in all their other tasks. Restorers who agree to be supervisors feel themselves recognized for their abilities and learn a lot from their trainees, particularly about library collections condition and management, users needs and requests.

- All the places of the “minor repairs” workshop are very often occupied, and it proved immediately its effectiveness and productivity : Every year, from 2 500 to 3 500 documents are repaired or cleaned, which is much more than the output of DSC workshops in these types of treatment ; materials arriving in bad condition are immediately repaired and when they are carried back to storage rooms they are immediately available for users if necessary. Even if some trainees acquired sufficient skills to achieve more difficult treatments, the workshops mission has been maintained in quick repairs (the average time is nearly 25 minutes per document), and therefore the workshop activities remain really complementary of the restorations made by DSC teams on more damaged documents.

- In summary, the success of this training can be explained by several reasons :
 - o The needs of collections departments Heads for better maintenance of their materials met both the aspirations of many *magasiniers* for more various, manual and prestigious tasks, and DSC wish to strengthen the links between its workshops and the collections departments, which are their natural customers, and to address their needs more accurately.
 - o We set up together a training program which is exactly thought for its subsequent use, which is reserved to motivated volunteers, who must immediately put their new knowledge into practice ; the training is complemented by an effective supervision system. The direct link between the training and the practice workshop is obviously the main factor of this success ; but the very regular following and the continuous dialog between organizers and users have also permitted to adapt as often as necessary the training content, and above all the workshop running according to needs and necessities : organization and schedule of the working segments, sharing out of worktime between the departments, etc.

B – Training of the Legal Deposit Department staff to correctly handle printed documents

The main task of the Legal Deposit Department/DDL is to receive by post all the printed monographs and periodicals edited and distributed on the French territory, that BnF is commissioned to keep as cultural heritage documents, and to carry out the first treatments : parcels reception and opening, intellectual and physical checking, marking and registration, insertion of two specific internal numbers, sorting by themes, transportation, cataloguing, translation to collections departments for equipment and storage. To achieve all these activities, it is necessary to handle the documents very often, which are therefore submitted to great risks of deterioration. These risks are all the greater because crews are obliged to work very fast due to the huge quantities of materials which enter yearly in BnF collections thanks to the Legal Deposit Law (140 000 volumes of monographs and more than 300 000 leaflets of periodicals) : a “routine effect” can easily occur. Moreover, it is quite difficult to make people aware that these news and sometimes common documents are part of french cultural heritage.

Because she wanted to prevent the development of working habits which could be dangerous for documents, two years ago the new DDL Head asked DSC to set up a preservation training program specially dedicated to the entire DDL crew. The DSC Training Team worked from the base of an already existing training unit conceived for storage people of the collections departments, and fitted it to DDL distinctive features, in collaboration with the DDL conservation Chief.

The training session is short (half a day) and practical. During the first part, trainees are made aware of the effects of handling on documents deterioration, and of the large part in handling taken by library crews ; then all the stages of the Legal Deposit treatment chain are systematically and closely examined, with all the handling practices linked to them. At every time training people are showing the “good practices” and those which must absolutely be prohibited. Most of the promoted practices are well-known but also easily forgotten in the day-to-day work : for example to handle with cleaned hands, on worktables cleaned and fitted to their use ; to open packages with caution when using sharp tools ; to pay attention to the physical look and cleanliness of documents ; not to build high and unsteady piles with documents ; to use fitted and appropriately loaded trolleys for documents transportation, which must be pushed with caution ; to put and take correctly volumes on full shelves, etc.

The success of this preservation training program can be explained by three reasons :

- All people of DDL Department were trained in less than 3 years, whatever their special fields and their positions (from the DDL Head herself to storage and cataloguing teams) ; therefore common rules were expressed and listened by all ;
- The training was closely fitted to its purpose, and always co-conducted by one DSC people (who expressed the general rule) and one from DDL (who adapted rule to DDL specificities) ; this way of conducting proved to be very effective and very satisfying for the trainees ;
- The training sessions were immediately followed by concrete steps aiming at adapting workplaces and tools to the new rules : working spaces were reorganized, new trolleys were bought, food, drink and plants were moved away from the documents, etc. Thus DDL teams are continuing carrying out their tasks of initial treatment with the same efficiency than before, but also being much more aware that the documents they treat and handle are precious and have to be carefully preserved.