

Assessing a collection for Condition and Usability | January 2011

Summary

As part of the process of undertaking [Case Study 4: Physical conservation vs digitisation for preservation](#), LIFE-SHARE needed to assess the condition and usability of a collection at the University of Leeds Library.

The basis for doing this was to have a specific sample with which to compare workflow and costs, for preservation and conservation. However it was in itself an extremely worthwhile and revealing exercise, and one which we would recommend to any institution with potentially fragile books on the open shelves. Apart from forming the basis of the rest of the case study, the standout feature of the exercise for us was the fact that our books were in much worse a condition than had been expected. Now that we know this, we are better placed to act, and protect the collection and others like it.

Our methodology was to choose a collection, use Microsoft Excel to select 200 of the books and pamphlets from that collection entirely at random, and then have them assessed by the Library's Conservation Officer. She examined the books, gave each a unique identifying number, and recorded the following information about them:

- Type of binding
- Size
- Whether there was structural damage, and if so what this was
- How acidic the paper was, on a scale of 1-3
- Whether it was embrittled
- The number of pages
- An overall condition and usability rating from 1-4.

The condition and usability scored are defined as follows:

1. Item in good condition and usable. Minor or no interventional conservation required.
2. Item in fair condition with minor damage (e.g. minor tears); still usable with extra care and attention or may require alkalisation to prevent further deterioration.
3. Item in poor condition and badly deteriorated (e.g. loose sewing, detached pages, embrittled, unstable); strong risk of further damage if used. Urgent conservation needed.
4. Item in very poor condition (e.g. extremely fragile/fragmented/highly unstable/infested); it should not be used due to severe risk of further damage. Immediate conservation needed.

[NB: Strikingly, only 12 of our 200 item sample could be considered to be in good condition and not at risk at this time. 68 were in fair condition. Almost half, 99 items in total, were in poor condition and needed urgent conservation, and the remaining 21 were at severe risk and needed immediate action.]

Having done this, the Conservation Officer recommended treatment for the materials – a combination of internal processes such as minor repairs, creating custom enclosures, and dry-cleaning the binding; and external processes which would need to be outsourced, such as de-acidification.

Recommendations

Some recommendations about this process if you are planning to undergo something similar:

- **Choose a collection that is known to contain some fragile materials, but which is still fairly representative of the wider collections.** We chose to use French books, specifically from the early 20th century – we knew many of these were printed on acid paper and so were a cause for conservation concern, but at the same time they were not atypical of the Arts & Humanities books we have on the shelves at Leeds. To have chosen items from our 7-Day Loans Collection, the books which are key texts for learning and teaching, would not have been a valuable exercise as most of them are brand new or fairly new, so unlikely to have any conservation issues.
- **Establish a permanent format for recording data about the collection.** If you can produce a spreadsheet (or any other appropriate medium for recording the information about each book) which will stand the test of time, this will allow direct comparison of collections in the future. This can be used to show how different collections are fairing in comparison to one another, or to track the rate of deterioration of a given collection over time. Although at Leeds we had previously undertaken a condition and usability assessment of similar collections, it was not recorded in such detail as the LIFE-SHARE case study; as such they were not directly comparable, which was a missed opportunity. Future assessment will be recorded in the same format as the case study to enable cross-checking of data, etc.
- **Allow around 7 hours per 100 books to assess.** The process takes a surprisingly long time – although the actual assessment for condition and usability only took, in our Conservator's case, 2.7 minutes per book, locating the items, un-shelving them, transporting them to the Conservation Lab, entering the data about each one into a spreadsheet, and then re-shelving them, took an enormous amount of time collectively. It makes sense to ensure the Conservation Officer, usually a relatively highly graded staff member, only has to do the assessment and data entry; collection and transportation of books can be taken on by a lower graded member of staff.
- **If the materials are found to be in need of urgent conservation action, ensure the infrastructure is in place to act.** It is one thing to know your collections are in need of some intervention by a Conservator, but another to actually be able to act quickly and conserve the books. It is important to have a plan in place to escalate the issue to a higher level and ensure the resources are in place to protect the collection sampled, and if possible assess other collections too. Even just assessing the items takes a lot of time and money, so to conserve or preserve them too is a big investment which needs high level authority.

If you wish to assess your collection using Industry Standard methodology, you can refer to the National Preservation Office's *Preservation Assessment Survey* (see <http://www.bl.uk/blpac/paslib.html>). This recommends a figure of 400 books as being a statistically valid representative of a given collection (to within 5%), if the collection is larger than 5000 items. For this Case Study we did not have time to assess 400 items, so chose to study 200 instead; this meant our data was statistically valid to within 6.79%.

The Preservation Assessment Survey also recommends taking 400 books at random from your entire collection, rather than a specific collection, to give a sample statistically valid in representing your library or archive's entire stock.

LIFE-SHARE Project |

Beccy Shipman | Matthew Herring | Ned Potter

life-share@leeds.ac.uk | www.leeds.ac.uk/library/projects/lifeshare

The logo for JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) is displayed in a large, orange, sans-serif font.