

“A stitch in time...”: Cross-institutional and interdisciplinary cooperation en route to a preservation policy (a work in progress report)

Maria-Annabel Hanke

Preservation Services, Bibliothek für Bildungsgeschichtliche Forschung des Deutschen Instituts für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung , Berlin, Germany.

E-mail address: hanke@dipf.de



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Abstract:

The Research Library for the History of Education is a library with an archival character, preservation and conservation issues therefore have a special significance in our work. While developing our preservation policy, cooperation with different professions and institutions has proved to be stimulating and restraining in the process. Forms of cooperative work as well as specific projects are introduced in this paper. The training and promotion of young professionals take on a central role in this context by linking theory and practice.

Keywords: preservation, conservation, cooperation, young professionals, training

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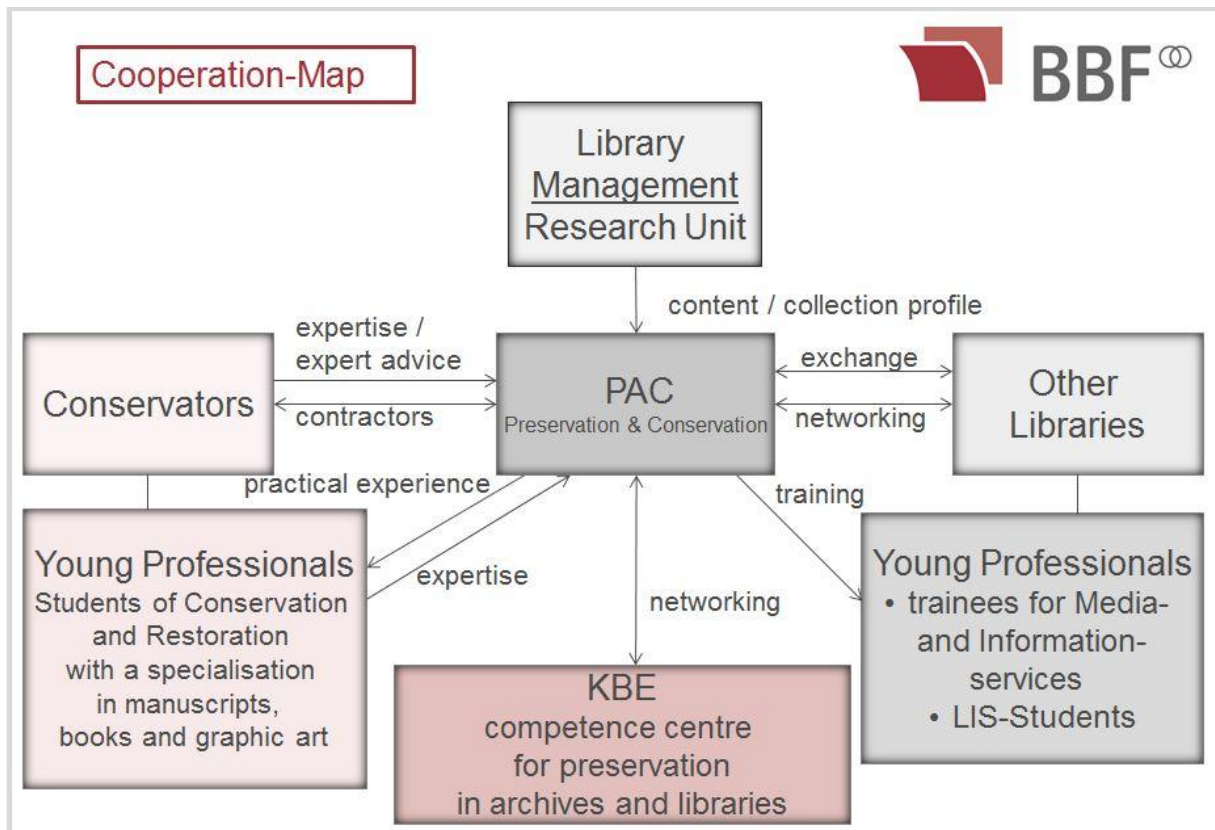
The Research Library for the History of Education (Bibliothek für Bildungsgeschichtliche Forschung – BBF) is a Berlin-based part of the German Institute for International Educational Research (DIPF). The BBF's library and archival collections constitute an important corpus for research in the history of education. It is the largest library specialised in education within Germany and, along with the Uschinskij-Library in Moscow and Denmark's Pædagogiske Bibliotek in Copenhagen, it is among the largest educational libraries in Europe. Like the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel, the BBF belongs to the circle of German cultural science research libraries with a national focus.

The BBF's collection began in 1876 as a teachers' library. Today the library holds more than 720,000 media items. Approximately 12,000 volumes published between 1493 and 1830 are preserved in the Collection of Old Prints. The BBF is a library with an archival character; therefore the conservation of the original material has a special significance in our work.

This also means that we are not only dedicated to the long-term preservation of library material in general, but also to the preservation of the original object as a historical source with all of its individual traces. The preservation of the original material is our “golden thread”, serving as the basis for all PAC activities, conceptually as well as in their actual implementation.

Above all, preservation management tasks at the BBF are comprised of raising awareness for PAC issues with the senior library management, staff and users as well as the general coordination, planning and organisation of subject-related measures. Preservation and conservation as a special field in library tasks has been integrated into all library routines, from acquisitions to interlibrary loans and loans for exhibitions up to digitisation. PAC routines at the BBF are dominated by direct preventive care activities (such as book care, condition survey, boxing, rehousing and protective measures) and indirect preventive care activities (such as environmental monitoring and documentation, furnishings, storing conditions and hygiene in repositories). Apart from preservation, we aim at the qualitative and quantitative development of conservation-measures with a particular focus on mass-phenomena such as the deterioration of acidic papers or red rot.

The BBF is currently working out a generally binding preservation policy paper, taking into account not only future tasks and questions of research from various disciplines, but also the changing tasks of libraries in general. On this path which has not yet come to an end, it has become apparent how many disciplines and specialist tasks have to be considered in a preservation concept in order to guarantee sustainability for the library’s collection. While in the process it has turned out that interdisciplinary and cross-institutional cooperations have proved to be a catalyst and impetus for the conceptual work.



Schematic overview of cross-institutional and interdisciplinary relations of the BBF's PAC department

As already indicated, there are cooperations at different levels with different professional backgrounds and challenges; to mention a few, the in-house historians of education of the research unit, who, with the eye of their scientific discipline, are indispensable when it comes to prioritising stocks worth preserving in terms of content, regardless of codicological or other characteristics marking the intrinsic value of an object. Therefore, they are important partners in the process of sharpening the collection profile and hence the interconnected preservation, which again is input into the conservation concept.

We have been able to gain positive and inspiring experiences in cooperating with external institutions and non-library professions, which I am going to introduce in more detail below. I would like to anticipate that the training and promotion of young professionals takes on a central role in this context.

As stated above, the focus of PAC activities at the BBF is on prevention, which is due to the fact that the BBF is a library without a restoration workshop. Owing to this situation, the PAC department relies on external professional expertise by closely liaising with a constant base of freelance conservators who are not only contractors, but reliable advisors as well.

Libraries are dependent on the comprehensive and experience-based knowledge of conservators and should strive to intensify close cooperation with that profession. Since conservators know about the needs of libraries, we as librarians have to be able to formulate questions about our collections in favour of our collections. Thus, a mutual give and take for the benefit of both sides arises from a working relationship.

We would already like to encourage the interdisciplinary exchange between conservators and libraries during training in order to give the next generation of conservators the opportunity to

learn about library workflows and mass phenomena in collection care at our library. A programme is currently being developed that supports students of conservation in cooperation with the University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Hildesheim in the faculty of Conservation and Restoration with a specialisation in manuscripts, books and graphic art. This year, and for the very first time, the BBF is going to award a scholarship for a master thesis on a collection-specific damage pattern.

As a topic, we chose leather-bound volumes published in the late 19th and early 20th century, with particular attention on vegetable-tanned leather and red rot. Together with the student, a method of handling the topic was developed: the central themes will be damage analysis, damage degree, treatment proposal and its exemplary implementation on sample books with different damage patterns.

The student thus has the opportunity to work independently and conceptually in close connection with the working practice. Furthermore, the thesis is of particular significance as the result will have a specific effect on our work. We hope to see a practical and comprehensive solution to our problem with highly deteriorated leather, which is applicable to the entire stock of leather-bound volumes concerned. In addition to this, it would be easier to calculate a projection for cost and time. If the test run taking place this year is to the satisfaction of both sides, the cooperation with universities and their student conservators will be made an integral part of the conservation philosophy in the BBF in the future.

To us, the linkage of theory and practice is essential, not only in the training of student conservators, but is also of particular interest concerning young library professionals from different institutions and training backgrounds. This regards (vocational) trainees for Media and Information Services in libraries (who often come from public rather than academic libraries) and LIS students, both of which have to complete compulsory internships of 1-6 weeks on average. As PAC as a subject is increasingly disappearing from the curricula of the training facilities, we are trying to promote preservation awareness by giving theoretical crash courses in combination with practical exercises. We have developed our own training material for this purpose, touching the following topics:

- What is preservation and conservation?
- book history and parts of a book
- material knowledge
- damages
- do's and don't's in damage treatment
- conservator (visit to workshop)
- bookbinder (visit to workshop)

Range and depth of content mediated depend on the future career of the intern and the duration of the internship.

Sensitising young library professionals for conservation issues is a rather indirect form of cross-institutional cooperation. The "Kompetenzzentrum Bestandserhaltung für Archive und Bibliotheken in Berlin und Brandenburg – KBE" (competence centre for preservation in archives and libraries) offers a more direct approach to getting in touch with other libraries on a professional level.

The KBE was established in 2001 and aims at the structural improvement of preserving library and archival material on a local scale. The KBE, among other things, offers a wide

range of advanced training courses and serves as a networking platform for archivists and librarians with preservation tasks.

At the beginning of this year and in cooperation with the KBE, the BBF initialised a discussion group directed at librarians of academic libraries with a special focus on historical collections with the objective of becoming involved in a detailed exchange of experiences, fostering interlibrary contacts and evaluating possibilities for cooperation. The BBF offered the content, location and organisation for this form of get-in-touch and keep-in-touch activity. The KBE provided the PR infrastructure and administration. The event received a great response not only by local librarians, but also by librarians from outside the Berlin-Brandenburg area. The preservation work of the BBF and the storage conditions in our repositories were presented in a lecture and guided tour. Of particular interest to the participants were the implementation of hygiene, climate monitoring and protective packaging. The idea of initiating a platform for exchanging ideas seems to have touched a nerve, as intended; there will be a follow-up event and some of the participating libraries have agreed to run a similar get-together.

The cooperation with the KBE is to be expanded in the long term with the aim of bringing local skills together and building networks, hence the problems and strategies of medium and smaller academic libraries without in-house workshops and conservators should be addressed.

Libraries without in-house conservators need reliable external partners. External input, be it from the PAC activities of other libraries, conservators, universities and researchers enormously helps to evaluate and develop one's own work on a conceptual and strategic level. Exchange and examples of best practice form an essential part in deciding where to set priorities and key aspects of activity with a preservation policy. At the same time it is a commitment and an ethical approach to conserving cultural heritage with meaning for our profession, which through education and training can be transferred to the following generations responsible for the protection of cultural assets.