

Harvey Varnet and Michèle V. Cloonan

Educating Iraqi librarians and library and information science educators

Risks and rewards

Responding to the devastating effects of war on Iraqi libraries, the Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) and the Harvard University libraries began a joint program in 2003 to train Iraqi librarians and library and information science educators, to aid in modernizing Iraqi libraries, and to help address the country's serious shortage of librarians.

ties scholarship to advance knowledge and understanding of Mesopotamia, the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present-day Iraq.”¹

Initial communications with our Iraqi colleagues was challenging because of the war in Iraq. In 2003, when we began this project, few people had either personal computers or reliable electricity in their homes. We depended



Twenty-three Iraqi librarians attended the second training session in Jordan offered through an NEH-sponsored program developed by Simmons College's GSLIS and Harvard. A total of 40 librarians were trained in 2005.

In March 2004 the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) awarded Simmons and Harvard a grant for a two-year project. The grant is part of the NEH program “Recovering Iraq's past to preserve and document Iraq's cultural heritage,” which funds projects to “preserve and document cultural resources in Iraq's archives, libraries, and museums. This initiative continues NEH's longstanding history of support for humani-

ties scholarship to advance knowledge and understanding of Mesopotamia, the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present-day Iraq.”¹

on the Middle East Library Association (MELA) and on a series of connections that Jeffrey Spurr, Lesley Wilkins, and András Riedlmayer of Harvard University had. Charles Jones, then

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Iraqi librarians engage in informal discussion during a class break at the first training session offered in 2005.

of the Oriental Institute of Chicago, started the IraqCrisis Line.²

A risky proposal

A planning meeting was held in Amman, Jordan, in June 2004, with members of Simmons, Harvard, the project's advisory board, and representatives of Iraq's libraries and library and information science professorate. Even something as seemingly simple as arranging a meeting is fraught with risk for Iraqis because of the dangers of traveling in Iraq. We relied on them to decide whether to fly (the airport road in Baghdad is one of the most dangerous in the country) or drive across Iraq. They chose the latter route, but some of them were detained at the Jordanian border for many hours.

It was with both anxiety and relief that we finally met our colleagues at the Inter-Continental Hotel in Amman, where we worked together for five days. The first day was spent getting to know one another and learning more about the still uncertain situation in Iraq. What followed were four scintillating days as we discussed the many changes in the profession that have taken place in the past 20-plus years. It is difficult for Americans to understand the extent of the Iraqis' isolation from their international colleagues for the past 25 years. This is a result of the cumulative effects on cultural institutions of the nearly decade-long Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, the Gulf War, the ensuing embargo, and, most recently, the American invasion.³

At that Amman meeting our team developed the framework and parameters for the courses that would be taught in 2005. There were two back-to-back sessions in Amman, with the first session commencing on July 4 and the second session ending on July 29, 2005. The courses were held at the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR)—a private, nonprofit academic institution that is dedicated to promoting research in Near East Studies. Scenically situated on a hill overlooking the University of Jordan, ACOR's campus has a library, classroom space, conservation lab, and living and eating quarters. The ACOR staff provided both the Simmons-led teaching team and the visiting Iraqis with logistical support. The opportunity to live and socialize with the Iraqis made our time in the Middle East a true cultural exchange.

The ACOR staff did a wonderful job and is to be thanked greatly for their hospitality and efforts on behalf of all participants. And the more we got to know our colleagues, the more effective our teaching became, as we could draw on examples that we gathered from talking to the Iraqis "after hours."⁴

The curriculum included sessions on:

- preservation—traditional practices as well as digital preservation issues
- collection management
- management
- reference services
- automation
- digital libraries
- organization of knowledge (cataloging)
- curriculum development
- electronic publishing

Seventeen Iraqi library and information science professors (eight men and nine women) attended the first session. In the second session, 17 additional Iraqi library and information science professors attended, along with 6 women from the National Library and Archives in Baghdad—a total of 23 in all with 5 men and 18 women. Iraqi institutions represented were Al-Basra University, Al-Mustansiriyah University, Al-Mosul University, Foundation of the

Technical Institute for Education—Baghdad and Mosul, and National Library and Archives.

Challenges and opportunities

Some of the challenges in holding these sessions in Jordan were:

1) The logistics of getting the teaching team members there for each person’s “session”—arranging flights, airport taxis, etc.

2) Coping with the early arrivals of many Iraqis—travel in, to, and from Iraq is perilous, and many individuals chose to arrive early in order to ensure themselves they’d be in attendance.

3) Dealing with the unexpected; some Iraqi mothers brought their children and we needed to make on-the-spot accommodations.

4) The “American model” of teaching can be intense—the day-to-day schedule had to be modified on occasion to take into account the subject matter and the energy-level of all participants.

5) Teaching via translation is a serious challenge. The English-language skills of the Iraqi participants are quite good. Still, communicating the nuances of the subject matter was and is a challenge for interpreters and learners alike.

Fortunately, the classroom set-up was more than adequate. Classes/sessions were held in ACOR’s Library. The teaching team had the use of a video/data projector—several brought their own laptops for teaching. Iraqi participants had the use of approximately ten desktop computers as part of the ACOR/Library lab.

We can report that the first phase of this project has been very successful. To a person, the Iraqi librarians responded positively to the teaching team’s efforts. Even though the Iraqis have been isolated in their professional

practice for a long time, we were impressed with their level of knowledge and their thirst for information regarding current practices. Evaluations of the first-phase efforts by our Iraqi counterparts were overwhelmingly positive. However, it is clear that the first phase was just that, an initial effort to provide a comprehensive overview of modern, current practices.

The participants told us through their evaluations and directly that what was needed next is more intense, in-depth instruction in several areas. The in-depth training would need to be followed by relevant internships in western libraries—observation of current practices would help Iraqi professionals understand in context the skills they are developing.



The American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) in Amman, Jordan.

At the beginning of the courses, the faculty decided to keep blogs so that we could share our experiences with our colleagues back home. We also invited the Iraqis to do the same. Here are excerpts from two entries, the first from Harvey Varnet followed by one from an Iraqi, Abdul.⁵

“Hello again from Amman—it’s

Friday, the holy day, so things are much quieter all around. I’m in the library/teaching lab and there are a few Iraqi men already at work on the computers.

“The news from London sobering (the day after the subway bombings)—while chatting with some men this morning, they are sympathetic but . . . they live with this kind of thing every day—they are not unkind, just somewhat resigned to the world’s craziness. We talked about ‘is the glass half-full or half-empty.’ They say, ‘it has water in it that’s all’ practical? philosophic? Who’s to say.”

“Hello, everyone—I am Abdul, and I am a member of the Iraqi group that is training in Amman at ACOR. I am an assistant lecturer in al-Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad in the department of Information and Libraries in the College of Arts.

“We are now in the tenth day of the course and I want to tell you a little about these days. First, we had a very long and dangerous and exhausting trip from Baghdad to here. We spent more than 13 hours on the roads ’cause we were coming by car and we came through a lot of checkpoints and car inspections—these took a lot of time!

“We had 2 days rest because we arrived early due to the long trip and wanting to get to the course on time. We met with the instructors who are very nice people and who seem to have good experience. We could benefit from them because of the circumstances in Iraq and we have been cut off from the world for so long.”⁶

Looking towards the future

We often ask ourselves if our work matters. We know we speak for the entire teaching team when we emphatically say yes. Our outreach to our Iraqi colleagues has been graciously received and deeply appreciated. We have not only improved their skills, we have made friends and established relationships that should benefit libraries and librarians.

The Simmons/Harvard team recently learned that NEH has awarded us a second round of funding allowing us to offer additional courses to 32 Iraqis this summer at Al-Ain University in the United Arab Emirates.

We close this brief report with a quote from one of the blogs kept by Michèle V. Cloonan during the training:

“So what is our role? While in Amman I read some of Vaclav Havel’s early essays. (For those of you too young to remember, before Havel was president of the Czech Republic, he was a well known playwright, poet, and dissident).

A prolific author, he often wrote about moral responsibility in the face of political repression.

“As librarians we seldom think about the potential of our moral force against the destruction of libraries, archives, and museums. For me this past month was an important example of how even in a country as unstable as Iraq, librarians can continue to offer the kinds of services that will aid in the rebuilding of a country.”

Notes

1. National Endowment for the Humanities guidelines at www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/iraq.html. This special initiative concluded October 1, 2005; NEH will consider applications for projects on Iraq in its regular programs.

2. IraqCrisis Line is online at oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/iraq.html.

3. For a report on the current state of libraries in Iraq see, Jeffrey Spurr, “Indispensable Yet Vulnerable: The library in Dangerous Times. A Report on the Status of Iraqi Academic Libraries and a Survey of Efforts to Assist Them, with Historical Introduction, June 2005.” ([MELA oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/mela/indispensable.html](http://MELA.oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/mela/indispensable.html)).

4. The teaching team comprised the following individuals: Dean and Professor Michèle V. Cloonan, Simmons College; Basima Bezirgan (translator), retired, University of Chicago libraries; Cynthia Correia, Simmons College adjunct faculty; David Hirsch, (translator/teacher), Librarian for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Charles E. Young research Library, UCLA; Associate Dean and Professor Ian Johnson, Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University, Scotland; Shayee Khanaka (translator), University of California-Berkeley; Professor Patricia Oyler, Simmons College; Harvey Varnet, Special Assistant to the Office of the Vice Present, Providence College.

5. To protect this individual’s identity, we offer only his partial name.

6. All of the blogs can be read at my.simmons.edu/gslis/resources/publications/index.shtml#letter. 