

**Latin Americanists and Librarians:
Their Nexus Through Technology and
Interdisciplinarity**

By
Allan Scherlen
Assistant Professor
Collection Development Librarian for the Social Sciences
University Libraries
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC, 28608
scherlnag@appstate.edu

**Prepared for delivery at the 2001 meeting of the Latin American Studies
Association, Washington D.C., September 6-8, 2001**

I. INTRODUCTION:

Over the decades, Latin American Studies research methods and subject interests have undergone monumental changes. Like all contemporary scholars, Latin Americanists are confronted by an abundance of emerging electronic resources, ranging from new periodical indexes to e-journals and e-books to a sea of Web sites, some of which contain valuable archived materials. Ferreting out useful information from the growing maze of electronic resources can be both daunting and time consuming for even the most indefatigable researcher; professors and students of Latin American Studies may feel overwhelmed at times by this onslaught of continuous information change and proliferation.

A second challenge for the Latin American researcher is the ever-growing interdisciplinarity of research. Though the interdisciplinarity of Latin American Studies has been discussed in the literature since the nineteen-seventies,¹ expansion of the field in recent years means that scholars must be knowledgeable about numerous developments in a number of related disciplines. Keeping abreast of new contributions in allied fields can be a challenge, to say the least.

A key to finding assistance with these two growing areas of challenge--conducting electronic research and following the expanding interdisciplinarity of resources--is the academic librarian. The academic librarian's expertise is in discovering new information sources, becoming skilled at using them, and being aware of changes and/or additions in existing research resources. This expertise is often overlooked and underutilized by faculty and students alike who could benefit from looking to their librarian as a resource

evaluator & information ‘detective’, a navigational guide and a “scout” for new materials. The collection development librarian, in particular, is in a unique position to scan across the disciplines for materials of interest to faculty who may not routinely examine catalogs, journals and reviews outside their primary discipline.

Given the explosion of information and the intrinsic interdisciplinarity of Latin American Studies, librarians can be indispensable to scholars in this area-- albeit, often not considered. Strong ties between the Latin American Studies faculty and librarians associated both with reference/instruction and with collection development are important for improving research as well as the quality of course design.

This paper describes the importance of university librarians to the research and teaching of Latin American Studies faculty and outlines suggestions for building mutually beneficial ties between the two that can serve to strengthen research, teaching and the Latin American Studies materials collection. This model of close working ties between Latin Americanists and librarians can be extrapolated to benefit faculty in other multidisciplinary areas as well.

II. EXPANSION OF INFORMATION SOURCES AND DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE BASE

A. INFORMATION OVERLOAD – TECHNOLOGY

In the last 15 years, access to information has increased exponentially. Prior to the maturing of the World Wide Web circa 1995, Latin Americanists had limited access to documents from Latin American governments, Latin American journals, or even more

than a handful of U.S. /British journals devoted to their cross-discipline. Scholars at the University of Texas at Austin, for instance, could read publications such as *Proceso* at the Benson Library, but those at most other universities did not have a convenient source of this or many other important Latin American publications. This has all changed with the advent of the Web. Even very general article indexes suitable for undergraduate research, such as Ebsco's *Academic Search Elite* and Gale's *InfoTrac Expanded Academic ASAP*, can serve up a wide range of articles related to Latin America (a recent subject search of the former yielded 5400 citations and articles, while the latter produced 4400). But with the explosion in information access have come problems in efficiently navigating the maze and locating useful information.

1. TECHNOLOGY ISSUES FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES RESEARCH

The numerous electronic resources continuously emerging on the academic information horizon make it difficult for individual faculty researchers to keep up with, not to mention, master, all the resources available; furthermore, existing resources continue to evolve. In recent months, for example, *Uncover*, the document delivery database, an excellent resource for articles on Latin Americanists, was taken over by *Ingenta*. When faculty returned to our campus this fall, many were startled to find that not only had *Uncover* become *Ingenta*, but the interface and features of the new database were quite different.

The evolution of serial publishing in Latin America over the past few years is a classic example of the kinds of changes Latin Americanists are experiencing with resources in their area. In the early nineties important news magazines, such as Peru's *Caretas*

<[http:// www.rcp.net.pe /CARETAS](http://www.rcp.net.pe/CARETAS)> and Mexico's *Proceso* <[http:// proceso. web.com. mx](http://proceso.web.com.mx)>, showcased electronic editions. Within a few years, scholars suddenly gained access through their Web browsers to an array of newspapers from Mexico to Argentina.

There also emerged clearinghouse Web sites which gathered similar Web sites together for easier access. Examples include the Latin American Newpage at the University of California, San Diego <<http://gort.ucsd.edu/news/hc.html>> a good central source that emerged for Latin American news publications. Others are *Mundo Latino* <<http://www.MundoLatino.org/prensa/> > and the Latin American and Caribbean Government Documents Project at Cornell <[http:// lib1.library.cornell.edu/ colldev/ ladocshome.html](http://lib1.library.cornell.edu/colldev/ladocshome.html) > that organizes and describes the many Latin American and Caribbean official documents appearing on the Internet. Just last year, a new Web site, *Universia.net*, premiered. With over 300 participating universities in Spain and Latin America, it is intended to be a vital resource for scholars and researchers of Hispanic themes all over the world.² Of course, UT Lanic <[http:// lanic.utexas.edu](http://lanic.utexas.edu)>, created at the University of Texas's Institute of Latin American Studies, continues to be the principal gateway to Latin American electronic information.

Many scholars may not be aware of the full spectrum of resources available via their own library's subscription resources. For example, though scholars may know that their library has *Lexis/Nexis*, they may not know that they may also have access to the *Lexis/Nexis* 'library' called NSAMER which collects a variety of materials on Latin America, the US and Canada.

For historical information, for example, Latin Americanists may not consider something as traditional as consulting their library's collection of *The Times* of London,

which has quite extensive Latin American coverage with annual indexes dating back to 1785 and microfilm covering the same time span.

In the more traditional formats, such as paper monographs and microforms, numerous collections once difficult to access are becoming available. For example, as was noted a couple of months ago in LASNET, the British Library, in cooperation with IDC Publishers, plans to make available on microfiche numerous rare religious books printed in Spanish America during the colonial period. Other microform archive collections are being made available from such vendors as *SR Books* who host archival collections such as the vast Princeton University Latin American Microfilm Collection.

Useful government document information may elude researchers, especially since many older documents may not be cataloged or online. They are best identified with the assistance of their librarian, who is experienced in using documents collections. One example of an elusive U.S. document useful to Latin Americanists is the *Daily Report* (FBIS), translations of non-U.S. radio and TV broadcasts, newspaper and magazine articles, wire services and speeches.

Many of these and other important resources for the Latin American scholar are already organized and linked on Web-based study guides compiled by reference and instruction librarians at many institutions with Latin American Studies programs.

LIBRARIANS AS TECHNICAL GUIDES & CONSULTANTS

Librarians can be the Latin Americanists' in-house resource consultants. Even though one may be a trained and skilled researcher, much can be gained from consulting with a specialist in their field of doing research, the librarian. For example, at Appalachian

State University faculty and students are encouraged to schedule personal consultations in the Research Advisory Program (RAP Sessions). These one-hour sessions provide library users the opportunity to meet with a librarian for in-depth reference assistance to identify appropriate sources for a research topic.

Those who take advantage of this service find that librarians are the people to turn to for finding better ways to accomplish high-tech library research. Librarians can help users understand how to efficiently operate database search engines, work through changes in media format and interfaces (i.e., which buttons to push), as well as be informed about new resources of interest.

Another way librarians can be of great assistance is in accessing full-text and citation indexes to which the teaching faculty may not have direct access. For example, DIALOG (www.dialog.com) contains hundreds of full-text databases, many of which cannot be accessed anywhere else, and which usually must be searched by a librarian on a pay-by-the-search basis. [One traditionally useful database area of DIALOG being their *Latin American News*]

2. LIBRARIANS AND THE LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES COURSE

Technology is not only changing how we do research but also how we teach and organize coursework. Though the university library may be rich in potential curricular resources, both traditional and electronic, many classroom faculty may not avail themselves of the benefits of incorporating those resources into their coursework. Librarians are available and eager to work with instructors and their classes. Librarian contribution to the class can range from a single session, a series of sessions or full

partnership. Library literature contains numerous examples of faculty-librarian classroom cooperation in both developing and conducting resource-based courses in various disciplines.

Librarians can, at the very least, act as specialists for the classroom, bringing their day-to-day refinement of search techniques, such as teaching Boolean search strategies, fluency with the details and subtle features of relevant online article indexes and suggesting new reference resources, as well as older but still useful materials, that might have otherwise have been missed.

Most importantly, librarians bring needed information literacy components to courses. This quickly emerging area of library instruction, which is closely tied to the librarian mission to promote critical thinking, includes helping others learn how to evaluate online resources and construct effective search strategies, using Boolean techniques, nesting, truncation and adjacency operators, in searching online article indexes and Web search engines. The added dimension of library and information instruction to the university curriculum provides essential, life-long skills to help students become critical thinkers and self-reliant, info-savvy researchers—important skills to have in this information age.

GETTING THE WORD OUT TO STUDENTS – THERE’S MORE TO RESEARCH THAN “RE-SEARCHING” THE WEB

One cannot take for granted that students will follow sound research methods on their path to fulfilling course assignments. The Web has transformed how students respond to research assignments. Librarians who work in reference often encounter students who

assume total self-reliance in their research, confident they know the tricks, and yet rely exclusively on searching the Web for all their research. Instructors, in turn, are often frustrated by students who turn in patchwork papers based upon unscholarly sources gleaned from Web sites that result from Google or Yahoo searches. Constructive intervention and guidance during the student's research process in the form of library instruction and/or librarian consultation can greatly benefit not only a student's personal success but also the overall success of the course in which the student is enrolled.

For example, undergraduate students doing an assignment on current events in Latin America need not waste valuable research time looking through search engine results on the Net for miscellaneous relevant information if they can be guided early on to more value-laden and appropriate sources, such as Latin American newspapers. Even students unfamiliar with the Spanish or Portuguese languages can now do basic research into resources from Latin America by employing simple online electronic translators available for no cost at Web sites such as AltaVista or WorldLingo. Such devices are still in early stages of development, but they do allow one to get "the gist" of news headlines and articles.

Moreover, instructors and librarians can preemptively direct students away from expensive fee-based commercial article indexes, such as *Questia* and *Northern Light*, toward the library's subscription online resources for their research-- working together to familiarize students with selecting, evaluating and incorporating scholarly resources into their research assignments.

COURSE SPECIFIC WEB-BASED STUDY GUIDES

Professors are surprised sometimes to discover that librarians are willing and interested in building custom pathfinders/study guides, either print or Web based, for the Latin Americanist's class and/or frequently researched topics addressed in the course. Many librarians at universities with Latin American Studies programs have already made strides to bring these kinds of resources together into Web-based research guides, customized for particular classes.³ For example, at Appalachian State University I pulled together indexes, Web pages, and other resources useful for a Latin American Studies course that focused upon migrant farm workers in the United States.

COLLABORATION ON WEB-BASED COURSE SOFTWARE

Teaching faculty who use Web-based course software, such as Blackboard CourseInfo, Web-CT or TopClass, can enhance the course software and avoid duplicating existing library Web guides by either linking directly to these guides or working in collaboration with the librarian to incorporate library and other online sources into the instructor's Web-course package. Too often faculty using Web-course software and librarians designing online study guides unnecessarily duplicate efforts. I have seen a number of class Web pages containing homemade library guides that are both inaccurate and incomplete, often missing key resources in the list. I have seen other class Web pages that make no mention at all of library resources or existing online library study guides. It is important for librarians get the word out to teaching faculty that they are available to work with them in this burgeoning area of curriculum development. And it is equally important for classroom faculty to contact the library to discuss collaborative possibilities.

B. DIFFUSION OF INFORMATION – INTERDISCIPLINARITY

1. INTERDISCIPLINARY ISSUES FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

RESEARCH

The interdisciplinary nature of Latin American Studies has been a topic of discussion for several decades, and this intrinsic quality continues to be a challenge to the Latin Americanist. While research materials are generally organized by disciplines, many research areas of the Latin Americanist fall into gaps between the disciplines. The information sought by an interdisciplinary researcher may reside in unfamiliar disciplinary territory or just in unanticipated sources.

An examination of scholarly press catalogs in the area of Latin American Studies reveals numerous cross-disciplinary titles. Some examples: the recent University of Texas Press book, *Cultural Logics and Global Economics; Maya Identity in Thought and Practice* by Edward F. Fischer, of interest to political economists and anthropologists alike, their 1990 book, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military; Myth and History* by Elizabeth Salas, which is, as the *Hispanic American Historical Review* noted, “of interest to scholars of all disciplines who are interested in providing a framework for the discussion of the patriarchal conception of ‘woman.’”²

Some other examples of interdisciplinary titles in Latin American Studies published by scholarly publisher include: *The Soul of Latin America; the Cultural and Political Tradition*, by Howard J. Wiarda (Yale Press); *Christianity, Social Change, and Globalization in the Americas*, edited by Anna L. Peterson, et. al. (Rutgers University Press); *Tropical Rainforests; Latin American Nature and Society in Transition*, edited by

Susan E. Place (SR Books); and *Transnational Latina/o Communities; Politics, Processes, and Cultures*, edited by Carlos VJlez-Ibñez, et. al. (Rowen & Littlefield).

The emerging sub-area of Latin American Gender Studies provides further examples of current interdisciplinary research. Some titles in this area include *Women And Social Movements In Latin America : Power From Below* by Lynn Stephen (University of Texas Press); *After the Revolution; Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatamala* by Ilja A. Luciak; and *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs; Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*, by Lorraine Bayard de Volo (The latter two from John Hopkins University Press).²

Collection development librarians can be an excellent sources of information for Latin Americanists on new titles in general and materials of interest that cross-disciplinary line in particular. Typically, collection development librarians are responsible for selecting materials for the library collection. Thus, the collection development librarian's job entails reading book reviews from various disciplines, perusing publisher catalogs and promotional materials across subject areas, and examining approval copies of new releases. Acquiring an overview of unrelated materials without the constraints of disciplinary boundaries is one of the strengths of a good collection development librarian and can be a strong asset to scholars who must spend their time focused within their own area.

2. INTERDISCIPLINARITY ISSUES FOR TEACHING

Faced with an area of teaching that crosses a number of disciplines, the instructor of Latin American studies may have to use materials from a number of disciplines, often

newly emerging resources with which he or she may not be very familiar. A Latin American Studies course may seek to familiarize students with online resources as varied as: INFO-LATINOAMERICA, Anthropological Literature, Sociological Abstracts and Historical Abstracts. Librarians recognize that knowledge does not always come in separate packages bounded by disciplines, so library instruction for Latin American Studies can give concrete instruction that moves students across disciplinary boundaries. A librarian can help students better understand “interdisciplinary” concepts, as well as point them to unfamiliar sources. For instance, economic majors may be unaware of key anthropological journals, such as the *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* or the *Boletin De Antropologia Americana*. Conversely, anthropology majors may be unfamiliar with economic resources such as the *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, *Latin American Business Review*, or the *A.I.D. Economic Data Book, Latin America*, put out by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

III. LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES FACULTY & LIBRARIANS WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE COURSES AND COLLECTIONS:

There is great value in teaching faculty and librarians coming together. A Latin American Studies program will benefit by its faculty giving input into the library’s collection decisions and by drawing upon the expertise of librarians. Librarians, in turn, can better serve the Latin American Studies program by welcoming faculty into the process of selection and weeding of materials, examining trial electronic resources and

inviting teaching faculty input on Web-based study guides. How this is accomplished depends on the culture and personality of each institution.

A. WHAT CAN A LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES FACULTY MEMBER DO?

A first step in making a bridge to the library is to find out about library instruction programs and to discover the collection development librarian assigned to one's area of Latin American Studies. This can be as easy as picking up the phone. Teaching faculty should get to know how the relationship between their home department and the library is structured—What is the protocol for communication with the library? For example, is a library liaison appointed by the department to communicate collection requests for the department? What is the liaison's role in the department? Does the departments have an allocated library materials budget? Are there set deadlines for materials requests? One's collection development librarian should be willing to discuss these and other library matters with all department faculty at any time.

Latin American Studies faculty should be sure not only to communicate their collection needs to their department's library liaison, but also to communicate directly to the collection development librarian their own particular research interests. (If you are in history but your research is economic history of Mexico, for example, the collection development librarian can keep you in mind when examining materials and reviews related to economics.)

Since a central purpose of the library collection, besides supporting faculty research, is to support the curriculum, collection development librarians need to be kept intimately familiar with evolving student course requirements. Teaching faculty can help assure

that the library collection is continuing to serve their students' course assignments and research by sending copies of syllabi to the collection development librarians each semester.

Teaching faculty can also play an active role both in the growth and the weeding of the library collection. Besides looking through approval plan books and slips, faculty can direct librarians to resources encountered at conferences, on professional listservs or in professional literature. For example, one's librarian may be unaware of emerging online resources from other countries that can be added to the library's Latin American online study guides. Department faculty can also walk through the physical collection with a librarian to point out areas in need of purging or storage.

Teaching faculty can be valuable participants in library decision-making. For example, they can participate in evaluation of trial electronic databases. Teaching faculty can lend persuasive support for obtaining an expensive but useful resource. They are also essential contributors to user-perspective input on new library building design.

Remember there is strength in numbers. Know your fellow Latin Americanists. Develop, at a minimum, an ad-hoc group and use this organization to work with your library in shaping library decisions about Latin American resource collection and library instruction.

B. WHAT CAN A LIBRARIAN DO TO ASSIST THE LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES CURRICULUM AND COLLECTION?

Librarians involved with Latin American Studies, either in the realm of library instruction or collection development need to become familiar with the research and

course work of Latin American Studies faculty. These faculty members may be scattered across various departments, such as History, Geography, Economics, Literature, and Political Science, each with a separate library liaison and set tradition for doing library business. The relationship can be initiated by sending letters or e-mail to each of the Latin American Studies faculty, informing them of library services particular to their needs. Many librarians have found that building one librarian-faculty relationship at a time works better than attempting to invite too many teaching faculty members simultaneously into collaboration. The librarian can begin by informing teaching faculty about new developments in library resources and, just as important, the idiosyncratic way library ordering and other procedures work, so as to enhance teaching faculty input. For example, teaching faculty can come to understand why and when journals are renewed or cancelled and how to play a part in this process.

Librarians can encourage their library to have a liaison to Latin American Studies faculty, someone to meet with them both formally and informally, perhaps participating in the Latin American Studies Committee, if one exists.

IV. CONCLUSION:

We live in an information age and though teaching faculty may be experts in their field, they have much they can learn from librarians who are also masters of their field—finding information. A strong communication link and working relationship between the librarians and Latin American Studies faculty will serve in developing the strength and quality of key areas of the library collection important to Latin Americanists. Close collaboration between faculty and librarians can also serve as a source for improving the

research skills of faculty and students, as well as improving the Latin American Studies curriculum. The deluge of information, its constant change, and its increasing cross-disciplinary proliferation, makes the pursuit of cooperation between librarians and Latin American Studies faculty essential.

¹ Mitchell, Christopher, ed., *Changing Perspectives In Latin American Studies : Insights From Six Disciplines*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, (1988): 5.

² < <http://www.universia.net/>> Universia is based in Madrid (<http://www.universia.es>), but has offices in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, España, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico and Venezuela, all of which are scheduled to have their own portal by sometime in 2002, each containing information specific to their respective countries. Chile (<http://www.universia.cl>) and Puerto Rico (<http://www.universia.pr>) have already been launched.

³ For some examples of library resource guides designed for Latin American Studies courses see: Appalachian State University's at < <http://www.library.appstate.edu/Reference/latinamerica.html>> U of Penn's at < <http://www.library.upenn.edu/resources/subject/area/latin/latin.html>> and U of Arizona's at <<http://www.library.arizona.edu/users/tmarshall/laspath.htm>>

⁴ "Soldaderas In The Mexican Military - Myth And History - Salas,E." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 71, no. 4 (NOV 1991): 904-905.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of the problem in interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies see Marilyn Boxer's article, "Unruly Knowledge: Women's Studies and the Problem of Disciplinarity." *NWSA Journal*, 12 no. 2 (2000): 119-129.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Block, David; Stern, Peter A., "Latin American Serials: Trends and Developments," *Serials Review*, 23 no. 4, p37, (1997): 8p.
- Boxer, Marilyn J. "Unruly Knowledge: Women's Studies and the Problem of Disciplinarity," *NWSA Journal*, 12 no. 2 (2000): 119-129.
- Dogan, Mattei & Robert Pahre. *Creative Marginality: Innovation At The Intersections Of Social Sciences*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1990.
- Mayville, William V., *Interdisciplinarity, The Mutable Paradigm*, Washington: American Association for Higher Education, 1979.
- Mitchell, Christopher, ed., *Changing Perspectives In Latin American Studies : Insights From Six Disciplines*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Newell, William H, ed., *Interdisciplinarity: Essays From the Literature*, New York : College Entrance Examination Board, c1998.
- "Soldaderas In The Mexican Military - Myth And History - Salas,E." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 71, no. 4 (NOV 1991): 904-905.