JUSTIFYING THE CONTINUED USE OF THE
DEWEY DECIMAL CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

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Introduction

According to Bawden and Robinson, one of the most well-known and commonly used enumerative tools for subject description in library catalogs is the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system (2013, 118). While some libraries, in particular academic libraries, have changed their classification systems, many continue to use the DDC. Libraries that continue to use the DDC pose many reasons for making the choice. It is important that aspiring information professionals are knowledgeable of these reasons and can use them to justify why libraries continue using the Dewey Decimal Classification system.

Literature Review

Since the 1960s, reclassification away from the Dewey Decimal Classification system has been a major topic and consideration of information professionals. Even now, the issue continues to permeate libraries at all levels. Shorten, Seikel, and Ahrberg wrote, "In the 1960s and early 1970s, reclassification of library collections from the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) to the Library of Congress (LC) was a major trend in academic libraries […]" (2005, 123). Shorten et. al conducted a survey of thirty-four DDC academic libraries to identify factors that contribute to the libraries' continued use of the Dewey system (2005, 123). The survey identified primary reasons academic libraries continue to utilize the DDC.

Information professionals at the primary and secondary school levels are also affected by the question of reclassification. Pendergrass conducted a nonscientific poll of library patrons, fellow staff members, school librarians, and others to verify her reasoning for choosing to continue using the Dewey Decimal Classification system. She asked, "Do we throw out what is old but trusted for new organizational systems, or do we continue using the [DDC] system and

make changes and adjustments to the system to fit our individual school situations?" (2013, 57).

Pendergrass goes on to name the benefits of the DDC system and other reasons to justify its use.

Bawden and Robinson (2013) describe general information about the DDC and the

benefits and limitations of using enumerative classifications. For example, the DDC system uses

classificatory notation. This is a benefit of the DDC because it is language-independent and a

book with a particular topic will have the same notation in libraries all over the world that uses

that classification (Bawden and Robinson 2013). Future information professionals should be

aware of the potential question of library reclassification and familiarize themselves with

rationales libraries use when continuing to utilize Dewey Decimal Classification system.

Discussion

"OCLC reported that only 25 percent of colleges and universities in the United States use

DDC, while 95 percent of all public and K-12 schools in the United States use it" (Shorten et al.

2005, 125). Some information professionals have made the decision to organize their libraries

based on genre, to use the Library of Congress Classification system, or to utilize a different

method of classification and/or organization. There are benefits in continuing to utilize the

Dewey Decimal System. Pendergrass' pole resulted in her colleagues and numerous patrons

showing overwhelming support for the continued use of the DDC (2013, 57). This shows that

her continued use of the DDC supports the majority of her users' desires. She notes that the

DDC is more helpful for students in that, after using an OPAC, they can go directly to the

shelves to find a particular item (Pendergrass 2013, 59). This, in turn, saves the users' time.

Shorten et al. also named benefits of continuing the use of the DDC system. These included

patron familiarity and the hierarchical structure that allows for close and broad classification

(2005). Librarians at differing levels are able to justify the decision to classify using the DDC system. They claim DDC meets their users' needs and the continuity, and familiarity, makes it easier for their users to understand how to obtain their needed resources. The positive rationales are aspects aspiring information professionals should understand when faced with potential reclassification questions. It helps them in understanding why libraries continue to classify with the DDC, emphasizes the importance of learning about the system, and can help with justification of using the DDC system in the future.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, other reasons information professionals justify the continued use of the DDC are to avoid negative impacts. Pendergrass notes the huge undertaking of implementing a different organizational system will have affects such as time loss, job distraction from more important responsibilities, genre discrepancies, and more (Pendergrass 2013). Shorten et al. (2005) repeated some of these rationales while also identifying other reasons. These included: lack of staff for reclassification, lack of resources for such a major shift, and cost. Bawden and Robinson note that "major restructuring is unpopular because of the upheaval which would be caused to large libraries which use [enumerative classifications] for physical arrangement of material" (2013, 118). A library's workforce would have to spend time replacing labels, moving books, and possibly learning a new classification system. This could take away from more important responsibilities of librarians in assisting their users and fulfilling job duties. Materials to replace labels, system guides, and more would affect finances. Whether a library would accomplish reclassification by closing, more staff being brought in, staff taking away from their current responsibilities, or any other possibility, this would result in a negative impact. When choosing, or changing, a classification system many factors can influence a decision. As reclassification away from the Dewey Decimal

Classification System continues to be a trending question, aspiring information professionals must be aware of, not only the benefits of the DDC, but also the possible negative impacts of changing systems.

Conclusion

As no perfect system exists, information professionals must examine several issues: whether their current classification system is effective for their users' needs, how reclassifying would affect many aspects of their library, and whether or not they have, or could obtain, all the resources necessary to change their classification method. Practicing professionals assert that Dewey fulfills these needs. Aspiring information professionals must realize that their libraries' choice of classification system may be questioned as reclassification is a persistent trend, and those that utilize the DDC can feel confident in justifying their choice.

REFERENCES

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