

LibraryCrunch

Service for the Next Generation Library: A Library 2.0 Perspective by Michael Casey

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Spine Labels and De-Dewefication

We all have traditional library practices we hold dear. For some people it's being able to offer classical literature to the reading public. For me it's knowing that our customers can ask us almost anything and expect a good and solid answer. But we also have sacred cows -- things we never question and hold onto far longer than we should. For me, the two items below are sacred cows I would like to see changed. Please remember that I am speaking from a public library perspective, and your opinion may (almost certainly) differ.

1. Why do we place author-name spine labels on hardcover books when staff and customers can find the same books without the labels? How much do we spend each year to make and place (and replace) these labels -- not just sticker cost but staff time? I like genre labels, but author labels?

For example, of these books waiting to be shelved only one has a spine label. Are spine labels needed on the other two?



2. Is Dewey still serving us well in non-fiction? If you have genre labels on fiction books, why not have subject labels on non-fiction books and then simply shelve your materials by subject area (and by author within each subject area)? Imagine having all the computer books in one place, the baby name books with parenting, and Plato and Aristotle and Nietzsche all in one area called *philosophy*. Too radical?

Are we really keeping our "[collections organized so that \[our\] users can easily locate the resources they need](#)"? Perhaps very large facilities can justify Dewey. But does Dewey classification best serve buildings under thirty or forty-thousand square feet?

Are we spending too much time trying to force our users to utilize Dewey -- and losing too many users despite our effort? If we really want to make our users comfortable and serve them well (and allow them to serve themselves well) then perhaps some of us need to reexamine our shelving and labeling methods.

Certainly there are many arguments against subject-based non-fiction shelving (notice I did not say bookstore-style shelving). When you scale to very large collections -- say several thousand titles on flowers -- then you probably want a more rigid structure. But if you have collections on that scale then you probably also fall outside 90% of today's public libraries.

[library 2.0](#)

Posted by Michael on May 9, 2006 05:35 PM | [Permalink](#)

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How many times have I heard a customer timidly confess about "never learning that Dewey Decimal thing"? I think Dewey intimidates both our current and potential library users. And perhaps we've already lost customers because of the complexity of our classification system.

Labeling and Dewey seem to mainly benefit library staff. Do we want to make things easy for us or do we want to make things easy for our customers, **the reason** we're here? As a librarian and library user I would prefer to find similar items all in the same location (alpha by author, of course). As you pointed out, there are several areas where this is not the case with Dewey.

Posted by: Laura Savastinuk | [May 9, 2006 06:58 PM](#)

God forbid we make it easy for our users to browse the library.

Posted by: Alex Steinberg | [May 9, 2006 08:13 PM](#)

Isn't one of the nice things about Dewey that all public libraries are set up in more or less the same way? I don't know the exact Dewey call number for computer books or Shakespeare, but I know the former are close to the beginning and the latter are close to the end in any library I go into. And most public libraries do a good job of putting signs at the end of each aisle to help me find what I'm looking for when I'm browsing.

I also recall setting up a new Barnes & Noble store many years ago. It seemed like every hard to classify nonfiction book was in "Sociology," making that section fairly worthless--might as well have been called The Rest of the Nonfiction Books. I'd expect that doing away with Dewey would result in similar problems.

But I'm a librarian geek and library lifer, so I recognize I'm not your target audience.

Posted by: [Steve Lawson](#) | [May 9, 2006 10:16 PM](#)

yes, i agree thaht dewey can be frustrating, but it seems like that applies to any scheme to categorize books. largely, browsing a library is still fairly easy to do because the dewey numbers can act as a guide, not an impediment.

well said about the fiction though, it would also apply to biographies shelved by subject and author last name.

Posted by: joe grobelny | [May 10, 2006 09:34 AM](#)

While it seems that subject labels may work in small libraries, there are some public library systems with both large and small branches where patrons use several libraries. The confusion and extra work that would result from differential cataloging for such systems needs to be factored in, especially when items are transferred from one branch to another as part of the weeding/collection development thing. Having said that, though, in Sacramento, we are moving toward simplified cataloging for audiovisual materials - audiobooks, music, and DVDs.

Posted by: Ann Owens | [May 10, 2006 11:31 AM](#)

I am a librarian in a public library; however, in this case, I will speak personally rather than professionally about point #1: I find it much easier to find fiction titles when they have author labels! Each publisher uses a different font and size on their book jackets/spines, and my eyes get fatigued as they try to adjust to these differences. So I would vote to keep those author-name spine labels for fiction; they may not be absolutely necessary, but they make my life as a browser so much more pleasant! Just my 2 cents...

Posted by: Laurie Woo | [May 10, 2006 12:44 PM](#)

I have less beef with the standard author label--after all, they're cheap if you buy them from the book jobbers prelabeled--than with the whole organized-by-Dewey thing. We haven't looked hard enough at the larger issue: is Dewey organization serving us well? What other models might be better?

Posted by: [K.G. Schneider](#) | [May 10, 2006 02:07 PM](#)

I admit that because I have trained myself to look at the spine label when shelving, it is something I automatically look for and it would take an adjustment period to break that habit. But that's my problem, not the library user's.

Even when I'm in a bookstore I sometimes catch myself looking at the bottom of the spine before I remember that bookstores don't use spine labels. And I am still able to find what I'm looking for. I think I look for the spine label because I am a library employee and it is what I'm used to doing.

When I try to remember back to how I browsed the library shelves before I became a librarian, I don't think that I ever looked at the spine labels on fiction. And once I finally found my way to the

nonfiction section I was after, I never looked at the gibberish of numbers and letters on the label because I had no idea what they meant! Yes, there are library users who know the 921s are biographies and the 641.5s are cookbooks (cooking!), but I would imagine the other 99.9% of library customers would appreciate a simpler way of locating materials.

Posted by: Laura Savastinuk | [May 10, 2006 02:21 PM](#)

For almost a decade I was the director of what would normally be considered a "small to medium" sized library. For the picture books in the children's room we had bins and grouped the books only by the first letter of the author's last name. Worked fine for browsers, but when you were trying to find a specific book it was hell.

Now the library I am director of has a collection of more than half a million items in the main library alone. I cannot begin to imagine what it would be like to find any one specific book if they were organized by subject only.

We have gone to using some signage for broad general categories, which does help users...somewhat. My experience is that many signs are wasted because people just don't read them.

Posted by: [Michael Golrick](#) | [May 10, 2006 04:10 PM](#)

I've been a librarian for almost fifteen years now and I've grown very comfortable with the DDC. I can quickly direct patrons to the books they need, and many of my patrons are also very good at going at using Dewey.

But I do not fool myself into thinking that everyone is comfortable with Dewey. I must admit that on a regular basis I hear patrons (especially new library users, not just young ones either) commenting about the complexity of our classification. I agree that very large (academic mostly) libraries are still best served by strict classification such as LC, but public libraries (where I have always worked) may want to consider a change.

I am not comfortable saying "all" my patrons like and enjoy using Dewey. While I am thoroughly proficient with Dewey I do fear we may be creating a barrier to more widespread use of our libraries. Maybe we do not need to completely abandon Dewey, but I do think we need to do more than add signage. Subject-based shelving in public libraries may be our next major change.

Thanks for making me think!

Posted by: Joan Leavey | [May 10, 2006 04:12 PM](#)

I sympathize with our users when it comes to finding books that should be together but are instead found aisles apart. But perhaps the answer is not abandoning Dewey. Perhaps OCLC (the owners of the Dewey Decimal Classification system) need to do what they should have done years ago and fix a broken classification system. Or are they too worried about the cacophony of complaints that will arise from all of us when we have to convert and shift so many books?

Posted by: James Iacopelli | [May 10, 2006 04:27 PM](#)

I suggest anyone who wants DDC, LCC, or any other system, to go away, first try a hand at creating a classification system from scratch.

Also, show the empirical evidence--a logically organized analysis--of how a system is "broken" and then argue for changing it. The description "broken" doesn't mean anything unless you back it up with gathered and analyzed evidence. What does work and what doesn't and what solutions are needed to make it work?

Are we to dumb down systems of knowledge organization and retrieval for our users or should be perhaps push them a little harder to learn something that is...yes, complicated and imperfect. Isn't one the roles of a librarian to help patrons overcome the barriers?

Posted by: [Shawne D. Miksa](#) | [May 11, 2006 12:51 PM](#)

Dewey is subject classification. The point of it is to organize the books so patrons can browse and so they can locate a specific title.

Posted by: [Vicky Chase](#) | [May 11, 2006 04:20 PM](#)

Shawne, I see many similarities between our shelving discussion and the discussions regarding the usefulness and effectiveness of Google searching versus more powerful database searching – how do we best serve those who do not want to learn a complicated system. Please keep in mind that I am talking about public libraries and not academic or special libraries when I suggest a more subject-based shelving strategy.

I agree that the role of the librarian is to get the customer over that barrier, whatever it may be, so that they can find the information or material they want. But there is a big difference between the student or researcher wanting documents for a dissertation and the walk-in customer who wants a book on kitchen remodeling. Of course the librarian will perform the reference interview –

are you painting, upgrading plumbing, redesigning? But those are all located in separate areas; plumbing in 696, remodeling in 643, and kitchen design in 747. This is inefficient for both the librarian and the customer. Obviously this is not the only area in which Dewey begins to complicate more than simplify.

Were we lucky enough to have limitless resources we could devote large quantities of time to "educating" our customers in Dewey. But we do not have that luxury. As public librarians we must work within a very tight budget, and anything we can do to make our customer more self-sufficient will benefit both staff and customer. If this self-sufficiency can lead to having more time for staff to interact personally with customers then that will be wonderful.

Dewey as a subject classification system is, as someone commented, a broken system. I say that with confidence because of the many many interactions I have with customers on a regular daily basis and, even more importantly, the many non-users of libraries who I speak with on a regular basis as part of community outreach and in my role as branch manager during the construction phase of my building. I cannot tell you how many people say that they once tried using the library but could not understand our shelving system, and have since not returned. Yes, we can try to teach them (if we have the resources) and yes, we can add signage (as we have in my branch) but ultimately we must ask ourselves one question, are we doing our job and serving our users in the best way possible? I'm not so sure anymore of the answer to that question.

Posted by: [Michael Casey](#) | [May 11, 2006 06:03 PM](#)

As Librarian at a correctional facility library, I have users who are mostly not high school or college educated. I had to catalog the collection from scratch, using the Dewey DC. Where possible I have tried to keep the 300's Social Sciences from being too big. I put books on the Civil rights struggle in the history section wherever possible, for example. The 300's seem to generate the biggest numbers to the right of the Decimal point. Of course Melvil couldn't have guessed how many books would be written on computers and all the various softwares, versions etc. If he had we'd would have shorter numbers.

Now I am using software to create a digital. With this type of catalog, we will be able to mark it and print it and even if someone writes a book which has 20 different subjects it's spot on the shelf will be located. There's no hope for unifying books by subject. Indiana is a Midwest subject, it is a Great lakes State, in other books, an Ohio River Valley State in others and in books on Law cases would, along with Wisconsin, and Illinois be a Seventh Circuit state. Authors don't write books on one easy subject. Even children's books get LC tagged with the folk tales sometimes.

Posted by: Bill Goodhart | [May 11, 2006 10:47 PM](#)

At one point I worked as a shelve in a public library. Both speed and accuracy in shelving were important, and having standard labels placed in a consistent location on the spine was definitely a big help. While I can sympathize with your second point, any hierarchical classification system that assigns a single subject to an item is going to have this problem and the physical item can only be placed at a single physical location anyway. Whether Dewey, LC, or something else is used I think is irrelevant. I believe more effort needs to be directed in ensuring that the user/patron has a good, link-rich search tool (i.e., catalog) to use. Think Amazon.

Posted by: Allen Moore | [May 12, 2006 09:12 PM](#)

Dewey is primarily an inventory system. Ideally we would organize books in a way that would make them easy to be removed and replaced on their shelves (inventory) but enhanced findability and discovery for our users.

Posted by: [K.G. Schneider](#) | [May 16, 2006 01:59 PM](#)

Forgoing an classification system like Dewey for subject filing (especially in non-fiction) could open up a whole can of worms, since many books have multiple subjects, which could cause just as much confusion. While Dewey isn't perfect, one of its merits was you could expand or contract it as needed in your library. At NYPL, they had what we called "bastard dewey," an abridged version that gave broad subject classifications, but also enabled us to shelve like things together. It's especially good for large collections where the subjects are similar but not exactly alike (elementary education next to high school education, etc.) Remember also that when you have library pages shelving books, it's better to have some system they can follow than just saying "put it back on the Music shelves."

Posted by: Dan | [May 22, 2006 04:08 PM](#)

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