Dewey—or Don’t We—Classify?

Suzanne M. Stauffer, ALSC Research and Development Committee

The issue of classification of school and public library materials has been in the news ever since the Maricopa County Library District in Arizona decided to organize their nonfiction at the Perry branch utilizing the subject headings used by the Book Industry Study group rather than according to Melvil Dewey’s classifications system, which has been updated twenty-two times since its creation in 1876.1 Comments, such as “Dewey doesn’t facilitate browsing,”2 books in bookstores are “grouped by subject… instead of according to the Dewey Decimal System,”3 and the call number is only used to “find the right book at the right address on the shelf,”4 reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the structure, function, and purpose of the Dewey Decimal System (DDC). The primary purpose of DDC is to organize materials according to precise subject in a systematic arrangement from the general to the specific. Besides making it possible to easily locate a given item, such an arrangement supports browsing more effectively than arranging materials by the author’s last name within a broad general category because each book is related to those on either side by specific subject, not alphabetical accident. The user can easily find additional materials on a topic in a single stop, and if the desired work is not on the shelf, similar works will be in the same location. By arranging materials by the author’s last name within a broad general category, the bookstore doesn’t facilitate browsing so much as demand it because there is no other way to find a specific title. In addition, the DDC arrangement is the same in every library, while the arrangement in bookstores varies with each store.

Furthermore, bookstores also shelve books according to current commercial status rather than subject, in areas such as “New Books,” “Sale Books,” “Remainders,” etc. As Shonda Brisco discovered, this method “obliges the customer to engage the store clerk,” which provides the clerk with the opportunity to suggest further items for purchase and so fulfill the mission of the bookstore, which is to make a profit.5 Ironically, many promote the “bookstore arrangement” for libraries to encourage patron independence and reduce the need to ask librarians for assistance.

Perhaps more important for the librarian faced with this decision and the need to justify it to the library’s directors is the lack of information about children’s understanding of the DDC, their use of it, and their ability to locate desired materials on the shelves using it or any other systematic method. Research into children’s information-seeking behavior has focused primarily on the reference encounter, online catalogs, the Internet, and digital libraries.6 Recently, however, several researchers have investigated children’s ability to find the books that they have located in the library catalog as well as their ability to access information electronically.7 These researchers found DDC does require certain skills and cognitive abilities that develop with age, but that most children are able to use DDC independently by the fourth grade. These skills and abilities include counting to 999 and working with decimal numbers, which are learned in school, thinking of information in terms of related categories with divisions and subdivisions, and locating items in real space (spatial ability).8 Children are inherently capable of categorizing objects and information. They progress from dividing information into two
categories (e.g., people and animals) in kindergarten to a large number of more sophisticated and abstract categories by fourth grade. Their spatial ability develops along with other cognitive abilities as they mature.

These studies also found that children did not understand the sequencing of books on shelves, expecting the books to be arranged from one end of the range to the other by shelf rather than section by section. These findings suggest that young children will have trouble with any system (numerical or otherwise) that organizes information into more than two or three categories and that all children will continue to need instruction in the physical arrangement of the books on the shelves, regardless of the system used.

In addition to the benefits of frequent updates, systematic subject arrangement, and uniformity across libraries mentioned above, DDC organizes information according to traditional Western academic disciplines, so that most of the nonfiction in public and school libraries is organized according to how it is used in the curriculum. Children who learn to use DDC will also be learning to organize information according to the structure that they will encounter throughout their academic and professional careers.

This research suggests that librarians can take some simple steps to make the collection more accessible to the children who use it while retaining the benefits of using DDC. First, take a page from the bookstore model and make use of generous signage. In the tradition of Charles Ammi Cutter, whose Rules for a Dictionary Catalog (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904) included the instruction to use language familiar to the library's community, signs can employ familiar terms from children's vocabulary and from the curriculum rather than the formal language used in DDC. Signs and book labels can use pictures as well as words to indicate subjects. Directional signs can literally point children in the right direction. Library-use instruction can include an explanatory tour of the collection, and will take into account the age and cognitive abilities of the children.

Books can be classified using the Abridged DDC into broader categories with shorter numbers that require less mathematical ability to follow. They can be recategorized where necessary and can be located with other materials that are used in the same way or for the same purpose.

The librarian will maintain skills, knowledge, and abilities by reading professional literature, attending workshops and conferences, and taking advantage of other opportunities for continuing professional education. Most importantly, the librarian will get to know the children who use the library, their needs, interests, and abilities, and respond to them. No system of organization can substitute for that.

References and Notes

