

Is It Truly a Matter of “Dewey or Don’t We”?



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To some, discussing the demise of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system is tantamount to blasphemy, while to others it is a discussion long overdue (no pun intended). I have been asked, as an educator of librarians, to present my thoughts on the issue. My conclusions are based not on thorough, scientifically sound research but rather on discussions I’ve had with my students and with building-level school librarians. What I have discovered is that both the pro- and

anti-DDC perspectives use the same reasons for their arguments, namely: easier to keep the collection organized, better information retrieval, and (perhaps most importantly) integrates well with the Common Core State Standards requirements. Additionally, detractors say that DDC is unnecessary in today’s school library collections that consist mostly of electronic resources.

Those who argue against DDC cite the following issues:

1. DDC does not do well in organizing fiction collections.

This is true, but it is unreasonable to blame DDC for a problem it was never designed to address in the first place: that of arranging popular fiction. For a long time fiction has been organized alphabetically by author. This arrangement does not meet students’ needs. However, that reality is not the fault of DDC, and there is no reason why all fiction should be lumped together and arranged alphabetically by author just because the DDC system has no number for it. Models of organizing fiction by genre, series, and reading levels are effective and work well with the way children (or even adults) look for fiction. I fully agree with this approach but repeat that it is an unfair criticism of DDC to say it does not deal well with fiction.

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2. Numbers are difficult to understand and intimidating to the user, thus hindering information retrieval.

I was recently in the library of a middle school and examined the section for U.S. history (973). I found the library used the number 973 as a general classification; however, some books had longer numbers: 973.3 for the American Revolution and 973.7 for the Civil War. This usage made perfect sense to me. Those two time periods are highlighted in that school's curriculum. The hierarchical and relational construction of the system could not have been exemplified any more clearly than on those shelves with the broad number first and the two specialized numbers following, thus lending itself so perfectly to the information needs of children who are looking for American Revolution and Civil War books.

Indeed, in this collection, books that in other libraries would have had longer numbers (for example, 973.9 for U.S. 20th-century history) have the whole number 973 because those other areas are not emphasized in the curriculum in that middle school. This example displays the flexibility of DDC to meet the needs of the users. The 973 number is also used to separate the history of the United States from that of other countries, for example France (944) or Italy (945).

Neither bookstore nor genre models allow for relational or hierarchical organization. Under those models we have a single category for U.S. history, or, worse, a catch-all category for history in general. This flat organization is, in my opinion, a hindrance to research needs. It works fine for browsing, but if information is needed quickly the need to go from shelf to shelf, depending on spine titles to identify the right book, is too frustrating—

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even if we are not talking about many shelves.

An argument for the bookstore or genre model is that signs can be used to lead the user to the right information. This statement is made as if the use of signs is forbidden with collections organized by DDC—a totally false accusation.

3. Electronic resources do not require a place on a shelf; therefore, classification numbers are irrelevant.

In 1999 the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) Subcommittee on Metadata and Subject Analysis submitted a report, "Subject Data in the Metadata Record: Recommendations and Rationale." One conclusion was that not only is classification still important, but, in fact, it is more important than ever before. The authors of the report asserted that classification of Web resources can provide pathfinders to hierarchically linked resources and should be included in metadata records.

4. DDC does not meet curricular and Common Core State Standards requirements because it does not align with school subjects.

On the contrary, I submit that Dewey created an organizational model based on disciplines of study that operates in nearly perfect harmony with school curricula. Science, technology, history, social sciences, the arts, and literature are all standard elements of the

school curriculum. So, too, are those subject areas articulated in DDC. When teaching DDC, I tell my students to pick up the item and think, "If I were going to use this item in a class in school, which class would I be going to?" The numbers fit the curriculum needs and, when used with good signage, can be understood by even the youngest of our students.

As stated above, I think the bookstore/genre models are great for fiction. Librarians who have made the genre switch for their fiction collections are thrilled with the results. However, in my humble opinion, for information books and other resources: keep the Dewey.



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Work Cited:

Association for Library Collections and Technical Services Subcommittee on Metadata and Subject Analysis. 1999. "Subject Data in the Metadata Record: Recommendations and Rationale." <www.ala.org/alcts/resources/org/cat/subjectdata_record> (accessed September 7, 2013).

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