

The Administrator Looks at Classification

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A strong case can be made out, I am convinced, for the proposition that many librarians are obsessed with classification for the sake of classification. With rare exceptions, investigation has revealed, library users are totally indifferent to classification, so long as it does not actually interfere with their finding the books they want. If they have thought about the matter at all and were given a choice, the readers would vote for the utmost possible simplicity in whatever scheme of classification is adopted. Logical sequences, a fetish worshipped by numerous classifiers, mean little to all except an occasional professor of philosophy.

Though I would not argue for it, there is a good deal to be said for the accession order in arranging the books in a library—simply numbering the first book received 1, the second 2, and so on *ad infinitum*, filling every shelf to capacity, and saving much space. Such a plan appears to have worked satisfactorily in the half-million volume library of the London School of Economics, but that is a closed shelf collection and perhaps belongs to a special category.

Carrying the thesis further, I would maintain that librarians, principally in colleges and universities, have been guilty of wasting millions of dollars in elaborate and unnecessary reclassification programs, using funds that could have been spent to far greater advantage to everyone concerned in building up their book resources. To be specific, consider the cases of two of the most poverty-stricken university libraries in the country: The University of Mississippi and the University of South Carolina, both of which have expended tens of thousands of dollars in recent years, changing over from one standard system of classification to another. Meanwhile their book budgets were at about the level of a college library without any university pretensions. Here is almost incontrovertible support for such critics as Lawrence C. Powell, when they charge that librarians are more concerned with housekeeping than with books and reading.

What exactly does the library patron—scholar, research worker, student, or general reader—have a right to expect of library classification? One thing he should *not* expect, because it is a practical impossibility, is to find *all* the materials on any given subject grouped together. This was, of course, convincingly demonstrated by the Kelley

studies.¹ A characteristic of the literature of virtually every modern field is that it cuts across subject lines. There are no longer any watertight compartments—if there ever were. The physicist, to illustrate, is interested not only in the strictly physical literature, but in biology, chemistry, engineering, mathematics, and other related areas. The lawyer is concerned not simply with legal treatises, but with psychology, medicine, political sciences, economics, sociology, and nearly everything else under the sun. Every classifier is familiar with innumerable cases of border-line books—books that could just as logically be placed in one classification division as another, or perhaps several others, with the final decision usually resting upon the interests of the particular institution.

No less responsible for the scattering of materials on a specific topic is format. Even if it were possible to group together all the separately-printed monographic titles, vast quantities of references on most subjects must remain scattered in periodicals and other serial publications, government documents, newspapers, collections of essays, reference works, and bibliographical compilations.

We can only conclude, therefore, that the most perfect system of classification ever devised by man, or likely to be invented, can be but partially successful in any aim to bring together all related materials on whatever subject. It follows logically, therefore, that the users of libraries must anticipate supplementing the undoubted values of classification with catalogs, periodical indexes, documents indexes, essay indexes, printed bibliographies, and similar tools. The deficiencies of classification can be partially offset by expert cataloging, with which classification must always remain interdependent, but even the combination does not provide a complete answer. Eventually, perhaps, some form of automation, indexing every idea dealt with in the library's collections, may furnish an adequate solution.

When people enter a library to find a book, I suggest that they will ordinarily use one of three approaches. If there is a specific title in mind, it will be located through author or title in the catalog. This approach is characteristic of the scholar who, in most instances, will know or is presumed to know exactly what he wants. The only significance of classification for him is as a finding device. The student and general reader, on the other hand, are often uncertain about their requirements, except that they are interested in a subject. They may attempt to solve their problem by going direct to the shelves (assuming there is an open stack system), or through inspection of subject entries in the card catalog. Of these two approaches, the catalog is almost invariably more reliable and more complete, though that method lacks the psychological satisfaction of seeing and handling the books themselves.

Whether the library collection is to be arranged for the convenience of the specialist or for the generalist, simplicity of classification is to be preferred. Here is another spot where the librarian is frequently tempted by art for art's sake, stringing out the classification symbols,

whether letters or numbers, to interminable lengths. It may be mistaken judgement to fix an arbitrary limitation, but it seems to me difficult to justify a subject classification of more than six characters for any book, and if author and title symbols are added, these too should not be allowed to exceed a half-dozen. Anything beyond that number complicates location and shelving problems, and increases the labor and expense of classification.

But, assert perfectionists among the classifiers, scientific and exact classification often requires carrying numbers out to eight, ten, or even more places. This, to me, is comparable to the value of pi in mathematics. No matter how far it is extended, it is still imperfect, and for ordinary purposes I am willing to settle for 3.14 instead of 3.14159265 or pi extended to infinity.

As an old New York Public Library alumnus, I recall how simple, yet generally efficient, is the scheme developed over sixty years ago by Dr. John Shaw Billings for that great research institution. Here, in one of the world's largest libraries, three letters are usually sufficient to classify any book in the collection. The principle of the classification is so clear that a new stack attendant can readily grasp it in a few minutes' time. Cutter numbers and minute subdivisions do not clutter up or confuse finding a book on the shelf. This also is a closed-stack system, though that fact I think does not destroy the validity of my argument. Given the class number, any intelligent person can quickly locate a specific title.

When life can thus be so uncomplicated, why should college libraries of less than 100,000 volumes adopt, as dozens of them have done, anything so detailed and complex as the Library of Congress classification? Some are apparently under the delusion that they will eventually reach the size of Harvard or the British Museum, and consequently they must be ready for the future. Meanwhile, as the price of preparing for that unlikely contingency, their students and faculty for generations to come must struggle with a system too involved for them to understand or appreciate, a scheme they have not met in high school and will probably not find in any public library they may use later, and which puts unnecessary obstacles in their way in using the college library.

It is not proposed here to weigh the respective advantages and disadvantages of the Library of Congress and Dewey Decimal classifications. That has been done *ad nauseam* and by experts. According to Eaton's investigations², less than two per cent of the academic libraries in the United States use anything other than one of these two schemes, and the percentage is at least as high for public libraries. As a practical matter, it would be difficult to justify adoption of any classification other than Dewey or L. C. in an American library, except perhaps for an occasional highly specialized collection. These two are the only schemes for which any provision has been made to keep updated, and both possess the important advantage of having their classification numbers printed on Library of Congress cards. Despite their

acknowledged defects, the Dewey and L. C. have proven themselves in the fire of several generations' experience.

From the point of view of an administrator, the chief question in my mind is this one: Having adopted one scheme, either L. C. or Dewey, for a library, is it wise to change? Assuming classification has been in the hands of competent personnel, and has been applied as efficiently and expertly as human frailties permit, can the librarian make a reasonable case for reclassification? My candid opinion is that he cannot.

According to Maurice Tauber, who has studied the matter more exhaustively than anyone else, to my knowledge:

Most of the reasons for reclassification have been based on either or both of two assumptions: (1) That the use of the new classification achieves a grouping of the books in the collection that is of greater educational significance and shows to the users the currently accepted relationships among the branches of knowledge more effectively than did the system being replaced, and (2) That the adoption of a new classification will reduce the costs of technical processes.³

Tauber believes that there has been considerable rationalization among librarians who have attempted to justify reclassification. There is little concrete evidence that the hoped-for benefits actually materialize. We do know, however, that the cost involved in complete or extensive reclassification runs into large sums of money, that it frequently extends over decades of time, and may seriously interfere with the use of the library while the work is in progress. Another consideration brought out by Tauber in a further study is whether an inferior classification system and catalog appreciably handicap library users. His findings cast substantial doubt on the matter, from which he concludes:

The burden of proof rests upon the librarian to show that the outmoded classification and the antiquated catalog interfere with the use of library materials or increase the cost of preparing them for use. It is not possible to answer definitively the question of whether a particular library should reclassify or recatalog. If its present status is such as to interfere greatly with the proper functioning of the library in its service to scholarship, then a change is indicated; otherwise, changes should be made with considerable caution. Only as greatly improved service can be seen to result from reorganization may the tremendous costs involved be justified.⁴

A case study of the difficulties of reclassification was described by Harriet MacPherson.⁵ The project was to transfer about 4,000 volumes from the 650 class in Dewey to a special classification developed

for the Columbia University School of Business Library. This would seem a rather small operation. Yet the reclassification involved the removal, frequent remaking, and the refileing of 4,000 shelf list cards, and the actual handling of all the volumes. The last step meant verification of the books with the cards, frequent recataloging of the books, fitting the books into the new classification scheme, and labeling the volumes with new numbers. The entire process required the services of two people for more than two years. Their work was continually hampered and retarded by delays in locating the books, caused by such factors as many books being charged out to readers, some volumes being on reserve in departmental libraries, professors on sabbatical leave having carried off a few volumes, some books being in the bindery, and others having been lost. Here in microcosm are the problems confronting a large library in even more aggravated form when it decides to reclassify.

The question of whether a library afflicted with an obsolete and wholly inadequate classification should reclassify poses quite a different problem from the decision to change from, say, Dewey to L. C. or from L. C. to Dewey. About a dozen years ago, I was a member of a survey team for the Cornell University Library. We were called upon to advise on the retention or abandonment of a homemade plan, the Harris classification, adopted in 1891. Some 800,000 volumes at Cornell had been arranged by this curious scheme, based on the old British Museum system of press numbers, a fixed location device. The surveyors agreed that there was no alternative to discontinuing this outdated, inflexible, and inconsistent arrangement, which had for all practical purposes broken down, and replacing it with the Library of Congress classification. Under such conditions, there was no question that reclassification was essential, even though it involved the Library in estimated expenditures of \$600,000, and fifteen to twenty years of disruption.

Undoubtedly, more studies are needed of the way people actually use library catalogs and classification, as a basis for administrative decisions. We then might be able to operate more on fact than on theory. Paul Dunkin, who, as Head Cataloger at the Folger Shakespeare Library for a number of years, had an excellent vantage point from which to view scholars at work, offered some observations on how, specifically, an Elizabethan scholar proceeds with his researches. Such a scholar, reports Dunkin:

works with Elizabethan handwriting (palaeography), Francis Bacon (philosophy and law), Elizabeth and Essex (history and biography), 'rogues and vagabonds' (sociology and economics), and Thomas Cartwright (religion), as well as with the plays of Shakespeare (literature).⁶

Comparing their basically different approaches to classification, Dunkin pointed out that, "The librarian's classification is, so to speak,

vertical; the scholar's, horizontal." Perhaps the twain are destined never to meet.

In the Classics Library at the University of Illinois is a prime example of the scholar's horizontal classification, achieved mainly by ignoring the librarian's classification. Discarding the literature classification in Dewey for the Classics, all Latin authors are arranged in one large alphabetical group under a single class number, and similarly all Greek authors are in a straight alphabetical sequence under another number. There have been assembled here philosophy, church fathers, economics, the languages, the arts, the literatures, antiquities, history and biography, without any effort to subdivide by specific topics. The basic concept is to bring together books according to their use. This scheme, which was devised fifty years ago, for a library of 35,000 volumes, is apparently exactly what the scholar wants, and generations of them have expressed their satisfaction with it. The essential idea has been incorporated into the L. C. classification's treatment of the classical literatures.

As a general rule, however, tinkering with a classification arrangement creates more problems than it solves. If one has adopted the Library of Congress or Dewey scheme, it is best to adhere to it and not attempt to introduce innovations to meet what may be regarded as special situations. As a keen critic of classification, Berwick Sayers, remarked, "Librarians are seldom able to leave their classification alone." Mr. Sayers added that "the moving about of classes to suit the convenience of the furniture arrangements, the adjustments made with biography, fiction, other literature, and in music, occur to one as often causing difficulties . . . changes are often unskillfully made and the advantages they give are not always so great as their authors imagine."⁷ It is the adoption of special, homemade schemes of classification and radical modifications of standard classification schedules that have more frequently brought about the need for reclassification than has dissatisfaction with an established plan. The amateur usually fails to realize the complexities of classification, when he starts changing it.

In trying to represent the point of view of the administrator in this paper, my aim has been to consider those aspects of classification that involve administrative problems and relationships. Chief among these are costs, efficiency, the convenience of the reading public, and the relation of classification to the library service as a whole. Those are considerations that concern every professional-minded librarian, and not merely administrators.

Classification means different things to different people. Robert Graves in his book *5 Pens in Hand* relates what he calls his favorite story about nomenclature:

An old lady was taking a pet tortoise by train in a basket from London to Edinburgh, and wanted to know whether she ought to buy a dog-ticket for it, as one has to do in England if one takes a

cat by train—because cats officially count as dogs. “No,” said the ticket inspector, “No mum! Cats is dogs, and rabbits is dogs, and dogs is dogs, and squirrels in cages is parrots, but this ’ere turkle is a hinsect. We won’t charge you nothing, mum!”⁸

Notes

1. Grace O. Kelley, *The Classification of Books, an Inquiry into its Usefulness to the Reader* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1937)

2. Thelma Eaton, *Classification in Theory and Practice, a Collection of Papers* (Champaign, Ill.: Illini Union Bookstore, 1957), pp. 29-42, 45-58.

3. Maurice F. Tauber, “Subject Cataloging and Classification Approach the Crossroad,” *College and Research Libraries*, III (March, 1942), 153-54.

4. Maurice F. Tauber, “Reclassification and Recataloging in College and University Libraries, Reasons and Evaluation,” *Library Quarterly*, XII (October, 1942), 845.

5. Harriet D. MacPherson, “Reclassification of College and University Libraries,” *College and Research Libraries*, I (March, 1940) 160.

6. Paul S. Dunkin, “Classification and the Scholar,” *College and Research Libraries*, III (September, 1942), 336.

7. W.C. Berwick Sayers, “Failures of Classification Considered,” *Library World*, XLIV (March, 1942), 129.

8. Robert Graves, *5 Pens in Hand* (New York: Doubleday, 1958) pp. 333-34.