



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 173-142-E
Division Number: IV
Professional Group: Classification and Indexing
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 142
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

Teaching Classification in the 21st Century

Patricia G. Oyler

Simmons College
Graduate School of Library and Information Science
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract:

Classification instruction in the new millenium will be markedly different because the focus and needs of our users have altered, as have information formats. Although the purpose of classifying information remains the same in the 21st century as in the 20th century—assisting users in locating relevant information--we must teach the process in such a way that the librarian or information scientist will be able to apply that knowledge to the organization of information in any format. Teaching classification during the past century was, in some cases, a practical approach for parking information in stacks. While a theoretical overlay was present, the thrust of the courses was not the organization of information, but the organization of books in catalogs and on shelves. In the world of the 21st century with a variety of formats, the theoretical basis is becoming more important. The challenge for library and information science educators is to educate classifiers to organize the formats of the future while responding to the continuing need to classify print materials in libraries. The focus of this paper is on teaching classification and organization of information whether the information is in digital form, in the World Wide Web, in databases, in print form, or in books on shelves.

Background

Cataloging and classification curricula in schools of library and information science have been studied and written about by a number of authors and educators. (1) If these topics have been researched so extensively why do they continue to be written about? The answer, of course, is that the constant and frequent changes occurring within libraries and in the library profession have serious implications for

cataloging and classification education. The curriculum must be flexible and dynamic if it is going to meet the needs of this evolving environment. Vellucci says that “a constant examination of both the curriculum and the environmental change is required in order to sustain a cataloging curriculum that is responsive to an evolving profession yet grounded in solid theory and principles.”(2)

Educators want to prepare their students for the future, yet no one is sure what that future will look like. In light of that uncertainty, cataloging teachers are constantly watching for the factors likely to influence the organization of information, in order to incorporate appropriate changes into their courses. But how much new material can be added to a course before it becomes overloaded? What can be deleted without leaving a significant gap in knowledge? “The inevitable result is not only the restructuring of a specific course, but a rethinking of the entire context of the cataloging curriculum to accommodate new areas of study, while retaining the fundamental theory and critical thinking process that will enable students to adapt to their changing futures.”(3)

Theory versus Practice

One of the most long-standing controversies among cataloging (4) educators and practitioners is how much cataloging and classification theory and how much practical application should be included in cataloging courses, particularly the basic or introductory courses. Most educators feel that a firm grounding in the theory and principles underlying the organization of information will better enable catalogers to adapt to changing environments. If catalogers have a solid grounding in theory, they will be better able to understand and accept changing cataloging and classification systems.

Practitioners, on the other hand, want to hire recent graduates with practical knowledge of the existing cataloging practices, who will require less training in routine procedures and be more productive in the long run. But to teach both the theory and practical knowledge, in-depth, would require more hours than are allotted to most cataloging courses.

Recently, there has been a shift in attitude among cataloging practitioners toward an emphasis on theory as opposed to practical knowledge. With the introduction of electronic resources, the World Wide Web, electronic databases and digital libraries it is becoming increasingly important for cataloging librarians to know how to adapt their knowledge to these new formats. If cataloging librarians are going to be players in the organization of electronic materials they will need to understand the theoretical basis for subject analysis, including classification.

Teaching Classification

Automation, electronic databases, and the enormous expansion of information on the World Wide Web have allowed library and information science practitioners, educators, and users to recognize the value of understanding both the theoretical underpinnings and practical application of classification. Williamson identifies seven categories of information covered in required courses which include some classification: Principles, Theory, Historical Background, Objectives, Specific Classification Systems, Facet Analysis, and Automatic Text Analysis. (5) Several other authors have identified some or all of these categories in texts and readers in cataloging and classification. (6) To examine what is currently taught about classification, how it might be taught and how it might be taught in the future, I would like to use the course I teach at Simmons College as a case study.

Simmons GSLIS as Case Study

Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS), Boston, MA, USA, requires that all students take the course entitled, “Organization of Knowledge.” This course is considered

the core or basic introduction to cataloging and subject analysis including classification. Simmons GSLIS has a major commitment to the teaching of cataloging and classification and, as a result, there are four full-time faculty members with a background and interest in cataloging and subject analysis. In addition, classification concepts are included in “Advanced Cataloging and Classification,” “Non-Print Cataloging,” and “Subject Analysis.” Some of the specialized courses such as "Art Documentation," "Music Librarianship," and "Medical Librarianship" discuss classification as it relates to that specific subject.

Subject analysis including classification occupies about one-half of the basic course. Principles of subject headings, controlled vocabulary versus natural language, pre- and post-coordinated systems, and the use of Library of Congress subject headings are covered under subject headings. The classification portion of the course covers principles of library classification, the use of the Library of Congress classification, and of the Dewey Decimal classification, and other classification schemes which are used worldwide are also covered briefly.

Intner writes that “Authors of articles in the literature, speakers at meetings, and faculty and students in library schools all seem to agree on three things about cataloging coursework: there is an enormous amount of material to be covered; it is difficult and it is dull. Nothing is clearer than the compelling need to make cataloging issues manageable for the students learning about them and to make the learning process interesting.”(7) It helps to show students how they can apply what they learn to actually assist users in locating information. In addition, it is necessary to make the students feel like they are learning something that will be relevant to their future careers.

At the beginning of the course students are asked to search titles, authors and subjects in library catalogs, databases, and the Web to illustrate the differences in access in catalogs and the role that control plays in locating information. Another exercise is used to emphasize the value of controlled vocabulary such as subject headings and of classification. Students are asked to search for a specific title without using any cataloging or classification information. They are, in effect, searching for a needle in a haystack. Then, they are allowed to use classification schedules and subject headings. They also search for information on the Web and look at Web site catalogs organized by library and other classification schemes. This helps students to appreciate the role of classification in organizing and locating information, and to make the discussion of theory more relevant.

The introductory course also examines theory of classification and then moves on to the Library of Congress and Dewey Decimal Classifications. Other classification schemes, such as UDC and Bliss, are briefly reviewed, but not actually taught or applied. Students are given a number of exercises in which they apply both the Library of Congress and Dewey Decimal Classifications to list of titles and then to actual library materials. After applying these classification schemes students are better able to consider the theoretical aspects of classification. The study of classification wraps up with a discussion of how theoretical understanding can facilitate application.

Because of the tremendous amount of material expected to be covered in a short time, all exercises take place outside the classroom. But each year the material to be added increases, and the problem of what to include becomes more and more difficult.

The balance of the theoretical and the practical, the use of physical items and electronic resources, the study of the more traditional library applications, and the new Web uses of classification stimulate student interest and attention. But it is interesting to note that students look for a balance. If a faculty member seems to cover more theory than practice; the students will ask for ways to learn the practice, even if it means spending more of their own time.

As I mentioned earlier we have four full-time faculty members teaching the “Organization of Knowledge.” As can be expected each has a slightly different approach to the course based on their background, experience, and interests. Consequently, some of the sections of the course are more theoretical than others. Initially, students are most interested in learning what they think they will need to get a job. They mirror more closely practitioners in their desire for practice over theory. However, once the relevance of theoretical knowledge is demonstrated, students become much more interested in learning it. They also can appreciate the rapid change in the field and how understanding theory and principles will enable them to adapt to change.

Teaching Classification in the Future

In the future, teaching classification is going to become both easier and more difficult. It is going to become easier because the Web will yield many examples of the value of using classification systems and the problems of not using them. It will also be easier to establish relevancy for students new to an area of study that may of them have feared and dreaded. It is going to become more difficult because more theory and a wider variety of classification schemes will need to be covered.

As technology has increased interest in the study of the theory of classification, it will also facilitate the teaching of classification. Programmed learning and Web tutorials may enable students to learn more outside the classroom and thus help to alleviate the problem of "how do I cover all of the traditional material as well as all of the new material."

- (1) See Francis Miksa, “Cataloging Education in the Library and Information Science Curriculum,” in *Recruiting, Education and Training Cataloging Librarians*, S. Intner and J.S. Hill, eds. (New York: Greenwood Press, (1989): 273-297; Jerry D. Saye, “The Cataloging Experience in Library and Information Science Education: An Educator’s Perspective,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 7:4 (Summer 1987): 27-45. Roxanne Sellber, “The Teaching of Cataloging in U.S. Library Schools,” *Library Resources and Technical Services*, 32:1 (January 1988): 30-42; Alan R. Thomas, *The Library Cataloging Curriculum, USA: A Survey of the Contemporary Compulsory Instruction* (London: Panizzi Press, 1976); Michael Carpenter, “Making Cataloging Interesting,” in *Recruiting, Educating and Training Cataloging Librarians*, S. Intner and J.S. Hill, eds. (New York: Greenwood Press, (1989): 169-186; Kathryn Luther Henderson, “Some Persistent Issues in the Education of Catalogers and Classifiers,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 7:4 (Summer 1987): 5-26; Doris H. Clack, “Education for Cataloging: A Symposium Paper,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 16:3 (1993): 27-37; J. Bradford Young, “The Teaching of Cataloging: Education or Training,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 7:4 (Summer 1987): 149-163; Nancy J. Williamson, “Classification: What Should We Be Training People to Do?” in *Classification of Library Materials*, B.G. Bengtson and J.S. Hill, eds. (New York: Neal-Schuman, (1990): 27-39.
- (2) Sherry L. Vellucci, “Cataloging Across the Curriculum: A Syndetic Structure for Teaching Cataloging,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 24:1/2 (1997): 35-57.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- (4) Cataloging is used in this paper to include descriptive cataloging, classification and the assignment of subject headings.
- (5) Nancy J. Williamson, “Classification: What Should We Be Training People to Do?” in *Classification of Library Materials*, B.G. Bengtson and J.S. Hill, eds. (New York: Neal-Schuman (1990): 30.
- (6) See Michael Carpenter and Elaine Svenonius, *Foundations of Cataloging: A Sourcebook* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985); Lois Mai Chan, *Cataloguing and Classification: An Introduction*, (2nd ed.) (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994); Lois Mai Chan, *A Guide to the Library of Congress Classification*, (5th ed.) (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999); Lois Mai Chang, John P. Comaromi, Joan S. Mitchell & Mohinder P. Satija, *Dewey Decimal Classification: A Practical Guide*, (2nd ed., rev. for DDC21) (Albany, NY: Forest Press, 1996); Ia C. McIlwaine, *Guide to the Use of*

UDC, (rev.ed.) (The Hague, Netherlands: IFLA, 1995); Ann F. Painter (ed.), *Reader in Classification and Descriptive Cataloging*, (Washington, DC: NCR Microcard Editions, 1972); Arlene G. Taylor, *The Organization of Information*, (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999); Arlene G. Taylor, *Wynar's Introduction to Cataloging and Classification*, (9th ed.) (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2000).

- (7) Sheila S. Intner, "Responding to Change: New Goals and Strategies for Core Cataloging Courses" in *Recruiting, Educating, and Training Cataloging Librarians*, S. Intner and J.S. Hill, eds. (New York: Greenwood Press, (1989): 230.