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Changing Classification Systems: An Example of Resource Sharing Among Libraries

Daniel Starr

Thomas J. Watson Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York City, USA

Abstract:

A specialized art research library changes from a local classification system in order to adopt the Library of Congress classification system.

“Changing Classification Systems: An Example of Resource Sharing Among Libraries”

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Thomas J. Watson Library has used a local classification system since it was developed in the 1920's. The system has not been systematically updated or maintained for years. There is no one authoritative version of it in either print or electronic form. It has no numbers for subjects in the 21st century and does not have numbers that recognize recent changes in political boundaries. The system is constructed so that it would even be difficult to find space to insert numbers to cover these topics. Its limitations have long been recognized but the prospect of changing systems when we already had 500,000 volumes

classified using the old numbers was daunting and always prevented the library from undertaking such a major change.

Nevertheless, we decided to begin using Library of Congress Classification on April 1, 2002. Two major factors influenced our decision at this time. (1) We had special funding for shifting the entire collection in our book stacks. We knew we would have room for two years growth before we ran out of space. We could either leave approximately 7 cm. of space per shelf throughout the book stacks, or consolidate all empty space in one area for books using the new classification system. Having all of our available space in one area was a more efficient way to use the little space we had. (2) We estimate that 70% of the cataloging records taken from the RLIN database and used to catalog our new acquisitions has LC numbers assigned by other libraries. Using these numbers would save us considerable time compared to assigned numbers using our local system.

These two arguments that we would save time and make the most use of our space by switching were compelling reasons and convinced our museum administration that this was the correct thing to do. What was involved in making the change?

- Convincing the curators – Our book stacks are open to museum staff and heavily browsed. We expected that there would be strong objections to the change from certain curators, who had worked at the museum for a long time and were used to going to one spot in the stacks. It turned out that there were a few complaints, but the major concern of the curatorial staff was that there would be two classification systems. They were accepting, or even pleased that we were adopting LC and understood our reasoning, but they wanted the whole collection reclassified. When we told them that we would have to finish the retrospective conversion of our card catalog first, and then find special funding so that we could accomplish this without overburdening existing staff they were disappointed, but understanding.
- Training catalogers and other staff – We presented a few informal classes on how to assign LC classification numbers, but since none of us was an expert on LC and since most of the staff was already familiar with it from library school, using it in previous jobs, or from seeing it in other research libraries, and since the intellectual process of assigning numbers is the same, we found few problems in training the catalogers. It also helped that the documentation was so much more complete than the documentation for our existing system. While there will always be questions about where best to classify a book, since a book can only be put in one spot, there is less confusion using a fully developed and documented system. There is more on-line training available for support staff, and we were able to find very useful guides on the web sites of major university libraries that we could use to train the circulation staff.
- Labeling and bindery changes -- In some ways, this was the hardest aspect of the change. Since there is no one standard way of choosing the format for how the call numbers will look on labels we had to discuss the various options and come to a consensus on which format to use. The circulation staff, since they are responsible for finding and shelving

books in the stacks, played the key role in this. We needed to change the program that produces labels, and also the one that interfaces with our commercial binder, so that the format of the numbers would be consistent on the spine. Since we are not going to apply LC numbers to existing serial publications (we did not want to split up runs of journals) we also had to make sure that we could still process labels in the old format, for old numbers. We also had to leave space for two years growth at the end of each current serial.

- Documenting local policies – We resolved that our basic principle would be that we will make as few changes to the LC system as possible and to document all decisions that we do make. We do not to get into the same confusing situation we were in when we started, and have documented every decision regarding classification practices that we have made. While we intend to be as standard as possible, we have already made some decisions about local exceptions. (1) We will classify all auction catalogs under the general number for the auction house, not for the topic of the individual sale. (2) We will classify one copy of all of our own publications in the general number assigned to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, not according to the specific subject of the catalog. (3) Collections of photographs by one photographer will be classified under the photographer, not under the subject of the photographs. (It is well known that the numbers for photography as an art form are a weakness of the LC system.)

Finally, you might ask, why does classification fit under the topic of this workshop, “Connecting Art Libraries: Partnerships and Projects?” First, we must always remember that sharing day-to-day library work, such as cataloging records and classification numbers is a basic form of cooperation, especially when libraries use a common database, such as RLIN or OCLC, or work towards sharing cataloging records by developing a common MARC format. Second, we may sometimes forget that our informal partnerships through IFLA and our contacts with colleagues are a major, under-recognized type of resource sharing – we share our expertise. I would never have proposed this change except for a conversation with Sylvie LeRay during IFLA in Boston in 2001. She mentioned that the libraries of the IMHA in Paris were going to be using Library of Congress Classification in their new library. This made me realize that this was a project that we could do as well. When you have a director named Philippe de Montebello, it helps any argument to be able to say that we are going to follow the lead of our French colleagues.

Brief Biographical Information: Manager of Bibliographic Operations, Thomas J. Watson Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, since April 2001; Chief Librarian, Technical Services and Planning, The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, 1996 to 2001; Associate Librarian, Cataloging, The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York 1979 to 1996; President, Art Libraries Society of North America, 2002-2003