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Where Does This Book Belong? Let the Patron Decide

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In this article, I propose a way we could apply a living, breathing, context-sensitive classification system to parts of our collection instead of basing the organization of physical items on the static, subjective, and sometimes-arbitrary classification system.

I was inspired by reading a book called *The Dynamic Library: Organizing Knowledge at the Sitterwerk – Precedents and Possibilities*. The book is a collection of essays from a symposium held in Sitterwerk, Switzerland in 2011. At the symposium, participants explored classification systems and new orders of knowledge in the context of an art collection.

As noted in the book, the primary purpose of classification systems is to assign a place for a book so that it can then be found. Most classification systems we are familiar with such as the Dewey Decimal Classification System (DDC), LCC (Library of Congress Classification), UDC (Universal Classification System) and BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications) support this primary purpose and also support serendipitous discovery by organizing related things together.

However, the person browsing the physical shelves will only enjoy the serendipitous benefit from one of the subject headings associated with an item. So, for example, I might not find that book about scientific breakthroughs by lesbians because the book would have to be placed in either the 509.2 Dewey range (with science) or possibly somewhere in the 306.7663¹ (with lesbians) but it wouldn't be in both places. And if you were looking for a book about Muslim lesbian scientists, you'd really have a hard time because many of the classifications systems are

still struggling with how to incorporate material about Islam.²

The extent to which one has a successful serendipitous experience is going to depend on the classification system being used as well as the person doing the classifying. How we organize material is very subjective and, to some extent, arbitrary, no matter how hard we may try.

Using the catalog helps. Because with a catalog we are able to make use of all the descriptors associated with an item. Though still dependent on that one person who did the cataloging, we'd have a better chance of finding what we are looking for because of the additional access points available.

Around 2012, many public libraries moved from Dewey to BISAC (or some variation thereof) because they felt it suited their collection and their patrons better. In covering this trend, Cassidy Charles warned: "When considering a new classification system though, always return to one of the fundamental [questions of] collection development: what do the patrons want? Users' experience and input was critical to each reorganization."³

I find it interesting that Charles states that user input is critical because I doubt that actual library patrons provided "input" into any of the classification systems that their libraries have adopted. They may have provided feedback, but not input into the new design. After all, organizing information is what we're trained to do so why would we ask non-professionals about classification? We might let our patrons add tags to our catalogs but to suggest how a book should

be classified...to determine what book should be next to what other books...Nope. That's our job.

But let's poke at that a bit. We are letting our patrons have a say in collection development when we adopt a floating collection policy. Instead of seeing the holdings in a single library location as a collection to be curated by our professionals, we give patrons a voice in what goes where. The location to which the item is returned, that's where it belongs – at least until the next person borrows it and returns it somewhere else.

Patron-driven acquisition is another way we've empowered patrons to get more engaged in defining our collections. Many public libraries allow patrons to suggest a title for purchase and unless the title falls outside of the library's collection management policy, it is ordered immediately. The Zip program here in California takes that a step further and orders the requested title and has it shipped directly to the person who requested it. When that person is done with the item, they return it to the library where it is usually incorporated into the collection.

Between patron-driven acquisitions, adding tags in our catalog, and floating collections, we've already opened the door to giving our patrons more say in what is in our collection, what access points are associated with it, and where material should live.

I'm proposing we take another step in that direction. With RFID, we could engage our patrons in arranging items in our collections so they can affect the serendipitous effect of browsing the physical collection. I'm not suggesting we do it for everything but I think it is something we should explore with some subsets of our collection.

For example, I think it is possible – if not likely – that how teens would arrange their material is quite different from how we might think it

should be arranged. Some libraries are pulling material together from several different sections of the library (reference, CDs, DVDs, posters, etc.) into “neighborhoods” based on a theme such as health or small business. This type of collection could lend itself to a patron-based shelving system. Exhibit style collections on current topics or collections put together by a guest curator might be another way to play with this idea on a limited basis.

One key to the experiment is to ensure we have a way to keep track of where things are so we can locate a specific title when necessary. RFID provides a solution. We can let patrons re-arrange the collection however they see fit and use RFID smart shelves to continually monitor where each item is. At least two vendors offer smart shelves today but they don't offer them for this purpose. Usually the smart shelves are marketed as “return shelves” that allow a patron to return a book to a place where it is instantly checked in and ready for circulation. Smart shelves are also marketed as a way to keep shelves in order and to support pulling items to fill holds, but so far, no one has suggested smart shelves could be used so that patrons could dynamically re-arrange them as they see fit.

Even without smart shelves, there are other ways to keep track of the dynamic arrangement of material. At the Sitterwerk symposium, participants created shelves with a track that held an RFID reader so the reader could continuously scan the shelves to monitor what was where. It would also be possible to use a portable handheld reader to inventory the collection each day.

The tricky part of this experiment is the software that would allow patrons to find a specific title. Initially, it might be necessary for the RFID system to keep track of the exact location because our current ILSs aren't flexible or cooperative enough to receive a new location from a third party system and then update the location.

But without getting bogged down in the details, imagine the opportunity here. Instead of relying on one classification system and one person's idea of what goes where, we would be learning from our own users about relationships between resources. We'd learn more about how they used the collection and what made sense to them. We'd be getting their input every day.

I have this image of a dynamic, continuously morphing collection that would accurately represent the needs of the users. It would change as different people used it. It would change over

time. Perhaps we'd even invite people to add items from their home library to the collection so it wouldn't just change relationships, it would also grow and evolve.

Engaging patrons in the organization of their library collections would result in an even more context sensitive collection that could change and grow organically. All we'd have to do is help get it started and set up a system for keeping track of how it evolves. RFID provides a way to do that. Who wants to give it a try?

¹ Sullivan, D. (2015, July 23). A brief history of homophobia in Dewey decimal classification. *Overland*. Retrieved from <https://overland.org.au/2015/07/a-brief-history-of-homophobia-in-dewey-decimal-classification/>.

² Idrees, H. (2012). Library classification systems and organization of Islamic knowledge: Current global scenario and optimal solution, *Association of Library Collection and Technical Services*, 56(3),

171-182. Retrieved from <https://journals.ala.org/lrts/article/view/5532/6803>.

³ Charles, C. (2012, December 18). Is Dewey dead? *Public Libraries Online*. Retrieved from <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2012/12/is-dewey-dead/>.