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Library Inventory Methods: Using Flexibility and Creativity to Achieve a Common Goal Within a Federated Library System

Jennifer Harveland, SELCO (Southeastern Libraries Cooperating)

Abstract

Overview of a multi-year process in a library system that included weeding, inventory, reclamation with OCLC, and a plan for ongoing collection maintenance accomplished across 90 academic, public, special and school libraries of varying sizes in an 11-county federated region. Article addresses general procedures, best practices and expected and unexpected outcomes of the project. Both regional and individual library perspectives are presented with details about project inspiration, funding, planning, implementation strategies and aftereffects.

Introduction

This article discusses a regional library system's process of transitioning many of its member libraries' collection records to full participation with [OCLC](#) (Online Computer Library Center). The process, known as reclamation, can bring holdings up-to-date if they have not been consistently maintained. Over time, library holdings may be shelved incorrectly, lost, or removed from the collection without removing electronic records of the item. Items may be relocated a different physical location without a corresponding change in the electronic record. Reclamation removes outdated records and ensures items' electronic records match with their physical characteristics and locations, resulting in collection records that are up-to-date and a collection where items can be easily located by patrons and library staff.

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Four phases of the project are identified and described; proposal and education of member library staff, initial collection maintenance in 3 sections, the reclamation cycle, and ongoing maintenance. The expectations, challenges, successes and surprises the staff encountered throughout the implementation and continuation of the project are delineated.

Southeastern Libraries Cooperating (SELCO), a federated library region in Minnesota, took on an OCLC reclamation project beginning in 2011 with the goal of synchronizing the online holdings of 90 of its academic, public, special and school libraries with the OCLC WorldCat database.

“Reclamation” refers to the process where library holdings records were then matched with World Cat and OCLC returned a file of records that need re-cataloging or additional attention. SELCO catalogers managed this process with assistance from library staff.

The benefits of this project are far-reaching. Besides having an accurate, up-to-date and tidy collection, SELCO is currently funding all Online Libraries as full cataloging OCLC members. This membership level gives libraries quick access to high quality MARC records, and each library’s holdings are accurate and visible in Worldcat.org. Visible holdings in Worldcat.org gives each library the benefits associated with OCLC, such as preparation for OCLC ILL, and the use of OCLC’s APIs like the one used in Goodreads.com. Use of OCLC’s batch record processing and record delivery service further increased cataloging speed at libraries.

The project helped library staff gain confidence in their collections and collection development skills. As librarians analyzed collections and made decisions about organizing materials, they connected with their users and strengthened their role as community liaisons.

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The original timeline stretched over four years because libraries in the region are locally autonomous. After accommodating busy local schedules and managing technical complications, the project took close to five years to complete.

Phase 1: Project Proposal and Education

Technical Services Librarian Cheryl Hill initiated the project after The Chatfield Brass Band & Music Lending Library (CBBMLL) joined the SELCO Integrated Library System (ILS) in 2009. SELCO catalogers had added more than 24,000 original records to OCLC from this special library's rare and unusual holdings. Each of those records resulted in a credit, or cash equivalent, which could be used to "pay" OCLC for services. After the CBBMLL's holdings were cataloged, SELCO had a substantial credit with OCLC as a result of that original cataloging.

Hill saw an opportunity and proposed making all of the SELCO libraries Full cataloging members and helping them through the reclamation process to use the credits. [Minitex](#), a statewide network of academic, public, state government, and special libraries, is a collaborative partner of OCLC. In fall 2011, she met with Carla Dewey Urban, who was the Director of what is known today as [Digital Initiatives & Metadata Education](#) (DIME) at Minitex, and proposed the reclamation project.

Using the credits built up at OCLC enabled SELCO to reduce overall project costs. Since then, OCLC has changed its crediting structure and the partnership between OCLC and Minitex has changed so that the way the project was funded would be difficult to replicate today.

In addition to the OCLC credits, the project was partially funded by a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant, which is administered by the Institute of Museum and

Library Services (IMLS). The grant funding covered the purchase of additional inventory equipment and the salary line of a cataloger whose primary duties were to assist with inventories and clean up the unresolved item reports.

Hill theorized that the initial libraries that went through the process would have a larger percentage of items needing to be reclaimed. As more libraries went through the process, she anticipated that the percentage of records needing attention would drop.

The idea was presented to library directors in December 2011. The initial challenge that SELCO faced was the need for weeding collections prior to the inventory and reclamation process. Not only are librarians sometimes reluctant to get rid of books because they are seen as invaluable, communities often respond negatively when weeding occurs. To combat the negative perceptions of weeding and to give librarians a solid foundation, SELCO brought in the popular bloggers the “Awful Library Book Ladies” (<http://awfullibrarybooks.net/>) for training. Holly Hibner and Mary Kelly’s blog offers humorous commentary and real-life examples of books that should be removed from collections and has a large following. In addition to the blog they offer presentations on collection quality, maintenance, weeding and more.

On January 31, 2013, two well-attended sessions helped acquaint librarians with the positive benefits of weeding. Some librarians were motivated to get started immediately. According to Hill, the workshop gave library staff the tools they needed to counter common perceptions or misperceptions regarding weeding. If a city official or a member of the public expressed concern about weeding, especially as a misuse of tax dollars, library staff could address those concerns in a professional manner with data to back up their claims.

At that time, due to staffing or budgetary constraints, many libraries did not catalog unique newly acquired items; this resulted in items sitting in back rooms indefinitely. Some

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locations consistently waited for a peer library to add bibliographic records before adding their own holdings. Other libraries acquired MARC records via z39.50 from the Library of Congress. A small segment of libraries paid for CatExpress records. The vastness of the OCLC database, combined with the credits SELCO had earned in creating original catalog records, would allow libraries to eliminate those backlogs, enabling patrons to have access to materials acquired with taxpayer dollars.

Introductory emails were sent, explaining the purpose of the reclamation project and the overall objectives of the OCLC. One of the major goals of this project was to prevent the aforementioned backlogs at libraries. The libraries in this federated system employed unique workflows when acquiring and cataloging new items, which added to the complexity of this project.

Following these emails, onsite visits were conducted in preparation for inventory and weeding. SELCO staff met with library personnel to share information in person, tour the facility, note areas in need of improvement and review initial reports. The expectation of both the emails and in-person visits was to effect necessary, positive change by clarifying the benefits of the reclamation project.

SELCO staff encouraged libraries to weed collections ahead of the OCLC reclamation process. As expected, a variety of concerns were voiced. Metrics used to measure library success often rely on easily quantifiable measures such as collection size, effectively valuing quantity over quality of materials. Societal ideas about the value of books and the taboo against discarding books also posed a challenge. In addition, library staff were nervous that they would make mistakes in the weeding process.

As a result of the Awful Library Book Ladies workshop, an enthusiastic pilot group was formed to begin the weeding phase of the project. The group consisted of the following libraries: Albert Lea, Austin, Stewartville, and Zumbrota Public Libraries, the Northfield Public Library and Bookmobile, Chatfield Brass Band & Music Lending Library, and SELCO's special collections.

Libraries were encouraged to implement the Continuous Review, Evaluation, and Weeding (CREW) method. Based on CREW recommendations and a similar resource for school libraries, "Weeding for the School Library," Hill developed customized reports. Library staff used the reports to help identify materials that should be removed from the collection. For example, the report might identify books "Older than _____, no circulation in _____ and in this Dewey range." If a book fit those criteria, the recommendation was to weed it. SELCO continued to have conversations about the weeding process with library staff. "There was a lot of trepidation and uncertainty regarding weeding," says Hill.

Phase 2: Initial Collection Maintenance - Weeding

In order to complete the weeding phase, SELCO encouraged the libraries to choose the most effective method to attain that goal in their particular location. Some libraries closed temporarily, others completed the project in segments while remaining open, and still others used volunteers, including Friends groups and Board members, to speed the process.

Some challenges presented themselves along the way; the weeding process itself was highly labor-intensive and consumed more resources than anticipated. SELCO staff visited each location at least once to start the process, sharing general information and expertise. Depending

upon local challenges due to insufficient staff or time, SELCO provided the labor to accomplish weeding.

Albert Lea and Stewartville Public Libraries were the first to complete the weeding process, then influenced others, saying that they saw multiple benefits of weeding. “Once we started getting people to weed, it got easier,” Hill said. Benefits of weeding included less crowded shelving, which increased the visual appeal of the library. Staff and patrons alike expressed their appreciation that items were more easily located, and many patrons remarked that the shelves looked clean and organized and – a key for many librarians – no one missed the weeded books. Librarians even heard, “I can’t believe how many new books you’ve bought,” even though there had been no change in library buying patterns.

Librarians and staff felt that they had better familiarity with the collection, which resulted in improved patron services. Items that had been weeded from local collections often were available in the region or through MNLINK, a statewide virtual library. Other benefits included the ability to keep up with current collection needs, continuous feedback on the collection’s strengths and weaknesses, enabling the library to make better purchasing decisions, and an enhanced reputation because materials were up-to-date.

Through the initial sites that underwent the weeding process, SELCO staff learned some valuable lessons and was able to institute best practices to achieving their objective going forward. It became clear that preparing the libraries was crucial. SELCO developed a routine of sending instructions via email that included a short summary of what was involved. They looked at the collection size and estimated how many people would be needed and recommended that public libraries enlist the help of their regular patrons, Friends groups, Board members and

volunteers. They provided FAQs, and detailed exactly what SELCO staff would do in the process and what was expected of libraries.

Phase 2: Initial Collection Maintenance -- Inventory

As weeding concluded at a location and reports were run to take a look at each collection, SELCO staff set an inventory date. The inventory needed to begin and end within a short time period because timing is crucial for the accuracy of the data being sent to OCLC.

Inventory is a process in the Integrated Library System (ILS) that compares the information in the item record with the physical material on the shelf. The process begins by scanning all the material in a collection by collection code and then performing clean up based on a series of reports.

SELCO's Horizon ILS requires a collection code for each item, which indicates a shelving location within the library. Because SELCO is a federated system, each library controls its collection decisions individually, resulting in 383 separate collection codes for the entire system. For example, one library may have a code for **Paperback – Western – Fiction** which represents a discrete shelving location for Western paperbacks. Another library, choosing to shelve all fiction paperbacks together regardless of genre, might use the collection code **Paperback – Fiction** for all fiction paperbacks. One of the goals of an inventory is to identify items that are not shelved in the location indicated by their collection codes. This requires libraries to be deliberate in organizing their collections and making sure the collection codes are correct for that library's collection.

One psychological road block for many library staff was the feeling that if items were discovered to be missing or incorrectly shelved, that the library staff would be perceived as less

effective in their jobs. Hill's experience doing an inventory in a previous position as Library Director prepared her to address those concerns. "As part of the preparation, we emphasized that every library was going to have items that were missing or were otherwise not where they were expected to be. Sharing my experience and reassuring librarians that the process was not to cast blame but simply to clean up the records for the benefit of library staff and patrons throughout the region seemed to help with some of that hesitation," said Hill.

For a library with approximately 52,000 items, four staff using laptops and bar code scanners could generally complete an inventory in fewer than four days. How each library carried out the inventory varied, but a library could remain open to patrons. Only those items with the collection code or codes being inventoried were unavailable for circulation until that segment of the collection was complete.

SELCO staff went to each location to train the staff, volunteers and board members who would become the local inventory team. Generally the local inventory team undertook the bulk of the scanning, although SELCO staff did assist at some locations.

As each collection code was inventoried, two types of reports were generated: *Report Missing Inventory*; items in that collection that should have been scanned but were not, and an *Exceptions* report. That report detailed items with the wrong collection code, wrong location code or wrong status. In addition, libraries were asked to clean up items that were Lost, Missing, Withdrawn, or stuck In Transit.

"I anticipated the first libraries' fix lists would be large, but as we moved through libraries, more records would have been corrected and thus there would be fewer errors at subsequent libraries," said Hill. "For example, once you fix the James Patterson records at one library, other libraries that have the same titles will already have a record that matches OCLC."

Despite that, the number of records that would need attention and the amount of work required to fix them was larger than expected in the first few locations.

A SELCO staff member was assigned the task of cleaning up the unresolved item reports after an inventory was completed. As the clean-up process progressed, the number of records from each library that were incorrect started dropping from double digits down to 2-3% unresolved/not matching OCLC. This confirmed Hill's earlier suspicions. "Since we're a shared database, libraries have records that overlap," stated Hill.

Phase 2: Initial Collection Maintenance -- Collection Cleanup

Once inventory was complete, missing or lost items were deleted from the database and other cleanup tasks were performed on records. Library staff then had to make decisions about possibly reorganizing collections as well as how to label and mark serials.

Next, SELCO staff generated a file of bibliographic records with attached item records reflecting the organizational and cataloging practices of the library. Library staff sent the files to OCLC via FTP along with documentation on their organizational and cataloging practices.

Phase 3: Reclamation Cycle

OCLC processed the library's file, typically overnight, and returned that file with OCLC numbers inserted. They also returned a file of bibliographic records they could not match for one reason or another; there might have been holdings already in OCLC and the match just failed, or it could be that the item required original cataloging. These records had to be looked at individually, so a reclamation specialist was assigned to try and run unresolved files again using refined techniques to match the file.

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The reclamation specialist then updated the library's holdings. The data was uploaded to OCLC with a time stamp, and matched against the records of the previous holdings. Any records set earlier than the time stamp were deleted, ensuring the library's actual holdings were saved, and lost or missing items were purged from the database. This created an accurate account of the library's holdings in WorldCat.

Quality records through OCLC result in faster cataloging and less backlog, and because OCLC allows members to add to records, the collaboration results in more complete and accurate records across the database.

Phase 4: Ongoing Collection Maintenance

SELCO staff emphasized that OCLC only allows one free reclamation process per OCLC holding symbol. As a result, all phases – Initial Collection Maintenance, Reclamation and Ongoing Collection Maintenance - were equally important to ensure the future integrity of local collections and the database. After all the work undertaken, continuing to maintain holdings in OCLC is vitally important.

Hill and SELCO staff recommended ongoing use of the Continuous Review, Evaluation and Weeding (CREW), in part because it integrates all the processes into one smooth, streamlined and ongoing routine. CREW is designed to routinely remove outdated and unused materials from the collection while identifying collection gaps or deficiencies. SELCO offered training to ensure libraries continued to maintain holdings and improve workflow.

Previously libraries immediately deleted withdrawn items from Horizon; now those items are assigned Status W. Once a month, SELCO staff batch remove Status W holdings in OCLC

before deleting the item records from Horizon. In addition, any new records libraries add in Horizon must have an OCLC number to ensure holdings are accurate in OCLC.

Each site received training to enable libraries to use the fuller functionality of OCLC and do some manual maintenance of OCLC holdings for those occasions when batch holdings maintenance doesn't work.

Conclusion

As the project wrapped up, SELCO staff realized there were effects that had not been predicted. As expected, library shelves were less crowded and cleaner but in addition there was improved accessibility of local collections, which had a tremendous impact on patron service and perceptions of libraries. Library staff gained knowledge of the local collection during the process, and having organized it, were able to provide stronger customer service.

Hill says this project had far deeper effects than simply connecting SELCO libraries fully with OCLC. Library staff were forced to rethink the library's role in the community. Certainly eBooks, programming, computers and the many other functions libraries perform are important, but collections are still a central focus. It also became clear that community relationships and relationship building are important.

The project moved items out of the back room so they were available for patron use. It also helped build confidence among library staff to enable them to serve as liaisons between the library and the community. Oftentimes, the current library manager/director or library staff has inherited an established institution with longtime practices, and they may lack the confidence to make decisions that affect the quality of the collection.

Library staff gained confidence in their collections and collection development skills, allowing them to better assess community interests and needs. As librarians dug into their collections and made decisions about how to organize and display materials, they were empowered to connect with their users, and to advocate for libraries from a position of knowledge and strength, thereby serving as community liaisons. These benefits were not anticipated, but they are every bit as important as the technical benefits of Full OCLC participation for the libraries and the region.

“We know the main reason people use libraries is to check out materials. Not having materials that meet today’s community needs can make a library outdated and obsolete. Irrelevant things are easy pickings when budgets are cut,” says Hill. “If you don’t keep up with your community, you’re doing a disservice to the community and to the taxpayers who are paying for the library.”

About SELCO

SELCO, Southeastern Libraries Cooperating, is a regional library system based in Rochester, Minnesota. It serves academic, public, school and special libraries. The member libraries share resources, programs, personnel and technical innovations to achieve common goals and meet the needs of individual communities. For more information, visit www.selco.info