

Out with the Dew(ey) and in the with the New: Adopting a BISAC Classification System to
Support Public and School Libraries

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Abstract

This essay will highlight the benefits of transitioning public and school libraries alike from the Dew Decimal Classification system (DDC) to the Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) classification system, along with challenges that may be faced during and after implementation, as well as how to approach these challenges to create positive outcomes. Using WordThink, a classification system based off BISAC that was created by Anythink Libraries in 2008, this essay will provide examples of how reorganizing and relabeling library materials will once again excite patrons and encourage them to return to libraries, ready to explore this new and inviting classification system.

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Dewey Decimal is the world's most widely utilized classification system, spanning an estimated two hundred thousand libraries over one hundred and thirty-five countries. In the United States alone, Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) is used in upwards of ninety-five percent of public and school libraries (Chiavaroli, 2019). Even so, public and school libraries in the United States are beginning to think twice about keeping this long-standing classification system. With younger generations losing interest in libraries, these institutions began researching what makes people keep their distance from the library, and what makes them keep coming back.

Benefitting Browsers

Working in public library concierge, the number one answer I get to the question “Is there something I can help you find?” is “I’m just browsing.” In support of this browsing trend, BISAC-inspired models of classification allow patrons to freely browse materials without need of assistance. Pam Sandlian Smith – the director of Anythink Libraries – states that “in a popular browsing collection, navigation that is subject-oriented and word-based creates an ease of use that empowers customers. All they need to know is the topic that they are looking for, and then they can either browse or look for a title that is shelved alphabetically within the subject range” (Smith, 2011). Unlike Dewey Decimals’ general knowledge classification system of numerated divisions and sections, BISAC models use a word-based style consisting of categories and subcategories. When a browsing patron walks into a library that still uses DDC, they are hit with numerated sections that do not naturally communicate to them what resides in those sections. If they were interested in browsing nonfiction books pertaining to U.S. 20th Century History, for example, they must either know the system before being able to browse, or else ask for

assistance in navigating this classification code in order to locate the appropriate materials. In this case, the correct Class is 900-999 for History and Geography (See Appendix A for Main Classifications), but there is no inherent way to know that. It must simply be taught and memorized. In comparison, the BISAC-inspired WordThink classification system uses the signage “History” to advertise nonfiction history books, and one of the subsections included in that section is labeled “US 20th Century” (See Appendix B). According to Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science, law four specifically outlines that libraries are responsible for implementing structures to “save the time of the reader” (Ranganathan, 2006), and utilizing a BISAC classification system does just this.

Library Anxiety

Delving further into the explanation as to why BISAC models are more appropriate classification systems for public libraries is the idea of “library anxiety”. Defined as anxiety manifesting in the patron as a result of feeling inadequate or otherwise overwhelmed by the layout and process of locating materials within a library, this disorder is enough to keep patrons away from entering libraries, much less checking out library materials. What BISAC classification does is eliminate this barrier to access by using natural and inherent language that directs patrons to the appropriate sections without intimidation.

Using an example of self-search, patrons could take to the online public access catalog (OPAC) and search for a specific book. If they were interested in locating *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (Grann, 2017) using the Dewey Decimal system, the call number that would be provided for them on the OPAC is “976.600497” (See Appendix C for figure). This number has significance to those that understand its compilation, but to those who are unfamiliar, it is just a long retrieval number that they must memorize or

write down in order to find their book. Using the same text as a comparison, the BISAC-inspired call number in an OPAC is “History, US 20th (See Appendix D for figure). The patron knows they must find the History category, locate the subcategory labeled “20th Century”, and there they will find their book in its place among the alphabetized materials.

Patrons with Dyscalculia

This topic was not evident in any of my research, and needs further examination, as it supports the need to remove user-access barriers centered around library anxiety. Dyscalculia is a learning disability that makes those suffering with the condition have difficulty understanding and retaining the order of numbers. Take the same call number identified earlier for *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (Grann, 2017), which is “976.600497”, patrons suffering with dyscalculia may struggle to know where this book is located because they may not recall if 976 is before or after 977, much less recall decimal orders. This is another layer added on to the already debilitating reality of library anxiety.

BISAC for Children’s Collections

The reason to implement BISAC models in school libraries is the same reason why it should be implemented in children’s sections at public libraries – children naturally browse for materials. What’s more is that BISAC models allow for the merchandising of materials, meaning that there are reserved spaces on shelves where books can be front facing to exemplify the category (or subcategory) that consists there. At Anythink Libraries, nonfiction children’s materials are organized by categories and subcategories, with plenty of merchandising to assist younger patrons in finding said categories. Recently a child patron asked me for (nonfiction) books about trains for a school report, and instead of providing them with a call number, I directed them to the transportation category and the child easily and independently located the

train subcategory and began looking through that subcategory's collection of books. Fiction shelves are set up lower to the ground to accommodate for the youngest of readers, and are categorized in a similar fashion (e.g. poetry, fairy tales, senses, etc.). Rarely do I need to assist young patrons who are just browsing either the nonfiction or fiction sections, because they can navigate independently with the guided help of the user-friendly classification system in place and enjoy looking through different categories that are of interest to them. These categories and subcategories also promote "connections between keyword identification in searching in print and digital resources" (Buchter, 2013). With younger generations using both digital and print materials, this introduction to sight words and keywords is essential to develop at a young age, and is also a tool for early literacy development.

The second consideration relating specifically to children's collections in public and school libraries is that Dewey Decimal classification requires that patrons have "background knowledge in number sense and decimals" (Buchter, 2013), of which is not introduced to students until roughly the fourth or fifth grade, at which time still they are not expected to master the concepts. Students that have difficulty with mathematical concepts are more likely to experience library anxiety at a young age, (which carries into adulthood in many cases), since they are unable to navigate the Dewey Decimal system unaided. Furthermore, since these materials are centered around children of a variety of ages and grades, implementing a classification system that this demographic can navigate independently is a part of upholding equality of access to library users (Kaplan et al., 2013).

Higher Circulation Rates

Anythink Libraries made the transition to WordThink in 2009 (a process which took approximately a year for their six locations) and have since seen thrilling results. In an interview, Pam Sandlian Smith states that “because of this method of organization and other self-service features, we have been able to absorb a tripling in circulation with minimal increase in staffing.” (Cohen, 2011)

Similarly, Red Hawk Elementary underwent a pilot project in 2011 to implement their own BISAC-inspired classification model, which uses similar genre-based categories to those of WordThink. Statistics showed that after implementing this new classification system, “students who previously would only read J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books were now checking out titles written by other fantasy authors [and were] making connections between fantasy and mythology, science fiction and science events, historical fiction and history” (Buchter, 2013). This adoption of transparent classification led to students making connections between genres, and broadening their reading interests. Nonfiction material circulation increased as well, rising to sixty-one percent of all checked out materials, compared to only thirty-nine percent at neighboring schools that still used Dewey Decimal classification (Buchter, 2013).

Challenges

Change can be intimidating, and changing classifications systems is a comprehensive process that requires the support of patrons and staff to successfully implement. Without the support of patrons, this classification system would be futile because nobody would be utilizing it. Without the support of staff, patrons may become apprehensive about the changes. This is why it is crucial to listen to your stakeholders, understand their frustrations (regarding the current classification system, and regarding changes), and decrease apprehensions by providing research outlining the benefits of transitioning. Staff are also a big part of making the switch, as they are

largely in charge of relabeling library materials to the new classification system. To keep this intimidation minimal, one must focus on the big picture: patrons will be happier, more self-sufficient, and eager to return to explore the library's collection, and library staff will be to thank for eliminating this barrier to user-access.

Conclusions and Future Study

More research on how patrons with dyscalculia benefit from a word-based classification system will strengthen the idea that the numeric classification system acts as a barrier to access. This demographic has yet to be highlighted in research surrounding library anxiety and the need for changing DDC to BISAC classification, yet I suspect a large part of patrons suffering from library anxiety would address the numbering system as part of their reason for discomfort in libraries. Exposure of this learning disability will add another level to encourage public and school libraries to make the switch to a word-based classification system to support equity of user access.

Libraries must keep up with their ever-changing communities in which they serve, or else risk becoming irrelevant. Taking a quote from the article *Ditching Dewey: Take Your Collections from Enraging to Engaging and Position Your Library for 21st Century Success*: "The perception that libraries and librarians are redundant is a fairly common belief now. If we continue to fight against this tide of patron feedback rather than embracing change, redundancy will be a fact rather than our greatest fear" (Chiavaroli, 2019). Turning again to Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science, Law Five states that "The library is a growing organism" (2006), meaning that as our community grows and develops, libraries too must choose growth and development in their collections and methods instead of remaining static. It is our responsibility to promote this

new wave of system classification that our patrons show interest in, or else why are we here, and who are we serving?

References

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Appendix A

Ten Main Classes of Dewey Decimal Classification

Dewey Numbers	Dewey Main Category
000 - 099	General Information
100 - 199	Philosophy & Psychology
200 - 299	Religion
300 - 399	Social Sciences
400 - 499	Language
500 - 599	Science
600 - 699	Technology
700 - 799	Arts & Recreation
800 - 899	Literature
900 - 999	History & Geography

Retrieved from: <https://sites.google.com/a/sheltonpublicschools.org/perry-hill-school-media-center/sixth-grade/dewey-decimal-webquest?tmpl=%2Fsystem%2Fapp%2Ftemplates%2Fprint%2F&showPrintDialog=1>

Appendix B

Example of BISAC-inspired WordThink Classification Category and Subcategory with
Merchandising



Appendix C

Visual of OPAC that still uses Dewey Decimal Classification for Call Number



2017

5. *Killers of the Flower Moon: the Osage murders and the birth of the FBI*
by Grann, David, author.

Call Number: 976.600497 Grann

Available Copies: 4 (of 29)

Current Holds: 3

☒ WHERE IS IT?

☐ FULL DETAILS

☐ PLACE HOLD

[Add to My List](#)

Appendix D

Visual of OPAC that switched to WordThink Classification for Call Number



★★★★★

1) Killers of the Flower Moon: the Osage murders and the birth of the FBI

Author: [David Grann](#)
Language: English

Choose a Format

+ Book

Show Edition

On Shelf

Brighton - Adult Nonfiction

Peri Mack - Adult Nonfiction

Wright Farms - Adult Nonfiction has 2

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HISTORY US

20TH I

HISTORY US

20TH I

HISTORY US

20TH I

Place Hold