

The Relevance and Revisionability of Dewey Decimal Classification in the Public Library

For over a century, Dewey Decimal Classification has proven to be an effective system for the collocation of information in its various manifestations. While myriad alternatives have developed and demonstrated successful implementation over the course of history, the Dewey Decimal System has persevered due to both its intuitive division of human knowledge and its resultant ease of access. While it is true that defects of this system occasionally impede its efficiency, it is well-established and time-tested. The implementation of a new system on the basis of retail trends would not only isolate the library from the predominant community of public libraries worldwide that adhere to the Dewey Decimal System's organizational structure, but would demand considerable investment in superfluous labour and materials toward establishing simply a comparable foundation upon which future cataloguing endeavours would depend. In providing an objective assessment of Dewey Decimal Classification through analysis of the subject of cooking, following a brief introduction of the topic, I will examine the system's effectiveness in dividing and arranging relevant information in correlation with the library's patron bases.

Cooking is the process of heating foods in preparation for their consumption via such methods as baking, barbequing, boiling, frying, grilling, microwaving, roasting, smoking, and steaming. It often accommodates particular dietary restrictions such as those pertaining to allergies such as nuts and dairy, health concerns such as low carbohydrates and fats, life choices such as vegetarianism and rawism, and religious or cultural doctrines such as kosher and halal. It is a practice that has been employed by the majority of cultures around the world since ancient times. Different cultures and traditions have distinctive guidelines for cooking, particularly concerning the health concerns of meat preparation; in some regions of the world, minimum

internal temperatures of cooked meat in public restaurants are regulated by law, while in others, traditional meat dishes are entirely raw. Although this is the primary use of the term, and occasionally refers to non-heated food preparation, it is also used to describe the heating of non-food substances such as ceramics, which will not be considered for the purposes of this report.

Having established a context for the analysis of the subject of cooking, I will now assess the validity of its assignment within Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) with consideration of the library system's diverse user-base, including the Islamic community, young people and young families, and hospital patients struggling with various health conditions.

Upon first approaching the ten main classes of DDC, a primary concern becomes with which of these "Cooking" is most appropriately associated. While "600 Technology" is perhaps a less intuitive category than, say, "500 Science" or "700 Arts & recreation," closer examination of the subdivisions of each of these reveals that "Cooking" is in fact closely tied to technology and has been, certainly, since the discovery of fire. A more problematic concern is the multiple subdivisions assigned to cooking within "641 Food and drink": "641.5 Cooking," "641.6 Cooking specific materials," "641.7 Specific cooking processes and techniques," and "641.8 Cooking specific kinds of dishes and preparing beverages." While it is practical to avoid unnecessarily inaccessible depth in subdividing the subject, not only do the latter three describe specific aspects of the former, indicating that they should exist lower in the classification hierarchy, but subdivisions within these four categories tend to inexplicably overlap. Two examples of this phenomenon are ethnic cooking and cooking for young people, which I will address in more detail in further assessing DDC's ability to represent these demographics. In this respect, perhaps, as has been noted by Library and Information Science (LIS) scholars, "The

Procrustean Ten” theoretical system of classification is evidenced in the provision of its own self-imposed limitations.

Aside from the aforementioned ambiguities, another major contention with DDC is that it is largely outdated in its Anglo-American-centricity. This is not an unfounded criticism as subdivisions such as “641.82 Main dishes” and “641.86 Desserts” appear to account primarily for foods, meals, and preparation prominent in North America. Additionally, cultural aspects in relation to cooking tend to follow the same trend, as “641.568 Cooking for special occasions” only lists “641.5686 Christmas cooking” as a subdivision and “641.566 Cooking for Christian church limitations and observances” and “641.567 Cooking for religious limitations and observances” are equal in the hierarchy, with the latter only providing the subdivision “641.5676 Jewish cooking,...” Perhaps the major class that opposes this Anglo-American-centricity is “641.593-641.599 Cooking characteristic of specific continents, countries, localities,” which provides a diverse range of regions; however, even this includes two out of eight total regional styles of cooking that are attributed to the U.S.A. alone – “641.5975 American cooking (U.S.),...” and “641.5975 Southern cooking (U.S.),...” While it is often inefficient for a financially-challenged public library system to indulge in classification customization, DDC *does* provide flexibility in its support of customizing classification numbers via virtually limitless subdivision concatenation.

In assessing the validity of the representation of Islamic cooking in DDC, I will analyze the ambiguous overlap of class divisions regarding ethnic cooking, as mentioned above, the capacity in which Islam is exemplified in the present classes, and the process of concatenating relevant call numbers where DDC fails to provide adequate foundation. First, ethnic cooking exists as both “641[.5089] Cooking with respect to ethnic and national groups,” under “641.508

Cooking with respect to groups of people” and “641.592 Ethnic cooking,” under “641.59 Cooking characteristic of specific geographic environments, ethnic cooking.” While the former refers to the latter thusly, “Do not use for cooking with respect to other ethnic and national groups; class in 641.592,” it provides little reasoning behind the distinction, simply provoking speculation – such as theory versus practice, perhaps – that further enforces its ambiguity. If one who studies information classification as a profession finds difficulty in interpreting such an anomaly, what chance does an average library patron have in utilizing such an apparently indiscriminate system? DDC has its deficiencies, yet what is important to note is that the average library patron does not predicate the details of his or her information search strategy on its functionality and flawless accuracy. Rather, the system is designed for the collocation of resources by the professional staff who provide a catalogue with detailed and cross-referenced bibliographic records as the primary source for supporting the needs of their user-base.

Second, aside from these conflicting classes, further inadequacy is in the absence of virtually any direct reference to Islam, the world’s second largest religion, or its cooking practices such as the consideration of halal foods within the hierarchy of “641.5 Cooking.” Additionally, the most relevant reference to cooking under the classification for the religion, “297.1-297.8 Islam,” is “297.53 Sawm (Fast),” which refers to a period of fasting on the Muslim calendar. Two classes in particular that should arguably include Islam in some capacity are “641.56 Cooking for special situations, reasons, ages,” which includes “641.566 Cooking for Christian church limitations and observances” and “641.567 Cooking for religious limitations and observances” and “641.592 Ethnic cooking,” which includes "641.59205-641.59209 Specific ethnic and national groups with ethnic origins from more than one continent, of European descent," "641.5921-641.5929 Specific ethnic and national groups," and "641.592971 Eskimo

cooking,...” While the former provides an alternative to Christian practice, equal status in the classification hierarchy implies that any religion other than Christianity will require the concatenation of an indicator of that faith, lowering it in said hierarchy, and therefore in purported precedence. This can be seen in the only subdivision of “641.567 Cooking for religious limitations and observances,” “641.5676 Jewish cooking,...” – reference to a religion less than ten percent the size of Islam in terms of adherents, yet one that is perhaps significantly more recognized in North America.

The latter of the two examples further reinforces Anglo-American-centricity in its exclusion of Islam in that it only distinguishes “641.59205-641.59209 Specific ethnic and national groups with ethnic origins from more than one continent, of European descent” from “641.5921-641.5929 Specific ethnic and national groups.” What is confusing about this hierarchy is that while the former is of a lower classification, the two are listed together under “Ethnic cooking.” Additionally, “641.592971 Eskimo cooking,...,” beyond its politically incorrect language, is listed in this same class, yet is composed of an even lower classification than its peers. Furthermore, the only subdivision of “Specific ethnic and national groups” is “641.59296073 African American cooking,...”

Third, while Islam is not well-represented by DDC within the subject of cooking, as previously mentioned, beyond the evident biases that obstruct hierarchical accuracy, classification concatenation provides a flexible means of expanding the collocation of essentially any subject area. Examples of this can be seen in two publications pertaining to Islamic cooking as classified by the Toronto Public Library (TPL). “Halal food, fun and laughter,” by Linda D. Delgado is classified via DDC as 641.5677 DEL. As we have established, 641.567 indicates “Cooking for religious limitations and observances.” What DDC notes in this classification is,

“Add to base number 641.567 the numbers following 29 in 292-299, e.g., Jewish cooking 641.5676.” As Islam is classed as 297, the call number simply indicates that this book falls under religious observances of that religion, which is true. A second example, "Sufi cuisine," by Nevin Halici is classified as 641.56774, again falling under Islam, but indicating the specific sect of Sufism (“297.4 Sufism (Islamic mysticism)”). Additional circumstances may lead to further complex concatenation, and so long as notation for customizing non-existent classification is provided by DDC, virtually any subject may be specified to any degree of detail.

In assessing DDC’s representation of another of the library system’s prevalent demographics, young people and young families, in terms of cooking, I will analyze a second overlap of subdivisions in addition to the concatenation of customized classifications. First, like ethnic cooking, cooking for young people is again established within two separate class divisions, “641.5622 Young People” and “641.5083 Cooking with respect to young people.” The former notes, "Class here cooking for children" and "Class cooking by children in 641.5123," providing the only subdivision of “641.56222 Cooking for infants.” Meanwhile, the latter indicates, "Do not use for cooking by children; class in 641.5123" and "Do not use for cooking for young people; class in 641.5622," with no established subdivisions. While the distinction between cooking for children and cooking by children is evident, what is not is that between cooking for young people and cooking in respect to young people. As with Islam, the inexplicable dual classification simply begs more questions than it answers.

Examples of publications pertaining to cooking for young people, as classified by TPL, reveal further complexities synonymous with the previously stated concern over inexplicably multiplex classification. Three examples will exemplify to various degrees the apparent ambivalence of DDC toward certain subjects. "Cooking with children: fifteen lessons for

children, age 7 and up, who really want to learn to cook," by Marion Cunningham is classified as 641.5 CUN – simply under “Cooking.” This title clearly fits more appropriately into either one or the other classes, “Young people” or “Cooking with respect to young people,” yet its classification has been finalized at the broadest level of the hierarchy possible. This calls attention to inconsistent classification, perhaps due to the conflicting work of multiple cataloguers, or, less likely, the lack of necessity in specifying a detailed class for such a book within the identified library system (this is significantly undermined by the classification of the following titles).

Another book classified by TPL, “The kid-friendly ADHD & autism cookbook: the ultimate guide to the gluten-free, milk-free diet," by Pamela J. Compart, is assigned as 641.5638 COM. This classification falls under “641.5638 Cooking with respect to carbohydrate, fat, protein content.” This class is clearly applicable; however, equally appropriate might be classification under “641.56318 People with food allergies.” This raises the topic of subjectivity in classification – who is considered an authoritative voice in assigning a creative work to any given class? The author? A reader? A cataloguer who has likely not read the book? In conjunction with consistency, will one book of the same subject be classified separately by another cataloguer due to the subjective nature of the task? What parameters do different libraries establish in attempting to maintain some semblance of consistency and objectivity in their classification of library resources?

"Caring and cooking for the allergic child," by Linda L. Thomas, yet another book catalogued by TPL, has been designated as 618.9297 T35. This example proves further complexity in the rationale behind its classification. From the title alone, “caring” appears to take slight precedence over “cooking,” which verifies its collocation under “618.9297 Allergies--humans--

pediatrics,...” However, a subjective decision, again, had to be made on the part of the cataloguer for under which classes and subdivisions it was assigned. Was this accurately assigned under “610 Medicine & health,” and subsequently “618.92 Pediatrics,” or would it have been equally suitable within “641.56318 People with food allergies,” under “641.5 Cooking?” Can one say objectively one way or the other, or will subjectivity heedlessly permeate the classification of information regardless of the implemented system? Certainly no system is flawless or immune to human error.

These previous examples speak to the complexities a cataloguer must address in approaching the classification of the third prominent demographic within the library system, hospital patients struggling with various health conditions. While subdivisions of classes can often be tailored to many specifications, the ability to find that information purely based on DDC classification is limited by how intuitively subjects are attuned to broader classifications. Two examples that fit this context are "Healthy Indian cooking for diabetes: delicious khana for life," by Azmina Govindji, 616.46206 GOV and "The complete arthritis health, diet guide & cookbook: includes 125 recipes for managing inflammation & arthritis pain," by Kim Arrey, 616.722 ARR. The former is classified under “616.46206 Diabetes--therapy,...” and the latter under “616.722 *Arthritis.” Both are collocated under the subdivision “616.1-616.9 Specific diseases,” of “610 Medicine & health,” outside of the realm of cooking, yet one acknowledges cooking as a form of therapy and the other doesn’t, even though a correlative subdivision exists - “616.72206 Arthritis--therapy,...” It seems that, regardless of final designation, both negative and positive results of classification will be invariably incited with the DDC’s provision of multiple valid classes. Arguments could be made against the classification of these books under cooking, while comparable arguments could be made of their designation under medicine and

health. Similar to the previously addressed demographics, little is contextually present within the subdivisions of “641.5 Cooking” that has not be addressed previously within this report. Perhaps this is more substantial evidence for the reasoning behind the classification of these two books, as, while concatenated call numbers can be generated fairly accurately, this involves significant toil and initiative by the cataloguer beyond what is provided barebones by DDC. Perhaps Medicine and health simply provided more accessible pre-made subdivisions for the subject than did Cooking.

Having assessed the functionality of DDC via the given subject and prominent samples of the library community’s diverse demographics, irrespective of its numerous flaws and inconsistencies, this classification scheme is far more conducive to the needs of both the library’s users and management than would be that of the system of a retail outlet. Reasons for this include maintaining consistency with other library systems in providing ease of access for patrons in addition to available support for cataloguing and sharing customized call numbers for staff, the largely sound theoretical framework of DDC, and the financial investment dependent on implementing an entirely new system. What would prove a more effective and efficient strategy in lieu of completely implementing and overhauling a different classification scheme is the investment of the required resources toward solving the perceived difficulties produced by DDC. For example, time and energy could be devoted toward developing policies that would define consistent decision-making when provided with multiple viable divisions in designating class. Foundations could be modified on the local level toward eliminating biases within the hierarchical structure.

Additionally, these difficulties within the intricacies of DDC have arguably little effect on the library’s end-users, save perhaps the act of browsing nearby shelves for related resources;

however, this particular dilemma has been encountered within bookstores in a comparative frequency as within libraries. The majority of patrons' information retrieval strategies involve the use of the library's catalogue and bibliographic records via keyword searching. DDC has little bearing on this aspect of the library's virtual collocation of resources. For both library patrons and staff, a major barrier in embracing the proposed classification system would be in adapting to the inevitable learning curve which would not only augment expenses, but potentially intimidate and alienate users, despite prevalence of similar systems by public retailers. While the system employed by a retail store suits the purpose of optimizing revenues based on what materials and subjects are presently popular, that of a library is to provide information on every subject from every perspective in a permanent capacity, regardless of popularity or contention. And while it can be argued that class schemes contribute to the formation of a culture, it can also be said that these systems come to reflect the cultures in which they are entrenched more accurately over time, particularly if accentuation is placed on such an endeavour as optimizing said classification.

Dewey Decimal Classification in a public library environment is simply more effective and efficient than the organizational scheme of a retail outlet in every respect of that context. Questioning the validity of a classification system does not necessitate that the system in question is inadequate, rather that it is actively prompting reaction to and engagement by its users, including cataloguers, toward a desired optimal functionality. Supplanting DDC would foremost affect the cataloguers, yet the purpose of the library's classification system is to accommodate the users who would largely remain unaware of any major contrived differentiation.

Works cited

OCLC Online Computer Library Center. "Dewey Services." OCLC Connexion. Last modified 2012. Accessed December 9, 2012. <http://connexion.oclc.org>.