

Assignment 7: Research Paper

Addressing Bias in Classification Systems Through Critical Cataloging

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LIS6711: Organization of Knowledge I

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November 29, 2022

According to a recent article in *The School Library Journal*, school librarians across the country are creating a movement to rethink the Dewey Decimal Classification system in their stacks. The librarians are discovering that the venerated (though dated and dusty) system no longer fits the patrons they serve, and they are taking matters into their own hands. It makes sense to start in the schools. “The push to slowly shift away from some of Dewey’s overtly biased categorizations comes amid a greater effort to decolonize—or build racially equitable—libraries in general.” (Joseph, 2021).

I attended two private Christian schools from first through 12th grades. The first school I attended was founded on the grounds of a former private estate. The school library was in the grand home of the estate. It’s here where I learned the Dewey Decimal System. I can picture the librarian there behind her circulation desk and the DDC poster behind her. It is unknown to me whether Mrs. Merrell ever confronted the bias in DDC. It’s unlikely in the homogeneous setting she worked within. And I should know. Though my very first job was in a public library, I have since worked in two private Christian school libraries. I even performed basic cataloging work. The first time I learned of bias in classification systems is in this class.

We could think of Melvil Dewey as a problematic pioneer and his classification system as a product of its time. “The problem of bias in classification can be linked to the nature of classification as a social construct. It reflects the same biases as the culture that creates it.” (Olson, 1998) Dewey, a straight, white, protestant male was attending Amherst College when he created his classification system. Women were not admitted to Amherst until 1974. The

biases of the DDC reflect the culture in which it was created. However, time has shown that Dewey was a deeply racist and sexist individual whose classification system not only reflected the culture of his time but intended to further his white supremacist ideals through its use.

(Weigand, 1996)

Does the answer lie in ditching Dewey? The Library of Congress Cataloging and Subject Headings have their own biases as well. A group of Dartmouth students discovered this while attempting to petition the Library of Congress to change the term “Illegal Alien” and ran smack into a political firestorm. (Schwartz, 2022). While some libraries are shifting towards a bookseller model or starting a new classification system from scratch, others are proposing critical cataloging. Efforts towards more inclusive cataloging include scrapping DDC and LCC altogether and replacing them with the Critical Catalog. There’s the Cataloging Lab, a sandbox for sharing suggestions for better Library of Congress subject headings. The drawbacks?

Interoperability. In an interview for *On the Media*, Emily Drabinsky, Critical Pedagogy Librarian, CUNY, says, “I always wonder when people say, “Burn it down,” if they've ever built anything. It can be very, very difficult to build things. The interoperability piece is super important, and if we want libraries to be able to share, we need those systems to continue functioning.”

(Schwartz, 2022).

According to American University, “Critical Cataloging, a subset of Critical Librarianship, focuses on mitigating the ways in which classification and the organization of knowledge codify systems and hierarchies of oppression.” (Bruce, 2020). Critical librarianship and critical cataloging are useful tools in a librarian’s battle for social justice and information literacy. These tools can be

honed in cataloging classes. In Hope A. Olsen's article "Thinking Professionals: Teaching Critical Cataloging," she addresses the idea that, too often, cataloging students are seeking that one "right" term and, aside from the fact that every human will have a different point of view, considering context is important to address terms that are inclusive to a marginalized group of which the cataloging professional may not be a member.

However, Elizabeth Drabinsky who is president-elect of The American Library Association, acknowledges the lack of funding and training in cataloging in general. Public schools and libraries are underfunded institutions. Drabinsky sees the issues with bias in catalogs as tandem with other library issues such as underrepresentation among professionals in the archive, library, and museum fields. "Finding areas of common interest. Labor conditions, representation, access to the power to how to shape how our institutions work. These are problems we share in common, and we need to work together to come up with collective solutions." (Ross, Drabinski, E., & Leigh, K. 2022).

In the meantime, the important work that school librarians are accomplishing is what librarian Nicole A. Cook calls for: critical self-reflection and critical action. Understanding the population a librarian serves and creating better environments for learning, including thoughtful and just cataloging, can only improve outcomes. As proof, according to critlib.org, a site devoted to critical librarianship, the Library of Congress did change two subject headings in November 2021 from "Alien" to "Non-citizen" and "illegal aliens" to "illegal immigrants." Critical action taken by a group of students making a difference.

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