

Are Dewey's Days Numbered?: Libraries Nationwide Are Ditching the Old Classification System

slj.com/2012/09/collection-development/are-deweys-days-numbered-libraries-across-the-country-are-giving-the-old-classification-system-the-heave-ho-heres-one-schools-story/



Illustration by Victor Juhasz

Join the authors for a Twitter chat, Thursday, October 11, at 9 p.m. EST hashtag: #sljdewey

Pushing between snack time and reading group, Zack, a third-grade boy, ducks into our school library while another class is beginning to check out books. “Sue, do you have anything about making stuff with paper?” asks the third grader. Around him, a dozen nine-year-olds independently browse different sections that are marked by large, kid-friendly signs, such as “Scary,” “Animals,” and “Adventure.”

With only a moment to spare, the librarian suggests that Zack look above the shelves for the big “Making Stuff” sign, and then search the labels under “P” for paper. A few minutes later, he’s grinning at Sue, holding not only a book about origami, but also one on sewing that he snatched from a nearby shelf. “That was easy!” he boasts. “And I found more things I want to do, too!”

Zack’s “Aha!” moment is the kind of discovery we like to call orchestrated luck—and it’s the inspiration for a unique system that we’ve developed to encourage more independent and empowered seeking in our library. Here at the [Ethical Cultural Fieldston School](#), a private preK–5 school in New York City, we’ve gotten rid of the Dewey decimal system and created a new library system that’s tailored to the needs of our students, staff, and curriculum. Thanks, in part, to whole-word labeling, child-friendly categories, and visually compelling signs, our kids are now amazingly optimistic about finding what they want. In fact, they

keep telling us, “Wow, you’ve really organized the library!”

Our post-Dewey system, which we’ve affectionately dubbed [Metis](#) (after the clever, crafty mother of the Greek god Athena), puts things together in a way that encourages kids to move easily from one idea to another. Zack’s natural and simple segue from paper craft to sewing would probably never have happened with Dewey: it would have entailed a jump from 735 to 646. That’s a big reason why a small but growing number of school and public libraries—from the [Perry Branch Library](#) in Gilbert, AZ; and Burke High School in Omaha, NE; to the newly opened Carmel Elementary School in Clarksville, TN; and Darien Library in Connecticut—have ditched Dewey, or at least have escorted the 136-year-old system partway out the door.

Has Metis made a difference? Absolutely. During the past year, in our middle-grade library (for kids in grades three to five), we’ve seen dramatic increases in circulation—including around 100 percent or more in our “Sports,” “Countries,” “Humor,” and “Mystery” sections, and a spike of 240 percent in “Machines” (which includes the military and transportation). And in those always under-used sections like “Languages” and what we now call “Community” (sections of the 300s in Dewey), we’ve seen a jump of more than 300 percent. The early grades library, for preK through second-grade kids, has seen similar gains in areas such as “Humor” (87 percent), “Scary” (148 percent), and “Adventure” (110 percent).

Students aren’t the only ones who are enjoying the ease of navigating our collection. “I love your new system!” exclaims one of our kindergarten teachers. “I can find what I need for my classes in no time,” says another. And parents are also appreciative. “My child loves choosing a book to read with me every morning,” reports the mother of a young boy. “We usually start in ‘Machines’ and can find what we want without help. He’s even begun to branch out a bit and is asking for books about space now!”

Winter of our discontent

Certainly there was no lack of order back in the old days, in 2010, when we still used the Dewey decimal system: our shelves were labeled and organized; the online catalog was accessible; students were taught the basics of searching from the earliest grades. So what made us switch?

Our discontent with Dewey arose after years of confronting train books in the 380s and transportation items in the 620s; crafts scattered throughout the 600s and 700s; pets stuck next to cooking; and double-digit Dewey numbers for our extensive folktale collection. More important, we had the sense that for all the energy that we and our students were spending on teaching and learning Dewey (all those scavenger hunts and online library games), even our most advanced students still struggled to navigate smoothly from their initial request through the catalog to the item’s correct place on the shelves. So much effort was expended on this process that we felt as if our library was focused on finding materials rather than actually using them, and at odds with the emphasis on inquiry and critical thinking skills found in the American Association of School Librarians’ [“Standards for the 21st-Century Learner.”](#)

Once our objections to using Dewey became clear to us, the problems we’d been working around for years became intolerable and we began questioning everything. “Is Dewey and the curriculum focus that it demands leaving us behind in the 20th century?” we asked ourselves. “Why are we using decimals in a children’s library, when they don’t learn that until fourth-grade math? And why are our picture books arranged by author, when most children are more interested in the content than in who wrote the book?” By January 2011, we knew it was time to say good-bye to Dewey.

Ditching Dewey

With a palpable sense of terror and excitement, we set about creating a new system. We knew the task was huge, and we had no idea if we were up to it. The process involved a great deal of thinking, talking,

and pushing at one another's arguments to try to find flaws in them. Questioning our long-held assumptions generated a wave of almost superhuman energy that propelled us into the massive undertaking ahead.

With some sleuthing, we discovered the work of Linda Cooper, a professor at New York's Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Science, who had researched the way that kids categorize information. Taking a cue from her methodology, we asked our fourth and fifth graders to brainstorm the contents of their ideal library in terms of categories or topics. It was from a request during one of these sessions that we got the idea for and name of our new crafts category, when a student innocently asked, "Can you please make a section on making stuff?" These sessions helped us hone our 26 "main categories," counterparts to Dewey's 10 main classes.

We also gave small groups of third and fourth graders carefully selected stacks of books and asked them to organize them in a meaningful way, and then to explain their reasoning. We discovered that many students wanted books on flying animals to be lumped together, and almost everyone wanted items on aquatic animals to be grouped together—penguins with sharks, dolphins, and seashells. Ultimately, after consulting with our science teachers, we decided to adapt their terminology, and we formulated animal subdivisions that approximated scientific classifications, while making some exceptions: "Aquatic Animals," "Birds," "Bugs," "Reptiles," "Mammals," and "Prehistoric."

Our kindergarteners and first graders were asked to make some sophisticated choices about sports biographies and animal books by moving to one side of the room or another in response to specific questions, such as, "Does Derek Jeter belong with famous people or sports?" or "Should this book on whales go with the mammal books or with books about other aquatic animals?" (Jeter sensibly went with sports, and whales with aquatic animals, despite the fact that our students were aware that the Yankees shortstop is famous and that whales are mammals.)

We also measured some of our young library users' attitudes. We asked our first and fourth graders how they felt while they were searching for a good book, and how they felt when they had trouble finding a title. Our first graders didn't hold back; their responses were emotional and surprisingly succinct. "When I can't find what I want, I feel aginy [sic]," wrote one young boy. He wasn't the only one, affirming that we had to make our students' library experiences much better.

Articles of belief

As we worked on developing ideas about categories and subcategories, their order, call numbers, and visual labels, we kept a few principles in mind. These principles became our navigational tools. Our system had to be...

Child-centered: it had to start from a student's point of view and use appropriate language for our users.

Browsable: the order and the sections and subsections had to be clear not only to librarians, but also to students, faculty, and parents.

Flexible: it had to be capable of being adapted for use by a range of ages and be capable of evolving over time, as the world changed and our collection grew.

'Why are we using decimals in a children's library, when they don't learn that until fourth-grade math?'



We also knew that we wanted a system that allowed our students to be as independent as possible—and that meant our spine labels needed a major overhaul. For starters, we wanted to make sure that the labels had a strong visual component, so that students could easily tell what section they were in—this was especially important for our youngest learners who may lack reading skills. To accomplish this, we hired a graphic designer to create a subject label for each main category—for instance, a tennis racket hitting a football for “Sports” and an image of gears for “Machines.” These labels are a huge hit with everyone. They clearly identify what the book is about, and they’re so visually engaging and child-friendly that they’re often the first things our patrons comment on.

We also knew that the use of any kind of code had to be minimal, if at all. Consequently, we decided to use whole language in our call numbers and on our spine labels. So, for instance, instead of 793.57 GUT, a corresponding label now reads “Sports–Baseball,” and 818 HAL has become “Humor–Jokes.”

The grand plan

After several months of dissecting ideas and piling books into groups, we started to see the big picture and established the following plan:

Primarily, we’d use alphabetical order. Although younger students struggle with this, it’s a skill that’s taught in the earliest grades, and reinforced in classrooms, with print dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Because alphabetizing the main classes by name would result in an order that wasn’t very helpful (as in “Adventure,” “Animals,” and “Arts”), we decided to assign a single letter (A-Z) to each of our main categories. This is the only code we use in our system, and it has enabled us to create a flow and logical order for the entire library space, with, for example, “Machines,” then “Science,” leading into “Nature,” then “Animals” and “Pets.”

Within our main categories, we use mostly an alphabetical arrangement for the subcategories, which gives students a clear, intuitive order when browsing, and allows for maximum flexibility and adaptability in terms of future changes to and the expansion of our collection. In a few cases, alphabetical order wasn’t helpful, and we opted to place a number before the subcategory so that the shelves have a logical order. For instance, in “Countries,” we’ve arranged books by eras: “1. Ancient,” “2. Medieval,” and so on.

Fairly early on, we made the crucial decision to give up the idea of creating a system that classifies books as precisely as Dewey does. Instead, we opted for something we call “categorization,” based on some of the ideas developed by England’s East Sussex County Library in the 1980s. We’d put books in helpful categories, like “Languages” or “Mystery,” and dispense with author Cutters on the spines. After all, most students don’t care who wrote a book on volcanoes, they just want to find the topic, so the writer’s name isn’t especially helpful. (Putting the first three letters of the author’s surname on the call number is useful if you want to know exactly where a book is on the shelf, but it’s unnecessary if you keep your subcategories browsable.) Overall, this meant that many times we’d have more books—say, 15 books in “Nature-Disasters”—with the same call numbers than we did with Dewey. We figured it was our job to keep those categories manageable and of a helpful size. We did use author Cutters in “Picture Stories,” “Fiction,” and “Verse,” where subcategories are larger or the author’s name is an important factor in selecting a book, especially



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for students and teachers in the upper grades.

While we were at it, we also decided we'd break some rules when it came to dealing with fiction and nonfiction. Since we often talk to our students about evaluating online information and critical thinking, we thought that mixing together fiction and nonfiction titles would lead to some interesting teaching opportunities and conversations about books. In addition, it would help us categorize the growing number of books that occupy that grey area between the two. (For years, we'd been trying to explain to kids why the "[Magic School Bus](#)" series was in nonfiction when it's obvious to any five-year-old that Ms. Frizzle isn't real.) We decided that, particularly in the lower-grades library, we'd interfile fiction and nonfiction, and clearly indicate the difference on the spine by using a red dot for "imagination" or a blue dot for "information"—our terms for fiction and nonfiction. A lot of students, who love being able to find all sorts of items on the same shelf, also urged us to add a purple dot to identify books that straddle both categories, but so far, we've resisted that temptation.

Springing forward

Over the next several months, we had time to test, ruminate, and get a good feeling for what would work as separate categories. We consulted with the science department about our animal classifications and with the guidance department about the best word to represent learning differences, as well as disabilities such as blindness, so that our terminology aligned with our curriculum. With summer 2011 rapidly approaching, we decided to test some of our theories while we still had a captive audience.

We put "Holiday" picture books and nonfiction books together and every title we found that fit the notion of "Scary" into separately labeled areas. (This arrangement turned out to be a huge kid-magnet, and we couldn't keep those shelves filled.) In the upper-grades library, we already had our Dewey fiction area labeled by genre, but now we separated the titles into smaller sections, such as "Adventure," "Fantasy," and "Sci-fi." Kids who'd previously had trouble choosing a book for independent or pleasure reading loved this new and easier-to-navigate arrangement.

During spring break, we tore apart the nonfiction sections (300s, 600s, and 700s) and worked on creating subcategories for "Machines," "Community," "Ourselves," and "Making Stuff," putting stacks of books on carts, and reorganizing the shelves in a rough way. Some of the first categories we worked on were synthetic, in that they gathered together books from various parts of Dewey. The "Mystery" category, for example, includes books about spies (327), puzzles (793.7), crime (360), the unexplained (001.9), and codes (650), and "Making Stuff" features books on models from the 620s, cookbooks from 640, books from many sections of the 700s, and guides for writing poetry from 808. Our circulation immediately soared, especially in the noncurricular areas, such as "Making Stuff." And even with the old Dewey labels still on our books and rough signs on shelves, one of our third graders, who'd asked for help in the last few moments of class, had no trouble finding a magic book, because she understood how to look under "M" for magic in the "Making Stuff" section. "That was so easy," she declared, "I don't know why I even needed to ask for help."

Summer of love

The end of the 2010–2011 school year found us pulling apart the shelves. With our alphabet floor mats strewn across the rug, we began piling up picture books in the lower-grades library, and dissolving what remained of the Dewey order in our upper-grades room. We ordered custom picture labels for each category and laid in a stockpile of dots, stars, and spine-label protectors. Book by book, we determined whether it was fiction or nonfiction. We wrestled with the problems inherent in making some of the longer whole-word designations (such as "USA–African Americans–Civil Rights") fit on a spine label. Then, after the books had been assigned to their new categories, it was time to reassign call numbers in the catalog, print labels, and relabel every single item in the library. We sorted all day and reclassified all night, getting

the next section ready for relabeling.

Fortunately, we had a lot of help from our community. Several high school students came back to work on our assembly lines, stopping briefly, every now and then, as they came across one of their old favorite novels. More than three dozen volunteers, including parents, faculty, administrators, and kids, helped out. They joined our family members and a few stalwart friends in removing old layers of labels bearing years of Dewey workarounds. It took us six weeks to tackle our 20,000-volume collection, but it was truly a cleansing experience for all of us.

A new beginning

As September 2011 approached, we made posters using our subject-picture labels, put up shelf signs, introduced our faculty to the new system, and got ready to roll it out to our students. Some teachers preferred just a printed outline, while others worked with us to get a feel for the new sections. In our introductory student sessions, we encouraged kids to explore the system. While a handful of students who had been relatively comfortable with Dewey expressed some discomfort with the new arrangement, the vast majority was thrilled by the change.

During their very first class in the upper-grades library, our third graders were easily able to find humorous fiction, scary fiction, basketball, and animal fiction on their own, leaving the librarian free to talk to students about fractured fairy tales and whether or not Gail Carson Levine was a good choice—and then quickly help another student find an appropriate audiobook.

Since then, we've seen kids navigate the new system with ease and speed, locating materials independently with just a sentence or two of explanation from us. Students who'd struggled to find a good book to read independently are suddenly choosing books from multiple sections with simple prompting. Books on inventions, science experiments, and children's play scripts that had languished for years are now flying off the shelves. And nowadays, we spend checkout time talking to kids about the next book they might like to read rather than helping them find a joke or magic book.

Parents are also thrilled with the new setup. They're now able to help their kids find books, and that sense of accomplishment has translated into a greater appreciation of our library and its services.

The faculty response has been positive, too. While teachers who knew exactly where to go to find their old favorites were at first a little disconcerted by the changes, they soon discovered that the new system provides opportunities to quickly find new resources. That probably explains why teachers are now visiting the library more frequently. It's not uncommon for one to rush in during a prep period, looking for picture books on bullying or sharing (topics that were formerly scattered all over the picture book and nonfiction sections with Dewey), and walk out with everything they need within a few minutes, rather than spending a half hour or more moving from catalog to shelf and back again.

Where to, next?

Is there really a "happily ever after"? We think so. We only just finished up the "tale" end of cataloging our collection, and we still have some rather ungainly call numbers in some of the history sections. We're working on improving our signage, and we're finding new ways to fine-tune the services we provide. We've also set up a website at www.metisinnovations.com to encourage our colleagues in the library world to



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share their ideas.

Change is hard, but the new system has been a boon for our students, faculty, and parents, and it's boosted the library's standing in our school and community. Having moved away from an old system of organization that demanded that a significant portion of our teaching time was spent on simply finding books, we're now able to concentrate on talking with our students about books, as well as teaching them critical thinking and assessment skills. In this 21st-century world of rapidly changing technology, we want our library to play a central role in our school and community. We're finding that our new system supports the library program so well that we are better able to collaborate and support the schoolwide curriculum. We know our new system isn't perfect, but we're definitely on the right track. And to think it all started when we waved good-bye to Dewey.



From the left: Librarian Tali Balas Kaplan, Assistant Librarian Andrea K. Dolloff, Librarian Sue Giffard, and Technology Librarian Jennifer Still-Schiff teach at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York City.

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