One of the constants in the life of a school librarian, where that person fulfils the role of the school librarian (ie no support assistants) is that every day is different. That might seem self-evident, but it is also a given that when the day consists of LRC supervision, computer support, teaching information literacy, organising literacy initiatives and building electronic media for lesson support, it is hard to commit time to longer term projects.

The following article looks briefly at one such longer term project in this school library, which took just over four years to complete, bearing in mind that many, many other projects were running in parallel, such as revitalising the library as a school cultural hub and constructing an e-learning resource base on the school intranet, but these are tales for another day.

OK, just to set the scene, this school was (and remains) a comprehensive school in West Sussex. Actually, it is a voluntary-maintained Roman Catholic school, located outside Bognor Regis, with some 750 students up to Year 11 and a sixth-form of a further 180 students. As a Catholic school it is heavily over-subscribed each year by the strong Catholic Polish and Filipino communities in nearby Bognor. Each year, the school has a relatively high proportion of inclusion students, ie those for whom English is either an additional or a foreign language; not only Polish or Tagalog as first languages, but also a sprinkling of Mandarin Chinese, Turkish, Latvian and Portuguese. And that is where the problems started…

**Consolidated library objectives**

When I first joined the school, my brief was to re-establish the school library, for the following reasons.
1. It was only used by 8-10 students at break times.
2. Very few sixth-formers used the library during lessons.
3. None of my predecessors had any library qualifications and had catalogued items with little consistency.
4. The school was not willing to divert curriculum time to formal library lessons.
5. There were several underlying problems that had existed for many years, not least that the eclipse-2 LMS had not been utilised properly and that some 1200 books were listed as located in “the library”.

One of the first jobs was to set some **general library objectives** and circulate them to all the teaching staff and these are shown below.

- to establish and develop the library and associated information facilities as the centre of the school’s learning/information culture
- to promote a love of literature amongst all ages, including the organising of display work, visiting speakers, etc
- to promote the use of the library as an essential and valuable resource among its customers.

**Note:** to avoid confusion, the school library is referred to now as the LRC, as it contains over 10,500 books, 50 computers, extensive journals and e-resources, AV equipment for hire and a suite for lessons requiring projector/screen.

Apart from EAL/EFL students, this school has a reasonable proportion of students each year who have problems with learning, sometimes with numbers and often with concepts. Again, with no possibility of library lessons, which was the best way to educate new users in using the school library so that they could be confident about coming in and finding what they wanted under their own steam?
This problem was exacerbated by the fact that my strategy to deal with the issue of making the library popular had worked so well that, instead of 8-10 students using the library at break times, we now had 50-60 students (average) using the library at break times and it was not always possible to answer continual queries of where to find books on costume, cubism, food technology, woodworking, to name a few.

Several library user surveys later, the problem was identified – not one student knew what the numbers on the book spines signified or why the concepts were linked to the numbers. To rub salt into the wound, not one student really cared, despite large posters that listed Dewey numbers against the subjects. The underlying questions, of course, were (a) who were the market/customers and (b) what were their information needs? So, the next major objective was the need to educate library users in information literacy skills.

Helping users to find information

Some school libraries in West Sussex use simplified Dewey for classification and guidance, but this still involves formal library lessons and explanations of how Dewey works. It can be complex for students with numerical problems or special learning needs who find it difficult to reconcile six figure numbers (or more) with concepts.

Sometimes, I tell prospective students and their parents that this is the only school library of its type in southern England and this is true. We do not have a linear Dewey system here and nor can we ever return to it. What we do have in place is a full, subject-based library arrangement, with 20 or more sub-classification systems that are unique to this school library.

Before starting with the rather knotty subject of classification (not so much rocket science as library science), each library has its own variances, according to the librarian’s view of indexing. One of my college lecturers used to pose this problem: you have a book on the science of music: do you place
it in science (Dewey: 500) or music (Dewey: 780)? We have a comparatively small library (some 10,500 items) and this problem has less impact, because it is not a long step from science to the performing arts, but use of the **keywords facility** on the library computer catalogue serves to point people in the right direction. This is not such a radical idea, because most on-line researchers use keywords as the first step, normally via Google or Bing.

The real answer is to be consistent in one’s approach. In general, all the non-fiction books have been relocated into **areas that are commensurate with the school’s departments**, so that a student need only go to one area of the library to find all the resources for his or her query. To this end, the reference library has been dismantled too and the reference books included with the appropriate subject categories. Bearing in mind that the library is curriculum-driven, this idea of locating non-fiction stock by school faculty is logical.

In some subjects, it has been necessary to refine this approach further. For example, *history* appears as a hopeless mess (technical terminology!) in Dewey with 940 relating to the history of Europe, 941 relating to the history of Britain and 942 relating to the history of England and Wales. A year 7 student looking for works on the Tudors might be referred to a mix of 941.550942 and 942.50736. This is not viable in a school library (not even one using simplified Dewey) and this library now has separate sub-divisions for the history section into key time periods categories, eg the Tudors, the Victorians, the Middle Ages, the Stuarts, etc.

For example, students looking for books on the Battle of Hastings can (and do) go straight to the history bookcase and the shelf of books on the Middle Ages; these books are labelled H/MED (H/ as a general prefix for History and MED for medieval) for easy access. There are several advantages to the users.

1. Each departmental bookcase is signed clearly, eg Classical Greece and Rome, Food Technology, Sport, Law, Science, Textiles, etc.
2. The heads of departments review the stock regularly and suggest new
topics, replacements or gaps in the coverage.
3. All new non-fiction stock is bought against curriculum requirements — there are few books on antiques, creative crafts, gardening or mind/body/spirit (apart from Roman Catholicism).
4. The library catalogue (SearchStar) is contained on every school terminal, as part of eclipse.net, and users are guided to book location via the keywords. Each book record contains at least one keyword to indicate the relevant bookcase.
5. Each bookcase has shelf labels to show the new classification.
6. The school hosts its own version of eclipse.net; this means that it has been customised to reflect the new classification.
7. At the start of the project, the LMS held some 20,000 keywords, many of them synonyms; the current system has been purged to some 2500 terms on strict KWIC/KWOC principles and a system thesaurus asks users to clarify unfamiliar terms. For example, the previous system had some 15 different terms for the USA. Now, you will be asked for America, America – history or America – geography.

In effect, each school department has its own mini-library for the benefit of school students. New subjects or curriculum changes may warrant the construction of a new mini-library, but this is easily accommodated. For example, it was felt that the school would benefit from a special mini-library on Roman Catholicism. The resultant Faith Matters section has its own classification (FM/01, FM/02, etc) and takes in special materials on homilies, papal sermons, encyclicals, pilgrimages and personal Catholic testimonies.

The revised classification was performed on a piecemeal department-by-department basis over a four year period, according to a pre-structured plan. It is unique to this library, although it is interesting that several neighbouring schools have also reported problems with Dewey and have requested details of our scheme. The boxed example below demonstrates our approach towards encouraging self-discovery by the users.
For example, let us say that I purchase a new book or DVD that falls into the remit of Sport. There is a customer-friendly shelf arrangement (within a mini-library just for this generic subject) that is grouped by a general spine prefix of S/ for ease of use, followed by suffixes for /GAMES or /ATH or /ANI to denote categories of sport, ie ball games, athletics and animal-related sports.

In a conventional school library, classified by Dewey, the recommended number for cricket coaching (for example) is 796.35809 or for a history of Manchester United Football Club as 796.334630942733! In our library, both books are classified as S/GAMES on a single shelf for easy access and browsing by students and tutors.

Does it work?

This is the million-dollar question and there appear to be two answers. Subsequent user surveys and library monitor training exercises reveal that the classification is really easy to use from the user’s point of view. The biographical designation of 920 has been dropped in favour of B/ + first three letters of the person's name (eg B/EDI for Thomas Edison or B/WIL for Harold Wilson). Biographies of scientists are placed in the science section, musicians or actors are located in the performing arts section and politicians appear in the politics bookcase. Easy or what? Good for customers then – students, teachers, visitors, etc.

Dewey purists are now foaming at the mouth no doubt and it is more complex to run from the librarian’s point of view. Whereas the librarian/cataloguer once had to be number-perfect in Dewey (or UDC or Bliss or whatever), this system is basic and allows flexibility, providing that the layout remains true to the curriculum. The librarian simply needs to be phrase-perfect on the keywords, so as to retain consistency for future searches, and knowledgeable about changes to the curriculum. It also helps if the LMS is both flexible and reconfigurable.

Here’s the key though. As an 11-year old customer, you may come into a
library looking for information on Android phones, volcanoes or the Great Fire of London. If you cannot find your subject easily, you may leave and not return: an unsatisfied customer. Our subject-based approach means that you are easily guided to the relevant bookcase and shelf, eg the shelf where all the books have spine labels of ICT and includes lots of books on all types of smartphones. You are now a satisfied customer and the library has managed to increase your research ability in a subtle way. Further, the on-line library catalogue would have guided you to the same shelf.

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**Biography:** Nick O’Connor is a chartered librarian, working in a secondary school library in West Sussex. He does not want to be seen as a heretic (or burned at the stake) for his treatment of the Dewey system and would like to say that this replacement works fine at this school…

Before joining his current post, he spent some 25 years working in electronic information services and library roles in the private sector, including some eight years running his own group of companies, specialising in e-books, internet e-training and e-information services. He lives in Surrey with his family and lists his hobbies as herbal medicine and folklore.