

As metadata specialists working with an in-house classification scheme we would like to share our experiences of working with a unique scheme. With just less than 32,000 students, and being the seventh largest university in the United Kingdom, we have a broad range of subject and research areas to cater for. Local classification schemes are usually found in smaller specialist libraries and it is quite unusual for an academic institution of the University of Leeds' size to have adopted such a scheme. The implications of inheriting an in-house classification scheme are significant for both the classifier and the end user. Before we address these implications it is first of all necessary to provide some background to our scheme and its context within the University of Leeds libraries.

History

The University of Leeds uses four main classification schemes, although our in-house "Leeds scheme" is used for the vast majority of our book stock. National Library of Medicine Classification is used in our Health Sciences Library, Library of Congress is used for Psychology and Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) is used for Education.

Before the Brotherton Library was built in 1936, all of the library's collection was scattered in subject departments around campus. Books were simply given the name of the subject library as location and with no subdivisions e.g. "French" or "Botany". The main classification scheme within the University of Leeds libraries is unique to the University and has been developed in accordance with the development of the University over the years. Many libraries adopt 'localised' or 'specialised' classification schemes with the intention of providing the user with a more in-depth and comprehensive breakdown of subject knowledge. The classification scheme used at the University of Leeds in most part developed this way, with small localised schemes being developed to accommodate the stock of departmental libraries that once housed a significant proportion of the University's bibliographic material.

With a new university library on campus, and a newly appointed Assistant Librarian in Kenneth Garside, the Leeds classification scheme was brought together and developed further by the adding of notation to the original subjects. For example, the classmark Sociology F-5.3 BAR would thus be a book on divorce and family break-up in the Sociology schedule with an author named Barnes. Over the years the need for self-contained departments housing research resources diminished and there was a gradual move towards a more united front or gathering together of services. As a result, these small individual libraries have been amalgamated into four main sites, the Brotherton, Edward Boyle, Health Sciences and Laidlaw libraries housing approximately 2 million books.

Until the end of the 1990s subject librarians were responsible for updating the scheme and had responsibility for all classification. In theory this worked well as they had an in-depth knowledge of their subject areas and were ordering books and liaising with academics. However, on the downside, these individual subject classification schedules had the potential to turn into mini schemata of their own. Books were being squeezed into one schedule which would have been better classified in another. Dare we say, that some subject schedules were guarded territorially? One prime example is Criminology, which exists in an almost identical format in both the Sociology and Law schedules.

During this period, no systematic programme of updating and revising the schemes was apparent. Changes and additions to some individual schemes (to accommodate new subjects and disciplines and relieve congestion) were only carried out sporadically and as and when it was deemed necessary.

When all classification and cataloguing was merged together into a centralised Metadata Team, the chance finally arose to look at the classification scheme as a whole and to introduce a programme of continuous review and development.

Implications

Having worked with both the in-house University of Leeds scheme and a faceted scheme like DDC, we feel we are well placed to ponder the advantages and disadvantages of localised classification and share our experiences of some obstacles we have faced.

One would not dispute that the adoption of a scheme like DDC from the library's inception would have been a simpler and more pragmatic road to follow (simply because it is updated without the input and intervention of the classifier) for a large academic institution like ourselves. However, the cost and practical implications of rectifying such a decision would be vast and this has led us to embrace the scheme we have inherited. The freedom and sense of control we have over our scheme can prove at times to be both satisfying as well as daunting and there are distinct advantages and disadvantages of being in such a commanding position.

Taking the positives into consideration, we believe our classification scheme is more user friendly for the customer. For instance, the fact that specific subject areas (as opposed to sometimes overly long DDC numbers) appear on the spine of the book is less daunting for the end user. From a classification perspective, it eradicates the construction of complex subdivisions and allows the classifier to be more creative. Also, the power to amend and create new classmarks free from the constraints of a governing body allows for the greater freedom to address new areas of study and advances in technology, and express the University's areas of study and expertise. Classmarks can be as detailed as we desire and the freedom to create can prove particularly useful when addressing the growing trend of interdisciplinary texts. Although this can be advantageous, with greater freedom comes increased responsibility. Maintenance and revision need to be addressed regularly to conserve an effective scheme, and some of the ways we have tried to address this will be dealt with in due course.

From a negative perspective it is fair to say that if the University of Leeds scheme was being designed today the approach would be significantly different. The scheme suffers from design issues stemming back to its inception, and the unregulated way it has developed over the years. The fact that it has been designed and managed by different members of staff with varying degrees of subject knowledge has led to a lack of uniformity throughout the scheme, with some subject areas being more developed than others. This can be illustrated by some subject areas lacking detail thus resulting in vast and congested classmarks such as 'Law B-3.6' (European Union law), 'Art R-0' (Photography) and 'Sociology F-14' (Culture) that are well in excess of one thousand items. This lack of detail is particularly un-useful to the customer in that similar texts may be shelved apart. Equally, this proves very unsatisfactory for the classifier and there has been a tendency to avoid overly used classmarks wherever possible so that the problem of overcrowding is not compounded. A recent example of such a dilemma was presented when classifying *'Food on the Page: Cookbooks and American Culture'* by Megan J. Elias (2017). Sociology F-14 (Culture) includes the scope note '*including postmodernism, fashion, food*' and on the surface seems like an ideal classmark for such a text. However, the sheer vastness of this classmark combined by the lack of geographical subdivisions led to the text being placed in 'Modern History U-0.06' (United States – Social History) to accommodate both the historical and geographical elements.

Over-indulgent and excessive detail in some areas can be equally frustrating and sometimes amusing to a new cataloguer. For example, within Zoology B – "Studies of Taxonomic Groups" there are extremely detailed and long pages of subdivisions for protozoa, molluscs, insects, fish and birds and yet when you arrive at mammals there are just 20 possible classmarks, three of which are Carnivora (cats, badgers, bears, dogs), Primates and Man.

Several areas within the English classification scheme have also made the classification process overly complex and throughout the years this has led to many classmarks being used infrequently. These problems were compounded by lack of maintenance and revision and many schemes had become unevenly balanced. Ferrari (1999) highlights the necessary maintenance and revision of localised classification schemes, and if this is not applied strictly a scheme is liable to become unruly. This has certainly been the case with the University of Leeds scheme in the past. The uneven treatment of subject areas has led to some classmarks being too detailed and barely used, and others significantly lacking detail, resulting in hugely congested classmarks. Lack of detail has added to this congestion through best fit classmarks having to be used regularly. This lack of detail, combined with insufficient updates, also led to the problem of the scheme often being unable to accommodate new stock/subject areas, once again fuelling the use of best fit classmarks and classmark congestion. With regard to the inconsistent design of the scheme, it can be noted that the uneven application of geographical subdivisions, and the duplication of subject areas has proved problematic for both the classifier and user.

As the University of Leeds scheme was designed to suit a set of small departmental libraries that were often used in isolation from one another, the issue of classmark duplication has also become a significant problem over the years. When the University's collections were brought together and housed within fewer central library sites, it was not unusual for similar subject areas to be located in different areas of the scheme. For example, there is a crossover of 'Criminology' within 'Sociology' and 'Law' and 'Biography' within 'Politics' and 'Modern History'. This problem was exacerbated in the past through departmental politics and collection funding, and it appears that there was a reluctance to address it. As a consequence, at times this made the classification process significantly more complex, and hindered browsing of our collections from a user's perspective.

When combined, this set of inter-related problems, -generated by the inconsistent design, and the sporadic and sparse attention to updating and revision- has counteracted the fundamental aim of localised classification in that it is able to offer a more detailed and comprehensive means of classification than their generalised counterparts (MacDonald, 1991, p.95).

Moving Forward

Following the handover of classification responsibility from subject librarians to a centralised 'Metadata Team' with metadata specialists classifying across the whole range of subjects, the problems of the scheme began to become more apparent. Following the outcomes of a library 'Lean' project in 2013, a classification review group was established to address classification problems and inconsistencies, and improve the classification experience of both the classifier and the end user.

During the process of a series of ongoing weekly meetings, classification schemes have been systematically reviewed and revised to eradicate rogue classmarks (where mistakes have been made or new unofficial classmarks have been developed without notation on the schedule master copy), inconsistencies of notation and adding scope notes to the schedules to aid the classifier. Cross referencing has been carried out to highlight similar classmarks throughout the scheme as a whole, and in some instances classmarks have been closed and reclassified where duplication was deemed a significant problem.

The introduction of new subject areas has also taken place to accommodate new historical periods, new advances in technology, topical themes such as 'Brexit' and 'Terrorism', and new areas of study within the University. It is our aim in the future to develop further relationships with the ordering team and their selection of reading list material to identify and anticipate new topics of study before the monographs are ordered and received.

Attempts have been made to make our schedules more consistent and linear in terms of terminology and numbering, although the latter has proved more difficult due to inconsistencies of the initial design of the schemes. Despite this, we feel that improvements have been made in this area.

With regard to the issue of classmark congestion, the problem areas have been identified and in some cases dealt with through further subdivisions and reclassification. Classmarks of over one thousand items have been identified, but it has to be noted that these are proving more challenging as it would take significant time and budgetary resources to subdivide and reclassify these areas effectively. Progress is being made on tackling these vast classmarks but is inevitably slow.

On the whole we are pleased with our progress and have made improvements that we feel are both beneficial to the classifier and the end user. We recognise our scheme still has its flaws. Time and effort are required to maintain it, and keep it up-to-date and comprehensive, but the freedoms that accompany these efforts also prove beneficial. One cannot ignore the fact that a general classification scheme, encompassing all knowledge, such as DCC, would be more suitable to a collection of our size, although localised classification (perhaps on a smaller scale) is not without its merits. We share Ferrari's (1999) view that constant revision of localised schemes have to be strictly adhered to in order to prevent further generation of problems for both the classifier and the customer. To that end the classification review group will continue to meet, and will aim to anticipate and prevent future problems.

If Kenneth Garside had remained at Leeds University beyond 1945 we would like to think he would have implemented such a systematic review of his scheme. Since this responsibility has now fallen to us, our job now is to nurture and develop Garside's legacy in order to provide a scheme that is both comprehensive, contemporary and fit for the interdisciplinary library user of the 21st century.

References

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