Time Management in Cataloging

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I

How long a day lasts.
It starts at dawn,
goes on all night,
right into the small
hours, finds time
for each minute
individually, wastes
no second,
however swift.

VIII

Seems only yesterday
you woke in this same
bedroom and dressed
for the same steady job,
here where you will wake
again for work tomorrow,
your yesterdays adding up
to thirty years of waking
since you were waved off
by hands it now takes
memory to flesh out.

XIV

How briefly a day
lasts, unravelling so fast
you can't keep pace.
You are at the morning
bus stop, wondering
if you definitely
locked the hall door
when, what seems
like seconds later,
sunset struts by
in all its sky-draped
finery, its evening
wear, and you are
unlocking the hall door.

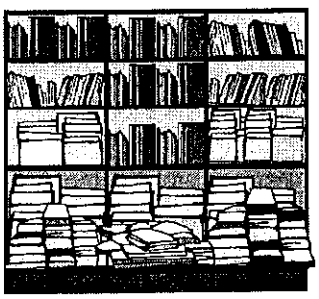
From 'Time Pieces', Dennis O'Driscoll. [1]

All of us develop time management skills to suit the work and our own temperaments. This is another way of saying, there is no one way of managing your time. Cataloguers are presented, or if you like confronted, with special time issues.

We have to begin with the evident fact that our work never ends, there is no time in a growing library when a cataloguer can ever think they are going to finish the work. We are always starting something new. We are in the midst of a creative endeavour. We need to be reflective about the workload, familiar with its requirements, open to its challenges; otherwise it becomes a chore rather a pleasure.

Accession is the first word of the day. Devising work-flows that successfully manage the material coming into the library is a major consideration. It is worth rethinking the workflows from year to year. The technology, for example, facilitates new ways of controlling the material.

At the Joint Theological Library, Parkville, the introduction of a short record into the catalogue for each newly ordered monograph, at the point of ordering or accession, has meant that all new books are represented on the catalogue before they even reached the cataloguer. This would not work for every system but often it saves time when we are searching to see if a book has arrived, or is in the library. Borrowers are alerted to its existence and online visitors can make a document delivery request immediately.



Arranging books awaiting cataloguing can save time. Some place them on the shelf in arrival order, then slavishly work on each one in turn. This linear method could drive someone to dementia. Others place them in alphabetical order by author, for quick access. Others devise a priority order based on subject, courses, language, request, or even the size of the book.

If we do all the big books first, it can appear we have

got through a lot of cataloguing; just don't pay any attention to that trolley of liturgical pamphlets. A sensible arrangement of pre-catalogued material can help immeasurably in getting on top of what otherwise looks like a huge pile of stuff.

Prioritising your time can include decisions about the best and quickest moment to allocate the call number; when to work online and when to work on your local system, and so forth.

One of the main issues we must consider is how to find the balance between accuracy in our cataloguing and getting the work done. Accuracy is the unwritten law. Generosity with the information we provide is a virtue that pays later in terms of the spread of knowledge and the avoidance of missing detail.

The task of cataloguing is to present to the user the most complete record possible, with all the required fields completed, and with as many access points as are necessary for the searcher to find the material.

That said, in pure cataloguing terms, if time is of the essence, the Rules do state a choice of three levels of description.[2] If you can justify a policy of brief description in order to save time, there is no reason not to adopt such a policy and keep to the essential elements set out in one of those levels.

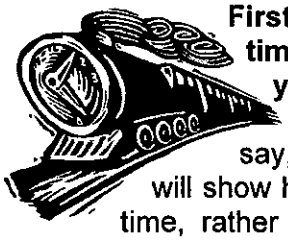
Minimal level cataloguing may suit some libraries and it does save time initially. Minimal level cataloguing is not the answer, though, in a world where

- a lecturer's citation could mean anything,
- the reading list was compiled by someone who hasn't made a bibliography since their degree, and
- the online notice didn't know an author from an editor.

Find a level of description and keep to it.

General Terms

In more general terms, it is worth reflecting on some basic time management principles.



First, you cannot fix your time until you know how you're using your time. Quantifying your time, say, by keeping a time log, will show how you actually use your time, rather than how you *think* you use your time. List the activities in a given week; you could be surprised how much time you're spending on work other than cataloguing, e.g. emails. It is even worth timing how much time you spend on personal rather than work-related jobs. [3]

Second, you have to ask, what needs to change? Why is nothing happening now? If it isn't working now, how can work time be changed so it works later? Librarians who spend their whole time fixing computers or writing journal articles need to ask this question. Once this has been asked it is a case of setting goals for change.

Third and last, you have to ask, what am I going to do to effect change? If you are the Library Manager, you may be able to delegate. If you are the Cataloguer on your own, you need to review your current work practices. You have to ask, what is wasting time? There may be need for organisational change. For example, at what time of the day do you do the best work? Should you be chatting to the users all morning and leaving cataloguing till the last hour of the day when your mind needs a strong coffee to maintain alertness?

You may want to introduce a diary system, where hours are divided into the most productive sequence of jobs through the day. You can make an audit of your own time, thereby defining how much time is spent on priorities and how much on what may be peripherals. And you can make yourself more conscious of time-wasting factors in the workplace, for example overcoming mess.

The guru of this subject, Stephen Covey, has written:

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> The essence of time management is to set priorities and then to organize and execute around them. Setting priorities requires us to think carefully and clearly about values, about ultimate concerns. These then have to be translated into long- and short-term goals and plans and translated once more into schedules or time slots. Then, unless something more important—not something more urgent—comes along, we must discipline ourselves to do as we planned. [4]

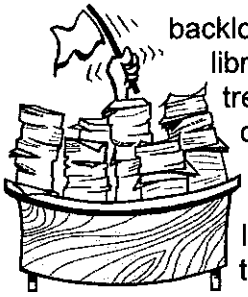
A fact to keep in mind with this work is that although cataloguing is a process of repetition, a production line even, there is no way time and work can be quantified. One book takes a minute to describe, another will take weeks of searching and verifying. The work itself is not a production line but a process that requires patience, perception, knowledge, and the ability to be elastic with time. You are constantly having to make dozens of connections.

Clock time can be meaningless in cataloguing. You are working at research level on material that demands the skill of a polymath. Those who think that cataloguing is some clerical task, or that it's like shelling peas, have missed the boat entirely. Such opinions are born of ignorance.

Another fact about cataloguing is that it involves the inestimable activity of reading and the rest of it involves the inestimable activity of writing. I use the word 'inestimable' here with all its meanings. This is always difficult to impress on people who think in their simplistic way that work is about action, about what can be seen being done, about what is measurable in a plain utilitarian way. Reading, writing (and talking) are our main ways of passing time. How do we think about managing such activities in time terms? All of which leads to some old and new issues.

Backlog, or Arrears

Grossest amongst these is the Backlog, and even the Backlog of Backlogs. The



backlog is sometimes felt to be a librarian's guilty secret. It is treated as an embarrassment or a joke, better dismissed than discussed. When queried about an uncatalogued book, one is tempted to reply: 'I'll do it if someone asks for it!' Whereas the backlog is not to be denied but accepted.

It ought not to be a sign of work incomplete, of being behind, of laziness or worse, but as the sign of a healthy future, of an expanding rather than a contracting collection. A backlog needs always to be placed in the contexts of collection building, special strengths, and comparative workloads.

It is a common reality of libraries and a challenge of time management. There are several ways of approaching a backlog:

1. Appoint limited time, short-term employees to work on specific sections, or even on a large scale assault. There are cataloguing and library services that can provide the cataloguers; we can also be looking around within the Association, where expertise in our own subject is an advantage.
2. Introduce a special projects scheme to reduce parts of the workload. Retrospective conversion, for example, may be an easier short term solution than the systematic re-description of a collection.
3. Focus on one subject area. For example, your backlog may have a predominance of biblical studies where it would be quicker to classify and catalogue all of those books together. The mind is directed to concentrate on one field of study, an easier task than having to dart from one subject to another.
4. Apply rapid cataloguing practices. Make short records of the entire backlog that can be fleshed out later. Alternatively, download any record from anywhere and flag them as 'In

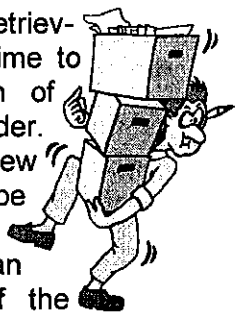
Process'. The logic is that the backlog is then represented on the catalogue, even if most of the real work still has to be done.

5. Prioritise the formats or types. For example, you may wish to deal with all the reference works first, or everything published after a certain date. As important, there may be formats or types you wish to leave till last. For example, there may be no argument for cataloguing backlogs of serials except in the long-term.

6. Alter your workflows to handle a large scale collection. For example, classifying the entire backlog first will save time later. With certain kinds of backlogs (e.g. the huge bequest or the clergyperson's library) a thorough catalogue check to start with can reduce the workload considerably before you even have to catalogue a thing.

7. Compare your backlog with other library backlogs and collection strengths. The idea is that you take into account, in setting your priorities for the cataloging of individual backlog items, whether the same items are located in other libraries' backlogs. Or whether the same items will not be found readily in another library, especially one with strengths in that area. Your backlog can then be divided into priority order along those lines.

8. Arrange the backlog in retrievable order. It takes little time to shelve a large collection of books into author or title order. If you have a ready overview of the material, it can be quickly placed in subject order. Once done, you can even make a feature of the backlog, advertising that the library has, for example, the greatest collection of unclassified hymnbooks in the Southern Hemisphere



9. Allocate time and resources to the Special Collection. The library may need to be made aware of the urgency of certain backlogs and cataloguers can use the procedures within the library itself to turn a cataloguing problem into a library issue. This is the curious reverse logic that pertains in our work places: the Special Collection is a priority of the library that is given to the cataloguers to solve, while it turns out that it is the cataloguers who must remind the library at large of the obligation that has been introduced. Seeking help becomes perfectly justified in such circumstances.

10. Monitor other potential backlogs and causes of backlogs. To flag but one issue here, we enter an era of different perspectives about the relative value of the catalogue. The digital revolution places new strains on our time, for example.

    Electronic resources have the potential to create backlogs and black holes that could have a more devastating effect than they have had with traditional print resources. Where does it all end? Is it even quantifiable in the way a book is? Just the question of links in MARC records to sites on the internet has backlog implications. How much time can we be spending on checking the publisher and table of contents addresses in our MARC records, just to confirm that they are worth visiting?

Cataloging versus Automation

At the dawn of the computer age, cataloguers were promised huge time saving and, it must be owned, it is sweet bliss never again to have to file a card alphabetically. Nevertheless, another issue that vexes many of us nowadays is the question: should we be spending more money, skills, and time on automation and its problems?

For some of us, the technology that was meant to make our work easier and quicker has become the very thing that

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has made it harder and slower. This is a serious matter for the cataloguer because the catalogue is the centre of any library network, without which the library would fall into chaos.

Cataloguing versus Automation is a Catch-22; one is dependent on the other and nothing can happen in cataloguing if the machine breaks down. Simply getting on with other work is a short-term solution, especially if you are not the technician who sorts out the system problem. But what if you are? The minimum amount of time is the cheery answer, but who knows how much time it might take?

This leads to a much bigger question of how much time librarians spend on automation. Are we now specialised computer managers? Information technologists first, information providers second? And in what proportions?

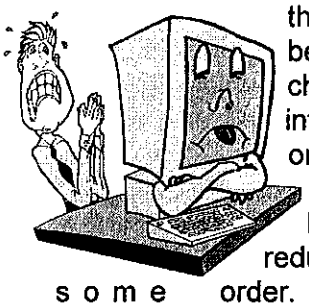
The disproportionate nature of automation work to the real time we should be spending on other work is a concern. It threatens to stall workflows, distract from the exacting accuracy we must maintain, and cause frustration and anxiety. Even if we have the system administration sorted out, cataloguers are still dependent on others on the technical side for assistance, advice, and emerging services and systems. Working with all of these people has become part of the work time we so value.

Then there is the language problem. Not only do Information Technology (IT) people think and speak in their own language, so do we. And when it is IT that sets the running of the system itself, there can be great difficulty getting them to understand the system according to our cataloguing language.

We have all met the allied reality that the manuals and directions have been composed not by librarians, but by programmers. It is a by-word of libraries today that the database or software package shall be made by someone who has never heard of AACR2 or standard bibliographic practice.

The metadata debate continues to be argued for enthusiastically by those who have never had explained to them the superior advantage of structured heading access, an idea invented one hundred years ago and one which metadata has few resources to meet.

At the centre of this miasma we still find the hardworking human being, trying to reduce chaos, or a mass of information, to some order. The only problem is that now the same human being has to reduce the automation to some order. The computer system is an added task.



One solution is to divide your load into computer and non-computer times, thus having something to go on with during delays. Low priority projects can be turned to promptly, a ready resort that can spare you frustration and even increase efficiency.

You can use the down-time to educate yourself further in the system. Rather than leave it to the boffins, work beside the boffins and glean as much technical information as possible. Instead of passing on the job to the usual expert—an act of dependency—work out how to deal with the job so you don't have to worry them again.

Other solutions are to reorganise the staff structure so that cataloguing is given more expert time outside of computer skills; to develop work practices that minimise the amount of time you must put into each record. And you can diversify the role of cataloguer, expanding the duties so that you are not captive to the technology.

One Person Libraries

Time management can be a special form of challenge for those libraries where the cataloguer is also Chief, Circulation, the lot, i.e. solo librarians. The work of the one person librarian reveals graphically the truth that time management is another way of talking about self-management.

We manage ourselves in the time we have, or according to our concept of how time works. Time itself, it must be remembered, being a human construct.

The solo librarian has no choice but to put cataloguing down the list of priorities. Necessity is the mother of invention. You must find dedicated time to do your cataloguing: it deserves and needs that kind of concentration.

If the time between arrival and circulation of your purchases is normally long, there is good reason to display, and even have available, these items before they are fully catalogued. By display is meant having all the new books where they can be seen and not taken. By available, having a short accession record or fast-add borrowing system in place that has the material out there with the user, even before you have got around to describing it. This is all in keeping with the motto that the library is for the user, not the librarian.

The loneliness of having no-one to talk to is relieved by the huge number of internet aids for librarians, and the dozens of very useful catalogues to visit. Compiling bookmarks of these sites and using them frequently improves the private language you must develop in dealing with your special context.

Concluding List

To conclude this survey of time management in cataloguing, here is a list, in no special order, of time savers:

1. Leave a closed card catalogue alone. Once you have gone over to computer, there is no reason to be maintaining the card catalogue, the shelf list, or any other index. Everything should now be going into the catalogue.
2. Do not be dictated to by faculty, users, or other self-appointed experts in cataloguing. Listen to what they say, but only act on it if the advice has validity within the terms of your work. If they become a nuisance, draw to their attention the fact that you work within a system of international rules that you did not write yourself, but without which the whole system would become ungovernable.
3. Ransack agencies, record databases, and other places. The web gives an unprecedented access to sites where we can lift our own information. Catalogues on the internet, our own and others, save enormous time as well as acting as standards by which to measure our own progress and completeness.
4. There is no driving reason to be editing every tag in a MARC record. Some libraries use tags for their own in-house records, but the tidying of the zero tags especially seems needless. There is no knowing when information stored in zero and untraced tags may not someday become useful, especially if it is searchable or has crucial cataloguing history. There are good reasons for saving many of them. Use your own discretion in choosing which ones to delete.
5. Give dedicated time to cataloguing to the exclusion of all else. Regulate the hours so time daily is spent solely on cataloguing. Everyone has their own distractions and foibles in this respect: the non-urgent reference question, the email, conversations on the lists. Some people find any excuse to talk to people at any time of the day, including the telephone. Procrastination can be some people's temptation of choice; others find stacks of things to do (management, shelving, analysis) that they convince themselves are cataloguing, but which don't get any cataloguing done. You only complete the cataloguing by sitting down and doing it.
6. Make people the first priority of your work. It is your real users who have the needs. The books that come first are those on reading lists and reserve,

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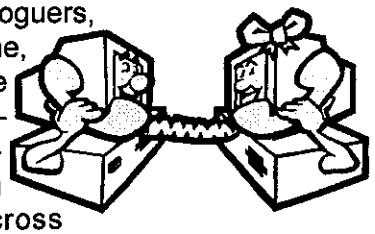
those on request. Awareness of immediate needs is decisive.

7. Be sensible about your constituency. Our libraries vary. The level of description must meet at least a minimum standard, but it must give your users any access point that finds the material. A complete record with every tracing under the sun is a bonus, but not all libraries need these to make the work accessible. The rule of thumb with Tag 505, for example, is to delete it -

   - if no words add to the keyword search;
   - if all the important words and names are already in title, subject, and so forth;
   - if the words are misleading and do not represent the true content;
   - if the words are a redundant repetition.

   Tag 520 can take up half the record nowadays. One can be ruthless, only retaining those tags that really do supply extra information that cannot be intuited from the rest of the description. 520s will never be a substitute for proper description and analysis. Their increasing presence is a sign of another trend in bibliographical control worldwide: selling the book. Prices, publisher links, ISBNs, and other devices in the record, some common features it must be said, are all part of the global market strategies of modern bookselling. Cataloguers are not booksellers; they are about helping people find a copy and about supplying accurate information. You can initiate in-house ways of dealing with many of the tags.

8. Talk to other cataloguers, by voice, by phone, by email. We work in a specialised area of librarianship. When you come across something that contradicts the rules, or for which there is no rule, you are not alone. There are lots of instances that are at variance with the rules and for which there is no rule. There are subjects for which we have no subject heading, publications where the imprint detail is somewhere other than in the publication, authors who spell their names more ways than William Shakespeare. These are daily, not monthly occurrences. Having someone to talk to about the manifold perversity of the literature can save you a lot of time.

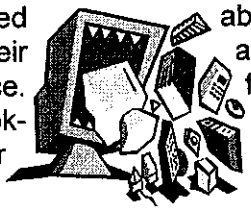


9. Are you (improbably) obsessive-compulsive? Have you invented or inherited rules and practices that overstress you and everyone else? Rules and practices the reasons for which you now forget? It is time to review what you are doing. It is time to simplify and streamline. It may even be time to take a short holiday.

10. At every available opportunity, educate the user in how to exploit all aspects of the catalogue. The art of the refined search, more than anything else, is something that users are grateful for ever after. Introductory courses are vital. Simply asking people if they are finding what they are looking for can save time later. Leaving the user to work it out for themselves every time is not good enough. In both search screen directions and in personal communications, anything that improves understanding and ease of access is a time saver.

11. Do not initiate projects in the current environment that are inconclusive and have no cataloguing precedent or warrant. Most problematic among these is the concern some people have that they need to catalogue the internet. This is folly. A catalogue is created to describe a contained collection, not an uncontainable universe of shifting information.

The desire by some enthusiasts to add internet sites and the like, relevant to their studies, leads to delusion and chaos. Internet catalogues of recommended sites are an invaluable tool, but they serve a separate function to the library catalogue. They need to be separate, available on a library website yes, kept updated yes, but manageable and with their own set of rules for maintenance. They should be in a different bookmark catalogue to the one for your standing collection.



12. Remind those who need reminding of the centrality of cataloguing. Our reputation as indexers, classifiers, subject experts, and so forth, should be increasingly emphasised, especially in a world where cyberspace gives the impression it all comes for free from somewhere 'out there'. It doesn't, the catalogue comes from inside the library and the library could not function without it. Such reminders save a lot of time later when debates arise about staffing values.

13. The changes have been fabulous and the technology incredible; however this does not mean that cataloguing has been enhanced - in many areas it has become neglected. If you read the library literature of only five years ago, it is full of promises of increased productivity, vastly improved authority control, greater communication between cataloguers.

    By today there would be a utopian environment of increased excellence of service and delivery to the cataloguers and, via them, to everybody else. Whereas the opposite has been happening, a reversal in the standards we were taught to uphold, an overwhelmingly high expectation upon us to keep track of a gigantic load of less than complete information.

    The information revolution, far from making the original cataloguer redundant or sidelined, has brought their essential role more into focus. One reason is that authority control and international standards have suffered in the changes. Outside libraries less work is done on these than ever before. Supply of records may have increased, uniform excellence has decreased. This could be in large part because of a superstition about the machine being the answer and a corresponding forgetfulness about who has maintained that excellence. Machines know nothing about excellence.

14. Cataloguers need to be informed, dedicated and of an open mind. These are the characteristic virtues of a good cataloguer, as espoused by Mr Cutter in the 19th century. They remain true today. (Consider their opposites and you will grasp the meaning of the saying.) The implication of these three virtues is worth meditating upon, especially when you hear time's winged chariot hovering near.

References

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