

Running an English-Language Library for the Literary Disabled

by Leslene Woodward

When I gave a talk on my library system recently, I started by saying if listeners had not heard the term *literary disabled* before, not to worry—I had just invented it.

The more grandiose title is actually *An operational system for small libraries without qualified librarians where students speak English as a second or third language*, but I think when I went on to say I ran an English-language library for students who do not speak English, I really confused people.

The trouble is, that is exactly what I do.

My background is two years running a library in an Indian seminary, where the students all spoke English as usually a third or even fourth language, and now my current posting in a small seminary in Kiribati, in the South Pacific Ocean, where, although English is an official language, it is still a second or third language for many students.

In both countries, I have found many students who do not speak English fluently, and some who barely speak it at all.

From the Indian library I learned several things—students often are not familiar with either the sequence of the English alphabet or the western decimal system. They find it hard to understand our silent letters when spelling a name, and even more difficult to remember that point 012 comes before point 102.

I also discovered that the online search programs are spelling specific, and if you key in the wrongly spelt surname, you will get a “we do not have” box on the screen, even if the book in question is on the shelf.

I found as well that to write a catalogue card the “correct” way was again providing too much information for a student who just wanted to know the classification number.

Quite simply, the detailed Dewey system/correct library catalogue system is just not geared to students who do not speak English as their first language.





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So I came to the Kiribati seminary library determined to try to overcome these problems.

Now here I found one other thing that also influenced my thinking on the whole subject—filing books by subject (subject grouping system) rather than by the traditional Dewey numerical method.

The library had not been properly classified for some years, and books purchased or donated had simply been put on the shelves along with other books on the same subject, a fact which brought home to me another important point—how many small libraries cannot afford a qualified librarian to carry out all this complicated and (to the layperson) mysterious “classifying according to Dewey.”

So I determined to see if I could develop a system which laypeople—a lecturer, administration officer or school teacher—could operate without getting a perpetual headache.

And I like to think I have. At the time of writing, two years after I started, the system is complete and more importantly, it works. It must—no-one ever asks me where to find a book, they all know where to go. They might ask, “Where do I find a book on how to be a theologian?” or “Have you anything on the second coming?” but they can always track down theology or pastoral counselling for themselves.

I conceived the scenario that my students were *literary disabled*—could not cope easily with the English language—and designed the library around that concept.

Everything is designed for simplicity, so students do not have a lot of detail to sort through when they want to find a book. I started with the most basic premise of all library work—consider the reader. If the reader (the student) has trouble following the decimal system, reading the card catalogue or just finding the books on the shelves, let us make it easier for him.

The Dewey system

I was determined I would not inflict on students the long sequences of numbers necessary to define each subsection of a classification, so I tried something else.

Given that students at the library here were used to looking for books in particular places on the shelves, without any reference to numbering, I tried combining the two.

I also tried to keep the names of each section/subsection identical with or similar to the names of the subjects being taught, having had an irritating experience in the Indian library where a major classification was filed under one name and the subject was taught under another name.

So I made *Theology* 230, then *Theology of God* became 230.1, the *Holy Spirit* was 230.2 and *Christology* 230.3. Then I placed them all on the same set of shelves.

Now I know all of this is librarian heresy, but I had so many students asking for a subject which I knew would be covered under

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at least two classifications (as well as having individual books on God, the Holy Spirit and Christ, some books treat them all in the same volume) that it proved very satisfactory to take them to one set of shelves and say “there you are, look through those.”

I found it particularly useful when dealing with the counselling classification, where I had subjects like counselling, sex, marriage, sickness (read alcoholism/abortion), children, families, growing old and coping with death. I gave *Counselling* the main number, every other subject became point 1, point 2, point 3, etc, and they all went on the same set of shelves.

Naturally I watched to see whether this arrangement would work, and it did. Students were happy to be presented with everything they wanted on a subject right in front of them, rather than having to move from stack to stack tracking down numbers.

It might be heresy, but—consider the reader, and the readers seemed very happy with it.

It also achieved what I wanted as a long-term objective—a classification system that anyone could carry out.

Accession number/catalogue

Then I came to the question of the accession number for each book. There was a register—I finally found it accidentally pushed into a box in our storeroom. Not much help, especially with all the new un-numbered books.

Now the Indian library had used the divided dictionary card system before it went online—subject, author and title cards plus a separate numerical card system that filed all books according to their Dewey number.

But I noticed although this system gave the staff a lot of work in keeping it up-to-date, it appeared to have no purpose—no-one ever used it.

So faced with the fact I had to do a totally new accession register for the entire library, I decided to combine this with a very much simplified catalogue of all books. So I created my accession number/catalogue computer record of every book in the library. I kept it very simple—number, author’s name, title of book, translation (if any), edition, publisher, country, date of publication. Not done according to correct library procedure, but it did give us basic information on every book. I then did three catalogues, under Subject, Title and Author, both on the computer and on cards. I am personally not in favour of the combined author/title system of filing, as appears popular with some Indian libraries, and prefer to keep them separate.

What I now have is a two-system catalogue—computerized and card. I did both because I have found some students are uncomfortable looking at a list of books on a screen, and prefer the card system.

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a card catalogue and computerized system. That is the reason I have called my system “for small libraries”, because I am not certain if the subject grouping system would really work for libraries over, perhaps, 10,000 books?

The audit

Whenever I mentioned this word in the Indian library it brought forth a loud groan from everyone, in which I joined. Doing an audit of 65,000 books is not a subject to be tackled lightly.

So at the Tarawa college I was determined to try to come up with a system that could be put in place easily, and I found the computerized catalogue gave me what I wanted.

I simply printed out the subject catalogue, went along to each classification, and marked the books still on the shelves, using the book title and the accession number to identify each one. I made a copy of the computerized Subject catalogue, deleted all the books accounted for, and what was left was a list of missing books. It worked well, and was very quick.

I did the initial one, to be sure it would work; in future I shall simply call on students, give each one several classifications, and let them do the work. I can keep the records on the computer as each student completes his/her section.

Finally

I wanted to create a library where the most confused English-speaking student could find a book easily. Remember the students often can read English better than they speak it. I also wanted a system that could be run by an administrator who is not a qualified librarian, because there are so many small libraries dotted around the islands of the Pacific that simply cannot afford to pay a qualified librarian, and usually cannot even find a volunteer librarian.

And I believe I have created something that will work. The test is already in front of me—I have been asked to set up a library for the Nurses Training Department of our local hospital, and if you thought law, engineering and theology had some tongue-twisters in their jargon, try setting up a medical library!

I have to date got everything classified and organized, so the nurses can find any subject they need easily. I now have to start on the paper work—accession register, computerized catalogue and card system, again, keeping them simple—the trainee nurses speak even less English than my seminary students, so the library must be very simple and uncomplicated. I gather they can read enough English to follow the textbooks, together with lectures in I-Kiribati (the local language.) It is only a very small library; I hope to start the documentation this week. But so far, I am hopeful my system will hold up to its first outside test.

I told the nursing supervisors/lecturers that I wanted to give them a library where the youngest student nurse from the Outer Islands



(where they hardly ever hear a word of English) could easily find the book she wanted; if I can achieve that, then I have hopes my system can be of use to all my *literary disabled* students everywhere.