

The Realities of Reclassification

Interest in reclassification and recataloging has revived with the development of a national acquisitions and cataloging program. The paper reviews the pros and cons of reclassification and examines three common assumptions concerning reclassification. The primary factors governing the desirability of reclassification are discussed, such as size, age, organization of the collection, etc. Finally, the merits of partial reclassification are presented as an alternative to total reclassification.

A NUMBER OF ACADEMIC libraries have initiated reclassification projects in recent years. These same institutions, though, have not always faced up to the harsh realities of reclassification—its costs, advantages, and disadvantages. Too often a decision to reclassify has been based solely on unsubstantiated assumptions and emotional reactions. Reclassification is a lively issue, primarily because many libraries are considering switching from Dewey to LC classification. In part it is the imminence of a national shared-cataloging program that has stimulated new interest in LC classification.

Libraries principally are interested in taking advantage of work produced by the Library of Congress, but the question of reclassification is inextricably related to the decision to adopt LC classification. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine the advantages of reclassification, both real and imagined; to enumerate the factors on which a decision must be based; and to discuss the alternative of partial reclassification in order to bring into sharper focus the real cost of reclassification.

Before proceeding further, however, we must establish a clear distinction be-

tween the benefits realized by adopting LC classification from those of reclassification. If the literature is any indication, confusion abounds. Writers often cite cost economies of utilizing LC copy as an advantage of reclassification, and while it is true that reclassification with LC copy will be cheaper than reclassification without LC copy, these economies are achieved through the processing of new titles, not by reprocessing of retrospective collections. The decision to reclassify may be justified on several grounds, but not under the banner of "cost economy."

The advantages of adopting the LC classification have been thoroughly documented in the literature. Economy and speed are the principal reasons—economies in book processing and speedier flows of material through the technical services departments. Another benefit of adopting LC is that the change increases the usefulness of bibliographic tools published by the Library of Congress. Also, the LC scheme is purported to be a more suitable system for organizing research collections. Although not often cited as a benefit, at least initially, availability of LC copy reduces the ever present temptation to alter, locally, cataloging copy. Moreover, the use of LC copy has prompted libraries to organize special processing units so that titles for

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which cataloging copy is available can be processed entirely by nonprofessional staff.

Switching to the LC classification is not without its disadvantages, however. The changeover produces two collections, consequently readers and staff members must be trained to work with two systems. Work procedures become more complicated and expensive since parallel operations must be maintained, *i.e.*, circulation, cataloging, marking, etc. In the long run, however, the greatest disadvantage may be a library's inability to resolve economically the problems of reclassifying retrospective collections, once the LC classification is adopted.

ADVANTAGES OF RECLASSIFICATION

The literature attributes a number of benefits to reclassification. The advantages usually cited are: (1) reclassification and recataloging will correct past errors; (2) LC is a more suitable scheme for scholarly collections; (3) reclassification avoids the confusion brought about by two collections; and (4) reclassification will increase the effectiveness of browsing. A fundamental difficulty here is that with the possible exception of the first, correction of errors, the gains credited to reclassification are founded on traditionally accepted assumptions, and the tools used to measure their impact are, by and large, subjective. It is not a foregone conclusion that reclassification will produce improvements dramatic enough to convince cost-conscious nonlibrary administrators. For this reason, any library contemplating reclassification should weigh realistically the probable impact of each factor on library services.

1. *Library of Congress classification is a more suitable scheme for research collections.* There is probably a great deal of truth to this statement although like other schemes LC has its innate weaknesses. It is becoming fashionable to inculcate Dewey for our classificatory ills—Dewey also serves as a convenient

scapegoat. But in truth the root of the trouble may lie elsewhere. Since a corps of disgruntled users can be found on most campuses, regardless of the classification system in use, the real problem may be that no universal classification system is capable of satisfying completely a heterogeneous user group. Rest assured, readers will quickly dispel any notion that switching to LC eliminates complaints.

2. *Reclassification will increase browsability.* At least two assumptions are implied by this statement. First, that browsing is a legitimate expectation of a research collection and, second, that LC provides a more browsable collection than other classification systems. We know, empirically at least, that browsing is affected by a variety of factors; the type of library, the level of user, accessibility of the collections (open *vs.* closed stacks), the subject area, etc. Our understanding of browsing is not complete; there are still fundamental questions to be answered. How many readers actually browse; under what conditions do they browse; how many titles are required to satisfy a browser's need; what correlation exists between the books finally borrowed and the original need as the reader conceived it?

An open stack research collection organized according to a universal classification scheme itself militates against browsing. Most librarians agree that a universal scheme will result in the scattering of related materials. The degree of dispersal varies from subject to subject. The purpose of an open-stacked library is to make materials more accessible to users; in other words, we are extending a special invitation to borrow more books. The latest books (and often the most attractive) on a subject should be in circulation most of the time, with the result that the browser will frequently have to select from the remains.

3. *Reclassification will avoid the difficulties and inconvenience of working*

with two collections. Two collections will erect new barriers between readers and materials. Two collections will also disperse related materials and consequently reduce the effectiveness of browsing. There is no evidence, however, to support the contention that two collections will seriously impede library service. Most libraries already are composites of collections organized according to different schemes. It is not unusual for a library to organize its phono-records, archives, manuscripts, government documents, curriculum collections, pamphlets, and undergraduate collections all according to different classification schemes. Parenthetically we must add that from the user's point of view, a collection will be split for the duration of the reclassification project; and based on recent experience, this situation might well persist for a number of years.

The principal arguments against reclassification center on economic issues. While a library must wage an uphill battle to produce a tangible "reclassification profit sheet," a "reclassification price tag" is easily calculated, particularly a summary of direct labor costs. In this paper we have defined "direct" costs as those expenses incurred actually in reclassification, and "indirect" costs as the funds that would have been spent on other services if reclassification had not been undertaken.

CRITERIA FOR RECLASSIFICATION

The dilemma becomes one of weighing the potential advantages of reclassification against its costs. No one can categorically state that reclassification is desirable or undesirable. Published cost figures are not too useful because they reflect conditions unique to one environment. There are, however, several useful guides available to librarians contemplating reclassification.

1. *Size of the collection.* (a) There is a high correlation between a collection size and the cost of reclassification.

There is, however, probably no point at which we can state that size, and size alone, precludes reclassification. (b) The importance of classification will diminish as the collection grows. The call number will serve more as a locator device than as a means for arranging books by subject content. (c) The larger the collection, the greater the number of titles for which there will be no LC cataloging copy available. This will proportionately increase processing costs.

2. *Age of the collection.* The older the collection, the more recataloging is likely to occur. Obsolete subject headings, poor entries, and time-honored local practices all will be contributing factors. That recataloging can be divorced from reclassification is a tale from our professional folklore. Reclassification cost predictions that do not allow for some recataloging should be viewed with skepticism. Those who reassure that no recataloging will occur are likely deluding only themselves. I have discussed this problem with a number of catalogers. Almost without exception they expressed the view that many more titles were recataloged than administrators were aware of. A cataloger is likely to believe that upper level administrators are not sufficiently in tune with the realities of reclassification. To instruct a cataloger to ignore mistakes of the past and to change only classification numbers is likely to lead to worker frustration. What satisfaction is there in releasing work that (from the cataloger's point of view) is blatantly sloppy or incorrect?

The importance of allowing for recataloging cannot be stressed too strongly. Such considerations as the proportion of titles in a collection for which LC cataloging copy is available and the age of the collection, to some degree, will determine the number of books that will require original reprocessing.

3. *Organization of the collection.* Decentralized collections will increase processing costs. The costs of pulling, chang-

ing, and refiling records, as well as book transportation costs, are all dependent on the extent of decentralization.

There are additional factors not directly related to costs that also warrant consideration. These include:

4. *Type of library.* Libraries serving readers who are more likely to browse, e.g., college libraries rather than university libraries, may have a greater need for reclassification. One can also anticipate locating LC copy for a large proportion of the titles that would normally be acquired for a college library or undergraduate library collection.

5. *Nature of the building.* Reclassification may be more desirable for collections housed in a fixed-function building. Collections in modular buildings can physically be relocated in order to minimize the inconveniences of two collections. (Of course the architecture of a building could also have a direct bearing on costs.)

6. *Political environment.* The campus political climate cannot be ignored. The top library administrators are in a position to mold campus sentiment one way or the other. Reclassification undertaken with the support of the institution's administration and faculty will proceed much more smoothly than when the academic community is apathetic or opposed to the project.

7. *Financial support.* Adequate and stable financing is imperative if the project is to be completed within a reasonable period of time. Under-financed projects will drain funds from other programs or, worse, will bog down completely for a lack of support. Even after a library has assiduously weighed the criteria, all that may be possible is the development of a general profile. For example, decentrally organized research collections numbering from five hundred thousand to one million volumes or more will be most expensive to reclassify; by contrast, a recently established college library collection (the smaller, the bet-

ter) serving undergraduates exclusively will be the least expensive to process. Unfortunately, most real life situations will fall between these two extremes. In such cases, the final decision will depend on the best judgment of administrators and staff. There is, however, an alternative to an either/or decision.

PARTIAL RECLASSIFICATION

There will be situations in which partial reclassification is preferable to total reclassification. This will be true for a variety of reasons, e.g., a lack of funds, the tenor of campus politics, architecture of the building, or rapid growth of the collection. The effect of sudden collection growth is sometimes overlooked. Collections can be expected to grow rapidly in institutions that undergo educational metamorphoses—junior to four-year colleges; teacher to liberal arts colleges, and colleges to multipurpose universities. Because of rapid growth, the bulk of the working collection will be classed in LC within a relatively short period of time; consequently, the need for reclassification may become less pressing.

If a library decides to undertake partial reclassification, at least in the short run, categories to be reclassified will have to be selected. Added copies and added editions are usually reclassified, although some libraries have chosen not to reprocess either earlier editions or first copies. Separately housed or specially organized collections are often viewed as desirable starting points. An undergraduate collection is a case in point. It is a discreet body of materials housed in a separate area, intended for a user group that can be partially segregated from other user groups. Reference collections or specially shelved materials such as oversized books are also possibilities.

Subject obsolescence of materials also deserves attention. Why reclass materials in science and technology when a short

use-span can be anticipated for most of these books. In fact, these same materials might someday form the core of an on-campus storage unit. On the other hand, the humanistic disciplines, for the most part, are not as affected by age; so that a stronger case is plausible for reclassifying the humanities rather than the sciences, if one is concerned primarily with the convenience of users. The humanities and related areas, however, comprise a sizeable proportion of collections so that costs must be weighed against convenience.

Periodicals and serials, at first glance, will appear to be prime candidates. But reconsider the question, because on closer examination the subtle complexities will begin to materialize. The futility of trying to distinguish between periodicals and serials illustrates well the difficulties. Remember, too, that no great advantage can be achieved in arranging periodicals by any one classification system. Classification numbers, either via LC or Dewey, are usually general in scope and often too broad to be of much use to browsers. Furthermore, when periodicals are shelved separately from monographic materials, subject arrangement becomes even less meaningful. Reclassification of monographic serials is even more complex. A library would be well advised to think the problem through carefully before undertaking serials reclassification.

SUMMARY

Too often libraries have undertaken reclassification projects without adequate supporting data. Anticipated cost savings are exaggerated because the data are based on fallacious assumptions. Estimates are unrealistic either because they do not reflect actual systems costs or because the savings realized by adopting LC cataloging copy are also erroneously claimed for reclassification of retrospective collections.

To praise or denounce libraries that have undertaken reclassification is not the purpose of this paper; the point to emphasize is that a library contemplating reclassification should examine realistically the pros and cons and the alternatives before reaching a final decision. Too often a library that has embarked enthusiastically on the course of reclassification soon finds itself mired in confusion with funds exhausted. In order to continue work, monies are diverted from other worthwhile projects. Because funds are a scarce commodity and projects so plentiful, each library must establish a priority list for potential projects such as reclassification. Librarians do not agree on the importance of reclassification, but one important point is that no matter how we frame it, by definition reclassification boils down to redoing work. Is it worth the price? ■ ■

