

Letter to the Editor

How Universal is Universality?

The recent workshop of the ASIST SIG-CR Special Interest Group on Classification Research took universality as its theme (in particular whether contemporary digital realities require universality). It became clear in various discussions that participants attach quite different meanings to the word “universal.” Since the debate regarding the desirability and feasibility of universal systems is central to the field of knowledge organization, clarification of the very meaning of the word we so often debate seems apposite.

I had—perhaps naively—always assumed that a universal system was simply one which strove to have a place for every subject that authors might address. My implicit definition of a universal system was thus “a place for everything.” I have then urged a particular type of universal system which was not just universal in coverage but also employed the same structure and terminology throughout. My purpose was to allow people from any group or perspective to readily find relevant works written from their own or any other perspective as they wished. Yet for many other participants the word universal means something like “we can all see the world in the same way.” Universality, then, was associated inextricably with a preference for one perspective over others. Such a definition is antithetical to my desire to facilitate respect for different perspectives. Efforts to persuade people pursuing this second definition of the desirability and feasibility of universal systems were thus doomed from the start, for they found the goal questionable if not offensive.

I did a quick Internet search for definitions of “universal.” The definition provided by Google itself is “of, affecting, or done by all people or things in the world or in a particular group.” My implicit definition accords well with an “of all things” view whereas the alternative definition reflects the commonality implicit in “done by all people.” So both definitions could claim some dictionary legitimacy. In any case I think the general approach of knowledge organization is not to judge some definitions as better than others but rather to clarify what meanings we attach to the terms we use in our systems, and seek to have these reflect common usage as much as possible (I leave aside here the question of whether we should instead employ jargon in our classifications in the hopes of even greater terminological clarification).

When intensional definitions—of the essence of a thing—prove troublesome, it is tempting to turn to an extensional definition—in this case of the members of

the class of universal systems. Existing universal classifications fit my definition of comprehensive coverage. But they are each widely critiqued for reflecting a particular perspective (or iterations of certain perspectives over decades of development). It would not be surprising if non-essential characteristics of such classifications were attributed to the general class of universal systems (as I would define them) and then assumed to hold inevitably for all future universal classifications. It seems unlikely then that extensional definition will prove helpful here.

How best then to deal with this terminological ambiguity? We can turn to the field of interdisciplinary studies for strategies for addressing intellectual conflict. And we can turn to a strategy I have long advocated within knowledge organization of breaking contested (complex) terms into their constituent parts (Szostak 2011). Repko (2012) urges the strategy of “redefinition.” Faced with terminological conflict, we carefully define one or more terms. If we can potentially achieve some consensus about the meaning being attached to particular terms in a particular context (perhaps just a particular paper), this might provide the common ground on which cross-group understanding can be achieved.

Though I was surprised by a definition of “universal” as “we can all see the world in the same way,” I did not find it difficult to comprehend. I hope that others could likewise appreciate my “a place for everything” understanding of the term. If I am correct then this interchange is in fact an example of my core argument in Szostak (2011): By breaking a complex term such as “universal” into constituent terms that are far less contested (such as “everything” and “same”) we greatly enhance understanding. (And we can further clarify (some types of) basic terms by placing them in logical hierarchies.) We are thus advised not to use the term “universal” in a universal classification (at least without clarificatory scope notes) but rather to seek less contested terminology that captures what different people mean by “universal.”

I may well follow in future the advice I received to instead use terms such as “comprehensive” or “holistic” or “general” (the last following Foskett 1991) to describe my efforts, though these terms also are somewhat contested. Or I may instead continue to use “universal” but immediately leap to define what I mean by this (Indeed I am thinking of a mantra with which to start all my papers and presentations that would include “I love domain analysis,” “I value different perspectives,” “I have read Kuhn and (people who have cited) Foucault,” “I like Wittgen-

stein,” and various other statements which seem inherently obvious to me but seem occasionally not so to others). My advice to others is simple: if you are going to use the word “universal” you need to define what you mean by this term utilizing more basic terminology. Or you will be misunderstood.

There is a subtle but important difference between defining “universal” as “we can all see the world in the same way,” and making a causal argument that a universal classification (as I would define it) must necessarily involve “seeing the world in the same way.” The former I have accepted and attempted to address above. The latter I would disagree with. Since the definitional issue may reflect in part the causal argument, let me briefly summarize the reasons for my objection:

- As argued above, the disagreements between individuals or groups about the meanings attached to complex/contested terms can be greatly alleviated by breaking these into basic terminology around which a much greater degree of consensus can be achieved.
- Disagreements regarding the nature of classes can be alleviated by limiting the use of hierarchy, and also by pursuing a synthetic approach (Szostak 2014).
- Individuals or groups also disagree regarding which causal relationships (where “causal” is defined broadly to indicate any influence that any thing may exert on any other) are most important or the nature of particular causal relationship. Such differences can (potentially) be admirably handled within a universal classification (as I would define it) grounded in basic terminology: we can agree (enough) on what the terms mean and still disagree on how they interact. Works reflecting quite different perspectives can then be readily placed and found within such a classification. I have argued in Szostak (2014) that a synthetic approach to classification is particularly valuable in this respect.
- Communications theory tells us that phrases are less ambiguous than individual terms. A synthetic approach serves then to further reduce ambiguity.
- We can further advance respect for different perspectives within any bibliographic classification by classifying works in terms of authorial perspective. This is a challenging project, to be sure, but I have made some suggestions in Szostak (2014) about how it might proceed, and am working on a more formal proposal along these lines.
- Neither disciplines nor cultures are absolutely incommensurate. If we back away from an assumption of perfect incommensurability then it becomes an empirical question as to whether we can reduce ambiguity enough for a universal classification (as I would define it) to be feasible. The point of the paper that I and

Claudio Gnoli prepared for the ASIST classification workshop was to outline various types of empirical evaluation that could be performed to that end. It is simply inappropriate to reach an inherently empirical conclusion about whether a certain classificatory project is feasible without performing empirical evaluation. One should not reach empirical conclusions from theory or philosophical assumption alone.

It was stated at the workshop that universality is an ethical question. This is true only if one either defines universal as “we can all see the world in the same way,” or assumes that universal classifications must stifle diverse perspectives: then important ethical questions about our duty to respect diverse perspectives indeed arise. But if universality is defined as “a place for everything,” then it only becomes an ethical issue if we determine empirically that it is not in fact possible to have a respectful universality. We should not assume an ethical dilemma in advance. I invite all who really care about diversity to join me in that empirical project. We should not presume, but should be prepared to be delighted by, an empirical finding that respectful universality is possible.

I might note that we have in this brief essay employed three of the four strategies advocated in Repko (2012) for addressing intellectual conflicts (the fourth involves extending a theory to include variables deemed important by others). Redefinition was discussed above. The strategy of organization involves mapping together the causal arguments (again defined broadly) stressed by different individuals or groups. These may continue to disagree about which relationships are most important but might come to agree about the set of relevant relationships as a whole. The second bullet point above was grounded in the idea of organization. But the entire bulleted argument sketches a set of relationships between a universal classification (as I have defined it) and allowing diverse perspectives to be both respected and heard. I invite others to suggest different causal relationships that should be included in that space. And I reiterate the need for empirical evaluation of these.

The strategy of “transformation” involves placing apparent dichotomies along a continuum. An assumption of absolute incommensurability might be contrasted with a view that there really are not communication barriers between disciplines or cultural groups. Few if any of us likely fall on either of these extremes (although I might well add to my mantra that “I recognize that there are communication challenges across domains, which reflect both differences in terminology and perspective”). The sixth bullet point above referred to (part of) that continuum, and noted that it is an empirical question as to how much ambiguity there is. Claudio and I stressed in our

paper that we in the field of knowledge organization have strategies for reducing this ambiguity. We urged the empirical evaluation of these strategies themselves as well as of whether ambiguity can be reduced enough to allow a universal classification that respected diversity.

It is a healthy characteristic of the field of knowledge organization that people come to it from a variety of different perspectives. At the very least we can have some really entertaining conversations as a result. I came to the field because I think that knowledge organization is, especially at this historical moment, by far the most important field in the scholarly enterprise. We can harness our diversity to the critical task of building the best possible classifications for the future only if we avoid talking past each other. We must instead:

- ensure that we understand how we each employ key terminology
- be careful of our assumptions, and seek to understand the assumptions of others
- strive to agree on a set of goals, and on the relationships that deserve to be investigated between different classificatory practices and those goals
- empirically evaluate those relationships

I believe that with these strategies we can together achieve a universal classification (as I have defined it) that not

only respects diversity of all sorts but enhances cross-group understanding. But I am open to both theoretical and empirical arguments otherwise.

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