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Dewey: The Neglected Introduction

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Dewey's Introduction has been dropped from the current 19th Edition of his Classification Scheme. Perhaps because of its allegedly "phonetic" spelling it has been unduly neglected. However, since it is considered that this Introduction says everything which can be said about Library Classification it is also considered that it should not now be forgotten. It anticipated many developments for which later writers have been given the credit. However, it did not solve the problem which has evaded all library classification and indexing since in spite of the optimistic claims of classification and similar enthusiasts, namely, How do we know or define "the subject" of a book or document? Also, the failure to relate the theory in the Introduction to the actual arrangement of the subjects within the schedules set the unfortunate pattern by which library classification came to be discussed with little or no reference to the subject matter involved. The fact that Dewey's century-old classification survives as the most widely used one reflects both the physical difficulty of trying to reclassify any established library and the lack of any new thinking in educational curricula. Nor is there any adequate evidence that later library classification schemes represent any worthwhile advance on Dewey. (Author)

1. "Orijin and growth"

It is now more than a Century since Melvil Dewey published the first edition of the Decimal Classification and Relative Index. In his "Introduction to Edition 12" reprinted in edition 18 he claimed he had developed this as early as 1873. (1)

In the hundred or more years which have elapsed since then the World has changed greatly. Libraries have changed rather less. Only in the last 20 years have they begun to develop beyond the organizational and contents limits they had reached a century ago. Their aim 100 years ago was the self-sufficient library; the assumption was that is should contain everything its readers needed. Most librarians are indeed still trying to attain this, at whatever expense to those outside who have to foot the bill. In 1870, the book was still dominant as a means of education, of information storage and of durable communication. There were no telephones – Bell's Patent dates from the 'Dewey year', 1876. There was neither radio nor TV. There were no cars or planes. 'Communication' was by post, and sometimes quicker than today. Most important from the library point of view, the book form had not been challenged as the dominant form of literature by the Journal form and its subsequent Abstracting and Indexing ancillaries.

So far, however, from alternative and more modern methods of communication and information overcoming the book, the last century has also seen a remarkable increase in book publication. Several factors are at work here. Vast increases in educational opportunities have produced matching increases in teachers, academics and researchers struggling to get into print – and not infrequently succeeding. Education is still based primarily on the text-book and the 'recommended' book of the teacher or tutor. There are now many more books published in a year than any one person can read in a lifetime. The Librarians have dealt with their journals by binding them and turning them into quasi-books. These vast increases in book quantities have meant that some sort of division into more manageable compartments, as in decimal and similar classification, is necessary. Library classification continues and librarians have granted it increasing importance in their scheme of things. Indeed, for those who had most influence in library education in Britain for nearly half a century 'classification' was 'librarianship'.

The most widely used scheme of library classification, at any rate in the Western and former colonial World, Dewey is also the one in which most students of librarianship take their examination in practical classification. By contrast, its theory has been almost totally neglected; this in spite of, or perhaps because of, a 47 page introduction written in the 'simplified' spelling which Dewey optimistically or naively imagined would prove as useful and become as widespread as the scheme itself. Inevitably, therefore, comparisons which are odious came to be made. "Sometimes one wonders whether the whole idea of classification is not as cranky as the simplified spelling of the Dewey introduction". (2)

If one specified "library classification", the question might still be asked. The phonetic spelling of the Introduction reflects an English (language) insularity and American isolationism which could be maintained in the heyday of the 19th Century but which, with the rise of Asian super-powers and African nationalism, has not stood the test of time. Whatever advantages phonetic spelling and the later development of Basic English (3) (4) have offered they have made no headway against the native language form of English and its illogically spelled written version.

Among the vast outpourings of librarians and information scientists on classification and its developments in the Century which has elapsed since Dewey first published his scheme, and particularly since the end of World War II, reference to Dewey's own introduction is conspicuous by its absence. The attitude of the present generation is seen in the former Editor's (B.A. Custer) perhaps slightly condescending note which precedes it in the 18th edition.

> "Melvil Dewey's Introduction is reprinted, with a few minor changes, just as he wrote and spelled it. Many of its statements and examples are obsolete, or even in direct contradiction to the Editor's Introduction, and it should be read in the context of its time". (5)

Indeed, in the 19th edition, published in 1979, "Melvil Dewey's mostly obsolete introduction has been dropped, but those parts of it still valuable for the practitioner and student have been incorporated into other preliminary sections". (6)

2. "Phoenix" Introduction

However, it is because the present writer considers that the neglected Dewey Introduction contains the best statements so far put forward for library classification

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that it is proposed to examine it closely before it disappears from view in the discarded volumes of earlier editions. If for no other reason, this would be justified from one of the first sentences of Dewey's first paragraph, for this sentence rests on the basic assumption of all library classification, and indeed of all library practice, until recently.

"With rare exceptions, libraries were growing rapidly". (7)

It is this assumption which was later restated by Ranganathan as the "5th Law".

"A library is a growing organism". (8)

In the era of oil and energy crises it is an assumption which cannot so easily be taken for granted.

The philosophy behind the Dewey scheme is one that later classification theorists would have done well to follow, even if the scheme could not always achieve its aims!

"Practical utility and economy ar its keynotes and no theoretic refinement has been allowd to modify the skeme, if it wud detract from usefulness or ad to cost.

It was chiefly necessary to find a method that wud clas, arranje and index books and pamflets on shelvs, cards of a catalog ... as redily as an ordinary index gyds to proper paje of a bound book. This difficult problem was solvd by uzing no reference marks except the simplest simbols known to the human mind, arabic numerals ...

Tho the importance of classification was recognised, the filosofic sistems proposed wer so difficult to understand or apply that not 1 person in 1000 cud uze them practically. Decimal Clasification simplicity and even more its Relativ Index hav made this work 10-fold eazier".

For the present, we shall leave unsaid our comments on the pseudo-philosophical library classifications which have succeeded Dewey. But he overestimated the simplicity of his own scheme.

"... this very simpl sistem is redily made to record the utmost refinements of specialists, and the Relativ Index, as simple as a, b, c, sends the novice to the exact place where the expert has clasifyd the matter sought".

More recent classification enthusiasts could have spared us much had they been prepared to listen to this advice.

"The 1st edition, publisht in 1876, 12 pajes of tables containing 1,000 sections, was criticized as altogether too elaborate for even a larj library. As fast, however, as the Relativ Index with its remarkabl powers became known, the rapidly increasing uzers askt for further subdivisions ..."

Before leaving this section, however, it is interesting to note that other notations were considered before the Decimal Scheme was adopted.

"We devized and experimented with several notations by means of numbers, letters, and combined numbers and letters, with bases of 26, 35, 50, 100 and 150, yet none seemed good enuf ..."

3. 'Relativ' Index

Thus, it was the "Relativ Index" even more than the Classification which Dewey regarded as the "most important feature of the sistem". And in a footnote to page 69 he said:

"... extended investigation by others fails to show that this most important feature of the sistem – the Relative Index, on which all else hinjes – had ever before been uzed as here to index by a singl reference most diverse material. Relative location had been uzed, but not in the present combination with the subject index, which givs it most of its value ... The decimal form and many nemonic features hav not been found in erlier use ..." (9)

(In fact, one American Library had one sort of base 10, of decimal shelving, rather earlier. (10) Whether or not this influenced Dewey is uncertain. Sayers mentions the possibility but leaves the matter open. (11))

Dewey was right to stress the value of the Relative Index. Again, had subsequent classification enthusiasts been prepared to listen to this advice we could have been spared much subsequent irrelevance. True, his approach betrays a certain 19th Century innocence amounting to bombast:

"The Index gives similar or sinonimus words, and the same words in different connections, so any intelijent person will surely get the ryt number ...

Had he lookt for 'railroad' he wud hav found after it 22 separate entries, each preceded by a word or fraze indicating the faze of the subject in the skeme".

(Thus Dewey on the brink of 'phase' in so-called 'facet analysis'!) But he thought he had cured the problem which is still unfortunately with us.

"The greatest objection to a clast catalog has always been the difficulty in knowing just where to clas a book and just where to look for it when again wanted. Different librarians, or the same librarian at different times, clast the same or similar books in widely different places. Where one man did all the work for many years there was a degree of uniformity; but even then there was the danjer of looking at the same book at different times from different viewpoints, thus cauzing confuzion. When the daily pres is ful of one faze of a subject, tendency is strong to clas all books on this subject from current viewpoint; and next year, if a different side of this same subject is before the public, there is same tendency to clas books from new viewpoint; and next year, if a different side of this same subject is before the public, there is same tendency to clas books from new viewpoint, thereby separating similar books and bringing together books on different fazes ... The Relative Index, with its cachwords, was desynd and is found in use to meet both these requirements ... If this is dun, all requirements of a good clasification are fild ... the only real test of any skeme is its helpfulness to its uzers". (12)

4. Future follies

Thus, in one paragraph Dewey had anticipated the points of view, phase or 'facet' themes, with which Ranganathan is usually credited; the theme of catering for points of view, of there being many possible aspects of a subject. He had also touched upon differing emphasis with passage of time, one of the real stumbling blocks in any classification once the basic notation has been allocated. Above all, he pointed out the vital practical requirement of any classification or information retrieval system, namely that the one thing which really mattered was the user, a feature much emphasised in recent years but probably with no more success than Dewey achieved. For any classification scheme must serve not one user but an indefinite number. How many have the same idea as to where a book should be filed? And how many librarians come to exactly the same conclusion as to where a particular book should be classified and where it should be found? It is a problem the answer to which evaded not only Dewey, in spite of all his claims, but every classifier since.

Here, one further confusion needs to be considered. Dewey obviously envizaged that the Relative Index could be added to indefinitely. Not only that, but that more than one or even multiple aspects of a subject could be added to the index while retaining the single one place classification number for each entry. This is

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a possibility which seems to have eluded present day classification theory and practice ever since the introduction of the colon in UDC. (13) Today, the automatic response to any need for added entries, of additional subject reference, is to add another number from elsewhere in the classification and link it to others, generally with a symbol such as a colon. Thus, the emphasis has moved from Relative Index to Relative Schedules. The drawback to this is the complexity of the numbers so produced, particularly with the inevitable complications of non-sequential symbols such as the colon. This last became only the first of many such symbols and bringing with it the further complication of indexing, relatively or otherwise, the pseudo-numbers so produced.

To what extent this ambiguity is due to Dewey himself is uncertain. On the second page of his introduction he says:

"A colon between two numbers to mean 'in relation to', and other combining simbols for time, languaj, etc. make of the sistem a compact shorthand for each fact".

But whether this is an original feature, or whether this was added at a later date following the adoption of the Decimal Classification by the then newly organized Institut International de Bibliographie (IIB) is uncertain. Certainly in what he wrote in 1926, Dewey did not seem to realize that the introduction of this colon symbol – 'in relation to' – duplicated his Relative Index and brought a complication which marred the original simple logic of Class Number/Class Heading technique.

However, he did seem to anticipate one development which is only really beginning to be feasible with the advent of the computer and the prospects of Cataloguing-in-publication.

"This index allows a great part of thc work of classifying to be dun in advancc by experts in larj central libraries with ampl resources, thus securing, at a mere fraction of uzual cost, better and more uniform results than wud be possible to the ordinary classifycr and reducing labout to much narrower limits than ever before.

To thcse thousands of subjects have been carefully assynd their individual numbers, many of them after long consideration and consultation with specialists. No one person is lerned enuf to clas wizely books on all subjects and syences; but botanists can assyn all botanic subjects to the ryt number, mathematicians all mathematical topics, and thus the Index will in time becum as accurate as the best skolarship of the day can make it. Even if the decision reacht is not always wizest, all practical purposes are servd, becauz, as each classifyer copies the number from same Index, all books on that subject ar together; and, as each reader gets his number from this same Index, he goes directly to the book he seeks". (14)

Thus, all "systems" lead ultimately to centralization! However, he had also touched on one of the basic problems of library classification. How can any classifier know all the subjects he is supposed to deal with? Even at the beginning, therefore, in the construction of the first modern scheme, i.e. modern in the sense of still in use, the originator came up against this perennial problem. It is one which has intensified beyond all measure in the intervening Century. It has become an even more pressing problem at the second stage of classification, that is the application of schedules to books. It is the problem which, with the vast growth of highly specialized scientific and technical literature in the 20th Century, was partly responsible for the splintering of the library world, and particularly of those concerned with classification and information retrieval into separate groups, first of "special libraries" and then of "Information Scientists", though how much of the latter is scientific is open to doubt.

"I do not wish to cntcr here into the controvcrsy between librarian and subject specialists, unformation scientist, intelligence officer, or whatever he is called, but I side with the specialist enough to say that before you can draw up a classification scheme, or even apply one, some knowledge of the subject is necessary. In many cases, perhaps even the majority of cases, it need be no more than ability to recognise the terms of reference; in othcrs, a much higher level is necessary". (15)

Neither Dewey nor anyone else could have been expected to anticipate the vast developments of science and technology and even of social "sciences" nor the development of "the third world". It was still possible for him to regard botany and mathematics as clear cut, separate subjects, "mutually exclusive" in the terms of the subsequently developed criteria. Could anyone then have foreseen the complex inter-related technologies of a Century later; the cross-fertilization of ideas, the "interdisciplinary" subjects which have developed, the cross-classification which has become necessary? Who could foresee that there would be mathematical and statistical applications to virtually every subject, not excluding botany; that there would be not only 'bio-chemistry' but also 'bio-engineering' and 'bio-social' studies? The list could be endless. No library classification devised at, and for, a particular time or place can hope to cope for all time. It is not just a question of the numerical base being filled and new subjects and discoveries having to be fitted in by the decimal expedient of ever-lengthening notation but also a question of changes of ideas, of environment. The optimistic over-simplification of Dewey classification is as bad as the naiveties of the phonetic spelling.

A point of minor interest is that, in relation to the decimal division, he used the term 'co-ordination', not in the present sense which that overworked word has in information retrieval, namely, of simultaneous searching on two or more terms, but again in the sense that an administrative classification such as one for books involves compromise.

"Co-ordination. Thcoretically division of every subject into just 9 parts is absurd".

Much of what has been talked about subsequently on 'pre-coordinate' and 'post-coordinate' indexing might have struck him as even more absurd. But from the start he was aware that any theory had to be tempered with practice. Unfortunately, not all his successors or imitators were.

"New subjects. A new topic is always closely related to sum existing hed. If therc is no blank number availabl it is combined with the hed nearest allyd, and, when important enuf, distinct provision for the new cumr [sic] is made by ading another decimal. The sistem is thus capabl of unlimited expansion, and can never break down for lak of room for growth.

Choice and arranjement of heds. Detaild explanation of sclection and arranjement of the many thousand heds wud be tedius; but everywhere filosofic theory and accuracy hav yielded to practical usefulness. The imposibility of making a satisfactory clasification of all knowlej as prevervd in books, has been appreciated from the first, and theoretic harmony and exactness hav been repeatedly sacrificed to practical requirements". (16)

The impossibility of classifying 'knowledge' is something which could still be learned by classification enthusiasts

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today. Note particularly the qualification of 'knowledj as preserved in books'. The appreciation that all knowledge or information is not that which is recorded in book or equivalent form is something which still has to be brought home to most of those who have filled the pages of Anglo-American library and information literature since World War 2.

Again, in talking about 'Catchtitles', which earlier he had called 'catch-words', now usually called 'Keywords', he showed a common sense not always encountered in much of present day discussion.

"Cachtitles. In naming hedings, strict accuracy has often been sacrificed to brevity". (17)

This anticipated Ogden and Richards nearly half a century later:

"Language if it is to be used must be a ready instrument. The handiness and ease of a phrase is always more important in deciding whether it will be extensively used than its accuracy". (18)

How much useless controversy over Catchwords, Keywords, Descriptions, Headings, Uniterms, Concepts, etc., could have been saved if the various protagonists had referred back to the original document? But inevitably the Dewey optimism was to be confounded by the passage of time, the growing complexity of knowledge and of the record of it. Thus, the optimism of "Reference to the Index will decide at once most doubtful points" can no longer be maintained. However, it does not prevent all library classifiers making the same claim, even if only by implication. Every designer of a scheme must think his an improvement on what has gone before, otherwise why does he bother? Every librarian who classifies a book thinks this must be the "right" place, even if only 'faute de mieux' and that every Reader should expect to find it there. The discussion on 'Minute clasing' – note the term, rather than the usual classifying, thus anticipating Bliss in the distinction between constructing a scheme and applying it, showed the usual optimism.

"Minute clasing. On first publication in 1976, a common criticizm was that 1,000 heds cud never be successfully uzed, however desirable so close clasification myt be. As soon, however, as actual experience proved it as eazy to uze 1,000 heds in the new sistem as 100 in the old, the obviusly great practical value of close clasing led one uzer after another to urj strongly publication of more subdivisions".

5. Catalogue or bookshelves?

There follows advice which librarians still urge others to follow, too often in vain.

"A reader wishing a specific book shud go, not to shelvs, but to catalog, where he can find its place quickest. If he wishes a specific subject, he is sent instantly to its exact place by the Subject Index. If he wishes to study the Library's resources at the shelves he will be *greatly helpt by minute clasing*"

But is this last sentence always true? And how brief or alternatively, how lengthy in notation is 'minute'?

Under the heading 'Decimalism' comes the famous sentence: (italicized):

"*Decimals have been uzed as servants, not as masters.* When subjects ar combined or separated into just 10 heds, it has been from no necesity of the skeme, but becauz it seemd most useful, all things considered . . .

There has been perverse misapprehension of this feature, and critics oftenest stumbl over 'procrustean 10'. In fact, this is an element of usefulness. A railroad also has the fault that it is procrustean in its path and in its times. It can not cum to yur door nor wait yur convenience, as docs the automobile". (19)

A later generation might have argued that decimalization so far from being 'procrustean' was an element of standardization, of the search for constants, the only basis for scientific progress.

"Every application of logic or mathematics consists in the substitution of constants for variables". (20)

(The comparison with a railroad may be a little unfortunate in the motor car age; the oil crisis may result in bringing it back into favour again!)

Any managerial or administrative procedure has to be a compromise between an ideal arrangement or organization and the graph, diagram or numerical sequence defining it for managerial control and subsequent application. Thus, Dewey eventually arrived at the essential determinants of library shelf and catalogue organization – 'What' and 'Where'.

"Relativ location. Economy and simplicity cald not only for the Subject Index, but also for sum plan of consolidating the 2 sets of marks previusly uzed; one teling *what* subject a book treated, the other *where* the book was shelvd. By relative location and decimal clas numbers we make our simpl arabic numerals tel of each book and pamphlet, both *what* it is and *where* it is".

He also realized that passage of time affects the relative position of a book in shelf classification and that it may do so adversely.

"Amung hundreds of points raized by librarians . . . the only one in which it was not shown to be equal or superior to erlier sistems was that in this relative location a book which this year stands, e.g. at the end of a certain shelf, may not be on that shelf at all another year, becauz of uneven growth of parts of the library".

However, objection was quickly dismissed. So, too, was the caveat which immediately followed it, namely on size, which from the administrative point of view is the most economical way of shelving books:

". . . close distinction of sizes . . . saves a litl space, but at far too great a cost; for every distinction of sizes makes a paralel clasification".

In his discussion of "Catalogs" he started, or perpetuated, the misnomer which has persisted ever since. He defines the "Name catalog" as "names of authors and of persons or places writn about". (21) Neither he nor subsequent librarians seem to have appreciated that the dictionary definition of 'name' (22) refers not only to persons but also names of 'things' or 'any object of thought', hence the old philosophical and grammatical distinction between "proper" names and "class" names.

Also, in view of the subsequent divergence between English and American practice, preference of the former being generally for subject (class number sequence) catalogues with separate subject indexes and the latter for the dictionary catalogue, what he has to say is of more than passing interest.

"The dictionary catalog is as eazily uzed with this sistem as with any other, and is at present on the crest of its wave of popularity . . . The Subject Index . . . is a skeleton dictionary catalog, covering everything not fully covered by the 'name catalog'."

Later, in summarizing the claimed merits of his system, he spoke of it as "a satisfactory adaptation of card catalog principle to shelvs", a curious reversal of priorities which has, unconsciously, bedevilled much library thinking ever since – too often the Library seems to be run

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by and for the catalogue rather than for the books and their Readers.

6. How or how not to apply

However, it is one thing to construct a classification. It is another to apply it. At least a dozen pages are devoted to suggested 'uze' (i.e. application rather than retrieval) of tables and index, the problems of 'Bilding numbers' — and number-building — and of the "variations practicable in adjusting to special local requirements". (23)

Besides the obvious advice of familiarising oneself with the schedules: "Get a jeneral knowlej of the skeme . . ." he went first to the obvious, or at least what may seem to be obvious but which perhaps has not always proved to be so in practice.

"Subject of a book. To find this out, consult: 1 Title, since it is jeneraly chosen to show what the book is about, but as many titles are vague or misleading, never clas from title alone . . ."

and here he adds six other reference points ranging from "Contents table" to "Specialists".

However, as the present writer pointed out what unfortunately happens now is that: "in a desperate desire to be profound, this is interpreted as 'classify by anything but title', with the result that books and documents are found in any place but the obvious". (24)

However, no one can argue with him on his initial advice about "Assyning clas numbers".

"1. Practical usefulness controls. *Put each book under the subject to the student of which it is most useful*", (His italics)

But what immediately follows opens the floodgates of variation and shows that even the originator did not believe that the standardization of schedules would result in identical applications in every case:

"unless local rezonz 'attract' it to a place stil more useful in your library".

More optimism, over-simplification, dogmatism perhaps, follows:

"2. *Content* or real subject of which a book treats and not *form* or accidental wording of title, determin its place. Following this rule, put a filosofy of art with Art, not with Filosofy, a history of mathematics with Mathematics, not with History; for filosofy or history is simply the *form* which these books hav taken. Their true content or subject is Art or Mathematics, and to the student of these subject they are most useful".

(So much for the philosophers and the historians!)

The third rule began to show something of the complexity which was creeping into the literature of science and which was to defeat the idea of a one place classification or a standard application.

". . . e.g. it is of litl consequence whether 'one wud be apt to look' under 595.16 for Darwin's *"Formation of vegetable mould"*, but of much consequence that one studying erthworms shud find that book in 595.16 Erthworms, since it is chiefly valuable as a study of erthworms' habits".

The best advice of all followed.

"Anyone wanting that special book shud look for it in catalog under Darwin."(!)

The inability of library classification to cope with scientific complexity had thus been admitted from the outset. If you want to find scientific information, know who the author is! ("Its not what you know but who you know")

And 'special' librarians could have saved themselves much trouble had they read Dewey more and classification enthusiasts less.

"7. Consider not only scope and tendency of each book, but also nature and specialties of each library".

Whether Dewey realized it or not, it was impossible to claim a standardized and still less any future 'universal' classification when such admissions and exceptions had been made.

Only two other points now need to be noted from the remainder of the introduction and that is the question of numbers, 'specific' numbers and length of number. The first is:

"4. Giv every book most specific number which wil contain it. This varies in different libraries according to number of figures uzed. . . . Decide this according to circumstances in each library".

And on 'Bilding numbers' there was again advice which later generations might have heard, learned and digested; not only for his own but for later classifications,

Combining numbers in a way not printed in Tables must be dun with great care, or confusion results. Many uzers, facinated with the possibilities of the sistem, make combinations more injenius than useful . . . every aded simbol must be clearly writen in Tables and Index".

But what then happens to standardization? The other concerns the reference to the "Bibliographic modifications" introduced by the Institut International de Bibliographie (IIB) in 1895 and which subsequently developed into the UDC.

The reason for this development was that:

"Over detailed as the Clasification alredy seemd to many librarians, lak of subdivision was the Institute's 1st difficulty and it urjd it at once to enlarj the Tables . . .

. . . IIB had devized and uzes injenius simbols, expressing many interrelations and greatly increasing numbering capacity".

He failed to see that the

"Relatiun syn: . . . most useful simbol of all . . ." (25)

could, and would, bring ambiguity to the idea of the Relativ Index and wreck the theoretical and administrative simplicity of the one place scheme.

Although Dewey had stressed the practical and the user, there is one glaring omission in the introduction which has, unwittingly or otherwise, bedevilled all subsequent discussion on library classification and indeed other forms of retrieval. And that is the failure to relate the theory to the actual division of subjects adopted. There is nothing in his Introduction to indicate why he chose the particular sequence of classes which he did; nothing as to why there is the inexplicable divorce between Language at 400 and Literature at 800 with the whole of Science, Technology and Arts between them. Nor would subsequent generations have agreed to allocations of notation which gave a quarter only of notational base to science and technology and three-quarters to non-scientific areas. Would they always agree that history is the hand-maiden of geography and to be widely divorced from social studies — whether these last are called 'sciences' or not? The failure to identify the arrangement with the theory, enabled much subsequent speculation on library classification to cloud the issue with theories of evolution and 'natural order'. It also set the pattern by which classification theory is discussed without reference to the subject matter involved. Sceptics might say because librarians generally know

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nothing about the subject they are classifying. (But the Information Scientists often seem to be little better!)

The Dewey Classification is, in fact, an arrangement of books for shelves and consequently of book spine titles, authors names and subject sequence numbers on shelves. It outlines, though not necessarily in the simplest order, the curriculum of school subjects – Language, Literature, Geography, History, Science, Religion. For Colleges of higher education, one or two extras such as Philosophy, Technology and Fine Arts were added. One is tempted to speculate that the sequence chosen for the "First Summary; the 10 Main Classes" was that in which he found the books already arranged at Amherst College and that he "decimalized" the book currency and provided an intellectual "exchange rate" in the shape of the "Relativ Index".

The fact that the outline and major sequences of subdivisions ("the first, 1,000", etc.) have survived a Century demonstrates not so much his foresight but the lack of any fundamentally new thinking within the world of educational curricula; this despite the millions of subsequent words devoted to that area and to library classification. The giant strides taken by science and technology in that Century have not been reflected in new educational or library operational reforms designed to cope with them. Educational expansion has been bought at the cost of over-narrowing specialization. "We know more and more about less and less".

7. "Extent of use"

"The rejster of libraries which hav actually adopted it, tho growing rapidly, is incomplete. Libraries often uze the sistem for many years before we lern the fact". (26)

In their survey of Cataloguing and Classification in British University Libraries in the late 60's, Friedman and Jeffrys found that of the sixty-nine libraries examined: –

"Twenty-five used the Library of Congress Classification . . . Twenty-two made use of the Dewey Classification . . . Seventeen libraries made use of the Universal Decimal Classification . . ." (27)

Thus, almost a century after its inception, Dewey held its own. The other equally widely used classification scheme was also of American origin. The UDC is a modified version of Dewey. It is significant that, in spite of the vast outpourings of theory by the English classification writers, no British scheme of classification has any hold in British Universities and associated institutions. In Public Libraries, Dewey reigns supreme.

Writing in 1974 of the United States classification since 1950, Stevenson said that they had "enshrined DDC and LC near the centre of Librarianship . . . The way we thought about classification around 1950 was such as to give DDC and LC a legitimacy and permanency of the sort usually reserved for religious texts and sacred rituals. Unfortunately, this approach is still found to a great extent today . . . They must also be identified as 'general classifications' because they know no subject limitations". (28)

But has something so widely used not at least an equal legitimacy to subsequent rivals?

An adequate outline of the principal schemes of book classification is given by Howard Philips in his 'Primer of Book Classification'. (29) Some years ago Phillips himself modestly described this work to the writer as a "cram" for the British Library Association registration examination but this is too modest an assessment. It is not a book to be despised merely because it is slim and comprehensible. A brief examination of the summaries which he gives of the schedules of the main schemes will show that they represent no advance on Dewey. The method is the same. The fact that by switching wholly or in part to an alphabetical rather than a numerical notation, they theoretically increase the base from 10 to 26, is only a stratagem rather than an advance.

". . . the other major classifications . . . are all essentially Dewey's" (30).

Notes:

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(2) Moss, R.: Aslib Proc., 14, 1962, p. 33.
(3) Ogden, C.K.: Basic English . . . 7th ed., 1938.
(4) Richards, I.A.: Basic English and its uses, 1943.
(5) Dewey, M., op. cit. (Statement by Custer), p. 66. In quoting from Dewey's own introduction I have also copied – or tried to copy – his phonetic spelling; "tried" because it is not easy to do so, particularly for the typist.
(6) Dewey, M. op. cit. Vol. 1, ed. 19, 1979, p. xxii
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(26) Ibid, p. 68.
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