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Classification Teaching for Students of Librarianship

Reflections and Proposals

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As a contribution towards an improved teaching of classification knowledge in German library schools some seven problem areas are outlined among which the lacking clarity as to the teaching objectives, the training deficits of teachers, their isolation and the lack of teaching aids. Against these, some seven proposals for improvement are submitted. In the annex a list of topics concerning the teaching of classification and subject indexing at the Library School of Baden-Württemberg, Stuttgart are given.
I.C.

(Ed. Note: In the last issue we reported about a seminar held in Cologne Dec. 7–8, 1978 on Classification and Education (I.C. 79–1, p. 37–38) and invited our colleagues to submit short reports on the contents of their teaching programs in classification. The following article was one of the lectures presented at that seminar. It describes a particular situation in Germany. We would like to hear how this compares to the situations in other countries? What proposals are there, what experiences and which are the teaching objectives in this field in other parts of the world? Except for one contribution we have not as yet had any response. May this article stimulate your concern for our field!)

1. Teaching Problems in Classification

1.1 Lacking clarity as to the teaching objectives

I have the impression that we disagree from institute to institute on what, with regards to contents, *must* be taught in classification training courses, on what *can* be offered in addition, and on what the teaching program *might* include furthermore as optional subjects offered on a voluntary basis. For this uncertainty there are various reasons:

1. The teaching objectives to be set for instruction in classification are nowhere clearly defined. Pertinent statements contained in training programs and curricula usually do not go beyond mere headings. Hardly anything is said as to the depth and width of the subject matter to be treated. The determining factors are: the tradition of the given institute and, as the supreme measure, the preferences of the instructor imparting this knowledge.

2. The – in Eppelsheimer's words – "Babylonian diversity of forms of subject description" is a burden on both teachers and students and a major obstacle to uniformity. Regional considerations also play a part. Who, in this immense field of wildly proliferating – if often interesting – attempts at creating order, can clearly separate, as often needs to be done, the important from the unimportant, or the significant from the bizarre? Apt to be rendered skeptical by the diversity of systems, the trainee can be motivated only with difficulty to cultivate the arid and stony soil of subject description, preferring instead to heap praise on our colleague Schulz of the Marburg University Library as a man deserving to be honored for his advocacy of a radical abolishment of the systematic catalog. Not a few in our audience are prepared to agree with him – with a man who earned his reputation through his wholesale slashing away at systematic catalogs of every creed and color. They find it only regrettable that this prophet should have so little honor in his homeland, the Federal Republic of Germany.

3. A third reason, or so I believe, for the lack of clarity on teaching objectives, especially for medium-level librarians, may lie in the fact that classification teaching has expanded in the recent past. Since the early 70s, when prolonged theoretical training of medium-level librarians was introduced first, if I am not mistaken, the number of required instruction hours has been steadily increasing. While earlier curricula provided for only a few hours of training in subject description – a topic reserved after all for higher-level librarians – the number of hours devoted to this subject has considerably increased since 1970. More time is now set aside for this field. In the training of medium-level librarians, purely formal description no longer is allotted – as it formerly was as a matter of course – the lion's share of the total number of hours.

4. Also, some disagreement still seems to prevail as to how the training offered should be differentiated among the three professional levels involved. Just what is the professional knowledge that should be mastered by the Assistant (lower-level) Librarian, the graduate (medium-level) Librarian, and the Senior (higher-level) Librarian?

When preparing myself for this seminar I re-read several times Mrs. Heinrich's contribution on the training of (medium-level) librarians at public libraries as offered by the training institute in Cologne (1). What (medium-level) Librarians are offered in these courses not only exceeds by far the level of other training institutes, it also exceeds by far anything I was taught myself during my own higher-level training, as well as anything Senior Librarians were taught in Cologne itself only a few years ago. More than anything else did this paper make me aware of the non-uniformity of the teaching objectives in classification training. We disagree from institute to institute on what, with regards to contents, *must* be offered to each of the three professional categories and on what *can* be taught in addition.

1.2 The training deficit existing with classification teachers

Just how does one become a teacher of subject description at our training institutes? I venture to say: very often by pure chance and through the persuasive abilities of one's superiors. The mere fact of one being appoint-

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ed teacher seems to endow one with the necessary qualifications. Usually of very short duration, the time of preparation is spent in large measure on recalling the subject-catalog course one took oneself during one's training and on finding that one's own teacher actually did not present things too badly. (There never was anyone else to set an example, after all.) Add to this the throrough study of a textbook and of a few important monographs to serve as stimulants. A final, not wholly unimportant matter: the personal experience gathered in one's own professional practice. Now can all this really be said to add up to adequate qualification?

Therefore: Our classification training also suffers from the fact that we, as teachers of this subject, have had too little chance to prepare ourselves adequately for this activity. Today there no longer is any justification for imposing this field, more and more developing and steadily diversifying as it is, upon colleagues who have not been adequately trained for this task. Even now, to my knowledge, no systematic efforts are being made to provide for a qualified crop of teachers in this field who have received didactical training on the university level and who possess the expert knowledge enabling them to properly teach this subject.

Thus, the No. 2 problem in classification teaching is the inadequacy of the – preparatory as well as professional – training of the teacher.

1.3 The problem of the isolated teacher

Classification is taught at all librarian training institutes. While, therefore, all teachers concerned are confronted with the same, none-too-easy, field of work, each one of them tries to master his or her difficulties all by him- or herself. The striking fact is that – apart from Mrs. Heinrich in her aforementioned paper – no one has ever published anything in the German language on problems in classification teaching. A great silence surrounds these questions, or rather: the debate on them has not yet got under way. Therefore, unless things change – and in this connection I expect a great deal from the seminar scheduled for next spring – non-uniformity in classification teaching will continue to remain with us. It was the very necessity of tackling these problems sooner or later which finally made me agree to deliver this address and make a start here and now. I am myself one of those barely-trained and hihgly isolated teachers of whom I spoke a little while ago. It started teaching only a year ago and am trying to teach in a 45-hour course what I deem to be required for medium-level librarions at scientific libraries.

In Appendix I to my paper I have tried to show you along what lines I have arranged my course. Specifically it shows what teaching objectives I have set. Now may I assume that this list is more or less representative for all teaching institutes? Let this be one of the matters to be clarified in our subsequent discussion.

Now I will move to a fourth problem.

1.4 Inadequate teaching aids

The teaching aids (textbooks, manuals and other documents accompanying our teaching) available to us so far no longer fulfill their purpose. I, too, lack the courage to exchange lecturing manuscripts with one of my colleagues, although such an exchange, while an imposition on the colleague, might be quite stimulating for both.

What is urgently needed today is a classification textbook of sound didactical and methodological structure, providing not only for the broad imparting of knowledge but also, and primarily, for a well-considered presentation of typical systems as exemplified by carefully selected models. Today it is no longer possible to teach every single system, but exemplary presentation of selected systems is and remains important. Today's textbooks must also be able to hold their own before the critical eyes of the practitioners. They must not present as wholly assured what is in fact totally controversial; rather – and here Roloff erred in the first two editions of his textbook (2) – they must indicate variants as well. A further problem:

1.5 The proliferating literature and the less and less intelligible language of the catalog theoreticians

In this respect we are often far removed from the principle formulated by Leyh: "The needs of the practice alone are the touchstone for the practicality of catalog devices!"(3).

The glaring discrepancy between theoretical and practical approaches is not working to the good of teaching in classification. We are faced with an immense host of catalog theories and system proposals which often are far removed from everyday library practice. The professional field with whose needs in mind we are to train our students takes little notice of research in the classification domain. The language of these theories to a large extent does not reach the ear of the practitioners. The classification teacher, on the other hand, might become the bridgebuilder who brings his word to bear to make sure that the theory remains oriented to the practice. Beyond any doubt, one of the guiding principles for our teaching is and remains: the applicability of the systems in the practice of the information institutions.

I do not mean to deny by this that theory's ordering thought may quite well be of importance for the practice. It is in this sense that I would like to see a proposal[1] understood, which, by means of a mental experiment concerned with theory, provides for the introduction into the systematization field of cybernetic considerations which will, in the end, make for greater clarity for the user, too, in the presentation of the stocks on hand.

For a discussion of and an exchange of views on this mental experiment I would be most grateful.

1.6 The lack of criteria for eliminating superfluous information in classification

I perceive a sixth problem in the collecting zeal peculiar to all librarians. After all, in choosing our profession we librarians have opted for collecting and conserving. But, lest we are crushed by the mass of information, it really is not possible to conserve everything. In terms of contents, the subject matter we teach must be reduced. There just is no way around it. We must even dispense with cherished ideas and systems, either because they have become history or because they are not suitable enough to serve as models. But who will furnish us con-

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vincing points of view telling us in this matter what can be simply omitted and what cannot? System evaluation criteria are urgently required here. Documentalists are currently debating whether it really is still necessary to teach the UDC or whether it would be better to simply strike it from the teaching program. I do not believe that a library-oriented classification teacher will dispense with this system, for in so doing he would render anything but a service to professional classification practice.

But what other things are there which, in contrast, may well be simply stricken form the catalog of systems to be treated in our teaching? We have no criteria of any kind permitting us without arbitrariness to disqualify systems as unfit to be taught.

1.7 The lack of substantial background knowledge on the part of our students

This brings me to the final problem I would like to bring up. Only a few years ago we could still safely assume all our students to possess a body of general basic knowledge. But the general educational deficit among today's students is getting bigger and bigger. In large measure, they often lack the educational background necessary to understand in what problem field the teacher is operating in the first place. Without a substantial substraction, classification teaching finds itself confronted with unsolvable problems. At least some mental image must be present of what, in the end, needs to be ordered. The reform carried out of the top grades of West German secondary schools, where instruction is becoming more and more specialized, is not the best possible preparation for instruction in classification.

Let this conclude my enumeration of existing problems. Several others could be mentioned: the list is by no means complete. Among the matters well worthy of discussion are: the inequality of the ranges of experience of the prospective librarians as resulting from their practical training, and ways and means for achieving greater uniformity here. I personally would be interested in knowing how the progress achieved toward the learning objectives set is determined, as well as in other questions and problems. But surely this will be a topic on the agenda of our next convention.

Now I would like to outline seven proposals that might help to solve the existing problems.

2. Proposals for Improving Classification Teaching

2.1 Agreement on the teaching objectives

First of all we should give thought to the teaching objectives for all three professional levels involved. We must differentiate between the objective of the teacher and that of the student, i.e. between the teaching objective and the learning objective. On this, Brigitte Eckstein writes in ‚Einmaleins der Hochschullehre' (The ABC of Academic Teaching): "However, the differentiation between teaching and learning objective is important, as the two may be markedly different; the better the agreement between the two, however, the greater – all other things being equal – will be the learning success achieved!" (4). For the teacher, but no less for the student, teaching objectives are a great help. Writes Eckstein: "The teaching objectives provide the sole means for assessing the teaching success and for improving teaching" (5).

We should therefore ask ourselves expressis verbis what knowledge, what understanding and what abilities or skills simply have to be imparted to the various professional categories. The teacher looks at his students in a twofold way: as examination candidates and as future collaborators on the subject catalog. Both perspectives should coincide, however. In the course of time, only those things should become relevant in the examination which afterwards will also be of practical importance. What knowledge does the professional community expect from the Assistant Librarian, from the – graduate – Librarian, and from the Senior Librarian?

With regard to the Assistant Librarian it must be remarked that in his or her training the subject catalog cannot be simply left out, as it has been so far. According to the new position description in force, he or she must be imparted basic knowledge on the following matters (which simultaneously define the teaching objectives):

1. He or she should be explained the various types of subject catalogs.
2. He or she must be familiarized with their respective functions.
3. He or she should learn to differentiate between formal and subject-related answers to queries.

In the "Blätter für Berufskunde" (Information Sheets on Position Description, 1st edition, 1977) we read about the Assistant Librarian: "In his or her training, the Assistant Librarian is made familiar with nearly all fields of work at the library, thus being prepared for and rendered capable of later specialization in this or that specific field of activity" (6). While it is emphasized that his or her task clearly has its center of gravity in the practical field, future tasks in the catalog sector are also expressly included: "With the aid of the various catalogs and document retrieval systems, the Assistant Librarian furnishes information of a formal nature and first orientation aid to enquiring parties, while referring more complicated matters beyond these categories to the competent Librarian" (7).

Thus, in the teaching curriculum for the Assistant Librarian the subject catalog can by no means be left out. He or she is expected to furnish his or her collaboration in the area of the subject catalog.

The teaching objectives for the graduate *Librarian* as I see them are listed in Appendix 1 to my paper. With the indicated subject matter as summarized in 10 chapters the Librarian should be familiar. In addition, in practical exercises spread out over 3 years of training the Librarian should be imparted the knowledge enabling him or her to collaborate in the subject catalog area in some three systems, e.g.:

1. The Eppelsheimer system
2. The UDC.
3. An open-shelf system in one of the new university libraries (Regensburg, Ulm, Konstanz).

Turning now to the *Senior Librarians* one faces a certain dilemma when formulating teaching objectives for them. On the onehand they should be well acquainted with all those fields with which the Librarian is made familiar; but the training period for Senior Librarians

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is shorter and the number of hours correspondingly smaller. There is a training method, however, which presumably can be more readily applied in the training of Senior Librarians than with Librarians, namely the comparative teaching method. This approach is recommendable, "since over and beyond a punctual assimilation of individual systems it imparts general principles of classification theory and theoretical precision" (8).

I would define the teaching objectives in Senior Librarian training as follows;

1. Knowledge of the currently most important systems. Pertinent indications are furnished by the work of the Study Group for Uniform Classification.
2. Imparting of the ability to compare systems so as to be able to decide on the applicability of the various classification types.
3. Imparting of skills enabling the student, after a brief training period, o describe his or her own field of study in terms of a wide variety of systems.

No doubt the aforedefined teaching objectives can be supplemented, narrowed down, and formulated more precisely. I expect valuable suggestions to this end from the forthcoming spring meeting.

2.2 Improved training of classification teachers

The training of teachers, including the selection of classification teachers, needs to be carried out in more responsible fashion. A specific preparatory period as well as a period of on-the-job training should be firm prerequisites. In general teacher training it is a wholly natural requirement for prospective teachers to sit in at lectures by experienced colleagues. Why shouldn't something like this become standard procedure with us, too? Proposals for improved training of subject-catalog teachers should be rounded up in the near future.

2.3 Assured postgraduate training of active teachers

Possibilities for postgraduate training should be offered more liberally to active teachers, and practical training courses in information science should be open not only to prospective teachers but also to active ones. A periodical exchange of experience on the contents, methodology and didactics of the subject matter is of great importance.

2.4 Preparation of new teaching aids

Closely connected with the aforegoing proposal is the following suggestion. We need new teaching aids. The "Allgemeine Ordnungslehre" (General Ordering Science) prepared by our colleague Greiner was a great help to me during my own instruction (9). Through a continuation of this approach, something of like nature should also be prepared for the "Spezielle Ordnungslehre" (Special Ordering Science), i.e. for the various classification systems.

I can conceive e.g. of "Didactical Aids in Subject Description" in the form of a loose-leaf collection or a small journal addressing itself to both theoreticians and practitioners in classification. This publication should be marked by a readily understandable language and by suggestions from the practice for the practice. It should also contain useful suggestions for the instructor offering on-the-job training on or with the subject catalog. No lengthy, involved articles should find acceptance here; instead, only brief, readily understandable papers, progress reports, evaluations of systems or classifications, and reports on experience of importance to the teacher should be permitted to appear here.

2.5 Contacts with the practice

This journal should also regularly open its columns to practitioners who, from their point of view, can thus develop ideas which might exercise a regulatory function for both theory and practice.

Now I will just briefly dwell on my two final proposals.

2.6 Criteria for the usefulness of a system

What criteria do we have for terming some systems relatively unimportant in our lectures and for eventually just dropping them altogether? Just when does a system become one of mere historical relevance? No system should be taught any longer for the sake of mere completeness; only those which can still serve as stimulants today, which provide feed for thought and point the way towards solutions to problems should still be included in our repertory. But who will guarantee, and by what standards, that systems filed away today as mere historical objects will not become fashionable again tomorrow?

2.7 Branches of knowledge and classification teaching

Without a doubt, our subject-catalog teaching will have to take place in close connection with instruction on the branches of knowledge. Or will this latter instruction be more and more neglected and eventually thrown overboard? For the answering of queries and for classification activity it is more important and necessary than ever.

In summing up, I would like to briefly present my proposals once again.

What do we need?

1. A clear idea of the teaching objectives in the training of Assistant Librarians, Librarians and Senior Librarians.
2. Better training of classification teachers.
3. Postgraduate training of teachers on a par with present-day scientific standards. . .
4. . . . and supported by a periodical publication entitled "Didaktische Blätter zur Klassifikationslehre" (Didactical Letters on Classification Teaching).
5. And all this should be continuously related to the practice, ...
6. . . . which should have a voice in defining the criteria for the systems to be taught.
7. Care should be taken to make sure that students are imparted the necessary substantial background knowledge through the theory of science. This is of particular importance in the training of medium-category personnel, i.e. of Librarians (as distinguished from Assistant or Senior Librarians).

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Note:

1 This had been added to the paper as Annex 2. The reader is asked to contact the author for it, if interested. His address: Badische Landesbibliothek, Postfach 1451, D-7500 Karlsruhe

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(5) Ecktein, B.: op. cit., p. 32.
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(7) Blätter, op. cit., p. 5.
(8) Heinrich, G.: op. cit., p. 206.
(9) Greiner, G.: Allgemeine Ordnungslehre. Frankfurt/Main 1978.

Annex

Contents of Teaching Program in Classification and Subject Indexing for Medium Level Education of Librarians at the Bibliotheksschule Baden-Württemberg 1978.

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5. Der Schlagwortkatalog
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