

Moving beyond the presentation layer:

Content and context in the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system

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This is a compilation of papers from an international group of researchers and practitioners assembled by OCLC research scientist Diane Vizine-Goetz and DDC editor-in-chief Joan Mitchell. The papers explore the Dewey Decimal System (DDS) from a variety of perspectives, with a focus on “peeling away the presentation layer” – the familiar linear notational sequence – to reveal “the content and context” offered by the DDS in practice.

The introductory section is substantial, comprising almost half of the book’s length, and consists of 3 papers, written by senior American academics, which examine the history of classification online, the DDS’s Relative Index, and the challenges of teaching the DDS, respectively.

The section begins with an eye-opening, if somewhat sobering, review by Karen Markey (Professor, School of Information, University of Michigan) of the history of the online use of classification systems. Of particular interest is the insight the paper provides into how and why our OPACs look and operate as they do, as well as Markey’s admonishment to the library community for their failure to provide better leadership with regard to organising web resources.

In the next paper, Francis Miksa (Professor, School of Information, University of Texas at Austin) examines the “Relative Index” over the 22 editions of the DDC. Features discussed include the ability of the index to include concepts or notations not formally included in the schedules, as well as to provide conceptual contexts for index terms. The paper, including its historical component, is helpful for the light it sheds, not only on the index, but on the DDS system as a whole.

The final paper in the introduction, by Arlene Taylor (Professor Emerita, Library and Information Science Program, University of Pittsburgh), describes various methods employed by her and others to teach the DDS, and outlines some the problems faced by educators and students. The article’s content is well-supported by a number of appended teaching aids.

The rest of the book comprises 6 case studies of the DDS in use, plus a report on a prototype browser being developed by OCLC. The case studies are grouped into 2 parts: “an international perspective”, which looks at the use of the DDS outside the United States, and “a web perspective”, which looks at the use of the DDS online. These are categories of convenience, as most papers include both an international and a web perspective. This arrangement, however, does highlight two central themes addressed in the book: firstly, the difficulties in using an American classification system as an international standard, and, secondly, the question of whether the system can be used effectively in a web environment, given its origin in the 19th century.

The international case studies come from Trinidad and Tobago, Switzerland, and Germany. As the editors point out in the preface, this is a small slice of Dewey’s worldwide usage (the DDS is currently used in 138 countries), but the papers are useful as they highlight and discuss a number of issues related to localisation and inter-operability of the system that can be generalised to other areas.

In the first case study, Lorraine Nero (cataloguer at the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago) discusses problems using the DDS and LCC to classify the music of Trinidad and Tobago, in light of the lack of provision for Caribbean popular music. She describes some of the solutions devised by local cataloguers to circumvent these issues, and suggests ways in which to amend the systems to include this subject area. This is a valuable study for catalogue departments in other countries, like South Africa, that also face the problem of cataloguing indigenous music genres with these standards.

In the next paper, Patrice Landry (Head of Subject Indexing, Swiss National Library) explains the decision, made in 1998, by the Swiss National Library to adopt the DDS for its new public access collections and as the organising tool for the Swiss national bibliography. The paper includes interesting observations on the practical difficulties encountered in the process, including those posed by using a classification system devised in the United States.

In the last paper of the section, Magda Heiner-Freiling (Deputy Head of Dept. of Classification and Indexing in Die Deutsche Bibliothek, and Director of the Project DDC German) discusses how German countries are using the DDS as a web retrieval tool for German language material, and in the process devising creative new ways to use the system. As with the other papers, problems created by the American bias of the DDS are addressed, and suggestions made for the future.

In the final section, 3 papers describe projects using DDC on the web in virtual locations in Europe and North America. In each of the projects, subject searching and browsing across different web resources is provided by mapping these resources, and, in some cases their individual classification systems or subject terms, to the DDC structure – which in effect is being used as an underlying “switching language”.

Koch, Golum, and Ardo (U.K. and Swedish researchers associated with the project) describe user browsing behaviour in Renardus, a web service providing subject access to European-based subject gateways for academic and research communities. A particularly interesting finding is that users frequently conduct lengthy searches, and favour browsing

techniques – contradicting the widespread belief that web users prefer searching to browsing, and that they have short attention spans, being unwilling to go beyond a few clicks to find information.

Nicholson, Dawson, and Shiri (Director and Senior Researcher at the Centre for Digital Library Research in Glasgow, and Assistant Professor, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, respectively) discuss the role of DDC in the HILT (High-level Thesaurus) project, a pilot U.K. project to provide subject access to quality web resources in order to support advanced education and research.

Zeeman and Turner (members of the Metadata Catalytic Initiative at Library and Archives Canada) describe how Library and Archives Canada (previously the National Library of Canada) and the federal Dept. of Canadian Heritage are using Dewey to manage web resources related to Canada and Canadian culture.

Finally, Vizine-Goetz, one of the co-editors of the book, reports on a prototype multilingual browser being developed by OCLC, which uses the DDS to provide users with the ability to subject browse, search, and display millions of WorldCat and FirstNet records. Illustrations show how the browser uses Dewey's "concept in context" system to display search results graphically and powerfully. She concludes that technology is no longer a barrier for delivering classification online for end-users of OPACs – an exciting conclusion to a stimulating and thought-provoking book.

The library profession appears to be at a potentially critical, and very exciting, point in its history, as it seems that most basic practices and tools are being reassessed in response to the profound changes in the environment. This book is a valuable resource to anyone working in the field and trying to keep abreast of all the debates and developments. The articles are very timely and informative, well-written, have extensive bibliographies, and make good use of illustrations, while the book as a whole is indexed. I would particularly recommend it to those studying, teaching, or using the DDS.

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