

DEWEY OR DON'T WE?



The Dewey Decimal Classification system has been used in public libraries for well over a century but, in the age of Google and mobile devices, is Dewey still the best way to organise our non-fiction collections?

The City of Melbourne Libraries are stepping into the brave new world of browsable zones and Dewey mash-ups.

Dewey has many advantages. It provides a standard system for classifying non-fiction and is used by 200 000 libraries worldwide. Dewey uses numbers, not words, and therefore is consistent across many different languages. It is a hierarchical system, enabling the classification of many subjects, from the very broad to the highly specific. Dewey allows for a level of 'granulation' in topic areas that general subject areas, such as those in bookstores, cannot duplicate. For finding a particular title, there is nothing like it.

But Dewey is a librarian-centred way of organising books. Given the majority of library users are browsers – they know

they want something to read but they don't know what it is until they see it – perhaps the main drawback of Dewey is that it is not intuitive for the user.

In 2007, the Perry Library, a branch of the Maricopa County Library District in Arizona, US, made the bold move to become Dewey-free, in response to a survey of library users in which they repeatedly heard comments like "Those numbers scare me," and "They make me feel stupid".

The Perry Library adapted a system of alphabetical-within-category organisation often used in book shops, based on the Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC). Many librarians feel BISAC's relative simplicity and user-friendly language has an advantage over Dewey's complexity.

The opening of a Dewey-free facility sparked heated debate in the American library community at the time, such as one blogger's condemnation of the change as heresy. Six years later, all 17 branches are using the system, known as ShelfLogic, and current Branch Manager of the Perry Library, Cathy Ormsby, says it is a resounding success.

"Customers are empowered to search in a relaxed manner for materials they need. Librarians and support staff have more time for in-depth assistance for those customers who require it," she says.

Another alternative is the 'mash-up' solution of Dewey and browsable zones – often referred to as 'genrefication' – combining the browsable book shop-

style zones and the precise find-ability of the Dewey System. Again in the US, at the Darien Library in Connecticut, a mixed solution called Glades has met with an overwhelmingly positive response, with one mother blogging "The books everywhere have been shelved, labelled, and organised in a way that makes me feel less like a moron and more empowered to find what I'm looking for on my own".

Several libraries in the UK have also employed the Dewey and browsable zone mash-up system, including Thame Library in Oxfordshire, where the system has been a hit with the community and adult non-fiction loans went up by 117% in the first three months after opening.

Closer to home, when the City of Melbourne opened the Southbank Library at Boyd in July 2012, only about 4500 non-fiction books could fit in the available space, and it was decided that the fine level of detail provided by Dewey was not necessary in such a small collection. Instead, we used a unique subject-based system, grouping books into intuitive, book shop-style categories such as arts and culture, food and drink, business and IT, and travel. We selected only popular areas to appeal to the Southbank residents and workers.

Patron response has been highly enthusiastic, with over 41 000 visitors and loans exceeding 44 500 in the first six months. While we haven't yet carried out formal surveys of the library users, Southbank Library staff say the patrons love the non-fiction system and find it very easy to use. Now, at the one year anniversary of opening, the Southbank Library has been nominated as one of 15 of the best practice libraries in an international scan under the auspices of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

There are however, disadvantages with the Southbank system. While it is ideal for a small browsing collection, it would not work as well in a larger library, where a greater level of detail is required. We also now have a system in one branch that is not employed in the other City of Melbourne libraries, meaning our cataloguing specifications have become complicated and extensive.

In the next two years, Melbourne Library Service will open two new libraries: Docklands Library and Community Centre opening in March 2014, and Carlton Library at the Kathleen Syme Centre in 2015. Following the success of the zoning system at Southbank, we are going to offer non-fiction in browsable zones in these libraries. Because Docklands and Carlton are going to be bigger libraries, we are using the mash-up system.

The entire sequence of Dewey numbers has been mapped to each zone, bringing related, but normally physically separate, topics together, such as gardening (635) and landscaping (712) coming together in the home and lifestyle zone. This approach also allows for physical flexibility – enabling the Docklands Library to locate biography next to fiction, and arts and culture adjacent to the performance space, creative editing suites, maker space and recording studios.

Following on from the success of zoning adult non-fiction, the children's team at Melbourne Library Service are keen to apply a similar principle to junior non-fiction, to help reverse the decline in junior non-fiction use over recent years. It seems no matter how much fun you try and make Dewey, more time is spent on teaching children the system than using the books themselves – and most children don't even learn decimals until Grade 4.

The main focus of the revamped junior non-fiction collection at Melbourne's Libraries will be on reading for pleasure, with books organised into categories such as animals, things to make and do, and fun facts. Books will be kept in broad Dewey order but the emphasis will be on face-out display and browsing.

Librarians are early adopters. We readily embrace innovations in technology and social media. It's time we started to look at the way our collections are organised and applied the same level of ingenuity to our library layouts. It's time we organised our collections to enable our users to easily discover more great books to read.

It's time we made Dewey work for us.

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This article is based on a presentation to Masters of Librarianship students at RMIT. Full copies are available by contacting Shirley at the above email address.

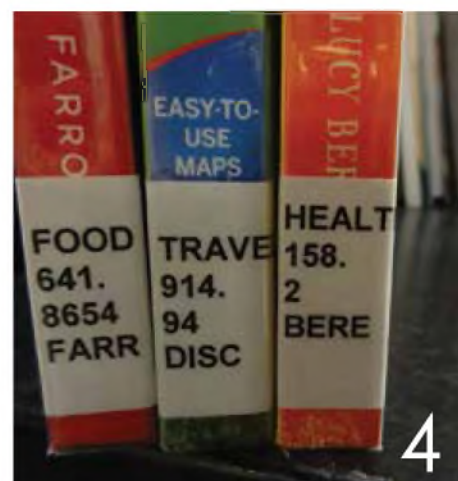
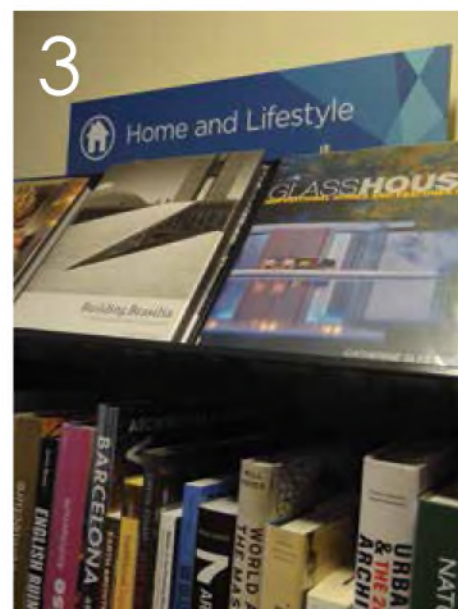
Images:
 1 and 2. No more crunching the numbers: an alternative to Dewey hits the shelves in Melbourne

3. Face-out shelving within browsable zones helps entice the reader

4. Genrefication: the Dewey mash-up offers specificity and browsability

-  ARTS + CULTURE
-  BIOGRAPHY
-  BUSINESS + IT
-  FOOD + DRINK
-  HEALTH
-  HISTORY + SOCIETY
-  HOME + LIFESTYLE
-  LITERATURE
-  SCIENCE + NATURE
-  TRAVEL

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