Teaching Classification in the 21st Century

Patricia G. Oyler
Simmons College
Graduate School of Library and Information Science
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract:

Classification instruction in the new millenium will be markedly different because the focus and needs of our users have altered, as have information formats. Although the purpose of classifying information remains the same in the 21st century as in the 20th century—assisting users in locating relevant information—we must teach the process in such a way that the librarian or information scientist will be able to apply that knowledge to the organization of information in any format. Teaching classification during the past century was, in some cases, a practical approach for parking information in stacks. While a theoretical overlay was present, the thrust of the courses was not the organization of information, but the organization of books in catalogs and on shelves. In the world of the 21st century with a variety of formats, the theoretical basis is becoming more important. The challenge for library and information science educators is to educate classifiers to organize the formats of the future while responding to the continuing need to classify print materials in libraries. The focus of this paper is on teaching classification and organization of information whether the information is in digital form, in the World Wide Web, in databases, in print form, or in books on shelves.

Background

Cataloging and classification curricula in schools of library and information science have been studied and written about by a number of authors and educators. (1) If these topics have been researched so extensively why do they continue to be written about? The answer, of course, is that the constant and frequent changes occurring within libraries and in the library profession have serious implications for
cataloging and classification education. The curriculum must be flexible and dynamic if it is going to meet the needs of this evolving environment. Vellucci says that “a constant examination of both the curriculum and the environmental change is required in order to sustain a cataloging curriculum that is responsive to an evolving profession yet grounded in solid theory and principles.” (2)

Educators want to prepare their students for the future, yet no one is sure what that future will look like. In light of that uncertainty, cataloging teachers are constantly watching for the factors likely to influence the organization of information, in order to incorporate appropriate changes into their courses. But how much new material can be added to a course before it becomes overloaded? What can be deleted without leaving a significant gap in knowledge? “The inevitable result is not only the restructuring of a specific course, but a rethinking of the entire context of the cataloging curriculum to accommodate new areas of study, while retaining the fundamental theory and critical thinking process that will enable students to adapt to their changing futures.” (3)

**Theory versus Practice**

One of the most long-standing controversies among cataloging educators and practitioners is how much cataloging and classification theory and how much practical application should be included in cataloging courses, particularly the basic or introductory courses. Most educators feel that a firm grounding in the theory and principles underlying the organization of information will better enable catalogers to adapt to changing environments. If catalogers have a solid grounding in theory, they will be better able to understand and accept changing cataloging and classification systems.

Practitioners, on the other hand, want to hire recent graduates with practical knowledge of the existing cataloging practices, who will require less training in routine procedures and be more productive in the long run. But to teach both the theory and practical knowledge, in-depth, would require more hours than are allotted to most cataloging courses.

Recently, there has been a shift in attitude among cataloging practitioners toward an emphasis on theory as opposed to practical knowledge. With the introduction of electronic resources, the World Wide Web, electronic databases and digital libraries it is becoming increasingly important for cataloging librarians to know how to adapt their knowledge to these new formats. If cataloging librarians are going to be players in the organization of electronic materials they will need to understand the theoretical basis for subject analysis, including classification.

**Teaching Classification**

Automation, electronic databases, and the enormous expansion of information on the World Wide Web have allowed library and information science practitioners, educators, and users to recognize the value of understanding both the theoretical underpinnings and practical application of classification. Williamson identifies seven categories of information covered in required courses which include some classification: Principles, Theory, Historical Background, Objectives, Specific Classification Systems, Facet Analysis, and Automatic Text Analysis. (5) Several other authors have identified some or all of these categories in texts and readers in cataloging and classification. (6) To examine what is currently taught about classification, how it might be taught and how it might be taught in the future, I would like to use the course I teach at Simmons College as a case study.

**Simmons GSLIS as Case Study**

Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS), Boston, MA, USA, requires that all students take the course entitled, “Organization of Knowledge.” This course is considered
the core or basic introduction to cataloging and subject analysis including classification. Simmons GSLIS
has a major commitment to the teaching of cataloging and classification and, as a result, there are four
full-time faculty members with a background and interest in cataloging and subject analysis. In addition,
classification concepts are included in “Advanced Cataloging and Classification,” “Non-Print Cataloging,”
and “Subject Analysis.” Some of the specialized courses such as "Art Documentation," "Music
Librarianship," and "Medical Librarianship" discuss classification as it relates to that specific subject.

Subject analysis including classification occupies about one-half of the basic course. Principles of subject
headings, controlled vocabulary versus natural language, pre- and post-coordinated systems, and the use
of Library of Congress subject headings are covered under subject headings. The classification portion of
the course covers principles of library classification, the use of the Library of Congress classification, and
of the Dewey Decimal classification, and other classification schemes which are used worldwide are also
covered briefly.

Intner writes that “Authors of articles in the literature, speakers at meetings, and faculty and students in
library schools all seem to agree on three things about cataloging coursework: there is an enormous
amount of material to be covered; it is difficult and it is dull. Nothing is clearer than the compelling need
to make cataloging issues manageable for the students learning about them and to make the learning
process interesting.”(7) It helps to show students how they can apply what they learn to actually assist
users in locating information. In addition, it is necessary to make the students feel like they are learning
something that will be relevant to their future careers.

At the beginning of the course students are asked to search titles, authors and subjects in library catalogs,
databases, and the Web to illustrate the differences in access in catalogs and the role that control plays in
locating information. Another exercise is used to emphasize the value of controlled vocabulary such as
subject headings and of classification. Students are asked to search for a specific title without using any
cataloging or classification information. They are, in effect, searching for a needle in a haystack. Then,
they are allowed to use classification schedules and subject headings. They also search for information on
the Web and look at Web site catalogs organized by library and other classification schemes. This helps
students to appreciate the role of classification in organizing and locating information, and to make the
discussion of theory more relevant.

The introductory course also examines theory of classification and then moves on to the Library of
Congress and Dewey Decimal Classifications. Other classification schemes, such as UDC and Bliss, are
briefly reviewed, but not actually taught or applied. Students are given a number of exercises in which
they apply both the Library of Congress and Dewey Decimal Classifications to list of titles and then to
actual library materials. After applying these classification schemes students are better able to consider the
theoretical aspects of classification. The study of classification wraps up with a discussion of how
theoretical understanding can facilitate application.

Because of the tremendous amount of material expected to be covered in a short time, all exercises take
place outside the classroom. But each year the material to be added increases, and the problem of what to
include becomes more and more difficult.

The balance of the theoretical and the practical, the use of physical items and electronic resources, the
study of the more traditional library applications, and the new Web uses of classification stimulate student
interest and attention. But it is interesting to note that students look for a balance. If a faculty member
seems to cover more theory than practice; the students will ask for ways to learn the practice, even if it
means spending more of their own time.
As I mentioned earlier we have four full-time faculty members teaching the “Organization of Knowledge.” As can be expected each has a slightly different approach to the course based on their background, experience, and interests. Consequently, some of the sections of the course are more theoretical than others. Initially, students are most interested in learning what they think they will need to get a job. They mirror more closely practitioners in their desire for practice over theory. However, once the relevance of theoretical knowledge is demonstrated, students become much more interested in learning it. They also can appreciate the rapid change in the field and how understanding theory and principles will enable them to adapt to change.

Teaching Classification in the Future

In the future, teaching classification is going to become both easier and more difficult. It is going to become easier because the Web will yield many examples of the value of using classification systems and the problems of not using them. It will also be easier to establish relevancy for students new to an area of study that may of them have feared and dreaded. It is going to become more difficult because more theory and a wider variety of classification schemes will need to be covered.

As technology has increased interest in the study of the theory of classification, it will also facilitate the teaching of classification. Programmed learning and Web tutorials may enable students to learn more outside the classroom and thus help to alleviate the problem of "how do I cover all of the traditional material as well as all of the new material."


(3) Ibid., p. 36.

(4) Cataloging is used in this paper to include descriptive cataloging, classification and the assignment of subject headings.


21st century job growth is outpacing our ability to develop a prepared workforce, making it more critical than ever to teach these skills. It is almost universally acknowledged that in order to succeed in the 21st century, students must learn much more than the “three Rs” and basic computer competency. The term “21st century skills” is used often in educational circles to refer to a range of abilities and competencies that go beyond what has traditionally been taught in the classroom, including problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation. Others define the term as “information literacy, media literacy, and information, communication and technology literacy.” Are you teaching in a 21st century classroom? Chances are if you are an English language educator working in the classroom today, you have already moved well ahead of your peers and colleagues teaching math, science, and good old fashioned grammar. Now that you know By Sara Davila. July 27, 2016. 361 108337. Are you teaching in a 21st century classroom? Chances are if you are an English language educator working in the classroom today, you have already moved well ahead of your peers and colleagues teaching math, science, and good old fashioned grammar. 21st Century learning means teaching just as you have done in the past centuries, but with way better tools. Today’s teachers have a great advantage, they have powerful learning tools at their disposal that they didn’t have before. 21st Century technology is an opportunity for students to acquire more knowledge. Lastly, the 21st century educator must use teaching strategies to ensure that the focus in education is on preparing today’s children for the future of where they will live and where they will work, not for our current world. What does the 21st century teacher look like to you? Do you think they must have a set of specific skills and characteristics? Please feel free to share your thoughts with us below. What does it mean to be a successful learner or graduate in today’s world? While in years past, a solid acquisition of the “three Rs” (reading, writing, and arithmetic) and mastery in the core academic subjects may have been the measure of attainment, the world of the 21st century requires a radically different orientation. To participate effectively in the increasingly complex societies and globalized economy that characterize today’s world, students need to think critically, communicate effectively, collaborate with diverse peers, solve complex problems, adopt a global mindset, and engage with...
21st century skills comprise skills, abilities, and learning dispositions that have been identified as being required for success in 21st century society and workplaces by educators, business leaders, academics, and governmental agencies. This is part of a growing international movement focusing on the skills required for students to master in preparation for success in a rapidly changing, digital society. Many of these skills are also associated with deeper learning, which is based on mastering... 21st Century Teacher skills are abilities and competencies that today’s teachers need to have in order to succeed in their teaching careers particularly during the technology-information breakthrough. These skills are meant to help students keep up with the lightning-pace of today’s modern changes. Each skill is unique and helps teachers produce quality teaching work. Being a reflective teacher is so critical in the 21st century. The amount of knowledge and new ideas that are unfolded every day is so remarkable. It is so important that teachers find appropriate time each day to think about classroom practices and improve their pedagogical competencies. In today’s hyper-connected world, no nation can launch a fully effective domestic education agenda without addressing global needs and trends, and nurturing a globally competent citizenship. Therefore, nations should be alerted to know how other nations are approaching to meet the ever increasing challenges. In a knowledge-based economy where creativity, innovation, and collaboration are highly regarded, one the most important twenty-first century skills students need is global competence. It is now a prerequisite for success in a world that demands scientific and technological literacy as well as cross-cultural leadership.