

Case Study**Going Dewey: Reclassifying a Curriculum Materials Collection**

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Abstract

Library staff developed a project to reclassify the Curriculum Materials Collection of a specialty library on the campus of a regional comprehensive university. Materials were reclassified from a custom classification system derived from those developed by Lois Belfield Watt in 1962 and Harlan Johnson in 1973, to the Dewey Decimal Classification. While the original system had the advantage of browsability for patrons who were familiar with it, its unusual nature made training patrons and staff challenging. The transition to Dewey is expected to ease training and use, enhance resource sharing, and allow student teachers to transfer their library skills to the schools they will be teaching in.

Keywords: instructional materials centers, classification, library collection management, Dewey decimal classification, library employees – training, library education

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Introduction

During the summer of 2021, library staff began a project to reclassify materials in the Curriculum Materials Collection at the University of West Florida's Professional Studies Library. Materials were to be reclassified from a custom classification system to the Dewey Decimal System. This paper explores the origins and goals of the old classification system, the challenges that came from using and maintaining it, the expected benefits from switching to the Dewey Decimal System, and the process used for the reclassification. Next steps for increasing the usability of the collection and lessons learned will also be addressed.

The Professional Studies Library originated as a Curriculum Materials Library, but now supports research and teaching in the university's Criminology and Criminal Justice, Education, Instructional Design and Technology, and Social Work programs, with 12,636 items divided into seven collections. The majority of the library is made up of the Curriculum Materials Collection, which consists of juvenile fiction and non-fiction, curriculum materials, and approximately 700 manipulatives. This supports the university's teacher education programs and provides additional resources for K-12 teachers residing in the surrounding counties.

For at least two decades, the Curriculum Materials Collection was organized using a customized system. This system required library staff to classify materials by subject, format, publisher, grade level, publication date, and author. Item call numbers included all this information to make the collection browsable. The intent behind this system was that patrons could get a good idea of whether the item was appropriate for their needs without using the catalog. This system was often confusing for new patrons and staff to use.

Classification Systems for Curriculum Collections

The custom classification system used at the Professional Studies Library was an outgrowth of classification systems by Watt (1962) and Johnson (1973) developed for Curriculum Materials Libraries from the early 1960s through the 1970s. The creators of these alternate classification systems argued that neither Dewey Decimal nor Library of Congress Classification systems were adequate for the types of materials housed at curriculum libraries because they did not convey the information teachers needed to find desired resources. One might argue that the need for custom classification systems remains, as they continue to be in use at many curriculum libraries, with 24% relying on them, 33% using Dewey, and the remaining 43% using Library of Congress classification (Gregor et al., 2015). These statistics come from a 2014 survey of 161 libraries in the U.S. and Canada (Gregor et al., 2015).

The Watt System, named for its author, Lois Belfield Watt, is one of the oldest classification systems developed specifically for curriculum collections. Published by the Educational Materials Review Center, and developed for the Education Materials Laboratory, the Watt system provided a specialized classification system for K-12 textbooks that would group works not only by subject matter but indicate how they related to the curriculum (Watt, 1962). Watt believed that this was important due to the international clientele the Education Materials Laboratory served, which included international visitors and teachers from across the United States. This system, which

included publisher and grade level, as part of the call number, kept book series together for easy browsing. The scheme extended the 370 range of the Dewey Decimal System to take advantage of its practice of arranging professional materials related to education between 370 and 380. The Watt system used an alphabetical code indicating material type. It assigned supplementary materials like general references, literature for children, “special purposes” materials like early reading books or adaptations of adult literature, and adult educational materials, the letters *A-D*. Within this range, the letter *C* had a special function. It designated materials for children to separate them from books on the same subject for adults. A history book for children would receive a classification of *370C973*, while a history book for adults was classified as usual in the Dewey Decimal System at *973* (Watt, 1962).

The letters *E-Z* indicated subjects for textbooks. In this sequence, the letter *X* designated “Materials about Textbooks” while the letter *Z* indicated “Bibliographies of Textbooks,” (Watt, 1962). Within this system, books were arranged by curricular area, school level, and then by the course. Works were again subdivided within the level of course by publisher, grade level, and then by author. The Watt system prioritized publisher over author to locate series of books together. Call numbers used a combination of upper and lowercase letters and numbers to indicate subject, school level, and place in the curriculum. With the uppercase *E* representing “Native Language and Literature” and the lowercase *e* representing elementary school, *Ee.1* would identify a book as “Analysis and Composition for the Elementary School,” (Watt, 1962). A second number identified specific course names within a subject area.

Call number labels included three standard lines to assist in shelving books. The first line included the identifier described above, the second line an abbreviation for the publisher and grade level of the book, and the third line the year of publication (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Sample Call Number Using the Watt System

370Ee.12	(elementary spelling)
ABC3	(American Book Company, third grade)
1961	(Publication date)

Building on the philosophy expressed by the Watts system and informed by classification systems in use for instructional materials collections at Arizona State University, the University of Arizona, and the University of California, Los Angeles, Harlan Johnson developed a classification system specifically for Northern Arizona University’s curriculum materials library (Johnson, 1973). This system is similar to the one developed at the University of West Florida. It used a readable abbreviation for subject as the basis for its classification system, as seen in Table 1 below (Johnson, 1973).

Table 1

Proposed Subject Abbreviations for the Northern Arizona University Curriculum Materials Library (Johnson, 1973)

Abbreviation	Subject
Art	Art
Acco	Accounting
Educ	Education
Guid	Guidance
Journ	Journalism
Lit	Literature
Math	Mathematics
Phys Ed	Physical Education
Soc St	Social Studies
Spec Ed	Special Education
Spell	Spelling

This system organized textbooks, workbooks, and manuals by subject, and then by grade level, publisher, and publication date. In this way, a call number for an accounting course textbook might look like that shown in Figure 2. Johnson's system was intended to be easily browsable with an emphasis on keeping like materials together, contrasting the Dewey Decimal System's inability to deal with use cases that focused on the type of material rather than the subject matter (Watt, 1962; Johnson, 1973).

Figure 2

Sample Call Number Using the Classification System Proposed for Northern Arizona University's Curriculum Materials Library

Acco	(Accounting)
3	(Third grade)
Dunn	(Publisher)
1971	(Publication date)

The Curriculum Materials Library (now the Professional Studies Library) and its custom system were established by Reference Librarian Ron Toifel in 1981, and followed this pattern (Servies, 1982). The first line of the call number included subject and material type. Subsequent lines identified publisher, grade level, publication date, and author. Unlike other curriculum materials libraries using custom classification systems, this scheme did not create alternate subject categories or label content based on the material type, using the same classification system for all item types whether they were fiction, textbooks, or manipulatives. Like Johnson's system, the goal was to have a browsable collection that kept similar material types and book series together without forcing library users to learn a complex numerical system like Dewey Decimal Classification.

The custom classification system included a detailed set of subject categories, with a master subject discipline indicated by a capital letter, followed by lowercase letters indicating the sub-discipline (see Table 2). The comprehensive nature of the subject list required the staff member classifying the item to understand the subject matter of the item and the ways in which teachers understood the subjects. While some proponents of

similar systems had claimed that such categorization lessened the need for well-trained staff, that attitude downplayed the challenges of classifying materials (Jones, 1971). When library staff trained student workers to provide an initial classification for new materials, they often lacked the experience or subject knowledge needed to use such a complex system, frequently requiring paraprofessional staff or librarians to redo their work. This complication defeated the goal of the supposedly “simpler” system, which was to allow permanent staff to focus on more important tasks.

Table 2*Subject Abbreviations Used for Curriculum Materials at the Professional Studies Library*

Abbreviation	Subject
ARa	Art, Appreciation and Criticism
Ba	Business Education, Accounting/Bookkeeping
Cap	Computer Science, Application Packages
Ecr	Education, Curriculum
Feg	Foreign Language, Egyptian
Gc	Guidance and Counseling, Career Education
Hh	Health Education, Hygiene
IDeg	Industrial/Vocational Education, Engine Mechanics
Lph	Language Arts, Phonics
LSf	Life Skills, Food and Nutrition
Ma	Mathematics, Algebra
Pmu	Preschool/Kindergarten, Music
Ser	Science, Earth Science
SOhw	Social Science, History World
SPema	Special Education, Mainstreaming

A form code indicating the type of material (see Table 3) followed the subject designation on the first line of the call number. This allowed library patrons to determine whether the item was an activity guide, answer sheet, workbook, or other material, based on the call number. Print and non-print materials used different sets of form codes, which allowed classification of media, games, kits, and models. As with subject classification, this required the staff member or librarian to understand the difference between a game, kit, model, realia, or more esoteric materials like slides or film strips.

The following lines indicated publisher, grade level, publication date, and author cutter (see Figure 3). While the utility of grade level, publication date, and author seems obvious, the inclusion of publisher is less so - the current library staff could not explain the utility, but the Watt system did include a possible explanation for including the publisher in the call number. Watt (1962) noted that it served as a mechanism to keep materials from the same author and publisher, that were related in the curriculum but did not share a Dewey Decimal Classification by subject, together. This method could keep a series of books together in the collection, enhancing their discoverability (Watt, 1962).

Table 3

Codes Designating Material Format in the Professional Studies Library's Classification System

Code	Print Material Type
.AG	Activity Guide
.AK	Answer Key
.BLB	Bulletin Boards
.CG	Curriculum Guide
.CTA	Classroom Teaching Aids
.GN	Graphic Novel
.LP	Lesson Plan
.SG	Study Guide
.TE	Teacher Edition
.TRB	Teacher Resource Book
.WTE	Workbook, Teacher Edition

When this system was developed, it was common practice for students to request textbooks by publisher rather than author or title (Johnson, 1973). However, this does not seem to be a current practice among preservice teachers at this university. Among current students, the most important criteria seem to be whether a given item fits the requirements of state and local curricular guidelines.

Figure 3

Sample Call Number Using the Professional Studies Library's Classification System

Sb.Tx	(Subject, form)
Ma	(Publisher code)
Gr. 10	(Grade level)
1991	(Publication date)
P63	(Author cutter)

The custom system adopted had two major benefits. First, once patrons learned how to use it, the system was browsable. Library staff hoped that it would reduce the need for patrons to discover materials through the catalog. Second, librarians could easily revise the subject classifications by adding new categories. Staff could also update form codes as they added new types of materials or old materials fell out of common use. This added flexibility beyond that provided by classification systems controlled by governing bodies.

Despite these advantages, the custom classification system was beset by problems in all areas of its use. For classification systems to work, they must be consistently applied, but as librarians and other staff changed, inconsistencies crept into how materials were classified. An especially challenging example was in the form code used to indicate whether literature was fiction or nonfiction. The form code schedule used *.S* for “supplementary” non-fiction and *.SLI* for supplementary fiction, but staff classifying these works often swapped the codes so that they labeled many fiction works as *.S* and many non-fiction works as *.SLI*. Subject classification was also sometimes inconsistently applied, preventing works on the same topic from being shelved together, defeating the goal of having a browsable collection.

Training staff and patrons to use the system also presented significant challenges. New students and faculty coming to the library required extensive explanations of how the call number system worked, not only so they could interpret the subject classifications, but also abbreviations for publishers and material types. Signs indicating subject areas on the shelves provided only basic help in locating materials. While library staff could assist library patrons, new staff, especially student workers who might only work at the library for a semester or two, needed significantly more training so they could provide assistance locating items on the shelves and so they could accurately shelve materials. Even with regular shelf-reading and inventories of the collection, mis-shelving was common, resulting in patrons being unable to locate materials.

These are challenges common to classification systems in general – using the Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress systems also requires patrons to learn how to find materials. However, the quirks of the custom system made it more difficult for new library users and staff alike to adapt to because of its re-use of letters in major disciplinary and sub-disciplinary categories. For example, the subject abbreviation for physical science was *Sp* and the abbreviation for special education began with *SPE*. The differences in subjects were not immediately obvious for either those seeking information, or those trying to return it to the shelf. The result was that sometimes items were shelved in the wrong location, making it more difficult for both patrons and staff to locate needed items. Only regular shelf maintenance could rectify issues created by mis-shelving. The use of lowercase and uppercase letters to differentiate in this way also created problems with generating reports in integrated library systems that did not support case sensitivity. Office productivity applications like MS Excel also failed to interpret letter cases correctly. The inability to distinguish letter cases made collection management tasks more difficult by jumbling unrelated subject areas in shelf lists. As a result, library staff listed items as missing when they were sitting on the shelf. Inventory processes also became more convoluted and time consuming because it was difficult to create accurate lists.

Librarians expect that switching to using the Dewey Decimal System for the Juvenile, Curriculum Materials, Manipulative, and Media collections will provide several benefits. Training staff, student workers, and patrons should be significantly easier. Some will be familiar with Dewey from school or public libraries, but even those who have not used it before will encounter a simpler numerical system. Due to the Dewey Decimal System's ubiquity, training materials such as tutorials and practice exercises are widely available to assist the training process. This should improve the accuracy of shelving and shelf-reading.

Because support for Dewey Decimal Classification is a standard feature of integrated library systems, reports will be more accurate and easier to create. This will improve the library staff's ability to analyze the use of the collection and allow more accurate inventory and weeding. Reclassifying these collections should also improve the library's participation in regional and national resource sharing (OCLC Training, 2019). Most of these efforts require libraries to use common classification systems such as Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress Classification. Participating in resource sharing may make deselecting materials more complicated as it could require library staff to verify whether the University Libraries have agreed to maintain older items, however, it also has the potential to free up shelf space in the collection by removing infrequently

used materials while ensuring that students and faculty retain access to them. Most patrons using the Juvenile, Curriculum Materials, Media, and Manipulative collections consist of education faculty, student teachers, and teachers in local public-school systems; using Dewey Decimal Classification will also allow them to transfer their library skills to use in public and school libraries. Library staff hope that this similarity will encourage increased use of the collections by alumni who become teachers in the local community.

Implementation

The Professional Studies Library resides in a 2,400 square-foot suite inside a classroom building dedicated to the academic disciplines that it serves. During the reclassification project, the library remained open, as faculty and students needed continued access to materials. This required that books, media, and manipulatives be staged in an organized fashion that facilitated their circulation, during the process of classification, labeling, and shelving. Rather than remove large amounts of materials from the library, catalogers worked in the stacks themselves, delineating the shelf location they had reached using a large orange card. This allowed student workers to follow their progress in removing call number labels, while the library manager produced new call number labels. Once relabeled with a Dewey Decimal call number, students reshelfed items.

This above description simplifies the process and diminishes the challenge of managing the reclassification process, as it was quite complex. Due to the constrained space available and the need to keep most areas of the library clear for student use, staging materials so that they could be located, required the liberal use of library carts and constant shifting of materials in the stacks. As catalogers reclassified materials, student workers placed them on a cart to clear space for shelving relabeled items. As students removed the old labels, books moved to a second cart, where the library manager added new labels and sorted them by Dewey Decimal Class. After a suitable number of relabeled items became available, student assistants sorted them based on their full call numbers and shelved them accordingly. Several times each week, students shifted the items in the stacks to ensure that there was room to add the new books. The staging process allowed library staff to assist patrons who needed materials that had been reclassified, but not yet relabeled, as library staff could quickly look through items in process. This effort to maintain access sometimes made the project feel more stressful, but the librarian believed that it was important to ensure access for pre-service teachers and faculty in the School of Education.

Training

The library experienced high levels of turnover over the course of the project, requiring regular training and retraining of new staff. All of the library's staff, other than its librarian, graduated or left the university during the summer of 2021. In August, the library hired two graduate assistants and a student assistant, followed by a new library manager in November. Two of the students left the library in December, requiring the library to find an additional graduate assistant and a new student assistant. The new staff

required training in the library's custom classification system. The student workers also required training in both Library of Congress Classification and Dewey Decimal Classification. The librarian and library manager developed custom training modules for the Canvas Learning Management System that included videos, scavenger hunts, and shelf-reading exercises. Before being allowed to work in the stacks, students completed Library U's *Shelving with Dewey* program at WebJunction (Gesinger, 2017). The goal of the training is to teach library staff and volunteers how to shelve materials using Dewey Decimal Call Numbers. The course defined DDC, explained classes and divisions, elements of a call number, shelving and shelving order. Each module included quizzes and interactive activities to test knowledge and provide practice arranging works in the correct order (Gesinger, 2017).

After students completed the WebJunction certificate, the library manager assigned practice shelf reading and requested that new student workers complete a scavenger hunt. During the shelf-reading exercises, the library manager assigned a section of shelving in which the students verified that each item remained in the proper order. The library manager then checked the student's work and provided additional training to help students correct any mistakes made and answered student questions about book order. The scavenger hunt exercise required students to locate books from a list of 14 call numbers. Once located and brought to the library's service desk, they then had to correctly reshelve all 14 works. Because the 14 books might be shelved in one of four collections - Juvenile, Curriculum Materials, Library of Congress, or Permanent Reserves - only 2 of the 8 students trained successfully located all of the assigned materials. Student workers were cleared to begin working with the library items on their own only after demonstrating that they could reshelve all 14 pieces. The new call numbers frequently led to questions about proper shelving order, leading the library manager to supplement this training by developing a cheat sheet (see Table 4) for student workers who encountered issues shelving using Dewey Decimal Classification. The cheat sheet enabled student workers to answer their own shelving questions, reducing errors and increasing their ability to independently solve problems.

Table 4

Sample Dewey Decimal Call Numbers Used in Student Training

Call Number List 1	Call Number List 2
331	331.0413
331.01	331.042
331.014	331.1
331.02	331.198
331.041	331.2

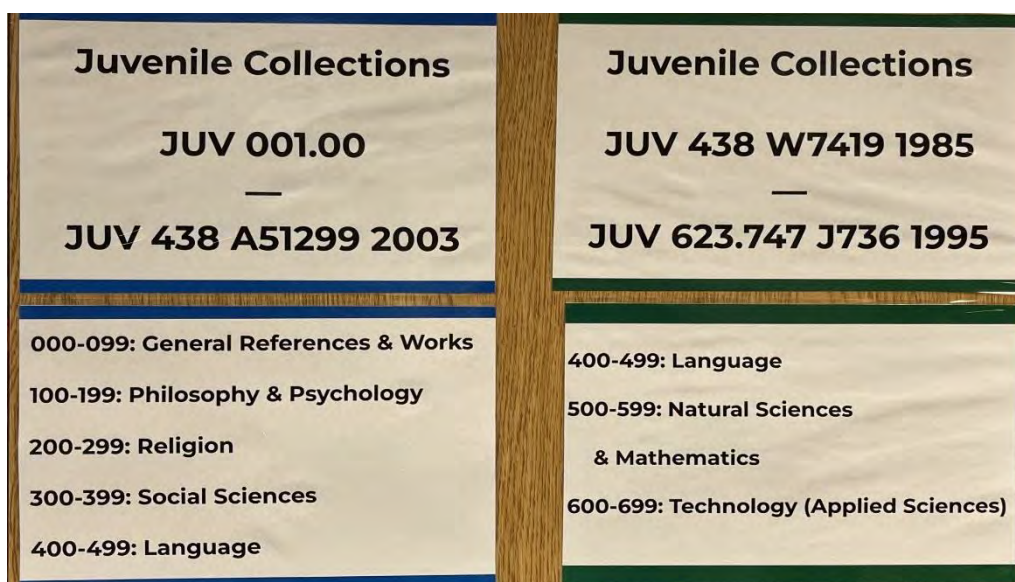
Wayfinding

Library staff removed signs and labels indicating the location of materials based on the old classification system at the beginning of the project. To assist patrons in finding reclassified items, staff added new signs that included the Dewey classes housed on that range of shelves, including both numerical and text descriptions. After student workers identified the beginning and ending books on the aisle the library manager made

additional signs for each aisle indicating which books were on the shelves. Library staff also hung a large poster with general classification categories that included identifiable symbols for each category to assist patrons with the new system. As the project progressed and staff continued shifting books, they also updated signs to accurately reflect the contents of the shelves. When the project ended, staff replaced the temporary signage with permanent placards that followed university branding guidelines for color and font (see Figure 4). In addition to helping patrons locate the materials they needed, regularly updating signs on shelves helped student workers learn the new call number system. Finally, librarians updated LibGuides explaining how to find books using call numbers to replace references to the custom call number system with tutorials on the Dewey Decimal System.

Figure 4

Aisle Signs Indicating Dewey Decimal Ranges and Categories



Classification with Dewey

The reclassification project coincided with a rearrangement of the library's collections, dividing the Curriculum Materials Collection into collections for juvenile fiction and non-fiction, curriculum materials for teachers and student teachers, media, and manipulatives. The use of Dewey Decimal Classification for such disparate types of materials required catalogers to develop a plan for dealing with unusual items in addition to the more common textual sources. The simplest items to classify were curriculum materials such as textbooks adopted by the local school districts, lesson plans, activity guides, rubrics, and other teaching materials, and juvenile non-fiction. These items often had good call numbers available in MARC records obtained from OCLC, which catalogers could adopt after verifying that the material described in the record matched the item in hand.

The most common practice, at other libraries, for organizing fiction is by author's last name, date, and a cutter (Montana State Library, n.d.). To simplify shelving in the

small space available at the Professional Studies Library, catalogers assigned works of fiction a Dewey Decimal call number following the guidelines in Volume 3 of the *Dewey Decimal Classification and Relative Index*. All of these works fall under 813 - American literature in English, with picture books designated as 813, followed by an author cutter and publication date (see Figure 5). Books containing substantial textual content received subdivisions for periodization, such that books published between 1900-1945 were classified as 813.52, books published between 1945-1999 were classified as 813.54, and books published after 2000 were classified as 813.6 (Dewey et al., 2011). This practice produced immediate benefits and challenges. Catalogers included popular works of British fiction published by American imprints like *The Hobbit* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to make it easier for patrons to locate them on the shelf. However, not including a simple author name on the call number label made accurate shelving and locating books challenging, requiring more frequent shelf reading.

Figure 5

Sample Call Number Used After Reclassifying the Curriculum Materials

JUV	(Collection notation)
813	(Dewey Decimal Classification for American Literature)
.54	(Dewey Subdivision for periodization)
M9961	(Author cutter)
1984	(Publication date)

The manipulative collection presented a special challenge, since games, flashcards, globes, maps, models, slides, and equipment are often not assigned either Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress call numbers. Previously, librarians had classified these according to the custom classification system, and they had local records within the university Integrated Library System to help patrons find them in the catalog. While it was relatively easy for catalogers to identify the Dewey class that an item belonged to, they relied on additional subject information that had been previously added to MARC 590 and 690 fields to delineate divisions and subdivisions. For manipulatives related to the sciences, these fields provided the necessary data for catalogers to further identify them as being related to physics, geology, or chemistry.

Dewey in Practice

Given the complexity of the collection, organizing items and designing call number labels required more than changing the call number for each work and placing it on the shelves. To visually distinguish the books in the Juvenile and Curriculum Materials collections, and ease shelving and location of books, library staff added the prefix *JUV* to the call number labels for materials in the Juvenile collection.

To aid in discovery by material type, call numbers retained an element from the custom classification system in our new call number structure. Each call number displayed in the online public access catalog and each label included a form code that indicated material type (see Table 5). In this way, patrons searching for physical items to assist in teaching can distinguish between flash cards, stencils, games, specimens, and other types of learning objects. Form codes appear on the item labels after the Dewey

Decimal call number and Cutter, with a year of publication included only to differentiate between similar items. Form codes appear on the item labels after the Dewey Decimal call number and Cutter, with a year of publication included only to differentiate between similar items.

Table 5

Codes Designating Material Types for Manipulative Materials Used in Conjunction with Dewey Decimal Classification

CODE	MATERIAL TYPE
CARD	Activity Card, Flash Card, Sequence Card, Word Card
CHART	Chart, Wall Chart
GAME	Educational Games, Simulations, Toys
KIT	Multimedia Kit
MAP	Map or Globe
MANIP	Manipulative Material, Blocks
MODEL	Model
REALIA	Realia
SLIDE	Slides
SPECI	Specimen
STENCIL	Stencil/Template

Conclusion and Next Steps

Completion of the reclassification project represented a major development in revitalizing library operations as students returned to the campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure that patrons will continue to be able to find the materials they seek, the library implemented a regular process of shelf-reading and data collection. When staff find materials that are out of place, they are scanned into the library's integrated library system to document usage. The metrics generated from this activity will supplement the library's circulation statistics so that librarians can judge which portions of the collection receive regular use. To increase patron's ability to find young adult books, staff affixed additional spine labels to books in that category, making them stand out in the library stacks (see Figure 6).

One reason librarians decided to create additional collections rather than maintain a single Curriculum Materials Collection was the increased flexibility that the new organization provided. Separating out fiction for children into the Juvenile collection allows librarians to connect the holdings to the Children's Literature Comprehensive Database³ (CLCD) Using CLCD, patrons can search for reviews, teaching tools, and read-alikes in their chosen categories while the Local Collection Services feature allows them to quickly identify which works are part of the local collection and available for their use. The staff of the library is confident that implementing these changes will

³ The Children's Literature Comprehensive Database (CLCD) provides access to criticism, reviews, lesson plans, and teaching guides for Children's and Young Adult books and other media. Links to WorldCat allow users to locate copies of works in local libraries, while the Local Collection Services feature allows libraries that subscribe to the database to show which works are in their holdings (CLCD, LLC, 2023).

provide a better library user experience for patrons, while providing students library skills they can transfer to school or public libraries after they graduate.

Figure 6

Book Labels for Young Adult Books and Award Winners



Comparative assessment of the experiences of students who used both the library's previous custom classification system and the replacement Dewey Decimal Classification system is unfortunately not possible as students most familiar with the old system have all since graduated from the university. However, library staff do plan to survey faculty who have used the collection both before and after the change in classification systems to determine whether the new organization is an improvement. Library staff believe that faculty will provide an adequate stand-in for students as they were accustomed to quickly locating and using library materials using the library's previous classification system and seem to have adapted to using Dewey call numbers.

Reclassifying and reorganizing the Professional Studies Library's Curriculum Materials Collection from its custom system to Dewey Decimal Classification while maintaining daily operations was quite challenging. Despite what seemed like thorough planning, it required several ad hoc decisions to ensure that students and faculty could access materials that were in the reclassification process. The limited space available to stage materials as they were reclassified, relabeled, and reshelved created a chaotic atmosphere in some parts of the library. Despite the challenges, library staff were able to continue to meet patron requests and are confident that converting the collection to Dewey Decimal Classification will improve library usability and patron satisfaction.

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