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Principles of Explaining LC Call Numbers

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The Principles

1st. Refer to them as call numbers.

2nd. Teaching about call numbers should be sequenced. The person who is explaining LC call numbers should have a clear idea of what people need to know first about this topic.

3rd. All library staff's understanding of call numbers should be expressed in words, and not merely intuitive.

4th. All library staff should participate in explaining call numbers to new people (new students or new library patrons, and new staff).

5th. Catalogers should be involved in explaining call numbers to new people.

6th. LC and Dewey are among our country's contributions to librarianship!

7th. LC call numbers are complex because the world is complex.

The Principles Exemplified: Highlights from “Just a Few Secrets of Call Numbers”

Today’s poster is an outgrowth of a previous talk which I gave three years ago at my library's annual staff workshop. Copies of the written version of the earlier talk are available here for you to take with you, in two versions (full version for LC libraries, and abbreviated version with notes for Dewey Decimal libraries). In this part of the poster, I will tie in the principles with points made in the original talk. Numbers in [square brackets] refer to sections of the original talk.

Area of Knowledge

- Library of Congress and Dewey: Two different languages for describing the topics people write about

- The Psychoanalytic study of the child.
- The origins of intelligence in children / by Jean Piaget; translated by Margaret Cook.
- The first line of numbers is read as a whole number

- The second line of numbers is read as a decimal.
- The last principle justifies the fact that call numbers need to be simplified, perhaps dramatically simpler, call numbers for our remaining print collections (such as subject term nonfiction). This poster presenter believes we're not going to turn that view of what they need to retrieve.

Background Assumption

The background assumption is that call numbers as we know them will continue to be useful in libraries for at least another decade. That justifies investing resources in improving how we teach and communicate about call numbers.

Discussion of the Principles

1. The point of the 1st principle is not to be ashamed of our terminology. It is not perfect, but it is good enough, and it makes distinctions which deserve to be respected.

2. Examples of the 2nd principle about sequencing the learning abound in "Just a Few Secrets of Call Numbers." The concept of Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress Classification as two parallel languages is put right near the beginning, because most researchers and library staff in the U.S. come to LC with some prior knowledge of Dewey Decimal. The concept of when library users need ISBN's and when they need call numbers is also put very near the beginning, because it is important not to waste our library users' time by letting them focus on the wrong number from the point of view of what they need to retrieve.

3-4. The 3rd principle makes the 4th principle possible. If we can put our understanding of how call numbers work into words, then we are prepared to help explain call numbers to new people.

5. The 5th principle is a logical outgrowth of the 4th principle. Just as reference and instruction librarians take part in explaining call numbers as a part of library instruction, so also catalog librarians should take part in explaining call numbers as a logical outgrowth of their experience working with the classification schedules. From the classification schedules, lots of principles can be extracted, varying widely in importance and baseness.

6. The 6th principle is not a "love it or leave it" statement, but it is something for American librarians to be proud of.

7. The last principle justifies the fact that call numbers need to be talked over in order to be understood.

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