Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Dewey Decimal Classification Trending Downward in U.S. Academic Libraries, but Unlikely to Disappear Completely

A Review of:

Lund, B., & Agbaji, D. (2018). Use of Dewey Decimal Classification by academic libraries in the United States. *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly, 56*(7), 653-661. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2018.1517851

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the current use of Dewey Decimal Classification in academic libraries in the United States of America (U.S.).

Design – Cross-sectional survey using a systematic sampling method.

Setting – Online academic library catalogues in the U.S.

Subjects – 3,973 academic library catalogues.

Methods – The researchers identified 3,973 academic libraries affiliated with degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the U.S. The researchers searched each library's online catalogue for 10 terms from a predetermined list. From the results of each search, the researchers selected at least five titles, noted the classification scheme used to classify each title, and coded the library as using Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), Library of Congress Classification (LCC), both DDC and LCC, or other classification schemes.

Based on the results of their data collection, the researchers calculated totals. The totals of this

current study's data collection were compared to statistics on DDC usage from two previous reports, one published in 1975 and one in 1996. The researchers performed statistical analyses to determine if there were any discernible trends from the earliest reported statistics through to the current study.

Main Results – Collections classified using DDC were present in 717 libraries (18.9%). Adjusting for the increase in the number of academic libraries in the U.S. between 1975 and 2017, DDC usage in academic libraries has declined by 56% in that time frame. The number of libraries with only DDC in evidence is unreported.

Conclusion – The previous four decades have seen a significant decrease in the use of DDC in U.S. academic libraries in favour of LCC; however, the rate at which DDC has disappeared from academic libraries has slowed dramatically since the 1960s. There is no clear indication that DDC will disappear from academic libraries completely.

Commentary

The superiority of classification systems is a topic of perennial debate in library circles, and though opinions abound, there have been surprisingly few recent empirical studies on the subject. Shorten, Seikel, and Ahrberg (2005) asked why some academic libraries have persisted in their use of DDC, while Lund and Agbaji (2018), the authors of this study, had previously investigated the preference for either DDC or LCC among academic library employees. Statistics on the usage of DDC in academic libraries were reported in 1975 and 1996, and this study, undertaken in 2017, closes another 21-year gap in its sampling of U.S. academic libraries. This study helpfully confirmed the trend indicated by the previous two reports: DDC has a diminishing presence in academic libraries.

Measured with Glynn's (2006) critical appraisal checklist, this study had some shortcomings. The study would benefit from a more thorough reporting of the results of data collection. The researchers assessed library

catalogues for the presence of "DDC, LCC, both, or another system"; yet, despite the four possible categorizations, the authors presented the results in binary form. Dewey collections either were or were not present, which cannot convey the nuance of the full data set. For instance, a library using only DDC and a library employing primarily LCC with only their children's collection in DDC were both counted equally as having DDC collections present, despite the great difference in practical implementation of the classification systems. The number of libraries wherein DDC was found to be the only scheme in evidence was an unreported statistic which would have been a key indicator of DDC's retreat from academic libraries.

This study also did not maintain a clear distinction between a library's *use* of DDC, which was the point of inquiry in the primary research question, and the *presence* of DDC collections in library catalogues, which was what the collected data measured. While there is little question of the diminished state of DDC in academic libraries, presence of DDC collections does not necessarily equate to an active policy of classifying materials with DDC, which the authors acknowledged, noting that what constitutes "use" varies from library to library. This variable definition resulted in imprecise conclusions.

The cataloguing world is cooperative by necessity, so it is useful to know what our peer libraries are doing. Certain libraries may choose to continue using DDC for their own reasons, and what these reasons are (the authors in this study made good conjectures) is worth further study; other libraries continuing to classify their materials with DDC may wish to act on the conclusions of this study and consider reclassifying their collection with the more commonly used LCC scheme.

References

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