BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

The accidental taxonomist. By Heather Hedden. Medford, N.J.: Information Inc., 2010. 464 pages (soft cover). ISBN 978-1-57387-397-0. US$39.50.

Taxonomies can be amusing because of their apparent arbitrariness. The classic example is Borges' description of a Chinese classification of animals that are (*a*) belonging to the emperor, (*b*) embalmed, (*c*) tame, (*d*) sucking pigs, (*e*) sirens, (*f*) fabulous, (*g*) stray dogs, (*h*) included in the present classification, (*i*) frenzied, (*j*) innumerable, (*k*) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (*l*) et cetera, (*m*) having just broken the water pitcher, (*n*) that from a long way off look like flies [1]. This book focuses on the nonarbitrariness of taxonomies by clearly explaining and describing who constructs them, and why and how they are constructed.

The book is written primarily for "accidental" taxonomists, that is, those who are thrust into taxonomy rather than choosing to have it be a part of their work. The rapid growth of the web and web-based information has stimulated interest in, and need for, taxonomy, and requires an increasing number of accidental taxonomists, so the book has quite a wide appeal. Even those who are only consumers of web-based information encounter terms such as taxonomy, folksonomy, thesaurus, and so on, more frequently than before. For example, see the Resources Center at the Educause website (http://www.educause.edu/resources/browse/topic), which invites you to "Browse the taxonomy" and links to a folksonomy as well. The book is intended to be a helpful and practical guide for those who work with taxonomies, but could also serve as the text for an introductory course in creating taxonomies and controlled vocabularies. Finally, the book could serve as an overview for those who are looking to work in this area, since it includes two chapters about who taxonomists are and what they do, supplemented by a 2009 survey of self-described taxonomists.

To appreciate how useful this book can be, readers should understand that the author uses the word "taxonomy" as it is currently most commonly used, rather than its original meaning of "the study of classification". She says "only since the late 1990s has it been understood to mean information organization in general. Taxonomy in this sense includes controlled vocabularies for document indexing and retrieval, subject categories in content management systems, navigation labels and categories in website information architecture, and standardized terminology within a corporate knowledge base" (p. xxi). Thus, this book has a wide potential audience among knowledge workers.

This book has something for all levels of knowledge workers: students, beginners, and more experienced taxonomists. There are 12 chapters and four appendices, and I suspect that most readers (except the students) will want to focus on some chapters at the expense of others. The introductory chapters on taxonomies and taxonomists set the stage for the more practical chapters that follow. In the general chapter on taxonomies, I found the observation that taxonomies are primarily created to support three functions: indexing, retrieval, and organization and navigation, to be particularly helpful.

These first general chapters are followed by two very practical and useful chapters on creating terms and creating relationships, the two foundations of building taxonomies. These chapters are packed with useful information. Those who went to library school may have learned some of this information in class, e.g., the importance of indexing to the most specific level. Some of it is simple common sense, which nevertheless bears repeating. However, most of the information will save the average accidental and inexperienced taxonomist a great deal of time, e.g., how to use Excel to create a three level taxonomy, or how to decide how many nonpreferred terms to create.

Chapter 5, which deals with taxonomy software, is the chapter that I found most useful, because it is the area I know least about. It covers the different kinds of software available, and the cost, descriptions, and features of common packages. It should be noted that the book has an associated website which includes an updated list of all the external websites listed throughout the book; this is particularly useful with regard to software.

There are two chapters on taxonomies for human and automated indexing. Likely most readers will make practical use of either one or the other chapter, but it is interesting to read both chapters to see how the taxonomy requirements differ. These are followed by chapters on taxonomy structures and taxonomy displays – both very detailed in explanation and potentially the most useful and time-saving chapters in the book. The chapter on structures covers hierarchies, facets, and multiple vocabularies. In the chapter on displays, I discovered that what the MeSH "explode" feature is doing is called "recursive retrieval".

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with what happens in the workplace, not only the planning, design, and creation of taxonomies but also their implementation and maintenance. Careful attention is paid to describing several possible workplace scenarios, e.g., what procedures to follow if the taxonomist is also the project manager.

The writing style is extremely clear and straightforward throughout. Terms and their often multiple meanings are carefully explained. These explanations are supplemented by a glossary, which is one of the four appendices to the book. Not surprisingly there is a good index, and another bonus is the recommended reading list. The final appendix is a list of websites, which also appears and is updated on the book's website. The book includes numerous figures and examples throughout. These are extremely valuable, because although the writing style is very clear, it is hard to imagine an effective substitute in words for an illustration of an Excel spreadsheet showing alternative layouts for a taxonomy.

The author, Heather Hedden, is well qualified to write this book, having many years experience in indexing, developing and managing taxonomies, controlled vocabulary management, thesaurus development, as well as a background in writing and editing. She teaches online courses in taxonomies and indexing, both independently and

through the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Boston, Massachusetts.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is involved with taxonomies in the workplace. Although it may not be as much fun as Borges' classification, it will definitely be much more useful.

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1. Borges JL. Other inquisitions, 1937–1952. Austin: University of Texas Press; 1964. Translated by Ruth L.C. Simms.