The Case for General Classification

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Information science should not be thought of as distinct from
library science, but rather as an aspect of the broad range of
activities involved in information transfer. Librarians have
become hesitant in the face of automation. The traditional
reliance on structuring the means of information retrieval has
yielded somewhat to methods of co-ordinate indexing, with
computer skills becoming paramount. Information transfer
ethics tend more and more towards the idea of accessing remote
holdings using Boolean techniques. The apparent dominance
of the computer has been reinforced by its introduction into
in-house activities. In the face of these developments the
core skills of library classification and cataloguing have
been downgraded. At one time these two areas of study
constituted a universal requirement in the programs of
library schools. Perhaps the pendulum will swing back as the
search for intelligent systems becomes intensified. Inform-
ation scientists have concentrated largely on limited domains
of knowledge, directed towards a specific mission or clientele.
These initiatives have been incorporated into the library

sphere of information transfer without too much thought being
devoted as to absence of systematic structure within the
systems accessed. There can be little argument that the
results have been highly successful. Yet retrieval techniques
based on co-ordinate indexing obscure the semi-static and
limited nature of the data accessed, notwithstanding the
enormous dimensions of today's software industry. If progress
is to be made towards truly intelligent equipment then
recognition must be given to the potential of top-down
structuring of knowledge. This leads back to the conclusion
that a revival of the study of general library classification
is called for. Notwithstanding their very clear deficiencies
these classification schemes furnish working models of
knowledge arrayed in all its disciplines. The dynamics of
emergent learning can then be represented, and it is this
potential for communicating dynamic thought that can be
exploited. Intelligent front-ends, automatic indexing,
expert systems, among other areas of development would
benefit. General classification has to be distinguished from
special classifications limited to a domain, and framed
according to the most expedient arrangement, where context
allows for default interpretations of terms used. General
classification even for librarians has become chiefly
bibliothecal in its objectives, concerned largely with the
administration of a given collection. The objective of
restoring the status of classification studies would not be to
further this bibliothecal function, but to help achieve a sense
of helpful order, proceeding from the top down, from various

suggested principles, and away from the expedients used

within specialized disciplines and domains. Cognition

is interdisciplinary and open-ended in its generation of

decisions and ideas.   There can be no closed expert system. If

ambiguities occur too persistently then it may be that the

knowledge representation methodology is lacking.   An irony

exists for librarians. General classification is for them an

Eldorado which they are allowing to languish.   Libraries

tend to represent the entire spectrum of knowledge, even in

those cases where a collection is centred on a particular

domain.   The basic library skill of inter-relating differing

subject domains ought now be grafted on to the other

practices in the information transfer arena.   By following this

route progress towards reasoning hardware can be accelerated,

outstripping hopefully research in circuitry and brain tissue.

The dominance of the highly bibliothecal Library of Congress

scheme has obscured recognition that considerable advances

in conceptual dynamics have been realized in other schemes

and systems.   Some of these failed to become established due

to low bibliothecal potential, or because marketing skills

were absent. Greater interactivity within the information

transfer sector benefits general classification also, as new

topics are emerging at a rate faster than the traditional

printed formats can handle them.