To Dewey or Not To Dewey:

Genrefying Fiction

Cynthia J. Ford

University of West Georgia

Abstract

This paper considers the advantages and disadvantages of arranging a school library's fiction

collection by genre instead of the traditional Dewey Decimal Classification System. The

discussion includes interrelated themes of childhood development and 21st century learners, and

the role technology has played in the changing landscape of the traditional library. The review of

related literature includes information from proponents on both sides of the issue. In addition, a

step-by-step plan of action for rearranging an existing collection by genre is given.

To Dewey or Not To Dewey: Genrefying Fiction

There are media specialists that passionately support the Dewey Decimal Classification System for school libraries. And, there are just many that feel it is outdated and no longer serves its purpose for 21st century learners. Technology has changed the way students learn, and the way libraries support that learning. Interrelated with the Dewey discussion are issues of childhood development and learning styles of the X-generation. Over that past few years, there has been much discussion about genre shelving versus following Melville Dewey's system. Here I will discuss these issues and the reasons for my decision "To Dewey or Not to Dewey".

Before I begin, I feel that I should give a brief background of my library. We opened in 2006 with a beautiful, bright and shiny library. Our space is huge and of course, our opening collection was too – 13,000 print volumes! We had instructional space, computers (placed around the perimeter of the reference section), all sorts of technology for teachers to check out, and a designated space for students to work on projects. Then, I was the paraprofessional and worked with two wonderful librarians. Even though both had come from traditional libraries, they were progressive in their thinking. Still, our library was very traditional in that it was considered a 'quiet' space; reference materials were shelved together and rarely allowed out of the library; and books were shelved by the Dewey system, except fiction that was pulled out and shelved in alphabetical order by author's last name. Customarily, we only teachers allowed to check out equipment such as cameras and headphones. Fortunately, we did (and still do) have central support for our library and a wonderful collection of digital databases supported by our school district.

Now, let us fast-forward almost ten years. The two original media specialists have moved on, and I am currently one of the media specialists. Like me, my co-librarian came from outside the education realm, so we bring a variety of experiences to the library setting. Over the past three years, we have made many changes. First, to make using the computers more conducive for instruction and classes, we moved all of the computers into one area of the library near our overhead projector. Next, we incorporated printed reference materials into the non-fiction section and allowed the same circulation that proved to us that if allowed, students would check them out.   We also made most of our electronics available to students for overnight checkout. Students could not believe that they could borrow our cameras, headphones, microphones and flash drives! We *really* "went rogue" when we started playing music from Pandora in the library for most of the day, and allowing students to eat and drink in the library (all right, we are not *that* cool, food and drink are not allowed near the computers)! Even with these changes, we felt the atmosphere could still be more inviting, so we added soft seating to create welcoming areas for students to relax and collaborate with each other. Soft lighting makes the space even cozier. Our efforts were rewarded as now in the hour before school begins each day, we have more than 200 students in the library working on the computers, sitting in study groups, collaborating on projects, checking out books and simply hanging out.

During this same time, our central support and county supervisors began looking at libraries in a new light. The Learning Commons model became a topic of discussion in several of our school district meetings, and we wanted in! With that in mind, this year we began a rigorous weeding of our collection. We pulled out materials that did not support the curriculum, that were out of date, or that simply were not attractive to our students. Of course, we ran circulation reports to use as reference, and we asked for teacher input for collection development

in certain subject areas. To date we have weeded more that 5000 of our 18,000 printed volumes.

This allows us to highlight the books that we do have; and, by removing the empty shelves, we

now have even more space to transform our library.

What is next – yes, you guessed it – we are organizing the fiction section by genre. We

have been discussing the advantages and disadvantages of this for a few years, talking to other

media specialists in our district and at professional conferences, doing informal surveys with our

students and staff, and drumming up administrative support. We feel this is one more way to

make our library more student-centered. Signing up for this class gave me the incentive to read

books, articles, and blogs to gather more information and to help formulate a plan for the project.

My co-worker and I brainstormed which genres we would use and a timeframe to complete the

project. Because we knew that several of our own district libraries were also rearranging their

fiction sections by genre, I sent out an email asking my fellow Cobb County School District

media specialists several questions so that we could learn from their collective knowledge. My

questions were:

- If you have "genrefied" or considered it, would you tell me why you did or why you decided not to do it?
- If you did, what genre categories did you choose?
- How did/will you identify the books by genre? (i.e., stickers, colored tape, call numbers, etc.)
- Did you physically rearrange your books in sections–like a bookstore?
- Can you tell a difference in your circulation since you changed?
- How long did it take and what were your biggest challenges?
- How did you identify books in Destiny (OPAC system)? Did you change the call numbers, sub-locate, etc.
- Are you glad you did it?

Several media specialists that responded were considering this project but were 'on the

fence', asking themselves the same questions that I was asking. A few had just gone through a

major 'weeding' and transformation of their libraries to the Learning Commons model, and

replied they just were not ready for another big project anytime in the near future. Beth Kuhn of

Vaughn Elementary said, "I know that it would be very labor-intensive and would require a lot

of re-teaching. Wait…who am I kidding? The students STILL have trouble locating fiction

books, even after we go over and over it, so the re-teaching might not be such a big hurdle". She

added that before she takes on such an enormous project, she wants good solid reasons and a

coherent game plan (B. Kuhn, personal communication, June 19, 2015). At Shallowford Falls

Elementary, Janice Kelly is working over the summer to reorganize her fiction by genre. "I am

tired of kids coming in and asking where the scary books or the funny books are, so we're

switching…just fiction. Our fifth-graders are required to read different genres and this should

make it easier for them to find the books they need" (J. Kelly, personal communication, June 17,

2015). Soap Creek Elementary media specialist, Megin Robinson, has already rearranged her

fiction by genre and says she can tell a difference in circulation. "The books are just easier to

find. I don't have to explain to the kids why joke books or graphic novels are in non-fiction.

That is huge for little kids". She expressed that this project was well worth her time (M.

Robinson, personal communication, June 22, 2015). Likewise, Milford Elementary loves the

change, but media specialist Linda Johns says that "not being able to have designations in

Destiny makes it more of a browsing section and makes me hesitant to change any other

section". She asked that I share my findings in hopes that there is a better solution for denoting

the genres in Destiny (L. Johns, personal communication, June 17, 2015).

   The respondents that were unlikely to change had several reasons. Some cited lack of

physical space, time, and full-time help as major concerns. Analogous to most of the objections

I have read in articles and blogs, several media specialists voiced their concerns for their students

in having consistency from one library to another. Ellen Adams at Fair Oaks Elementary is

"struggling with the fact that I need to be preparing our students to use ANY library, not just our school library. If they come to rely on being able to choose a book by genre, what happens when they go to another school that isn't set up that way, or to the public library"? She says her students do not choose books by genre anyway and she would like to see how this is working in other schools (E. Adams, personal communication, June 23, 2015).

Most naysayers countered that we, the librarians, are responsible for teaching students to use the system in place, and that they need the skills practice. Diehard Dewey fans think reorganizing this way defeats the purpose of having students browse a collection, branch out to a variety of genres, and learn skills that will assist them in any library setting.

Similar to the responses of my peers, my review of literature revealed that media specialists are either adamantly for, or steadfastly against organizing by genre. Not surprisingly, I found a multitude of articles related to this debate. Unexpectedly, I also found related themes of childhood development, and 21st-century learners and their skills along with the alternating views on Dewey shelving.

 "DDC is not developmentally appropriate for children, and the connections are not intuitive. Most children never get beyond the basic ideas of Dewey because the system is too difficult given their stage of intellectual development" (Kaplan, Giffard, Still-Schiff, & Dolloff, 2013, p. 32). The suggestion here is that while older children and adults are able to ascertain the logic behind the Dewey system, young children, for instance, do not make the correlation between baseball and 'fine and decorative arts' , where Dewey places this subject in the 700 category.   In the same vain, Dr. Phyllis Snipes cites leading developmental psychologist Jean Piaget's stages of development, along with findings of Carol Kuhlthau, regarding younger children's ability to categorize items and understand the logic behind such categorization (2015).

"Generally, very young children do not have the ability to see things in more than one "class".

Simple, direct access to a book is best for early grade students" (Snipes, 2015, p. 26).

An added consideration in this discussion is that generation Y or millennials have grown

up with technology and are very different in the way they search for information. "Current

students have always had the Web as an integral part of their lives; their brains are wired for

keyboard searching. Using a subject-based classification system in place of DDC allows for

seamless transition between Web searching and searching in the school library for non-digital

resources. It lessens anxiety and increases independence" (Buchter, 2013, p. 49).

Personally, I know that most of my high school students were taught the Dewey system

in elementary school. In our beginning-of-the-year orientations, I talk with students about the

arrangement of the library, and I do see a dim light go off when I remind them of the Dewey

Decimal System. However, what I have found is that enthusiastic readers usually learned the

system and make the most of it. After all, Dewey is, in a way, already sorted by genre – since

like-subjects are classed together. Yet, Dewey does not serve fiction well; therefore, most

libraries pull out fiction and organize it by author's last name. Nevertheless, this presumes that

students look for books by author, and "most are not versed in acclaimed authors and classic

young adult books, but many are aware of their own current interests, hobbies, and passions"

(Jackman, 2014, p. 22). Even then, reluctant readers seem to have a difficult time finding books

that appeal to them. When my students are required to choose a fiction book for class, I see them

taking books off the shelf at random, looking for the 'thin' books or the ones with larger fonts. I

try to offer advice, but it takes time to discern the student's interests and reading level, and in a

high school setting (especially one on block scheduling), time is at a premium. Many days

students literally run into the library between classes and ask us for a book. Most times, we are

able to find the book quickly, but there have been times where I have taken down the student's name, found the book, and delivered it to a classroom.

Episodes like these make me wonder how many students leave without getting what they want or need. How many more students would check out books if they could easily browse the shelves for the types of books they *like* to read? What is more, a part of our school strategic plan is to "increase critical reading skills across the curriculum in conjunction with increasing Lexile levels" (Hillgrove High School, 2014). "Fundamental to the library collection as learning environment is the school librarian's support for literacy development as well as inquiry" (Gordon, 2013, p. 52). Like with anything, we all improve our skills by practicing those skills. So it would make sense that if we provide easier access for students to find books that interest them, they are likely to read more.

As an experiment, a few years ago we grouped all of the graphic novels, fiction and non-fiction, and displayed them on a separate wall. At the time, it was a small collection, but rapidly became the most circulated section of our library. Students began telling other students about the collection and giving us lists of books that they would like added. Now, we have over 1100 graphic novels and this is still the most circulated section! Is that because we have more students that love graphic novels, or is it more likely that since we group these materials, it gives students more independence and encourages more exploration of this section? This evidence was the catalyst for our consideration of organizing the rest of the fiction collection by genre. Moreover, we have observed that the majority of our patrons stick with a specific genre or author that they like best, and are more likely to branch out if a display catches their attention, or other students recommend books.

As previously stated, I believe that Dewey is logical for non-fiction as it already groups books by like subjects. To some extent, the system is flexible and subjective to the logic of the cataloger. Oftentimes, I have questioned why a title is in a certain Dewey category. As I weeded non-fiction, I found numerous titles that could easily have been placed in a different Dewey category that would seem more logical to an end-user. Usually, I can see the logic of the cataloger, but sometimes with investigation, I can find another Dewey category that will make more sense to my patrons.

Consequently, my co-worker and I have decided that genrefying the fiction section will serve our students better. We believe that the new arrangement will promote browsing, inspire renewed interest in the collection, create excitement, boost independence, and encourage reluctant readers. Librarian Jessica Gilcreast (2014) noted that after she rearranged her fiction section by genre, there was "independent library usage by even the most reluctant readers, special needs students, and ESL students" (p. 42). Similarly, Becky Jackman (2014) reported that after she switched to genre shelving, her circulation "increased sixty-nine percent over the same period last year" (p. 24). Our hope is this change in shelving will entice our reluctant readers to read more and help our avid readers to discover new authors within their favorite genre, and perhaps encourage them to branch out to neighboring genres.

Obviously, to take on such an enormous task, there must be a well thought-out plan in place. Fortunately, I have a partner to help think through this process and the collective wisdom of many professionals in the field. Thankfully, many groundbreaking Dewey "ditchers" have shared their experiences in articles, books, and blogs and we can learn from their experiences. If anyone is considering tackling this project, I would suggest at least reading through blogs of librarians such as Mrs. ReaderPants, The Library Voice, Carina Gonzalez, or Christy Minton.

After making the ambitious decision (we have over 5000 titles in fiction) to rearrange our fiction section by genre, my co-librarian and I made a plan. First, armed with usage reports from Destiny, we did a cursory weeding of the fiction. Here we deleted multiple copies of past best sellers (we no longer need five copies of the first Harry Potter- we kept two), books that were unappealing, or books that did not peak the interests of our patrons. Once we had 'touched' the collection, we spent several days discussing genre titles, and just how many categories we should include. Some titles were easy – like Sports, Dystopia and Post-Apocalyptic, Graphic Novels, Classics, Fantasy, Supernatural, Short Stories, Romance, Realistic Fiction, Science Fiction and Multicultural - because these themes have very decisive elements. Others, like Adventure, Mystery, Thriller, Horror, and Suspense proved more difficult as characteristics of these are likely to crossover to multiple genres, and perceptions of these labels vary with individuals. With these ambiguous genre titles, we asked opinions of our students and staff. Ultimately, we decided that Mysteries would include the crime and detective-style books, and Thrillers would include suspense and adventure, as well as horror. If it proves that students think books belong in a different category, or we find, for example, that we have a multitude of horror books, we can always change the label or add a new genre. Although labor-intensive, this rearrangement is not irreversible or nonflexible. On a side note, I learned that for a small fee some library vendors provide a service that analyzes a collection and suggests genres for each title. We did try this as a test case for one of our vendors and we found that the analysis probably worked better for an elementary library than a high school library. Further, we found that category definitions are subjective, and theirs category placement of many of our titles did not fit the mindset of our stakeholders.

Although a consideration for some libraries, space is not an issue for us. With our significant weeding of the non-fiction section, we now have plenty of room to rearrange our shelves and to shelve our fiction by genre. Nevertheless, physically moving books without some category indicator on the books and location indicator in the OPAC system would create considerable confusion. Accordingly, our next step was to decide how to denote genre on each book and how to indicate genre in our electronic catalog.

Considering the alternatives for physically identifying books (colored tape, genre labels, colored dots, changing call numbers, etc.), and looking at what was readily available through library vendors, we chose to use genre labels from Demco because they were self-explanatory. There are varying styles to choose from that are visually age-appropriate for different grade levels and even custom options available. Because, we really did not like the Dystopian or Sports icon labels that were prepackaged, we customized those two labels. Since we learned early on that spine labels have a tendency to come off if not protected, we also ordered label protectors to go over the genre labels.   Next, we looked at placement of the label…should it be on the top of the spine or underneath the call number? For consistency in appearance, we are adding the genre label underneath the call number that is approximately one and one-half inches above the bottom edge of the spine. This way, the labels easily recognizable and create a visually appealing 'line' across the bottoms of the shelves.

At this point, our decision for the OPAC system is to use the sub-location feature in Destiny. Several librarians mentioned that this is what they had done and it worked well because once we rearrange the shelves, using the global edit feature in Destiny makes quick work of adding the sub-location. In his response to my topic and timeline, one of my classmates stated that he has arranged three libraries by genre – two that used Follett's Destiny, and he found that

sub-locating titles worked best. "However, for most students, especially reluctant readers, they

don't use the OPAC, they just go to the genre and look at the shelves. The real advantage of this

system is students don't really need to use an OPAC at all. For those who are series readers, then

your placing the genre in sub-locations works well with them. You have to do a little training

and teaching to show these students where to find sub-location but after a few times they will get

it and then help you teach other students" (F. Wright, personal communication, July 10, 2015).

We are still contemplating adding genres to Destiny for keyword searching but need to have

further discussions with Follett's technical support to determine if this would produce the desired

outcomes. Here also, we must consider how the system will best work efficiently and accurately

in performing inventory reporting for this section. Mr. Wright suggested creating a category for

each genre and perhaps a circulation type to use for inventory purposes. Because we are still in

the process of putting the books into genres, we have some time to delve deeper into Destiny

considerations.

Now that we have decided on genres, a labeling system, and a preliminary way to

identify the location of books in our catalog, we are beginning to categorize those five-thousand

fiction titles! What is the best way to do this? We did try pulling reports from Destiny by

subject or genre name. This only works well for specific titles, like Sports and Supernatural

(paranormal), but not so well for other areas. For example, for Sports, I executed a "power"

search and added keywords like Sports OR Football OR Baseball, and indicated "any of these

words", and I did get a great list. The drawback here is that Destiny limits the search to three

keywords or subjects. To find books about other sports such as volleyball, soccer, racing, or

basketball, I had to run reports using different search parameters and print additional lists. Most

times, these lists were overlapping, and physically searching for the books by the list proved

time-consuming.

  Since we are not ready to rearrange books physically, and we are beginning this project

over the summer, we are going through the collection title by title and writing the genre inside

the front cover. Surprisingly, this process does not require as much time as one would think. So

far, with help from a few student volunteers, we have identified and labeled books through the

H's (this is a great project for students needing documented volunteer hours). Aside from the

negative aspect of having to look at each book, the benefit is that both of us are REALLY getting

to know our fiction collection and this process definitely helps with collection development.

  By reading the covers, the CIP, or the summary in Destiny, for most titles the genre is

clear. If a title is easily be placed in multiple sections, then we agree with Carina Gonzalez's

suggestion, "If I take the genre out of the book, would the story be irreparably changed? If the

answer is YES, then the book is probably that genre. In the end, I don't worry so much about

what is the right category, as what will get the book in the most hands" (2014). According to the

articles by media specialists that have completed this project, the prevailing challenge is that

some books fit into multiple genres. Remember though, if students think the book fits

somewhere else that is something that is easily changed. For now, we will skip the few

ambiguous titles and will investigate these further when we start to move the books on the

shelves.

  As for the physical arrangement of the shelves, we already know how many shelves we

have in use and that we have chosen fourteen initial genres. Graphic novels already have their

own space on an outside wall, and we will not be moving those. Therefore, when we have

labeled all of the books, we will need a count of how many books in each category so we know

how many shelves must be devoted to each genre. As stated earlier, this transformation will take

place while school is in session, so we are trying to be the least disruptive to our patrons as

possible. For that reason, we may have our student aids count the number of books in each genre.

That number would tell us how many shelves we would need and help us to lay out a floor plan

before we actually remove the books from the shelves. Most likely, we will rearrange the section

over a weekend with help from many volunteers. Undeniably, moving books over summer

would be a better alternative as we could just stack the books all on tables as we categorize and

not have an urgent need to get them back on the shelves.

Lastly, we need a marketing and merchandising plan in place to let our stakeholders

know about this change and how this it will benefit them. As most successful libraries do, we

practice shameless self-promotion whenever we get the chance! In our orientation classes, we

will mention this project, and then when it is complete, will give 'tours' of the fiction section to

classes that come into the library. We also plan to leave display space within each genre so that

we can highlight related non-fiction titles to expose students to informational text. We are

brainstorming other ways to promote the change, like a segment on the school's weekly

newscast, bulletin boards, bookmarks, a contest during lunches, book talks, a pathfinder

describing genre characteristics on our website, and the list goes on.

Presently, I am creating new signage for the whole library using Wordle to create non-

fiction posters that depict the Dewey number and related terms. For fiction, I am using Wordle,

making the genre name central with key characteristics of the genre around the genre name. I am

also including a large image of the genre sticker with an outside band in the same color so that this will clearly define the sections, much like that of a bookstore.

Certainly, there are many opinions and reasons "to Dewey or Not to Dewey".   With a Dewey system, there is consistency between school libraries and public libraries, and there is an authority control. Conversely, proponents of arranging books by genre feel that a library arranged this way is more student-centered, and possibly more developmentally appropriate for younger patrons. Genrefication promotes browsing, inspires curiosity and excitement, renews interested in the collection, and hopefully strengthens students reading skills. What is more, it assists the librarian with collection development, and there is documented evidence that genre shelving significantly increases circulation. I can identify with both schools of thought, but ultimately, I think we need choose what serves our stakeholders best.

Consider that my students that move on to college will most likely use the Library of Congress system, and that most colleges have special collections and subject librarians to help with specific fields of study. As bookstore shoppers, my former and current students will encounter the BISAC model - a subject heading based system. Whatever the system, as long as there is some type of reliable systematic arrangement of material and the system is defined and teachable, it can work. The bottom line here is to get books into students' hands, and to create positive customer experiences that keep our patrons coming back for more. Recently while in a Barnes and Nobel bookstore, I asked one of the assistants if patrons found it difficult to locate books. She smiled and said that 'older' shoppers sometimes do, but the kids usually figure it out (A. Sedrick, personal communication, June 25, 2015). At that comment I had to smile - yes, the kids WILL figure it out, they always do.

References

Buchter, H. (2013, November). Dewey vs genre throwdown. *Knowledge Quest, 42*(2), 48-55.

Gilcreast, J. (2014). From drab to fab. *Knowledge Quest, 42*(4), 38-43.

Gonzalez, C. (2014, March 7). Let the fiction genrefying begin! [Web log post]. Retrieved June
        8, 2015, from http://librariancarina.blogspot.co.nz/

Gordon, C. (2013). Dewey do Dewey don't. *Knowledge Quest, 42*(2).

Hillgrove High School. (2014). *School strategic plan* [Brochure]. Powder Springs, GA: Author.

Jackman, B. (2014). Genre shelving: Why and how I made the leap. *Library Media Connection,
        32*(5), 22-24.

Kaplan, T. B., Giffard, S., Still-Schiff, J., & Dolloff, A. K. (2013). One size does not fit all.
        Knowledge Quest, 42(2), 30-37.

Snipes, P. R. (2015). Concrete to abstract: Growing past genre into Dewey. *Library Media
        Connection, 33*(4), 26-29.