

# How do you solve a problem like Dewey?

By Jenny Chang, Lisa Seddon, and Sarah Wethered

## Introduction

In July 2021, the Vancouver shoe designer, John Fluevog, introduced a shoe called “Melvil” as part of his new “Biblio” line. All the shoes are named after famous librarians. After a few short days, the Melvil was renamed “Althea” after Althea Warren, who was president of the ALA from 1943-1944. The reason for this change was the controversy surrounding Melvil Dewey and accusations that he was racist, homophobic, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, and a sexual predator, who was kicked out of the American Librarian Association in 1905 (an organization he co-founded) for sexual impropriety. The Fluevog community, aka the Flummunity, is a diverse and inclusive community that welcomes people of all ages, genders, sexual orientations, cultures, and beliefs. Having a shoe named after Melvil Dewey, seemed to counter everything that the shoe brand and the community of “Fluezies” stands for. As a self-proclaimed Fluezie and a teacher-librarian, this caused Sarah to think about why the Flummunity would not stand for a shoe being named after Melvil Dewey, but libraries all over the world still use the classification system named after him.

In 2022, Sarah and Jenny, two of the teacher-librarians at New Westminster Secondary School (NWSS) began to hear about the Xwi7xwa Library at University of British Columbia (UBC), which catalogues their resources using the Brian Deer Classification System. Jenny and Sarah visited the library in November 2022 to explore the type of resources the library held, with the intention to collect ideas of the types and titles of resources that they could purchase for the New Westminster Secondary School Library Learning Commons. Jenny and Sarah were interested in how the resources were organized, but at this time, this was no more than just a developing thought.

In February 2023, Lisa, the teacher-librarian of Queensborough Middle School (QMS), and Sarah attended the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) Women’s Institute. While there, they spoke to Adina Williams, a young Indigenous activist who was studying at UBC, and a member of the Squamish First Nation. Adina spoke eloquently about the necessity for acts of Reconciliation with Indigenous people to be directly related to the work that a person did, and that acts of Reconciliation needed to be something difficult. She also mentioned the Xwi7xwa Library at UBC. It was like a lightbulb went off in Lisa and Sarah’s head at the same time. At this moment, the idea to re-catalogue the non-fiction catalogues of NWSS and QMS was born. Lisa and Sarah just had to convince Jenny that it was something that could be accomplished. Thus began the multi-year re-cataloguing project that has taken place at NWSS and QMS.

## **Controversy Surrounding Melvil Dewey and the Dewey Decimal Classification System**

Melvil Dewey was a controversial figure in his own time. He was known to be quite domineering and always believed that he was right. His accounting practices for the various companies and organizations he ran were highly irregular, and were a spider's web of interconnectedness that made sense to Dewey, but would not pass an audit by a reputable accountant (Wiegand, 1996). These reasons aside, there are many more serious allegations against Melvil Dewey that make him and his classification system highly problematic.

### **Dewey and Racism**

At a private club he owned on Lake Placid, Dewey did not allow Jewish or Black people to become members or visitors. A club pamphlet read: "No one shall be received as a member or guest, against whom there is physical, moral, social or race objection. ... It is found impracticable to make exceptions to Jews or others excluded, even when of unusual personal qualifications." Jews that wished to join the Lake Placid Club challenged the regulations for many years, and Dewey responded by spending thousands of dollars defending the right for the club to exclude certain members of society (Weigand, 1996). The club grudgingly welcomed Jews and Blacks at events held at the club, such as the ALA Annual Conference, but they were prohibited from becoming members.

Dewey's racist beliefs are ingrained throughout his cataloguing system. For example, Christianity takes up 90 of the 100 numbers in the 200s, and all other religions are squished into just 10 numbers. Judaism (296) is next to Islam (297), which is close to Greek and Roman mythology (292). The implication could therefore be drawn that Christianity is the dominant religion of the world which is why so much of the 200s is devoted to it, despite the fact nearly seventy percent of the global population practices a religion other than Christianity.

Further, the DDC states most materials about Indigenous people of North America should be assigned the 970.00497 call number "North American native peoples," which implies that indigenous culture is historical, and not a vibrant culture that still exists. As Tomren (2004) states, "...the DDC does not recognize the sovereign status of American [First] nations, nor their government-to-government relationship with the United States." The same can be seen with Canadian examples. One must remember that the DDC was created just twenty-five years after the Trail of Tears in the United States, which saw the forced migrations of over 125,000 Indigenous people native to the Southern US states to "Indian Territory" across the Mississippi River. At the same time, the Canadian government was developing Indian Residential Schools with the express purpose to "take the Indian out of the Indian," via forced assimilation into colonial settler society. The 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes towards indigenous people in North America are still perpetuated today in the DDC.

## Dewey and Sexism

In an 1886 speech titled “Librarianship as a Profession for College-Bred Women,” Dewey characterized college-educated women as having the character and intelligence to become librarians but noted that they were more likely to leave the profession to pursue ‘home life’ such as homemaker or mother. Dewey also stated that women deserved smaller salaries than men “because males, in addition to being capable of the same library work, could also “lift a heavy case, or climb a ladder. . . . There are many uses for which a stout corduroy is really worth more than the finest silk” (Lindell, 2019).

We only have to look at the 300s of the DDC to see just how little Dewey thought of women. Women’s issues are 305.4 – not a whole number in the DDC, however, just a fraction of “Groups of People.” And when you consider that women’s reproductive health (342.08) is part of Constitutional and Administrative Law; or that abortion is also found in in the 360s (Social problems of and services to groups of people), you begin to realize how little thought was given to women’s issues. Again, one cannot find this surprising, given the long historical precedent of women’s identities getting folded into their husbands’ under the concept of coverture, which did not entirely end until the mid-twentieth century. The question remains whether those attitudes still deserve to be enshrined in a system used by thousands of public and school libraries.

It was ultimately Dewey’s sexual impropriety that marked the beginning of his downfall and his expulsion from the ALA in 1906. For many years, it was an open secret that Dewey liked to hug and kiss female staff members and students, whether or not it was welcome. Dewey also required female applicants to his library school to include, “their height, weight, hair color, eye color, and a photo” (Conger & Ervin, 2016, 35:25). Annie Dewey, Melvil’s wife, wrote a letter in 1906 to Isabel Lord of the New York State Library School which stated that “[Melvil] was so sure of his own self-control . . . unconsciously his manner has grown more and more unconventional and familiar . . . he has been frequently warned of the danger . . . [and that Melvil knew Annie] was absolutely free from jealousy, he has doubtless gone further than with a wife who felt it necessary to watch her husband” (Wiegand, 1996, p.303). Annie also noted that there was no need for Isabel to spread the rumours any further. Evidently, Mrs. Dewey knew of her husband’s improprieties and did not step in to stop it. Mary Wright Plummer, one of his first students, refused to meet with him after she became the president of the ALA in 1915 (Conger & Ervin, 2016). Tessa Kelso, the head of the Los Angeles Public Library said of Dewey in 1925, “For many years, women librarians have been the special prey of Mr. Dewey in a series of outrages upon decency” (Kendall, 2014). By 1930, he had to pay a \$2000 fine to a secretary at his Lake Placid club for sexual harassment. Eventually, the ALA board voted to expel Melvil Dewey from the organization he helped co-found; and in 2019, they stripped his name from their highest honour. Henceforth, the Melvil Dewey Medal would now be known as the ALA Medal of Excellence (Albanese 2019).

## **Dewey and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community**

LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) topics have variously been assigned to DDC categories such as Abnormal Psychology, Perversion, and Derangement, as a Social Problem and even as Medical Disorders. In addition, these topics are close to other “social problems” such as alcoholism, slavery, and prostitution. These classifications remove – and leaves unrecognized – the humanity of LGBTI people. Furthermore, it does not place LGBTI history, stories, medical and mental health, and other issues within their proper context.

## **Alternatives to the DDC**

While learning more about the BDC, we read many articles about other alternatives to Dewey that are being used, including an entire issue of *Knowledge Quest* devoted to the topic. While many of the articles within focus on the move towards gentrifying a library collection – fiction and nonfiction alike – some alternate methods of classifying library material was discussed, primarily Metis or BISAC. Evidence suggests this has been a topic of discussion circulating among libraries and librarians for years. The cover story of the October 2012 issue of *School Library Journal* described the efforts of librarians to try something other than the DDC, and the pushback they faced within the wider librarian community. Allison G. Kaplan (2013) stated, “Discussing the demise of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system is tantamount to blasphemy” (p.46). Clearly the reverence or universal acceptance of Dewey has begun to dissipate. When Sarah, Lisa, and Jenny have presented at the BCTLA fall conference, their sessions are full of curious librarians, who want to do something that makes sense for their students and removes the Victorian-era bias Dewey put into his system. Three of the most commonly used systems are: BISAC, METIS, and the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC).

### **BISAC**

- Used by bookstores and vendors
- Classifies by topic
- Does not prioritize Western/European content
- Can be limited for topics
- Categories can be extensive and overwhelming for students

### **METIS**

- Developed by the Ethical Culture School in NYC
- Meant for school libraries
- Simple system accessible to children
- Adaptable to any school library

## **Universal Decimal Classification (UDC)**

- Similar to DDC
- Mostly in academic libraries
- Developed in Belgium in 1895
- Allows classification with multifaceted subjects
- Can be complex (Franzen, 2022)

## **Reasons why we chose the Brian Deer Classification System (BDC)**

In the 1970s, Kahnawá:ke librarian, Brian Deer, worked to create for the Assembly of First Nations a new way of classifying information that moved beyond the strict confines of the DDC. The system that he created is based on an Indigenous viewpoint and is much more flexible than the DDC. Each library grounds their catalogue based on the Indigenous territory that it is situated on, and all knowledge radiates from it. Each library has the flexibility to have a slightly different classification and to tailor their classification system to their own personal context. A key strength of the BDC, in our opinion, is that the mysterious numbers associated with the DDC are gone and are replaced with letters which donate subjects, thus making locating of materials by staff and students much easier.

Indigenous knowledge is placed first in all sections of the BDC. Therefore, in the A section (Reference and General Knowledge), a dictionary in an Indigenous language would be placed before an English, French, or Spanish one. In the U section (Worldview), books on Indigenous religion would be placed before Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Since 2017, the K-12 curriculum has had an Indigenous focus in every subject and every grade level. Teachers around the province have been scrambling to find resources to support this system wide curriculum change. Teacher-librarians around the province have been answering the call to find these resources, and what better way to highlight them than to have them in the forefront of our catalogues, as the Brian Deer Classification System would do. Further, as Canadians, we should be focusing on acts of reconciliation, and by decolonizing our library catalogue by making the switch the BCD, we are doing just that.

## **The Nuts and Bolts of Decolonizing Your Catalogue**

Once we decided to embark on this project, we developed a strategy to get the work done. Ultimately, we were off on our ambitious timelines, but the following are the steps we went through to complete this project.

1. Do a deep dive into the controversy surrounding Melvil Dewey and the Dewey Decimal Classification. Next, learn everything you can about Brian Deer and his

classification system. Resources are noted in the works cited (McKie, 2020; Bosum & Dunne, 2017; Cherry & Mukunda, 2015).

2. Get permission and co-operation from the local First Nation. At the same time, get permission from your school administration and district administration, especially if you have a union catalogue. When we had a joint meeting with our district vice principal of Indigenous Education and a representative of the Qayqayt First Nation (the land on which NWSS and QMS sit), they were both enthusiastic and offered their support in any way possible.
3. Create your manual of call numbers. The SD40 manual is linked [here](#). We chose to keep the Sears Subject Headings, but created new subject headings when necessary. This work can be time consuming. Your OPAC should allow you to download Excel files of your collection. Download your nonfiction by Dewey number so you have a sheet for each class (000, 100, 200, etc.). In Destiny, the spreadsheet will have more information than you might need. Delete the columns that are irrelevant. Add a column for your BDC call numbers.
4. Begin the task of assigning new call numbers to the books. We decided to keep the old Dewey number in the Marc record in the “900 a” field. It helps to have a workstation setup with two screens. The manual can go on one screen and the other can have the Excel file and your OPAC. You can also choose to print the Excel sheets, and write the BDC call numbers in their column, then transcribe them into the Excel file when you are satisfied with the new call numbers. Have someone else look at the new call numbers in order to ensure there are no typos or other mistakes.
5. Purchase your supplies, including new spine labels, label protectors, and signage  
Supplies needed to do this project:
  - Lots of spine labels (more than you think you will need)
  - Label protectors
  - New signage (can be created in Canva, Adobe, etc.). A sample is provided at this [link](#).
  - Shelf dividers/[labels](#) (NWSS bought theirs from IKEA; QMS bought theirs on clearance from Brodart)
  - Lots of highlighters, sticky notes, and ledger-sized paper to be used when analyzing your collection and creating your manual
  - Endless amounts of chocolate and cups of tea to keep you sane
  - A sense of humour and a sense of purpose
6. Print and put on all of the new labels. We found that we could avoid having to manually type in the call numbers twice by assigning copy categories for each

hundred in the DDC within our library software (Follett Destiny) and then printing them out. If you have a clerk or a library technician, this part can be divided amongst you. Lisa found it helpful to have a blank spine label template when she started changing them, so she could make labels for books that required edits.

7. Re-shelve your books in their new order. At NWSS, we methodically did each section of the DDC at once, pulling off all the 100s, 200s, etc. We then shifted the shelves so the books could be returned in their new order. If you have a large collection, you may have to shelve shift numerous times. At the NWSS, we did get a few new shelving units, which allowed us to have a little more flexibility and room when re-shelving our newly catalogued resources.

### **Things we would do differently:**

If we were to do this process again, there are a few things that we would do differently. We would re-classify NWSS first, as it is a more extensive collection. Doing QMS first led to gaps, etc. due to it being a much smaller collection and required edits to QMS labels. We would also weed our non-fiction collections like our lives depended on it as we ended up assigning call numbers and printing our new spine labels for books that should have been weeded. This was an incredible waste of time. Last, we would have done an inventory first so we were not changing call numbers of books no longer in the collection.

### **Things to think about when considering this project**

Be kind to yourself if it takes longer than anticipated. We thought this would take 18 months but we still have lots of books to do at NWSS as of December 2024. Having six different non-fiction collections also increased the complications. We have chosen to start with the non-fiction collection in English (the largest of our non-fiction collections), but will eventually have to re-catalogue our French non-fiction, English graphic non-fiction, French graphic non-fiction, popular non-fiction, and educational DVD collection. All of the books at QMS have new labels; however, despite the smaller size, not all of the MARC records have been changed. A teacher-librarian considering this should also think about their own FTE and their schedule. Is there a clerk or technician available to help? Do you have capable library volunteers who assist in the manual labour parts of the transition? How flexible is your schedule?

### **Conclusion**

DDC, by the mere fact that it has been established library science for over 150 years, falls into the category of institutionalized or systemic "-isms." Materials about women's health, racism, sexuality and gender identity, and feminism are slotted next to books about mental health, drug addiction, costuming, and weaponry. As we have discussed above, the DDC 300s are the proverbial "junk drawer" of library science. There is no

real rhyme or reason for why those books are near each other. An organic relationship does not exist. Also, books about over-the-counter medication are classified with drugs that have traditionally been denoted as illegal. Lisa is a neurodiverse person, and what message does it send to her that the medication that makes it possible for her to function on a daily basis is classed as a "dangerous" drug, right next to cocaine? While efforts to work within the DDC system are indeed laudable for libraries, it fails to address the prejudices and opinions Melvil Dewey held and that created the foundation of the DDC system.

As to the assertion that the call numbers are "just numbers," that is an ingenious line of thought. In keeping the DDC relevant in our libraries, that is in essence the same action as retaining street names and statues dedicated to those whose memories continue to perpetuate the systemic racism Indigenous people have suffered. That is essentially what we do when we dismiss concerns about DDC as mere numbers.

Transitioning to BDC is an active and continuing act of reconciliation. Besides, that we are only doing what the BC Curriculum demands as it pertains to Indigenous content -- that it is co-equal to the traditional European curriculum of BC and Canadian schools.

Librarianship is a profession dominated by women. According to the United States Department of Labor, 82.2% of U.S. librarians identify as female (Barrows, 2024). Yet by continuing to use the DDC, we define ourselves by a man who did not believe women were capable of doing the work required of librarians. Ideally, librarianship is a profession that continually evolves and meets the current needs of our patrons and students. However, in clinging to DDC, we feel we are keeping ourselves rooted in a history and a system that pretended we did not exist.

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