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Where Should These Books Go?

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Introduction

This activity was developed at a community college that is part of a large urban system. Students come from a wide range of academic backgrounds, but half are first-generation college students, many have graduated from high schools without libraries or librarians, and many are conducting independent research for the first time. I teach this activity as part of a larger workshop when discussion with a course professor has led to the mutual goal of strengthening students' skills in using (physical) books for research. Most of these workshops have taken place with pre-college students in intensive developmental courses, younger students working toward an associate's degree while in high school, and English language learners.

The overall goal of the full workshop is to show students ways to take charge of their own research. In this opening activity, students learn how library books are organized and that such systems of organization have been created within particular historical contexts and as such are powerful but arbitrary. In the subsequent steps of the workshop, students brainstorm keywords based on their research questions and conduct searches using the library's online discovery tool (discussing the subjective judgment evident in the application of subject headings). They then search for books in the stacks, applying what we have discussed about call numbers and the strategy of browsing to compare and select among books on similar topics. Once students have selected one book each, they return to the classroom to examine its internal or-

ganization in detail. They glean information from key organizational features (prefaces, introductions, headings, etc.) and explore the analog search tools of index and table of contents to see how these tools can help readers assess a book's relevance, scope, approach, and tone.

There are two elements of critical pedagogy in the book-ordering exercise. The activity is moderately constructionist in that students must create their own meaning from observing the information at hand, infer a system of logic, come to consensus about a hypothesis for order, articulate their reasoning to other students, and critique their peers' solutions. Although the librarian guides discussion, students are encouraged to question and speculate.

The second element of critical pedagogy is a brief lecture that makes visible the subjectivity of deciding what a text is about and introduces the idea that systems that categorize information have been created by particular people and institutions holding political and social power within specific historical contexts and are therefore neither eternal nor beyond challenge.

Learning Outcomes

- Confidently use call numbers to find books on a shelf.
- Browse and select books based on the understanding that libraries order books by subject, and so savvy researchers develop the habit of browsing to choose among books on related subjects, based on their own inquiry and interests.
- Acknowledge that library systems of classification have been created within particular historical and political contexts and therefore reflect the dominant biases of those institutions and times.

Materials

- Books or faux books
- Shelves (book carts work well)
- Shelf labels

Preparation

Books are selected from the library catalog and reflect the subject matter of the course or research assignment. I strive to include works whose content offers a critical perspective on the topics at hand, works written by authors of color, and, when possible, books written in Spanish, as many of our students are bilingual in Spanish and English. I have used faux books made from card-

board boxes covered with poster paper and have printed and laminated titles and call numbers that attach to the spines with Velcro. Using faux books has a number of benefits: it allows me to maintain several sets of labels that can be changed easily, avoids the possibility that desired books might be unavailable on any given day, and avoids the need to harvest and reshelve books for each workshop. A consequence that may be seen either as a benefit or as a limitation is that faux books drastically limit the information students have about the books; using real books would introduce many more characteristics that students could interpret as the main organizing principle.

Books are chosen in sets of three that are intuitively related by title and share similar call numbers. Each set should pose a number of questions for students to notice, such as: Should plain H come before or after HQ? When two books have identical first (or bottom) lines, which should go first? Why do some call numbers have only three lines, while others have up to five? How are these books related by subject? and so on.

Shelf labels are also printed, laminated, and attached with Velcro or tape to the shelves. Call number ranges should be chosen so that students must infer their inclusivity; for example, for a set of books starting in the D range, an appropriate shelf label might read "C 100–F 50."

Session Instructions

1. Introduce yourself and pose the main questions addressed by the workshop.
2. Introduce book-ordering activity by dividing class into small groups, and give each group a set of three books. Explain that their task is to decide the best order for the books and then place them on a prelabeled shelf of their choice. Let students know that they will be asked to explain their choices to the class and to assess each other's work.
3. Students work in small groups, using reasoning to make observations about the information they see and to create a hypothesis for a logical order.
4. Circulate through the classroom, asking students about their ideas and asking clarifying questions, without correcting or imposing a system. (If the instructor is present, they should do this as well.)
5. After all groups have chosen an order and placed their books on a shelf, each group explains their reasoning, then allows for other students to ask respectful questions and counter-theories. If students pose a question to the librarian (e.g., "Why does this shelf label say 'J 100—M 50' when 100 is bigger than 50?"), you can choose to open the question to the class so that other students may respond.

6. After all groups have presented and discussion has reached consensus regarding the key elements of call number organization, reiterate these elements for emphasis, for example, call numbers are read one line at a time, from top to bottom; single letter first lines come before dual letter first lines; decimals are counted differently from integers, and so on.

7. Ask students what they notice about the books' titles, leading to the observation that books on related subjects are close together. When you ask why this might matter, at least one student will usually suggest the idea of browsing, although you may need to provide the term *browsing* and underline its importance in giving students more control over their own research. The gist of the message is "You, the researcher, choose the books you want, not the online catalog; don't assume the first result is always best."

8. Speak briefly on the development of call numbers as an historical process, indicating that Melvil Dewey and the Library of Congress initiated their systems for convenience and uniformity, and the systems carry their own prejudices as well as reflecting inequalities within the publishing industry and library collections (clear examples may be useful, such as the multiple subclasses devoted to Western countries' political institutions versus the one subclass for all Asian and African political institutions). The main idea to convey is that students will benefit from learning to use these systems, but there is nothing sacred about them, and we can challenge their assumptions.

Assessment

When teaching this, I have observed students as they reason and debate in small groups, as they come to consensus, and as they explain their choices and question each other in the large group. In a later section of the workshop, I observe students looking for books by using call numbers, gauge how confidently they navigate through the stacks, and observe whether and how long they browse to compare books before selecting one.

Reflections

In earlier iterations of this workshop, I would explain through lecture, diagrams, metaphors, and handouts how call numbers work, and students would nod and say they understood, then go to the stacks and often struggle to find books or even correctly identify the shelves that would contain their desired call number. Since I added this book-ordering activity, students have demonstrated much more success in using call numbers to find books.

Students are inevitably engaged and animated, more so than I initially anticipated, in the small-group work and class discussion. The solutions they devise

are logical and sometimes ingenious, but often do not align with the LoC system. Students sometimes propose ordering the books by their title, either alphabetically, by apparent importance, or from most general to most specific. Most students focus their attention on the call number, but often do not assume that the top line of the call number is the most important. Students often choose to order books by the sole line with an evident meaning—the date—but are unsure what to do if a book does not include a date line. Students are also often drawn to the Cutter number as the first organizing principle or choose to order books first by the top line and then the Cutter, skipping over the second line completely. When asked why the Cutter number looks important, students often answer that they don't know; one student said that "it looks the most like a code." Students sometimes create an order that matches LoC rules, but place the books in order from right to left. There are always some books placed on an incorrect shelf, an error that is usually caught by students who "get" the inclusivity of shelf labels and persuade their peers to make a change without intervention on my part.

One variation I plan to try will be adding an author label. Other possible variations would be using real books, or using larger sets. Using real books or larger sets could lead to much longer conversations. Because the rather limited purpose of the book-ordering activity is to make visible the fact that there is some logic behind the order and to pique students' curiosity and raise their stakes in the discussion and because the activity is only part of a larger workshop with limited time, I have chosen to stay with smaller faux book sets for now.

The most serious limitation to what this simple activity can accomplish is that it is not truly open-ended, as there is one correct order under the LoC system. Although students are intrigued by the puzzle, those who offer the most original ideas are eventually told by their peers or by me that they are incorrect. While this correction has not seemed overly demoralizing, and I take great care to be diplomatic and let students save face as they are corrected (e.g., I affirm the basic logic of their idea and use a neutral tone of voice to explain how their answer differs from the LoC convention), I am very much aware that the activity encourages free speculation but rewards only those who hit upon the "right answer" of LoC order.

Final Question

In one-shot library research workshops, I always feel the tension between helping students learn to master a tool and encouraging them to be critical of the assumptions and biases of that tool. In its current form, this activity places a greater emphasis on the former. How could it be implemented in a way that retains its success with its practical goals, while shifting the emphasis to greater critical reflection?