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The Effectiveness of LCC in Art Libraries: A Proposal for a User-based Study

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Problem Statement

Since the Library of Congress Classification system (LCC) was developed in 1910 (Clarke, 2011), it has been aptly utilized to organize collections across the nation and globe. It's easy to read, can be flexible for catalogers, and has been widely accepted. However, as many classification scholars have noted, there are disadvantages to this system. In particular, Class N, the schedule for fine arts, has provided many issues for catalogers. The subdivisions of this class order art publications foremost by medium: general visual arts (N), architecture (NA), sculpture (NB), drawing (NC), painting (ND), graphic arts (NE), decorative arts (NK), and the arts in general (NX) (Clarke, 2011). This organization appears to be useful at first; however, many have noted that contemporary art researchers may find it difficult to predict where they'll find books on new topics or art mediums within LCC library collections (Clarke, 2011). Further, some art forms, like decorative arts or crafts, have the potential to transcend the formal divisions of the current art headings by blurring the line between utilitarian craft and fine art (Schubert, 1993). Based on personal experience, I can also say that books of mixed or multi-media art do not fit snugly into the current art classes of LCC. The system may work well for general collections, but within contemporary art libraries, the LCC appears to be ineffective.

While all of the issues LCC poses for modern art collections are valid, they are nevertheless concerns raised from the cataloger's perspective. In theory, finding relevant materials in these problematic subjects would be difficult; but, the question remains as to whether or not this is true in practice. In order to understand the reality of the usefulness of the LCC system, I will propose a study that evaluates the effectiveness of the LCC in art libraries from the user's perspective, based particularly on their satisfaction with both browsing and purposeful retrieval, and success in searching.

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A study like this would provide valuable information on a system that is vital to the organization of collections world-wide. This study matters because classification is what makes a library useable whether it's through browsing or retrieval of specific items. While classification systems may be conceptually logical, if they do not fulfill the browsing or retrieval needs of the patrons that use it, it is not a valid system. Determining whether or not the information search process is helped or hindered by LCC could clarify whether or not the theoretical issues create practical ones, thereby requiring revision of the LCC. Therefore, from a user-focused study, I intend to not only gain an understanding of how effective the LCC art classes are, but also possible directions for improvement.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How effective is the LCC system in art libraries?

RQ2: What factors contribute to its effectiveness?

Literature Review

Whatever scheme it's organized by, the arts can be difficult to classify. The Art Libraries Society of North American even acknowledges the difficulty of this subject area by noting that "the special characteristics of art-related materials often fall outside typical library cataloging rules" (Clarke, 2010, p. 114). Other art librarians also acknowledge that the nature of the way the art world has developed also contributes to its inability to be neatly described. Clarke (2011) notes that this is has been an issue for many years, stating that "the visual arts have become more and more cross-medium since 1970" (p.23). Lee (2011) reiterates this by further arguing that the "move to cross-disciplinary and post-modernist approaches" has been the reason for many art libraries' dislike of current classification systems (p. 26). Newer art forms, like installation art or

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even photography, new developments in the field of art history, like the growth in theoretical works, and even the international lives that artists live today, all contribute to the difficulty in ordering art publications effectively. Catalogers, until now, have used subclass NX (the arts in general) to place works about more than one of the arts, but as contemporary art continues to develop and add new mediums, it may be that the LCC will become ineffective for users.

To assess the need of a project exploring the effectiveness of LCC and possible methods to use, I conducted a literature review surrounding the classification schemes in art libraries. The topics covered include: the information habits and needs of art researchers, effective aspects of LCC, ineffective aspects of LCC, and the quality of possible classification alternatives, such as the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC).

Information Habits and Needs of Art Researchers

Since classification schemes are, in part, intended to enable the use of the library by information-seekers, it was necessary to look into how those people use library collections, and what their primary needs are when using the stacks. Stam (1997) was likely one of the first researchers to examine the information behavior of art historians. She determined that art researchers rely on information provided by institutional colleagues, not necessarily librarians, and works that reproduce and describe art objects. A number of her participants noted that “accidental discovery is a usual phenomenon in their research” (Stam, 30). Countless researchers have since reiterated and added to her findings. The primacy of browsing the stacks has been proven repeatedly (Beaudoin, 2005; Clarke, 2010; Cripps, 2011; Ferrari, 2000; Gregory, 2007; Lee, 2011). Beaudoin (2005) noted that “browsing the stacks was found to be most useful to those users beginning research in a previously unknown or underdeveloped knowledge area” (p. 35). Later, in 2011, Cripps notes how electronic searching came to have

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more importance in the information-seeking process of art researchers, but also outlines the reasons why browsing is yet an important aspect of the process: it can “stimulate serendipity, lead to exploration of previously unconsidered directions, inspire creativity, solve creative problems, and resolve creative block” (p. 6). As more and more resources become digitized, art researchers will inevitably rely more on electronic resources; however, it appears that browsing the stacks is still important to art researchers.

The literature also revealed that art scholars also have specific information needs. Nearly all studies consulted indicate that these researchers need both visual and textual materials (Beaudoin, 2005; Clarke, 2010; Cripps, 2011; Fernandez-Keys, (2010); Ferrari, 2000; Gregory, 2007; Lee, 2011; Stam, 1997). Stam’s (1997) study indicated that art historians made “very high use of three image formats: printed reproductions in books and journals, black-and-white photographs, and photocopies” (p. 28). Other forms needed for art research include: artist monographs, photographic reproductions, indexes, and bibliographic materials (Beaudoin, 2005). In surveying art faculty from 67 universities in the United States, Gregory (2007) found that 36% of faculty use print and electronic resources in equal amounts, while 19% preferred electronic resources (p. 63). Twenty-two percent preferred print resources (p. 63). Fernandez-Keys reiterates that, while online resources are used extensively now, “print resources are still in high demand” (2010, p. 37). Despite this apparent growth in the use of electronic resources, print resources, whether they are for technical knowledge or inspiration, textual or visual, continue to be an important part of art research.

Based on the literature, browsing the stacks, and therefore the physical organization of the library, is important to art researchers. These studies may be limited in their conclusions due to sampling and collection methods (convenience sampling, emailed surveys, casual

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conversations). The types of researchers included art historians, college art faculty, and museum docents as well. Further, many of the studies are older than five years and therefore may not reflect current trends. However, based on the consistencies between the studies over a 20-year period, it can be concluded that art researchers will yet find it necessary to use the physical library and thus interact with its classification system.

Effective and Ineffective Aspects of LCC

As noted above, catalogers have described both problematic and useful aspects of the LCC system. In general, most of the authors appear to agree that LCC is flexible, hospitable to new classes, is easy to read, and can aid efficient cataloging practices because of its ubiquity (Clarke, 2011; Currier, 2002; de Cours 2002; Schubert, 1997). In fact, Currier's (2002) survey of 29 art libraries mainly in the United Kingdom revealed that those choosing to use LCC did so because it is "easy to read and to replace on shelves," is "a very flexible classification," and "seems to be readily accepted at this level of study," among other reasons (p. 21). The report from the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art in Paris on their choice of the classification system reiterates the same sentiments; along with its readability and flexibility, the LCC system "allows for easy expansion or adaptation" because of the classes that have been kept blank (de Cours, 2002, p. 25). In theory, catalogers should be able to expand subclasses to suit the future needs of art publications. De Cours also notes how the system was chosen because it "allows interrogation and exchange of information through the Internet" (2011, p. 25). The classification system is supported by OCLC and thus, items cataloged according to LCC are available for copy-cataloging, saving the library catalogers much-needed time. In all, LCC appears to suit many catalogers within art institutions.

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Many researchers have also discussed the ineffective aspects of the LCC system. Clarke (2011), for example, bases his discussion on the issues of LCC in Class N. The main issues he discusses concern its western bias (in subject and space devoted to specific countries), treatment of newer art forms, and organization being meant for general collections. Installation art, for example, may create problems. Because of the nature of the art form, it is sometimes “ambiguous whether one is dealing with a work on installation art or a large work that needed to be installed in an exhibition space” (p. 24). Other new art forms are just as difficult to classify. Clarke also describes the system’s illogical treatment of works dealing with more than one of the arts, such as music and painting. In fact, he states that “subclass NX dangles rather uncomfortably at the end of the sequence” (p. 23). Currier (2002), Ferrari (2000), and Schubert (1993) confirm these inefficiencies and add specific subclasses of concern, such as the placement of photography within subclass TR (Currier, 2002) and the unclear standards by which catalogers can distinguish between fine art objects and utilitarian objects of the same medium or technique (Schubert, 1993). Whether they are ultimately positive or negative about the LCC system, most researchers do agree that it does have its problems.

Most articles published concerning this classification appear to be reports on its use in specific institutions, surveys utilizing descriptive data, or reports discussing its conceptual merit. Therefore, while these art librarians have the experience and expertise to offer valid insight into LCC’s effectiveness, it solely concern’s the cataloger’s perspective. No studies, as of yet, have been found to evaluate LCC from the perspective of the user browsing the stacks for inspiration or serendipity. In fact, in my limited searching I could find no studies that specifically address the user experience of any classification system.

Alternatives to LCC

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Other art institutions make good use of other classification systems. Their benefits and drawbacks for fine art collections reveal possible aspects of a classification that may lead to its effectiveness or ineffectiveness.

Likely the next most popular classification system used in the studies surveyed, the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) has been found to have a great capacity for number-building, and, according to Currier's (2002) informal survey, most art libraries choose DDC when re-classifying collections to enable further browsing (p. 20). Cripps (2011) also states that DDC, when "approached from a user perspective and applied with attention to the scheme's potential, can provide a shelf order that promotes browsing" (p. 5). However, Cripps does go on to elaborate on its shortcomings, which is a sentiment that others have noted. In fact, many have described how DDC's long call numbers actually make it ill-suited to shelf-browsing (Clarke, 2010; Cripps, 2011; de Cours, 2002; Ferrari, 2000; Lawes & Olsson, 2011). Further, the classes are crowded (Cripps, 2011), and, as for the subject of art, DDC "separates theory and practice of art," which is a convention that makes browsing an ineffective endeavor (de Cours, 2002, 24). Ferrari (2000) describes an example of how DDC unhelpfully places exhibition catalogs under museum catalogs, not under the artist it concerns. This separation may "confuse patrons who are searching for all books on Duchamp and must look in other call number areas" (p.80).

Considering the ineffective aspects of the DDC, other art libraries have tried alternatives. These may include using existing schemes and modifying them to fit the needs of an art library (Lawes & Olsson, 2011; Lee, 2011), or trying something new altogether (Nijhoff, 2011; Perkins, 2011; Clarke, 2013). In fact, Ferrari (2000), in his comparative study of alternate classification systems used by art libraries in the United States, determined that most of these collections draw

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on DDC or other established systems. This suggests that LCC or DDC systems are not entirely effective for art library collections; yet, they may still have merit.

The description and assessment of established and alternate systems has revealed what an effective art classification system, in theory, would do. To make the collection easily browsable, the classification should use shorter call numbers and keep all work from a single artist together (Ferrari, 200). This ordering of artists by history or ethnicity would parallel current trends in art research. The system should also allow a reasonable degree of specificity in the arts, and be hospitable to new developments in the art world, such as installation art.

Such recommendations should ensure a positive experience for art library users; however, these all come from the catalogers and librarians who employ these methods, not the users. Further, most of these papers are not, in fact, formal studies or experiments. Their anecdotal descriptions often reveal conflicting opinions on the advantages and disadvantages each system. To develop a realistic understanding of the experience of using the LCC classification system, a study based on the user perspective is clearly needed.

Methodology

To collect the data, I will be using an online survey containing quantitative and qualitative questions. While quantitative questions would allow me to answer “how” effective the LCC system is, qualitative questions should enable me to identify the factors that lead to an effective system for users. This method of data collection is appropriate to answer the research questions, as it allows me to quantify the effectiveness based on satisfaction and degree of success. It also allows me to gather possible factors surrounding the positive or negative experiences of users that could be explored in future research.

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With effectiveness as my dependent variable, the LCC system is my independent variable. To measure effectiveness, I will be using level of satisfaction and success of the search. The operational variables for each aspect of effectiveness are asking participants to rate their satisfaction with their searching or browsing. I focus particularly on browsing as this was proven to be a behavior of this population in the literature. A long-response question will be included to ask why they felt that way. Because of what I found in the literature review, I will also ask about their preferred method of browsing for books on an artist: geographically, chronologically, or by media. These questions should reveal factors that lead to satisfaction and thus effectiveness.

Operational variables to measure success of their search or browsing include asking things like: Were they able to find what they were looking for (if they were looking for something specific)? Did they find a useful book they weren't looking for? How many books did they retrieve? How long did it take to retrieve?

I intend to control for extraneous variables by asking participants to self-report on things like their level of information literacy, how often they use the physical library, and the purpose for visiting the library.

The population to be studied will be art library users, which includes curators, fine art faculty, and art history faculty. The libraries could be in museum or academic settings, but I intend to limit participants to professionals in the art field. Leaving out arts students should limit inaccurate data due to the different level of information instruction a student may have received.

The sample will be recruited second-hand through the Art Libraries Society of North American (ARLIS-NA) listserv. I will ask the art librarians to email their library users the online survey. The closer connection the librarians have with their users should result in more participants.

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Since the sample population does not include vulnerable individuals and provides minimal to no risk for them, it fits under the Exempt category of IRB. Thus, I will be submitting an IRB application.

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