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Welcome to the Vespasian Warner Public Library District Podcast.

The Dewey Decimal system has been the standard of non-fiction sections in libraries for decades. Many children first learned to use it in school. It's what patrons expect to find when they come in to a library.

However, in 2018 the Vespasian Warner Library began the journey of moving away from the classic classification system toward a subject based system, giving both patrons and staff a new way to approach non-fiction.

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Melvil Dewey was an American librarian and founding member of the American Library Association. He first published his pamphlet on cataloguing classification in 1876. Since then, 22 more full editions have been published with the latest published in 2011. The years have also seen 15 abridged versions published with the most recent published in 2012.

The Dewey Decimal System is divided into ten classes, with each class represented by the whole numbers 000 to 900. Each class is divided into ten divisions. Each division is divided into ten sections. The three whole numbers denote the class and subdivisions. The decimals represent further divisions.

For example, if you were looking for a book on rheumatism, you'd start in the 600s, technology. From there you'd move to the 610s, medicine and health. You'd need to move to diseases, which would bring you to 616. Diseases of the musculoskeletal system are in the decimal .7. Diseases of the joints are .72. And finally, rheumatism would be found at .723. So, the entire Dewey Decimal call number for a book on rheumatism would be 616.723.

While this is an effective classification system, it has its limitations and drawbacks, and it's not one that non-librarians readily understand, even though many people grew up with it. It just doesn't make much sense to patrons sometimes. For example, the history of wars is classified in the 900s, but warfare is found in the 355s. Gardening is 625, but landscaping is 720. Dewey has inherent prejudices as well. For example, the bible and Christianity are found between 220-289, but every other religion in the world is restricted to 290-299.

In recent years, librarians across the country have been shifting away from the use of the Dewey Decimal System, at least when it comes to how patrons find books.

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It was the limitations and inherent prejudice of the system, as well as the unnecessary need for patrons to learn a special code just to find a book, that inspired Director Bobbi Perryman to explore a non-fiction classification system beyond Dewey.

It wasn't a change made lightly, nor was it easy.

Before Bobbi did anything, she discussed the potential change with her staff as they would be the ones doing the processing and shelving. Their input and support would be critical. At the time of the proposal, most of the staff was onboard. In fact, there was only one staff member was not in favor of the change, but their position would change during Bobbi's research process.

Finding a replacement classification system proved to be a challenge. Bobbi reached out to other libraries who'd stopped using Dewey, but none of their systems were

quite what she was looking for. Bobbi would present her research to the staff during monthly staff meetings getting their feedback about what they liked, didn't like, and how practical it would be to implement.

It was decided to use BISAC –Book Industry Standards and Communications- as a starting place. Numbers were dropped entirely, and BISAC categories were adjusted to better fit the collection. For example, "performing arts" became "entertainment" and "political science" became "government". The categories of "agriculture" and "war" were also added.

Non-fiction in young adult and juvenile books also ditched the numbers and the juvenile collection received their own categories that better fit the collection. After all, there are more books about dinosaurs on the children's floor than the adult floor.

The new non-fiction labels would now feature the main category followed by a subcategory or two and the first three letters of the author's name. Juvenile non-fiction books feature a J before the main category, and the main category is spelled out. Young adult non-fiction features a Y before the main category, and young adult and adult main categories are abbreviated. The categories are also

color coded to help make the categories even more distinct.

For example, under the new system, if you were to look for a book on rheumatism, you'd start in Health, easy to find thanks to the light blue color of the category. From there, you'll look for the subcategory of Diseases, and then the second subcategory, Musculoskeletal. Any books on rheumatism would be within that category. Perhaps not as precise as Dewey, but easier for patrons to navigate.

With the new system decided, it was time to implement the change.

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In order to make the new system work, Bobbi had to get out of the Dewey mindset.

For example, Bobbi found determining the new subcategories of literature challenging because in Dewey, literature is grouped by language family, then format, then time period. Bobbi was stuck on how to organize literature in the new system: by time period or by location. She finally asked the library staff for their input, and their answer quickly changed how she saw the collection. The

staff didn't think about location or time period when they thought about literature, but they knew which novels were classics. It then became obvious that the simplest way to organize literature was by format -classics, plays, folklore, etc.

The shift in perspective led Bobbi and her staff to adopt a new mantra when it came to switching the non-fiction collection to the new system. "Think like a patron." What would make the most sense to patrons when they were looking for a book.

When it was finally time to begin the conversion, library staff began with the juvenile fiction collection as it was smaller and therefore, a good place to work out the kinks.

The labor of changing from the old Dewey Decimal System to the new BISAC-inspired system was split between two staff members. It was found to be more efficient if one staff member changed the call numbers in the computer system and created and printed the new spine labels and another went through the process of pulling the books and putting the new spine labels on them.

While the conversion was happening, new items were processed in the new system with one staff member doing it all from start to finish.

The entire conversion of the non-fiction collection -juvenile, young adult, and adult- took months to complete.

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Before the conversion to the new non-fiction system began, the library put out social media posts and TV spots advertising the impending change. Though the library did get a few good questions they were happy to answer, the overwhelming response from patrons was "meh". It turned out that they didn't really care how the books were shelved as long as they -or a staff member- could find what they were looking for.

The only negative comments the library received? They were all from retired librarians.

Once the juvenile non-fiction collection was converted and patrons were able to see and experience the new system, the reaction was overwhelmingly positive. Parents and children were thrilled at how much easier it was to find the books that they were looking for.

This positive reception only continued with the conversion of the young adult and adult non-fiction collections.

In the years since the change, the new system has become normalized, but patrons new to the library are still delighted to learn and explore the non-fiction collection without Dewey.

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Ditching Dewey wasn't an easy decision to come to, and the creation and change to a new system took a lot of work, but the results have been a worth it for both staff and patrons.

Thank you for joining us. For more information about the Vespasian Warner Public Library District, please go to vwarner.org.

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