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Subject Catalogue Use at the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

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Abstract

A survey of the subject catalogue use at the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife was carried out for a period of six weeks using questionnaire. The focus of the study was to find out the extent to which the subject catalogue in the library, met the users needs, the level of use and the effectiveness of subject classification. The data was analysed using percentages. Results showed 88% usage level of the subject catalogue as well as 85% success rate of searches.

Introduction

Subject catalogue is regarded as the most invaluable key to the total collection of a library. It opens wide to the reader the resources of a library by subject, irrespective of the authors, form or format, medium or language of presentation. The subject catalogue thus becomes an essential tool in the hands of a sophisticated user who wishes to beat the antisocial antics of his colleagues who take the recommended text to other reading rooms. He discovers that, quite often, the subject catalogue presents to him a list of alternative texts, which may even be better than the ones suggested by his lecturer. It is therefore extremely important that the subject headings, which represent the subject, content or analysis of materials in a library, be precise and adequate to meet the retrieval needs of library users.

There are various standard lists of subject headings which a library might adopt and maintain for consistency. The most widely used by libraries are the *Sears List of Subject Headings* (SLSH) and the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH) with the latter being preferred by academic libraries. The structure of subjects in LCSH, their specificity and terminology are the attributes that have made it a useful reference tool of librarians in academic settings. Cataloguers of Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife have adopted this listing because of its acceptability and universality.

Over the years, the adequacy or otherwise of LCSH has been examined by different authors. Every attribute of that list has been examined and reappraised generally but a survey of the subject catalogue use as a scientific means of finding out the adequacy of subject headings in use in libraries has not been addressed. Ezomo (1988) underscores the benefits of such endeavours and affirms that utilisation studies of library catalogues are very important and imperative in any library in order to assist the library managers in offering efficient service to the users. It is further stressed that since so much money and time go into the preparation and maintenance of library catalogues, it is essential that they are used maximally. Any study in this area would therefore be worth the trouble and would be considered relevant to the needs of the academic society.

In cataloguing, the application of the standard cataloguing rules and classification schemes have been known to create some communication gaps especially between the cataloguers and the users. The cataloguer professionally abides by the standard way of making entries, particularly subject entries in the catalogues, while the users, unaware of the standards, make searches using the general terms they think or know about. To bridge this gap, cataloguers make conscious effort to provide additional guides without necessarily sacrificing the standards. In many libraries, an ample use is made of *see* and *see also* references in the subject catalogue. Where this is not done, the *L. C. Subject Headings* are provided to help users identify the used terms. By tradition, the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library makes use of these references sparingly and does not make available its subject headings to the users. It was assumed and observed over the years that the users of this catalogue have difficulties in hitting the right terms that are used. Hence this study set out to find out the extent of use of subject catalogue by users, the problems facing the users of this catalogue, as well as propose possible solutions.

Literature Review

Antonov (1985) asserts that librarians have the privilege and the duty to disclose to readers, through catalogues and bibliographic resources, the wealth of ideas included in books. It is important that the catalogue, especially the subject catalogue, be truly representative of the wealth of ideas in the books. With user surveys, librarians measure the level of effectiveness of the services they render. While the literature is replete with the results of user surveys, catalogue use surveys are fewer especially the card catalogues in these days of online catalogues. Subject searches, however, still find relevance both in online catalogues and card catalogues.

Tillotson (1995) sought to know whether keyword searching could provide a better option to subject searching in OPAC. It was found that, given an easy choice, people

would choose to use both keyword and controlled vocabulary (subject) searching. It was therefore concluded that both keyword and controlled vocabulary searching ought to be easily available in an OPAC and that explanations and help needed to be offered to subject searchers. Recent catalogue use studies have revealed an increase in the use of subject searching since the introduction of online catalogues. Matthews *et al* (1983) contend that while card catalogue use studies have led to the assumption that subject access was of relatively little value to users, online catalogue use has shown that a majority of searches are for subject-related information. It is also believed that subject searching is often unsuccessful in library catalogues. Peters (1993) confirms studies of success rates ranging from 12 per cent to 75 per cent.

Studies on known-item searches reveal that an appreciable number of the searches are subject searches. Akeroyd (1990) claims that searches performed solely to identify items on a particular subject may account for as much as 24 per cent of all author/title searches. Agnew *et al* (1986) found that of fifty searches, 10 per cent were actually subject searches. A study based on researcher specified queries found that 27 per cent of the card catalogue searches for the *Warren Report* began with a subject search (Krikelas, 1980). In an earlier study, it was found that 6 per cent of known-item search in a card catalogue began with a search for a subject heading (Tagliacozzo *et al*, 1970). Wildemuth and O'Neill (1995) in their study on known-item searches also found that subject searches is about 25 per cent while title searches is 94 per cent.

An interdisciplinary team of computer and behavioural scientists with library management led by Mercy Murphy carried out a user survey at the U. S. Air Force Academy Library (Murphy, 1979). The objectives of the survey were to obtain overall user evaluation of library effectiveness, pinpoint areas of indifference or ignorance and obtain distinctive usage profiles of the special clientele. Findings revealed a high opinion rating of known services and identified numerous little-known resources and services. Differences in usage patterns were observed especially evidenced in the information-seeking behaviour of freshmen and seniors and of historians and mathematicians.

The study by Groves and Davis (1980) revealed little use of the card catalogue in meeting clientele requests though books were substantially used. This discrepancy between catalogue and book use was attributed in part to the small size of the collection and the familiarity of the library staff with the collection. They therefore tend to browse the shelf rather than search for the items through the catalogue. The Maternal and Child Health / Population Dynamics Library saw the need to improve its subject catalogue (Leibtag, 1982). After making decisions involving heading sources and revision methodology, the improvement was implemented through weeding, correcting and integrating headings, keeping in mind the orientation of the majority of library users.

In the work of Ronai (1985), the state of subject catalogues at 16 county libraries were surveyed covering general users' catalogues as well as the retrieving facilities for local history and sound materials. It was found that subject-retrieving systems vary both in their compilation and outputs. There were catalogues based on the UDC and applying no structure within main groups (of cards); some followed strictly the hierarchy of UDC; others were with mixed structure. There was however a variety in the usage of references and in following the modifications of UDC in the old card catalogues. The indexing depth of the catalogues were found to be poor. The survey on catalogue use in the Latunde Odeku Medical Library by Ezomo (1988) revealed a poor use of the catalogues as only 33% of the respondents claimed to have used them. The study also revealed that subject access was 11% while title access (25%) and author access (21%) were preferred. This revealed a poor usage of the subject catalogue. The survey however revealed that the users were not given any user education programme as over 67% indicated their willingness to attend any such programme if organised for them.

Methodology

The Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife serves about twenty thousand students and two thousand senior and academic staff who are users of its resources. Obtaining information on the use of the catalogue could be achieved in a number of ways such as: (a) indirect observation method; (b) administering questionnaire on a selected random sample of readers from registered list of students and staff; (c) interviewing and administering questionnaire on readers at the port of entry into the library; and (d) administering questionnaire to actual users of the catalogue.

In the Indirect Observation method, field observers are expected to be located in the vicinity of the catalogue area. The main task will be to identify a user and place him under full observation throughout the user's stay at the catalogue. This method is highly subjective as the respondent's personal feeling cannot be easily obtained. At peak hours, the number of users may be too large for an observer to study in detail. The variability and coverage will be highly restricted as a result of the bias of the observer. Using the second method entails getting a random sample of readers from the library's list of registered users, sending questionnaires to them and asking them to return to the researcher or the library. The main shortcoming of this method is low response as most respondents may fail to return the completed questionnaires. Consequently, drawing conclusions from such may not be truly representative of the total population. Respondents may not be able to get explanations to questions they do not understand.

Administering questionnaires on users as they come in or go out of the library also has

the disadvantage of low return. If the users are interviewed, it will be difficult to get an in-depth response as many respondents may be hurrying to lectures or having a short time to spend in the library; therefore unable to settle down with the interviewer. In order to overcome these deficiencies, this study adopted the method of administering the questionnaire by research assistants to current users of the catalogue facilities, who then returned the questionnaire and return them before leaving the catalogue area. Respondents who had filled in the questionnaire once were not served on another visit to avoid duplication. Five undergraduates who were former library assistants were used as research assistants to administer the questionnaire covering library operational hours (07:30hrs. - 21:30 hrs.) for six weeks. The research assistants assisted in clarifying some of the questions raised by the respondents. This method enabled a high turnover of completed questionnaire within a short time and with minimum difficulty. It also enabled respondents to react to the catalogue facilities at a fixed point when the research was carried out without any appreciable change in the quality of the facilities. In all, 1000 copies of questionnaire designed were administered.

Analysis of Data

From a total of 1,000 questionnaire copies administered, 995 were found on closer examination, to be analysable. This represented a 99.5% return spanning all categories of users, viz. students (97.4%) and staff (2.6%) involving all faculties, departments and various levels of study. Responses on the use of the catalogues revealed that 93.1% of the respondents actually used the library's catalogues while 81.1% claimed that the catalogues were their first port of call in the quest to identify appropriate library books for their use.

Table 1: Familiarity with the Catalogues

Catalogue	No of Users	Percentage
Author/Title	615	61.8
Subject	738	74.2
Serials	90	9.0
Shelf List	99	9.9
Documents	69	6.9

Table 1 shows users' familiarity with the various catalogues. The result revealed that 74.2% of respondents were familiar with the subject catalogue while author / title was 61.8%. Serials, shelf list and documents catalogues were altogether 25.8%. The low usage of the serials catalogue could be due to the fact that postgraduate students and staff have direct access to the journals room and therefore preferred to browse the shelves while undergraduates go there with specific requests probably given by lecturers or obtained from books.

On the actual use of the subject catalogue, 88.4% of the respondents used the catalogue. Out of these, 45% use it more than once a week. A satisfaction rate of 89.4% was obtained as the respondents found it easy to use and understand. This revealed that the subject catalogue was highly used and of great value. This finding is contrary to the assumption that subject access was of relatively little value to users and poorly used (Matthews, 1983; Ezomo, 1988).

Those who found the subject catalogue difficult to use and understand (10.6%) were asked to give their reasons. The following were their reasons:

Arrangement is complex	45%
Related subjects not properly linked	20%
Terms used are unfamiliar	6%
Alternative terms are not linked to the terms used	1%
Others	7%
No response	21%

In some libraries, *see* and *see also* reference cards to link alternative terms and related terms, respectively, are copiously used. One major disadvantage of this is that it leads to the clogging of the catalogue. They were sparingly used in the Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library. Table 2 below shows the success rate for those who find the catalogue easy to use and understand. The study found that 85.4% were either highly successful, very successful or fairly successful. Only 14.6% were hardly successful or not successful.

Table 2: Success Rate of Subject Catalogue Searches -

Response	Frequency	Per cent	Cum Per cent
Highly Successful	173	17.4	17.4
Very Successful	374	37.6	55.0
Fairly Successful	302	30.4	85.4
Hardly Successful	37	3.7	89.1
Not Successful	109	10.9	100
Total	995	100.0	

On the number of search terms used before users' needs were met, responses showed that 76.3% of the subject catalogue users searched either less than or equal to three terms before they hit the target. This response and the high level of success rate as shown in Table 2 revealed that the subject catalogue of Hezekiah Oluwasanmi Library was very effective and met most users' needs. Those who were hardly successful or not successful in their searches (14.6%) were probed further on what they did or how they solved this problem. Their reactions were as follows:

Go on searching under related terms	43.4%
Seek help from fellow users	24.0%
Seek help from any library staff	17.7%
Seek help at the Reference desk	12.3%
Just go away	11.6%
Seek help from Circulation desk	8.2%
Find direction from a guide card	5.2%

The above responses showed that only 11.6% just go away while the rest seek help one way or the other. It is noteworthy that 43.4% persist in their search and are finally successful. Those that make use of guide cards like *see* and *see also* cards were only 5.2

per cent. It may therefore not be worthwhile for the library to invest on a copious use of these cards.

Table 3: Success Rate of Searches After Receiving Help

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Highly successful	95	9.5	9.5
Very Successful	312	31.4	40.9
Fairly Successful	299	30.1	71.0
Hardly Successful	49	4.9	75.9
Not Successful	19	1.9	77.8
No Response	221	22.2	100.0
Total	995	100.0	

The success rate after receiving help showed that 71% were successful while a negligible 6.8% were hardly or not successful. "No response" accounted for those who had been earlier successful in their searches.

It is noteworthy that 89.2% of the respondents had taken the Library Instruction Course, (LIB 001) which could have contributed to a large extent in the effective usage of the catalogues, especially the subject catalogue, and the success in the searches. Asked what improvement or innovations they would have liked to see in the Subject Catalogue, the following suggestions were given by the respondents:

Placement of book lists showing the subject terms used	42.4%
More coloured cards to demarcate subjects	30.7%
More cross -references in the subject catalogue	29.1%
Others	13.0%

Book lists would enhance searches and enable those having problems with their searches to discover used terms while the coloured cards would also facilitate and hasten searches. Most of those who indicated "Others" suggested computerisation of the library's services and removal of cards that are without books on the shelves. The call for computerisation and removal of cards without books revealed that the users wanted modernisation of library services, and were well informed on the contents of the catalogue and the shelf.

Conclusion

The survey revealed that users of the Hezekiah Okwesanmi Library were well informed and versatile in the use of library catalogues especially the subject catalogue. Most respondents hit their target or got information on their desired subject within a short time. The high success rate of users' searches could also probably be attributed to the respondents' knowledge of the use of Libraries gained from the Library Instruction course (LIB 001) normally taught to all new students. But this study did not do a comparison of the two groups of those who did LIB 001 and others who did not. Nevertheless, this study is indicative of the crucial importance of subject catalogue in a university library.

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