



Very few people, places, things, or concepts fall neatly into a single, universally agreed-upon box. And so, we end up in the land of compromise and lowest common denominators.

How Dewey Find What We're Really Looking For?

Chris Grabenstein

author@ChrisGrabenstein.com

So let's say your library has an extremely realistic, free-range hologram of a very rare white Bengal tiger, complete with icy blue eyes. Where would you want it to roam? In the children's section, near *Winnie the Pooh and Tigger Too*? Maybe near the popular-fiction shelves, close to *The Life of Pi*? How about with books on religion since the tiger symbolizes power and beauty in Hinduism? Then again, you might prefer to have your tiger wander around in the geography section, near books about the Indian subcontinent. Or, since it's a tiger (more precisely *Panthera tigris tigris*), you might want to see it in zoology with all the other critters.

Such is the choice that any organizer of shared information must face. Very few people, places, things, or concepts fall neatly into a single, universally agreed-upon box. And so,

we end up in the land of compromise and lowest common denominators.

The tiger goes into zoology. It makes sense.

If I put the white Bengal tiger with all the other animals, I will always know where to find it, even if I am studying the four symbols of Chinese constellations and want to compare the mythological Baihu (the white tiger of the West) to the real deal in southern Asia.

That's the decision made by Dr. Yanina Zinchenko, the fictional "most famous librarian in the world" whom I put in charge of Mr. Lemoncello's unbelievably spectacular library (the place has hover ladders to help you retrieve books from the highest shelves) in my new book for middle-grade readers *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's*

Library. The tiger is assigned a call number. But don't worry—the children's department gets an audio-animatronic Mother Goose that can sing along (or make rude noises) to just about any book, including *Treasure Island* and *Walter the Farting Dog*.

In writing about a fantastical library, I found myself rediscovering Melvil Dewey's Decimal Classification system. First insight? Not many guys are named Melvil anymore.

Doing my library research, I spent a good deal of time studying those colorful charts that break down the ten Dewey categories into easy-to-grasp icons. I also learned a little about how Mr. Dewey came up with his Decimal Classification system. Apparently, he was frustrated by the way all the different libraries of his day organized their books in different ways.

I'm not a librarian (I've never even played one on TV), but I imagine there must be a bazillion ways to organize information. Alphabetically. By title. By author. By subject matter. By genre. By book-cover color. By popularity, which, by the way, is how they organize the books in the massive Random House warehouse I toured in Maryland—the least popular titles go way up on the tippy top of the seven-story-tall shelving units.

I hadn't realized that Mr. Dewey decided to organize nonfiction titles into ten broad categories by asking, "What BIG question of life does the information fundamentally answer?"

He asked nearly catechismal questions like "Who am I?" (for the answer, please go to the 100s and grab a book about philosophy) and "How did we get here?" (the 200s, religion and mythology, or, for a more practical answer, check out transportation titles in the 300s).

In short, Mr. Dewey viewed the library as the place to answer all of life's questions.

The hero of my new novel, Mr. Luigi Lemoncello, shares that same love of libraries. He sees the library as a great public institution where anyone, no matter what race, religion, or economic status, can learn anything about everything. He even has a motto for his new library: "Knowledge Not Shared Remains Unknown."

In short, Mr. Dewey viewed the library as the place to answer all of life's questions.

The Dewey Decimal Classification system facilitates that knowledge sharing by making it easy to locate information by boiling it down to its essence.

A white Bengal tiger is first and foremost a tiger. An animal. Cage it in zoology.

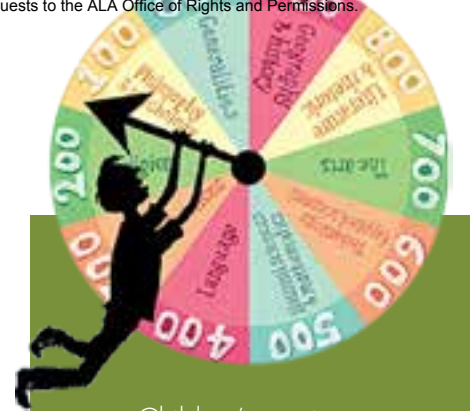
Yes, there are other systems, but Dewey is like the "GO" space on a Monopoly board. It gives us a common starting point.

I guess that's Dewey's other big advantage: It caught on. People use it. Remember Esperanto, the international language we were all supposed to be speaking by now? That's okay. Nobody else does, either.

That said, I don't really think simply knowing how and where to find information is the Holy Grail in any quest for knowledge. It is only a tool to help you answer the EVEN BIGGER questions.

Years ago, when I was a Boy Scout, our troop went on what the leaders called a "Lost Patrol Camping Trip." We were broken up into groups and dropped at various points in the middle of a forest. The object of the game was to find the camping site, which we knew only as a spot on a map. The first group to reach the rendezvous point won some sort of prize. Or glory. Maybe both. Our only tools were a compass and the map.

I suppose we could've just played a hunch and said, "It looks like it's at the top of a hill, so let's go climb a couple hills till we find it." Or, we could crack the map's code by "orienteeing"—lining up our compass's north with the map's north, taking a bearing, and following it. But knowing those basics didn't guarantee success.



Children's services librarians from the Carroll County Public Library in Finksburg, Maryland, have created a Dewey Decimal Classification scavenger hunt game that can be played in libraries everywhere.

For everything you need to host your own library game, visit www.chrisgrabenstein.com/kids/escape-from-mr-lemoncellos-library-game.php.



We also needed to know how to read a topographical map and why it's never a good idea to hike through a swamp—because the most direct route might lead straight through a boot-sucking bog. Those of us leading the Scout patrols also needed some fundamental management and first-aid skills, not to mention a passing knowledge of traditional hiking humor to boost morale. We needed information gathered from several different sources.

For the twelve 12-year-olds eager to win Mr. Lemoncello's big prize in *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library*, one

way to find the secret exit is to piece together a trail of clues taken from each of the ten DDC categories. No single category gives the players a complete answer. But put all the clues together, and the answer to the book's big riddle becomes clear.

This solution, I think, points to the enduring and fundamental strength of libraries: They offer us all the resources we need to examine every aspect of a subject under the expert guidance of trained explorers (a.k.a. librarians).

So put me down as a fan of the Dewey Decimal Classification system, but only as the first step in a more three-dimensional approach.

Because, for me, Shakespeare's plays really come alive only when I know where to find the scripts (the 800s), plus a little about Elizabethan history, the meaning of "iambic pentameter," what groundlings were (they paid a penny and sat on the ground), why religious folks shunned actors (the devil is the great pretender), and why every scene ends with a rhyming couplet (the plays were performed during the day, and without blackouts, the actors in the next scene needed some kind of cue to know they were on!).

No single DDC number, not even "822.33 William Shakespeare," can tell me all that.

All ten Dewey categories, taken together, can.

And if adoption of the Common Core State Standards leads (as I've read it might) to this kind of 360-degree answer for all kinds of questions, I'm predicting school librarians are going to be very, very busy!

Works Cited:

Filipcak, Bob. 1997. "Training Gets Doomed." *Training* (August 1). <<http://business.highbeam.com/137618/article-1G1-20045575/training-gets-doomed>> (accessed May 27, 2011).

Prensky, Marc. 2001a. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants" *On the Horizon* (October). <www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20PartI.pdf> (accessed April 15, 2009).

———. 2001b. *Digital Game-Based Learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

———. 2010. "And You Think Some Teachers Are Resistant to Technology Today." *Teaching with Contests* (March 23). <<http://teachingwithcontests.com/?p=1574>> (accessed May 27, 2011).

Chris Grabenstein is the author of the New York Times best-seller *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello's Library* from Random House. He is also the coauthor (with James Patterson) of the #1 best-sellers *I Funny* and *Treasure Hunters*. He is the author of twenty other books for children and adults, a playwright, screenwriter, former advertising executive, and improvisational comedian. Winner of two Anthony and three Agatha Awards, Chris wrote for Jim Henson's *Muppets* and cowrote the CBS TV movie *The Christmas Gift* starring John Denver. Chris lives in New York City with his wife, three cats, and a rescue dog named Fred who starred on Broadway in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. You can visit Chris (and Fred) at <www.ChrisGrabenstein.com>.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarian, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Illinois). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

EXTENT AND NATURE OF CIRCULATION

("Average" figures denote the average number of copies printed each issue during the preceding twelve months; "actual" figures denote actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: September/October 2013 issue). Total number of copies printed average 8,200; actual 9,019. Sales through dealers, carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: none. Mail subscription: actual 8,363. Free distribution actual 520. Total distribution average 8,200; actual 9,019. Office use, leftover, unaccounted, spoiled after printing average 75; actual 75. Total: average/actual 9,094. Percentage paid: average 97.56; actual 92.73