

From Code to Plain Text

- the implementation of a new shelfmark system at the Biomedical Library, Gothenburg University Library, Sweden.

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Abstract

In spring 2012, the Gothenburg University Library was going to leave the Swedish SAB-system as classification and shelfmark system in order to implement Dewey instead. As Dewey is not, in our opinion, a user friendly system for medical libraries, the Biomedical Library (the medical, odontological, health and care sciences branch at the Gothenburg University Library), looked for an alternative to Dewey. We wanted a simple and clear system with a structure adapted to the scholars and students at the Sahlgrenska Academy.

Discussions and preparations were initiated. The old SAB-system was scrapped, but not replaced by Dewey. We identified the need for a completely new shelfmark system in plain language, easy to understand for our users. We also had a wish that the change would lead to fewer and more condensed subject categories on the open shelves and the possibility to easily add new subjects or remove old ones. We wanted a living and flexible shelfmark system. Since our primary users – scholars, students and teachers at the medical, odontological, nursing and health departments - are already familiar with the MeSH terminology, there was an obvious gain to relabel the book collection using a system based on MeSH as a shelfmark system. Everybody should be able to browse the shelves, even new and inexperienced visitor.

The project was a big task. All the books on open shelves, 16 600 items, were relabelled. Almost all the library staff were engaged in the relabelling and were scheduled in the project. The way to a user friendly shelfmark system adapted to the needs of our users claimed both attention to details and organizational skills, interaction between software and trollies, labelling machines and schedules. And, not least, cooperation between all the librarians at the Biomedical Library. The shelfmark system project turned out to be an exciting challenge with valuable experiences of different kinds.

The process is described: from the idea of a new shelfmark system, through the development of a shelfmark term list to the practical implementation of relabelling the books and shelf them in a new system based on MeSH. After three years with the new shelfmark system a follow-up survey was conducted, resulting in reflections from both user and staff perspectives. In short, the new shelfmark system is considered to be easy to understand and use.

Key words

Libraries, Medical

Library Surveys

Medical Subject Headings

Vocabulary, Controlled

Library Shelfmark System

Teamwork

Why?

In spring 2012 Gothenburg University Library was going to leave the Swedish SAB system as classification and shelfmark system in order to implement Dewey.

Since Dewey is not, in our opinion, a user friendly system for medical libraries, the Biomedical Library looked for an alternative. We identified a need for a completely new shelfmark system in plain language, easy to understand for our users. We wanted a flexible system, adaptable to growth and change.

Since our primary users – scholars, students and teachers at the medical, the odontological and the health and care sciences departments – are already familiar with the MeSH terminology, there was an obvious gain to relabel the book collection using a terminology based on MeSH.

How the work was done...

It was a big project. All the books on open shelves were relabeled. Almost all the library staff were engaged in the relabeling and were scheduled in the project.

The project called for careful planning, including the development of a new shelfmark term list based on MeSH and a conversion chart between the old SAB codes and the new plain text subject categories.

When choosing shelfmark subject categories we tried to select terms with a broad coverage of the subject, close to the root in the MeSH tree structure.

We relabeled 16 600 books.

We used up 1,5 km (1 494 m) marking tape for the book spines.

... and what it resulted in

One of the results was fewer and more condensed subject categories on the open shelves in the library. The number of shelfmarks decreased from 289 (SAB) to 162 (MeSH).

The new shelfmark system based on MeSH is considered to be simple, clear, easy to understand and adapted to our users needs.

The project turned out to be fun, welded together the colleagues and ended with a party!

After 3 years, results of a follow-up survey

After three years of MeSH, users and colleagues had their say in a follow-up survey. The result was really gratifying. The main opinion seem to be that the new system is easier to understand and explain. Both users and staff seem to be happy and our colleagues think the great effort to update the catalogue and relabel all the books was worth the trouble.

Staff opinions

- The shelfmark system is considered logic, simple and easy to explain.
- Since our users are already familiar with the MeSH terminology it is a gain to use MeSH as a shelfmark system.
- Uncomplicated to add new subjects and remove old ones.
- Easy to find books, easy to reshelv books, easy to find misplaced books.
- No letter codes or numerical codes to try to understand and remember.

User opinions

- Easy to find books and to browse the shelves.
- Better with terms than codes.
- Almost all users search books by browsing the shelves on “their subject categories”.
- English terminology works well since students are used to English.