Dewey Decimal Classification development during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Alex Kyrios[1]

Abstract :

This article provides an overview of the revision process for the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), with an emphasis on the user advisory group Editorial Policy Committee (EPC), and recent efforts to prioritize community-driven changes. It details how these processes have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including innovations, challenges, and lessons for the future. It also includes three example cases of revisions that happened mostly or entirely during pandemic-era remote work.

Keywords: *Asynchronous work, Classification, Collaboration, COVID-19, DDC, Dewey, Electronic meetings, Remote work, Synchronous work.*

As the world's most widely used library classification system, it is always OCLC's intent that editors of the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) work with its international user base in updating and improving it. Wider feedback from diverse users makes for a better classification system for all. This article will give an overview of the collaboration process, with special attention to challenges brought on by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

For more than a hundred years, a user committee has helped drive DDC development: first, the American Library Association's Decimal Classification Advisory Committee in 1916, and later the Dewey Decimal Classification Editorial Policy Committee (EPC), formed in 1953 and still in place today. EPC reviews change proposals put forth by editors or volunteer contributors from the community, typically either approving them outright or requesting further work.

In recent years, EPC would meet in person once a year in the United States, either at OCLC headquarters in Ohio or at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Between these annual meetings, they would conduct asynchronous electronic meetings and other business via a listserv. Unsurprisingly, EPC has not met in person since 2019 now.

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The involvement of outside experts and librarians has been a factor in the development of the DDC since its earliest days. In more recent years, OCLC has made a concerted effort to further democratize this process and welcome in diverse contributors from around the world, following the same cooperative model used for other OCLC products, such as WorldCat.

This push for community-driven contributions has included open web sources like the Dewey Contributors page (oclc/DeweyContributors) and integration with existing venues, such as a "Help Revise the DDC" link in WebDewey and calls for participation on the Dewey blog (ddc.typepad.com).

The story of DDC development through the pandemic has many of the same elements found in other aspects of life under COVID: disruption, uncertainty, ambiguity, but also hope, renewal, and a healthy reexamining of the way things are versus the way we want them to be. Lessons from these times can inform future work.

Flexibility amid uncertainty: EPC's work :

Across years and different product releases, the work of EPC has provided a natural rhythm for DDC development, centered around the annual in-person EPC meeting typically held in June. After a meeting, editors would work on implementing changes that had been approved, then turn to proposals for the next meeting. In the new calendar year, they would begin disseminating those proposals for consideration for that year's meeting, and the cycle would repeat.

While important, the annual meeting was never the only way for EPC to work. To allow for more frequent changes, and to save time for larger proposals at the face-to-face meeting, editors and EPC would conduct electronic meetings in between. These meetings were numbered with letters, so in between face-to-face meetings 141 and 142 were electronic meetings 141A and 141B, for example.

Despite the name, these electronic meetings were conducted entirely via email list. Due to differing time zones—at the time of this writing, there are nine EPC members from six countries—synchronous electronic meetings were not attempted. Ironically, OCLC had started to investigate the possibility of doing so in 2019. The potential for a global pandemic was not the rationale!

One lesson from working during the pandemic is practical: consider what tools are already available. In this case, the asynchronous electronic meetings were familiar ground for EPC. If the face-to-face meeting remains indefinitely postponed due to health concerns, why not address what business we can via more electronic meetings? At the time of this writing, there have been four such meetings (142A-142D) since EPC 142, the last in-person meeting. This is not an entirely unprecedented number, but most times in the past with so many were during periods of intense activity, such as the preparation of the printed 23rd Edition.

Use tools that are already available, but also look for ways to tweak them. Together, editors and EPC realized there were some proposals more complex than would typically be handled at an electronic meeting, but that should not stay on hold until whenever a face-to-face meeting can take place. This could also apply to proposals with a few questions that simply needed to be talked through in regular conversation. To this end, we organized a one-hour synchronous session for the last week of an electronic meeting.

With the differences in time zones among EPC members, it is still difficult to even find an hour within everyone's normal work schedules. This is a problem for any international body. Especially as colleagues deal with disruptions related to the pandemic—physical health, of course, but also mental health, changes to schedules, being home with family members, etc.—it is important to keep a sense of perspective. Not everyone will necessarily be able to participate in such meetings, but we found times that worked for most members.

This add-on session was very valuable. It was valuable for the practical aspect, of being able to discuss issues in real time instead of email, but also for the human aspect. As we socially distance, work remotely, and lose the built-in socialization that comes with a shared workplace, we simply missed seeing each other and the opportunity to be social. Again, it helps provide a sense of perspective, and what's really important.

As we enter the third year of working under COVID-19, we continue to seek creative solutions to replace, or even improve upon, old workflows. A typical face-to-face EPC meeting ran almost two whole days. This is not unreasonable when members travel to gather together, with some arriving earlier to adjust to the different time zone. But sitting at a computer in an electronic meeting all day can be exhausting, and completely impractical when including, for example, librarians in Australia, South Africa, and the US all at once.

Look to previous successes when trying new things. EPC members can't meet online for an entire day, but they can do so for an hour. Discussions are ongoing as of this writing, but a promising possibility is a series of sessions, perhaps 2-4 over the course of one week, of 1-2 hours that together take the place of a face-to-face meeting.

While this could not fully replace in-person collaboration, it has advantages too. Members will not lose time to travel or coping with jet lag. There are natural, built-in breaks; if a question proves difficult to resolve one day, the time in between allows for more research and fresher perspectives. Perhaps most promisingly, this format makes it much easier for volunteer contributors who have authored their own proposals to speak to EPC directly. In the traditional format, this would have required coordinating additional travel, plus tighter scheduling so those contributors know when EPC will be considering their proposal specifically.

Amid the disruptions of the pandemic, it pays to be open-minded and considerate about the needs of others. Some adjustments to existing workflows are inevitable, but with creativity and resourcefulness, alternatives can be developed that will continue to benefit us going forward.

Adaptation and openness: Collaborating with volunteer contributors :

In contrast to EPC business, which has decades of established practice and patterns that the pandemic demanded change regarding, community-driven development of the DDC has been more flexible from the outset. While users have long been involved in development of the classification in one way or another, historically, this more often took the form of editors reaching out to subject-matter experts, still a largely top-down approach. More recent efforts to promote community-authored proposals were already designed to be flexible.

The DDC aims to be the best possible general classification system for users of different institution types around the world. Librarians and other allied professionals and staff members at those institutions know their users in ways that editors cannot, and have invaluable insight into how the DDC does or does not succeed in meeting the needs of these users.

Thus, the efforts around community-driven change proposals are meant to accommodate differing schedules. Depending on a contributor's time and interest levels, their participation can take almost any form, from reviewing others' proposals before they're sent to EPC, to working directly in the internal DDC database to draft changes of their own.

Typically, this does not require synchronous interaction, though editors remain on hand to assist with the process and talk through changes. Most of this can be done via email. Other tools, such as internal notes in the database or the built-in forums of the Dewey Contributors page (oc.lc/DeweyContributors), offer other opportunities for asynchronous communication. As necessary, synchronous meetings can also be scheduled.

This section will examine three examples of community-driven changes worked on entirely during the pandemic.

The first case most closely resembles old workflows, and may be useful as a baseline. A Canadian professor of sociology of religion had written scholarly articles on the provisions for a certain Christian denomination in the DDC, along with recommendations for improvements. Editors reached out to him, and he expressed interest in collaborating.

The professor's critiques reflected an outsider's perspective of the DDC. A few were either adequately explained by context, or would have required mass overhauls of the religion area to fully address. Many others successfully identified issues and their corresponding solutions.

The professor formulated a proposal for EPC, with the editors providing context and advising on what would make for a successful proposal. This combination of subject-matter expertise and DDC expertise was an effective combination, and EPC approved the proposal during Meeting 142B.

The second case also speaks to the flexibility of EPC workflows. Agreed upon work procedures between the DDC editors and EPC allows for fast-tracked proposals sent for

quick approval via the EPC listserv. This is often used for changes that are not likely to lead to controversy, but still go beyond simple typographical errors and the like (which are handled entirely by the editors).

EPC meetings can also potentially be bypassed in developments related to specific countries, where the country's national library or an equivalent body approves the changes ahead of time. Such was the case for Nepal, which previously only had a single notation in Table 2, the section of the DDC listing geographic notation that can be added to other numbers.

In 2015, a new system of seven provinces was introduced in Nepal. The provinces were numbered rather than named, with names to be determined later. Representing places without names represented a new challenge for the DDC. First, editors planned to wait until they were all named, but under advisement of Nepali librarians, they decided to proceed, using the names that had already been selected.

By January 2021, five of the provinces had been named. Still, some had different spellings or forms of names in the Latin alphabet, which the English DDC uses. Typically, the DDC follows the form of name found in Library of Congress authorities, but authorities for the provinces had not been established. There was also the question of whether to include in the DDC the numbers of the provinces that had since been named.

Under the auspices of the education ministry, Nepali librarians met via teleconference in December 2020 to put forth recommendations for representation of Nepal in Table 2. They discussed these questions, and reported back to the editors with recommendations and a draft outline of the provinces in Table 2.

The editors input the draft into the internal DDC database, then presented it to EPC via the listserv in January 2021. By unanimous consent, it was approved and made available in WebDewey the next week. The change was also made in time to be represented in the 2021 version of print-on-demand DDC.

Finally, the third case was prompted by a public librarian in the US who was seeing many works in her library going to the same number, specifically books on wedding planning. She also noticed many had a more practical focus, with content matter similar to other works on planning parties and entertainments, rather than weddings necessarily.

As with much DDC development work, these initial questions raised further issues. After consulting with the librarian, it was decided she would investigate some of them and editors would handle the rest. Unlike the other projects discussed in this article, no synchronous communication was needed. Email was sufficient.

This project resulted in two exhibits (the formal term for EPC change proposals). The first focused more narrowly on wedding planning, and provided two options for EPC to consider: a new number in the 390s (customs) or the 790s (entertainments). The second

exhibit looked at the broader relationship between customs and their associated parties or observances. Both were approved in electronic Meeting 142D, with EPC option for the 390 number for wedding planning.

The pandemic has been a mixed blessing for community-driven DDC development. Some contributors had more extra time while working remotely, or while not working directly with users in person. Others had the opposite situation, where family needs, reassignments, or other priorities meant planned efforts had to be set aside.

Conclusions :

The COVID-19 pandemic's effects on DDC development have not been as drastic as we might have feared. Recent shifts towards adaptability and democratized development provided a good toolset for creative changes to workflows, and flexibility on the part of editors and volunteer contributors alike have helped keep things moving along.

The largest barrier undoubtedly remains the inability to safely meet in person, especially with an international group like EPC. Efforts to mitigate this have shown some success, and the work remains ongoing. A "post-pandemic" world still feels like wishful thinking, but the resiliency shown by the worldwide DDC community bodes well for future work, whatever the broader environment.

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