The Kingston Hills are alive with the sound of local cataloguing practice

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The Lay of the Library Land

There are approximately π libraries at Kingston University, each whole library of which I am, as a cataloguer, expected to visit. The main, or "Ready Salted", library is at our Penrhyn Road campus, housed as of 2020 in our multi-award-winning[2] Town House™. The books here are, for the most part, very boring, at least from a cataloguer's perspective – textbooks and the like, records for which are ten-a-penny from any reputable MARC dealer. This works well for us, as we don't buy in any MARC records (unrelated, I'm assured, to the amount of money we spent on the aforementioned Town House™), and we can only make use of what we can find through free Z39.50 sources.

Knight's Park library is where our arty types make themselves at home, sprawling out over the tables with their canvases, fabrics, and crayons.[3] The resources here are more specialist, including exhibition catalogues and architecture journals, but we can usually steal a decent Z39.50 record from some unsuspecting philanthrope for most, only needing to add extra detail on contents, for example, in a few cases.

Roehampton Vale is the .141 (etc.) library. It's purely for engineers, and so small that books destined for there are delivered to, and catalogued at, the final library in our list. I have never been to the Vale. I hear third-hand horror stories of Lego robots playing table tennis, and count my blessings.

Our final library is at our Kingston Hill site. As the name would suggest, it is on a hill outside Kingston-upon-Thames, a location apparently chosen to be as difficult as possible for someone living where I do to access.[4] Being the cataloguing hero I am, however, I do manage to make it there on occasion. The Kingston Hill collection is predominantly based around the needs of our nursing and teaching students. The nursing side of things is fairly straightforward, cataloguing-wise – mostly textbooks and other widely available books, records for which are easy to find. The teaching side, however, is a different matter.

Teaching Trials

The particularly interesting part of the teaching collection is the large "teaching resources" section. This has four main components: children's educational books, children's and young adults' fiction, picture books for young children, and "kits". The last are, in some ways, the easiest to deal with, and somehow simultaneously both the most fun and most annoying to catalogue. They are early years tools for teaching things like counting, phonics, and co-ordination, which we order from specialist suppliers. By the time I come to catalogue a new order, they'll have been unpacked and, in many cases, sorted into zip-lock folders, and I'll be confronted with the challenge of cataloguing such items as "counting sticks", "sorting pebbles", or "10,000 bees".

As mentioned, they're fun to play with, and it's always good to brush up on my counting and sorting skills (where the kits aren't too advanced), but the mild annoyance lies in the fact that it doesn't really matter from a discovery perspective what I do – teaching students are always going to find them by browsing in person rather than searching the catalogue for "pebbles" or "sticks". I try to include subject headings on the teaching aim of the kit, on the off-chance these are useful, but for the most part the records are basic (and, in all likelihood,

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[1] This is an abridged version of my ridiculous job title, which strictly includes brackets, nouns, and adjectives mixed together with gleeful abandon. Apparently the distinction between *Adviser* and *Advisor* is significant too. That information on seniors isn't going to advise itself!

[2] RIBA Sterling Prize 2021, Mies Van der Rohe award 2022, Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress 1935.

[3] Or whatever artists use. Spirographs?

[4] Their decision to site it there long before I moved to where I currently live shows particularly malicious forethought.

pretty bad in terms of rules-following), and probably most useful for issue desk staff in checking, for example, how many sticks have been lost/eaten/stuck up noses. As you might imagine, there's a high attrition rate and no expectation that these items are going to be in circulation for a long time, so there's no collection preservation requirement for records to fulfil either.

The process, then, is quite straightforward. I create a record from scratch, as these aren't exactly the kind of record you can steal from the Library of Congress. I fill out the basic details, with the main focus on the 300 field and subject headings. Finally, I send photographic evidence to my family WhatsApp group that I have just catalogued my brother.

Figure 1: "Sorting pebbles" bearing various representations of the author's brother

The educational books are also purchased in bulk from specialist suppliers, and can also be a bit of a nuisance to find records for, leaving many to be done from scratch. There are no real specialist requirements for these, and I generally catalogue them as I would any other book (although I do sometimes feel a little stupid including a whole 504 index note for a five-item index covering a ten-page book). The only exception to business-as-usual lies with the 521 "Target Audience" note that I always aim to add if applicable (or retain if included on an imported record), and in which I put reading grade information if explicitly stated on the item, such as:

A *"Green band"* book

or

A *"Sable on a fess between two double manacles Argent three pheons Gules on a chief Or a demi lions between two lozenges Azure"* book.[5]

Finally, we have fiction books. These, and the accompanying cataloguing shenanigans, are not exclusive to the Kingston Hill campus, but the fiction collection here is the largest and most faffy, as, in addition to the recreational reading books common to all the sites, Kingston Hill also hosts large numbers of fiction books in the Teaching Resources section, from picture books for young children to young adult novels. For this reason, and for the sake of providing some kind of structure to what would otherwise be an even more rambling account, I will treat them as essentially a Kingston Hill problem. And problem they, to some extent, are.

In order for our catalogue users, both trainee teachers and seekers of recreation, to find fiction on specific themes, we make a point at Kingston of adding subject headings to fiction records. Imported records sometimes include them, but often don't, and determining the "aboutness" of a fiction book can be moderately time-consuming. There are also always huge numbers of the things to catalogue, and they're often

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[5] You got me, that's the coat of arms of the Johnson family, Suffolk. I have no idea what any of these reading grades mean. My ignorance will be relevant later.

depressingly thin books, so you can spend hours cataloguing and barely make a dent in the "to do" shelves.

Occasionally the pressure will get to me and I will start to discern bleak, paranoid subtexts that the authors (presumably?) never intended to include; as, with hindsight, I may have done when I presented the charming children's picture book *Merrylegs*, about a riding school pony's dreams of unicorns, as a harrowing tale of mental breakdown, self-delusion, and petty crime.

520		$$a A riding school pony's unhappiness with his life, and jealousy of others, leads to a crime spree and mental breakdown. We learn that recognising the joy that we bring to others through our toil and drudgery is not the answer - only through escaping to a fantasy world of delusions can we truly be happy.
650	0	$$a Ponies $$v Juvenile fiction.
650	0	$$a Job stress $$v Juvenile fiction.
650	0	$$a Depression, Mental $$v Juvenile fiction.
650	0	$$a Neurasthenia $$v Juvenile fiction.
650	0	$$a Hallucinations and illusions $$v Juvenile fiction.
650	0	$$a Trespass $$v Juvenile fiction.
650	0	$$a Delusions $$v Juvenile fiction.
655	7	$$a Picture books $$2 lcgft

Figure 2: details of my record for Merrylegs

Training Tribulations

My colleague Katrina and I make up the cataloguing team at Kingston. Or, to be more precise, about, ooh, 35% of us does. The rest of us is committed to the (increasingly time-consuming) world of Scholarly Communication and repository management. Even in the glorious pre-pandemic days it was difficult for us to clear the backlogs at all of the sites, and it was pretty dispiriting knowing we were the bottleneck. As part of a drive towards ~~having to do less work~~ increasing efficiency and reducing backlogs, we created a workflow for our acquistions colleagues whereby, upon receiving an item, if the record met certain criteria, or if a record could be found for overlaying through Z39.50 that did, then the "pass to cataloguing" step could be skipped.

As this was delegating cataloguing work to non-cataloguers, we placed strict boundaries upon the process – as all cataloguers will know, there is only so much you can explain in simple terms before you are essentially training someone up as a cataloguer from scratch. We didn't have anywhere near the spare time required to do this, and, of course, if we *had* trained up new cataloguers, they would have been eligible for the seniority and extravagant pay packages we all enjoy (har har). Our main restriction concerned subject headings – if subject headings were required, an item would have to be passed on to us. The main offenders for such treatment were, of course, fiction books, for which subject headings are often not added. So the backlog continued – at least at Kingston Hill, where fiction abounds.

This was the situation when, on one of my rare forays to Kingston Hill, I was approached by my subject team colleague with responsibility for teaching resources. In an astonishing display of tact, she managed to note the backlog, comment on the urgency of certain items, and express a willingness to help without resorting to the insults I probably deserved. I shooed her away with the usual sob story at the time, but later got to thinking; there were actually a number of selling points in allowing her to help with the cataloguing:

- Said colleague did have past cataloguing experience
- Said colleague was the subject expert, and, importantly, understood the significance of the reading grades
- Said colleague knew which books needed prioritisation (sadly not always just the most interesting/ entertaining/shelf-space-hungry ones)

If no actual training would be required, if the boundaries of the work could be clearly set, and if ultimate cataloguing authority could remain with us cataloguers, it would make sense to allow her to help.

So, after getting the go-ahead, I set about writing instructions. Like any normal person, I find writing instructions to be one of the most soul-destroying exercises imaginable, and only my ability, in general, to override my short-term laziness (not wanting to do it) with my long-term laziness (knowing it will make my life easier in the future) stops me from giving up and just keeping the tasks to myself rather than delegating them. But the more instructions I have written, the more I have come to realise that they are actually incredibly useful, not only for their stated purpose of describing how to do things, but for the critical eye they require you to cast over existing processes. Writing these instructions in particular was interesting as it made me re-assess how we described genre/form, reading level, and target audience. My findings (below) are probably already well-known to many readers, decidedly inexpertly-described, and in many places work-in-progress at best. But, hey, sometimes you get what you pay for with this journal.

Facile Findings

As I understand it, as cataloguers we are analysing items through (at least) three distinct lenses – what the item is *about*, what *type* of item it is, and who it is *for*. Historically these have been somewhat confused and conflated in the subject headings field. Providing distinct genre/form (the *type* information) is important, and for this we use the 655 field in MARC21, in which we (ideally) include terms from a dedicated vocabulary – for our purposes, *Library of Congress Genre Form Terms (LCGFT).* But, on working out how to describe this for my instructions, I realised I hadn't been doing what I thought I was doing.

I had been adding a second indicator 0, denoting (I thought) LCGFT. In fact, what I was doing (I think…) was pointing to LCSH, which seemingly contains all the terms of LCGFT within it. What I *should* have been doing (I think…) was to include a second indicator 7 and $$2 lcgft, which would point to LCGFT as a distinct vocabulary. Presumably the inclusion of the terms in good(?) old LCSH is a historical decision preceding the formal separation of LCGFT, and maybe they won't stay in there forever, but I haven't yet spotted any differences between the terms included within the two, and I'm not sure how important it is to go with the (slightly faffier) newer coding. Still, I'm trying to make the effort to use it – where would cataloguing be without commitment to poorly-understood principles in the face of overwhelming indifference?

The second discovery of sorts was regarding target audiences/reading grades. As mentioned, we already included 521 notes fields for reading grades, and I made sure to include this in the instructions. But what about where no grade is provided, but a cataloguer-provided assessment of reading age would be helpful? Isn't there a field in the 008 for such things, with unhelpfully vague terms I've never properly got my head round? Indeed there is! And, furthermore, it seems that the terms *are* actually defined, if I'd ever bothered to investigate:

a - Preschool
Intended for children, approximate ages 0-5 years.
b - Primary
Intended for children, approximate ages 6-8 years.
c - Pre-adolescent
Intended for young people, approximate ages 9-13.
d - Adolescent
Intended for young people, approximate ages 14-17.
j - Juvenile
Intended for use by children and young people, approximate ages 0-15. The code is used when a more specific code for the juvenile target audience is not desired.

So in writing these instructions my own knowledge was once again improved. Incidentally, I also finally worked out the distinction between "Juvenile fiction" and "Juvenile literature" $$v "Form" subdivisions.[6] "Fiction" is, of course, fiction. And "literature" is, of course, *non-fiction*. As in the common usage of the phrase "great works of literature" to refer to outstanding dictionaries, textbooks, etc. Not sure why that confused me previously!

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[6] As can be seen from the *Merrylegs* example above, I have still been applying these when bothered, despite my protestations about non-subject headings in subject fields, because…well, I don't know. Belt and braces, I guess

Of course, reading age or grade isn't the only way of interpreting the phrase "target audience", and, indeed, isn't the only piece of information about an item's target audience that might be useful to our readers. They may want to find books written for teachers, Asian Americans, or Manichaeans.[7] And a book *for* a particular group may not also be *about* that group, so you shouldn't just rely on subject headings. This is where *Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms (LCDGT)* come in. These are designed "…to describe the characteristics of the intended audiences of resources, and also the creators of, and contributors to, those resources."[8]

This, however, is where our beloved(?) LMS, Alma, fails us at present. Unlike the fields I've mentioned previously, the 385 field, where such terms are meant, I believe, to live, is not currently set up to dynamically search LCDGT, and I'll be damned if I'm going to go back to the bad old days of trawling through vocabularies myself, or, in this case, suggesting that our cataloguer-by-proxy does. Call me spoilt, but until Ex Libris add that functionality, I don't think it's worth the hassle of adding 385 fields. Although, that said, there's no clear demand for them until people start using them…

I was checking back with our specialist-cataloguer-to-be as I progressed with the documentation, to make sure that I wasn't wasting time on aspects that our users wouldn't actually find useful, and she was of the opinion that basically all of the above would be worth including if possible. Indeed, at one point I needed to go further in my pursuit of metadata ~~perfection~~ good-enough-ness. In discussing genre/form terms with an eye towards making a reference list of the most common and popular item types, we realised that a key item type – "Board books" – didn't have a verified LCGFT heading, and, furthermore, could not be ascertained from the records as they stood without including a form term. So I included instructions for adding local 653 fields for such items.

Cryptic Conclusions

So far, the delegation has been a definite success - from the main success criterion (me having to do less work) at least, and potentially from other criteria as well. As for my conclusions from writing up our practices; well, they're hardly earth-shattering discoveries, but, none-the-less, here's three:

1. Sadly, as mentioned previously, writing instructions can be a very useful exercise, and attempting to explain workflows and reasoning can lead to useful analysis, clarifications, and even positive changes.

2. It seems to be possible to delegate cataloguing work without devaluing our skills and expertise, as long as boundaries are determined and ultimate authority is retained. It can potentially even be beneficial if it allows subject matter experts more direct access to the metadata. For more complex stuff, though, this still requires finding and exploiting pre-existing, un-utilised cataloguing experience, so it doesn't solve the broader problem of a lack of cataloguing training available.

3. "Local practice" doesn't just mean doing things differently to the established standards – it can mean, as with us, going further in following the standards in certain regards than is the norm. I think it's all useful stuff, though there's an argument for doing some research to find out how helpful they actually are to our users.[9]

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[7] I was going to write that nobody would be writing books for Manichaeans these days, but on checking Wikipedia (Manichaeism - Wikipedia) there are apparently still Manichaeans in China. Good for them! Though they'll be out of luck if they expect an LCDGT about themselves. See, you can even learn things whilst writing an article about writing instructions! And maybe even learn things whilst reading a footnote about writing an article about writing instructions. About writing a record. About a book written for reading by Manichaeans.

[8] https://id.loc.gov/authorities/demographicTerms.html.

[9] This would, of course, require me to find the time and inclination to conduct said research, which seems highly unlikely at present.

Of course, if our practices aren't deviations from the standard, then, in an ideal world, they'd be contributed towards – or taken from – a universal master record for the item. But the complexities of the broader metadata infrastructure are beyond the scope of this waffling, even assuming I could get my head round them! For now, as far as I can tell, we still need local cataloguing expertise to provide the extra information that's relevant to our specific user groups.[10]

[10] In other words, "my job is vital, please don't fire me".