

Hospitality in notation and relative location¹

Before the advent of DDC in the late XIX Century

The location of a book in a library was either fixed or absolute. Those systems used to determine that location are known as fixed location systems. Structurally speaking, such numbers used to define such a place consisted of two parts: (1) subject part and (2) location part. Take, for example, an imaginary number R. 7.15. Here R means a subject, say mathematics; and 7.17 means the 15th book on the 7th shelf of the stack containing mathematics books. All these symbols were not universal, but local devices and so varied diversely from library to library. The number of parts of a "class number" ordinarily shown by a dot, also varied from library to library (2). The problem was that as libraries grew, fixed location systems could not preserve the subject grouping, however broad and crude. When the space already allocated to a subject was filled, to accommodate new books either the subject grouping had to be abandoned, or part of the collection had to be numbered anew – the latter being a very taxing ordeal. To escape this vexing problem, some librarians resorted to other internal or external characteristics to classify the documents, such as size, color of binding, language, place of publication, or chiefly the accession number. While these methods never involved reclassifying work to accommodate a new book in that "class," neither did they achieve the fine results yielded by a subject classification. The basic conflict was between hospitality and subject grouping, which Melvil Dewey very successfully and ingeniously solved in an inspired moment on a fine morning in May 1873. Dewey's number represents not the physical location of the book, but its subject contents; and the hospitality problem was solved by using decimal notation which can endlessly stretched without disturbing the other classes. The solution was neat and brilliant.²

Up to day, Dewey Decimal Classification is the most widespread system to assign their place on the shelves to books. Melvil Dewey was perfectly aware of the novelty and the importance of the introduction of decimal notation in collections with open shelves, especially for quickly growing libraries, where the main aim was the users freely browsing among the shelves and easily finding the books without the use of the catalogs.

¹ Carlo Bianchini, *Book number: uno strumento per l'organizzazione delle collezioni. Manuale ad uso dei bibliotecari* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 2017), 23–25.

² M.P. Satija, "Book Number and Call Number". *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. Vol. 45, Supplement 10, 18-45, (Marcel Dekker, 1990), 18.