Genrefication in Secondary School Libraries

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Abstract

Most school libraries organize fiction books alphabetically by an author's last name. In order for a student to find and compare potential fiction reading material, the traditional school library model would have the student either search the library system for the topic and then go from stack to stack looking for books about the topic from any number of locations or seek advice from school library staff who would direct the student to potential titles as part of a reader's advisory. In an effort to make fiction book selection easier for students, some school librarians have turned to genrefied fiction collections. However, there are many school librarians who feel that organizing fiction books by genre first rather than author's last name creates more problems than it solves. This paper will explore the history behind genrefication, discuss the Paradox of Choice and patron browsing habits, and present the modern debate regarding genrefication of fiction books in school libraries.

   Keywords: genrefication, school libraries, libraries, reader interest classification, students, fiction, fiction collections, fiction classification, paradox of choice

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Introduction

The Problem with Traditional Organization of Fiction

While non-fiction sections in school libraries are generally organized by some sort of topic using the Dewey Decimal Classification System or the Library of Congress Classification System, most school libraries organize fiction books alphabetically by an author's last name. So, if a student wanted to read a non-fiction book about a topic, finding a single book about that topic will likely mean also finding books near that one about the same topic and other related topics. However, if a teen wanted to read a fiction book that addressed the same topic, finding a single book in the fiction section on that topic will only lead to other similar books if that book's author wrote more books about the same topic. This limits a student's reading choices on that topic to those by a single author held in the collection.

In order for a student to find and compare potential fiction reading material, the traditional school library model would have the student either search the library system for the topic and then go from stack to stack looking for books about the topic from any number of locations or seek advice from school library staff who would direct the student to potential titles as part of a reader's advisory. This model presents a few problems.

The primary patrons in school libraries are the students (although teachers, administrators, and other staff may also use the school library). As students age, a few things happen that affect or can be affected by library use. First, students gain independence and want to be seen as being independent. They also explore ideas outside of those introduced in their core subject areas. These factors can affect a student's desire to approach library staff for help when choosing reading material, particularly reading material that is not directly related to schoolwork. A student may not want to be seen as less capable or less independent if they ask for help finding something to read. The student may be worried about approaching a school staff member about reading materials that may be seen as controversial by people in their community, for instance reading material that explores addiction, mental health, or sexuality.

Limited Access to Qualified School Librarians

In school libraries in Michigan, there is no requirement that there is a certified school librarian that oversees each school library, so although "Michigan schools are encouraged to provide school libraries and ND endorsed teachers of Library Media to their students" (Michigan Department of Education, n.d., para. 13), there are only proposed bills (Michigan Association of School Librarians, 2022). In fact, a school library might be run by anyone that the school assigns to it as long as the person isn't directly responsible for instruction in some specified areas. In addition, school libraries may only have one person working in the library, certified or not. This means that the person on staff in a school library may not have formal training in librarianship. The person may not understand ethical concerns, like balancing patron privacy with parent rights. If the staff member has library training or is a certified school librarian, there is still a high chance that they work alone in the library, meaning that helping more than one student at a time while balancing other work (like material checkout, technology help, and collection management) can be difficult. Added to the potential for the librarian to have limited time, in a high school library, students may only have access to the library before school, after school, and between class.

In an effort to make fiction book selection easier for students, some school librarians have turned to genrefied fiction collections. Books organized by genre fit other organization systems that teens are already familiar with, including video media networks (like Netflix or Hulu) and bookstores. The idea is that genrefied fiction collections allow students to quickly and independently find fiction books that are similar in nature to those that they already enjoy reading or that may cover similar subject matter to a topic that they want to read about. In addition to allowing students to gain independence, genrefication can also help address issues with staff availability or teens feeling nervous approaching staff to ask for help locating books that contain materials that students or the local community may view as controversial.

However, there are many school librarians who feel that organizing fiction books by genre first rather than author's last name creates more problems than it solves. Those who argue against it suggest that it will make it more difficult for students to access reading materials in their public and academic libraries after they graduate from high school. They sometimes argue against genrefication on the basis that a book's genre may

fall into more than one category, making genrefication subjective and inconsistent between libraries. There is also a concern for the considerable amount of time it takes to convert a library's fiction collection from alphabetical order to genre order.

History of Genrefication

Since at least 1877, librarians have been debating how works of fiction should be sorted (E. A. Baker, 1899, p. 216). While Melvin Dewey worked on the Dewey Decimal Classification System, others were concerned with the best way to catalog and shelf the growing number of fiction novels. In 1899, E. A. Baker wrote "All our artificial arrangements of books, skillfully constructed catalogues, open-access systems, and other methods of alluring and improving the reader.... stop short at fiction" (p. 198) and argues that fiction books were the most appealing and had the most influence over the public, and as such should get the most attention when it came to organization (p. 199). The default had been (and remains) to classify works of fiction together and shelf them alphabetically by authors' last names.

In the late 1980s, Reader Interest Classification (RIC) became a hot topic, and the debate renewed. Libraries had been adding stickers or markings to some books (like mysteries or romance novels) to help patrons find them easily, but for the most part, these books were kept with other fiction books. S. L. Baker and G. W. Shepherd (1987) published a review of principles to a successful fiction classification system, the top three being that it should make it easier for patrons to find the types of books desired, any subdivision that helps should be used, and that it should be used to expose readers to authors they would normally miss (p. 246).

A year later, S. L. Baker wanted to find out if classifying and sorting fiction by genre would combat patron information overload (1988, p. 366). The results of her study that involved three public library fiction collections found that classifying fiction into genres increased circulation and that shelving books by genre had a greater effect (1988, p. 374). She also noted that the effect was greater in larger libraries with larger fiction collections (1988, p.366).

Choice and Browsing

Consumer research shows that too many options causes confusion and exhaustion (S. L. Baker, 1988, p. 366) and that "even if a high-utility commodity exists, if the quantity of products is high, there is a possibility of non-purchase because of consumers' psychological burden and fatigue" (Kinjo and Ebina, 2015, p. 296). The Paradox of Choice, a term coined by Barry Schwartz in 2004, explains that there is a point at which too many options causes anxiety and unhappiness (p. 2). The more people wander, looking at an overwhelming number of options without finding what they want, the more likely they are to leave without making a selection.

Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) wrote that students as young as 4th grade want to choose their own books when they are in the library (p. 854). As children grow, they want to gain independence and are less likely to ask for help (watch any 3-year-old or teenager). People who have a vague idea of what they want tend to browse until they find something or give up. Since adults and children have strong preferences for types of books (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006, p. 854), and most library patrons find a book by browsing (S. L. Baker, 1988; Woodard, 2005), the abundance of fiction books can actually cause patrons to become anxious or unhappy. Additionally, looking in multiple locations for similar books frustrates students who already struggle to enjoy reading (Taylor et al., 2019, p. 854). If this happens enough, these negative feelings could become linked with the library itself, decreasing a students' desire to visit the library or read for pleasure.

Grouping like items combats choice overload. Grocery stores group baking items together; consumers aren't likely to find soup and socks purposely shelved together. Bookstores have been using Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) and shelving similar subjects together since the late 1990s (Harbison & Fakundiny, 2019, p. 35). Businesses spend money to organize by BISAC in order to help customers find books about a topic faster, keeping customers happy, and ensuring repeat business (Woodward, 2005, p. 118).

The Modern Debate

Renewed Interest

In recent years, school librarians have renewed the debate. As more school librarians looked for ways to encourage student autonomy, support curriculum standards related to genre, and expose students to a diverse selection of authors, the term genrefication - grouping materials like books, music, or movies by subject

and/or genre - came into play (Follet, 2019; Graphic Traffic, 2008). Most of the debate takes place on social

media. School librarians who have genrefied and write about it tend to publish their process and results in

personal blogs.

There are generally three different camps: no change is needed, change just the fiction, or change the

entire collection. School librarians who do not agree with genrefication tend to look at it as "ditching Dewey"

and cite the amount of time it takes to reorganize an entire collection and the disservice it does to students

who will move on to college and use a traditional system, and the idea that no system is perfect as reasons to

resist change (Pendergrass, 2013, pp. 58-59).

Those who change to partial or completely genrefied collections do so for many reasons. The most

common reason is that school librarians want to help connect students to books they want in a way that

promotes independence in their students and saves students, teachers, and librarians time (Follett, 2019, p. 5;

Moeller & Becnel, 2019, p. 205; Sweeney, 2013, p. 41). They also point out that students naturally browse by

genre or subject (Taylor et al., 2019) and look at the way that classroom teachers organize book collections by

genre (Hembree, 2013).

Moeller and Becnel (2019) noted that students enrolled in their MLIS school librarianship courses

frequently chose to research genrefication because they thought that helping students find reading materials

was "a problem worth solving" (p. 201). However, their students struggled to find recent research, and the

professors wrote that "there is a dearth of contemporary empirical evidence that examines the effectiveness

of genrefication for library patrons" (p. 201).

Modern Trends

Of the studies that have been done, both for public and school libraries, there are post-genrefication

trends that suggest that genrefication can have a positive result on patrons' self-selection of books. Classroom

teachers and librarians noted that students were more independent from adults and an increase in student-to-

student conversations about and recommendations of books (Hembree, 2013; Moeller and Becnel, 2019;

Sweeney, 213; Torres, 2021). This aligns with Moeller and Becnel's (2019) as well as S. L. Baker's (1988) findings

that classifying fiction helps readers become comfortable exploring titles that are similar to others they have

enjoyed rather than only finding works by the same author. There has been an increase in the curriculum

support that school librarians have been able to offer classroom teachers (Sweeney, 2019; Taylor et al., 2019).

In fact, Hembree pointed to a 20% increase in 3rd grade and 24% increase in 4th grade reading scores (2013, p.

65). Finally, many see an increase in circulation (Hembree, 2013; Sweeney, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019).

Challenges

It is also worth noting a few challenges when it comes to genrefication. In a study of three public

library fiction collections, S. L. Baker (1988) found that the smaller library did not see the same level of benefits

as the medium and large library (p. 374). Moeller and Becnel (2019) stated that the school librarians that they

interviewed said that genrefication did discourage students from using the OPAC and that this disuse was

encouraged by teachers (p. 204). Other than that, any negative comments about genrefication revolved

around the amount of time the process took and the initial cost of stickers and signs (Moeller and Becnel, 2019,

p. 204). Witteven (2019) wrote about several public libraries in an area that genrefied their fiction collection

and pointed to one who reversed it specifically in the YA section because YA books had too much crossover

between genres (p. 44).

There have been relatively few studies done about genrefication in libraries, and not all of them have

been specific to school libraries. Of those done in school libraries, many are accompanied by large weeding

efforts which leads to the question: is it genrefication or collection management that made the difference? The

need to research and document this growing method of organization is apparent, and doing so will help

librarians, particularly school librarians, decide if genrefication will help students become more independent

library users and whether it is worth the time for their library.

<p style="text-align:center">**Conclusion**</p>

The history behind organizing fiction books by fiction goes back to the late 1800s. The recent trend for

school librarians to try genrefication as an organizational method is growing rapidly, but serious research

behind the methods employed has not been done in over 30 years. Marketing research, used by bookstores

and other businesses, demonstrates that people who are given choices organized by like-items are more likely

to find something that meets their needs. However, when these choices are not organized by like-items,

people tend to be overwhelmed and frequently choose to leave empty-handed. Teens have grown up in a

world that organizes bookstores, movies, and TV shows by genre or topic first. While more research is needed

on the topic, a review of the literature suggests that genrefication has the potential to increase teen patron

independence.

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