

Empowering children

to help themselves

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An edited version of a contribution to a panel discussion held at Rylands Public Library on 6 November 2002, organised by the School Libraries and Youth Services Interest Group of the Western Cape branch of LIASA (Library and Information Association of South Africa).

If our goal, as children's librarians is to create independent creative seekers and users of information and lovers of literature, then we need to make the world of books and libraries accessible to children and young people to ensure they become skilful and independent users of libraries and books. Young users should not unnecessarily have to rely on librarians to act as intermediaries when seeking information - this practice is quite frankly disempowering. The user feels small and helpless and the librarian all powerful. Bear in mind that for many people, libraries are intimidating institutions with their rules and regulations and often unexpressed code of conduct. To the uninitiated the library is a maze of shelves housing a myriad of books - a place of confusion often difficult to negotiate if not signposted correctly. It appears to me that librarians who are familiar and comfortable in this world expect others to find their own way into their world with no map or directions.

Good library signage and arrangement of one's book stock are but two basic means of providing information to travellers in library land. Simple and obvious as they are, they

are often not accorded the importance and ongoing attention that is essential.

Bookstock arrangement

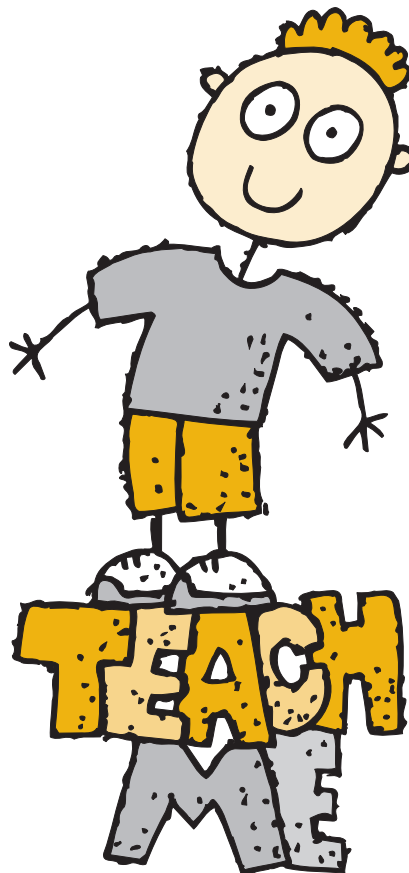
Librarians often say that everyone knows where the books are - or if they don't, 'they can come and ask me'. But is this always the case? How many people don't ask because

the library staff are very busy or they cannot be found or the user is too shy or too hurried to ask?

The most important aspect of book stock arrangement is that it should be logical. Picture books in one section. Fiction in another. But what about the most popular series or the collection of easy readers? Housing them together in a clearly-demarcated area ensures ease of access for both users and library staff. The arrangement should logically follow the progression of the child through its reading development, from picture books up to teenage fiction. In my travels, however, I have seen collections of beginner readers stuck next to the teenage fiction collection. Why? If at all possible, isn't it more logical to put it next to the picture books, for surely these readers are more likely to use the easy reader collection than teenagers?

We are all familiar with the problems with library shelves that might have suited the stock when the library originally opened, but do not any longer as the size of the collection has grown. I have seen an overflow from the picture book section accommodated in one library by putting all the board books on high shelves. The result was that the books intended for the youngest audience of toddlers were shelved where even short adults (like myself) had to stand on tiptoe to reach them... It is vital to bear in mind the differing physical, social and developmental needs of each age group of users and try and group 'their' books accordingly.

I always ask children's librarians to do two things. The first is to get down on one's knees to see if the books intended for a specific age group are accessible to them. This goes for the issue desk too. The second is to ask why you put books where you do? Often you will hear that 'it has always been done like this'. Or, 'it makes shelving easier'. Is this a good enough reason? We need to do what we can to alleviate shelving problems in these times of drastic staff cuts, but surely the needs of users must take precedence to ensure ease of access. The very simplest of solutions are often very obvious. All it takes is a willingness to look critically at one's library and then change things around.



Moving books is not that difficult or time-consuming, once one sets one's mind to it. As the Nike slogan says, 'Just do it'.

Another huge frustration for library users is when a sequence of books is interrupted at the end of a shelf and one can't figure out where it continues - often to find that where one would logically expect it to continue, it does not. For example, if I come to the end of a shelving unit at the letter K in the fiction sequence, I will then logically expect to find the sequence continuing on the other side of the shelf, around the corner. I look there and find that this is the start of the non-fiction section. So where is L? Is it right on the other side of the library against a far wall? If so, why isn't there a notice telling me this at the end of K?

We would do well to look at our local supermarkets to see how they do things. For after all, they are in the self-service game and want people to help themselves to goods off their shelves.

Two recent experiences illustrate exactly what I mean. I rushed into a supermarket in a suburb I rarely visit to quickly buy a loaf of bread. The bread was not to be found near the bakery, but in an aisle far away. I spent quite some time wandering through the aisles looking for this most basic of foodstuffs. In my local supermarket, however, the bread is housed next to the bakery, the most logical place and exactly where one would expect to find it. Pushing my trolley through my local Pick'n Pay recently, I was most interested to see how they have dealt with the problem of a shelving unit not being sufficient to house a 'collection', a problem experienced by many librarians. The bottom end of the aisle where the toiletries were displayed on both sides was getting too full and the soap was moved up to the top end of the aisle. I

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instantly saw why it was put there and not around the corner. The supermarket staff know that their customers go up or down the top and bottom aisles in one sequence with their trolleys and were thus more likely to find the soap there than if they had been displayed around the corner.

Clear signage

Just as the layout of a library and the arrangement of books should be logical and clear, so too should the signage. That means signs for the different sections as well as shelf labels and always in 'language' that users understand. It doesn't help to use the word 'human anatomy' when the words

children use are 'the human body'. Shelf labels should be made for the subject areas and topics that children request most frequently. Sometimes librarians unthinkingly put up shelf labels for 'important' Dewey numbers without first establishing whether they have books on the subject or whether the public regularly requests books on that subject.

Most importantly, shelf labels must correspond with the books on that topic. How often doesn't one find that the books which should be where the shelf label is are simply not there, but two shelves down. The reason being that book stock shrinks and expands as books go out and are returned. It is vital that books and labels correspond at all times. When the library is busy and a child wants books on birds, very often the librarians will say, go and look on that shelf and look for the shelf label that reads birds. If no books on birds are to be found the child will be frustrated and might very well not return to the librarian asking for more assistance. Here, of course, I am not referring to instances where all the books on birds have been issued or temporarily housed on the 'projects' shelf.

Put yourself in the young user's mode of thinking. Why put obstacles in their way and make it difficult to find what they want. The more difficult things are for them and the less they are able to help themselves, the less likely they are to come back. If it is too difficult to find something, they will probably go somewhere else.

The arrangement of books, layout and signage is vital in making libraries and books accessible to our children and in empowering them to help themselves. Simple and easy to do, but so easy to disregard. And it is something we have to check on a daily, monthly and annual basis. We can't display signs and forget about them. We can't arrange our book stock and then forget about it. It requires ongoing maintenance, a willingness to make changes, a critical eye and a creative approach to making books accessible.

