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Discussion on Standardizing Subject Headings

This is a place to discuss ways of standardizing the subject headings we apply to materials, or even whether it is worth it to do so.

As it stands we have been using the FAST subject terms that have been applied in various places and compiled through OCLC. These subject headings can at times be oddly specific. Sometimes there may only be a single subject term that does not accurately represent the material. There is also a huge number of headings, resulting in similar items (say a book and its closely related sequel) having different terms applied.

That is not to say it is a poor system, just that there could be room for improvement if we can put together some kind of system or taxonomy that can be applied economically.

I would say that any scheme needs to:

- Describe items accurately without being too narrow/specific
- Take into account the level of accuracy required by the patron-base
- Be small enough to reasonably manage
- Be intuitive enough that we don't need to look terms up all the time
- Be economical enough that the time spent working on it isn't greater than the time it saves
- Not just repeat the information found in the genre terms

Systems to look at using or cannibalizing:

	Pros	Cons
LOC	Very accurate	Massive amount of terms - unmanageable
	Most widely used	Unintuitive for average user
		Will need to be copied from other sources
FAST	More easily readable than LOC	A lot of terms - unmanageable
	Can be poached from OCLC	Some items are poorly described in OCLC
		Variations in similar items
BISAC	Intuitive for patrons	Very low level description
	Small enough to be manageable	Similar to genre terms with a bit more depth
	Works well for bulk-purchases	Probably won't be able to copy catalogue
CSH	Accurate for Canadian context	Not sure if easy to use for patrons
		Maybe too limited for the collection
X̱wi7x̱wa Classification and Names	Nice to have for collections related to indigenous material	Has to be used in conjunction with other subject headings
		Likely require more work to implement
THEMA		
Sears		

Links to each:

LOC (This is pretty useless as a reference - Classification Web would be nice but requires a login)

FAST (Go to Applications to use the Search function)

BISAC

THEMA

CSH

X̱wi7x̱wa Classification and Names

Sears List of Subject Headings

At a glance I like BISAC because it's small and simple. We could incorporate the whole scheme into Drupal, and it would be small enough that typing a bit of the heading would yield a usable drop-down selection. Of course not being able to copy catalogue means that we would have to spend a bit more time reading the description (unless we could find a place to copy from). Also it doesn't describe fiction very well - basically just Genre. It might be a scheme we could use for Non-fiction though - for example look at History; I think it would describe history books to a reasonable level - basically time and place.

_ I'm personally really not a fan of using the FAST headings… because sometimes they work great but sometimes they're just plain weird…The ability to search by title/ISBN is really awesome but when you're working through more obscure titles that aren't in there and are just trying to find some acceptable subject headings it can be a bit of a nightmare! - lg

I also like BISAC, which is easy to navigate and use. CSH doesn't describe fiction well either. FAST is good because it renders results, but I think for it to work we'll have to set up criteria to pick and choose from what are there. Sometimes when I type in the field, a better term appears on the list.– LL

Just went through THEMA - I like how it handles Non-Fiction (although it's still pretty unwieldy), however fiction is the sticking point again. It gives broad genres and leaves it at that. Describing the fiction items could be tough because if we aren't copying someone else's work (ie: OCLC) we need to figure out what's going on in the book by the jacket cover/description which takes time. Which brings up the question - does the fiction need to be that well described? Going back to BISAC it would describe a gay romance as FICTION / Romance / LGBT / Gay, which for most patrons browsing would probably be good enough to get them where they are going, at which point it's up to them to read the description, esp. if it has FICTION / Science Fiction / Time Travel attached to it as well. But if someone wants an historical fiction that takes place in 17th century Paris, that may be tough… - RM

Implementation questions

- NNELS relies on other library, publisher and distributor records for its metadata. The most common subject headings used in these records are probably LOC (from libraries) and BISAC (from publishers). If another subject classification were to be used, NNELS would need to implement a crosswalk/mapping from LOC and/or BISAC to this subject classification in order to automate the assignment of subject terms to records. Given this…
    - it might be easiest to utilize a subset of LOC subject headings for NNELS? we would map LOC subject headings to a smaller subset (similar to what we did for our genre taxonomy)
    - we could additionally develop a BISAC to LOC (for NNELS) crosswalk?
    - we could also map LOC to BISAC. Is there a crosswalk that already exists?

…………………………. If we go with a simplified version of LOC we could copy catalogue from libraries easily enough. How would we determine what the subset is? Do we just cap the depth of the subject

heading at like 3 layers or something and lop off anything beyond that?

I think regardless, it might be worthwhile putting one BISAC heading in. BISAC seems to use pretty natural language, and I assume the keyword searches might have an easy time hitting on one of the parts of a BISAC heading. I do think BISAC lacks the depth to be used alone, but the lack of depth also allows a heading to be picked from a list and applied to an item. - RM

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