Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

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Commentary

Making Meaningful Connections and Relationships in Cataloguing Practices: The Decolonizing Description Project at University of Alberta Libraries

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Overview

This paper seeks to examine some of the history behind the work that led to the Decolonizing Description Working Group (DDWG) and the efforts that have come from the further Decolonizing Description Project at the University of Alberta Libraries (UAL). Within universities and a variety of memory institutions, there has been a shift since the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report (2015). This paper seeks to give those who are interested in this type of work some insight into the processes that have been underway at the UAL, and into ways that this could be replicated within their own institutions.

Truth and Reconciliation in Libraries

The Decolonizing Description Project at the UAL flows from the recommendations of the final report of the DDWG. The work of this group seeks to examine our classification systems and explores new approaches of creating new, more accurate and appropriate subject headings within our classification schemes. It is the emphasis on the *ways* of how to go about investigating more respectful ways of building relationships with Indigenous communities that will make this type of work successful. It is not enough to simply put in additional efforts for "including" Indigenous peoples, but rather to build relationships *with* Indigenous peoples. The release of the Calls to

Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission allows us to reimagine the ways that we work alongside Indigenous peoples. In order to have truly reciprocal and respectful relationships we need to allow as much time and space as is required for this to happen. In the words of Justice Murray Sinclair, "it was education that got us into this, and it will be education that gets us out" (Anderson, 2016). This same sentiment can be applied to the ways that libraries use broad and inappropriate subject headings to identify vast groups of people, such as 'Indians of North America'. Librarian of the past misclassified and misunderstood these seemingly innocuous ramifications, which has led to this erasure and exclusion for future generations of scholars. In order to better understand how best to work with Indigenous communities and knowledge, librarians will need to begin a time of education on these matters.

Decolonizing Description Project Background

As I began my work in my position as an Academic Librarian Resident, with a focus on the Decolonizing Description Project, it became quite apparent that I would need to centre the relationships that UAL already has with Indigenous communities throughout Alberta, as well as with other librarians who had taken on a similar project. To begin, it was critical to reach out to other librarians who have been working with Indigenous knowledge and subject headings. Deborah Lee from the University of Saskatchewan Libraries was one of those people, and she gave me the idea of hosting the Making Meaning Symposium at UAL. Many librarians, scholars and students have been having conversations about the ways that our library classification systems do not correctly represent or reflect Indigenous knowledge, and this makes accessing these resources through the library very difficult. The intention was to gather together many people who would be affected by changes to classifying Indigenous knowledge, and to begin having the necessary first conversations to begin this work.

In recent years, there has been a shift across many libraries and library systems to change the ways that librarianship is practiced, with a greater emphasis on community-based processes. While it is one thing to be able to reach out to and build a greater sense of community among people who already use the library, it is another thing altogether to reach out to those who have traditionally been excluded. This omission and failure to take into account different ways of knowing has been entrenched in library classification systems. This is why relationship-building is a critical aspect of a technical project. It reaffirms that librarians are not experts when it comes to Indigenous knowledge, and that we have much to learn when it comes to the ways that we serve Indigenous communities. In the beginning, it may seem like a significant gap that needs to be bridged, but the payoffs from respectfully moving forward with Indigenous communities will only ever change libraries for the better.

The DDWG was formed in 2016, made of several members of UAL representing different aspects of librarianship. There were people involved in public service, as well as metadata and cataloguing specialists. The DDWG spent a year investigating the ways that descriptive standards can be applied in ways that more accurately and respectfully reflect Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledges. More has been written about the Decolonizing Description Project in other venues (Farnel, Koufogiannakis, Laroque, Bigelow, Carr-Wiggin, Feisst, & Larson, 2018) and the project seeks to continue to build relationships between Indigenous communities and the UAL. By viewing these communities as equal partners within the project, a relationship built upon mutual respect will be beneficial for users of libraries for years to come.

First Steps

There have been many lessons learned in the brief time that the Decolonizing Description Project has been underway. The first and

foremost would be to start with building upon the connections we already have, and to do everything we can to incorporate what has already been done while respecting our relationships. The UAL is in a unique position as a leader in moving forward with these project goals, due to the relationships that it has with affiliated tribal college libraries through the First Nations Information Connection (FNIC) as well as through the NEOS library consortium. Interestingly, NEOS is not only an acronym that can mean Networking Edmonton's Online Systems, but also a nod to the Greek word *neos*, meaning new (NEOS FAQs). It is within these new and connected resources that we hope to be able to continue this work as it gains momentum. Libraries are known for sharing resources, and while we hope to be able to accomplish this with our current partners, there is always potential for expanding our circles and working toward building new partnerships. It is also essential to reflect this type of outwards work for other institutions that would be interested in achieving similar goals within their own unique local contexts.

Integrating Community Knowledge

There are many steps that can be taken for the consultation process for this project. It is best to be able to take the time at the beginning of the project, so that we are going forward with communities in a good way. In thinking about who is included in 'Indigenous community members,' it is important for us to recognize that we have a unique and dynamic Indigenous community on our campus. Many Indigenous people come from a variety of locations, not just across Alberta but from across the world, to study and work here. These Indigenous students, staff and faculty are experts in their own communities, and can have much to teach us about how we can better shape library services with them in mind. The people who are using our library are also experts in the ways that our systems have either helped or hindered their research processes. By spending the time to have more meaningful relationships with these

people, we will also gain a better understanding of the more nuanced ways that classification can be done more meaningfully. In addition, the consultation process will also seek to understand the best term to replace 'Indians of North America' with, and to continue to have this conversation in the future. Relationships are not stuck in time, and neither should the subject headings and classification systems that we use be. By understanding the areas of where we need to make improvements as an institution, we will only ever help our researchers do better work, and with less frustrations. These are the first steps towards creating a more effective working library for Indigenous people, where respect and reciprocity are inherent.

It should also be noted that while UAL are beginning with investigating what the people within our immediate campus community have to say, we will also be looking to bolster our existing relationships with FNIC partners and beyond. Indeed, these partner institutions also represent some of the same communities that our on-campus students come from. If the UAL and University of Alberta more broadly are committing to working with Indigenous communities, then it only makes sense to honour this commitment by being present in communities, wherever that happens to be logistically. These future consultations, whether they appear in a survey format or otherwise, can be embedded as part of the library services that are shared throughout the consortium. Likewise, these future consultations can appear on the library websites and remain up, as a means of ongoing consultation and service improvement. We expect that the number of responses from these surveys will change throughout the year, for example when information literacy classes make the intentions of these surveys known, or when more community visits are conducted. It should also be stated that the intention of these surveys is never going to be to make more work for the institution or individual instructors. Rather, this is part of an ongoing benefit of sharing resources in a consortium environment.

These consultations will be building upon the work that has been started by the Manitoba Archival Information Network (MAIN) in their project to create more accurate archival subject headings. Other institutions have been engaging in similar work, notably the University of British Columbia. Other libraries are at the beginning phases of investigating what this type of project might look like, and there is much to be gained from working together and sharing our processes and lessons learned as we are all seeking to move forward. While we are building relationships at our own institution, it is also critical to build relationships with others who have taken on similar projects. While we are undergoing an education process to understand the ways that we can learn from Indigenous communities, we can also engage in teaching and learning processes from other institutions. This learning goes beyond trying to establish ways of creating new subject headings and extends to shaping engagement and library services as well. This is not to say that efforts lobbying for systematic changes are not welcome in future processes of this project, but rather, a diversity of tactics grounded in local contexts will be the most effective way of creating long-lasting change across the library landscape.

Making Meaning Symposium

In starting the Decolonizing Description Project, it was important to be able to begin this work grounded in and incorporating as many voices of the people who will be most affected by the project. Gathering many people, both who work in communities as well as in libraries, quickly became the best way that we saw to move forward with this project. While at the surface, the Decolonizing Description Project can be seen as a technical, cataloguing project, it is much more than that. The intention of the project is to change the ways that Indigenous knowledge is represented, reflected and respected within libraries. Our social biases have been reflected within classification systems, and we cannot only rely on our technical skills to solve these

social problems that libraries have helped to reinforce in trying to achieve a balance between interests of community members, as well as with the more technical aspects of what will be needed in order to implement this project. Based on the feedback that we have received, it was surprising to see that people were interested in more of the technical details and in really discussing what and more importantly how these changes will be made possible. The time for a project like this has come, and many people within libraries have known about the problems around classification for a long time. The focus now can be on how we will actually implement these changes, and to go forward with community partners.

It was the integration of a sharing circle format that really made the symposium a meaningful event. In a sharing circle, people are given the opportunity to speak in a safe, but open and facilitated discussion. There were three different circles throughout the two days, in order to capture people's thoughts and perceptions throughout the event. We were interested in understanding how people were identifying the communities they come from, including but not limited to an Indigenous identity or occupation-related identity, but also how these perceptions may have changed as the conversations continued. Another aspect that stood out for many people was the Indigenous student/scholar panel on the second day. The chance to hear from students themselves about how subject headings and classification have affected and hindered their academic work was very eye-opening for many people. We are aware that our current subject headings are inadequate, but having an understanding of exactly how they reflect on the academic work of our Indigenous students is very powerful. It is well known in different learning institutions that Indigenous students do not feel supported or reflected, and we can see that lack of representation reflected in every aspect of learning institutions, including in the way we organize information in our libraries.

The next steps of this project will be to continue to have a presence and build a culture of respect and learning in our partner communities. This includes the creation of additional partnerships as well as respecting where these new directions of service may take us. This also involves a great deal of transparency in every step of the way, in order to avoid mistakes such as those that have been created through unequal research relationships in the past. We are also hoping that by seeking to continue all of the conversations that have been started with the Making Meaning Symposium, that we are able to spark interest in a variety of libraries. What works in one particular context might not necessarily work in others, but the intention of creating new, systematic examinations of how we can engage with Indigenous people and knowledges better in the future is something that all memory institutions are being called to do. Gaining momentum within learning institutions such as libraries can only seek to create further change in a variety of institutions, as we will be showing students that new ways of creating change is indeed possible.

Going forward, the relationships that we build with other libraries will also help to bolster the new relationships that we will foster with our existing vendors. Being able to understand the potential problematic subject headings across a variety of local contexts will help us to prevent materials from needing to be reclassified in the future, as will having strong connections with other libraries as we go forward with newer understandings of how we want our classification systems to be. These vendor relationships are also an integral part of how people will be able to interact with materials

within the library, and therefore these relationships will also need to be examined. By creating new workflows and relationships with our vendors, these new workflows will be presented in a more streamlined manner, as integrating Indigenous knowledge into the library becomes a more critical part of what we do.

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