

Melvil Dewey, the father of modern librarianship, was one strange guy. But his classification system is still used in most of the world

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It's tough teaching the Dewey Decimal System. I mean, let's face it, basically it's rather dull stuff. So, the question is, how can one liven it up and manage to wipe that incredibly bored, been-there, done-that, don't-care look off of students' faces? Well, it may not be 100 percent possible, but there is something interesting about the Dewey Decimal System that you can share with students: namely, Melvil Dewey himself.

Dewey was a fascinating blend of genius, reformer, and fanatical philanthropist, and as such caused storms of controversy during his lifetime. He was intense, organized, outspoken, irrepressible, and noticeably eccentric. People who met him either loved his unusual zeal or abhorred his skewed vision, and thus Dewey has been called everything from "the most resourceful librarian in the world" (the *New York Sun*) to a "nauseating slobberer" (H. W. Rosenbaum). "There is much to like and admire about Melvil Dewey," wrote Wayne A. Wiegand in his biography of the man, "but there is equally as much (and perhaps more) to dislike about his character."



Library work was only one of a myriad of odd causes Melvil Dewey was committed to. He considered himself first and foremost to be a reformer and as such tackled anything he thought needed reforming. Unfortunately, many of Dewey's causes died with him, in 1931, but his Decimal System, now more than 125 years old, is still being used in the majority of the world's public and school libraries and is the reason his name is still commonly known.

The World According to Dewey

In order to understand Dewey, it is necessary to know the era he was born into. The year was 1851 and it was an age of scientific discoveries, increased education, and redefined religion. In fact, upper New York State, where Dewey was born, was known as the

"Burned-Over District" because so many religious reform movements had swept through it. These evangelicals, including Dewey's parents, stressed hard work, social responsibility, and education as the preferred route for a meaningful life.

Dewey was very soon caught up in the fervor of his times and that, combined with a rather exacting and determined personality, quickly grew into a force to be reckoned with. Very early on, for example, he catalogued his mother's pantry for better efficiency. He later taught himself shoemaking to save money and studied bookkeeping to help his father manage the accounts of the store he owned.

Dewey also possessed a great passion for learning and by age 13 had saved enough money to buy what he considered "the most essential book"—an unabridged dictionary. All of his life he was to consult a dictionary almost daily in his quest of correct linguistic knowledge. In fact, some 60 years later, a friend wrote that seldom was a meal in the Dewey household "not interrupted by dictionary research. We argued constantly about pronunciation and derivations, and I can still see Dr. Dewey dashing from the dining room, his napkin sailing from his vest, in his search of accuracy in his favorite Funk and Wagnall's unabridged" (Wiegand, p. 328).

By age 15, Dewey had decided on his life's work. He went to town one day and purchased a set of bone cufflinks inscribed with the letter "R" for Reformer. But he had not yet decided what he was going to reform. As he cast his mind about, an opportunity to teach school came his way. He was paid \$1.50 a day to pour out all of his rousing energy, and his pupils apparently enjoyed it, as they all cried when he left (according to Dewey). This success led Dewey to declare that educational reform was to be his life, and with this goal firmly in mind, he set off, in 1870, for Amherst College in Massachusetts.

Eureka! The Dewey Decimal System Is Born

Dewey was an odd duck even by the standards of his day. He said straight out that he did not intend to socialize during his time at Amherst. This was due to his somewhat serious nature and to a lack of pocket money, as he was not from a well-to-do family. (Despite this proclamation, there is evidence that he could not resist squiring girls around and was known to sometimes visit two or three in one night.)

In fact, Dewey began working in the library at Amherst as a way to earn some much-needed money. The inefficient way that books were catalogued and shelved (in the order acquired) bothered his orderly mind, and so with characteristic energy, he threw himself into studying the problem. He visited other libraries, chatted with librarians, studied systems that were currently in use, and read about proposed ones. And then, in Dewey's words, "After months of study, one Sunday during a long sermon [in church]... the solution flasht over me so that I jumpt in my seat and came very near to shouting, 'Eureka!'" (Rider, p. 28).

His idea, of course, was to use decimals to classify all human knowledge, thus marrying the idea of arranging books by subject with the decimal system and creating a method

that could be easily revised and/or expanded as needed. Dewey's idea was inspired but not totally original (though he never admitted it—he meant well, but he possessed a rather large ego). It was actually a compilation of the methods he had been studying, albeit with a new twist.

Dewey spent the next few months feverishly working out the details of his scheme. He convinced Amherst to let him re-classify its library, and then published his system and began to promote it. His goal was not to become famous but rather to have every library use his system so that libraries would become more cohesive and efficient.

Never Waste a Minute!

Libraries and library work remained at the top of Dewey's reform agenda for most of his adult life. But they weren't Dewey's only interest by any means. He developed equal passions for a wide variety of endeavors, including teaching shorthand and promoting the use of bicycles. What these interests all had in common was that they stemmed from Dewey's passion for saving energy and increasing productivity.

This mania for efficiency was driven not only by Dewey's personality and background but by an accident that occurred before he left for Amherst College. Dewey was in school one day when a fire broke out in the building. True to his character, he made repeated trips into the burning school, trying to save as many books as he could. In the process, Dewey inhaled a lot of smoke and within a week developed a deep, persistent cough.

He consulted a local doctor, who predicted that he would probably not live much beyond two years. This announcement had a profound effect on young Dewey (as it would on anyone), and even though he proved the doctor wrong and lived to be 80, from that day onward, Dewey became preoccupied with the effective use of time.

Dewey instilled this fervor in his future wife, Annie Godfrey. When they married, in 1878, they agreed to meet once a month to discuss how best to use their time and energy. They each drew up a list of assignments for self-improvement, including daily admonitions to "eat slowly" and "sing 15 min.," and then would discuss the previous month's achievements and failures (Wiegand, p. 75).

When Dewey eventually became a head librarian, in 1883, he ran his office like a command post. "He wrote notes in different colors from one of five fountain pens he carried in his pocket—each color designated for a particular department under his supervision. He would shove these into pigeonholes that employees were supposed to come and check daily.... It is said that by operating this way, he was able to handle, on average, the 555 pieces of mail that came through his office each day" (Wiegand, p. 192).

Even after he retired from library work, Dewey still looked for ways to increase his efficiency. When he was 72, he began to "use a self-designed pencil with different leads in two workable ends. Switching from one end to another was faster than switching from one pencil to another, he argued" (Wiegand, p. 334).

Tackling the "Ineficiensi" of the English Language

As early as when he began teaching, Dewey chafed at the time and energy wasted on spelling and writing English. He estimated that this "absurd spelling of English... wasted three years of the average schoolchild's life" and decided that English should be reformed so that it was written as it sounded (Wiegand, p. 247).

He began with his own name. Shortly after graduation from Amherst College in 1874, he dropped the "le" from Melville. Five years later, on his 28th birthday, he legally changed the spelling of Dewey to "Dui." The Melvil caught on, but strangely enough (or not) the new spelling of his surname never did.

Dewey also devised a simplified system of words that he was to use for the rest of his life in all his written communication. This sometimes brought him ridicule and scorn but with typical Dewey fortitude, he ignored his critics.

Here are some examples of Dewey's simplified spelling system:

cofi (coffee)

techer (teacher)

unanimusli (unanimously)

weits (weights)

meni (many)

clymat (climate)

eficiensi (efficiency)

posibl (possible)

Dewey's quest for simplicity in English was largely unsuccessful. Though his arguments were sound, the fact is, change in language comes slowly and patience was never one of Dewey's strong points. Instead, he forged ahead, attempting to win over everyone he could to his new way of spelling. Unfortunately, as Fremont Rider wrote in his biography of Dewey, "[His] uncompromising, indeed almost fanatical, devotion to the cause of simplified spelling probably hurt that cause more than it helped."

Dewey, Women, and Library School

Why there are so many women librarians today is usually attributed to Dewey's influence and due, in large part, to his opening of the first professional library school in the world.

Dewey had realized, back when he was at Amherst, that in order for his decimal system to become universally accepted, it must be taught. So when Columbia College hired him in 1883 to become its head librarian, he soon persuaded the college trustees to let him open a library school as well. What Dewey neglected to tell them was that he intended to admit women, which was a problem because, at the time, Columbia College only allowed women to attend a special women's college.

When word spread that Dewey was accepting women into his school, he was swamped with applications. The trustees were furious and refused to let him use any classrooms, but Dewey carried on anyway. He had his students clean up an old, dusty room in the college chapel across the street from the campus and smoothly told the students that the reason for the lack of classroom space was due to the fact that he had not planned for such a large first class. Actually, there were only 20 students, 17 of whom were women. This continued to be the trend as library work rapidly became one of the few careers that an educated woman could successfully pursue in that era.

Dewey was, naturally, unique as a professor. As one student remembers, "For his lectures, Dewey would rush in at the last moment. . . . He would begin almost immediately to pace back and forth and talk at the rate of 180 words per minute (some students actually counted), while students took notes furiously. Occasionally he would stop pacing, turn full square towards the class, draw his six foot frame erect before them, and while tipping his head back, address them by looking down his nose" (Rider, p. 119).

Some students could not abide Dewey's electrifying lectures and quit after only a few weeks. The majority, however, were inspired to admiration and came to align themselves with Dewey's notion that they were pioneers in library history.

Original Optimist or Outrageous Oddball?

By now, you have perhaps realized what an eccentric genius Dewey was. Due to his energetic fervor and single-minded determination, he was able to create the most universally used cataloging system in the world, helped usher in a new profession, successfully ran the first library school in the country, set up America's first traveling libraries, revamped New York's Board of Regents, opened a world-class resort (after his retirement), and much, much more.

But in his zeal to accomplish great things, Dewey often rode rough-shod over others. Thus, with every achievement came a host of problems and a fresh batch of offended officials, as Dewey was never able to curb either his lack of patience or his outspokenness.

He might have accomplished a great deal more if he could have restrained these tendencies, but, then, that would not have been the character that was Melvil Dewey. Despite his faults, he acquired many admirers and even his critics had to admit that "though [Dewey] had as many crank notions as anybody outside of an asylum, he was zealous, inventive, and in many ways useful" (Wiegand, p. 205).

So, now you have had a little dip of Dewey. (Please consult the bibliography for sources if these oddments have piqued your curiosity.) I have included but a tiny bit of the "complex of contradictions" that was contained in the "father of modern librarianship." Hopefully it is enough, however, so that if you share some of these stories with students they might begin to realize that genius comes at a price and also that, just occasionally, there is a librarian who is one....

Author Information

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Dewey by the Numbers

Here are some practical hints and suggestions for weaving the information included in this article into your lesson plans:

1. Introduce the Dewey Decimal System by discussing its origin and the how and whys of its invention rather than the mechanics. I like to begin by saying, "Melvil Dewey (who was not related to Donald Duck) was sitting in church one Sunday, when eureka! he came up with the idea for his Dewey Decimal System."
2. Write one or more of the quotes mentioned in this article on a blackboard (or a whiteboard) so students can read them as they troop in for class. Begin your introduction of the classification system with a discussion of one of these quotes. For example, I like to write "the most resourceful librarian in the world" and "nauseating slobberer" on the board. I find this wakes the kids up a bit and leads to an interesting discussion about geniuses, and the pros and cons of being one.
3. Use visual aids. Although there is plenty of material available on the Dewey Decimal System, unfortunately there is a scarcity of items for sale that portray Dewey the individual. Wayne Wiegand's *Irrepressible Reformer* (see bibliography) includes some excellent photographs, and I recommend photocopying and displaying some of them so that your students can see the image of the man under discussion.
4. Keep copies of the Dewey Decimal System handy (both new and old) and have students attempt to catalog a book or two so that they have an understanding of how the system is set up (plus a sense of what the heck you do when you are not teaching).
5. When explaining the mechanics of how Dewey set up his Decimal System, give a mini-lecture on Dewey's efficiency mania (see the "Never Waste a Minute" section for details). Pass out bookmarks with the 10 categories defined, and then ask students to guess which categories certain books would be shelved in. Start with simple examples, such as France (900s, Geography and History) and progress to harder subjects, like Dancing (300s, Social Sciences). Then throw in a few weird ones, such as cookbooks (600s, Applied Sciences and Technology). This last example illustrates that no one, not even Dewey, can create a perfectly

logical system. (It also encourages students to consult the catalog when in doubt.)

6. At some point, throw in a lesson about the importance of spelling when using the catalog. Starting this lesson with the question "Who hates spelling?" always elicits groans and comments. I also like to have some examples of Dewey's simplified spelling program written on the board. I conclude this lesson by saying that Dewey was largely unsuccessful and that correct spelling is still important in order to successfully locate the books you are looking for.
7. Teach the Dewey way. If students are having a particularly apathetic day, try imitating Dewey's teaching style. It isn't as hard as it seems. When they are seated, rush in and begin pacing all around their tables. Talk just as fast as you can (have one or more students try and count the number of words) and do a lot of gesturing. You can say anything you want but I tend to use this time to throw in the line, "Have you ever noticed that there are more women librarians than men?" and then stop to ask why. After some very interesting responses, I resume my animated style and do some explaining of Dewey's admittance of women into his library school, a very forward-thinking and daring thing to do in his day (and then I get back to explaining the Decimal System).
8. If you give a quiz at the end of teaching the Dewey Decimal System, include a bonus question about Melvil Dewey. You can reward students with extra points, stickers, etc. I like to ask, "How do you spell the name of the man who invented the Decimal System used in most libraries today?" I find it helps to cement the name Dewey in students' minds.

Bibliography Books

Dawe, George Grosvenor.

Melvil Dewey, Seer: Inspirer:

Doer, 1851–1931. New York: Lake Placid Club, 1932.

Rider, Fremont. *Melvil Dewey.* Chicago: American Library

Association, 1944.

Wiegand, Wayne A. *Irrepressible Reformer, Biography of Melvil Dewey.* Chicago: American Library Association, 1996.

Web Sites

Melvil Dewey—Who2, Famous People Web Site www.who2.com/melvildewey.html

This site contains vital statistics as well as four good links to more information about Dewey.

Dewey Decimal Classification Home Page www.oclc.org/fp

The official Dewey Decimal Classification site includes a "Melvil Dewey Biography" section as well as all sorts of information about the DDC.

Dewey, Development, and Diversification
mail.barnard.columbia.edu/~mm848/2ndAHLpaper.htm#