# How to sort a library with genrification

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Genrefication, the process of dividing a library's collection into genres, has been gaining popularity with the library community over the last few years. Genrefication is all about having students spend less time searching for books and having more time enjoying books (Hewitt, 2015). Although making the switch to a genrefied collection can be a daunting task, it ultimately makes the collection more responsive to the needs of students.

I made the move to sort my own collection into genres in 2015 after some exploration and research. One of the first articles I read on the subject was a posting by Library Girl titled "Five more conversations [about school libraries] that I don't want to have anymore" (LaGarde, 2013). Genre shelving was her first listed topic, and she was fairly blunt when she said, "I want to stop having this conversation because in the end, this really isn't a debate. Simply put, we need to remove the secret code that stands between our students and the resources they need and start organizing our spaces based on what's good for kids (not librarians)" (2013). I recall feeling a little stunned. Prior to this, I didn't realize that librarians were having a debate on this issue. In fact, it never occurred to me to consider other ways to organize my collection. At that time, I was just beginning in a new high school library, so I took some time to observe how my students were asking for materials. I noticed that students *did* seem to almost always ask for things by categories. And while the Dewey classification system made it easy to answer a question like "Do you have anything on Ancient Greece?", it was ill-equipped to handle a question like, "Do you have

anything like *The Hunger Games*?"  Maybe there was a better way. My curiosity was piqued, so I decided to investigate a little more.

Transforming the library collection seemed a bit overwhelming, so I decided to begin by considering others who had tried this type of project. This led me to a series of posts on the blog *Mrs. ReaderPants*, by Leigh Collazo, which documented her move to a genrefied collection beginning in 2011. I highly recommend this site for anyone considering genrefying their school collection, as it provides a step-by-step account of a genrefication project from beginning to end. Colazzo takes the time to answer her readers' questions about the process, and presents many legitimate reasons for pursuing genrefication. For instance, in response to the objection that genrefication means getting rid of the Dewey system, Leigh makes it clear that when she refers to genrefication for the school library she is referring, primarily, to sorting the fiction section (Collazo, June 9, 2015). Dewey's classification already sorts non-fiction by category, which is why locating those books on Ancient Greece is a straightforward task. But, over time, the Fiction section of libraries has expanded out of its original place in the 800s, and has become a section of its own. Often, that section is subdivided into Easy and Fiction. Today, as fiction sections have continued to expand, it becomes increasingly difficult for students to locate topics of interest within the fiction section of libraries. Separation by author, while a useful organization piece for librarians, is not an intuitive indicator for students looking for the latest dystopian novel.

This is exactly where genrefication is effective. A further subdivision of the fiction section into genres makes it much more inviting for students looking for books like *The Hunger Games*, or a new mystery, or, "I don't care what I'm reading, as long as it has sports." Instead of wandering

up and down the shelves of fiction, a student interested in sports can head right to the Sports section, and quickly browse books of interest. Genrefication is already seen in many book stores and public libraries. Science fiction and fantasy books are separated out from mysteries which are in turn separated out from romances. As Colazzo points out, nobody going to a grocery store would be happy randomly walking up and down the shelves hoping to find what they need based on who made the food! We are all better served by having the bread in a section separate from the produce (June 11, 2015). As LaGarde notes, shelving by genre teaches students "a life skill, not a library skill" (2013).

All of these arguments made perfect sense to me – I know I almost always gravitate to particular genres when I look for materials at the public library – so it was time to think about how to implement the theory of genrefied shelving in practice. While there are different ways of going about a genrefication project, here are the steps that I took:

1. First, I determined which genres I wanted to have in my library. I started by looking at a few of the books in my collection that would obviously fall into genres, and began to make categories. Eventually I had worked out the following: Realistic Fiction, Historical Fiction, Adventure, Romance, Dystopia, Paranormal Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Mystery, Horror, Sports, and Classics. I also took the opportunity to create a Graphic Novel section and to separate my French novels from my English collection.

2. Cataloguing is done centrally in my division, so I contacted my cataloguing department to ask their opinion regarding the addition of genres to our existing bibliographic records.

They were able to match my categories with genre headings from the Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) Subject Headings.

3. Next, I began assigning genres to each individual book, and adding spine labels to the books to indicate the genre one shelf at a time. Once the first shelf had genre labels attached, I sorted that shelf into the genre categories. Then, I continued this process the second shelf. When that shelf was completed, I added the newly sorted books to the genres categories I had begun on the first shelf. In this way, I created the genre sections as I went. This portion of the project is the most time consuming, as it involved multiple steps:

    a. First each book was assigned a genre. This can be tricky, as some books cross genres. When it seemed obvious, I simply made the call myself and assigned the genre. However, if the genre was less obvious, I would consult Goodreads to see where other users had "shelved" the books. There was usually a very clear preference. If Goodreads proved ambiguous, I consulted other teachers and librarians and went with the majority.

    b. Each book needed a genre sticker attached. I opted to use picture stickers, some of which I obtained from Brodart, and others that I made myself. To make my own genre stickers , I found public domain images online, and used Photoshop to resize them to 1" x 1 ½" and add the genre name. I then printed the pictures on 1" x 1 ½" self-adhesive labels. A more cost-effective option is to denote genres with coloured self-adhesive dots, provided you can find enough colours to represent all of your genres. Another option is to include the genre on the spine labels. An example of

this, using the Fantasy (FAN) novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, would

be:

FAN
FIC
ROW

    c.   As each book was assigned a genre, the catalogue record was amended to include the BISAC subject heading which allowed students to search for a book in the OPAC and find the genre section for that book.

4.   Once all of the fiction books had been assigned genres and the stickers had been attached, I physically separated the books into different sections of the library. The books were already separated into genre sections, so it was a question of where I then wanted to put each section. I chose to locate "Real World" genres, such as Realistic Fiction, Historical Fiction, Romance, and Mysteries, nearer to each other. "Non-Real World" genres, such as Fantasy, Paranormal Romance, and Science Fiction, were shelved nearer to each other.

5.   Finally, I made signage to make it easy for patrons to locate the various genre sections.

During this genrefication process, books would come and go from the library. Any books that were already assigned a genre were simply put back in that genre when they returned. Any books that had not been assigned a genre were assigned a genre prior to re-shelving and were then shelved in their genre sections. While there may be faster methods of genrfying a collection, this method allowed me to work at a pace that matched the time I had available with no disruption to my regular circulation.

It has been two years since I genrified my collection, and I would not consider going back. My students enjoy looking through the various sections, and many will inquire if I have anything

new for a particular genre section. It is also easy for me to identify the types of books students enjoy reading as I watch them browse the stacks, which helps me provide recommendations to students who are looking for something new to read. Additionally, I got to know my collection very well throughout the process of assigning genres! Overall, I found the genrefication process to be a very positive exercise. For those of you considering genre sections for your library collection, I highly encourage you to enter into the process. As Jennifer LaGarde says, "[Y]our students are ready…they are just waiting on you to be" (2013).

References

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