

The Genrefication of an Elementary School Library

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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The genrefication of school libraries has been a topic of much debate in recent years. After observing the staff and student use of an elementary library, the decision was made to undergo the process of genrefication. The intent of the genrefication process was to create a more user-friendly experience for teachers and students who were looking for materials for both education purposes and reading enjoyment.

The Process

To begin, the library had to be closed for a week, and all materials recalled prior to the start date. Several tables were set up in the space and labelled according to 'topics' selected by the division administration. These topics are loosely based on the Dewey Decimal system, beginning with general knowledge, and progressing to sports, arts, social studies and science topics, ending with the ever-popular animal section of the children's library. After an aggressive weeding of materials, each table was labelled with one of these larger themes or topics. All non-fiction was sorted into one of the major categories. This process took about a day and a half. Next, the picture books were evaluated for their curricular value. Any picture book that might be used to teach to an outcome – for example, a picture book about soil – would be moved to that section of the 'non-fiction'. This thinned out the picture book section by almost half. The idea behind this process was that a teacher would be able to walk up to a curricular section of the 'non-fiction' and find any and all

books in the library that support that outcome. Using soil as the example again, a teacher would not need to search the database for books on soil and then gather materials from various parts of the non-fiction and picture book sections, but would just find the “soil” section in the ‘non-fiction’ and take whatever materials were there. Following this blend of material types, this section began to be referred to as ‘topics’, rather than ‘non-fiction’.

Next, the fiction section of the library underwent the genrefication process. Novels were sorted into genres with a logical progression aimed at encouraging students to find books that were in or adjacent to their area of interest. The progression is as follows: Historical Fiction, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Dystopia, Mystery, Action, Humour, and Realistic Fiction. After evaluating the collection, an additional category was created: Urban Fiction. Urban Fiction was added to keep the high-interest low-vocabulary books together for students and teachers to find. Books of popular interest were also given their own category, such as “Sports”, “Animals” and “Fairies”. Specific popular series had their own section, too, including “Geronimo Stilton” and “Diary of a Wimpy Kid”. The threshold for one of these categories was 10 titles or more. A final fiction category, “Early Reader”, was added to be a home for beginning chapter books. Finally, Graphic Novels were removed from non-fiction and given their own category and shelf space.

Once the collection had been evaluated and sorted into genres and topics, the process of labelling each book began. For novels, the author labels on the base of the spine remained in the same place. At the top of each spine, a new label was added to identify which genre the book fit into. The non-fiction and picture books in the ‘topics’ collection had a new, larger label placed over the old one, which listed the category the book belonged

to. In order to provide a simpler browsing experience, some categories were broken down into sub-categories, too. For example, a book about police officers would be under the category “Community” and sub-category “Workers”. The label for the titles belonging to a sub-category would list both the main and sub-category at the base of the book spine, covering the old Dewey label, so the book about police officers would have a spine label that reads “Community – Workers”. Rather than adjusting the call number for each title in the bibliographic holding, a ‘location’ was added to each title, which stated the genre or category to which the book belonged.

Student Reception

With a move from librarian-led book exchanges to teacher-led book exchanges, it was important to make the library as user-friendly as possible for students. Clear labelling on each shelf was put in place to assist students with their book searches. This was designed to reduce the number of questions teachers would face regarding the location of books, as they would be less familiar with the space. Any educational professional that has taken a classroom to the school library has faced numerous students asking questions such as “Where are the puppy books?”, “I want to find the Geronimo Stilton books.” and “I can’t find the ghost stories!” This system was designed to reduce that strain on the teacher, especially with the ongoing loss of librarians across the country. Teachers and students needed to be able to find their own books through clear signage and organization, as a librarian would not always be available.

A survey of senior-grade students revealed that students were mostly pleased with the genrefication. The questions and responses are summarized below:

- 1. On a scale of 1-5, one being the most difficult and five being the most easy, how easy is it to find books in the library now that it is genrefied?** The average student response for this question came to 4.02. Over 85 per cent of respondents selected 4 or 5 out of 5. No respondents selected 1 out of 5. This result demonstrates that, at the very least, students do not find it more difficult to find books in the genrefied library and that most students find it easier.
- 2. On a scale of 1-5, one being the most difficult and five being the most easy, how easy was it to find books of your interest in the library before it was genrefied?** The average student response to this question was 2.63. Over 39 per cent of respondents selected 1 or 2 out of 5. The most popular response was 3 out of 5, which was selected by almost half of the students. In comparison to the first question, this demonstrates a marked improvement in the ease of use of the school library.
- 3. Do you feel that you are more likely to find books that you need for school in the library now that it is genrefied? Ex: non-fiction books on a topic, novels for a book report.** 71 per cent of students selected “More Likely” as the response to this question, and 29 per cent selected “About the Same”, indicating that the ‘topics’ section of the library had improved student use of materials. No students selected “Less Likely”.
- 4. Do you feel that you are more likely to find books to read for enjoyment in the school library now that it is genrefied?** 63 per cent of students responded that they are “More Likely” to find books for reading enjoyment in the library. 32 percent selected “About the Same” and 5 per cent selected “Less Likely”. Most students are

able to track down books for their reading pleasure with as much or more ease in the genrefied library. One possible explanation for the 5 per cent that selected “Less Likely” is that their favourite books have been moved to a new space which caused some difficulty finding their reading material of choice.

- 5. What is your opinion of the genrefied library? Please be honest and give examples. You may want to compare the library as it is now to how it was last year.** Responses to this question were varied, but mostly positive. Students highlight a few positive points: a) being able to find the books that they like due to labelling; b) reminding students of a book store experience; c) a more modern and clean look to the space; and d) helping them explore new genres. Some concerns raised by students included: a) a change in location of a favourite book; and b) being unsure of the correct genre of a book they were searching for.

Overall, students seem to prefer the genrefied library. There has been an increase in circulation amongst the senior grades, which could be due to a number of factors. However, student responses demonstrate that the genrefication of the library is at least one of those factors.

Teacher Reception

While student response to the genrefication is mostly positive, the teacher response is more varied. The intention of genrefication was to lower the number of questions for teachers during a library period, and, more importantly, to make it easier to find materials to support curriculum outcomes. After a year of using the genrefied library, a sampling of teachers answered the following questions:

- 1. How has the genrefication of the library affected your ability to find materials to teach with?** Over a third of teachers responded by saying it is much easier to find library materials that supported their classroom teaching. More than half of teachers found it the same or a little easier to find materials. No teachers found it more difficult to find materials to use with instruction.
- 2. How has the genrefication of the library affected your students' ability to find materials to read for enjoyment?** Around 60 per cent of teachers reported that their students find it “much easier” to find materials to read for enjoyment. The remaining responses were divided between it being the same difficulty or more difficult. Some teachers later cited that they were used to the alphabetical system for fiction and Dewey system for non-fiction, which would explain some difficulty here.
- 3. Do you feel that a genrefied library is the appropriate format for an elementary school library?** Respondents could select ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to respond to this question. Around two thirds of participants selected ‘yes’. Some of the opinions supporting teachers’ responses were clarified with the following question:
- 4. What is your overall impression of the genrefied library?** Teachers were able to write their own short paragraph responses to this question. One teacher stated, “I find it very accessible, visually appealing, and I appreciate the similarity it offers to other bookstores that students frequently visit”. Some noted the organization and ease of use of the genrefied library, while others expressed concern with knowing which genre to search in for particular authors.

5. **Are you better able to answer students' questions about where to find books in the genrefied library?** This question was designed to assess whether student questions about locating books were reduced due to the genrefication. The majority of responses to this yes-no question was 'yes', indicating that one of the main intentions behind the genrefication was successful.
6. **What are your thoughts on the current layout of the library? You may want to compare to previous years.** Teacher respondents wrote a few sentences to answer this question. One teacher wrote "[It is] much easier when you're looking to pull books on the same topic. Easier to find books you need". Responses were mostly positive. One response noted that the genrefication had not "provided an extra surge of reading enthusiasm" in their classroom. This demonstrates that while the genrefication might make materials easier to find, it did not provide an increase in eagerness to read. However, one teacher's response does not make for a universal experience. The genrefication can provide the opportunity for reading incentives, which may promote engagement. Students could try to 'read across the genres' or discover a new genre before the end of the school year. Framed correctly, the genrefication could provide an increase in student engagement with library materials.

As with the students, teacher responses to the genrefication are mostly positive. The main area of concern for teachers appears to be finding author-specific materials, or being able to search within a new system.

Benefits for the Librarian

The genrefied library offers many benefits for the librarian, despite the lengthy process. Once the genrefication process is complete, it offers a view of which non-fiction topics have more materials than other topics. This can aid in purchasing decisions, as it can provide insight as to which topics or subject areas have more materials and therefore do not need to be purchased. The topics that have fewer materials can be the focus of purchasing until the library collection is better rounded. Additionally, the shelving in a genrefied library takes considerably less time, as books in the 'topics' section do not need to be shelved alphabetically. With fiction, novels can be sorted into their genre prior to shelving, breaking the process down into smaller and quicker chunks. Finally, when looking to provide teachers with library materials to support curriculum units, all relevant materials can be found on one shelf. This format provides teachers and librarians with non-fiction and fiction materials to support curriculum in one place.

Overall, the genrefied format has been successful in the elementary school library. While the process at the time appeared arduous, the genrefied system has saved time for anyone looking for teaching materials or reading materials for enjoyment. With the main goal of the library being to "get books into the hands of teachers and students", the genrefied library has created a more user-friendly experience, thereby supporting this objective. Students and teachers can easily find materials that they are looking for, regardless of reading purpose. Despite the collection being smaller, the circulation statistics have grown, and students have the opportunity to being well-rounded readers by reading across the genres.