Energise>>Enthuse>>Inspire

Stuck on Standards

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As I have always had a passion for technology and data, it seemed natural for me to work with metadata. Once I graduated from my Bachelor in Library and Information Management I started looking for work; fortunately for me the Northern Territory Library was looking for a keen person to join the cataloguing team. For the first six months I learned standards, as the daily work of a cataloguer refers to AACR2, MARC21, LCSH and Dewey. As I progressed and became familiar with cataloguing standards I was further extended by Territory Stories, the Northern Territory Library digital repository, being added to my workload. This meant that I had to also be across Dublin Core and extended metadata standards.

After the first year I was able to confidently catalogue items to either the library catalogue or digital repository. I have now been a cataloguing for 2 ½ years and the way these standards enable libraries to share records across different systems always amazes me. I am excited about the coming Resource Description and Access (RDA) standards and what changes it will bring. I am a firm believer in ongoing education, and with standards the opportunities for learning are never ending. I have had a lot of on the job training, mentoring by senior cataloguers and been active within my organisation.

As a new cataloguer I see RDA making changes in cataloguing that make sense. When I was learning AACR2 I would ask why a rule or standard had to be a certain way that did not take advantages of modern catalogues. An example I can think of is the "Main entry" field for a record that is either author or title: this is from the card cataloguing days where a record needed to have a main record and then additional entry points would be "see also" cards. I have never used a card catalogue, so this concept was foreign to me. I am happy that RDA recognises that a record now has multiple access points.

As I have grown in experience I have also been able to bring my own skills in understanding data and technology into the team. The digital repository was still in early stages when I joined and I have been lucky to work closely with the technical team to help develop forms and workflows that allow cataloguers to work effectively and efficiently. My background in databases and reporting has assisted me in communicating the cataloguing metadata needs and knowing what type of changes could be made to the digital repository. Through a joint effort with technical services, changes have been made behind the scenes: one major joint project undertaken was geographical locations index.

In the last two years geographical locations have become a more common consideration when searching for information and this was identified as an area that the digital repository was lacking. This project included both technical services and cataloguing teams. Before any changes to the data within the repository could be made, a lot of background work needed to be done, including looking at the actual terms to be used, standards of their use, and how to handle the metadata.

As with all good cataloguing the thesaurus of terms is the basic building block, and the obvious choice was the existing Northern Territory Place Name Register. This is an excellent resource that provides free access to government approved names of Northern Territory locations as well as alternative and historical names. The next step was to look at the standards around the data: this included much discussion and debate in which many situations had to be considered to develop a set of standards. A sample of questions was regarding what to do with: unknown locations? Inter-state locations? Identical place names? And these were the easy questions!

Fortunately, before this project there had been an informal policy that metadata relating to geographical locations would be added as a free text subject. This allowed me to quickly pull together existing subjects and request changes as a system wide approach. By using the standards that had been decided on I was able to make quick decisions about what was the correct term to be used and bring together place names that

had previously been fractured – there were five different variations of the location "Darwin." As with all changes that are made to standards, this was always done to improve search ability and navigation for clients and staff members. This project gave me a much higher appreciation for work done by committees to create such extensive and international standards such as AACR2 and RDA.

My own philosophy towards cataloguing is that by looking at a record in the catalogue a user will be able to make a quick decision if the item is the material they need or not. While cataloguing is not thought of as an exciting place within the library world, I would have to argue that it is an area that is facing the most change and innovation in the next five years, and that makes it a great area for a graduate who is interested in the future of libraries. Standards play an important role in libraries: they bring together information and allow both the public and library professionals to access the knowledge that is contained within the library. The structured information of the catalogue allows for new ideas to be applied to searching, and as libraries move to forward looking interfaces, like the National Library's Trove, it is important to create that structure by applying the cataloguing standards.

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