Identifying a Problem

It was early March 2008, and I was only a few months from finishing my third year as an elementary school librarian. During the morning recess the school library was humming with the sounds of students. Suddenly, three students rushed in asking me to help them find a silent-reading book for class. Looking at the clock and seeing the bell was about to ring any second, I told them I could, but we’d need to look up some choices on the computer and then we would be late to class. We could find lots of choices at the next recess.

“Never mind, we’ll get something in class. We can’t wait.”

Sound familiar? After nearly three years of watching my students’ disappointment when I told them that the best way to find a book was by using a computer, I decided enough was enough. Something had to change, especially since many students left the school library without a book because they were frustrated by the system.

It didn’t matter that I had devoted numerous lessons on how to use our OPAC or shown students read-alike websites that could aid them in finding another book. Those lessons seemed to work only for the students who were avid readers who had the tenacity to find anything they wanted. The kids I was losing were the reluctant readers. These kids would read if the process of finding a book wasn’t a struggle. Using the computer involved too many steps and significant frustration. If I couldn’t help them right when they needed me, they typically left without a book. When I asked them why, their answer was simple. Their classrooms had mini-libraries where...
the chapter books were arranged in tubs and sorted by genre. Teachers had an efficient system in place. Memories of my own former classroom library merged with the thoughts of rearranging the school library, and an idea began to emerge.

**Researching and Planning**

What if the fiction books were shelved by genre? Bookstores and classroom libraries are arranged by genre. Why should it be harder for students to find a book in a library than it is in a bookstore? Why not take this successful model and apply it to a school library? Wouldn’t arranging by genre make it easier for students to find the books they like and then read more?

These essential questions guided my research. In 2008 not many people were talking about genre shelving, especially at the elementary level. However, the idea wasn’t as revolutionary as I thought. In a study of young adult fiction in public libraries, researchers found supporting evidence for genre shelving that dated to 1902 (Rohde, Hoey, and Chamberlain 1998). In the early 1930s the book *How to Run a Rental Library* specified the importance of dividing new fiction, detection, westerns, and adventure books on separate shelves (Conklin 1934). A study of a California junior high library showed that 88 percent of the
students found the genre system less complicated than a traditional arrangement (Briggs 1973).

With data in hand, I knew the next step at my school required the endorsement of our principal. He had just one question: “Will it be good for kids?” After hearing my reasoning and seeing the research, he gave me his blessing. By this time it was late April. Should we convert now or wait until the summer and open with the new system in the fall? Figuring I had nothing to lose and everything to gain, we took the leap with only two months of school left in the year.

Taking Action

Creating Categories

My library assistant and I identified eleven categories we would use: fantasy, science fiction, adventure/action, mystery, horror/spooky, sports, realistic, animal fiction, humor, graphics, and classics. In bookstores I had also seen romance, thrillers, and westerns, but those were more appropriate for middle and high school. In the end, we chose genres that most closely matched our collection and the age level of our students.

Weeding and Categorizing

The next step was to separate the books. Every book came off the shelf and was categorized immediately by genre. Any book with a genre sticker already provided the foundation for our groups. Unmarked books were set aside. Piles of books covered all the spare space we could find. We also used this opportunity to weed the collection of damaged, obsolete, or unused books. We were ruthless. There was no point in converting the school library if the shelves were packed with books nobody wanted to read. Anything that looked dated or had yellowed pages was immediately culled from the collection. The only exceptions were old Newbery Medal winners. These were saved for our classics shelf. We also identified genres in which the selection was limited and made order lists for new books.

Labeling Books

Then we dealt with the remaining unmarked books one by one. If neither of us had read the book, we looked at the MARC record or online reviews to find the main category for the book. Students helped too. Often they had read the book and could make a suggestion. With any books that could have dual classification, I chose the genre that dominated and best matched our collection. We originally labeled our books with commercial genre stickers on the spine. This year I shifted to a color system using a transparent colored sticker over the call number indicating the genre category. This method is less expensive than using commercial stickers, helps with reading shelves, and allows books to be genre labeled less obviously.

Placing Categories

After labeling, it was time to put books back on the shelves. We used bookstore merchandising display strategies for genre placement. We wanted to create a comfortable space where students would want to linger and look around the shelves.
Fantasy, our genre with the highest circulation, was located on the best frontline shelves. We deliberately positioned adjacent shelves to lure students to different, yet related, genres. For example, animal fiction was situated on one side of fantasy and adventure/action on the other. Each genre built upon the next to minimize the negative effects of low traffic areas in the library. Bright, colorful signs were added to draw the students to the books. Tiffany Whitehead, a middle school librarian in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, has created a set of Creative Commons color-coded genre signs that are available on Flickr for use by librarians (<www.flickr.com/photos/49483751@N02/sets/72157631128222632>).

**Updating OPAC**

Genre shelving doesn’t mean disregarding computer searches. We wanted a dual system where anyone could search via the OPAC or by browsing the stacks. To keep it simple, we added a genre abbreviation to the end of the call number. For example, the book *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen was given the call number “F PAU ADV,” indicating this book could be found alphabetically on the adventure shelf. Because we did a mid-year conversion and needed to work quickly, we put the books back on the shelf before we altered the call numbers in our catalog. Then after the shelves were organized, we changed the catalog records. Trained volunteers helped us complete the process by the end of the school year.

**Enjoying the Results**

Students loved the new system from the beginning due to its intuitive nature. Conversations about books mingled at genre sections. “It’s amazing how the kids just come right in and walk to their favorite area.” high school librarian Susan Gregerson shared in an e-mail. In the first full year of implementation, our circulations rose from 2,599 to 4,996 books per year, representing a 92 percent increase. In the same year, third- and fourth-graders meeting the standard in our state’s reading test rose by 20 percent and 24 percent respectively. By the end of our fourth year with the genre system, annual circulation had increased to 12,117 books, representing a cumulative 366 percent increase from inception.

Conversion to genre shelving doesn’t have to be all or nothing. Starting with one genre and systematically rotating through them works just as well. Whatever method you use, the results will astound you. As fifth-grade teacher Judy Higgins told me, “I don’t need a classroom library anymore. My kids can get everything they want in the library now.”

Looking ahead, I have no current plans to change the arrangement of the whole nonfiction section. (I’m concerned about the possibility of exchanging one set of problems for another.) However, I would like to increase readership of nonfiction books suitable for our youngest, newest readers. One of the items on my to-do list is to explore options for helping emerging readers easily find nonfiction tailored just for them. If I find an effective method, I’ll let you know via AASLForum!

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**Works Cited:**


