The seeds for the theme of this issue began in June 2012 during the Sunday AASL Affiliate Assembly meeting at ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California. The delegates from the affiliated state organizations were deliberating and voting on Statements of Concern. These concerns are taken seriously as those approved by the Affiliate Assembly are sent to the AASL Executive Board, which must take action and report back to the AASL Affiliate Assembly, detailing what was done.

No one expected the Statement of Concern first brought by the Kansas Association of School Librarians (KASL) to result in an issue of Knowledge Quest. In her article in this issue, Juanita Jameson (at the time, president of KASL and one of its delegates) gives more of the background on how the issue came to the floor of the Affiliate Assembly. What happened next—and how I became the guest editor for this issue—is a story in itself.

When the Statement of Concern reached the AASL Executive Committee the decision was made to add to the schedule for ALA Midwinter in Seattle a “Hot Topics” program on “genre-fying” a collection. Six panelists, all of whom have articles in this issue, presented on the subject, taking pro, con, and middle-of-the-road views. I was asked by AASL’s president at the time, Susan Ballard, to be the moderator. The room was packed with people in every seat, people standing—and some finding seats on the floor.

The discussion at the end brought forth from the audience additional strong views. A number of those voices are included here as well. With that much emotion, it was obvious that the topic needed greater and more widespread coverage and discussion. The result was the decision to devote an issue of Knowledge Quest to this theme. As the “impartial” voice, I was asked to be the guest editor.

A Personal Perspective

My personal experience with genre-fying began many years ago. At the time, I worked in a high school library with a sizable collection, including at least five thousand fiction titles. As a reader, I had little difficulty finding something of interest to borrow. I could always look for my favorite authors or seek out a recommended title. Sometimes I would choose a book that was on the best-seller list. Browsing was an enjoyable pastime. Because of my personal inclinations, I would scan the shelves for a thick book and then read the blurb to see if it was a likely choice. I

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admit, unless I was searching for something specific, I would generally survey the three shelves within my eye range, rarely looking upward or downward.

I began wondering how my students who were less devoted to reading as a leisure activity would fare when trying to find something to read for a book report. I discovered that, other than trying to find a thin book, students didn’t know how to approach the collection, which they found daunting. Its size defeated its purpose of encouraging them to read. What I saw as a treasure trove, they found overwhelming. I realized I needed to do something different.

Although I had weeded the fiction collection, a challenging task in many ways, I saw that too many books looked dusty. Most of these were the classics you do not discard. So my first venture into genre-fying was to remove all classics and shelve them separately, putting a “C” above the spine label and adding the designation to the records so the books could be found. I suggested the classics collection as a source to check before going on a college interview. The move immediately made our fiction shelves look much better.

New books and graphic novels were already being shelved separately. I decided to go with my students’ favorite genres: fantasy and science fiction. At first I was going to make them two separate areas but, after discussing the issue with students, I kept it as a single designation. Instant hit. Mysteries were the next to be genre-fied. By tackling the task one genre at a time, I kept the job from being overwhelming and was able to assess the response before committing more time and effort. I even wrote an article about the process for the November 1997 issue of my newsletter, School Librarian’s Workshop.

Even though the small reclassification was successful, I never even considered doing the same with the nonfiction collection. Despite anomalies, the Dewey Decimal Classification system seemed to me to be logical and efficient. As this issue more than demonstrates, librarians have a wealth of opinions on all sides of the topic.

What Should You Do?

Is it a good idea to “genre-fy” your collection? Should you consider it only for fiction? Has the Dewey Decimal Classification system run its course, no longer relevant in the twenty-first century? Or is it still the best alternative? These are important questions for school librarians (and public librarians as well). You will have to come to a decision that will best meet the needs of your users.

This issue will help you determine your future course. Read what practitioners have done and why. Compare the opinions of those who take positions that are polar opposites. Consider some of the middle-of-the-road options. Talk with your colleagues—and your students. Then decide.

Hilda K. Weisburg is the editor of School Librarian’s Workshop, a bimonthly e-newsletter for K–12 librarians. Starting in November, she will teach a six-week e-course for ALA Editions titled “Being Indispensable: A School Librarian’s Guide to Proving Your Value and Keeping Your Job.” Her first YA fantasy, Woven through Time, was published in October by Vermillion Pencil Press, an imprint of Grey Gate Media. She is a member of AASL, a delegate to the AASL Affiliate Assembly from the New Jersey Association of School Librarians, a member of the ALA Committee on Literacy, and chair of the AASL Advocacy Committee.

Work Cited: