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THREE

Weeding

What Is Weeding?

Many people have difficulty throwing anything away. Librarians are no exception. Most librarians will agree that it is sometimes necessary to remove items from a collection, but that does not make the task any easier. Weeding is an essential but often overlooked aspect of collection development. It is essential because it helps to improve access to a library's resources. Every library has a finite amount of space that can be used to house its resources. Library collections should always be evolving to reflect changes in the information needs of its users and changes in the information itself. Weeding affords librarians the opportunity to reevaluate their collections

Weeding is sometimes thought of as selection in reverse because it removes resources from the collection when they are no longer useful. It involves evaluation of the collection in order to determine which resources need to be removed from the collection. This process has been described as retirement, pruning, reverse selection, deselection, relegation, and discarding. Since all of these terms have negative connotations, it is sometimes difficult to convince administrators and users that this is an important function, especially since some collection evaluation standards are based on the total number of items in the library rather than quality or relevancy. We need a more positive term to describe this process because it is an essential

aspect of collection management. One suggestion is to try the term used by the Washington Library Media Association. They call it *collection renewal*. Another suggestion is the term *collection reevaluation*. Both of these are more proactive and positive concepts. They imply management, professionalism, and decision making.

No matter what we choose to call it, a good working definition is important. One definition is the process of removing materials from a collection to another location. That location does not necessarily mean a trash can, but it could be a secondary storage site, another library or institution, or a book sale. No matter what kind of secondary site is chosen for the disposal of the material, that material is no longer immediately accessible to users.

Stueart makes the point that weeding and discarding are sometimes used interchangeably, but in fact are not synonymous.¹ According to the definition given, storage is an optional aspect of weeding. Storing enables the library to retain the material but at a second level of access usually not open to the public. It serves as an interim solution because libraries have a finite amount of storage space.

Now that we have a working definition, it is time to take the next step. The professional literature about weeding stresses the importance of planning so that decisions are based on facts, not whims or hunches. Before any program is implemented, the library's goals need to be reevaluated to ensure that the materials being weeded will be those that are no longer relevant to the library's collection.

Evaluation of Policy and Goals

Collection reevaluation (weeding), though essential, can be one of the most controversial aspects of collection development. Formulation and adoption of policy are a necessity. The new standards for school library media centers as set forth in *Information Power* address the importance of policy formulation in collection development. "All schools must have a collection

development plan that addresses their collection needs and includes such specific steps as school and community analysis, policy development, selection, acquisition, weeding, and evaluation.”² Note that weeding is seen here as an important aspect of collection development. Unfortunately, this statement does not appear in the revised version published in 1998. The new version simply reads “The collections of the library media program are developed and evaluated collaboratively to support the school’s curriculum and to meet the diverse learning needs of students.”³ There is no mention of policy with regard to collection development anywhere in this new document. This is a serious oversight. Selection of materials and weeding are similar activities; they require the same kinds of decision making. The key concepts in collection development, just as in collection analysis, are management and planning.

In establishing a weeding program, Stueart cautions, “to reduce the hazards implicit in weeding, three essential steps should be included in the initial planning process: (1) analysis of needs, (2) analysis of options, and (3) determination of what is feasible.”⁴ His article, despite its date of publication, presents a comprehensive overview of the topic and addresses many of the most common concerns about the process, such as reasons for weeding, for example, redundancy in the collection; shifts in goals and emphases of the library; physical deterioration or obsolescence of materials; and, the need for space. He also discusses several points that need to be considered in developing a weeding strategy, such as cost, politics, the availability of storage, and cooperative agreements. To this list we now need to add electronic access. With the emergence of the Internet, many resources are available to us beyond the physical confines of our libraries. We also have a wide array of electronic formats. Access now has a much broader scope than ever before. To avoid problems, there is much to consider, such as checking to see if there are any local constraints, regulations, or statutes that might affect your weeding program or laws that might prohibit the sale of books.

Phyllis Van Orden raises some interesting points for consideration in developing a policy for reevaluating items in your

collections to determine which items should be repaired, replaced, or removed.⁵

1. What will happen if someone needs the materials that have been removed?
2. How can we provide a replacement policy to assure that a decrease in numbers of items held will not lead to a budget cut?
3. What will the source of funding be for the cost of the reevaluation if additional personnel are needed?
4. How will the transfer or disposal of materials and equipment be handled?

By considering these and other factors, you can form or review your collection development policies and goals. After a policy is in place, you must translate it into action. Most of us are not able to go through our collections from one end to the other, so it is useful to consider other strategies. Oftentimes we have space problems in a specific area of our collection or subjects have been added to or deleted from the curriculum. Then it is useful to identify priorities or areas of immediate need to establish a schedule for weeding. It is important to consider what is feasible with the staff available, the structure of the weeding program, and the establishment of a timetable. We need to decide whether or not we will opt for continuous weeding as materials are returned, or intermittent weeding throughout the year, or occasional weeding as part of a day or for a whole day. Unless we make time for it, it will not get done.

In Defense of Weeding

Weeding is one aspect of collection development, and a natural follow-up to collection evaluation. Weeding occurs when materials no longer appropriate for a collection are removed from it. While many librarians and media specialists acknowledge the need for and value of weeding, parents, teachers, and administrators and other users do not always understand. The following reasons for weeding can both stimulate the professional's own thinking and can explain weeding to others.

There are a number of reasons why librarians should remove materials from the shelves of their collection. They include rapidly growing collections combined with a shortage of space, the high costs of maintaining and adding shelving space, the need to maintain both accuracy and currency in information, the need to improve access to information for users, and the problems created by physical damage to the materials.

An incredible amount of resources are available in print and electronic formats. Even with the self-imposed limitations on the numbers and types of items obtained because of budget constraints, most libraries are still accumulating materials at a rapid rate. This means that more and more items are being added to library collections. Each item needs to be cataloged and shelved, and each takes up space.

Space can soon become a severely limiting factor. Every inch of shelving and storage space costs money, not only to build and put into place, but also to maintain. Buildings are not easily expanded, and there are only so many clever compact-shelving ideas available. All options generally cost money.

We have a professional responsibility to provide our users with the best resources possible. Any resource that does not include the most recent information is not likely to be of value to our users. At best, it is simply not useful; at worst it is dangerously false.

Further, as collections grow and new resources become interspersed with older ones, the ability of the users to locate the best source possible becomes increasingly limited. Many users do not have the patience to wade through too many inaccurate or outdated materials to locate the one valuable resource. Removal of the obsolete material makes it easier and quicker for the user to locate what he or she needs. Most people take the path of least resistance and do not expend a lot of energy looking.

Information in some materials may be inaccurate or dangerous, perpetuate stereotypes, or somehow contain misinformation. Too frequently, biographies for children have errors, as Moore shows clearly in her article.⁶ Some science-fair books instruct children to build a volcano using matches instead of baking soda and vinegar. Chemistry books may advocate dangerous

experiments. Some books do stereotype minorities, women, the aged, or other groups in ways that are clearly inappropriate. The media specialist or librarian can justify removing these materials.

Some of the materials in a library collection, either through normal usage or borrower carelessness, become damaged. They may be dropped in a mud puddle, chewed by the dog, or colored by helpful hands. Pages may be torn or missing; the binding may no longer hold the book together; the cover may fall off. The VCR (videocassette recorder) may mangle a videotape; a CD-ROM may become badly scratched, etc. The types and causes of damage are many and varied. Some items can be repaired. Others may need to be weeded.

Library users and their needs change. Changes in technology have rendered some formats, such as filmstrips, obsolete. Therefore, a library collection must also change if it is to continue to meet the needs of its users. Some of this can be accomplished by purchasing new items. But it is also helpful to remove items that are no longer pertinent.

As materials are removed from the collection, there can be a number of positive outcomes. For example, weeding can relieve overcrowding and make space available for new acquisitions. Access to the remaining materials can be greatly improved because it is easier to find an item if there are fewer materials to search. Often, the weeded collection will become more physically attractive. As its appearance improves, users may begin to have more respect for items in the collection and therefore treat them more carefully.

The number of items in a collection by itself is not a good indicator of its quality. Other factors, such as age, currency, and accuracy of the content of items in the collection must be considered. At the same time, standards and regulations may rely on collection size as an indication of quality. Weeding the collection helps decrease reliance on numbers alone, and can improve the overall collection by removing substandard items.

Weeding can be cost-effective. There are continuing costs associated with maintaining a library collection. Besides the ordinary costs of heating, cooling, and so forth, there are spe-

cific activities associated with the collection. Shelves must be read to keep materials in the proper order. Items must be dusted and kept clean. All materials should be inventoried regularly. The public access catalog and an inventory must be maintained. It is a drain on library resources to perform these activities for items that no longer belong in the collection.

As technology improves and becomes more affordable, most libraries have converted to online catalogs and circulation systems. It is not efficient to spend time and money entering materials into the new system when those items no longer belong in the collection. Therefore, weeding should be done before automating the library or media center.

Barriers to Weeding

In weeding, the same steps that placed materials on the shelves are performed in reverse. It is a time-consuming effort. Our professional literature is filled with reasons, rationalizations, and excuses for why we do not weed our collections. The following are the reasons most frequently cited.

1. *I am too busy. I have no time to weed.*

We would find the time if we knew how much it costs us to house an obsolete item.

2. *Books are sacred.*

We have emotional and intellectual blocks against removing books from a collection. Many of us consider books to be valuable records of our human heritage. Removing them becomes painful.

3. *A book might be needed by someone at some time in the future.*

This is rare. It is much more likely that you will be asked for a book that you never acquired. Few libraries, even the large research libraries, can afford to house a book until sometime in the future when someone shows up to use it. A more realistic ap-

proach is to consider cooperation and networking with other libraries. Make agreements about what will be collected and kept by whom.

4. *Numbers are considered a criterion of the quality of a library.*

We are forced to play a numbers game and include obsolete items in the official count. Unfortunately, quantity is no indication of quality. A good library is not necessarily a big library.

5. *I hate to admit that I made a mistake in selecting this item.*

So what? Because selection is not based on scientific formulas or objective measurements, but rather on the librarian's judgment of resources and people, every librarian has probably made some mistakes. There were all sorts of variables at work when that item was selected, i.e., how much money you had, interest in the subject at that time, availability of other titles on the same subject, etc. You can sharpen your judgment by experience and training, but you can never make it infallible.

6. *Weeding is just willful destruction of public property.*

No, it is a very constructive process, as outlined in the next section.

General Guidelines for Weeding

Given that weeding is an integral part of collection development, decisions on whether to retain or remove an item must be made on an individual basis. There is no easy-to-follow rule or set of rules to use in making each decision. Instead, each librarian or media specialist must apply professional judgment and a thorough knowledge of the user community when weeding the collection. However, there are some general guidelines that may be helpful.

The physical condition of an item may be reason for removal. It may be so battered, torn, dirty, or damaged that it is not worth the time and effort needed to recondition it. Small print, missing pages, or any damage to or obsolescence of electronic formats are indicators for removal.

Duplicate copies can be justified for items that are in great demand. As use declines, the extra copies can become candidates for weeding. Other changes in user needs, such as curriculum revisions and changes in the demographics of the user population, can result in decreased use of some items in the collection. If Latin has not been taught in a school for the last twenty years, does its media center still need thirty titles in Latin?

With time, the utility of some items decreases, and it may be appropriate to remove them from the collection. It is reasonable to question the value of a set of encyclopedias published in 1953. Published guidelines, such as those in Van Orden's book, are available, which suggest appropriate ages or circulation data for weeding different subject areas and various types of materials.⁷ For other items, the content may be superseded by newer editions or recent developments, in addition to the general age guidelines. If a new edition is published, does the collection really need two earlier editions? There are some fields, such as space flight, which change very rapidly. Older titles in these areas should be checked for obsolescence and removed when they become dated.

There are materials in any library collection that do not belong there. Some items are not being used, either in or out of the library. The library users may have changed. If the media center originally served kindergarten through sixth grade, but now the users are primary-grade children, then many books on the fifth- and sixth-grade reading levels may no longer be needed. The demographics of the community might have changed and the collection does not reflect this new cultural diversity. There may be unsolicited gifts in the collection that do not meet the criteria in the selection policy. Some items may have been acquired through mistakes in selection. Any

materials that are inappropriate for a particular collection are candidates for removal.

For some items, initial purchase is justified. These include the local newspapers and magazines of special interest to users. But if these are not indexed, there is little need to keep many back issues. Without access, information in these items is almost impossible to locate. So it is better to use available storage for magazines, newspapers, and other items where it is possible to find specific articles or other content easily.

General Guidelines for Retention

The comments given above are intended as general guidelines only. The professional judgment of the librarian or media specialist must be used throughout the entire procedure. When a decision is made about removing an item, that decision may be guided by the rules of thumb given here. But the librarian's personal experience, knowledge of availability of resources in a wide variety of formats, access to information resources, and familiarity with the users are also vitally important.

Just as there are some materials that should be weeded, there are some items that should be retained in a collection, such as items that are still being used by a particular user or user group. One book, for instance, may be especially adept at introducing children to an idea or stimulating discussion. That title is important to the adults who continue to use it with children. When useful items are identified, and if they are out of print or otherwise unavailable, they probably should not be discarded. In this case, even older or worn titles may need to be retained.

It is important to be aware of the overall balance of the collection. If removing materials would impair collection coverage in a particular subject area, it may be better to retain the items. Sometimes it is possible to have certain titles rebound. Other repairs may help extend the life of certain materials.

In general, the classics have a place in children's collections. Unless a newer, more attractive edition is available, those titles

should be kept. Also, within the bounds of professional judgment, it may be valuable to retain items listed in a current edition of a standard bibliography for a particular library.

Some materials are of special interest to an individual library. These may include titles about local or state history or peripheral items pertinent to individuals or groups in the community. Local publications, such as school yearbooks, can be of interest. These items can be difficult or impossible to replace, and are often of continuing interest or importance. They should be retained in the collection, unless they are available elsewhere in the community. (For example, newspapers often keep their own back files of publications.)

Some items may be of interest to a particular library. For instance, a prominent local author may present autographed copies of his books to the library. Titles purchased with memorial funds may fall into this category. There may be an occasional rare book. These items may need to be retained. If such an item is identified it may be helpful to prominently stamp it, "Do not discard."

There are no ironclad rules for weeding. There are only general guidelines to help the librarian or media specialist apply professional judgment. A very helpful resource called *Sunlink: Weed of the Month Club* has been developed by the Florida Department of Education School Library Media Services Office. *SUNLINK Weed of the Month Club* maintains a website to help media specialists and librarians weed their collections.⁸ Monthly topics are identified for consideration, and specific criteria and considerations for each topic are listed, along with titles recommended for weeding and titles recommended for use. The current topic (September 2001) is conflict management. These topics are still available through their website: immigration, civil rights, poetry, nutrition, science experiments, curiosities and wonders, tobacco education, Cuba, drug and alcohol education, transportation, black history, music, hobbies and crafts, weather, professional collections, vocational trades, personal finance, maps and atlases, sports, holidays, geography, fiction, computer science, folktales, biography, cookery, dinosaurs, diseases, careers, Europe, Africa, Native Americans, and space and astronomy. It is an invaluable resource.

How to Discard Library Materials

Once you have actually removed items from your collection, you are faced with having to get rid of them. This can sometimes be a ticklish situation, and horror stories abound concerning discarded items that return to flaunt their original owners. You need to develop a plan based on your own situation. The following list of methods that have been tried comes from Iowa's Department of Public Instruction:⁹

1. Bag and tag for destruction.
2. Put a few in each waste basket every day.
3. Take them to the dump.
4. Take them to another community's dump.
5. Tear or break them up and put them in a waste basket.
6. Offer them to a charity book sale—many such groups now sell magazines, records, etc., as well as books.
7. Have a white elephant sale.
8. Offer other libraries or other agencies in the community an opportunity to select anything they can use.
9. Box and send them to the superintendent.
10. Store them until they are forgotten.

Another recent suggestion is to sell them on the Internet on Ebay. Before doing so, check out the legal implications. You also need to make sure that you are not selling something that has become highly collectible. If you still want to sell it, make sure you get fair market value for it.

The same publication offers some important points to consider when selecting a method.¹⁰ (Note: These points are applicable to most libraries.)

1. The method(s) selected should be in harmony with school policy.
2. The school district selection policy should specifically assign responsibility for discarding library materials and equipment to the library media specialists, including responsibility to determine intrinsic worth.
3. The school district should use established depreciation tables for library materials and equipment. Such tables

also help justify discarding materials and equipment purchased with general funds.

4. All items not destroyed should have all identifying marks removed or be clearly marked as discarded.
5. Library materials in classrooms need to be weeded too. The classroom should not become a dump. If older items such as sets of encyclopedias are placed in the classrooms they should be discarded after a specified time, such as ten years.
6. If major weeding is to be done, the school and community should be prepared and advised that regular weeding in the future will be at a more sedate pace.

The comments made about classrooms in point 5 are especially relevant to school media specialists. If teachers have large personal collections of resources in their classrooms, they may be hesitant to allow students to visit the media center.

This final point is an important one. It is imperative to win weeding supporters in order to avoid a public relations nightmare such as the one that happened at the San Francisco Public Library, when more than 100,000 volumes were discarded at one time. The mistake was timing. Weeding is a process that should be done gradually and continuously.¹¹

The methods outlined are for your consideration. Each situation is unique. As professionals, you will be able to plan and implement the most effective weeding program for your library. The bottom line is just to take the time and do it. No matter what method you select, do not let your actions cause problems for someone else. Be considerate and be aware that your discards may be offensive to or unwanted by others.

And one final thought on the subject . . . one of the most interesting reasons given for weeding was that it burns calories. Think about the implications.

NOTES

1. Robert D. Stueart, "Weeding of Library Materials—Politics and Policies," in *Collection Management* 7 (summer 1985): 48.

2. American Association of School Librarians and Association for Educational Communications and Technology, *Information Power* (Chicago: American Library Association; Washington, D.C.: Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1988), 73.

3. ———, *Information Power* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1998), 90.

4. Stueart, 48.

5. Phyllis J. Van Orden, *The Collection Program in Schools*, 2nd ed. (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1995), 242.

6. Ann W. Moore, "A Question of Accuracy: Errors in Children's Biographies," *School Library Journal* (February 1985): 34-35.

7. Van Orden, *ibid.*

8. See <http://www.sunlink.ucf.edu/weed>

9. Betty Jo Buckingham, *Weeding the Library Media Center Collections* (Des Moines: State of Iowa, Department of Public Instruction, 1984), 15.

10. *Ibid.*, 15.

11. Will Manley, "S.F.P.L. Blues," *American Libraries* (December 1996): 96.

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Buckingham, Betty Jo. Revised by Barbara Safford. *Weeding the Library Media Center Collections*. 2nd ed. Des Moines: State of Iowa, Department of Education, 1994. <http://www.iema-ia.org/IEMA209.html> (February 2001).

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Kniffel, Leonard. "Criticism Follows Hoopla at New San Francisco Library." *American Libraries* (August 1996): 12-13.

Manley, Will. "S.F.P.L. Blues." *American Libraries* (December 1996): 96.

Manning, Pat, and Alan R. Newman. "Safety Isn't Always First: A Disturbing Look at Chemistry Books." *School Library Journal* (October 1986): 99-102.

Miller, J. Wesley. "Throwing Out Belles Lettres with the Bathwater." *American Libraries* (June 1984): 384-85.

Eloquently makes the point that librarians need to be familiar with their community and collections to avoid weeding materials that should be retained.

Moore, Ann W. "A Question of Accuracy: Errors in Children's Biographies." *School Library Journal* (February 1985): 34-35.

Identifies specific examples of errors that fall into three categories—mistakes on items (e.g., dates) that could be easily checked; errors caused by attempts to simplify content; and “patently false, incorrect information.”

Stueart, Robert D. “Weeding of Library Materials—Politics and Policies.” *Collection Management* (summer 1985): 47-58.

Van Orden, Phyllis. *The Collection Program in Schools: Concepts, Practices, and Information Sources*. 2nd ed. Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1995.

WEBSITES FOR WEEDING

www.iema-ia.org/IEMA209.html

Weeding the Library Media Center Collections, 2nd edition, from the State of Iowa Department of Education, by Betty Jo Buckingham. Revised by Barbara Safford.

Includes the why, when, and how of weeding. Both subjective and objective weeding. Procedures. Guidelines for each Dewey class. How to discard.

www.sldirectory.com/libsf/resf/coldev2.html

General site on collection development with links to other sites; includes a section of links for weeding.

www.sunlink.ucf.edu/weed

Homepage for SUNLINK Weed of the Month Club.

www.doe.state.la.us/doe/publications/bulletins/1134/append_i.htm

Weeding guidelines from the Louisiana Department of Education.