

Catalog Adviser Service at California

THE LIBRARIAN who likes people, enjoys variety in his work, and has a good knowledge of the principles of cataloging, will find the position of catalog adviser a most desirable assignment.

The catalog information desk at the University of California Library is in full view of visitors and students as they enter the main hall. Many persons obviously are relieved to find someone at a central desk who can answer their questions and give directions. Students soon learn that the catalog adviser will help them to use the catalog, show them how to find material, and answer a wide variety of miscellaneous enquiries.

The catalog adviser is a member of the catalog department and understands the records and has access to them, and her desk serves therefore as a center for corrections and improvements in the catalog. Faculty members find it convenient to leave complaints and suggestions with her, and librarians from other departments give her notes about errors in filing, duplicate call numbers, and other mistakes which she can correct without bothering the workers in the catalog department proper. Hence, although the catalog adviser must be approachable and must avoid the appearance of being too busy, she finds time for various activities which lighten the burden of the catalogers.

A final aspect of the position is most important to a catalog adviser whose chief interest is the making of a good catalog—the opportunity to observe critically the use

of the catalog, to discover its weaknesses, and to suggest principles which should be followed in making it usable. It is this phase which seems of greatest significance, and the following paragraphs provide a report of the observations of the catalog advisers¹ in one library on the use of the catalog by students and faculty members.

In studying the use of the catalog the most simple approach seemed to be to keep in mind two points: first, why was a given question asked, and, second, could the question have been prevented? There are several reasons for certain questions. Inexperience in the use of the catalog, lack of complete information or the presence of incorrect information concerning entries, and inability to decipher abbreviations, are examples. Lack of knowledge of entry rules or filing rules is also involved. This concerns (1) entries for societies, institutions, government bodies, and conferences and committees, and (2) the works of voluminous authors, the names of rulers, compound names, and names with prefixes.

In addition to the questions on the finding of cards, there are some concerning the information on cards. For example, often it must be pointed out that "Educ. Dept. — — Another copy" means Educ. Dept. *another* copy and not *only* copy. Also, symbols on the cards, such as the double star, result in many questions.

Then there are the students who look in

¹ When this paper was written, Mrs. Lisl Loeb and the writer jointly held the position of catalog adviser. Each was assigned to the catalog information desk for three hours a day.

the wrong catalog, since there are more than one. Although some confuse the subject with the author-title catalog, most cases of looking in the wrong catalog are due to a fundamental misunderstanding of what librarians mean by "author." Once it is explained that an author is not necessarily a person, users have little difficulty in understanding which catalog to consult. The few cases where the line of demarcation between the catalogs is indistinct cause little trouble. Finally, there are questions which are due to errors and weaknesses in the catalog itself, such as the omission of cross references, the occurrence of cross references which are not clear, errors in typing of call numbers, occasional misfiled cards, and worn out and illegible cards.

One could go on at great length giving examples of questions but, in spite of the fact that many of the examples are somewhat humorous, the list would soon tend to assume the aspect of a mere recital of woes. And furthermore, too many examples along this line would be unfair to both the public and the catalog. Most people work at the trays without requiring help; so, in general, the students and faculty are able to use the catalog, and the catalog does fulfil its function well a great deal of the time. We are searching for, and emphasizing, failures and defects, not successes and points of excellence, because uncovering problems and finding solutions are a direct means of making improvements.

It is true that catalog entry rules are complicated—there are rules and exceptions, and exceptions to the exceptions. But the rules are complicated, not because anyone likes them that way, but because they were devised to bring some degree of unity to a mass of material which is almost hopelessly diverse. The catalog indexes all types of publications in all languages and must take into account usage peculiar to innumerable races, countries, governments,

institutions, rulers, religious bodies, and persons throughout all periods of history. And as if all this were not enough, it even has to cope with the idiosyncrasies of modern publishers. Even assuming that the rules are to be streamlined, it is impossible to believe that catalog entries will ever be simple for the average user of the catalog. It looks as though librarians must always be on hand to assist with difficult problems and perhaps supplement individual instruction by class instruction.

But what can the catalogers do about the problems? Perhaps the first step is to keep in touch with the difficulties of the public and to watch for opportunities for improvement, no matter how slight. This entails such efforts as are indicated below.

Consider the habits of users of the catalog. For example, we know that students remember titles rather than authors. Then, for recent books of general interest as well as for fiction, distinctive title entries should be made. How we can get the titles out of the catalog again when their usefulness is past is another problem; but, unless students are expected to use the *Cumulative Book Index*, those titles are needed now.

Continue to emphasize cross references. The author-title catalog is strong in cross references. Of course practical use of the catalog will always reveal gaps which are not foreseen, and one of the chief activities of the catalog advisers is to fill in these gaps, not only through their own experience but by promptly acting upon suggestions from various divisions of the library. More subject cross references may be made as the checking of subject headings progresses, and it is well to continue to watch for subject references which are desirable even though they do not appear in the Library of Congress list.

Use more visual aids. A device which is important and in which the catalog at California is weak rather than strong is a

system of guide cards. Students have had difficulty in finding periodicals such as *Time* and *Life*. An assistant at the periodical desk in the University of California Library had also been aware of this problem for a long time and she suggested a guide card for each periodical indexed in the *Readers' Guide*. These guide cards were made, and a drop in the number of questions was observed. More guide cards are needed in all the catalogs.

Make the meaning of the cards clear. Such terms as "see his" and "see its" are confusing in cross references. Consequently, the rule for making cross references was changed several months ago and no new references with this specialized library terminology are being added at California. The change from the "Period. Stack" designation to a call number immediately cut the number of questions. The adding of "Reading Room" under old class call numbers which formerly were only preceded by an R, to indicate "Reading Room," is in line with the principle that we must say what we mean and avoid symbols whenever possible. A member of the staff has been working on ways to clarify

the meaning of the two stamps "For other editions see" and "For fuller information see," and students are to be asked to express their opinions about a set of sample cards which carry these stamps.

Recognize problems caused by systems peculiar to the library. Jens Nyholm has already discussed certain experimental changes in the method of recording periodical holdings. The fact that this is a closed stack library adds to the difficulties of making cards which are adequate. Contents notes and notes about indexes for sets in several volumes become more important because readers cannot go to the shelves.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that the catalog advisers have found their experience at the catalog information desk helpful in their work as catalogers. One cannot strive to put oneself in a student's place, in order to study the catalog, without having one's own viewpoint modified. Criticism of the catalog in general terms cannot be evaluated and certainly cannot help to solve problems; but if cooperation can consist of specific suggestions, integration of the catalogers' and public viewpoints can be achieved.