RETROSPECTIVE /BACKLOG CATALOGUING: THE EXPERIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST LIBRARY, CAPE COAST

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ABSTRACT

This paper looked at retrospective cataloguing in the Library of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) from 1991 to 2004.

It was discovered that over twelve thousand (12,000) volumes of books had not been processed or catalogued in this Library. This means that these materials did not have any traces in the public catalogue and therefore their retrieval was very difficult. To clear the backlog a cataloguer from a sister university library was engaged on contract from January to August 1994.

By the end of the cataloguer's contract a total of five thousand (5,000) volumes had been catalogued and their records provided in the public catalogues.

This paper concludes by suggesting to the library management that librarians in the library be encouraged to take interest in cataloguing; that the Head of the Cataloguing Department be tasked with the responsibility of seeing to clear the backlog. Finally the paper also suggests that the services of students could be used during holidays to work specifically on the backlog.

KEYWORDS: RETROSPECTIVE CATALOGUING, BACKLOG CATALOGUING, UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

Introduction

The issue of retrospective or backlog cataloguing in the main library of the University of Cape Coast is just one of the many problems that affect all academic libraries not only in Ghana but worldwide.

The University of Cape Coast Library has identified this problem as one which started as far back as 1991 when the idea to automate the Library was mooted. The Library then resorted to computer printouts to the total neglect of the card catalogues, both author and classified. But the problem with these computer printouts is that they are not easy to use. Besides, the increasing number of students makes access to them problematic. The introduction of the Bibliophile to speed up cataloguing processes in 1999 also compounded the problem. This has rather resulted in creating backlogs and putting books in circulation without relevant tracings of such books in the public catalogues. The problem associated with such a situation is the difficulty which library users have in tracing library books. This situation also turns the library into a "super market" where users will have to move from shelf to shelf in the library in order to find what they need.

This also makes the existence of the public catalogue an ineffective guide. This situation is unacceptable and should be corrected.

Libraries the world over are expected to provide their users with information that they need with minimum delay. It is, therefore, very necessary that the public catalogues, be they manual or computerized, be updated from time to time to enable users find

information they require in every library or information centre. It also enables the library to keep track of its information resources. We should bear in mind that the public catalogue should always be the first point of call by library users if they have to know how to use the library or if they have to be effective users of information.

The need to catalogue and provide cards for the backlog of library materials is therefore important and should be treated as such when the need arises. It is therefore in order that the University of Cape Coast Library found it necessary to hire the services of a cataloguer to concentrate on the processing of the library's back log of materials that have found their way onto the shelves without their relevant information in the public catalogues. It should also be borne in mind that such materials can be easily stolen without any trace. Even if librarians are converting their manual catalogues into computerized form they will still need the manual form as their primary sources which will at the same time serve as a backup in case of power outages or even when the computers refuse to work due to technical problems as has often been the case.

The issue of retrospective/backlog cataloguing should not be looked at as some negligence on the part of the cataloguer or librarian or even as a sign of a lack of commitment. It should be anticipated and where possible tackled so that it does not get out of proportion.

Literature review

A survey by Salley (1968) revealed that, "of all university library members of the Association of Research Libraries, it was discovered that 78% had significant backlogs requiring special handling procedures. Agew et al (1984) repeated the survey by Salley and discovered that 77% of the libraries still reported backlogs and that the libraries without backlogs were said to have resorted to automation, which prevented the accumulation of backlogs. Unfortunately however, none of the surveys stated the extent or nature of the backlogs. The above statements have been found to be applicable to almost all public university libraries in Ghana. What has not been tested is the percentage of backlogs but one fact that remains true with the universities is that all the libraries have one form of backlog or another which keeps increasing as the library's stock increases.

This has been compounded by the lack of adequate professional librarians in the system and worsened further by the springing up of new libraries which attract librarians with better conditions of service.

Butler and Garcha (1989) were of the view that "backlogs were a function of the cataloguers who still very much get involved in the activities that have long been associated with their career. These include descriptive cataloguing, assigning call numbers, subject headings and in addition entering the required record into every field they can think of, double checking and triple checking authority records, all of which slow down the whole cataloguing process that lead to high backlogs". They remarked that

"one must learn to balance thoroughness with practicality to reduce backlogs in whatever form".

One thing that is common also in Ghanaian universities is that all the university libraries have not been able to have their full compliment of professional as well as para-professional staff to properly handle all library operations as should be the case and this has affected the performance of cataloguers since they also have other responsibilities aside from cataloguing. Therefore in Ghana, the problem is not so much with the processes involved in cataloguing but rather the other responsibilities of the cataloguer which are considered very important or even more important and which constantly and consistently interfere with his cataloguing work.

Carol and Tedine (1988) observed that "backlogs have been treated in literature as a management problem, which can be solved by adjusting staffing pattern or by adopting less arduous cataloguing criteria". They further observed that "the general recommendation given do not consider specific conditions in particular libraries that contributed to persistent backlogs nor do they examine the nature of materials consigned as backlogs". Adjusting staffing pattern could help but this is not a solution to the backlog problems in Ghana. The problem in Ghana is the lack of enough professional librarians, which makes it difficult for critical library issues like cataloguing to be tackled seriously. This is compounded by the fact that most librarians in the system do not want to be associated with cataloguing (reasons best known to themselves) and this has

worsened the problem as it creates severe backlogs. Cameden and Cooper (1994) linked "backlogs to continuing lack of sufficient numbers of professional cataloguers

and employment of non- professional staff to do the work of professional cataloguers which has contributed to irregular processing" This statement, to a large extent, is true in some cases. This is a situation that is common to all libraries in Ghana: it is the lack of sufficient numbers of professional cataloguers. Also, in most cases, non-professionals who are interested in and enthusiastic about cataloguing are only trained on the job to do cataloguing with no formal training given to them.

There is also the problem of one-man cataloguer in which case he has nobody to consult but will put aside problematic titles for another time thereby pilling up such materials. In our view on backlog cataloguing "the elimination of backlog will reduce the turnover time for cataloguing in-coming theses/dissertations, making these items available to library users as well". This statement also confirms that when library materials are catalogued as they come into the library their access to users is easier than when not catalogued.

Methodology

The method used in the collection of information for this paper was mainly discussions with the Head of the Cataloguing Department, all cataloguing staff, both current on the job as well as Library Assistants who have worked in the Cataloguing Department in the past but still staff of the University Library. The discussions with the library staff provided an idea as to what had been done and where there were problems..

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The cataloguer had to also keep a daily register of materials processed and this formed the basis of the monthly statistics of materials processed which was used in the discussions.

The backlog situation at the UCC Library

The backlog situation at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) Library has been traced back to 1991 when the idea of getting the library and its operations computerized was mooted. The idea of producing catalogue cards for filing was given up in favour of computer printouts. However these could not be filed and were bound into book form. The idea of stopping the production of cards for the catalogues, the writers think was, in the first place a serious oversight since the Library still needed the manual catalogue as a reliable backup in case of any eventuality. Also the card catalogues serve as the Library's primary source. The major problem with the bound form of catalogue print out is that more than one person cannot at the same time use it and other users will have to wait for one person to finish before another can have access. With the current increasing numbers in student enrolment this type of catalogue could not help users. The Library therefore ended up accumulating over twelve thousand (12,000) materials on the shelves without any trace of them in the public catalogues. We should remember as librarians that when we fail to properly process incoming material plus their location for easy access then the library becomes a supermarket where buyers will have to travel from shelf to shelf in search of commodities. It therefore became imperative that the UCC Library had to find a way of addressing this problem.

In 1991 the bibliophile was introduced to speed up the cataloguing process since many more books had arrived and they needed to be processed for use, this time with the production of their cards for filing in the public access catalogues. The production of catalogue cards for filing in the public catalogue therefore resumed in 1999, leaving out materials that were processed between 1991 and 1999 that had no cards in the public catalogues but found themselves on the shelves in the Library anyway.

Measures put in place to clear the backlog

On assuming duty as Acting Librarian of the University of Cape Coast Library, the Librarian realised that there was some huge backlog that needed to be given attention. The Librarian then thought it prudent to employ a cataloguer even if on a short-term basis to specifically tackle the backlog problem. This was in view of the fact that the Library was already understaffed and it was difficult to get experienced librarians. The Library was also continuously receiving new materials on daily basis, which made it difficult to ignore their processing in favour of backlog cataloguing.

To arrest the situation therefore, a cataloguer was identified and given a short-term appointment of eight months to handle the backlog /retrospective cataloguing of the materials in the main library of the University of Cape Coast that were already on the shelves but without any information about them in the public catalogues.

There were over twelve thousand (12,000) volumes of books on the shelves without traces of them in the library public catalogues. The responsibility of the cataloguer was to

ensure that all materials on the open shelves that did not have cards in the public catalogues were processed and cards provided in the public catalogue for them. These books were easy to identify since they did not have any barcodes in them. The cataloguer therefore assumed duty on January 5, 2004 to tackle this problem and attention was given to all materials on the open shelves in the student's reference library. These materials were withdrawn and sent to the cataloguing room for the necessary processing.

Discussions

On assuming duty to take up the responsibility of the backlog cataloguing at the University of Cape Coast Library sometime was spent to study the cataloguing procedure of the UCC Library. The visiting cataloguer initially anticipated took two days for this purpose and was assisted by the existing cataloguing staff of the Library. In all it took the cataloguer one week to study the process as well as the procedures involved in the use of the bibliophile for cataloguing at the UCC as its use differs from library to library. It was agreed that all materials in the student's reference library should be processed since they were not properly processed.

On a daily basis, forty (40) books were moved from the students reference library to the cataloguing room for the necessary cataloguing processes. Unfortunately however, the tempo with which this process was moving was disrupted for about three weeks in April owing to the delay in the renewal of the license for the Bibliophile software.

In January, a total of 400 books were processed. This number was on the basis of forty (40) volumes per day for ten (10) days. In February a total of 800 books were processed. This was on the basis of forty (40) books per day for twenty (20) days while in March a total of nine hundred and twenty (920) books were processed at forty (40) books per day for twenty-three (23) days. In April three hundred and twenty volumes (320) were processed in eight days. In May a total of five hundred and sixty volumes (560) were processed in fourteen (14) days. Between January and the end of May a total of three thousand (3,000) books were processed. Catalogue cards are now being printed for filing.

Conclusion/Suggestions

At the end of August when the cataloguer had finished his eight-month assignment, over five thousand (5,000) of the said twelve thousand volumes of the backlog material had been re-catalogued though cards were yet to be processed and properly filed in the public catalogues. What should be done is that library staff should be encouraged to continue with the backlog.

The good thing about the University of Cape Coast Library is that quite a number of staff are interested in cataloguing and they should be encouraged. It is also suggested that the Library should look at the possibility of organizing overtime work for library staff to handle the backlog issue. The head of the cataloguing unit should be tasked to see to the completion of this assignment within a few months. This therefore suggests that in addition to the introduction of overtime for the backlog cataloguing, all professional librarians should be mobilized to confront the backlog issue when students are on

vacation. This will greatly facilitate work, since when students are around they consult these same materials. This, the writers believe, will be a more realistic solution. Finally, it is gratifying to note that new catalogue cabinets have been acquired to ease congestion in the public catalogues. This will therefore make it possible for library users to search for materials from the public catalogues and become "effective" users of the Library

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Theses/dissertations backlog cataloguing project.

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