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The Elephant Technique of Collection Development

David V. Loertscher

Described here is a technique of collection development called collection mapping in which three collection segments are charted: the base collection, general emphasis areas and specific emphasis areas. Information is given on how to make a collection map and on how to use it for evaluating and improving the collection.

There is a tidbit of sage advice that goes something like this: "If you want to eat an elephant, cut it up into little pieces." Snakes have never learned that tidbit and sometimes that ignorance is fatal. If you have studied snake teeth recently, you know that they curve inwardly toward the belly. Such a structure is wonderful for many purposes, but once food starts down the snake throat, the curve of the teeth prevents the snake from regurgitating its prey. So it's all or nothing. The snake either eats the whole animal in one bite or dies.

It is said that confession is good for the soul. In this article, I would like to review my past collection development methods (which I shall dub the snake method), and suggest an alternative elephant method.

A number of years ago, I was an elementary school library media specialist in Elko, Nevada. The collection at that school contained 10,000 books, 2,000 filmstrips and a variety of other media. Later, I served as a high school library media specialist in Idaho Falls, Idaho and again had a large multimedia collection. The high school was on modular scheduling at the time and a number of curricular areas did not have a

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text book. Teachers and students relied on the library media collection for all teaching and learning materials.

As I look back at the methods I used to build those two collections, I get an uneasy feeling that even though I tried my best, I used the snake method of collection development and should have used the elephant approach. How did I choose materials? Where did I get my ideas? Why didn't I change my methods sooner when I had nagging feelings of distress? Since hindsight is always better than foresight, I shall outline my mistakes and hope that some reader will not make the same ones I did.

The snake method of collection development is a spin-off of the public library approach to collection development. That approach is great for public libraries but doesn't work in schools because of a fundamental difference in purpose. I may not have applied what I learned in library school very well, but here are the patterns I used:

1. I surveyed my community (the school and a brief overview of the curriculum). Mistake: While I had a general idea of what was taught, I did not make a thorough study of the various units that would be taught in the courses. Only after several years at the school did I start to recognize, "Oh, yes, there's the insect collecting unit again."
2. I had all the standard basic book collection lists and used them to build the collection so that some sort of balance was achieved. Mistake: While the standard lists are helpful, they are not created with a specific school or curricular need in mind. I was building a public library collection in a school and that is not what was needed.
3. I faithfully read selection periodicals each month, checking the most positively reviewed materials for purchase. I did try to keep in mind what I already had and what we needed. Mistake: I was selecting the cream of the crop across all areas of publishing—building balance as often as I selected for a curricular objective.
4. When I was given money and a deadline for purchase, I invited teachers and students to submit ideas for materials. Mistake: Teachers and students may know what they needed this week and last week but are often not helpful beyond that.

5. I kept a consideration file. At purchasing time, I prioritized the cards in the file and spent until the money was gone. Mistake: Many of the cards in the file became useless because I couldn't remember why I had been interested in that item in the first place. My priority sort was very subjective and often too hurried.

There were a host of other problems besides those listed. For example, I'd purchase a critically acclaimed title and then find that it would not serve the needs of the students for their assignments. The problem wasn't the book's quality; it just wasn't the right book for a particular need. There seemed to be many shelf sitters which were highly esteemed by some reviewer but of little value to an Indian student living on a reservation in Nevada.

Looking back, I realize that I wasted money. Even though I had 10,000 volumes on the shelves, the collection did not respond to user's needs often enough. I found a number of teachers who would rather have had \$100 a year to buy the things they wanted for their room rather than give the \$100 to the library media center. There was the auto shop teacher who wanted all the car repair manuals in his auto shop. There was the home economics teacher who wanted the large charts, posters and filmstrips in her kitchen permanently. These teachers did not think of the library media center as a place to obtain their instructional materials. We were supposedly geared up for the academic departments.

Several years ago, I began working on the problem of collection development as a part of creating evaluation methods for school library media centers. That effort has resulted in a collection mapping technique with an accompanying computer program which will be published shortly by Neal Schuman.¹ The technique will be described here but not in complete detail.

THE ELEPHANT METHOD

The library media specialist who wishes to build a collection systematically should remember the sage advice to cut up an elephant into small pieces before eating. Why not divide

the collection into a number of small manageable segments which match the various parts of the curriculum? Each of these pieces could then be built, weeded, or maintained as curriculum needs dictated. Each segment would have a corresponding piece of the total budget pie depending on the priorities assigned to the goal of expansion, replacement only, or de-emphasis.

Such an idea is not new. Academic libraries often have collection targets. These are areas of specialty where the goal is to collect everything in a topical area. These specialties often revolve around certain strong professors or departments of the university. They often support doctoral programs and research centers and are deemed a major reason to study at that university. Likewise, special libraries try to build in-depth collections in very narrow subject fields and only in areas which support the work of their specialized clientele.

For the school library media center, it would seem theoretically defensible to divide collection development into three main areas:

1. The building of a balanced or basic collection to serve a wide variety of interests and needs.
2. The creation of broad emphasis areas which would contain materials in a particular curricular area such as U.S. History over and above what a balanced collection might contain.
3. The collection of materials for in-depth coverage of specific curricular units such as the Civil War.

Each of these main areas could be subdivided as many times as necessary to match the needs of a particular school. How would the system work?

Step #1: Create a collection map which will put in graphic form the various segments of the collection.

A collection map is a visual supplement to the card catalog which graphically displays the breadth and depth of a library media collection. Such a map would be displayed on a large poster in the library media center for all to view. It would serve as a key to the collection showing strengths, collection

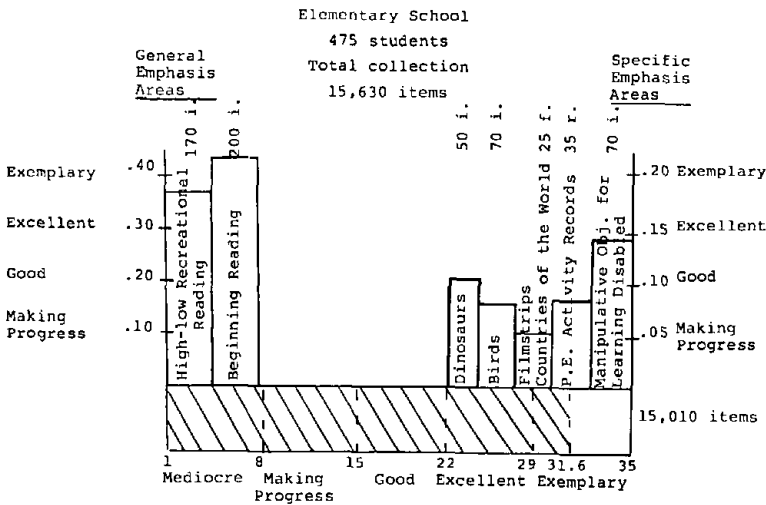
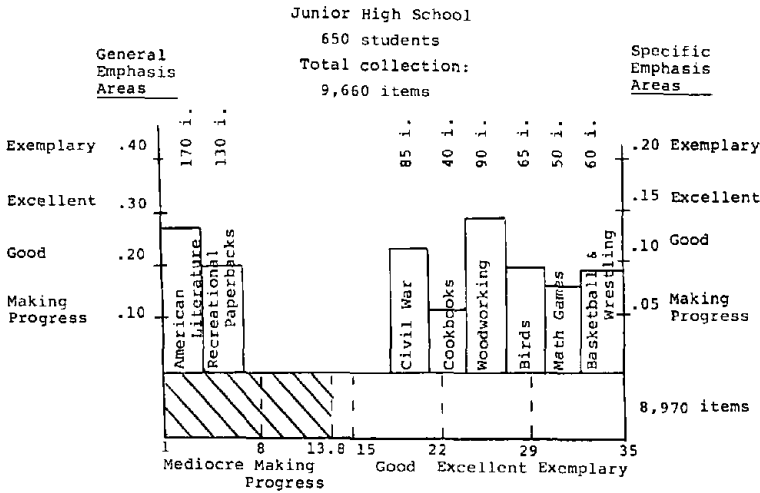
targets and collection size in a single chart. Each school's collection map might be completely different than the collection map of a neighboring school. In fact, several schools could coordinate their selection policies to create complementary collections which would be shared regularly.

Four sample collection maps follow. The reader should note the three main segments of the map—the base collection, the general emphasis areas and the specific emphasis areas. The emphasis areas can be multimedia or a single medium. Each is charted on a relative scale to show excellence in terms of size. The map has the underlying assumption that bigger is better. If the library media specialist regularly weeds the collection and keeps each segment “in tune” with the curriculum, the map is indicative of both quality and quantity.

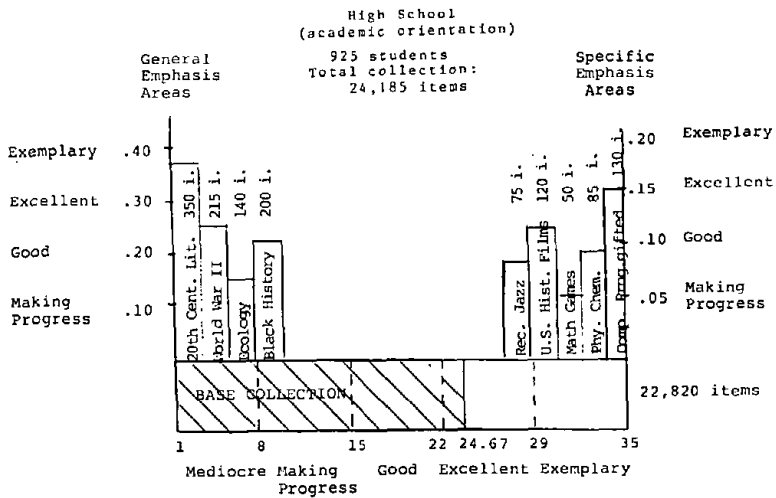
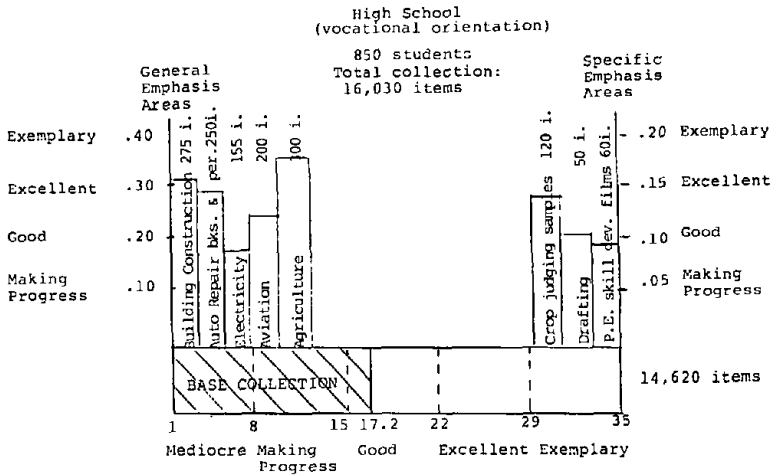
Creating a collection map takes about three to five hours depending on the types of records kept and the experience which the person has with the collection. The technique is basically this:

- a. Count the total number of items both print and audio-visual in each of the Dewey Decimal areas (Reference, 000, 100, 200 . . .)
- b. Decide what general emphasis areas support whole courses such as U.S. History, Chemistry, General math, etc. Count the number of items for each topic (count the number in Reference, 000, 100, 200 . . .)
- c. Decide what specific emphasis areas support specific units of instruction such as Civil War, insects, dinosaurs, etc. Count the number of items for each topic (count the number in Reference, 000, 100, 200 . . .)
- d. Divide the total size of each emphasis collection by the number of students in the school and chart the resulting items/student figure on the collection map.
- e. Add up the total of all emphasis items in each Dewey Area (Reference, 000, 100, 200 . . .) and subtract each total from the total number of items in each category as counted in (a) above. These remaining items represent the true basic collection size. Total all the basic items and divide the result by the number of students in the school and then chart this items/student figure on the collection map.

SAMPLE COLLECTION MAPS



If the library media specialist has estimated rather than counted exact numbers of items, the map is a quick way to visualize the whole in smaller pieces.



Step #2: Use the collection map as a planning tool, a bragging tool, and a begging tool.

The collection map which may have several or numerous segments could be used for:

- a. Showing faculty and students the strengths of a collection.
- b. Evaluating whether the strengths of a collection match the curriculum of a school.
- c. Suggesting the most logical areas of the curriculum that can be served the most effectively.
- d. Suggesting purchasing targets.
- e. Suggesting areas of the collection that might be irrelevant.
- f. Demonstrating areas of need and areas of excellence.

Step #3: Evaluate how well each of the segments is reacting to the demands made upon it.

The best evaluative tool of a collection is how it responds to usage demands. Every time a major demand is placed upon one of the emphasis areas of the collection or upon the base, the library media specialist and the teacher should evaluate how well the collection responded. With input from the students, these two people can quickly rate the collection on the following points:

- a. Diversity of formats available (both books and AV).
- b. Recency of the collection (Were the materials up-to-date?).
- c. Relevance of the collection to unit needs.
- d. Duplication (Was there enough materials for the number of students taught?).
- e. Reading/viewing/listening level (Was it ok for all students?).

The answers to those questions and the resulting systematic follow-up in an acquisition program, weeding activity, or replacement task provide the key to an improved collection development program.

Step #4: Use the evaluation sheets from step #3 to build a sound acquisition program.

Short and long range collection goals are easy to build when the collection is segmented. Some essential questions could be

asked which would lead to goal statements. Do the emphasis areas fit the curriculum of this school? If not, would it be better to give or trade these emphasis collections to another school which would have more use for them? What emphasis areas should be built in the next five years? Which emphasis areas should be improved? What curricular trends will affect the emphasis areas of the collection as they now exist?

New emphasis area targets could be handled like community fund drives with a thermometer chart put on the collection map indicating funding needs and progress toward funding goals.

Consideration files can be divided into sections matching the sections of the collection map. Percentages of the budget can be assigned to purchase materials in each of the target areas. Ordering periods might be adjusted to allow for purchase of materials in time for teaching units. Bibliographies and selection tools would be used to find materials for specific needs rather than for general broad interests. Smaller consideration files by topic area would be managed more effectively.

Step #5: Build a budgeting system which matches the segments of the collection map.

There are a number of types of budget systems which can easily be adapted to the collection target system advocated here. Breaking a lump sum of money into segments which supports certain collection targets is much easier to understand by administrators and certainly easier to defend. Budget cuts or improvements can be decided jointly by administrators and library media specialists with full knowledge of exactly what parts of the collection will be affected.

ELEPHANT STEW

This article has described a manual system of keeping track of segments of the library media collection and conscientiously building, maintaining, or weeding each of the segments. Those readers who have computerized their card catalog realize that much of this segmentation can be done within current computer systems as a by-product of the program.

Perhaps the elephant stew of the future would be to track each unit for a teacher which would not only be a total bibliography of materials for that unit, but would present analyses of types of materials available, duplicates, new items, replacement items, age, and progress on goals for that segment of the collection.

REFERENCE

1. Loertscher, David V., Woolls, Blanche, and Stroud, Janet G. *Evaluating School Library Media Programs*. Neal Schuman, 1985. The computer collection mapping program can be obtained from: David V. Loertscher, P.O. Box 1801, Fayetteville, AR 72702 for \$10.