

Biobibliographies

Melvil Dewey's Personality

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Abstract

Melvil Dewey's personality is related to the librarianship activity universally carried on. He is the founder of Dewey Decimal Classification (C.L.D.), the founder of librarianship education; a highly intellectual professor and a promoter of the permanent education in libraries. Melvil Dewey is a "genius full of energy". (1)

Keywords: Melvil Dewey, biographical data, professional activity, founder of librarianship education

Biographical Data

Melvil-Louis Kossuth Dewey – name which being passionate for stenography he reduced to Melvil Dewey. He was born on the 10th of December 1851, in Adams Center, near Watertown, New York, being the youngest of the five children of the family.

He attended the courses of Oneida Seminar, then those of Alfred University in order to prepare himself for the college. Beginning with 1870 he is a student at Amherst College until 1874 when he gets the graduation diploma (July 9th 1874). As a student, Melvil Dewey was an assistant-

librarian until 1876 at the Library of Amherst College that he reorganized according to his own classification and planning system of publications.

Between 1876-1883, Melvil Dewey leads his activity in Boston, and between 1883-1888 he works as a librarian and librarianship professor at Columbia University in New York.

The following period, between 1889-1905 is characterized by Melvil's activity as a secretary of the Regents' College in New York.

In 1885, Melvil Dewey set up the Lake Placid Club, a Foundation for Education, institution that, according to his own confessions, has become "the centre of his concerns" for the next 25 years, he himself being its manager between 1906-1926. He died in Florida, on the 26th of December 1931, of a brain attack.

Professional Activity

Undoubtedly, Dewey's life, concerns and professional activity were focused on library.

We cannot imagine an outstanding intellectual and professional autobiography of Melvil Dewey's without library at its core.

Unquestionably, Melvil Dewey's faith profession can be found in the editorial of the first issue of the "American Library Journal", entitled: "Profession". In time, the library was before hand a museum, and the librarian a bookworm among dusty books. Time has turned library into school and the librarian is a teacher, at his best, and the visitor is a reader among books as a worker is among his tools. (Dewey M. 1876, p. 5). (3)

According to these ideas, Melvil Dewey's activities were: organizing collections in a library; forming and training librarians, the permanent education; founding professional librarian organizations, initiating librarianship periodicals, and last but not least, the quite obsessive concern for the English language spelling reform and of the metric system.

Dewey was interested in the systematic organization of library collections even since his student years, when he "visited over 50 New York libraries and in all these institutions, according to his statements, he noticed a total lack of efficiency, the waste of work and money caused by the permanent reclassifications. Only then while he substantiate a classification system easy to apply". (4)

The concept and operation base of his classification system was represented by the Library of Amherst College, where he worked as a librarian, and the motivation was a strictly pragmatic one, to make the organization of publications collections efficient by creating a logical flexible and simple system of arranging and finding the books.

Without going into further details, we mention that Melvil Dewey had the conviction that the functioning of a system was dependant on designing operational solutions of comprising all the subjects and also of representing simple structures.

We do not try to limit the tacking of his decimal system and of the Arab figures to Dewey's euphoric assertion in his own journal, but we cannot elude the austerity reasoning of the author either: "After months of studies, on a Sunday morning while I was attending a long service of Stern pastor, and my mind was concerned with their vital problem, the solution suddenly occurred to me and jumping from my desk, I shouted: "Evrika". (5)

The concrete ways of assuming the availability of his project were found in the memorandum addressed by the young Dewey to the Committee of Amherst Library, which approved the implementation of his own system in arranging the publications of his library.

Three years later, in 1876, appeared the first edition of Dewey Decimal Classification: "A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library".

We are not going to make a complete presentation of Dewey Decimal Classification, but we will mention that the prevailing opinion of both theoreticians and practitioners is will illustrated in the Characterization made by W.C. Berwick Sayers: "His cardinal virtues are universality and hospitality, a simple extensible notation, being now an almost international classification vocabulary, excellent mnemonic features and an admirable index. It has lots of flaws, but it also has altering qualities so that it survived very convincing and apparently regrettable critics, going further despite them". (6) We must also add the fact that designing and building a classification system of the publications by Melvil Dewey is part of the universal librarianship performances.

In the same context, Paul Salvan, mentioning the main significance (interpretations) of Dewey Decimal Interpretations, appreciates that: "we must bring homage to Dewey's innovating effort, whose impact on the evolution of the classification systems is an undeniable fact". (7)

Significant, in its way, is also, Dewey's direct involvement between 1895-1905, in the activity of constituting the Universal Decimal Classification system.

We will also have to mention the fact that Melvil Dewey coordinated the scheme of his classification until 1931, next to publishers, who drew up and published DDC Thus, Darkas Fellows, Dewey's close contribution and publisher of DDC until 1938, when he died, had a great contribution at

publishing Dewey's Decimal Classification system, which actually meant "the end of what could be called the author's direct tradition". (8)

In fact, Melvil Dewey gave his author rights to Lake Placid Club Education Foundation, which administered Dewey Decimal Classification until DDC transferred at the Congress Library in Washington, where the Editorial Office has had leading competences until then.

Dewey – founder of the librarianship education

Melvil Dewey's personality must also be regarded as a founder of the librarianship education, as he settled the Librarians' School, but he also initiated professional foundations, which developed permanent formation and perfecting activities for librarians.

On the 5th of May 1887, Melvil Dewey inaugurated the librarians' school: "School of Library Economy at Columbia", which in 1889 moves to New York, Albany, known as: "New York State Library School", where he was followed by five of the professors at Columbia: Walter Biscoe, Ada Alice Jones, Florence Woodworth, May Seymour and Mary Salome Cutler, appointed deputy director of the school, with whom he actually had lots of professional arguments, especially on the relationship between the theory and practice of the college curriculum. (9) Even if for the beginning it was supposed to be a number of ten students, in 1889 the number doubled, and the "feminine presence represented a remarkable innovation, whose justification was then largely proved". (10) After two years the graduates are given diplomas in librarianship science and later, they could even get doctor's degree in their domain.

As for Dewey's stateliness in front of his students, Wayne Wiegand, professor at Wisconsin University, the one who closely followed Dewey's biography states the following: "Dewey's sudden appearance and disappearance added mystery among the students, many of them continuing to respect the feeling of having been among the pioneers of the librarianship school. [...] During the lectures Dewey started uttering 180 words per minute while students were writing down notes. He stopped occasionally, he looked at the class, straightened his back and as he tightly nodded his head, he addressed his students looking at them. Students would remember his prominent chin, his long head, his large nostrils, when he tried to emphasize something important." (11)

Another concern of Melvil Dewey's was the permanent education which was in close relationship with the library.

We support our assertion in Melvil Dewey's conviction according to which: "Education is done along the whole life. We must strive to teach masses read in our schools. Then they become leaders in their families and if we keep on being concerned with their education, we must do it through libraries which have to be as high schools and colleges for people." (Dewey, 1889). (12)

We can assert that the evaluation of the project concerning the bivalence library-education could be found in the activity of the foundations initiated and ran by Melvil Dewey himself, more precisely: Lake Placid Club (1885), Lake Placid Club Education Foundation (1922), Lake Placid South (1923-1931). Annually, between 1899-1908. Dewey together with his wife, Annie Godfrey Dewey organized the Lake Placid Conferences debating on both problems on education and their reflection on the Dewey Decimal Classification. At the first conference, Melvil Dewey presented the decimal principle which lies on the basis of his own classification. A very interesting aspect of the debates within these conferences was represented by the complete analysis of knowledge domains and their reflection on the DDC scheme.

Melvil Dewey's emotional and intellectual relationship with the Lake Placid Club Foundation for education was so close that, in 1924, he entrusted DDC to the Foundation which later set up the "Forest Press" Publishing House that issued the Dewey Decimal Classification publications. In 1988 The Forest Press belonged to OCLC-Online Computer Library Center.

At the same time, Melvil Dewey considered that the progress of the library would be possible through substantial reforms supported by professional organizations and by a press of specialty. That is why Dewey participates at the librarian's meeting organized in Philadelphia between 4-6 October 1876; as a result, the American Library Association is born whose appointed president is Justin Winsor and Melvil Dewey is secretary, the later accepting it for free, for 14 years, until 1890, when he was appointed president (13).

Also, Melvil Dewey, next to 22 librarians, members of the American Library Association, participated at the English Librarians Meeting, where they set up the British Librarians Association. (14)

The publication of the specialty periodicals is in close relationship with Melvil Dewey's name, who in 1876 founded "The American Library Journal" and ran it between 1876-1881. Not only the idea of issuing such a periodical was remarkable, but also the editorial strategy that he drew up

and promoted in the publication and contributed to the exchange of ideas and considerably supported reforms in the librarianship field.

The idea of logistically supporting the library activity was materialized by Melvil Dewey through the foundation of the “Library Bureau” in 1876, in Boston, whose purpose was to “support a long term materials supply in the libraries: catalogues with cards vertically arranged, books with detachable sheets, and index.” (15). Within this Bureau the standardization of the catalogue card for libraries was introduced.

The dynamic picture of Melvil Dewey’s activity and personality undoubtedly includes the constant concerns in the reform of the English language spelling reform and of the metric system. Thus, he activated as a secretary of the two associations: “The Spelling Reform Association” and of “The American Metric Bureau” and he suggested the simplification of the English language spelling that he applied to the second edition of the Dewey Decimal Classification and he used the new metric system at the standardized cards given by the Library Bureau. Referring to his published works next to the Dewey Decimal Classification, we mention “Library School Rules” such as the editorials in the Library Journal.

Upright, tenacious, loyal with modern managing gifts, “busily but quietly working” (16) with a “permanent dynamic character, Melvil Dewey will remain a tireless entertainer” (17) with a strong impact on the modern library.

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- (2) ŞAMURIN, E. I. *Istoria clasificării bibliotecar-bibliografice*. Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1964, p. 202
- (3) Cf. <http://listweb.syr.edu/~jsdp561/Dewey/activities.html>
- (4) *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. Vol. 7, New York: Marcel Dekker Inc, 1972, p. 142-143
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- (8) ŞAMURIN, E.I. *Op.cit.*, p. 218
- (9) Cf. WIEGAND, Wayne. Dewey Declassified: A Revelatory Look at the „Irresponsible Reformer”. In: *American Libraries*, jan. 1996, p. 54
- (10) DUBUC, Raoul. *La Classification Décimale Universelle: Manuel pratique d'utilisation*. Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1964, p. 16

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- (14) *Ibidem*, pp. 141-143
- (15) *Dictionary of American Library Biography*. New York: Libraries Unlimited, 1978, p. 152.
- (16) WIEGAND, Wayne. *Op. cit.*, p. 60
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