

Recreating Cataloging Culture: Backlog Reduction as Empowerment

In Spring 2006 the UCLA Cataloging & Metadata Center was informed that it would be moving, along the Print Acquisitions Department from the Young Research Library, YRL, to a smaller space in a pre-fabricated modular building at the far edge of campus called Kinross South. This move started a chain of events that caused our department to adopt a culture of efficiency and innovation.

In the Kinross building our cubicles would be smaller than what we had in the research library and we would have fewer shelving ranges in our work areas to store our backlogs. Each of the catalog librarians in the Monographic Cataloging Section, or Monocats, stored their backlogs in a combination of shelves in their work areas and on shelves assigned to them in the backlog area at YRL. Since I supervise the student who manages the backlogs for the Monocats, I was tasked with organizing the backlogs for the move. We abandoned the idea that each cataloger would maintain an individual backlog. All books and material would be shelved by language or format. [SLIDE 2] The reorganization of the materials made it much easier for us to keep quarterly statistics, basically an inventory list, and to know what was contained in the backlog. Our first backlog count of monographs for the department after moving to Kinross was 13,827 with a total of 51 languages, including Uigher and Ewe, in 13 scripts.

Even with these changes the Monocat backlogs were bursting at the seams in Kinross. French and Spanish language materials were housed on book trucks and the Southeast Asian languages were split into three backlogs containing the same languages, some of these housed in mail bins on the floor outside of our room. Although Monocats were noting the month of receipt of materials with a slip, in the move we realized that knowing the month of receipt was helpful, we also needed to know which year it arrived.

I am always eager to create efficiencies in the department and developed a mechanism to organize some of the departmental backlogs that could not be split into those needing original cataloging vs. those with

copy. We gained control over 5,600 item Arabic books by arranging them in system number order and combined the three separate Southeast Asian language backlogs and found shelving for them. These were more opportunities to know what was contained in the backlog, and made the search for rush catalog items easier and faster.

In February 2008 a backlog brainstorming session was held for all catalogers in the Cataloging & Metadata Center. The reasons behind this were to deal with limited shelving at Kinross, a desire to catch up on the backlog and give patrons better access to the library's collections, the need to free up cataloger time to work on non-MARC metadata, and the fact that budgets were shrinking and new staff would not be arriving (in other words, we had to rely on our own skills).

The ideas were grouped into 9 categories [SLIDE 3]. I am only showing these larger categories without all the specifics ideas they contained. While the catalogers often discussed the issue of backlogs, this was the first time serious action was taken. Over the last three years we have employed many of these ideas. As a result of this meeting our Principal cataloger, Sara Layne, developed a list of possible treatment options and shopped this around to different committees. She included a new option call mini-cat plus for less-than-full records that included keywords, subject headings, or summary note but no classification. These would be house in our off-site storage called the Southern Regional Library Facility.

April 2009 after a meeting of the Cataloging & Metadata Center members with the Associate University Librarian, to whom we report, workgroups were formed to address our biggest concerns. I was appointed the convener of the Eliminating backlogs group. Sara next wrote a document called Empowering Catalogers and increasing efficiencies. This document contained an innovative proposal: to shift decision making on the level of cataloging from the selectors to the catalogers. Catalogers had long known that the selectors did not completely understand what the levels of cataloging on our routing forms meant and did not understand that an item marked for minimal level cataloging would receive a full record if one was available in OCLC. The catalogers felt that we had a good understanding of our

collections from working with the materials they contained. We also learned that level of catalog decision was not always decided by the selector, but often was marked by an Acquisitions student. Once we learned of this the practice stopped so any decisions were truly those of the selector. Our Associate University Librarian approved an August 1, 2009 implementation of Cataloger's Decision with the goal of reducing our backlogs to no older than 6 months. The Eliminating Backlogs committee was tasked with implementing Empowering Catalogers and creating workflows for it. In September 2009 the Empowering Catalogers workflows launched. The workflow was revised in November 2009 to allow for Selector review of Monocat decisions. [SLIDE 4]

The first tasks in implementation were to revise our routing form with new cataloging option, space for cataloger or selector's initials and a check-box that notified copycatalogers to add a code into a 948 subfield. We are using the 948 to encode statistics for automatic retrieval. The newly devised code can be searched as a keyword in the cat client and retrieves the items cataloged as a result of a cataloger's decision. These are either the items that went through the copycatalogers or the items cataloged by the Monocats whenever they made a decision about level of cataloging. To date over 2500 titles have been cataloged through this process. This assumes that the records were coded each time so we can assume to real number to be slightly higher.

Each month my student prepares a truck of the oldest materials in our backlogs, sorted by language. For each language, a maximum of 15 items was placed on the shelf until the backlog was reduced to 6 months. Catalogers have two weeks to review materials on the truck and decide whether to catalog themselves with full level or opt for a less than full level. They must supply keywords or summary for mini-cat plus. All catalogers can pull material regardless of their cataloging assignment just to clear the truck. These are placed on another truck for selector review. The student sorts and counts materials on the selector truck by language. I send the language list to selectors and give them week turnaround for review. Selectors have option to accept cataloger's decision or select a fuller level. They have the option

to recommend subjects, keywords or other access points. If the cataloger's decision is overturned by the selector, the item is returned to the cataloger who made decision. Most of selector review materials go on to copycats and the cataloger's decision is not overturned.

These workflows have made it easier to communicate with selectors. A few months after full implementation the Monocats devoted several of our weekly meetings to talk with small groups of selectors about the areas they collect in, their collaborative collecting agreements and the needs of the faculty and students. The catalogers learned what the selectors were truly interested in seeing in our records, such as contents notes on occasion or a keyword to signify that it was a work of poems and which countries' imprints required full records. As a result of all this communication our selectors are our staunchest supporters and best allies for this process.

The roman script backlogs were reduced to 6 months after 8 months. At first we found items that had been on our backlog shelves for up to 3 years. We experimented with the length of aging. At one point we felt that four months was ideal in terms of aging because after that point most institutions who would add or enhance a record has already done so. We have since settled on 6 months. We are slowly working down our Cyrillic and Arabic backlogs in the same manner. My student now takes monthly counts of the Monocat backlogs and in addition to counting the total number of items for each language also gives a count of the number of items older than 6 months so we have a fairly real-time snapshot of the age of the backlogs.

This slide [SLIDE 5] details the different ways we have worked with selectors or found assistance outside of the department to catalog our backlogs. When the department was in the research library we had a place for items in languages not assigned to any cataloger, called the deferred languages shelf. Not the Island of Misfit Toys, but the shelf of dreams, for that long-imagined day when we would hire the expert who could read the language and catalog the books. We can no longer wait for someone else to catalog these materials. I worked with our South Asian Librarian, a library assistant and David Hirsch to work off

our materials in Marathi and Bengali, and with our African Studies Librarian for the Amharic and Tigrinya. I do want to talk about the Southeast Asian backlogs because this workflow had a large impact on our backlogs.

There is no cataloger, copy or monocat, who is assigned to the Southeast Asian backlog. Because the backlogs were growing, in 2009 I asked the selector to make decisions on level of cataloging and to provide keywords for cataloging during her initial review of the materials. This proved to be cumbersome and by January 2010 she developed a large backlog of materials that she was asked to complete and move on to cataloging. We determined that the catalogers should catalog the items that had existing full copy in OCLC. The selector would review those items lacking full copy to determine cataloging level, but she would assign keywords at a later stage in the workflow. When she explained to me that she used fully cataloged records in other libraries' catalogs to provide us with subjects and keywords by searching for records on Worldcat.org, I devised new workflow that would shift this work to the copycataloging staff. A library assistant would search for copy on OCLC using an ISBN or LCCN. If a full record is found it is used. Conversion tables are supplied for copycatalogers to verify page numbers when written in non-roman script such as Marathi or Thai. The copycataloger could supply subject headings or call number if one of the two was missing for books in roman scripts, (Vietnamese, Indonesian). If a record has neither subjects nor call number, the copycataloger searches the book in worldcat.org using the OCLC number in an "accession number" search. He then scrolls down to the "Find a copy in the library" link. He selects one or more of the library links to search the local catalogs for full copy. The copycataloger selects staff or MARC view. If the record is full, the call number and/or subject headings are added into the OCLC record and the master record enhanced. The last step of this workflow is possible now because some of our copycatalogers participate in the Expert Community under Peter Fletcher's supervision. Using this method for cataloging these otherwise growing backlogs, we have reduced our Southeast Asian backlogs as much as 94%. Those materials that still do not have copy are reshelfed. Because of our sizeable Thai backlog, I hired students to search the backlogs,

especially since a large portion does not have a standard number to search with. The students notated records for books that are variant editions. A copycataloger is working with these notes to create new records. I cataloged the remainder of the items with my student, who provided Romanization, Thai script, and subject terms. We will soon look into shared cataloging or more student help on a limited basis to complete the cataloging for these legacy collections with unsearchable backlogs, such as Burmese and Laotian.

This slide [SLIDE 6] shows a third method we are using for backlog reduction, although I am not going to speak about it other than to say that we have found that some materials, for various reasons, only warrant a collection level record and the slide details some of these reasons.

Our backlogs are now at an all time low of just under 6000. This is due to both external and internal forces. In the past the collections budget was untouched even in times of budget crises but in the last couple of years the collections were reduced and the approval plans even put on hiatus for several months. For several years the administration curtailed receipt of gift materials, although this has recently been reversed. Cataloger's decisions or at least those decisions that were recorded only account for 2500 of the 7000 item backlog reduction. The internal forces are the collective efforts of all of our catalogers and selectors who began to think differently about our catalog records, at what point in the life-cycle of the materials decisions about levels of cataloging could be made, and for pushing themselves to work with the materials in ways they never considered before.

Most of the work I discussed took place in the last few years. These workflows and processes continue.

Catalogers continue to seek out efficiencies. [Our Associate University Librarian](#) encourages the librarians to be outward facing in our work, particularly in areas working with the public and collection building. There is also a large push to uncover our hidden collections. To that end, [the Discovery Team](#) was created and charged with cataloging campus collections that were not in the regular workflow.

Examples of their projects include artists' books, serials in special collections and Ethiopian posters.

Caroline Miller, whom some of you know, leads the Discovery Team. The Discovery Team was recently tasked with eliminating [some of](#) the long term backlogs from the YRL basement. The largest collection in the basement is Hebrew [with some Yiddish](#), most of which is part of the Cummings Collection of Hebraica and Judaica. This [money used to purchase this](#) collection was donated to the UCLA Library in 1963 by Mrs. Theodore E. Cummings in honor of her husband. The [money was used to purchase the inventory of](#) books ~~from were purchased when~~ the book firm of Bamberger and Wahrman in Jerusalem [when it](#) closed. Approximately two thirds of the collection was cataloged and the remainder ~~awaited for~~ cataloging. The backlog totals about 10,000 items and is primarily rabbinics that date from the late 1800s to 1960.

Before any of the books could be transported to the Cataloging & Metadata Center for cataloging, they needed to be cleaned by the Preservation Department, [who hired an outside vendor for this task](#). We planned to [have](#) a student ~~to~~ search the books [in OCLC](#) to find usable copy [and to determine whether or not UCLA already owned the items.](#) ~~–~~We assumed that since the books had sufficiently aged in the basement, approximately 40% would have good enough copy that our student could use to catalog the books. Let me back up and explain the current staffing situation in the department because the prime barrier to completing the project is staffing. I am the current Hebrew cataloger but so far I am only assisting in terms of workflows and training. Caroline, our former Hebrew cataloger, ~~and is~~ the lead on the project. Caroline has two library assistants, neither of whom read Hebrew. [The Cataloging and Metadata Center](#) ~~We~~ had a library assistant who did copy cataloging for the Hebrew books but she resigned two years ago. Since the recession began, we have been unable to hire library assistants into permanent positions. Caroline's staff members are on grant monies that are renewed yearly. The only money that is readily available is for students and that is why a student was hired for this project.

We were lucky to find a library school student who knew Hebrew and could even read Rashi script. We trained her to search OCLC, [use the ALA-LC](#) Romanization rules, and ~~how~~ to locate a Hebrew date on a

publication. Due to the bibliographic complexity of the books, reprints, ~~and~~ related editions and bound-
withs, it was very difficult for our student to find reasonably good copy for the books. Her hit rate was
about 5-10%, far below our expectation. Even if a record matched the item, the records were so minimal
or problematic that they required significant work; work that was certainly not student level. Recently
our student was presented with ~~an another job-~~ offer she could not refuse and has left the project. This
highlights ~~two some~~ issues we have had with student employees: - School is and should be the first
priority for students and there is little guarantee that they will remain with a job for a protracted period.
Training, especially for a project as complex as this ~~one~~, is extensive and expensive if a student does not
remain for a long period of time. Additionally, sStudents cannot work at a high level and often this is
what is needed. Just prior to our student's resignation, Caroline and I proposed a new staffing model. It
was clear that we needed a high level library assistant for the project and we hoped to persuade our
former library assistant to return, even on a part time basis. In order to secure funding for this position it
had to be tied into a grant -funded project. Currently our grant projects are related to digitization.
Caroline proposed that the pre-1900 imprints be scanned and digitized and this is in the approval
process. One of Caroline's staff members is assisting her to prepare the proposal by estimating the
number of books in the collection to be digitized. While he cannot read Hebrew, hHe has learned to
decipher Hebrew dates using a chart that indicates the numeric values of Hebrew letters, and is
searching the books with added titles in roman and Cyrillic script. Because of his extensive knowledge of
languages, scripts, complex bibliographic records and a fascination with difficult cataloging, he is finding
cataloging copy for some of the books and is now an asset to the project. Additionally, in order to
estimate costs for digitization, this staff member is counting pages of each pre-1900 book. He uses the
same Hebrew letter chart to decipher the page and leaf numbers as he uses to decipher the dates. Our
former copycataloger, who is skilled in complex Hebrew cataloging, has agreed to return to work on the
project. That leaves Caroline as the original cataloger and me to catalog as called or as necessary.

It has been a slow start to cataloging this collection that has been with UCLA for fifty years. We finally feel that there will be a team in place. One of the biggest challenges was to advocate for appropriate staff and to realize the potential in existing staff.