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Collection analysis on social work: a cost-effective approach

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to ensure the provision of effective library support to the scholarly community in areas of collection development and management. Last year, the author's library made the first attempt to conduct a collection evaluation on a multidisciplinary subject – social work.

Design/methodology/approach – In view of extensive subject coverage of a cross-disciplinary subject and the library's constraints, a cost-effective and manageable strategy using internal resources was used. The focus of the study was to concentrate on core subject areas of social work. By making use of circulation statistics of those areas, adequacy, strengths and weaknesses of the collection would be identified.

Findings – A positive adequacy of the social work collection was evidenced from a high usage of the collection. An in-depth study on the two major active sections, DDC 361 (social problems and services) and DDC 362 (social work for different groups of people), was also undertaken. Specific subject areas for improvement were identified.

Originality/value – Through conducting the project, it not only directly served the main purpose of enhancing the quality of the collection in alliance with the development of academic departments, but also expanded our subject knowledge. It is hoped that our experience can offer tips and stimulant for other libraries contemplating collection analysis on a multidisciplinary subject under restricted resources.

Keywords Social work, Collection analysis, Collection evaluation, Collection management, Usage-based approach

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The Department of Social Work (SOWK), established in 1956, is one of the founding departments of the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU). It provides professional training and education for social workers in Hong Kong, with its undergraduate program leading to recognized social work qualifications. There are about 203 full-time equivalent students taking a variety of programs offered by the Department, ranging from the Associate Degree program, undergraduate program and post-graduate programs at the master to doctorate levels.

To ensure the provision of effective library service to the Department, especially with its long history in the HKBU, an evaluation of the collection pertaining to social work was conducted in 2013. This was the first attempt by our library to systematically conduct a collection analysis on a multidisciplinary subject. This article addresses the purposes of the study, evaluation methods with considerations of the library's circumstances, findings of the study and the benefits from this assessment exercise. Circulation statistics, being an internal library resource, serve as a useful and practical tool for collection analysis. It is hoped that sharing of our experience by making use of cost-effective measurement can offer clues or

insights for other libraries contemplating collection evaluation on multidisciplinary subjects.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the evaluation were:

- to analyze the social work collection in HKBU employing the usage-based evaluation method with circulation statistical data;
- to assess adequacy of the collection in relation to the usage rate in support of academic endeavors;
- to identify strengths and weaknesses of the collection in order to enhance the quality of the collection; and
- to analyze usage composition of the collection, particularly in terms of language and format.

Literature review

Numerous articles suggested a great wealth of methods to conduct collection evaluation. There was not any one model or single method perfectly applicable to all libraries under the present ever-changing and complex environment. Instead libraries needed to be able to select appropriate assessment strategies that fit their situation (Borin and Yi, 2008). To respond to the diverse and evolving library world today, Borin and Yi created several indicators for collection evaluation. They were collection capacity, subject-specific standards, scholarly publishing, environmental factors, users and usage (Borin and Yi, 2011). In our study, usage-based approach, one of the key indicators, was adopted.

Lyons (2006) suggested practical methodologies for the analysis of a monograph collection. Other than the print

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circulating collection, our research also involved audio-visual (A-V) materials. Lyons once again expressed that the best methodology was the one that matches your library's environment and resources. The environment referred to the intensity levels of staff skills, staff time and finances. Different methodologies were proposed according to various combinations of intensity and resources levels. It indicated that a methodology of internal analyses was preferable for the library environment of low intensity and low cost. In our case, taking into account limited staff time and economic constraints, we opted to adopt a cost-effective approach by using internal analyses on circulation statistics.

Some aspects of social work issues are quite localized and unique in terms of social problems and services to the place concerned. Thus, it is implausible to benchmark with peer libraries of other countries. The language of library materials is also a consideration when deciding which methodology will be used. Chinese language materials constitute a considerable proportion, over 40 per cent, of our library collection but the availability of standard lists for Chinese SWOK materials is limited. Although there are five local universities offering similar social work programs, it is not easy to identify a peer institute for benchmarking because of different curricular focus of individual programs. Moreover, our library's classification systems for English and Chinese languages are very distinct from theirs. Comparison by call number is therefore unworkable. Comparison by title is also unaffordable to us as it requires a great deal of time commitment to do it. Considering such constraints, it is apparent that the methods of peer group comparison and checking standard lists are not a viable option for our library's situation.

Use-based approach is a widely used evaluation technique to indicate an adequacy of a collection. Lockett (1989) listed a number of advantages of circulation studies on collection assessment, including easy access of data, large flexibility in duration of study and sample size, objective information and uncomplicated information management. In view of these, our library selected this method for our collection study.

This traditional method was suitable for print materials (Borin and Yi, 2008). They noted that despite tremendous growth of electronic resources, viability of print collections was still important for undergraduates and there was a need to continue to select and preserve high-use print items. The usage data could tell us the characteristics of use, including usage frequency, types of materials and what subjects were being used, which would provide us with valuable information for improving library collections and services. As stated in another article by Borin and Yi (2011), usage was reaffirmed as one of the good indicators for assessing academic library collections which showed the users' interest in using the collection. Circulation statistics for physical items, e.g. print and video, was the most common and effective measurement. With a profound history used by libraries, it gave strong evidence of the overall usage of the collection.

Among various collection evaluation methods like conspectus systems, WorldCat Collection Analysis tool, peer group benchmark, citation study and standard title lists, Kohn (2013) selected usage-based evaluation approach after assessing viability and feasibility of the above-mentioned methods, goals of the exercise and unique situation of her

library. With a curricular focus of her study, she chose usage-based evaluation for print collection corresponding to specific undergraduate courses. She found that it was the most suitable approach to gauge quantitative usage information and to provide direction for future purchasing and weeding decisions. Kohn's study gives us a very useful reference in conducting collection evaluation, especially when the library is under resources constraint.

In Lee's (1986) article, he made an association between usage levels to quality of collection. He pointed out that "heavy use of the collection shows that collection to be good, it follows that medium to good use of a collection denotes a collection that is satisfactory to users". It conveyed a sound assumption on the positive correlation between the usage and the quality of collection for our study. It further supported the use-based approach as one of the effective means of collection assessment.

Articles discussing collection evaluation on multidisciplinary subjects are limited. Lee (1986) conducted a collection evaluation on social work in Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT) in 1986. He used a blended approach through a comparison of WAIT Library's collecting intensity with publishing intensity, a survey on the needs of teaching staff as well as circulation and loan statistics. Lee took the Australian national bibliography database and other subject bibliographies and listings as the standard lists for checking the social work-related titles against his library. Regarding the method of circulation statistics, it was simply to find out the proportion of items being used based on an assumption that good use of the materials indicated a good collection. Per capita circulation statistics was also generated in his study. However, with advancement of technology, the focus is shifting to access to the materials rather than ownership of library materials. Per capita usage figures appear insignificant nowadays; therefore, number of users, including social work students and faculty members, were not covered in this study.

Methodology

Scope of the study

Social work is a multidisciplinary and diverse subject. Its knowledge crosses over many subject fields such as sociology, psychology and economics. Because of extensive subject coverage, it imposes difficulty and it is also unrealistic and infeasible to have an exhaustive study on all relevant subject areas for the assessment exercise.

To make the evaluation process cost efficient and manageable, our study was concentrated on the social work core areas based on the curriculum set out by Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) (2012) in Hong Kong (Table I). SWRB is a local statutory body to authorize and monitor the professional qualification, recognition and registration for registered social workers. The core areas are social work theories and practice, value and ethics, social welfare systems and social policies, human behavior and social environment, social administration and management.

The scope of our study was print books and A-V materials excluding local TV programs. The study period was restricted to borrowed materials in a four-year range, from 2009 to 2012. The usage data was based on the accumulated circulation statistics derived from the library system, where the checkout figures for titles include loan, renewal and internal use.

Table I Social work core areas

Core areas	DDC call number ranges	Descriptions
Social work theories and practice, social welfare systems, social policy, social administration and management	361	Social work theories, social problems and services, social welfare, casework, social policy
	362	Social problems of and services to groups of people, social security
Values and ethics	158-158.5	Personal improvement
	170	Ethics
	171.3	Personal fulfillment
	173	Ethics of family relationship
	176.4	Ethics of sexual relations
	177-177.7	Ethics of social relations
	179.2	Other ethical norms: treatment of children
	179.7-179.9	Respect and disrespect for human life
Human behavior and social environment	155-155.25	Life span human development
	155.4-155.6	Human growth and development
	155.92-155.94	Social environment

Note: Information can be found at the Web site of SWRB

Source: www.swrb.org.hk/Engasp/criteria_c.asp

Assumption

Although usage data is not directly linked to the quality of collection, usage statistics do provide an indication of strength and deficiency of the collection, as suggested by above-mentioned authors. A high percentage of titles borrowed and a high checkout rate in specific subject areas indicate that we should maintain and strengthen those areas in our collections. Conversely, a low percentage and a low checkout rate draw attention to either more vigorous promotion of collection use or deselection of low-use titles.

Methodology

Our library is using two distinct classification systems for English and Chinese materials, Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) for English language and Chinese Library Classification (CLC) for Chinese language. First, our efforts were made to identify English and Chinese call number ranges corresponding to the social work core subject areas indicated by SWRB. Second, based on the defined criteria, circulation statistics were generated for titles of core subject areas. Third, raw circulation data and significant bibliographic information were consolidated. Lastly, different categories of usage statistics were compiled after they had been scrutinized and corrected for areas of discrepancies.

Findings and discussion

An overview

A total of 24,246 titles, representing English and Chinese items, were examined in this exercise (Table II). English titles

accounted for 77.1 per cent (18,697 titles), while Chinese titles 22.9 per cent (5,549 titles). It was obvious that English titles carried much weight in the social work core areas in our library.

The overall usage rate was high with an average rate of 52.6 per cent of titles being borrowed, indicating more than half of the titles of core subject areas being used. Usage rate for Chinese titles, 72.9 per cent, was much higher than English titles, 46.5 per cent.

Each borrowed title had been accumulatively circulated for more than 30 times, reaching an average of 32.5 checkouts per title. Chinese titles were heavily used, 57.2 checkouts, much greater than English titles, 21 checkouts. However, English titles were borrowed extensively. English borrowed materials covered 68.2 per cent, whereas the remaining 31.8 per cent were Chinese titles.

The accumulated checkouts for Chinese titles, 231,447 checkouts, were greater than English titles, 183,008. For Chinese titles, it achieved a high checkout rate, 55.8 per cent and high rate of collection used, 72.9 per cent but comparatively of smaller collection size, 22.9 per cent. It tells us that an expansion for Chinese titles for the social work core collection should be considered to meet our users' needs.

A closer look at English titles

The usage level of English titles was satisfying, as nearly half of them, 46.5 per cent, had been used. The average checkout per circulated titles was 21. Except an area of "Social work for groups of people", all core subject areas attained the above-average checkout (Table III).

The call number range DDC 362 (social work for different groups of people) was an area of greatest strength within the

Table II An overview of usage-based collection evaluation

Core areas	Titles owned (%)		Checkouts (%)		Titles borrowed (%)		Collection used (% titles borrowed)	Usage per title (checkouts/title)
English titles	18,697	(77.1)	183,008	(44.2)	8,694	(68.2)	46.5	21
Chinese titles	5,549	(22.9)	231,447	(55.8)	4,048	(31.8)	72.9	57.2
Total	24,246	(100)	414,455	(100)	12,742	(100)	52.6	32.5

Table III English titles, including books and A-V materials

Core areas	Call number ranges	Titles owned (%)	Checkouts (%)	Titles borrowed (%)	Collection used (% titles borrowed)	Usage per title (checkouts/title)
<i>Social work theories and practice [..]</i>						
Social problems and services	DDC: 361	3,917 (20.9)	55,361 (30.3)	2,187 (25.1)	55.8	25.3
Social work for groups of people	DDC: 362	9,080 (48.6)	60,847 (33.2)	3,683 (42.4)	40.6	16.5
Values and ethics	DDC: 158-158.5, 170, 171.3, etc.	3,251 (17.4)	33,864 (18.5)	1,497 (17.2)	46	22.6
Human behavior and social environment	DDC: 155 . . . , etc.	2,449 (13.1)	32,936 (18)	1,327 (15.3)	54.2	24.8
Total		18,697 (100)	183,008 (100)	8,694 (100)	46.5	21

core subjects. It was revealed from the highest portion for the titles owned (9,080 titles, 48.6 per cent), number of checkouts (60,847 checkouts, 33.2 per cent) and number of checkout titles (3,683 titles, 42.4 per cent). Call number range DDC 361 (social problems and services) was ranked the second in titles owned (3,917 titles, 20.9 per cent), number of checkouts (55,361 titles, 30.3 per cent) and number of checkout titles (2,187 titles, 21.5 per cent). However, it attained the highest percentage of titles borrowed, 55.8 per cent, showing more than half of the titles checked out belonged to this call number group. In addition, it was also ranked the top for the usage, an average of 25.3 checkouts for each circulated title.

A great imbalance was found between books and A-V materials for English titles. In total, 97 per cent were book monographs, while A-V materials only accounted for 3 per cent; the title number was 18,166 titles versus 531 titles. There is a room for the growth of A-V materials.

The statistical distribution for English books followed the pattern of overall titles (Table IV). Collections of call number ranges DDC 362 and DDC 361 were found to be strong. They remained the important collections of high usage. As they were very active subject areas of social work collections, it was worthwhile having a detailed and in-depth analysis on these two sections' collections through a breakdown of DDC 361 and DDC 362.

Study on DDC 361 and DDC 362

To take a granular study on these two sections, based on the DDC structure, nine and ten sub-groups of call numbers were

assigned, respectively, to DDC 361 and DDC 362 (Tables V and VI). It was shown that an average checkout for DDC 361 was 25.4, higher than that of DDC 362 with 16.6 checkouts.

For DDC 361, titles of high usage were concentrated in three groups of call numbers, namely, DDC 361.4 (group work), DDC 361.8 (community action) and DDC 361.3 (practical social work), and their respective checkouts per title were 59.9, 35.3 and 28.8, all being well above the average checkout 25.4. "Group work" reached the highest checkout, 59.9 being double of the average checkout, 25.4 (Table V). However, titles in this call number range only occupied 4 per cent of the total titles in DDC 361. This draws our attention for future collection enhancement by purchasing more materials on this topic. Likewise, "Community action" was second highest in the circulation statistics, but the titles of this group were very small, only 2.5 per cent. In view of the gap between demand and supply for the materials on "Group work" (DDC 361.4) and "Community action" (DDC 361.8), collections of these two topics should be strengthened.

For DDC 362, the usage of all groups were fairly even, ranging from 27.3 to 11.4 checkouts. DDC 362.6 (people in late adulthood) attained the highest usage, 27.3 checkouts, while DDC 362.2 (people with mental illness and disabilities) was the second highest use, 19.3 checkouts (Table VI). Although titles of DDC 362.6 were heavily used, its collection was not in proportion, only amounting to 5 per cent. It implies that more resources in acquisitions should be targeted to the materials on this area.

Table IV Statistical distribution of English books

Core areas	Call number ranges	Titles owned (%)	Checkouts (%)	Titles borrowed (%)	Collection used (% titles borrowed)	Usage per title (checkouts/title)
<i>Social work theories and practice [..]</i>						
Social problems and services	DDC: 361	3,886 (21.6)	55,283 (30.6)	2,177 (25.4)	56.0	25.4
Social work for groups of people	DDC: 362	8,852 (48.5)	60,470 (33.4)	3,646 (42.6)	41.2	16.6
Values and ethics	DDC: 158-158.5, 170, 171.3, etc.	3,110 (17.1)	33,510 (18.5)	1,460 (17.1)	47	23.0
Human behavior and social environment	DDC: 155 . . . , etc.	2,318 (12.8)	31,622 (17.5)	1,274 (14.9)	55	24.8
Total		18,166 (100)	180,885 (100)	8,557 (100)	47.1	21.1
18,166/18,697 = 97 % of total English titles						

Table V DDC call number 361 social problems and services (book)

Call number ranges	Summary	Titles owned (%)		Checkouts (%)		Titles borrowed (%)		Collection used (% titles borrowed)	Usage per title (checkouts/title)
361	Specific kinds of assistance	654	(16.8)	7,200	(13)	337	(15.5)	51.5	21.4
361.1	Social problems	114	(2.9)	627	(1.1)	46	(2.1)	40.4	13.6
361.2	Social action	114	(2.9)	860	(1.6)	64	(2.9)	56.1	13.4
361.3	Social work	1,063	(27.4)	21,793	(39.4)	756	(34.7)	71.1	28.8
361.4	Group work	155	(4)	8,619	(15.6)	144	(6.6)	92.9	59.9
361.6	Governmental action	999	(25.7)	9,424	(17.1)	479	(22)	47.9	19.7
361.7	Private action	269	(6.9)	1,197	(2.2)	105	(4.8)	39	11.4
361.8	Community action	95	(2.5)	2,115	(3.8)	60	(2.8)	63.2	35.3
361.9	History, geographical treatment, biography for special kinds of social action	423	(10.9)	3,448	(6.2)	186	(8.6)	44	18.5
Total		3,886	(100)	55,283	(100)	2,177	(100)	56	25.4

Note: Call number 361.5 is not used in the latest edition of DDC

Table VI DDC call number 362 social problems of and services to groups of people (Book)

Call number ranges	Summary	Title owned (%)		Checkouts (%)		Titles borrowed (%)		Collection used (% titles borrowed)	Usage per title (checkouts/title)
362	Special topics of social problems of and services to groups of people	162	(1.8)	921	(1.5)	64	(1.8)	39.5	14.4
362.1	People with physical illness	3,013	(34)	18,151	(30)	1,166	(32)	38.7	15.6
362.2	People with mental illness and disabilities	1,481	(16.7)	13,724	(22.7)	711	(19.5)	48	19.3
362.3	People with mental retardation	147	(1.7)	956	(1.6)	59	(1.6)	40.1	16.2
362.4	People with physical disabilities	392	(4.4)	1,609	(2.7)	129	(3.5)	32.9	12.5
362.5	Poor people	485	(5.5)	2,507	(4.2)	207	(5.7)	42.7	12.1
362.6	People in late adulthood	441	(5)	6,277	(10.4)	230	(6.3)	52.2	27.3
362.7	Young people	1,528	(17.3)	8,175	(13.5)	570	(15.6)	37.3	14.3
362.8	Other groups of people	1,134	(12.8)	7,945	(13.2)	492	(13.5)	43.4	16.1
362.9	Social problems and services related to history, geographic treatment or biography	69	(0.8)	205	(0.3)	18	(0.5)	26.1	11.4
Total		8,852	(100)	60,470	(100)	3,646	(100)	41.2	16.6

DDC 361.7 (private action) and DDC 362.9 (social problems and services related to history, geographic treatment or biography) got the same lowest checkouts, 11.4. It might be due to the fact that the topics were not the main focus of the curriculum.

Although holdings for English A-V materials were not large, some interesting findings were still worthy to note. DDC 362 shared the largest portion in A-V titles with 229 titles of 43.1 per cent. Subjects on “Human behavior and social environment” (DDC 155) got the highest circulation, in an average of 24.8 times per title (Table VII), but it only accounted for 24.6 per cent of total A-V borrowable titles, the second lowest of titles owned in English A-V items. There is a strong need to expand the A-V collections of the topic on “Human behavior and social environment”.

Findings for Chinese titles

Chinese collection size pertaining to social work core areas was small with only 5,549 titles, which was only about one-third the amount of English titles. It may be connected to

the publishing market. Limited Chinese scholarly output in Hong Kong or Mainland, a historical emphasis on English language materials or even inadequate purchase from Taiwan publications, can be attributable to the small collection size.

The majority of the Chinese language titles were books (5,373 titles), while the A-V materials were represented by only 176 titles (Table VIII). However, the demand for Chinese titles was great. We can see this from its average percentage for collection used; 72.9 per cent of Chinese titles had been used, and its checkout per title was as high as 57.2. It points out that there is a great potential to increase Chinese materials of social work collection.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research study showed an adequacy of the Library’s SOWK collection as evidenced from a relatively high usage on the collection, with three out of four core subject areas achieving above-average checkouts, given an assumption of good collection associated with high usage. Nevertheless, areas of concern were an inadequate

Table VII Usage-based collection evaluation on social work for English A-V materials

Core areas	Call number ranges	Titles owned (%)	Checkouts (%)	Titles borrowed (%)	Collection used (% titles borrowed)	Usage per title (checkouts/title)
<i>Theories and practice, social welfare systems, social policy [. . .]</i>						
Social problems and services	DDC: 361	31 (5.8)	78 (4)	10 (7.3)	32.3	7.8
Social work for groups of people	DDC: 362	229 (43.1)	377 (17.8)	37 (27)	16.2	10.2
Values and ethics	DDC: 158-158.5, 170, 171.3, etc.	141 (26.5)	354 (16.6)	37 (27)	26.2	9.6
Human behavior and social environment	DDC: 155 . . . etc.	131 (24.6)	1,314 (61.6)	53 (38.7)	40.5	24.8
Total		532 (100)	2,123 (100)	137 (100)	25.8	15.5
532/18,697 = 3 % of total English titles						

Table VIII Usage-based collection evaluation on social work for Chinese titles

Formats	Titles owned (%)	Checkouts (%)	Titles borrowed (%)	Collection used (% titles borrowed)	Usage per title (checkouts/title)
Book	5,373 (96.8)	228,646 (98.8)	3,939 (97.3)	73.3	58
A-V	176 (3.2)	2,801 (1.2)	109 (2.7)	61.9	25.7
Total	5,549 (100)	231,447 (100)	4,048 (100)	72.9	57.2

size of Chinese publications and A-V materials. For an in-depth study on the two major active sections, DDC 361 and DDC 362, specific subject areas for improvement were identified, e.g. titles of “Group work” (DDC 361.4), “Community action” (DDC 361.8) and “People in late adulthood” (DDC 362.6).

Undoubtedly, there were limitations for the study. Factors such as scope of materials, accumulated usage statistics study period, time gap affect the result to a certain extent. Nevertheless, it is not our intention to undertake an exhaustive study that is minutely exact. Taking account of available resources, our study attempted to systematically conduct a collection analysis on a cross-disciplinary subject in a cost-effective manner. It also served as a stimulant for further exploration and research on the methodologies in contemplating the collection assessment of cross-disciplinary subjects.

Through conducting the project of collection evaluation, it not only directly serves our main purpose of showing characteristics, strength and weakness of the collection for the quality collection development, which benefits in building up alliance with the development of academic realm, but also implicitly expands our subject knowledge base. In addition, while compiling the bibliographic metadata and the relevant statistics, it concurrently revealed the multiple editions, multiple copies or obsolete titles, which definitely facilitated our collection management on the weeding exercise. This is a low-hanging fruit from the collection evaluation, realizing many goals by one action.

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