

Summary of discussion from CARLI Instruction Committee's
Are you as conflicted as we are? Challenges with teaching subject headings
February 11, 2022

In "Are you as conflicted as we are", Frances Brady (Adler University) and Alissa Droog (Northern Illinois University) shared their encounters with inconsistencies in subject heading applications and asked how others are dealing with these difficulties. 47 librarians attended the discussion and engaged through polls, chat, and verbal discussion. Below is a summary of the discussion.

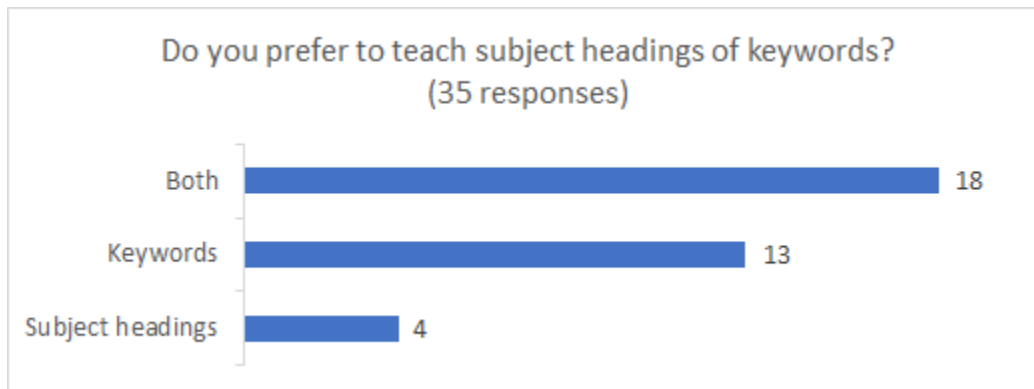


Image Description: Bar chart of Zoom poll responses to the question: "do you prefer to teach subject headings or keywords?" where 18 respondents said both, 13 reported teaching keywords and 4 reported teaching subject headings.

In what contexts do you teach subject headings/keywords? What levels, disciplines and what scaffolding do you use? What difficulties do you find in teaching subject headings or keywords?

In the discussion, it was clear that some disciplines (e.g. medical & mental health fields) use subject headings more than other disciplines do. Many teach students to use a combination of both subject headings and keywords, depending on the need to focus. Several librarians help students start with a familiar keyword search and move into using subject headings, particularly in consultations rather than instruction sessions. Others contended that they have stopped teaching subject headings as much because they are too restrictive; students are more familiar with using keywords from Google; the full text can be searched; subject headings are out of date; and students find the multi-step process out-of-date. Some librarians teach students that subject headings are like hashtags.

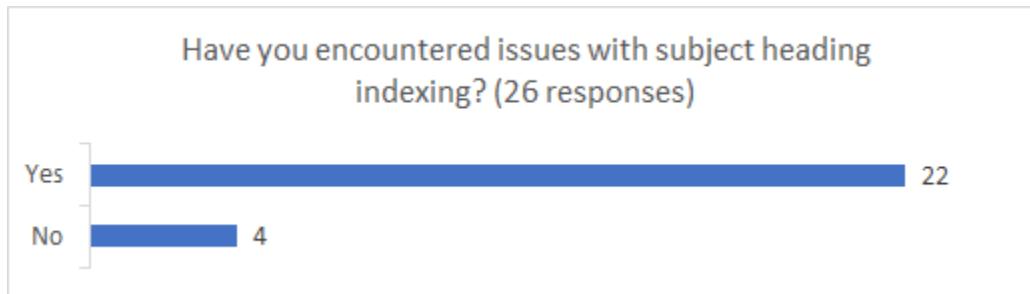


Image Description: Bar chart of Zoom poll responses to the question: “Have you encountered issues with subject heading indexing? where 22 said yes and 4 said no.

Tell us about any issues you’ve had with subject heading indexing.

Librarians discussed a lack of consistency in how subject headings are applied and different terms across databases.

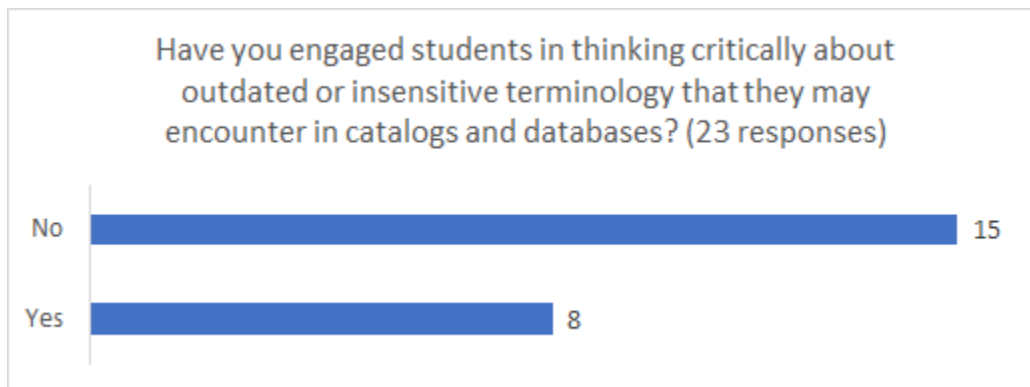


Image Description: Bar chart of Zoom poll responses to the question: “Have you engaged students in thinking critically about outdated or insensitive terminology that they may encounter in catalogs and databases?” where 15 said no and 8 said yes.

How have you engaged students in thinking critically about outdated or insensitive terminology that they may encounter in catalogs and databases?

Those who do not include subject headings in their instruction pointed to the lack of time in one-shots, while others make it an essential piece of their sessions. Some pointed to the challenge of insensitive and outdated language in articles, beyond just subject headings due to structural biases.

Have you collaborated with catalogers (or others responsible for description) to teach subject headings/keywords or to implement improvements that benefit users?

More attendees mentioned working with catalogers in their institutions rather than contacting databases. Someone pointed out that it is easier for catalogers to add or change to an existing subject heading rather than creating a new one or changing the language of existing headings.