Classification and indexing in Yeshiva libraries: analysis of the systems, their sources and development / Nachum Zitter

Abstract:

For over 1,800 years yeshivot for higher study of Torah1 have been an integral part of Jewish culture. In the last few hundred years a distinct yeshiva culture has developed, with many unique characteristics. One of the most important components of the yeshiva is the library, containing materials necessary for the regular study program as well as for in-depth study. The size of a yeshiva library varies from a few hundred to tens of thousands of books. Over the last 20 years, there has been a continuing acceleration of growth in the number of volumes held due to lowering of printing costs, changing sources of library budgets and the exponential growth in the number of new or revised titles available.

Typically, the yeshiva library contains only items from religious sources, although a few yeshiva libraries include a relatively small amount of secular works in fields which serve as background to the yeshiva's study program. The yeshiva library also follows many of the characteristics of special libraries: supporting the parent institution's information needs and a known body of users with a collection tailored for their use. Therefore, for purposes of this paper we view the yeshiva library as a special library.

In yeshiva libraries, the full range of librarians' tasks is performed by students, including acquisitions, cataloging & classification. The lack of professionally trained personnel may be one of the reasons for the dearth of research about yeshiva libraries, especially as to their internal organization and development.

In general, subject access in libraries is enabled through two primary tools: classification and indexing. During the previous century there has been an increasing tendency to utilize standardized classification and indexing schemes which appeal to a wide range of libraries. Yeshiva libraries, however, work within a framework of many unusual factors which often preclude the ability to utilize such systems and lead to the development of local schemes.

This paper researched the use of these two tools - classification and indexing in the context of yeshiva libraries, based on a sample of 28 libraries taken from across Israel. The present research focused upon two aspects: the process of classification and analysis of classification scheme tables. The first was analyzed chiefly through qualitative methods including in-depth interviews with librarians of participating institutions. The analysis of classification scheme tables employed quantification of data from this source and comparing it to various benchmarks. Comparisons were made between classification schemes used in different sectors of the yeshiva world as well as between yeshiva and other schemes. Qualitative information from the interviews was used to help explain the results.

"Classification process" included identifying the persons involved, the source of the schemes and their development, as well as the utilization of indexing. Classification scheme analysis centered on a number of topics, such as the order of main classes, placement of topics in main classes and methods and details of internal subdivisions. For each parameter, comparisons were made between different sectors of yeshiva society and to other schemes. Other topics include the importance of different notation styles, subject access in yeshivot in general and the ability of yeshiva students to identify authors of Torah works.

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Results show two stages of classification development. corresponding to two stages of library development: inside the study hall (beit hamidrash) and orsar sefizrim, i.e. a library located separate from the main study hall. In the first setting, classification tends to be minimalistic and influenced strongly by the method through which the book is used within the context of yeshiva study, and not necessarily according to its content or writing style. In the second case, classification schemes were much more developed and tended to prefer classification by topic rather than manner of use.

The vast majority of yeshiva library schemes were developed locally, increasing the importance of their analysis. As opposed to classification, indexing is used minimally and by relatively few yeshivot. Possible reasons for this were proposed and analyzed.

The comparisons of the schemes revealed a predominance (79%) of libraries that give notation by shelf number and not topic-based notation. The smaller group of libraries utilized classification schemes far more developed than the predominant group.

Two different patterns of main class order were revealed: One follows traditional Jewish ideological/philosophical reasoning, i.e. the primacy of the Tanach, while the other is more practically based on the yeshiva study system, i.e. the primacy of the Talmud. In most of the libraries studied, sub-topics were frequently appended to main classes, in contrast to accepted practice in standard schemes, chiefly to accommodate methods of study. Vast differences were noted in depth of sub-division although the rationale of sub-division remained the same.

The analysis of quantity of subdivisions produced remarkable results. This method clearly delineates the areas where extended subdivision was deemed necessary.

Comparisons between the depth of subdivision and subjects stressed in the curriculum of particular sectors of yeshivot showed mixed results. While no correlation was found between perceived importance and detailed subdivision within the largest classes (Talmud and halacha), significant correlations were found between the perceived importance of secondary classes (Jewish thought, Hassidut etc.) and the level of subdivision.

Comparisons of the results between different sectors led to many thought- provoking conclusions. Chief among these is the difference between Hareidi (ultra-orthodox) and Hesder (merging study with military service) yeshivot. Numerous comparisons show the Hesder yeshivot classification schemes to be more detailed and give far better subject access. Comparisons to other schemes highlight the heterogeneous nature of Jewish classification schemes and the importance of applying the correct type of scheme to the individual library.

Beyond the contribution of this paper towards the understanding of yeshiva libraries, additional research in the field of information science may be developed from its findings. Since these methods were developed locally and independently of published schemes their analysis can contribute to our understanding of the process of subdivision and classification. Furthermore, the relationships between type of notation and classification development were shown and should be further investigated. Finally, the findings clearly show correlations between methods of study and characteristics of locally developed classification schemes. Utilization of this knowledge can be a tool for analyzing study methods through applicable classification schemes. Alternatively, analysis of methods of study should be considered when planning and developing classification systems for educational institutions.

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