June 2013

Op Ed-590: Local Notes

Steve McKinzie

Catawba College, smckinzi@catawba.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McKinzie, Steve (2013) "Op Ed-590: Local Notes," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 3, Article 16.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6523>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Op Ed — 590: Local Notes

Bad Metaphors and Good: Why Weeding the Collection isn't Really Weeding at All

by **Steve McKinzie** (Library Director, Corriher-Linn-Black Library, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

I've a stack of emails from a major library listserv about weeding. I have even received invitations to Webinars on the topic. Now don't get me wrong. I understand what librarians are talking about when they say "weeding." They are trying to get rid of stuff. They want to discard from their collection outdated titles, less-than current analysis, and older scholarship that lacks either currency or relevance and probably both. They want to get the bad material out of the stacks, and I have no problem whatsoever with the practice. I regard it as altogether commendable. Every library, aside from major research libraries and the **Library of Congress**, needs to jettison scores of old titles and offer its users the best and most current collection.

But one wonders, why on earth do we call the practice "weeding?" One could scarcely imagine a more atrocious and inappropriate label. I ask you; are there no horticulturalists or amateur gardeners in our midst to cry foul — who are appalled at such woefully unfitting language? Discarding older less relevant materials isn't weeding — not by any stretch of the imagination or by any standard of sane nomenclature — it is thinning. That's right. We are talking about thinning our collections — not weeding them. We are getting rid of things we once thought valuable. We are not throwing things out that we never intended on having in the first place.

Now there are undoubtedly some among you who may counter that I am making far too much of this. It doesn't really matter what we call things. Even **Shakespeare** famously noted that a rose by any other name smells just as sweet. But let's be honest. The bard never dreamed of suggesting that people have a license to label anything anyway they want — especially when they are using a gardening term and using it recklessly.

Terms — especially metaphors should convey what they mean. They should suggest what they imply. For instance when we say in the library profession that a certain librarian has done yeoman's work in a particular field, we imply that the person has done the hard work of mastering the trade's basics. One thinks of a cataloger mastering the Marc record and learning cataloging from top to bottom or a reference librarian understanding a plethora of fundamental and key information sources. When we note that our collection covers

a certain subject, we suggest that there are enough varied resources (be that monographs, journals or online sources) to take in the broad dimensions of the topic — enough titles to blanket the subject. Such metaphors are appropriate. They make sense, even if we tend to overwork them.

But when we use the term *weeding* when we are really talking about getting rid of stuff in our collection, we employ an old horticultural or agricultural term that suggests something very different from what we really mean in the library profession. As everyone knows who has ever planted anything, weeding is the elimination of "undesirable" plants — invasive species that could well threaten whatever it is we've planted. They are living plants (often very tenacious ones) that suddenly sprout up in your garden unintended and uninvited — chickweeds, dandelions, invasive grasses — things that have to be jettisoned.

"Thinning," on the other hand, is entirely different. It is the removal of things you actually planted — highly selected hybrid or heritage varieties of carrots, spinach and what have you. These items are things that you cannot currently accommodate (however much you might like to) — plants crowded too close together — others that are too weak and unlikely to survive. In the library, thinning such items would mean selecting books and journals that you originally purchased (sometimes at enormously high prices) but which you now consider to be inappropriate or outdated. Such selections are not weeds. They are good things (like crowded lettuce seedlings that you planted only weeks before and that you now have to throw away) — the good that has to be dis-

carded to make way for the better. That is what thinning is all about.

Weeding, on the other hand, argues for something very different. It implies the removal of things which you never intended or wanted in your garden. In the library it would include things that found their way into your collection against your wishes or contrary to your collection development policy — books that might seriously misguide your readers, such as a plethora of holocaust denial literature that someone smuggled into the collection unbeknownst — or cheap romance novels brought in by a mischievous undergraduate and stuffed into your Renaissance literature collection. Getting rid of any of that by any and all means, would, of course, be weeding — that is the legitimate discarding of inappropriately acquired material.

All of this brings me around to a simple and straightforward suggestion. We need to change our terms — alter our labels in this instance. I am not complaining, nor am I out to criticize anyone's language. But we ought to get this straight. As librarians, we have a reputation for accurate labeling and a tendency to organize things intelligently. Consider our concern about the appropriateness and inappropriateness of **Library-of-Congress** subject headings and our penchant for political correctness. We care about language. We care about communicating clearly. It's high time we got rid of the term "weeding" — at the least the way we are currently using it. It's a bad label. It's the wrong metaphor. 🐾

Rumors from page 37

time with her family! We will miss you, **Lorraine!**

Speaking of which, **Albert Joy** (with the gorgeous daughter) tells me that he is going to retire at the end of this calendar year! **Albert** swears that this is his last **Charleston Conference** since he plans

to travel and play a lot! Boo hiss! Let's talk him out of it!

But — listen up! — **Georges Sarazin** has joined **Midwest Library Service** sales staff as of April 1, 2013. I remember **Georges** who is a 25-year veteran of the library industry, beginning his career with the **Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (CISTI)**. He has held several management posi-

continued on page 51