Using the CREW Method to Enhance Public and School Library Collections

BELINDA BOON
Kent State University School of Library and Information Science, Columbus, OH

Now, more than ever, public and school libraries struggle to maintain their relevance in the age of instant access, electronic databases, and Google. While print collections continue to grow, many collections are drowning in obsolete, unused, and unwanted materials. And while most libraries keep up with deselection in an intelligent manner, many still are stymied by obstacles ranging from dwindling materials budgets to long-term administrators and governing officials reluctant to let go of materials. This article encourages use of the CREW method, a systematic, 10-step weeding process outlined in a manual of the same title published by the Texas State Library & Archives Commission in the mid-1990s. An exploration of the weeding process, detailed explanation of the CREW method, considerations for library staff undertaking a large-scale weeding project, and methods for disposing of weeded materials also are included.

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INTRODUCTION

I appreciate the misunderstanding I have had with Nature over my perennial border. I think it is a flower garden; she thinks it is a meadow lacking grass, and tries to correct the error.

Sara Stein, My Weeds, 1988

Librarians are fond of using a gardening analogy when they talk about weeding their collections. But the idea of maintaining a useful collection...
of books and materials in uncluttered shelves free from shabby bindings, shelf-sitting titles, and outdated information carries with it the secret that all gardeners know: Maintaining a beautiful garden is an ongoing process requiring constant vigilance. The nature of library collections is to grow and expand, filling shelves and covering every available surface. And since library staff often are pulled in 10 different directions at once, weeding can easily fall to the bottom of everyone’s to-do list. Fortunately, undertaking a large weeding project can be made more manageable by breaking the process down into a logical sequence of smaller steps, a practice utilized by the CREW method.

First developed by Joseph P. Segal in his 1980 publication, *The CREW Manual: A Unified System of Weeding, Inventory, and Collection-Building for Small and Medium-Sized Public Libraries*, the CREW method proposes a systematic, step-by-step method of weeding. The acronym “CREW” stands for Continuous Review, Evaluation, and Weeding, a reference to the ongoing and dynamic nature of the collection-management process. Just as a coin has two sides, weeding is an integral component of collection development. The 10-step CREW method includes developing a weeding policy, reviewing usage statistics, gathering weeding tools, examining individual items, conducting an inventory, consulting standard indexes, sorting and handling weeded materials, ordering necessary replacements, setting up displays for low-circulating materials, and weeding on an annual basis. All 10 steps will be covered in more detail later in this article. First, it may be useful to review the definition of weeding.

**WHAT IS WEEDING?**

Weeding, sometimes called *deselection*, is the term used to describe the process of removing books and other library materials that generally fall into one or more of the following three categories:

1. **Books and materials in dilapidated physical condition:** These materials are easy to spot, and their removal from the collection is easy to justify. The most obtuse of county commissioners can be persuaded that a book covered with mildew or damaged by water should be discarded. Rule of thumb: If it looks like you need to put on latex gloves to pick it up, chances are no one else will want to pick it up either. When dealing with collections that have not been weeded in 5 or 10 years—or in your lifetime—consider going through the entire collection and pulling out all the ratty-looking books. Once this is done the collection will immediately take on a fresher, cleaner look. Staff can then focus on the next category of potential weeds:
2. Books and materials that contain outdated or inaccurate information:
There are many classic examples of these types of materials, such as the book with a 1959 publication date assuring readers that “One day, man will go to the moon!” (I actually weeded this very title from the children’s department in a rural public library in Kentucky during a workshop in 2005.) Aside from obviously dated titles like these, library staff should be on the lookout for older editions of medical, financial, and travel books, information that goes out of date very quickly. A 10-year-old book on cancer treatment will not supply the library patron with the accurate information they need, nor will a 5-year-old book on U.S. tax law. In cases such as this, circulation statistics do not tell the whole story. People who have been diagnosed with a serious illness, or who have loved ones suffering from that illness, will check out anything they can find—even books with inaccurate information—just to have something on the topic. Chances are they won’t bother to check the copyright date. It is the responsibility of the library staff to ensure that accurate and timely information is available to patrons who need it. For the most part, the removal of books and materials in this category also is easy to justify.

3. Books and materials that do not fit in the scope of the library’s collection:
Books and materials in this category can be difficult to spot. They may be brand-new books with accurate and up-to-date information and attractive covers, but for some reason these items aren’t of interest to the library’s community of users. This is a common occurrence in school library collections. A young and enthusiastic teacher may work with the librarian all year to build up a collection in her area of expertise; when she leaves at the end of the school year another teacher is hired to teach that subject—one who uses a completely different approach to the topic and needs different titles to support her teaching. Library shelf space is valuable real estate, and few school libraries can afford to let unused materials languish in the stacks. Happily, in cases such as this, teachers are almost always happy to receive books for their classroom collections, freeing up needed space in the library.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR WEEDING

Before beginning a large-scale weeding project, there are several things library staff can do to ensure a successful weeding experience.

Evaluate the Collection

The purpose of collection evaluation is to provide information about the collection to help the librarian justify spending, increase familiarity, provide
comparison data, and help identify gaps and areas needing improvement (Evans & Saponaro, 2005, pp. 315–316). Public library staff should take the time to familiarize themselves with the circulation history, interlibrary loan requests, publication ages, and shelf availability for every part of the collection before diving headlong into the weeding process. These data can be broken down for each area in the collection—picture books, biographies, genre fiction, Dewey ranges, audiobooks, etc. The resulting printouts may be massive, but they can be distributed among staff responsible for each area to help break down the process.

Based on the evaluation data and physical observation of the shelves, staff should be able to make recommendations for eliminating or expanding particular areas and for developing collection goals and priorities. For example, an analysis of the cookbook section may reveal that the median age of this part of the collection is 1983 and the shelves are crammed full despite traditionally heavy circulation. Staff might recommend heavy weeding to reduce the number of books by one-third. Since this is a popular area, weeded books might be put immediately into the library’s ongoing book sale to help raise money for new materials or donated to a local food kitchen.

Become Familiar with the Library’s Selection Policy

The selection policy should give staff a good idea of the scope and intent of the collection. Knowing the selection criteria, materials formats, collection limits, and details about the library’s service population will aid staff in determining what materials should be weeded from the collection.

Become Familiar with Goals for the Collection

Collection goals are generally short-term considerations intended to help address imbalances in the collection and establish priorities for collection development. Goals will change periodically as the priorities and status of the collection change. For example, a short-term goal to update the children’s nonfiction materials may be accomplished within 2 years, allowing staff to focus their maintenance efforts on another high-priority area in need of revamping. This goal is illustrated in the following public library policy statement:

Major reductions must be made in the entire Youth Services Department collection in order to maintain a current, relevant collection within existing space limitations. A short-range goal of the withdrawal of a minimum of 3,000 books by December 1, 1992 has been established. In the long-term, weeding must be done on this level and beyond to make room for more current materials. Subject areas that need updating are biography and children’s reference materials. These areas are already experiencing
an increased level of spending. Children’s reference materials need to be maintained on a continuing basis to build an effective resource for Library patrons (Morton Grove Public Library Board of Trustees, 2005).

Review the Library’s Roles in the Community

The well-known ALA publication, *The New Planning for Results: A Streamlined Approach*, describes a number of service responses that public libraries may provide for their communities, including Basic Literacy, Business & Career Information, Commons, Community Referral, Consumer Information, and Cultural Awareness (Nelson, 2001, p. 65). Identifying the primary and secondary roles your library plays will help determine the focus of the library’s collection and guide library staff in effective collection development and maintenance, including weeding. Following is a sample of how these roles may be depicted in a library’s collection development policy:

Collections are developed to meet the objectives of public library service. Because the public library serves a community embracing a wide range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, educational levels and interests, the Library may fulfill a number of roles in the community. After considering library and materials use, current and past strengths of the library, local demographic trends, citizen expectation as expressed in surveys, other library resources in the area and current resources of the Library, the Washoe County Library System has selected the following roles to emphasize:

Primary:

- **CURRENT TOPICS AND TITLES**—We help to fulfill our public’s appetite for information about popular cultural and social trends and their desire for satisfying recreational experiences.
- **LIFELONG LEARNING**—We help address our public’s desire for self-directed personal growth and development opportunities.

Secondary:

- **GENERAL INFORMATION**—We help to meet our public’s need for information and answers to questions on a broad array of topics related to work, school, and personal life.
- **COMMONS**—We provide an environment that helps to meet our public’s need to meet and interact with others and to participate in public discourse about community issues.
- **BUSINESS AND CAREER INFORMATION**—We address our public’s need for information related to business, careers, work, entrepreneurship, personal finances, and obtaining employment (Washoe County Public Library Board of Trustees, 2004).
Consider the Needs and Demands of Users

Although no library collection is built exclusively from user requests, librarians are in a unique position to understand the needs and demands of their users and be aware of other resources within the larger service community. For example, knowing that the local high school drama class needs contemporary monologues for the state contest may help staff decide to weed their shelf-sitting play anthologies. Realizing that the local community theatre group maintains an in-house collection of plays for its repertoire may help guide those weeded titles to a new home.

Consider How a Particular Item Relates to Others on the Same Subject

When making weeding decisions, consider whether an item supplements, complements, duplicates, or makes obsolete other titles in the same subject area. For example, a copy of *Fodor’s France 2008* makes the 2000, 2002, and 2004 editions unnecessary. Another book in a different area might be superfluous, not adding anything substantial to the body of knowledge on the subject. Will anyone really miss the dinosaur book that has been torn to shreds when there are 50 other dinosaur titles available? (I imagine a chorus of librarians across the country screaming, “Yes! These kids know all those books!”) The same principle applies to multiple copies of works that have declined in popularity, such as bestsellers from previous years. Keep the one or two copies in the best physical condition and weed the rest.

Consider Cooperative Agreements with Other Libraries

Libraries whose users routinely visit other branches or libraries in their area may base some weeding decisions on whether their users can obtain those materials at other institutions. This is often the case in small, rural libraries whose patrons visit several towns within the same county. Library branches in large city or county systems can check to see how many copies of a title or how many titles on a subject are available within the entire system before discarding shelf-sitters. It may be that the shelf-sitter in one branch flies off the shelf in the branch across town. School libraries also may have the opportunity to trade titles within their districts.

Is the Library Considered an Archive or Local History Center?

Most public libraries house local history collections and some even maintain costumes and ephemera. For example, the Weatherford (TX) Public Library includes the playbills and *Peter Pan* costume for Mary Martin, who is from
the area and made the role famous on Broadway. Even a school library, while not considered an archive, may be expected to collect and maintain certain materials in perpetuity, such as yearbooks or student directories. Knowing what these materials are before beginning a weeding project will allow staff to focus their efforts on the circulating collections.

Relying on Interlibrary Loan

More than one librarian has suggested that if every library were to discard the same books no one would be able to supply the titles through interlibrary loan. In reality, the chances that your library will discard the last copy on earth of any given title are remote indeed. Thanks to organizations like OCLC and their WorldCat product, interlibrary loan services have expanded to include the entire world, even for libraries in remote areas. The key to utilizing these services effectively is being aware of how often a particular item is requested by your community of users.

**WEEDING WITH THE CREW METHOD**

As stated earlier, the CREW method is a systematic, step-by-step method of weeding first proposed by Joseph P. Segal in his 1980 publication, *The CREW Manual: A Unified System of Weeding, Inventory, and Collection-Building for Small and Medium-Sized Public Libraries*. For the sake of simplicity, I break these steps into three categories—Before, During, and After Weeding.

**Before Weeding**

**MAKE WEEDING A PART OF POLICY**

Articulating your library’s weeding policy is one way to engage library staff, administrators, governing officials, and the public in the weeding process. In as few as one or two sentences the library can succinctly transmit a wealth of information about the weeding process, as in this example below:

> Materials that no longer meet the stated objectives of the library (including those that have become damaged or obsolete) will be systematically withdrawn on a continual basis according to the accepted professional practices described in the publication, *The CREW Method*. Disposition and replacement of library materials so weeded will be at the discretion of the library director, subject to all relevant provisions of the Charter of the Town of __________ and the statutes of the State of ______ (Boon, 1995, p. 13).
In this brief passage, readers learn that weeding is an accepted professional practice that involves the systematic, not random, removal of books and other library materials. (We don’t just come into work one day and decide all the red books have to go; there is a method to our seeming madness.) Readers also learn that someone with the necessary training and education is responsible for making the final decision about what is discarded from the collection. But although much information can be imparted in just two sentences, libraries may want to elaborate on the details of weeding criteria and disposal methods they use, as in the following example:

Obsolescence, damage, normal wear and tear and space limitations make the discarding of materials, equipment and furnishings a continuing process. Whenever possible, property which is no longer useful to the library should be recycled, either by donation to another library or public agency, sale to a willing buyer or through available waste recycling programs.

Weeding of Library Property
Factors considered in the discard of books and other library property include: Poor physical condition Lack of use Out of date information Multiple copies of titles no longer in demand Older editions replaced by later revisions Space limitations require priority decisions to be made in the discarding of library property. For example, lesser used books may have to be discarded to make room for newer ones (Schreiner Memorial Library Board of Trustees, 2005, 2008).

Read the Shelves
Once a weeding policy has been established and signed off on by the library board and other governing entities, library staff can make the weeding process easier by taking the time to read the shelves. Even juvenile volunteers can be employed to make sure all the books are right side up and pulled out to the edge of the shelves, which will make the weeder’s job flow more smoothly.

Check the Library’s Holdings (Inventory)
While school libraries are careful to conduct an inventory of their holdings at least once during the school year, it is not unusual to find public libraries that have not conducted an inventory in 10 or 20 years, if ever. Fortunately, hand-held scanners and automated catalogs have made the inventory process easier to conduct even for large library collections. Conducting an inventory while weeding makes sense because library staff must handle and examine
every item on the shelves during this process. Why not go one step further and check the items that are not pulled against the library’s catalog records?

During Weeding

Gather Usage Statistics

Library staff should review circulation and interlibrary loan statistics during the collection evaluation stage, but it can be helpful to have a printout showing these data in hand while weeding specific sections of the collection. It is also worthwhile to keep in mind that circulation statistics do not always indicate an item’s worth and should be taken with the proverbial grain of salt, particularly when evaluating materials that traditionally experience a low volume of turnover. Staff should not be eager to weed a low-circulating copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* unless other factors are evident. Classic titles and subject areas that do not rate the high interest of the majority of users still have a place in school and public library collections.

Gather Weeding Tools

Weeding tools include a book cart to hold weeded materials, disposal slips or Post-It® Notes to mark each item, and a pen or pencil. Disposal slips are used to indicate how the weeded items will be handled once they are removed from the collection. Materials might be sold in the Friends book sale, donated or traded to another library or to a local nonprofit organization, put on display in an effort to generate interest, repaired and reshelved, or sent off to the bindery to be rebound.

Examine the Collection Item by Item

This is the actual weeding process, handling and examining each item in the collection individually and determining if it should stay or go. Library shelf space is expensive real estate, and every item in the collection should be able to justify its existence there. Unfortunately, there is no shortcut for this time-consuming process, but it tends to go faster when it involves physically damaged or obviously outdated items.

Check Standard Indexes

Standard indexes like the *Children’s Catalog* and the *Fiction Catalog* put out by the H. W. Wilson publishing company often are used for collection development and reader’s advisory. They can sometimes be helpful in determining whether or not an item has enough merit to be retained in the collection. Keep in mind, however, that these works list every item considered to have
literary merit and that no one library could possibly hold every title they list. Library staff should consider the needs of their community of users and their space and budget restraints when using these tools as weeding aides.

**After Weeding**

**TREAT BOOKS ACCORDING TO THEIR DISPOSAL SLIPS**

It may be easier for staff to dispose of weeded materials after each book cart load rather than waiting until the end of the process. Weeded materials tend to cover every available flat surface with startling swiftness, and after only a few hours or days library staff may find themselves unable to see over the stacks of discards. It is much more efficient to deal with materials before the piles become overwhelming. Box up all of the books that need rebinding and ship them out; put aside books to be used in displays and create those displays as soon as possible; make lists of newer editions to be ordered when budget monies become available and reshelve the older editions; put materials to be donated in the library van (or the director’s Volkswagen) and take them across town to the senior center; stack the extra copies of *National Geographic* in the library’s ongoing book sale; put the dreadfully damaged items into black plastic garbage bags and sneak them to the dumpster. The more quickly you move to dispose of weeded items, the less overwhelmed you will be while conducting a massive weeding project.

**INCORPORATE WEEDING INTO THE LIBRARY’S ROUTINE**

The best way to prevent staff from becoming incapacitated with physical and mental stress is to avoid the kind of massive weeding projects that occur when a library has never been thoroughly weeded before. Although weeding “on the fly”—or on an as-needed basis—is a common practice, it has to be done continuously if it is to be effective. Once the entire collection has been weeded, it will be time to start again. Rather than picturing Sisyphus toiling endlessly to roll the stone to the top of the mountain in the Underworld only to have it roll back down again, keep in mind the message inherent in the acronym “CREW”: Continuing Review, Evaluation, and Weeding. Collection development and maintenance is an ongoing process of which weeding should be an integral part.

**CREATING DISPLAYS FOR LOW-CIRCULATING ITEMS**

Circulation statistics usually give some indication when a book is not fulfilling its role as a useful member of the collection; however, it is always a good idea to go one step further when investigating a shelf-sitter to find out why it is not engaging the interest of library users. Are patrons unaware that the
title exists? Perhaps a display could help generate interest in low-circulating books. Over the years I have heard some brilliant ideas for displaying unused library materials in ways that intrigue and invite users. One librarian told of how she used a baby bassinet and plush toys to announce “new arrivals” in her library. I saw a similar display in an elementary school in San Antonio, Texas, featuring a baby bed with a giant teddy bear reading amidst colorful picture books. What child—or teacher—could resist the pull of such a display? Another librarian told me her staff tested the interest in shelf-sitters by filing them on a book cart marked “to be shelved.” Knowing that people can’t resist seeing what others have checked out, the staff gave weeded books 1 week to generate interest before they were discarded permanently from the collection.

DISPOSING OF WEEDED MATERIALS

Weeding doesn’t necessarily mean throwing books away. Most of the time, the library’s discards are recycled into the Friends’ annual or ongoing book sales. Popular items sometimes can be repaired or rebound to give them a fresh appearance, and low-circulating items sometimes generate new interest when they are put on display. Weeded materials may be donated to other libraries or to community organizations such as the local women’s shelter or juvenile detention center, doctor’s offices, or nursing homes. The thing to keep in mind when donating weeded materials is whether or not they are still useful. No one is served by outdated or shabby donated books, but multiple copies of past years’ bestsellers may be welcome. Likewise, gently worn paperbacks and older copies of large-print fiction books are often much appreciated by local homeless shelters and nursing homes.

Above all, resist the urge to ship 20-year-old sets of encyclopedias and other useless items to Third World countries overseas with the mistaken belief that they will be treasured by those less fortunate. A librarian attending a state library conference several years ago told a story from her own experience that drove home this lesson. She once worked in a small Catholic college library that had not been weeded for many years. Most of the books she deaccessioned were published in the 1920s or earlier and had not been off the shelves in decades. Many were covered with mildew. Her administrator, however, was reluctant to let her throw the books away or put them in a charity book sale. Instead, he suggested that she have the books shipped overseas “to the missionaries.” The librarian was wise enough not to argue and instead called the national office in Washington to find out what this would entail. She was told they would be happy to accept the library’s donations as long as the books were no more than 5 years old and the library paid the postage. Once her administrator heard this news, he was happy to let her dispose of the books as she saw fit.
Sometimes there is no other recourse than to throw away badly damaged or obsolete materials. In the past, ripping weeded books in half was an acceptable practice since it prevented them from returning to the library’s collection (similar, in a way, to driving a stake into the heart of a vampire to prevent it from roaming). Weeded materials have an uncanny tendency to work their ways back into the collections they were pulled from, usually as a result of well-meaning individuals “saving” them from garage sales and dumpsters. Even if the books are stamped “WITHDRAWN” or “ON PERMANENT LOAN” in large red letters, people tend to recognize only the library’s property stamp and return them to their original home, thinking they have done a good deed. To avoid this, libraries should make every effort to permanently dispose of unusable items.

CONCLUSION

Weeding a library’s collection can be a daunting task, particularly if some time has passed since all or part of the collection has been critically evaluated. The busy environment of a typical public or school library only adds to the complexity of this task. Library staff sometimes finds it difficult simply to keep up with day-to-day operations, but maintaining an up-to-date and useful collection must be a top priority for any librarian who desires to successfully fulfill the information needs of her community of users. One useful method for managing a large-scale and massive weeding project is to follow a systematic series of steps, such as those outlined in The CREW Method (Boon, 1995). Breaking the weeding process down into manageable parts will assist library staff to gain a sense of completion, while at the same time ensuring that professional collection development standards are met and maintained. The result will be a collection to be proud of.

REFERENCES


