""""""current comments"

Education by Steeping, Nibbling, or Classification?

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Most Current Contents® readers may never have heard of Henry E. Bliss, the author of the Bliss Classification. I met this remarkable man when he was 83 years old. Quite by accident we met at Columbia University when I was a Grolier Bibliographical Fellow in 1953. He had just completed a revision of the science schedules of his classification system(1). Bliss's system of bibliographic classification required monumental effort, whose result is a remarkable achievement. During his fifty years' service as librarian of the College of the City of New York, Mr. Bliss had the perserverance to read fundamental textbooks of every branch of knowledge and science then extant. Out of his fantastically broad knowledge of science, he constructed the classification system which bears his name. Or the few occasions when we met again before his death in 1955, I asked him how, as a librarian and book-lover, he overcame the frustration I felt in not having enough time to read everything. He answered, "classification, that is, broadly speaking, the perception of relationships, is the only way." Hence, his fifty-year program to grasp the fundamentals of chemistry, physics, mathematics, biology, philosophy, etc. I suppose that this philosophy would receive today the applause of men like R.M. Hutchins. But, it must have seemed contradictory to Abraham Flexner who, in 1925, was saying, "men become educated by steeping themselves thoroughly in a few subjects, not by nibbling at many".(2)

The answer probably is somewhere in between-or a combination of both. Our greatest scientific minds have indeed steeped themselves in a few subjects while simultaneously perceiving the relations not only between fields of science, but also between science and society. I think Current Contents helps our readers in their simultaneous quest for depth and breadth. Other ISI® services, ASCA® and the Science Citation Index®, also help us to see not only the relations of fields but also the individual and collective impact of individuals and groups!

It is interesting to note the revived interest in the subject of classification-not merely in the context of library science but as it will be more broadly treated at the forthcoming meeting of the Classification Society on April 8-9, 1970, in Columbus, Ohio (3). Had Henry E. Bliss lived to his 100th year, he would certainly be among the registrants.

- Bliss, H.E., A Bibliographic Classification, Extended by Systematic Auxiliary Schedules for Composite Specification and Notations, (H.W. Wilson Co., New York, N.Y.) 1953.
- 2. Flexner, A., Medical Education, (The Macmillan Co., New York) 1925, p. 148.
- For information on the Classification Society, write to its president, R.R. Sokal, at the State University of New York.