

Teaching cataloguing ethics: an exploration of an ethics-infused knowledge organization curriculum

Deborah Lee

This article contemplates how cataloguing ethics might be taught within knowledge organization (KO). This exploration of cataloguing education considers the teaching of cataloguing ethics within an example Library and Information Studies programme. The first part focuses on how cataloguing ethics fits into the structure of KO teaching, including questions about whether it is a standalone topic or an integral part of the whole curriculum. The second part outlines three example activities with cataloguing ethics contents. Six pedagogical points are elicited, including ideas around the power held by the cataloguer, the relationship of cataloguing ethics to the wider library ecosystem and beyond, and the competing needs of library user/librarian/knowledge creator.

Introduction

Cataloguing ethics is an immensely important part of current cataloguing work and discussions, as well as being a significant area of research within knowledge organization (KO).¹ Cataloguing ethics is so important, because as Martin says, cataloguing – and we can extend this to all KO – is all about decisions and ‘every decision has an ethical impact, and those impacts matter because cataloguing carries power.’² In recent years, there has been a major growth in library initiatives and projects that aim to resolve ethical issues inherent in their catalogue data and classification schemes. With cataloguing ethics’ importance and prevalence in current practice and research, it is apposite to contemplate how cataloguing ethics is presented to those learning about KO. Therefore, this article explores how cataloguing ethics is taught within a Library and Information Studies (LIS) setting. It demonstrates what an ethics-infused KO curriculum might look like, including the key structural questions around positioning ethics in a KO curriculum and the important ethical ideas that underpin this teaching.

In this article, there is only space to consider one type of teaching: the study of LIS in an academic setting, typically part of a master’s degree. One reason for choosing this type of teaching over, say, a one-off professional development event, is that pedagogically it is interesting to see how the teaching of cataloguing ethics unfolds over the longer teaching unit of a master’s module. Furthermore, while the teaching of KO within LIS programmes has received much attention from researchers,³ the teaching of cataloguing ethics is not (yet) an important topic of discussion within the literature and cataloguing ethics is frequently not even mentioned.⁴ As one example of this, a 2022 encyclopaedia article about education in KO does not mention ethics in its suggestions for KO curricula.⁵ Nevertheless, there are some important exceptions. Snow, writing in 2019, extols the teaching of ethical issues within KO as one of the key points for current and future LIS curricula, while also acknowledging that cataloguing ethics is less commonly discussed than other areas of KO education.⁶ Therefore, this article’s focus on cataloguing ethics in LIS teaching is an important topic yet it has received little attention. Moreover, it fills a gap as it looks at the details of what and how cataloguing ethics are taught.

The analysis is limited to the KO teaching materials of only one LIS programme. For convenience reasons, this is where the author teaches: the MA

1. Terminology around cataloguing ethics is blurry, and many different terms have been used for these ideas. To start, the cataloguing ethics discussed in this article are actually the ethics of cataloguing, subject indexing *and* classification. There is also sometimes a divide in terminology between the ethical considerations of those producing metadata and organising documents in libraries, and the ethical considerations of those working on the KO systems and cataloguing guidelines. For this article, the term *cataloguing ethics* is used very broadly: it covers cataloguing, subject indexing and classification, and all types of ethical issues across all types of KO practices and research. The term *cataloguing ethics* has been selected to avoid the unwieldiness of constructions of alternative terms such as *cataloguing, subject indexing and classification ethics* or *ethics in knowledge organisation*.

2. Jennifer M. Martin, “Records, responsibility, and power: An overview of cataloguing ethics,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 59, no. 2-3, (2021): 281-304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2020.1871458>.

in Library and Information Studies, University College London (UCL). So, the presentation of teaching materials is presented with acknowledgement of the biases due to the author of this article also being responsible for these teaching materials. Furthermore, for space reasons this discussion is focussed on the teaching of cataloguing ethics, rather than learning cataloguing ethics, which are closely linked, but not the same. Ultimately, the ideas presented in this article originate from a very small case study, with the hope that it could provide a starting point for future work which looks at additional LIS programmes, additional contexts of teaching, and additional points in the learning cycle.

UCL offers two modules in KO, which are used illustratively for this article. *Cataloguing and classification* is a core module in LIS. It ‘... focuses on the description and organisation of both physical and digital bibliographic resources, covering bibliographic cataloguing, name authorities, subject analysis, subject indexing and classification schemes’.⁷ *Knowledge organisation* is an optional module for LIS students, and is also open to students from any other course in the department. It uses ‘... a theoretical lens in order to understand practical classification systems and real-life issues’ and topics include fundamental concepts of KO, theories of KO systems, classification schemes, thesauri, who and what is doing the KO, and ontologies.⁸

This article looks at some of the key aspects of an ethics-infused curriculum for KO, and the questions and decisions that might arise. The first part considers structural questions around how cataloguing ethics appears in the modules, and how these relate to cataloguing ethics’ position within KO itself. The second part looks at three examples of ethics content from the modules, unpicking the different themes and ways in which cataloguing ethics is embedded. Ultimately, this analysis of how cataloguing ethics is taught in one institution provides a starting part for considering what we need to think about when teaching cataloguing ethics, and also deepens our understanding of cataloguing ethics itself.

Cataloguing ethics within the structure of the curriculum

A major consideration when creating an ethics-infused cataloguing curriculum is how the cataloguing ethics is placed within the structure of the module. So, this asks whether cataloguing ethics is treated as a standalone topic, or conversely, whether cataloguing ethics is discussed whenever relevant to a particular area. An example of the former is where cataloguing ethics appears as one standalone session within a module, including ethical issues in name authority control and the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH); an example of the latter is where the session about names includes activities about ethical issues in name authority control, and the session about subject indexing includes a discussion about ethical issues with LCSH. Both have advantages and implications for pedagogy. When treating ethics as a named, specific section of teaching, it helps impart importance to the idea of cataloguing ethics. Arguably, it also helps to promote it, as cataloguing ethics would be named as a delineated subject area. Moreover, this approach brings together different ethical issues across the subject area, such as ethical issues found in names alongside ethical issues found in subjects.

At UCL, *Cataloguing and classification* and *Knowledge organisation* take the second approach: cataloguing ethics is threaded throughout the modules. Figures 1 and 2. give a summary of the structure of both modules, which also indicates major occurrences of ethics materials within these modules. Note that the broadness the outlines illustrated here only permit major occurrences of ethical topics to be recorded, rather than also illustrating every time ethical issues are mentioned. From a structure of knowledge perspective, the UCL example reflects cataloguing ethics being an integral, inseparable part of KO, rather than an additional topic added to it. Furthermore, in terms of *Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives*,⁹ cataloguing ethics is especially compatible with higher learning tasks such as analysis and evaluation. In particular, the threaded-through curriculum structure is helpful as ethical themes can be revisited from week-to-week, which is conducive to higher levels of learning. For example, in *Cataloguing and classification session 6*, students gain knowledge of the unethical treatment of names from marginalized groups by watching a pre-class video; subsequently, in

3. There are a multitude of examples, with a few of the most recent and important ones listed here. Hudon has carried out a number of analyses of KO education within (mostly) American and Canadian LIS programmes, which examine and summarize data about KO offerings across LIS programmes. (For instance, Michèle Hudon, “Teaching classification in the 21st Century,” *Knowledge Organization* 38, no. 4 (2011): 342-351, <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/0943-7444-2011-4-342/teaching-classification-in-the-21st-century-jahrgang-38-2011-heft-4?page=1>; Michèle Hudon, “The status of knowledge organization in library and information science master’s programs,” *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 59, no. 6 (2021): 576-96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2021.1934766>). A 2022 encyclopaedia article by Birger Hjørland provides an overview of KO education literature and its conceptual background. (Birger Hjørland, “Education in knowledge organization,” in *ISKO encyclopedia of knowledge organization*, ed. Birger Hjørland and Claudio Gnoli, Version 1.0, published November 7, 2022, <https://www.isko.org/cyclo/education>). Snow provides a detailed summary of the development of KO education research in their article about the future of KO education, as well as discussing key themes such as the debates about teaching theory versus teaching practice (Karen Snow, “Shifting sands and the prophet’s dream: exploring the future of information organization education,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 60, no. 2 (2019): 139-151, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.3138/jelis.2018-0043> <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2018-0043>).
4. In some cases it can be assumed that the absence of discussion of teaching cataloguing ethics is due to the absence of this topic in the curriculum, or instead, that the curriculum analysis is not intended to be granular enough to delineate specific topics.
5. Jane Daniels (@JaneDaniels1), “isko.org/cyclo/education “A course for organization of information... should at least cover topics such as analysis & evaluation of information & data, classification & indexing theories, and principles of database construction & thesaurus construction.” And Cataloguing Ethics?,” Twitter, in

session 8, the students analyse the issues surrounding the treatment of a marginalized group in a classification scheme. Interestingly, Hudon’s analysis of KO learning objectives in KO using *Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives* revealed that KO curricula often only reached the lower levels of learning;¹⁰ so,

Session	Overall topic	Selected major occurrences of ethical topics
1	Introduction to cataloguing and classification	
2	Bibliographic models: FRBR and LRM	
3	RDA and MARC21	RDA and global cataloguing
4	Learn to catalogue 1	
5	Learn to catalogue 2	Bias in summary notes
6	Controlled vocabularies and authority control	Names and gender; Names and culture; Creators’ autonomy and names; Privacy and names; NACO and ethics; Ethical scenarios around names
7	Subject analysis and LCSH	Bias and subject analysis; LCSH’s ethical problems, including examples about immigration status and gender
8	Classification and DDC	Ethical issues with grouping, othering, and hierarchies; General ethical issues with DDC including structure; Literary warrant; Language considerations with notation; The treatment of non-Western knowledge in DDC
9	Professional issues in cataloguing and classification	The study of cataloguing ethics; The cataloguing ethics of challenging works; Ethical issues of using bibliographic data in research; Ethical scenario around dealing with problematic library materials
10	Cataloguing in practice	Editing large data sets to deal with ethical issues

Fig. 1. Outline of *Cataloguing and classification*, with selected major occurrences of ethical topics

Session	Overall topic	Selected major occurrences of ethical topics
1	Introduction to knowledge organisation	Ethical issues with grouping and othering; Ethical issues with ordering terms
2	Relationships and faceting	Ethical issues with hierarchies
3	Classification schemes 1: introducing key ideas and Library of Congress Classification	Warrants, including literary warrant; Ethical issues with Library of Congress Classification
4	Classification schemes 2: Dewey Decimal Classification and ideas relating to time	General ethical issues with DDC including structure; Language considerations with notation; The treatment of non-Western knowledge in DDC; Ontogeny/exploring how marginalised groups are classified over time
5	Classification schemes 3: Other types of classification scheme	
6	Thesaurus creation 1: Introducing thesauri and creating the structure	Unethical treatment of topics in thesauri
7	Thesaurus creation 2: Vocabulary control	
8	Who (and what) is doing the KO?	User-led KO; Tagging and folksonomies; Automated indexing and the idea of eliminating human bias
9	Ontologies and thinking beyond the knowledge organisation system	
10	Professional issues in KO	

Fig. 2. Outline of *Knowledge organisation*, with selected major occurrences of ethical topics

December 19, 2022, 6:03 p.m., <https://twitter.com/JaneDaniels1/status/1604900343615148032>.

This is a comment on Hjørland, “Education in knowledge organization”.

6. Snow, “Shifting sands”.

7. University College London, “Cataloguing and classification (INST0010),” UCL module catalogue, accessed, January 5, 2023, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/module-catalogue/modules/cataloguing-and-classification-INST0010>.

8. University College London, “Knowledge organisation (INST0070),” UCL module catalogue, Accessed January 5th, 2023), <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/module-catalogue/modules/knowledge-organisation-INST0070>.

9. Benjamin S. Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals* (London: Longmans, 1956).

10. Michèle Hudon, “KO and classification education in the light of Benjamin Bloom’s Taxonomy of learning objectives,” in *Knowledge organization in the 21st century: between historical patterns and future prospects. Proceedings of the thirteenth international ISKO conference, 19–22 May 2014, Kraków, Poland*, ed. Wiesław Babik (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2014), 524-531.

the UCL example curriculum shows how cataloguing ethics can help KO education evoke higher levels of thinking.

Another structural issue concerns the categorisation of the type of ethical situation: Lee posits that there is a loose division between those applying systems and creating/editing metadata (which Lee calls *applied ethics*),¹¹ and ethical issues within the classification schemes themselves (which we could call *system-design ethics*). Perhaps inevitably, the division between *system-design ethics* and *applied ethics* follows the general structures of the modules at UCL, with the type of ethics matching the type of cataloguing and classification being discussed within that session. (Here, we are talking mostly about *Cataloguing and classification*, as *Knowledge organisation* focuses on systems and schemes rather than their usage.) However, this division between ethical issues in the systems and the application is important in education terms. Librarians are generally aware of ethical issues within systems, such as the unethical treatment of various marginalized communities in the *Dewey Decimal Classification*; yet, crucially, it is usually not within the cataloguer's powers to do anything about them.¹² Conversely, ethical issues in the creation of metadata, or ways of circumnavigating the ethical problems with an external global system – the applied ethics – are sometimes possible to resolve by the cataloguer. So, the pedagogical approach of differentiating between *system-design ethics* and *applied ethics* when teaching cataloguing ethics, has an important real-world implication.

Cataloguing ethics within the contents of the curriculum

Cataloguing ethics appears in many different ways within these modules, so three examples of teaching activities are used for illustrative purposes. The examples illustrate the range of different ethical issues covered, and the various pedagogical aims of including cataloguing ethics when teaching KO.

Example one (*Cataloguing and classification session 6*) concerns the ethics of name authority control. This small-group activity asks students to discuss some ethics scenarios about personal names, with examples including gender, language, domestic abuse and age. Students are asked to think about and to assess possible arguments which could justify using the potentially unethical data, including the balancing of creator rights with user needs. Accordingly, the activity propagates the idea of a creator's autonomy, and also solidifies an enduring theme of the module which is to think about the power and responsibilities of the cataloguer. The (difficult) questions are also designed to acknowledge the real-life complexities of these cataloguing issues, and to affirm that many ethical issues require balancing competing needs.

Example two (*Cataloguing and classification session 9*) is a small-group discussion. Students are presented with a scenario where they need to catalogue and classify a novel in a school library, where the novel has an ethically-problematic subtheme. Students are asked about potential cataloguing and classification solutions to deal with the ethical issues, and more pertinently, to present justifications both for and against taking these cataloguing/classification actions. Students are asked to use the *Code of cataloguing ethics*¹³ when thinking about their justifications. There are a number of pedagogical aspects to highlight here. First, this activity demonstrates the complex and messy nature of dealing with cataloguing ethics. It provides an opportunity to deepen students' learning about the *Code of cataloguing ethics*, as they need to analyse and apply it. This activity also (deliberately) requires thinking of the library catalogue as part of the wider ecosystem of the library and the institution as a whole. Moreover, this activity could be viewed as an example of how teaching cataloguing ethics blurs the traditional boundary between practice-focussed and theory-focussed KO education,¹⁴ as it offers a *theory-of-practice* approach.

Example three (*Knowledge organisation session 3*) looks at different types of warrant in classification. (Warrant is the justifications for including specific terms, the structure of that knowledge, and so on.) Students are asked to contemplate the idea of warrant, including challenging the dominance of literary warrant – the justification for something within a classification based on the published knowledge, as devised by Hulme in 2011¹⁵ – as the basis of bibliographic classification schemes. They are also asked to think about situations where different types of

11. Deborah Lee, "Reality, unreality, and artistic deception: the ethical dimensions of the knowledge organization of art documentation," *Knowledge Organization* 47, no. 8 (2020): 631-645, doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2020-8-631.

12. Sometimes the cataloguer has the option of proposing changes or commenting on proposed changes, such as commenting on draft proposals for DDC through the DDC Editorial Policy Committee (OCLC, "Dewey Editorial Policy Committee," accessed December 23, 2022, <https://www.oclc.org/en/dewey/resources/epc.html>). However, this is not the same as the cataloguer having the power to make changes themselves.

13. Cataloging Ethics Steering Committee, "Cataloging code of ethics," Final version, January 2021, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IBz7nXQPfr3U1P6Xiar9cLAkzoNX_P9fq7eHvzfSIz0/edit.

14. Theory versus practice in KO education is a recurrent theme in the literature. For example, it is one of Intner's three "Persistent issues" (Sheila S. Intner, "Persistent issues in cataloging education: considering the past and looking toward the future," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 34, no. 1-2 (2002): 15-28, https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v34n01_02), and there are summaries of the theory/practice debates in, for example, Snow, "Shifting sands" and Hudon, "Status of knowledge organization".

15. E. Wyndham Hulme, "Principles of book classification", in *Theory of subject: a source-book*, ed. Lois Mai Chan, Phyllis A. Richmond, and Elaine Svenonius (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1985), 48-51.

users might benefit from other warrants instead (such as scientific, cultural and educational warrants). Unlike the first two examples, this activity is not explicitly about ethics. Nevertheless, once warrant is discussed, many ethical issues emerge, especially in relation to users and knowledge-producers from marginalized communities. Interestingly, an important theme of this activity is the role of publishers in literary warrant, and how cataloguing ethics is in some cases based on publishing ethics – so linking the cataloguing outwards, even beyond the library ecosystem. This example is also useful as it shows that ethical issues can be present even within a seemingly non-ethics subject, illustrating the pervasive nature of ethical problems in KO.

Concluding thoughts

This exploration of teaching cataloguing ethics considers some interesting structural issues about how cataloguing ethics is embedded within the curriculum. The article outlines a fundamental curriculum question about whether cataloguing ethics is a distinct topic within KO, or instead, an intrinsic part of it. Additional complexities are added by a conceptual division between systems-design ethics and applied-ethics, which can be important to resolving real-life cataloguing ethics issues. The discussion of curriculum structure shows how having a narrative of cataloguing ethics running throughout a module could even help add more higher level learning activities into KO curricula. Furthermore, the issues around how to structure cataloguing ethics within a curriculum move beyond just KO education, with the resulting curricula potentially reflecting this ontological issue about what cataloguing ethics is, and where it stands in relation to cataloguing more generally.

The three example activities show what a KO curriculum could look like when cataloguing ethics in the classroom reflects the pervasiveness of ethical considerations in practice. Six key pedagogical points for teaching cataloguing ethics are offered by these examples. First, the power held (unintentionally or not) by the cataloguer is an important consideration, as shown in Example one. Second, cataloguing ethics is part of (and dependent on) the wider ecosystem such as the library, the organization, and beyond; Examples two and three highlight that cataloguing ethics needs consideration within that wider context. Third, cataloguing ethics is often triadic: it involves the careful balance of competing needs between users, librarians and knowledge creators. Examples one and two illustrate different aspects of these balances. Fourth, being able to justify cataloguing ethics decisions is important, and this often involves being able to see multiple, competing arguments. Example two would help students prepare for future professional situations that ask the librarian to justify ethics-related actions to library users, library colleagues, and the wider organization. Fifth, as Example three shows, cataloguing ethics is found even in so-called *non-ethics* activities, and so cataloguing ethics could be seen pedagogically as another lens through which you view all KO. Sixth, teaching cataloguing ethics can offer novel – and powerful – ways of thinking across the traditional practice/theory polarity in KO education.

This article is a short introduction to the subject of teaching cataloguing ethics in one particular institution, and future research could usefully expand upon the scope of the study. Examples include looking at the findings in the context of a wider set of cases, such as LIS curricula across the UK and beyond. Analysing professional development training around cataloguing ethics is an important next stage, especially contemplating potential links and collaborations between LIS programmes and professional development events about cataloguing ethics. Furthermore, studying other, less formal types of cataloguing ethics learning and how cataloguing ethics is navigated would be fascinating, perhaps exploring a sense of *cataloguing ethics literacy*. Ultimately, this article considers the under-explored area of what and how cataloguing ethics is taught, taking one particular LIS programme as a starting point. The resulting analysis has shown that contemplating the teaching of cataloguing ethics is important when thinking about the position and development of cataloguing ethics, and offers insights into how cataloguing ethics is interwoven with KO itself.

Deborah Lee
Lecturer in Library and Information Studies
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT
UK
Email: deborah.lee@ucl.ac.uk