

Encounters with Dewey

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Barnby Road school in Newark-on-Trent opened in 1957 and brought a touch of Modern architecture to the Georgian buildings, brick terraces, and modest villas of the town [photo 1]. The junior school was stocked with a sizeable library. It was here that I first came across the Dewey Decimal System. Some of my fellow pupils were trained in the system so that they could find and return books in their correct places as part of their librarian duties [photo 2]. But I now realise that the bigger idea being planted by headmaster Mr Walmsley and the teachers was that it was important to be able to find knowledge, rather than just relying on learning facts.

The [Dewey Decimal System](#) is invariably described as a classification system. Its use means that libraries are organised with books grouped by subjects, and with related subjects close by. I found it used not only in enlightened primary schools, but in all the municipal and university libraries that I have since spent many hours in.

The system was devised in the US in the 1870s. It shares the Victorian insistence not only that there is a place for everything but that everything should be in its place.

The same mindset featured much in my subsequent career as a statistician. Although statistics deals with uncertainty, it also relies on classifications, such as of industries, occupations, and [diseases](#), and it uses frameworks such as the [System of National Accounts](#) (SNA). The SNA is an internationally agreed standard set of recommendations on how to compile measures of economic activity. The headline measure, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is widely referred to. However, it is little understood, outside of the community of people compiling national accounts or using them for macro-economic policy-making.

One of my first jobs was in the production of UK national accounts and I soon picked up that GDP was revered in part because it adhered to the notion that everything has its place. Some fifty years on, and that is now seen as part of the problem with GDP. As Richard Heys, now working in UK national accounts put it, "What if the place for something of increasing relevance is outside the national accounts and the scope of GDP?" [\[here\]](#).

This points to need to revise and possibly expand classifications over time, as indeed happens with the Dewey system. SNA has undergone changes and a further [revision](#) is now underway. This time round, though, the challenge is greater. It is of course important to ensure that measures of GDP track what is defined as GDP as the economy advances over time. However, it is now more important to recognise and to use wider measures of change in the economy and society. For this reason, we all need to get involved in revising the SNA. The SNA *Towards 2025* journey, however, has yet to feature as strongly in the media, or generally to attract as much attention from civil society and businesses, as did CoP26, though it is arguably as important as that.

Barnby Road school was demolished some years ago. For me at least, learning about the Dewey Decimal System is something that will always remain. I value its insistence on order and organisation. But I also appreciate that it evolves over time, that what we know and how we view things is not just bound by the current version but should also help shape the future version.

Paul Allin retired from the Office for National Statistics in 2012 and is now a visiting professor in statistics at Imperial College London. He attended Barnby Road school from 1957 to 1963.

Photo 1



Barnby Road school (Infants' block), photo kindly supplied by Elaine Beddow

Photo 2



Fellow pupil showing his librarian badge, photo kindly supplied by Pete Robinson