

Thematic Network on Decolonization of Arctic Library and Archives Metadata (DALAM) Success Story

"DALAM Network Educates about Decolonization of Metadata"

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The impact of colonization is immense, influencing everything from national governance to justice systems to the subject headings in our library catalogues. Decolonization efforts, broadly, are activities that are designed to ameliorate the negative impacts of colonization. DALAM, the University of the Arctic Thematic Network on the Decolonization of Arctic Library and Archives Metadata, is a network that focuses on library subject headings and classification systems, archival descriptions, and other metadata that are incorrect, culturally inappropriate, derogatory or otherwise unacceptable within polar libraries and archives.

Established in 2023, DALAM is bringing together resources related to the decolonization of metadata, creating spaces for people to come together to discuss these issues and providing education and training on these topics to the library and archival community as well as to the general public.



Who needs to be educated and why?

We all do. While the need to decolonize is becoming a large part of public discourse, many people, both those who work in libraries, archives, and museums and those who are users of those services, may be unaware of the flaws in our classification schemes and have not had the opportunity to learn about the impacts of colonization in metadata and archival description.

What do they need to learn about?

Colonial impact in metadata and description has many forms. For example, users may highlight the use of old and outdated place names. They may find subject headings that are no longer appropriate or even derogatory. Names of people or groups of people may be those assigned by colonial institutions, rather than the names those people use for themselves. Terms for groups of people may be very broadly applied and may not identify specific groups, rendering them invisible within the metadata. Other terms may encompass a colonial point of view, for example "discovery of lands", which is not shared by colonized peoples.

People who work within libraries, archives and museums have identified the need to develop skills to allow them to move forward with decolonization of metadata and description. In addition to being able to identify terminology that requires decolonization, they need to be able to create safe spaces for all users by identifying the presence of potentially offensive and harmful terminology in their metadata. They need to learn how to work directly with communities to determine appropriate terms and spellings and to find community approved resources.



What are the challenges that DALAM has encountered in educating about decolonization of metadata?

The main challenge DALAM has encountered in educating its own members and others about decolonization of metadata is that it is a relatively new practice. In addition to educating others, we are educating ourselves. Much of our instruction and learning has to concentrate on fundamental aspects, explaining the background to the problem and identifying the basic steps for moving forward.

DALAM members come from both the Arctic region and other parts of the world. Different parts of the Arctic have very different colonization histories, so teaching needs to address decolonization in those different environments and among different people. For example, we need to understand if decolonization efforts with Inuit metadata will resonate with Sámi people and vice versa. Decolonization of metadata is a challenge for librarians outside of the Arctic as well: What can we learn from decolonization of metadata work that has been applied to Indigenous peoples beyond the Arctic such as First Nations, Māori, and Pasifika?

The scale of the work that needs to be done in Arctic metadata decolonization is also a challenge. These problems exist in every library, archive and museum that contains material about Arctic peoples. Many practitioners who need to learn about decolonization of metadata actually work with metadata directly, so what they need is practical help. While we need to learn about theoretical or political concepts, these might not be very useful to them, or worse, might be overwhelming.

Other challenges arise from the fact that even within communities of colonized people, individuals may not agree about appropriate terminologies and spellings. Learning about decolonization of metadata is sometimes as much about learning how to identify and approach communities to determine appropriate terminology.

How has DALAM been successful in educational efforts?

Since its creation, DALAM has been actively engaged in educational activities. The network meets monthly, alternating between planning and development sessions and training sessions. DALAM has held several successful and well-attended workshops, bringing together people who are at the beginning of the decolonization process and who are trying to determine what steps they need to take in decolonizing their metadata.

DALAM members have also been active in presenting posters and presentations, both about decolonization and about the DALAM network at conferences and other Arctic venues, to raise awareness about the decolonization of metadata.

Finally, DALAM is working on a Digital Library that will make public an open access collection of resources and training materials related to the decolonization of metadata, which anyone will be able to use to build their knowledge.

Over the long term, DALAM members hope to revise and improve library, archival and museum metadata to the point that Indigenous people will be comfortable using those information sources. The progress toward that goal involves educating members and others to the need for decolonization, developing knowledge about how to go about decolonizing metadata, and finally developing structures, standards and resources that will help everyone in the decolonization process.

Finally, like the whole of UArctic, our members and learners are dispersed across many time zones and speak many languages. It is difficult for people in different regions to attend single sessions, and for some, to understand the largely English language presentations. The DALAM Digital Library project is, in part, a response to this challenge.

The slogan "nothing about us without us," first used in the field of disabilities research, has also been applied to research carried out among the Indigenous communities of the Arctic. A similar ethical approach needs to be taken in our approach to the decolonization of library and archive subject indexing to avoid running the risk of disempowering the peoples and communities being described in such metadata. For this reason, DALAM is seeking an Indigenous person to co-lead the thematic network and is seeking validation from those peoples being described.

If you are interested in DALAM or know of others who may be a good fit, please learn more about our work on the [DALAM website](#).

Image 1: DALAM Meeting

Image 2: The Universal Decimal Classification system allows for the geographic groupings of books, (eg: Nunavut) an approach more closely aligned with Indigenous world views.

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<https://www.uarctic.org/activities/thematic-networks-and-institutes/thematic-networks-success-stories/dalam-network-educates-about-decolonization-of-metadata/> Accessed February 4, 2025