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From the University Presses -- Dissertations into Books? The Lack of Logic in the System

Sandy Thatcher

Penn State Press, sgt@psu.edu

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and to prevent a “revisionists’ paradise”? While online preservation methods are evolving, will print preservation retain a place of importance? Who will preserve at least one copy of the print materials that are being replaced by online content? In the quest to perfect digital preservation techniques, will online content recognition technology be as robust and timeless a means of preservation as the book has been for printed content?

Where are we headed? No one knows, for example, whether today’s search engines will be free of charge or will even exist in 2050. What form and extent will open access, institutional repositories, and self-archiving have in the future? What shape will publication/purchase business models take? What attitudes will prevail toward the integrity of information and the preservation of original content? While the details of “brave new world, 2050” are unknown today, those with a stake in the world of information and scholarly communication have a unique moment in history to shape the future of library collections — for better or for worse.

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From the University Presses — Dissertations into Books? The Lack of Logic in the System

by Sandy Thatcher (Director, Penn State Press; Phone: 814-865-1327) <sgt@psu.edu> www.psupress.org

Although the academy has been the progenitor of much creative thinking about systems and how they function — in such manifestations as general systems theory in the 1950s, cybernetics in the 1960s, catastrophe theory in the 1970s, chaos theory in the 1980s, and complexity theory in the 1990s — there has not been much effort to apply what Peter Senge called in his popular 1990 book of that name “the fifth discipline,” or systems thinking, to the study of the academy itself. But there is no doubt that the university is a very complex kind of organization indeed, and we need to understand better how all its multitudinous parts interact with each other and how “feedback loops”
occur within it if we are to be successful in adapting it to the rapid changes now under way in its economic, legal, social, and technological dimensions.

In this article I want to focus on just one example of the harm that comes from not ‘thinking systematically about scholarly communication’ (the title of a talk I gave at the 1997 conference on “The Specialized Scholarly Monograph in Crisis” co-sponsored by the ACLS, ARL, and AAUP). We often refer to scholarly communication as a “system,” and it is a system that is fundamental to, but not coextensive with, the “system” of higher education since contributions to it come from outside the academic world, too, through professional societies, the R&D divisions of private industry, the research arms of government agencies, and the like. But I am here concerned with part of that scholarly communication system that is totally in the control of the higher education system: the dissertation.

The dissertation has a long history as a major part of graduate education that I do not need to rehearse here. It is the most important symbol of the neophyte scholar’s claim to be recognized as qualified to do advanced research and to be admitted to the realm of higher education as a “professor” of knowledge in a specialized field. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that it has also emerged as a primary step in the research arms of government agencies, and education as a “professor” of knowledge in a specialized field. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that it has also emerged as a primary step in the research arms of government agencies, and the like. But I am here concerned with part of that scholarly communication system that is totally in the control of the higher education system: the dissertation.

This was a perfectly “rational” decision, of course, viewed from just the perspective of the library’s budget and the constraints on it. Choices had to be made, and this seemed a sensible way to stretch the book budget farther while not losing much value overall, since the original dissertations were already readily available through NDLTD or the ProQuest database. But consider the effect on yet another sector of the university: its publishing arm, the university press.

With the decline of monograph purchases by libraries already beginning to affect the economics of scholarly publishing as early as the late 1960s, university presses were compelled to adopt defensive strategies of their own, relying less on income from library sales and more on revenues derived from sales of books to the general trade and for course adoption. Presses also diversified the types of titles published, branching out from monographs to include more titles of general interest (including fiction, poetry, and regional books), reference works, and even some textbooks. With tough choices of their own to make, presses grew less receptive to publishing revised dissertations — and became even more averse to doing so once the patterns of library decisions about such works were clearly revealed. Again, from the presses’ perspective, this was a completely “rational” choice to make. Talk about feedback loops!

But is it “rational” for the system as a whole to have the market for revised dissertations and the possibility of publishing them so diminished? I think not. Look at the problem from the viewpoint of junior faculty. Under increasing pressure to publish a book or even two in less than six years, when the tenure clock runs out for most of them, these young scholars have little choice but to get as much mileage as they can out of their dissertations. So it is no surprise that many of them, in fields where the book is still regarded as the “gold standard,” opt to revise their dissertations. But, with fewer libraries willing to purchase them, fewer presses are willing to consider them, leaving the available outlets ever smaller in number. Is this situation fair to junior faculty? Does it make sense to penalize them for decisions made by other sectors of the university over which they have no control at all?

Well, one might ask, what really is lost if we don’t publish any revised dissertations? We have access to all of them anyway in electronic form, and now they can even be readily purchased through Amazon.com after the deal that ProQuest recently made. It seems a reasonable question to ask. Do revisions constitute sufficient “value added” to justify the cost to libraries publishing them and libraries buying them? As an editor who has spent nearly forty years working with authors on revised dissertations, I want to argue that the correct answer is yes. Although I could provide plenty of examples of dissertations that underwent very substantial revision to become books that have only a faint resemblance to the dissertations whence they originated, I do not want to base my argument on just that kind of evidence. It is true that revisions vary a great deal in their extent and depth and it would be difficult for librarians to identify which dissertations have been only lightly revised and which have been heavily revised. Authors’ acknowledgments, while they often give credit to inspiration and help from other colleagues, rarely go into any detail about how much revision was undertaken and what it entailed. Only press editors are privy to such information.

Rather, my main argument comes down to this: if libraries do not buy revised dissertations, and presses do not publish them, some outstanding books might never see the light of day and exert the influence on the fields they have the potential to advance in major ways. I doubt that the best of the dissertations will somehow, magically, come to be rescued from the mass of dissertations in the ProQuest database through Google searching and be recognized for the gems they are, with high rankings in citation indices to follow commensurate with their importance. Let me give you just a few examples of books I have edited over the years that got their start as dissertations and
Papa Abel Remembers
— The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 2:
Ready, Set, Go!

by Richard Abel (Aged Independent Learner) <rabel@easystreet.com>

So, in 1948, I was off to the University of California, Berkeley for graduate study in Medieval and Renaissance English history. By way of preparation for an academic career as a professor of history I was expected to undertake the customary graduate TA assignments. The first to which I was assigned in my second year in graduate school was a class in a then required “History and Government of the United States,” a rehash of a high-school civics course — and pitched at about the same level. About half the students were taking the class for the second or more times, which led me to the resolve to get them all through the class so no more taxpayers’ money need be spent on such elementary subject matter for these students. I don’t know if the half of that class that I, in turn, flunked had their grades recast by the Dean but I learned the valuable lesson that I possessed not the patience to deal with a bunch of unmotivated undergraduates. Farewell to an academic career. So the 1949-50 academic year closed on a note of utterly wrecked professorial expectations and with no certain way forward.

What was I to do to support my wife, new daughter, and myself? I called my Reed thesis advisor to seek his counsel. As good fortune would have it the then student manager of the Reed Coop had, it was thought, made an absolute shambles of the place. A week or two later a new career had been cast — entirely without intention, as is so commonly the case of those who wind up in the book-trade. As soon as UC classes were completed the move back to Portland was made.

continued on page 78