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The Doctoral Dissertation: Observations, Perspectives, Protean Nature?

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**Giant Leaps - Symposium on Electronic Theses and
Dissertations, May 23, 2019**
Purdue University

First, an Observation...on dissertations as bricks in the scholarly edifice...

“...those, looking in from the outside see no cathedral arising, and very few builders have appeared. For bricklaying does not produce architects.

The scholar has a responsibility to society—not less, but greater, than that of the labourer and the business man. His first duty is to know the truth, and his second is to make it known.”

Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1953): 499-500.

Graphic I: Disciplinary Morphology and Typology (Hérubel)

Disciplinarity

- A highly defined and honed approach with focused objectives, and specific methodological and technical characteristics. Specialized nomenclature and consensus-driven protocols and procedures are adhered to and maintained.
- **Examples--History, Philosophy**

Subdisciplinarity

- A highly specialized approach within a disciplinary framework concentrating on specific objectives, utilizing unique methodologies and techniques. Often, a particularistic area of interest is considered within the greater spectrum of a discipline.
- **Examples--History of Science, History of Education**

Interdisciplinarity

- Two or more disciplines come to together to examine a topic or set of topics and meld into a permanent relationship.
- **Examples--Historical Sociology, Historical Anthropology**

Multidisciplinarity

- Two or more disciplines involved, providing their unique perspectives without actually melding. Disciplines come together to explore phenomena and work on stated objectives, while retaining their singular characteristics.
- **Examples—Latin American Studies, American Studies**

The Doctoral Experience as Journey

- Different disciplinary traditions, protocols, vetting of knowledge.
- Usage of different theoretical perspectives.
- Different core knowledge necessitated by disciplinary learning.
- Course requirements, seminars, language, or computational tools & techniques, comprehensives, dissertation prospectus, & defense, dissertation candidacy, dissertation defense.
- Adherence to core disciplinary values, e.g. what constitutes knowledge?

What is the *raison d'être* of the Dissertation?

- Training?
- Final & identifiable artifact of doctoral process?
- Academic and/or intellectual Identity?
- Contribution to the disciplinary field of knowledge?
 - a). *Significance of contribution: new knowledge, new interpretation, what constitutes legitimate contribution?*
 - b). Directed, team, or individual-generated contribution?

The Protean Nature of the Dissertation: Liminal Journeys

- 1) Disciplinary domains—humanities, social sciences, stem, professional, e.g. education, public administration, social work, etc.
- 2) Types of disciplinary & professional dissertations—ex. Ph.D. [research], Ed. D., D.M.A (music), D.B.A. (business), D.Eng., D. A. [college teaching, broad subject focus].
- 3) Acculturation within the culture & ethos of a discipline—training for either professional or academic activity/careers [Becher 2001, Bourdieu,1990] .
- 4) Dissertations vary according to discipline and purpose of dissertation, e.g. practice-oriented, pure research.
- 5) Psychological and sociological influences in dissertation writing.
- 6) Identification with specialization or concentration.
- 7) Dissertations have changed—e.g. D.A., limited professional doctoral dissertation projects.

Internal Forces for Doctoral Process & Dissertations

- a). Time to degree—taking much longer for humanities & social sciences (U.S.A. Canada, France, U.K.)
- b). High debt for doctoral students.
- c). Faculty appointments declining, esp. in humanities & social sciences fields.
- d). Declining opportunities for dissertation to monograph, esp. in humanities [Hérubel, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2018]
- e). Work-force demands & influence—pragmatic demands.
- f). Powerful vocational interests within academic institutional frameworks.

External Forces on Dissertations

- Faculty appointments declining, esp. in humanities & social sciences fields.
- Non-academic work-force demands & influence—pragmatic demands, functionalism.
- Diminishing rarity of doctorate [esp. research Ph.D.] & professional, cultural, significance to larger society
- Humanities, arts, and to a lesser extent, social sciences, diminished importance vis-à-vis vocational interests & commodification of the academy and education in general = diminishing resources for these doctoral programs and doctoral students.

Old & Newly Emerging Forms of the Dissertation

- Straight dissertation textual form.
- Poetry, novels, musical compositions, as dissertations.
- Born Digital—one of possible futures.
- Depending upon the methodologies deployed, dissertations have accommodated certain sub-specializations—social/quantitative history.
- Use of visual repositories for art history, musicology, etc.
- Digital archeological analysis.
- New forms [series of published articles tied to a subject theme] with substantial animating preface, conclusions, and significance to the respective bodies of disciplinary knowledge.

History as Illustration—crisis as opportunity: Dissertations and public history options—diminishing academic appointments.

- Spectrum of specializations—sub-disciplines--hybridity.
- Already broaching digital dissertations—plus repositories for data.
- THE ROY ROSENZWEIG CENTER FOR HISTORY AND NEW MEDIA (RRCHNM) is “a multi-disciplinary team that develops online teaching resources, digital collections and exhibits, open-source software, and training in digital literacy and skills.”
- George Mason University and Dept. of History linkages.

More Questions than Answers?

- What are sound reasons for enlarging the definition of *dissertation*?
- What are the criteria per disciplinary formation for dissertation forms?
- Will new forms of dissertations equal research competencies?
- Will new forms equate to accepted intellectual & disciplinary forms of vetted knowledge?
- Will new forms equate to rigorous, deployment of analytical skills, or creative abilities?
- How will digital forms of dissertations add to the imprimatur inherent in the doctoral degree, especially the research Ph. D.?
- Are new forms of dissertation, an attempt to add to emerging knowledge, or another attempt to re-legitimize humanities & other pure academic disciplines facing continued onslaught from the commodified approach to learning and knowledge?

Selected Readings

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Thank you for your kind attention!

