

April 2007

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

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Recommended Citation

Thatcher, Sandy (2007) "From the University Presses -- Dissertations into Books? The Lack of Logic in the System," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 19: Iss. 2, Article 33.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5073>

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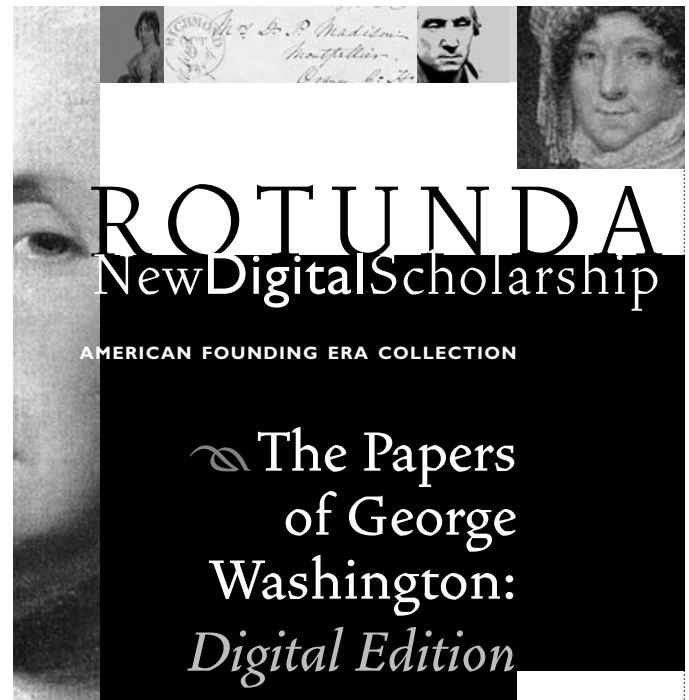
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From the University Presses — Dissertations into Books? The Lack of Logic in the System

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”

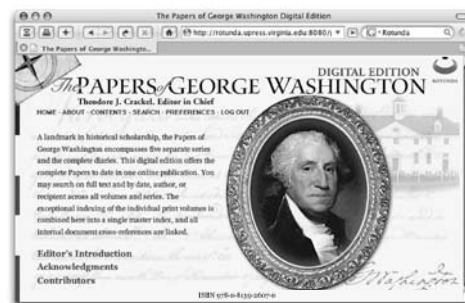
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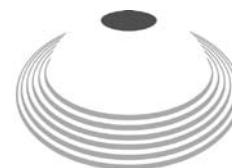
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occur within it if we are to be successful in adapting it to the rapid changes now under way in its economic, legal, social, and technological dimensions.

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 stepping stone on the road to tenure, in the form of a “revised” dissertation that seeks even greater intellectual immortality as a book. With the book widely regarded as the “gold standard” for promotion in many of the humanistic and social scientific disciplines today (as the recent *MLA Report* documented), it is not surprising that the revised dissertation has become almost a necessity for a junior scholar’s successful passage to tenured status, especially at those universities where now not only a first completed book is required but also at least significant progress on a second.

Upping the ante in this way seems a perfectly “rational” response by departments to the increasing pressures of competition and selectivity, as universities jockey to secure their places high in the prestige rankings that make so much difference to their overall success in attracting the best faculty, getting the most research grants, and instilling pride in alumni and gaining attention from foundations that lead to greater achievements in fundraising.

But let’s look now at what has been taking place elsewhere on campus. We all know that libraries’ budgets have been under severe strain for decades from the ever-escalating cost of subscriptions to STM journals. And we know that one effect of those budget difficulties has been libraries’ decisions to cut back on the purchases of monographs. Until the mid-1990s there was no particular reason to think that revised dissertations were subjected to any special form of discrimination when fewer monographs were ordered from the vendors that handled approval plans. But then the advance of technology began to transform the

way dissertations were made available. **UMI** always had dissertations to sell, but demand for any one of them in that photocopied form in a small trim size with that ugly-looking blue paper cover was miniscule. As **UMI** evolved into **ProQuest**, dissertations became stored electronically, and as the decade wore on more and more universities began launching programs, often first voluntary and then later mandatory (as at **Penn State** where I have served on the **Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Committee** from its beginning in 1998: <http://www.etsd.psu.edu>), to have dissertations submitted in electronic form. A growing number of these universities joined the **Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations** (<http://www.ndltd.org>) that cooperated in making dissertations available “open access” (before the term was invented). Meanwhile, **ProQuest** was busy licensing its dissertation database to academic libraries throughout the world. The result of this natural evolution was the attitude among libraries that dissertations generally are now part of their permanent collections. Thus, the question inevitably arose, if we already have access to all these dissertations, why should we spend our strained book budget on revised dissertations? And so it came to pass that, according to **Yankee Book Peddler’s** former resident sage, **Hellmut Schwarzer**, libraries began to ask their vendors to inspect the front matter of each book for any signs that it had its origin in a dissertation and, if such evidence was uncovered, to omit that book from the lot purchased through the approval plan. As far back as six years ago, **Schwarzer** told me, these instructions resulted in 40% of the sales of these books to libraries disappearing.

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 the system of presses 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 alone, for 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 they received from their dissertation advisers and 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

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proved, in revised form, to become pioneering works in their respective fields and

catapult their authors into the forefront of their disciplines: **Sonia Alvarez**, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil* (1990), **Charles Beitz**, *Political Theory and International Relations* (1979), **Miguel Centeno**'s *Democracy within Reason* (1994), **Susan Eckstein**'s *The Poverty of Revolution* (1977), **Jean Bethke Elshtain**'s *Public Man, Private Woman* (1981), **Peter Evans**'s *Dependent Development* (1979), **Helen Milner**'s *Resisting Protectionism* (1988), **Susan Moller Okin**'s *Women and Western Political Thought* (1979), and **Iris Marion Young**'s *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), **Alvarez** and **Eckstein** have both served as president of the **Latin American Studies Association**, **Centeno** is director of the **Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies**, **Beitz** and **Milner** also teach at **Princeton**, **Evans** is Professor of Sociology at **UC-Berkeley**, and before their recent untimely deaths **Okin** and **Young** were on the faculty, respectively, of **Stanford** and **Chicago**. One wonders what would have happened with their careers if they had not published such influential first books. I wonder the same for another person whose revised dissertation I published at **Princeton** in 1984: **Condoleezza Rice**. Would she be where she is today without that important first book, which helped her get tenure at **Stanford** where she later became provost?

Are you convinced? Then we need to tackle this problem together. No one group — libraries, presses, or promotion-and-tenure committees — can solve this problem on their own. It requires a collective approach because it is a dysfunction that arises from individual units of the university making their own “rational” decisions that are, when combined, irrational for the system as a whole. We need to think systematically more! 🐿

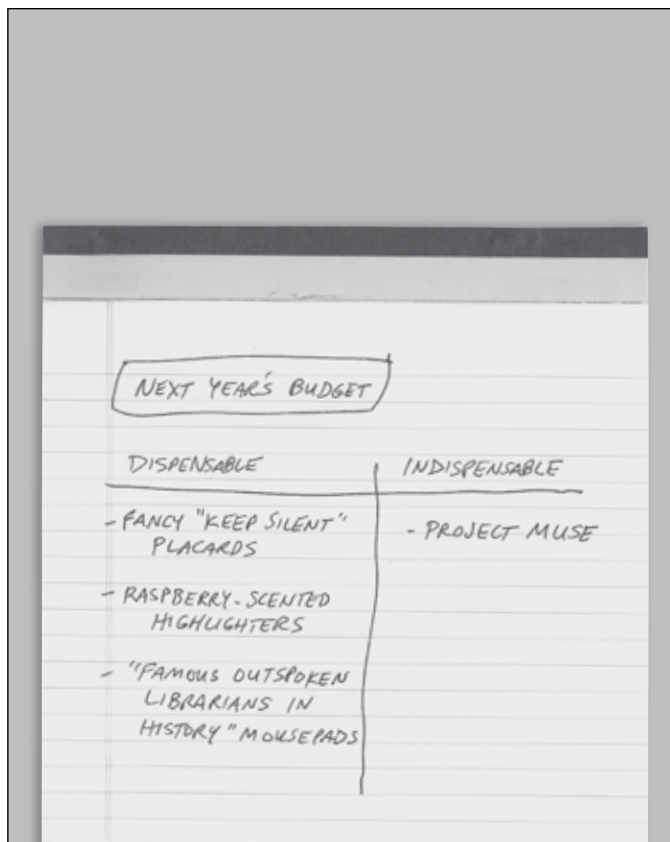
Papa Abel Remembers — The Tale of A Band of Booksellers, Fasicle 2: Ready, Set, Go!

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.

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