2014

Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: Moirologists, Authority and the Academy

Michael P. Pelikan
Penn State, mpp10@psu.edu

Recommended Citation
Pelikan, Michael P. (2017) "Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: Moirologists, Authority and the Academy," Against the Grain: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 42.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6685

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
from the University Presses
from page 60

From the University Presses

I without presses allow those that have them to bear rider problem, whereby universities and colleges funds to commercial textbook publishers; the free always for STM materials); the outflow of student university money to commercial presses (mostly, but not lining the problem of the massive outflow of univer individual institutions alone. These include tack- of the larger issues that simply can’t be resolved by cross-institutional partnerships to deal with some compare their experiences and perhaps to foster meeting, on report, as they did at the 2013 AAUP come to mind — and I hope they will periodically come to the 2013 AAUP meeting, on their successes and their difficulties.

At this writing, something like twenty presses report to libraries. It would make sense for them to meet at ARL or ALA or AAUP conferences to compare their experiences and perhaps to foster cross-institutional partnerships to deal with some of the larger issues that simply can’t be resolved by individual institutions alone. These include tackling the problem of the massive outflow of university money to commercial presses (mostly, but not always, for STM materials); the outflow of student funds to commercial textbook publishers; the free rider problem, whereby universities and colleges without presses allow those that have them to bear by far the lion’s share of the costs; and the honest consideration of whether all scholarship needs to be open access or whether alternative solutions might offer OA where it’s most needed while revenue-producing items — more affordably priced to be sure — would help build a sustainable system. Indeed, as Temple Dean of the Libraries Joe Lucia has suggested, we need to work together better to define what constitutes success in scholarly communication. There is so much to do, and we can do it so much better if really engage each other so that we take full advantage of our complementary skills.

The science of service.

At Eastern Book Company, we’ve spent more than half a century shaping our unique brand of service. The first step is fulfilling our customers’ orders with unmatched speed and accuracy. Then we custom-fit our operations to our customers’ needs, allowing libraries to streamline processes and maximize budgets. And finally, we cultivate next-generation technologies to help our customers build the libraries their users need.

Eastern Book Company
1-800-937-0331
www.ebc.com

Trust, Expertise, Service.

With that I bid you all adieu. Many thanks to those who have read any of the pieces I’ve contributed in the past couple of years. If some of them have sparked a thought or two, then the effort has been worth it. I hope to find new ways to contribute to the scholarly communications ecosystem in the months and years ahead, so you may from time to time hear from me again in this space. Meanwhile, my thanks to Katina Strauch for the opportunity to share my thoughts and to Tom Gilson and Toni Nix for putting up with my challenges to the concept of a fixed deadline. You folks are great! 🐱

Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — “Moirologists, Authority, and the Academy”

Column Editor: Michael P. Pelikan (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

I heard someone say recently, “The textbook industry is in trouble. You can’t swing a dead cat without hitting someone who thinks they can write the next textbook replacement.”

Huh? Who would want to swing a dead cat? How would such a person be regarded in a professional setting? And where does the expression “you can’t swing a dead cat without hitting (this or that),” come from, anyway?

The World Wide Web seems to be, well, not-fully-informative on this last question. Yahoo Answers labels as “Best Answer” a meandering set of data points touching variously upon “the hit TV show Cheers,” the idea that the gestured form of the expression is performed “by circling of one hand in the air like a lassoing action,” and the assertion that “the term ‘dead cat’ is an expression from the mide-70s… not referring to our kitty friends though.” Finally, the Yahoo Answers entry links to an etymology site according to which, “…there is no trace of this phrase, [sic] before the last twenty years.”

Hmmm. If I remember my Tom Sawyer correctly, it was Johnny Miller who, for the privilege of helping Tom whitewash the fence, “…bought in with a dead rat and a string to swing it with…”

continued on page 62
Not too great a leap from rat to cat. And since rats, mice, and other mammals are already called upon to assist in advancing the cause of Science, let’s use rats for the possibly distasteful job before us, that is, to tease out and separate conflicting truisms about the veracity of content accessible on or through the World Wide Web designed to serve an academic or educational mission.

Professional or paid mourners, according to Wikipedia, are also called Mairologists. Wikipedia cites http://wordsmith.org/words/moirologist.html. That’s reassuring, because my Concise Oxford Dictionary, Tenth Edition, is silent on the matter, my Webster’s Unabridged is not at my present location, and my kid sister, the Classicist, got the OED when we cleared out Dad’s study — she had more room than anyone else, as well as the most plausible requirement for it.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary does cover the word authority, however. For the purposes of this column, we’re going to use the third definition, “the power to influence others based on recognized knowledge or expertise” — an authoritative person, book, or other source.

I mention mairologists because they were, quoting Wikipedia, “…compensated to lament or deliver a eulogy.” I can’t claim to fall under the demographic group this represents and am glad of it. Truthfully, I couldn’t, in good conscience, accept compensation for lamenting something I truly lament. Nor, for that matter, would I comfortably lament something simply because I thought my job called for it.

At any event, I think it’s a little early to call in the mairologists for the textbook-publishing industry wake. There’s nothing going on in the world that should cause the textbook-publishing industry to choke to death on its last meal.

There may be, however, enough going on to give them a little heartburn…

But let’s not be negative.

Permit me instead to celebrate a couple of things. These, I think, are Good Things, and, in my opinion, worthy of celebration. If anyone wishes to regard them as a threat to a way of life, let them call in the mairologists. It’s not my job.

The first thing I’ll mention is Kahn Academy, which, if you haven’t visited yet, is found at https://www.khanacademy.org. Have you ever helped a kid out with homework only to run into the realization that some of your own K-12-acquired content could use a little dusting off? I first learned of the Kahn Academy in conversation with another parent who was helping a kid out with math homework. According to their “about” page, they are, “…a not-for-profit with the goal of changing education for the better by providing a free world-class education for anyone anywhere.”

According to the Wikipedia article on Kahn Academy, in 2004 Salman Khan, a graduate of MIT and Harvard Business School, began tutoring his cousin in mathematics using Yahoo’s Doodle Notepad. The article continues, “When other relatives and friends sought similar help, he decided it would be more practical to distribute the tutorials on YouTube. Their popularity there and the testimonials of appreciative students prompted Khan to quit his job in finance as a hedge fund analyst...in 2009, and focus on the tutorials (then released under the moniker ‘Khan Academy’) full time.” By 2010, Khan Academy had transformed into a 501(c)(3) organization and stopped accepting advertising revenue via YouTube and is now supported by donations including what Wikipedia terms, “…significant backing from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Google.”

From pre-college Math, the organization has branched out into additional subject areas including Science (Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Cosmology and Astronomy), Computer Science (Python Programming), Economics and Finance, (Microeconomics, Macroeconomics, Finance and Capital Markets, Entrepreneurship), and the Humanities (World History, Art History, American Civics). They also partner with content from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA, NY, NY), the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Stanford School of Medicine, and others.

This is already content of astonishingly high quality, and getting better.

Much good can also be said for our next exemplar, the CK-12 Foundation.

Again, according to Wikipedia, CK-12 is “…a California-based non-profit organization...established in 2007 by Neeru Khosla and Murugan Pal to support K-12 science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education.

They began though employing a Web-based platform called the “FlexBook,” but have gone on to broaden their focus to content delivery across multiple modes of delivery.

Do this if you haven’t already (and perhaps you have: maybe I’m the last person to discover this stuff — it wouldn’t be the first time...) go to Amazon, then the Kindle book store, then do a search on the term “CK-12.”

As of this writing, that search gets me 64 results, 52 of which are Kindle books published by the CK-12 Foundation, and 12 of which represent Amazon’s search system trying to be over-helpful.

The point is this: you can buy all 52 of those books published by the CK-12 Foundation, 41 of which have customer ratings of four stars or greater, for a grand-total-outlay of $0.00.

Just on the first page of results we find Basic Physics – Second Edition, Life Science for Middle School, Chemistry, Trigonometry, Middle School Math Grade 6 – Volume 1 of 2, Commonsense Composition, well, you get the idea...

If you take a look at the Physics book, you’ll find it’s reasonably well written, sometimes colorfully illustrated, and features hyperlinks embedded in the text. It’s published under a Creative Commons license.

To indulge in one of today’s most popular pursuits, the standing-up of a strawman argument for the sole purpose of bringing it down, I think we should shut down all the K-12 school libraries, send all their books to Mars (or some other planet affected by cataclysmic climate change), and toss the publishers and sellers of K-12 textbooks onto the scrapheap of History? Certainly not! And they shouldn’t or won’t willingly lie down on that scrapheap all by themselves, either.

I’ve clipped recipes from newspapers. Does that mean publishers should be made to stop printing cookbooks? How about if I’ve done a Google search for “Potatoes Au Gratin”? The key phrase here is “…made to.” I’m free to employ a recipe published in a newspaper, in a cookbook I’ve borrowed from my public library, or read off of my cell phone (protected by its spill-proof cover, of course).

By the same token, privately-held industry is free to manufacture or publish what it will, to “go with the flow,” or “swim upstream” in the marketplace, as however best fits their strategic plan. School boards have the right to make choices, and do.

Those manufacturers of buggy whip holders, back in the day, were free to continue to make buggy whip holders for as long as they wished. How long was dependent upon their willingness to absorb the pressures resulting from a dramatic drop in demand, a shrinking market, and cut-throat competition as rival buggy whip holder manufacturers sold off remaining inventory. Some of the buggy whip holders survived by switching to making clips into which to clip your horseless carriage’s starting crank.

And as I’ve pointed out more than once over the years, most of those folks, even those who thought about horseless carriages, thought about them as “horseless carriages,” not as “automobiles,” the term not yet having come into common use.

We’re in such times today. Even, lo, these many years into the “digital revolution,” or whatever you want to call it, we still have trouble thinking about Emerging Things except in terms relating to things with which we’re already familiar.

I think there’s good reason for hope. And I hope, one day, in some pan-galactic time, the standing-up of a strawman argument for the sole purpose of bringing it down, will die out and be over-helpful.