Hacking the Academy

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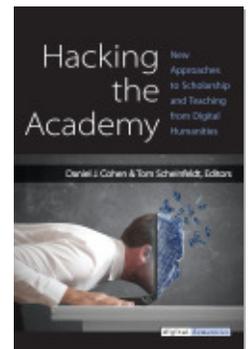Published by University of Michigan Press

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Reading and Writing

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The way we're taught to read is diametrically opposite the way we're taught to write. We learn to read books and articles quickly, under pressure, for the key points or for what we can use. But we write as if a learned gentleman of leisure sits in a paneled study, savoring every word. Books and articles are clogged with prose no one but first-year graduate students and the author's most devoted enemies actually read. Yet the titles of books and articles suggest the author imagines a literary audience of breathless millions. *An Age of Giants: Railroad Regulation in Kansas, 1933–1936*. Did I make this title up? Hard to tell, isn't it? Why do sober, solid academic tomes feel obliged to tart up their work like middle-aged trollops?

It's because of the disjunction between the way we are taught to read and the way we are taught to write. We aspire to write in what might be called, if one were feeling extremely generous, a "literary" style. But we learn to read as if gutting a fish. The state of affairs is well described by a joke many have heard or told:

Professor A: "Have you taught this new book by X?" Professor B: "Why not only have I taught it, I've read it!"

Within these comically unrealistic parameters, academic writing finds an extremely limited set of outlets. There are books, there are journal articles, and there are conference papers, which are but fetal journal articles or book chapters. Scholarly books and articles are, quite reasonably, hard to publish. They need peer review, which takes time; at its best, peer review makes for better, more reliable, more accurate work. At its worst, it wears interesting and novel ideas down to a smooth, dull, and uniform familiarity. It demands exactly the narcotizing qualifications and historiographic forced marches that put ordinary readers off academic work and render the colonic titles absurd.

When you think back on the books and articles that most influenced you, is your first thought "hell of a job on the peer review"? The stuff which has been most influential in my intellectual life, the stuff that's

been most profound and useful, is profound and useful in ways that have nothing at all to do with peer review.

Was Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* peer reviewed? It sure doesn't read as if it was. *History of Sexuality*, Volume 1? No. Both books had a profound influence. Was Geertz's essay on cockfighting in Bali dramatically improved by peer review? No. What's valuable about that famous essay is the clarity of his prose and the nature of the insights. Maybe peer review pushed him to make it a little better, but the value comes from the method, the intellectual core, not some fine-tuning on Balinese village customs forced by Geertz's disciplinary rivals.

Now the obvious objection is that peer review is supposed to be invisible, and present us—the general public—with a reliable, vetted, accurate product. One could argue that in these examples, it worked as it was supposed to. But again it's not the fact that they were peer-reviewed that makes these pieces worthwhile: peer review is to their worth as the parsley garnish is to the blue-plate special.

Now, of course, most of us are not brilliant thinkers, and even brilliant thinkers get help. No doubt Geertz, Foucault, and other postmodern worthies worked in a community, and benefited from exchange with their peers. We all want that input on our work: we want to clarify our thinking and gain from the insights of people we respect. But in a networked world there are ways to make that easier, not harder: more fluid and less cumbersome.

And because there are so very few templates for academic publishing, scholars have to inflate their work to fit—the book is all too often a blown-up article, and the article, all too often, is a blown-up conference paper. Does anyone doubt this? There's no outlet for small ideas, for what the sciences call a "research finding." There are few outlets for work that frankly mixes past history with present politics. There are few or no outlets for work that takes chances with form. It's as if basketball was still played only by slow midwestern men lobbing set shots.

Academic writing has been remarkably resistant to technological change. It survived the typewriter crisis with nary a blip; the word processor, despite its immense advantages, left little or no mark on academic prose, except that really good quotations tended to be repeated more often. So it continues today, blithely untouched by the staggering potential of networked digital technology, writing as if a neighbor had just dropped by in a carriage and left their card in the foyer. Yes, methodologies change;

the liquid in the glass changes colors and flavors, but the glass remains thick, square, and clouded with age.

There is of course nothing intrinsically wrong with the current model of academic publishing, just as there's nothing wrong with Brahms. But a world in which Brahms was the only template for musical expression would be both stupefying and willfully cloistered. Why not invent a new mode of academic publishing and communication—one rooted in the way we actually live and work; one that takes advantage of the technologies we have, instead of pretending they don't exist?