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Hacking the Academy

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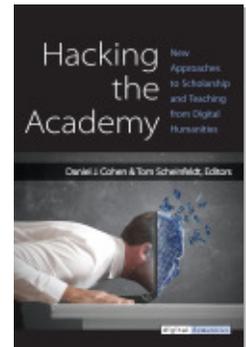
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Hacking the Dissertation

Anastasia Salter

When I teach, I'm constantly asking my students to work in open and collaborative spaces. I prefer student work that faces outward: wikis, Twitter, blogs, game projects, etc. Like Mark Sample, I believe that the student essay is flawed—"a compressed outpouring of energy . . . that means nothing to no one."

Can't the same be said of my dissertation? To a large extent, that's even expected. The dissertation is the large work that stands as a bridge to future research. Writing it is more the process of induction: a launching point, rather than an end product. It exists, it goes in front of a committee, and mostly it is of vast significance only to the person writing it.

There are several traditional venues for feedback during the dissertation-writing process: the most common is the conference presentation, a strictly scheduled event in which a portion of the work that has presumably been tailored into a stand-alone paper. From there, draft exchanges are possible, and social media certainly has eased the exchange of these types of documents. This type of limited collaboration is a sidenote to the bulk of the writing process, which was recently satirized by the website PhD Comics as a "trip down the rabbit hole" that amounts to a personal struggle with one's research.¹

That still hard-to-dismiss picture of the humanist surrounded by papers, not people and networks, stands in contrast to online communities where peer feedback can enhance a lonely process. The desire to share progress is seen even in tongue-in-cheek experiments like *Is My Thesis Hot or Not?*—a website where only the thesis statement is in play, and subject to user votes on the binary of "hot" or "not" with an open-comment system that can be an outlet for snark, or, more rarely, helpful criticism.²

This is one of the realities of putting work in open-access environments: it can be mocked and torn apart. More likely, it will be ignored completely. The most commonly used database for academic dissertations encourages work to be put into stasis: the ProQuest UMI Dissertation

database now has an open-access model for digital publication, but the work once archived sits as a PDF and cannot evolve dynamically.³

There are already many projects that have experimented with open peer review and collaboration. Of those, the most successful tend to be launched by an already established academic, as with Lawrence Lessig's collective revision of his work via wiki, *Code 2.0*. Humanities dissertations have occasionally embraced dynamic digital forms: Vika Zafrin's blog, *RolandHT*, was designed for the web, and is conscious of that form in every aspect of the data and methodology. Zach Whalen's blog, *The Videogame Text*, is a working example of the dissertation text brought into an interactive space, though the stated final goal remains a traditional book proposal.⁴

In these and other cases of experimental publishing, the exclusivity of the book is being overthrown. Many grad students I've spoken with are hesitant to place their work in open access venues for fear of decreasing its value down the road: they dream—and, yes, I myself will admit to having daydreamed—of making the leap from dissertation to monograph. The reality of such leaps, of course, is that they demand transformation: take Noah Wardrip-Fruin's recent book from MIT Press, *Expressive Processing*, and compare it to his earlier dissertation of the same name.⁵

The traditional dissertation as product reflects the dominance of the book: it creates a monograph that sits in a database. The processes of the humanities are to some extent self-perpetuating: write essays as an undergraduate, conference papers as a graduate student, a dissertation as a doctoral student, and books and journal articles as a professor. Making a work open access doesn't give it an audience, just as engaging in a dynamic project and seeking community input doesn't make a work inherently valuable—but it does more seriously reflect the purposing of the dissertation as a launching point.

Perhaps as all these stages of academic production are “hacked” we'll see more dissertations embracing the models that are now experimental. I'd like to see a community form online that resembles the collaborative social networks I've made an object of study. For instance, a community like Fanfiction.net brings value to its many users not only by offering a place to share one's story, but by offering a community of collaborators—other creators of content who are enthusiastic about sharing their own knowledge and opinions because they are engaged in the same processes for themselves.⁶ These types of communities go a step beyond the social networks we now have as graduate students (like Gradshare and Grad

Cafe) and become spaces that encourage continual revision, collaboration, and extension.⁷ Embracing these models might bring some of the same challenges we see in the classroom, like sorting out the different values of individual authorship and dealing with the ever-present risks of plagiarism, but the results might produce dissertation work that can move more easily to relevance in a larger discourse. A dissertation written—and blogged, and revised, and remixed—in networked space need not be condemned to stasis.

Notes

1. Jorge Cham, “PhD Comics: Cecilia in Thesisland, Pt. 2: Down the Raw Bit Code,” <http://www.phdcomics.com/comics/archive.php?comicid=1275>.
2. <http://ismythesishotornot.com/>.
3. “ProQuest Open Access Publishing PLUS,” ProQuest, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/products/dissertations/epoa.shtml>.
4. Lawrence Lessig, *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace, Version 2.0* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Vika Zafrin, *RolandHT*, <http://rolandht.org/>; *The Videogame Text*, “Typography and Textuality: Blogging the Book Proposal,” blog entry by Zach Whalen, <http://www.thevideogametext.com/vgt>.
5. Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).
6. <http://www.fanfiction.net/>.
7. GradShare, <http://www.gradshare.com/answers.html>; the Grad Cafe forums—graduate school Admission, advice, discussions, help and information, <http://forum.thegradcafe.com/>.