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Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

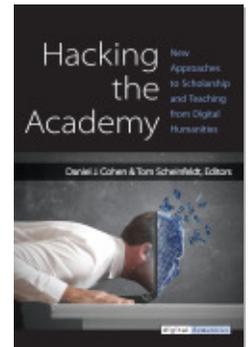
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An Open Letter to the Forces of Change

Jennifer Howard

To: The forces of change

From: J. Howard

So you want to hack the academy? I can't tell you how to do it. I can ask you a few well-intentioned questions, though, because journalists ask questions. These are a few that have occurred to me as I do what I do: write about academic publishing; go to conferences; talk to scholars, editors, publishers, and librarians; and generally get my feet wet in the fast-flowing, ever-shifting river of scholarly communication. These are questions lobbed at you from the sidelines, not from the trenches. I'm an observer, not a specialist, which may make these useful or may not. Either way, I'm curious to see the results of your experiment.

1) *What do you mean by that?* Or: beware the language of the oppressor. I keep a running list in my head of phrases I hear so often they no longer mean anything. For instance, can you break down “adding value” for me? If you're not an employee of NORAD or a grain farmer, do you really need to talk about “silos”? And on and on. Every field has its vocabulary and a rhetoric by which it recognizes itself; every discipline and every trade, including mine, has a shorthand: that's useful—and limiting. It's good to keep an eye on when useful has given way to limiting, especially if you're trying to remake the world. A fresh message requires a fresh vocabulary—or a freshening up of the old one. If you come up with a handy alternative to the phrase “the dissemination of research” please let me know, because I sure could use one.

2) *How do you keep crowdsourcing from becoming another in crowd?* This is tricky. A revolution does not succeed without like-minded souls, compadres, and comrades-in-arms working together. How do you create alternative forms of authority without creating an alternative regime? Are you opening the gates or shutting them? Storming the barricades or erecting new ones? Will the next generation—or those who feel excluded from the conversation—be tempted to bring out the tumbrels for you?

3) *Have you looked for friends in the enemy camp lately?* Or: maybe you will find allies where you don't expect any. As a journalist, I'm no stranger to generalizations. Still, it's disconcerting to go to different conferences and hear Entire Category X—administrators/university presses/librarians/journal editors/blank in the blank—written off as part of the problem when at least a few daring souls might not mind being part of a solution. It may not be *your* solution. You might have to venture a closer look to find out. I can't say what you will discover. It may not be at all what you expect. It might be exactly what you expect. Let me know.