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# SHAPING THE DIGITAL DISSERTATION

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN THE  
ARTS AND HUMANITIES





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# I. Dissertating in Public

*Kathleen Fitzpatrick*

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The process of writing a dissertation is often an exercise in profound isolation. Having begun graduate school as part of a cohort, having been closely supervised and surrounded through the process of coursework and qualifying exams, you are suddenly released and left to your own independent devices. In fact, the dissertation is intended as a test of those independent devices: can you self-motivate, self-regulate, develop and maintain a schedule to keep your work moving forward? The process is meant to enable the candidate to develop the self-reliant habits of mind that will serve them throughout their career. But what this exercise in independence frequently produces is far more troubling: the candidate runs headlong into loneliness, self-questioning and imposter syndrome.

These isolation-driven anxieties and doubts are so much a part of academic thinking about the individual long-form research project that we might begin to see them as features rather than bugs: tests of one's scholarly mettle. In fact, the profession has long since selected for the ability to withstand such isolation; those who make it through go on to design and oversee programs that impose the same conditions that were imposed on them. And of course, much of the later work that will be done by scholars who successfully join the tenure track—and that will be assessed, again, by those who have succeeded on that track—requires the same isolation, and the same ability to withstand it. After a certain point, in fact, we crave it: we want nothing more than to close the door, shut out the world, and focus on our individual projects.

But the isolation that is built into the dissertation process often comes at a profound cost: in some cases, to the individual mental health

of the scholars themselves, but in many more cases, to the health of the larger scholarly community. Being thrown out on our own, left to fend for ourselves, teaches us that the most important work that we do—the work on which our most important evaluations depend—must be done alone. We are pulled away from the more collective aspects of academic life and persuaded instead that the only work that matters, the only work that deserves our attention, is our ‘own’. The dissertation is one of the most crucial phases of the process through which scholars self-replicate, and when we select for independence we select against community. In encouraging scholars in formation to close the door, shut out other demands and focus inward, we undermine the potentials for connection, for collaboration, for collective action that foster a sense of scholarly work as contributing to a social rather than personal good. We reinforce the individualistic, competitive thinking that I have argued is eroding not only our relationships with one another on campus but also the relationships between institutions of higher education and the publics that we serve.

That for so many established scholars alternatives to the isolation of the dissertation process are literally unthinkable is precisely a sign that such isolation has taken on the status of ideology. We may never get far enough away from our ‘every tub on its own bottom’ assumptions to fully embrace, for instance, the possibilities of a collaborative dissertation, though that very impossibility creates an interesting thought problem. (Impossible why? What is the dissertation meant to do in preparing a candidate for a career? Are there aspects of the career, or indeed entire future careers that we can today only dimly imagine, that might be better served by the affordances of a team-based project?) Even if we accept the single-author requirement for the dissertation as a given, however—at least for now; we have, after all, begun to move away, if gradually, from the assumption that the dissertation must be strictly composed of linear, text-based argumentation and analysis—there are ways that candidates might be encouraged to work more communally and publicly on dissertation projects, ways that might help alleviate some of the isolation and the problems that it creates.

In fact, many candidates rely on writing groups for both support and accountability in the dissertation process. Such writing groups tend to be local and private, a small cluster of scholars banding together to help

one another through. It is possible, however, that more support might be found through scholarly networks online, through taking the leap to work on the dissertation in public. Public work like this can take a number of forms: it could be a matter of blogging about the process, about the ideas and the problems uncovered in the course of its research and composition. It could include posting drafts of chapters, or pieces of chapters, for discussion. In either case, the author could use a blog-based platform to work through challenges, to get feedback, to think about the significance of the project, and to build a sense of the community to whom the project speaks.

No doubt the last paragraph has the potential to induce an anxious reaction or two in some readers. If deep collaboration remains all but unthinkable in some corners of our scholarly lives, making work publicly available before it is 'ready'—before it's been revised, reviewed and given a professional seal of approval—is nothing short of impossible. We worry about the dangers inherent in allowing less-than-perfect work to be seen, about the possibility of having our ideas appropriated, about interfering with future publication opportunities. These worries are real, but also misplaced; they develop out of the general cloud of anxiety that covers the dissertation process, and they are heightened by well-meaning colleagues and advisors who do not always understand the potential benefits of working in public, or the ways that concerns such as these can be managed.

For instance: a willingness to make the process of developing the dissertation visible can not only help improve the project at hand but can also support future work, both one's own and that of others. Allowing work that is not yet perfect to be read and commented on not only can make possible early feedback from peers that can help guide the project's development, but it can also shed light on an occult process. And that visibility can benefit not just future dissertation writers but also many of our students: the hidden nature of our writing process too often leads novice writers to assume that our publications spring fully-formed from our heads; allowing them to see some of the messiness of our own processes can give them an understanding of what 'professional' drafting and revision look like, as well as the confidence to try it for themselves. It can also model for others—and for ourselves—the importance of conversation in the writing process.

Moreover, making the process of developing the dissertation visible can also demonstrate its potential to connect with a future audience. Projects that are written, or written about, in openly accessible ways can be found by editors who might be interested in working toward future publication. They can be found by other scholars who might be putting together collaborative projects in the field—conference panels or edited volumes, for instance—in which the work might play a role. And they can be found by journalists writing in related areas who might be interested in including the work in that reporting.

That last point raises its own set of concerns, of course, as scholars have recently complained about the growing tendency of such reporters to cite their sources inadequately at best, making it appear that the ideas developed through lengthy scholarly research and analysis are a mere part of the reporter's thinking. This is one of the several forms of 'getting scooped' that dissertation writers often worry about; other such worries include the possibility of another, faster scholar appropriating and publishing the work. These fears are, alas, real; a dissertation is designed to make an original contribution to the field, but it takes sufficiently long to be completed that one might reasonably worry about someone else catching wind of the idea and getting to the finish line first. However, these fears thrive on secrecy, and plagiarists, thieves and other unethical types are only able to get away with what they have done when there is no evidence that they have done it. In fact, the best way to avoid having one's work scooped is precisely *not* keeping it hidden away, but rather posting about it early and often. In this way, the ideas—complete with time stamps—come to be publicly associated with you, and any improper use can be equally publicly proven.

Finally, writing in public raises concerns for many candidates about the future publication possibilities for their dissertations, and how its public availability might disrupt them. On the one hand, it is true that university presses want the right of first publication for projects, and that the prior publication of that project online might diminish their interest. But that statement leaves out a few crucial qualifiers. First, university presses do not generally publish dissertations. Rather, they publish books that *develop out* of dissertations, and the distance between those two is more significant than it might sound. There is a lot of rethinking and revising involved in transforming a document largely written for

a committee—designed to demonstrate one’s mastery of a field and often responding to the idiosyncratic interests of one’s advisers—into one written for a larger public. As a result, making aspects of the dissertation openly available—including depositing it in an open-access repository—will not necessarily cause a press to pass on the basis that it has already been published. In fact, a project that has already drawn online interest, and that has demonstrated its author’s ability to write for and engage with a larger public, may well be appealing to those presses as the basis for a book.

And that last point is a key one to focus on: engaging with a larger public and developing a trusted network of readers interested in the work you are doing is of crucial importance. It is the key to overcoming the isolation involved in long-form scholarly work and to getting your work into conversation with the work of others. It is the key, in fact, to building a more open, more transparent, more generous scholarly community, because not only will your own work benefit from the connections that working in public can provide, but in fact the entire scholarly community can benefit. By finding more ways to work together, and to show the processes of our work, we can begin to make a bit more visible—a bit more accessible—what it is that scholars *do*. And that, in turn, might give us the potential to invite a range of broader publics into that work, creating a richer sense of why scholarly work *matters*.

Having arrived at this conclusion, however, I need to issue a strong final caveat: if greater forms of public engagement, of collaboration, of openness and community are key goals for scholars today, working toward those goals must not be left to them alone. We must consider what needs to change at the institutional level in order to support this work. That is to say, the impetus to work in public, and the responsibility for transforming their work, cannot lie solely at the feet of graduate students. Faculty, advisors and administrators must consider the ways that our curricula, our departments and our institutions facilitate and reward new kinds of open work, enabling it to be as transformative as possible. Only through such careful alignment of our institutions’ internal processes and reward structures with the deepest values we hope to espouse can we begin to contribute to the most humane, most generous purposes of higher education: developing and sharing knowledge in order to foster and sustain engaged, caring communities for us all.

