Ode to Dissertations and Theses

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April 11, 2016


On April 21, my campus, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, is celebrating its second research fair. We are anticipating over 100 posters and participation by a quarter of our student body. This year, one of our faculty proposed changing the name from “Undergraduate Research Day” to the “Celebration of Scholarship,” and we decided we would highlight not only student work, but faculty work as well.

As part of the activities for the day, my colleague and I devised a “Pin the Tassle on the Owl” game, where we ask people to match the faculty member with their dissertation title (or, in absence of a dissertation, another significant publication). This is an especially fun game for me, as I have an obsession with
theses and dissertations. It started when I was working in a special collections library, where we had a huge card catalog filled with cards relating to theses and dissertations on campus. One set was arranged by author, and the other by department. It was common for students beginning their degree programs to visit and to search through their department’s history of scholarship, looking either for ideas, or for things to avoid.

This obsession is also partially fueled by the fact that I, personally, have never written a master’s thesis or a dissertation. I often find myself daydreaming about topics that would interest me for long enough to complete a PhD program, but the topics that really interest me are ones that I am not sure I could use to further my career in a meaningful way. My sister, who actually has a PhD in astrophysics, has told me that writing a dissertation is "not rocket science," but I think she is being modest.

The easiest way to search for dissertations is using a tool like ProQuest’s Dissertations and Theses, which indexes more than 2 million items. If your university does not subscribe to Dissertations and Theses, there are numerous other ways to access content for free, usually by going to Google Scholar and adding “dissertation” to your search term, or searching within an institution’s institutional repository.

One of my favorite titles ever is from a friend who wrote her Master’s thesis in American Studies: From Old Maids to Action Heroes: Librarians and the Meanings of Librarian Stereotypes. Just this morning, while driving to work, and listening to Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince on audio book for the umpteenth time, I found myself wondering how much scholarship the series had spawned. By searching for “Harry Potter” in the abstract field in Dissertations and Theses, I discovered that there are over 100 items. I want to read them all. Does J.K. Rowling know about these? Would she want to read Harry Potter and social constructs: How J.K. Rowling’s message of equality fails? Is she aware that Dumbledore’s method of teaching is known as ‘inquiry-based,” as we are informed by Learning in Harry Potter: Metatextual Transformations? Could she ever have imagined that there would be not one, but at least two works of scholarship focused entirely on the food she invented for her Harry Potter series?
Children’s literature is an area where I am sure I would be able to find a topic that would interest me for the duration of a PhD program, but where would it get me? I have no interest in either teaching English or becoming a children’s librarian. And besides, someone has already written *Let them run wild: Childhood, the nineteenth-century storyteller, and the ascent of the moon*. The field of Digital Humanities probably exists because of people like me, who like technology but also humanities subjects. In 2004, a doctoral candidate at the University of Montreal somehow used *Anne of Green Gables* as a way to “show the implications of hypertext networking with regard to other understandings and practices of memory.” I am not sure exactly what that means, but it certainly sounds impressive (van der Klei, Alice. 2004. *The practice of memory in hypertext wor(l)ds*).

I like to play a game that involves searching for dissertations discussing my latest binge-watch television shows. I plan to read *Anthony Soprano; Aristotelian Tragic Hero, Anti-Hero, or Thug; and Why We Watch* as soon as it is fully available online (many people “embargo” their dissertations for five years, usually in case they plan on converting said dissertation into a book). *TV Nostalgia for the Boomer Home and Housewife* is the only dissertation I have found so far that might analyze Betty Draper of *Mad Men*, so I have downloaded it to skim once I actually finish watching the series. There are also all of the celebrities who have advanced degrees. Actress Mayim Bialik’s dissertation is about something called "Prader-Willi syndrome." Queen musician Brian May’s dissertation from Imperial College London actually sounds like a song title: *A survey of radial velocities in the zodiacal dust cloud*.

Two dissertations focus on my hometown of Columbia, Maryland – a planned community that has a somewhat unique history. The top hit for my current home, Scranton, Pennsylvania, is a thesis entitled *When Coal Was King*, but its focus is not the obvious. In truth, it was written for someone earning a Master of Fine Arts in Metal and Jewelry Design from the Rochester Institute of Technology. How cool is that?

People spend a lot of time, effort, and money to complete a master’s thesis or dissertation. Often these publications are overlooked, or they do not score high in relevancy rankings in discovery systems. It used to drive me crazy that the
cataloging department decided not to assign formal subject headings to theses and dissertations in our catalog at my prior institution. For example, another friend of mine wrote her master’s thesis in 2000 on *Catholic Americanism at the movies, 1930-1947*. Unfortunately, even though there are several Library of Congress subject heading construction that address the topic (Catholic Church--In motion pictures, for example), it is almost impossible to locate this thesis without knowing it exists in the first place. Perhaps other books have been written on this topic, both before and after the thesis, but if scholarship really is a conversation, then it is useful to hear all of it, and not just snippets.

If you have access to *Dissertations and Theses*, or if your institution has an institutional repository that contains ETDs (electronic theses and dissertations), take a look now and then. It can be inspirational. While writing this post, I discovered that no one appears to have tackled the idea that I had in the car this morning. So maybe I’ll consider that dissertation after all.