

Instruments of knowledge: toward the reform of the PhD dissertation

Paul Yachnin

Dept of English and Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas (IPLAI), McGill University

Three years ago, a group of Canadian and American scholars published a White Paper on the Future of the PhD in the Humanities (<http://iplai.ca/what-we-do/research-public-exchange/future-humanities/>). The White Paper concluded with seven recommendations. Here are the short versions:

- 1. Mentorship** Universities should create dedicated professional planning and placement services that serve to broaden the legitimate employment expectations of humanities PhDs and that prepare graduates for a multiplicity of career opportunities.
- 2. The PhD Dissertation** We recommend replacing the thesis with a coherent ensemble of projects, which can include single-author and collaborative essays, electronic archives or other kinds of digital scholarly resources, editions, translations, works of scholarship in a range of forms and oriented toward multiple audiences, and so on.
- 3. Professionalization and Time to Completion** We recommend that doctoral programs be four and no more than five years.
- 4. New Scholarly Technologies** We need to set a higher standard of digital literacy for humanities programs in recognition that graduates will be seeking employment in an information age.
- 5. Recruitment** We should expand the criteria by which candidates are admitted to PhD programs, considering skills, achievements, and career goals as well as past academic performance.
- 6. The Labour Market and the Culture of the Academy** Faculty, students, and administrators must take in the facts about the prospects for academic employment of PhDs and must begin discussions across the academy about how to redress the situation.
- 7. Reporting** We recommend that the leading academic/humanities organizations in Canada publish an agreement to the effect that all doctoral programs must keep up-to-date records, at a minimum, about recruitment of PhD students, years to completion, attrition rates, and a full accounting of placement inside and outside the academy—three, five, and ten years after graduation or after withdrawal from programs.

Numbers 1, 4, 5, and 6 have hardly raised an eyebrow. People shrugged their shoulders at 3, as if to say “of course, the programs should be shorter, but really, what can we do?” And, of course, the historians were not wrong to point out how long students have to spend in order to learn the languages they need for their research, not to mention the time they have to spend in the archives.

Recommendation number 7 is at the heart of the ongoing TRaCE project (<http://iplai.ca/what-we-do/research-public-exchange/future-humanities/trace/>), which is a collaboration of 24 Canadian universities, the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS), the Federation for the Humanities and the Social Sciences, the Jackman Humanities Institute at the University of Toronto, and a number of other partners, including Adoc Talent Management and the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). The project is headquartered at the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Idea (IPLAI) at McGill University. It is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the participating universities, and the partner organizations. (I will have more to say about the TRaCE project at the CGS Dissertations workshop.)

As I have talked to faculty members and students across Canada over the past three years, and especially in the course of the Future Humanities project in 2014-2015, it has been Recommendation 2 that has aroused the most discussion, debate, and resistance.¹ I was surprised to learn how many humanities students and faculty didn't know that the long-form thesis was not in fact standard across all the other disciplines. They were surprised that the "ensemble of projects" we were recommending in the White Paper was already standard practice in a number of disciplines.

But it was not the disciplinary isolation of my interlocutors that was most striking. What was most remarkable was how often people rose in defense of the long-form dissertation and how passionate their defenses of it were. Many interlocutors argued with both emotion and reason for the value of the long-form thesis because of how it signaled and also required the kind of deep, focused inquiry that is central to the humanities. And it is indeed not an easy task to reimagine the doctoral thesis as a work able both to go deeply into a particular question and also able to mobilize that research, or at least part of that research, for non-academic constituencies.

But some people seemed simply to be avoiding the larger question by undertaking a dissection of the practicality of the two model PhD programs, which were included in the White Paper, not as practical examples, but solely to provoke new thinking about program design. Many others said that changing the long-form PhD would degrade the degree, take out its heart, transform it into something else entirely.

As a literary scholar, I agree that the form of a text and the character of the implied reader are important. But I could not fathom why so many people thought that moving from the long-form dissertation to an ensemble of projects would amount to the destruction of the PhD itself. After all, while the projects were to be variously oriented, with at least one designed for a non-academic constituency, and each aiming toward a different form of publication and a different publication platform, they were also to be strongly interrelated around a single research question. Why this degree of emotional investment in the traditional format and the exclusivity of the readership for a work of scholarship?

¹ For more on Future Humanities, see <http://iplai.ca/what-we-do/research-public-exchange/future-humanities/>,

There are likely many reasons for the deeply rooted attachment to the long-form thesis. I'll focus on only two of them. The first is a underlying binary that conditions our understanding of what we do as humanities scholars.

Faculty members often represent themselves as fighting for the intrinsic value of humanities scholarship at the top of its form, the “for-itselfness” of such scholarship, against the instrumentalization of knowledge demanded by an increasingly corporatized and commercialized academy.

Consider how even a savvy thinker like Stefan Collini can characterize humanities knowledge as something set apart from practical concerns and something that is misrepresented essentially by arguments about how the value of a humanities education consists in teaching reading, writing, and analytical skills. “[S]kills-talk,” Collini says, “represents a failure of nerve. It is an attempt to justify an activity not in its own appropriate terms, but in terms derived from another set of categories altogether, categories drawn from the instrumental world of commerce and industry.”²

Collini is right about a good number of things. Humanities education is not valuable principally because it helps students develop a set of so-called “transferable skills.” And he is right that the modern university, even a university as deeply rooted in traditional scholarship as Cambridge, is increasingly likely to seek to justify itself by way of a limited set of terms that have to do, first, with the ability to develop innovative solutions to current ecological, economic, technological, health-related, and social problems and, second, with the capacity to prepare young people for the multiform world of work.

These things are true, and yet Collini’s main claim about the incommensurability of the intrinsic worth of humanities knowledge and the instrumental worth of literary (broadly defined) skills is wrong. It is a false dichotomy, and one that is pervasive in the modern university. That its falseness is so largely invisible points to second important matter. The assumed truth of a categorical divide and a mutual antagonism between the intrinsic and instrumental value of the humanities is a product not of the texts we study or write or of our practices as teachers or researchers. After all, our scholarship and teaching, when we are doing them well, have the character of deep inquiry and critical self-reflection and also the capacity to educate others in new ways of seeing, reading, thinking, writing, and speaking. Our work is both valuable in itself and valuable for its usefulness.

One could argue that the intrinsic-instrumental divide is, ironically enough, an effect of the hugely successful institutionalization of humanities research and teaching in the modern university. Since the incorporation of loosely-knit groups of teachers and students in the European Middle Ages, institutionalization has enabled a measure of employment security and a high degree of scholarly freedom in the face of ecclesiastical and state power.³ It has also had the effect of islanding scholarship within the university, especially since one important source of

² Stefan Collini, *What are Universities For?* (Penguin, 2012), loc 2353.

³ Francis Oakley, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11-37.

scholarly distinction has been its autonomy from what has increasingly been seen as the “outside world.”⁴

The doctoral dissertation is the distillation of the treasured apartness of humanities scholarship. It is easy to understand how the most challenging and the crowning work undertaken by aspiring doctors of letters has taken to itself the values along with misconceptions of the academic institution of the humanities. Faculty members often say to their supervisees (I have said it) things like, “this is the best time of your professional life. Now is when you can get to focus on what really matters rather than having to deal with all the political nonsense and administrative busyness that comes with a senior, tenured position.”

The second reason for the high degree of resistance to the idea of doing the the dissertation differently is straightforward and understandable, especially when the recommended changes involve writing some parts of it in a non-academic style, framing parts in a non-traditional format, disseminating parts (or all of it) by way of social media or other publication platforms, or aiming parts for a readership (or a viewing audience) different from the readership inside a particular discipline (itself inside the university). Most faculty members have made their way in the profession along the well-established lines of the conference presentation and journal and book publication. The audience or readership they seek to engage is comprised of faculty members, postdocs, and senior graduate students. They have learned to write in ways that are familiar within their disciplines but often inaccessible to people outside their disciplines. They have never traveled the winding pathways that lead from doctoral programs to the many other places where PhDs have settled and made lives for themselves. Most of us (I include myself) would not know where to begin if we were to take on the supervision of a dissertation that was to combine the traditional methodologies and expectations of humanities scholarship with a much more experimental, mobile, and public-facing dimension at the level of content, style, format, and mode and place of publication.

In spite of these considerable obstacles, I nevertheless maintain that creative reform of the dissertation is urgently needed. I have discussed elsewhere how add-on skills training programs are well-meaning and useful but hardly enough to meet the challenges facing the present-day graduating cohorts of PhDs.⁵ Since the great majority of PhDs in the humanities do not and will not be able to secure permanent academic employment, there is a pressing ethical requirement for the universities to redesign doctoral programs and especially the central, final element of the programs so that students do not internalize the widespread assumption that there is no place for them outside the academy and so they begin to learn how to carry their talent, knowledge, and (yes) skills into careers outside the university.

I am not arguing for reform of the dissertation so that PhDs will be “job-ready” for non-academic careers. We need a larger and more forward-looking view than that. The work I’ve been involved

⁴ One dire effect of the assumption that humanities research and teaching is islanded within the university, beset on all sides by “the instrumental world of commerce and industry,” has to do with how many PhDs choose to remain on the island as underpaid, overworked adjunct faculty instead of seeking careers in the multiple sectors of work and action outside the academy. See Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

⁵ “Rethinking the Humanities PhD,” *University Affairs*, April 2015.

in for the past three years is certainly about changing the culture of the academy so that the PhD leads and is seen to lead to a multiplicity of rewarding and worthwhile careers rather than to only one. The work is also dedicated to creating a new humanities research and teaching community that flourishes both inside and outside the university and thrives especially on account of the exchanges of knowledge and knowhow between the university and the multiple non-academic sectors of work and action.

The creation of such a community and the fostering of such exchanges are important goals of the TRaCE project. To invite PhDs in careers outside the university to take part in limited but creative and formative ways in graduate teaching, supervision, and mentoring is to begin to enable the reform of the dissertation in earnest. That reform will in turn strengthen the humanities by teaching humanities research and humanities teachers themselves how to move. The island of the academy is indeed a wonderful place, but there are many other sites in society for the cultivation of humanities research and teaching. It is possible to build many bridges between the island and the mainland that will enable a new era of transformative two-way traffic.

