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Sustaining Scholarship: Librarians and the Political Economy of Print

Emily Drabinski

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Abstract

As workers in the knowledge industry, librarians have particular insight into the implications of the tectonic shifts wrought by the decline of print. Drawing on work to make the journal *Radical Teacher* open access, this paper discusses how librarians can mobilize our insider knowledge to transform our communities of practice.

Keywords: scholarly communication; open access

Introduction

Leonard has trouble reading the layout when I've turned on the hidden characters. "Why are there all those dots everywhere? How do we get rid of all those dots?" I've shown Leonard a dozen times how to turn non-printing characters on and off, and I've explained why I've got them turned on. Copy for *Radical Teacher* usually arrives in various states of layout disarray—we have editors who hit the space bar five times at the start of each paragraph, insert section breaks for reasons I can't understand—probably an accident, use the tab key to hang indents in poorly-formatted reference lists. All of it throws everything off when Leonard and I copy and paste text from Word into the new article template we received from Vanessa at the University of Pittsburgh's library, our new partner in open access publishing. When non-printing characters are turned on, I can see what the hell is going on and fix the problems. Leonard marvels at my patience as I explain non-printing characters again, "See this thing that looks like a paragraph symbol?" This isn't patience; it's just how I do what I do. It's my job. I am, after all, a reference librarian. And while some of my work at LIU Brooklyn involves fielding complex research questions, honestly my work is primarily about showing people—again and again—how to turn nonprinting characters on and off.

I want to talk here about the work I have done with this journal, *Radical Teacher*, and how that work is the product of knowledge gained through intimate, workman-like familiarity with the political economy of print. This is knowledge situated by my labor—I know what I know because of the work that I do—shared with a

community that needed that knowledge, to what I think are pretty extraordinary ends. This journal will survive in no small part because of what I brought to it, not because I am really special, but because I am a librarian. And what I've learned through the process of helping this journal move from a very expensive, subscription-dependent closed publishing contract with a university press to an open access, online-only journal published by the University Library System at the University of Pittsburgh has changed my relationship to the movement for open access in scholarly publishing. I think librarians need to be everywhere scholars are making decisions about how to publish their work, doing what librarians often do in the academy, the lion's share of the work.

I joined the Board of *Radical Teacher* in 2008, after the journal published an article I wrote about the U.S.A. Patriot Act in libraries. This was in an issue about political suppression of ideas in higher education, and they'd heard that we librarians knew a thing or two about that. After the article came out, Dick Ohmann emailed to ask if I'd like to come on board full time and invited me to write a letter discussing, in part, my political perspectives. *Radical Teacher*, as its tagline says, is a socialist, feminist, and anti-racist journal on the theory and practice of teaching. Membership on the Board as well as publication in the journal relies on a connection to both parts of the journal title. One must be a teacher, whose ideas are politically radical, particularly relative to the politics of class.

So I wrote such a letter, sat down to an interview with several Board members during which we talked about class and race and gender and pedagogy, and was finally welcomed to the group. The Board meets every six weeks in Middletown, Connecticut, and I expected those meetings to be filled with political conversation and debates and strategizing about what is to be done. I was intimidated by that. I have some radical politics, more or less, but nothing doctrinaire. I was afraid I'd be asked about Trotsky. But at that first meeting, we didn't talk about Trotsky. We talked about money.

Just a few months before I joined the Board, the journal had signed a publishing contract with the University of Illinois Press. Since its founding in 1974, the journal had been a cut-and-paste affair, assembled by Dick and Susan and Paul and Frinde and Saul and the rest three times a year. Saul had decided he could no longer maintain the business end of the journal, things like monitoring subscription renewals and sending out back issues, and no one else on the Board was able to pick up the reins. In exchange for thousands of dollars a year, plus the costs of printing and mailing, UIP agreed to manage journal distribution in bookstores, recruit new subscriptions and maintain renewal lists, and integrate the journal into online databases like JSTOR.

While this arrangement solved the immediate problem of Saul's desire to step back from these administrative duties, it generated a new problem: a need for money.

Thousands of dollars a year. From the moment I stepped onto the Board until we signed our agreement with the University Library System at Pittsburgh, the majority of each meeting was spent panicking and frantically brainstorming strategies for how we would raise the money to stay afloat as a journal. The problem boiled down to this: the journal had taken on a significant new financial commitment just at the moment when print subscriptions were on a precipitous and permanent decline.

Now this problem was obvious to me, just as it is probably obvious to you. But to the Board, it was a mystery. They couldn't understand why subscriptions were dropping. Was UIP failing to send out renewal cards? Did we need to send out more direct mail? Were we losing subscriptions to *Rethinking Schools*? Were libraries paying their invoices late? From where I sat, the answer was very clear. We were widely available in electronic databases, including Academic Search Premier and Social Sciences Abstracts (this was back when Wilson was around), and part of the deal since joining UIP was that all of our content was available in JSTOR, and Project Muse as well. We were paid some money from those databases based on use of our journal, but it didn't amount to thousands of dollars a year, and much of it was one-time payments that we would never see again. And every year we owed Illinois thousands of dollars. As a librarian, the decline of institutional subscriptions made total sense: if I could get journal content from a Big Deal database that I was already locked into, I'd cut the print. Even if that only meant a savings of \$175, our institutional subscription cost, as a librarian it was a no brainer. Every penny counts, at least in my library. I'm a relatively new librarian, but I've been involved in two systematic journal weeding projects in two different libraries, and now culling subscriptions is just a normal part of our annual budget cycle. If *Radical Teacher* needed library subscriptions to survive, we were doomed.

This is the situated knowledge I brought to my new community of editors at *Radical Teacher*. I knew what I knew, and could explain what was happening, because of my location vis-à-vis the political economy of print. As a librarian, I know what it costs to produce information, and I know what it costs to buy it back. I know what it costs to organize it and I know what it costs to make it accessible to users. And I know that all of that labor is expensive. I also know that the shift to digital resources has profoundly altered the landscape for small print journals like ours, making it nearly impossible to survive. I had long had political arguments in favor of open access publishing, but when I brought this knowledge and general political viewpoint to this particular situation, I began to see that open access publishing was actually our only route to survival.

This was difficult to explain to my colleagues on the Board. Despite the fact that they were all Marxists, well versed in the theory and practice of means and ends, the means of their own production as scholars, activists, and publishers—were mysterious to them. They didn't understand what was happening; they wondered if

we could convince librarians not to cut subscriptions to the print journal, perhaps by explaining that we needed those subscriptions to survive. For several months they wavered, increasingly convinced by my increasingly vigorous explanation that we could not be published in a traditional model and hope to survive. We continued to spend a lot of time arguing about generating fundraising ideas rather than addressing the root cause of our economic decline: the shifting economy of scholarly publishing.

And for me, what I knew about the open access movement was deepened profoundly by my work with the Board. I knew the abstract arguments for open access publishing. I knew about SPARC, had librarian friends who saw open access as their passionate political future. I understood, I thought, the political economy of open scholarship, how it relies on exchange of reputation, not of cash, paid for by the institutions that fund scholarship and then are, under the old model, asked to buy back what they already own. I knew abstractly that open access would allow profit to accrue as it ought to—in reputation and influence, not cash, to scholars themselves, not publishers, for-profit or not. Only when I joined the Board did I realize that open access could also solve the economic challenge of survival for small journals like ours. Open access wasn't just the politically right thing to do, it was materially our only option.

It took a while, but the Board finally came around. Nobody wanted to lose print, but everyone finally acknowledged that we couldn't afford to keep it. Wealthy friends of the journal had been tapped and tapped again, direct mail resulted in no new inflows of cash, a donation button on the website yielded, I think, one financial commitment, and it was mine. I offered a solution to our problems: we would abandon our contract with the University of Illinois Press and sign on with the University Library System at the University of Pittsburgh. The librarians at Pitt knew what I knew: that skyrocketing journal prices meant the library would be unable to keep pace. The libraries had responded by funding two full-time positions to manage an open access portal for existing and new journals that would be online and open access using the Open Journal Software platform. We signed our contracts with Pitt, negotiated an early exit from our contract with UIP, and began the year-long process of going OA.

There were challenges. There were things I knew as a librarian that other Board members did not know, some things that surprised me. Board members were excited about the opportunity to publish more frequently, and in a format that would allow and encourage interaction with our content. They thought going online and open meant we'd be a blog, and that we'd no longer come out periodically like, you know, a periodical. We spent a lot of time looking at other journals published by Pitt as a way of helping Board members wrap their heads around an electronic journal, to convince them that we would remain a bona fide journal.

And some Board members expressed concerns that surprised me, but that I think are critical to understand as we work as a profession to bring more publications into the open access universe. Vague and free-floating anxieties about the digital world abounded. One Board member expressed concern that “anybody could read the magazine,” an objection that made no sense to me, but one I’ve since heard from other people who have worked to take existing publications to an online, open model. For many people, the open web can still be a scary place, populated by cyberbullies and far right—or, perhaps, far left—commenters who can wreak havoc on reputations. These fears may be of phantasms, but I think advocates need to be prepared to answer them.

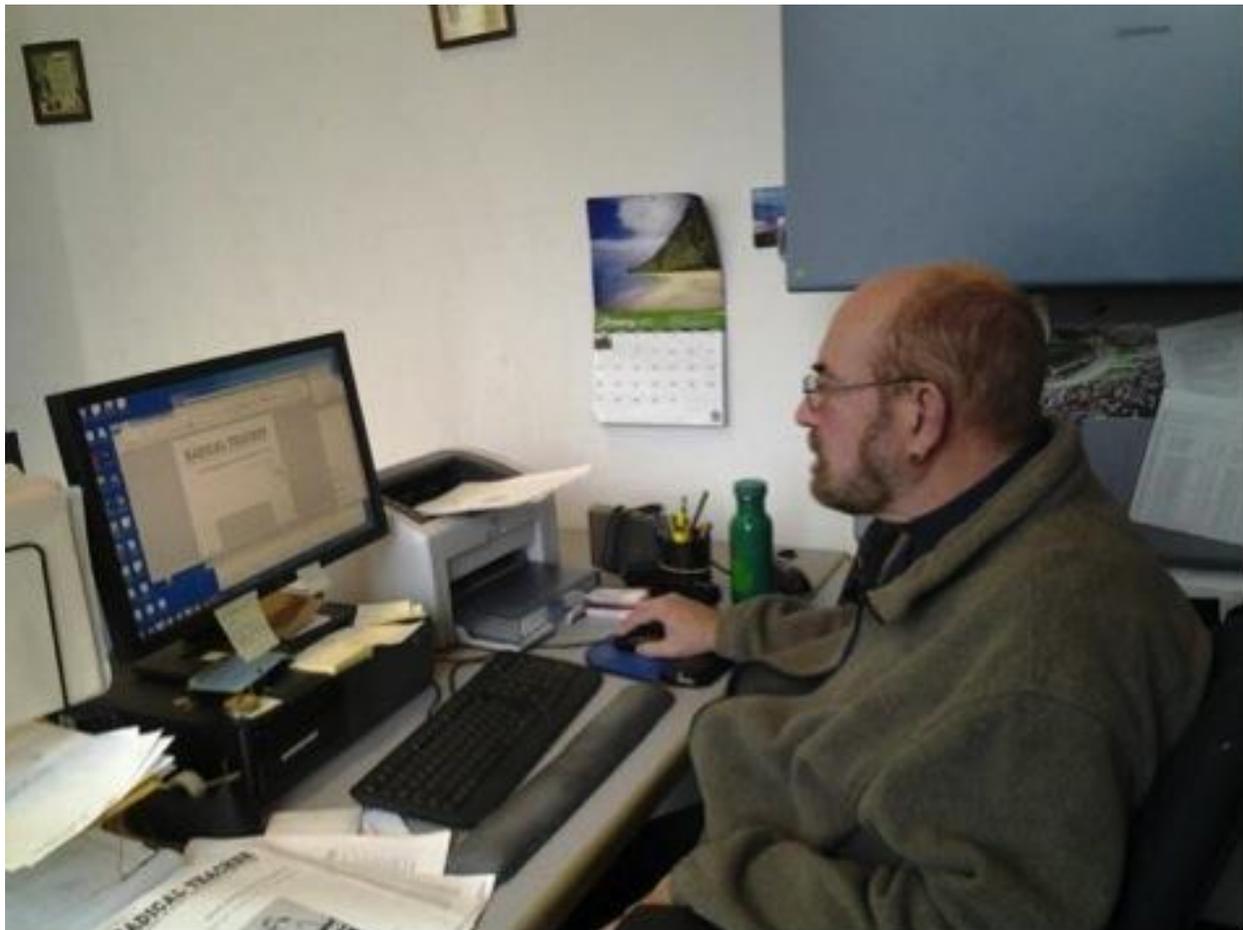
And most of all, people did not want to learn another system. They did not want to sign up for another account. By signing on with Pitt, we agreed to maintain peer review status. This meant copy would no longer be emailed back and forth between and among editors. I would no longer, as copy editor, receive a set of numbered word documents in my inbox. Copy would need to flow through the OJS system, and we would all need to learn how to make that work. While I know it will mean significantly more training of Board members on a new and complicated piece of software, I agree with Pitt’s insistence that we handle copy this way. The integrity of an online, open access journal is difficult to contest if that journal arrives in the open environment already credentialed. *College & Research Libraries*, for example, recently went open access. That is a journal with a reputation and peer review process that all of us already trust; it doesn’t change with the platform. By requiring peer review—and, I will admit, a more rigorously blind process than *Radical Teacher* used in the past—Pitt structurally secures the integrity of the journals it publishes. We’re going to have to sign up for new accounts, and we’re going to have to learn how to work a new system. As we were finally signing off on our Pitt contracts, Leonard said plaintively, “This is it, right? We won’t have to change for a while?” I assured him that indeed we would. This strikes me as the most true thing about our new scholarly publishing universe: it is eminently subject to change. Ultimately, despite all of these concerns, all of the Board accepted the reality of wrenching change: we would need to learn how to do things differently if we wanted to continue to publish work that would inform, reflect, and advance critical teaching practice in education. And that, everyone on the Board agreed, we wanted to do.

So I wanted to talk here about work, and what we know from our labor, and how important it is for us to take that knowledge to contexts that can’t see what we see, and to share it. But there is also much to learn by doing the work to make abstract political desires real in the world. I have learned that the open access movement needs journals like ours—with established reputations and experienced editorial boards—to do the hard work of going open access. As an author I am often exhorted to publish my own work in open access journals. This can be a tough call for a tenure-track junior faculty member who wants to publish in the top journals in my

field so I can keep my job. I think a better approach, one that addresses the problem more systemically and with less reliance on the much-vaunted-by-capitalism individual, is to pitch editorial boards to go open access—for economic reasons as much as political ones. This is work academic librarians can do, locations where we can take what we know and use it to make significant change.

Once we signed the contracts, most of the Board heaved a sigh of relief: no more fundraisers! But Leonard, the managing editor, and I were only at the beginning of our heavy lifting. My skills in teaching software and in manipulating and troubleshooting systems have been essential. Leonard's dogged commitment to making the journal look as good as it reads has been key to what was finally unveiled on the Internet on April 15th.

After much back and forth about design that took about six months—the pace of publishing is slow, even when it's digital—Pittsburgh supplied us with a Word template and set of styles that we're using to lay out the magazine. Leonard and I have spent hours together in my office, placing images, formatting pull quotes, and trying to figure out the difference between section breaks and section breaks-continuous. Here's a photo of what it really looks like to take a journal open access.



It looks like Leonard at my desk, doing his best to climb an extraordinarily steep learning curve. And it also looks like this: joy at reaching the occasional summit.



When we first started laying things out, Leonard would try to go back to the trusty tools he knew to make the articles look like he wanted them to: the space bar, the tab key, changing fonts and margins. “I’d love to have the headline just a little bigger,” he’d say, moving the cursor perilously close to the font-size dropdown menu. “It’s a template,” I’d say. “We can’t change anything.” He’d make a joke about the difference between gay men and lesbians when it comes to aesthetics, and defer. I can be stern when it comes to maintaining order. About eight articles in, Leonard came around to my—and Pittsburgh’s—way of thinking. We had a template to standardize the design so that we didn’t have to make choices about every little thing; design choices had already been made, once and for all. And a standardized template turned out, even Leonard could admit, to make *Radical Teacher* look more like a journal. All the headlines looked the same. When we met the last time, we didn’t fight about it at all. We just applied the styles to the text of articles about teaching the Occupy Movement at the CUNY Graduate Center, the Chicago Teachers Union strike, and feminist perspectives on free education. It’s all Verdana 8 point type and ready to read by anybody with an internet connection. We’ve learned how to make an online, open access journal, publishing *Radical Teacher* in a

format that allows the politics of our own production to match the politics of our content.

This first open access issue also includes 25 pages of poems about the Occupy Movement. Leonard and I formatted them using the template styles and sent the file to the editor for review. Her reply included no fewer than a dozen corrections, most involving things like font size and the space bar, and one sentence that ended with a question mark, an exclamation mark, a question mark, and another exclamation mark. A double interrobang. She was that frustrated by a formatting problem that Leonard and I didn't want to change. Leonard sent me a private email. "Doesn't she know we have to use the template?"