THE ROLE OF ELECTRONIC THESES AND DISSERTATIONS IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

John L. Eaton, Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Professor of Entomology, VA Tech
Edward A. Fox, Professor of Computer Science and Associate Director of the Computing Center, VA Tech
Gail McMillan, Associate Professor and Head of Scholarly Communications and Special Collections for the University Library, VA Tech

In Spring and Summer of 1997, NPR, the Chronicle of Higher Education, the Roanoke Times, the New York Times, EDUCOM Edupage, and other media publicized work on electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs). These news outlets, in their desire to report on controversy, largely missed the point of why it is desirable to produce theses and dissertations, and indeed many other publications, in electronic (digital) format. Hence, in this article we will seek to correct some of the misinformation released and show the benefits of the worldwide ETD initiative.

Few would dispute the following statements that describe the context for our initiative:

- Electronic publishing and related digital technologies (digital libraries), will be widely used to produce, store, and access information.
- Most scholars and researchers at institutions of higher education have an obligation to share their findings.
- Theses and dissertations constitute a great and largely hidden cache of primary data and information, much of which does not make its way into refereed publications.
- By the use of digital technology, theses and dissertations can be both improved and made more accessible to scholars and researchers.

Accordingly, we aim to:

- have graduate students learn about electronic publishing and digital libraries, applying that knowledge as they engage in research and build and submit their own ETDs;
- improve graduate education and knowledge sharing, through more effective, more complete, faster, and more widespread access to the information in ETDs;
- give graduate students access to electronic publishing and multimedia tools, to improve the expressive capability and quality of theses and dissertations;
- improve access to knowledge, reduce staff effort, and save shelf space in university libraries;
- help universities learn about digital libraries, as they collect, catalog, archive, and make ETDs accessible to scholars worldwide; and
- aid universities to learn how to unlock the potential of their students intellectual capital, individually and through federated collaboration, by participating in a Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD - see <http://www.ndltd.org>),

The concept of ETDs was first openly discussed at a 1987 meeting arranged by University Microfilms Inc. (UMI), and attended by representatives of Virginia Tech, University of Michigan, SoftQuad, and ArborText. In 1991, Virginia Tech decided to pursue the development of the ETD concept. Ed Fox (Computer Science) and John Eaton (Graduate School) have collaborated on this project since that time, investigating problems associated with production, archiving and access, initially with a local faculty committee. Since 1992, they have worked with the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), UMI and other interested organizations, helping run a series of design and discussion meetings. Additionally, the Virginia Tech University Libraries’ Scholarly Communications Project, under the leadership of Gail McMillan, began in 1993 to develop procedures and systems for processing, archiving, and providing public access to ETDs. At Virginia Tech, the Commission on Graduate Studies and Policies agreed to require the electronic submission of theses and dissertations beginning in 1997.

The ETD initiative spread to the Southeast with the help of $90K funding by the Southeastern Universities Research Association (SURA), and to the nation with about $210K funding by the U.S. Department of Education (for three years starting September 1996). In the first year of that project, corporate support of over $1M in donations was provided by IBM, Microsoft

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and Adobe. The original goals of the numbers of universities joining have been exceeded, and scores of other universities have been visited or expressed interest. Efforts are coordinated by a steering committee including members from Adobe, Canada, CIC (Big 10), CNI, CGS, IBM, NSF, OCLC, SOLINET, SURA, UK, UMI, Western Area Graduate Schools, World Bank, etc.

Why should theses and dissertations be submitted in digital format? The main reason is that people learn best by doing, and if students submit their ETDs, they should learn many of the concepts and skills of electronic publishing. At the same time, a valuable digital library can be constructed in an economical, scaleable, and sustainable manner—and students and others can benefit from using it. We aim to improve graduate education, wherein students become information literate; this can be partly accomplished if all graduate students become electronic publishers and can use digital libraries. Since in the United States alone about 400,000 students receive a graduate degree each year, the ETD initiative could involve very large numbers of students, who will be the next generation of educators, researchers, and scholars. If they can publish electronically and add to digital libraries, the future works they produce will not have to be scanned or re-keyed to become available through digital libraries.

Toward this end, we continue to develop text and multimedia documents, extensive WWW training materials, and a distributed education and evaluation program in which universities accept responsibility for local support of the initiative. Graduate students will be able to find the full texts of related ETDs easily, to read literature reviews prepared by their peers, and to follow hypertext links to relevant data and findings. Their professors can point to the best examples of research in their area, even to the level of an interesting table, an illustrative figure, or an enlightening visualization. ETDs already include color images or graphics, illustrate concepts with animations, and explain processes with video, and could use audio when dealing with musical studies.

Access begets access, so having more graduate works in the NDLTD is likely to stimulate greater interest in ETDs. Records from January through August 1997 show that the Virginia Tech Library ETD collection was accessed nearly 100,000 times. One document was accessed 7,000 times and several others were accessed over 1,000 times. Accesses come from all over the world; Twenty one institutions have now started pilot ETD projects. Three of these are in other countries.

How has Virginia Tech approached the submission of ETDs? Since 1994, the ETD submission process at Virginia Tech has students creating documents using common word processors and submitting them as Portable Document Format (PDF) files. These PDF files may be moved across computer platforms and operating systems and still retain their formatting. (The electronic documents look just like the paper copy—indeed a paper copy can be printed from the PDF file) Software for producing PDF is provided in campus computer labs, so using PDF costs the students nothing. The Acrobat Reader software needed to view the document also is free and may be downloaded from Adobe. Students submit PDF and multimedia files via a WWW submission form. To help students with this process, the project team conducts frequent workshops.

When the Graduate School receives the PDF file, it is reviewed on-line for proper format. Then the library catalogs the ETD and archives an electronic copy. An OpenText search engine supports full-text searching of the bibliographic data, abstract, and PDF files. Alternatively, digital library patrons can use the online library catalog to locate ETDs and use the given addresses (e.g., a persistent URL) to download them.

What are some of the challenges faced by an institution wishing to join the NDLTD? The Graduate School, library, and computing center must collaborate for the project to succeed. It is crucial to get faculty and graduate student support, and to develop an advisory committee of technologically adept faculty to help develop local policy. The governance system also should be informed during the development phases so they can guide full scale campus implementation.

Student training is of central importance. Creation of the PDF file and subsequent submission is relatively easy. A more serious challenge is improving the low level word processing skills of students, who typically use a wide variety of word processors and related tools (e.g., for mathematics, diagrams, or scanning images). We help students learn how to create electronic documents, which requires many to understand concepts such as resolution, fonts, quality of compression, bitmaps, and hypertext. Moving to requiring ETDs necessitates that some thought be given to enhancing the training, support staff, and programs, and arranging for electronic archiving.

What about relations with publishers? Since the ETD initiative is a federated effort involving many universities, and since there are thousands of publishers, this is complicated. Virginia Tech has contacted a number of publishers, as well as publisher’s associations such as AAP and AAUP. After detailed discussion with the American Chemical Society or AAAS, cordial and amicable solutions were developed that satisfy all parties. We hope that such publishers will formalize and make clear statements about these solutions so that students clearly understand how to proceed, and be assured that their careers and research will benefit rather than be harmed.

Part of learning about electronic publishing involves understanding copyright laws and issues regarding intellectual property rights. Through extensive discussion with concerned parties, Virginia Tech developed an approval form, available on the WWW, that is currently printed, completed, and signed by the student and all faculty committee members, specifying who can access their work and when access might be extended. This allows a student several options—to make the work available worldwide, to make parts available worldwide and parts available only to the local campus, to allow access only to the local campus, or to secure the ETD in the case of patent or proprietary concerns.

Restricting access to the campus (of the whole work in the rare cases when a book version of the thesis will be published, or of a chapter that is very similar to an article that will appear in a journal) satisfies concerns of publishers that require there be no prior publication of works they accept, but puts greater restrictions on

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