

A Modest Proposal for a More Efficient Organizational Decision-Making Effectiveness Structure at York University Libraries

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8 July 2013



INTRODUCTION

I propose a new committee to speed up decision-making and increase organizational effectiveness. I realize there will be objections to the creation of yet another committee, but please read on: this committee obviates the need for other committees, subcommittees, working groups and task forces, and will make our work easier, faster and more rigorous. This approach is entirely new and appropriately academic. It is specially designed for our culture.

OUR INEFFICIENT CURRENT PROCESS

The current York University Libraries (YUL) decision-making process is outlined in Figure 1.

There are certainly some advantages to this method: foremost is the number of opportunities it offers for discussion, analysis and critique of ideas. All librarians and archivists have several chances to offer their opinions and to speak for or against something (sometimes both in the same meeting).

But the process is obviously inefficient. Sometimes the same people and same groups hear about and argue over the same idea several times in the space of weeks. Streamlining the process will save people time and allow more concentrated and productive focus on the idea at hand. The process also inefficiently scatters both *problemizing* and *problematizing* across those people and groups: sometimes it is unclear whether they should do one, the other, or both, in what order.

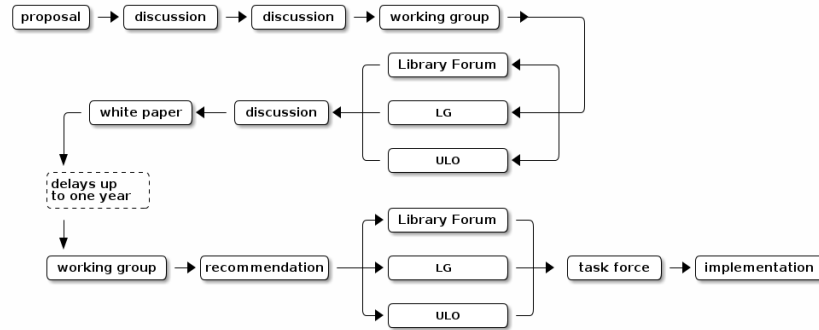


Figure 1: Current decision-making process.

PROBLEMIZATION AND PROBLEMATIZATION

Before I set out the more efficient process, we must distinguish between *problemizing* and *problematizing*. The OED defines them:

- “Problemize. *v. intr.* To discuss or consider problems.”
- “Problematize *v. intr.* To render problematic; to view, interpret, or analyse (an issue, discipline, etc.) as a problem or system of problems to be solved.”

To *problemize* is simple: “There is a problem with X because Y.” To *problematize* is more complex, but is explained by Foucault (1990) in his usual lucid prose: “Problematization doesn’t mean representation of a pre-existing object, nor the creation by discourse of an object that doesn’t exist. It is the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.).”¹

Both *problemizing* and *problematizing* are part of my proposed solution: the Problem(at)ization Committee.

¹To say something is “problematic” can be used in either sense. For example, a proposal to keep the Frost Library open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, is problematic (in the *problemize* sense) for many reasons: not enough staff, increased costs, university is closed on statutory holidays and over Christmas, etc. It is also problematic in the *problematize* sense because it raises issues of Frost’s role at Glendon, Glendon’s role in York, why a library should be open at all, and, if it should, why Frost is being privileged over a Keele campus library. Therefore I propose that in our discourse we use *problemic* for the first sense (as in, “Can you cover my reference desk shift tomorrow?” “I’m afraid that’s problemic.”) and *problematic* for the second sense (as in, “Can you cover my reference desk shift tomorrow?” “I’m afraid that’s problematic.”).

THE PROBLEM(AT)IZATION COMMITTEE

The Problem(at)ization Committee (ProbStar²) handles both *problemizing* and *problematizing*. It rolls all of the steps in the current decision-making process into one quick and efficient streamlined workflow. In the ideal case this has three easy stages (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Proposed decision-making process.

Everything about *problemizing* and *problematizing* is distilled into its purest form in the committee. All of the discussion and debate that was scattered across a dozen different venues is now concentrated into one committee in one room that will exhaustively analyze and discuss the issue at hand. The committee will forge in the smithy of its meetings the uncreated problem(at)izations of our profession. When the committee has completed its work successfully there is nothing more to be said about the idea under consideration (unless it is re-submitted back to the committee, for as Zapp reminds us, “Every decoding is another encoding” (Lodge 1994)).

MANDATE

The Problem(at)ization Committee is to consider every possible objection to a proposal, to raise every possible consideration that might add an aspect of change to the purpose and operations of the library were the proposal implemented, and to consider the discursive and non-discursive practices that constitute the proposal as an object of thought in the context of York University Libraries and York University.

Reasons in favour of a proposal may be considered if time is available.

²The full name is difficult to pronounce, so I suggest that in conversation or casual mention we apply a wildcard and get *problem**, which we can shorten to ProbStar: for example, one would ask, “Has this been to ProbStar yet?”

ASSESSMENT

At the end of each year the Problem(at)ization Committee will problem(at)ize the Problem(at)ization Committee and report to the Problem(at)ization Committee with its recommendation.

MEETINGS

The Problem(at)ization Committee will meet Wednesdays from 9 am to 5 pm and Thursdays from 9 to noon (extended to 5 pm if necessary).

MEMBERSHIP

The Problem(at)ization Committee will consist of one-third (rounded up) of the total complement of librarians and archivists, including at least one associate university librarian. (As always, the university librarian is a member *ex officio*.) A majority must hold continuing appointment, because it is only with sufficient years of experience at York that one is able to fully problem(at)ize an issue. It must have at least one member from each of Archives, Bibliographic Services, Bronfman, Frost and Steacie; at least one of whom, but not all five, must hold continuing appointment: if four hold continuing appointment one year then the next year only two may, unless the year before that only one did, in which case the next year three must. At least one librarian from Maps and SMIL (combined, not each) must be chosen a minimum of once every two years.

The issue of how to choose the first members of the committee requires problem(at)ization, as does what training new members should receive.

PROBLEM(AT)IZING

The Committee will give thoughtful and complete consideration to each proposal brought before it. It will ask such questions as:

- “Is ProbStar the proper venue for this discussion?”
- “Have you considered the pedagogical implications? If not, why not?”
- “If repression (*Verdrängung*) remains unconscious in its operation and suppression (*Unterdrückung*) effects what Freud calls a ‘second censorship’—between the conscious and the preconscious—or rather affects the affect, then is that, *a priori*, a repetition of the inscription of the toponomology on the *arkheion*?”
- “Can you make the font bigger?”
- “Do we have the infrastructure to support this sustainably?”
- “How will this affect [insert unit here]?”

- “How will we assess this?”
- “Can we (*may* we? *shall* we?) separate the space of *positions* from the space of *position-takings*, and examine the habituses of those (“us”) making the proposal and those (also “us”) problem(at)izing it?”
- “What is the genealogy?”
- “Is ProbStar the proper venue for this discussion?”
- “Where do we stand epistemically, if indeed ‘we’ can be said to ‘stand’ any ‘where’?”
- If research-related: “How does this fit into the university’s strategic research plan?” If not research-related: “Why isn’t this research-related?”
- “Is the data for this openly available? Can I use it to make charts?”
- “Is it available in French?”
- “What discursive formations are in effect here?”
- “How can we afford this?”
- “Can we reflect collegially on the manifestations of power and capital in play here? Just asking.”
- “How does this fit in with a potential reorganization?”
- “Who will be your co-chair?”
- “Why are we doing this, anyway? I mean, really, what’s it all about?”
- “Is ProbStar the proper venue for this discussion?”

COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Once the proposal has been fully *problemized* and *problematized*, the Committee will make one of two recommendations:

Implement (or ProbStar ++). If the proposal is accepted then a task force must be struck within one week and the work finished within six weeks. Once the problem(at)ization is done, no project in a library need take more than six weeks to accomplish, be it implementing a new discovery service, restructuring the institution, or something as important as changing stapler brands.

Reproblem(at)ize (or ProbStar +). If the proposal is not accepted then it is assumed this is *not* because the proposal lacks merit but because it has not been sufficiently problem(at)ized. The Problem(at)ization Committee will submit the proposal back to itself within six months (see Figure 3). Further problem(at)ization should resolve all issues.

All Problem(at)ization Committee decisions must be made by consensus.

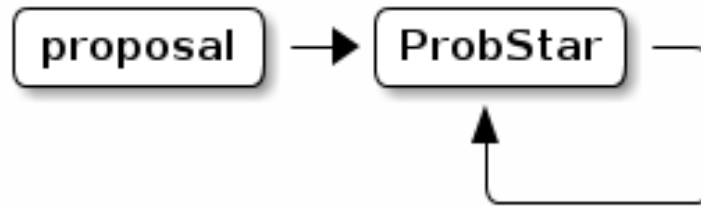


Figure 3: Reproblem(at)ization decision-making process.

CONCLUSION

I realize that this proposal is itself not *problemized* and *problematized*. Undoubtedly it has faults and errors. Certainly I have not situated this in any genealogic context of libraries or academia or organizational behaviour: though Foucault and Zapp have been briefly quoted, none of Weber, Drucker, Latour, Handy, Spivak, Christensen, Dewey or Ranganathan, not to mention Swift, Sokal or de Montfort, have been discussed. Because the Problem(at)ization Committee does not exist, it will have to go through our current process (Figure 1), which, although inefficient—I expect it will take at least two years—will fully *problemize* and *problematize* the proposal, so if it is successful we will all know that the Problem(at)ization Committee has been fully problem(at)ized (at least for its first year, after which it would reproblem(at)ize itself).

When that process is completed and the committee is working the benefits to YUL are obvious.

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