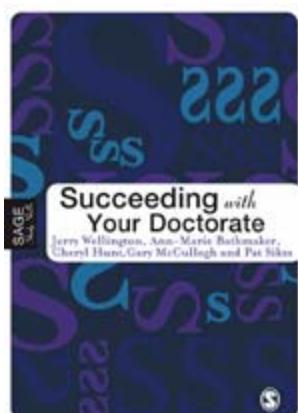


Book review



Succeeding with your Doctorate

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Review by Angela Dustagheer

This book is part of the Sage Study Skills Series and from page one the appeal of the book is evident in the jargon free, user friendly text. Considering it has five authors the text is seamless and continuity is maintained throughout the book. The five authors have the experience of working with postgraduate students and examining theses.

The balance appears right, it has not taken an advice giving stance but does alert the reader to what needs to be considered, what are the pitfalls and the potential problems that may arise along the route. The authors also state that the book is promoting a reflexive, self awareness approach to work, which is deemed appropriate for doctoral students to develop.

The book has five sections: Embarking on a Doctorate; Conceptualising and focusing the Study; Thinking about methodologies; Writing the thesis; and Presenting and sharing information. Each section deals with part of the PhD journey and takes the reader through the different aspects of the process. The book does portray a logical progression from A to B but it is also possible to dip into each chapter as they are written in a stand alone form. The first page of each chapter outlines the content with suggested objectives that the reader might ascertain from the text. It highlights and discusses the process and is inclusive of feedback from doctoral students. In each chapter there are headed sections that give information, areas of discussion and suggested activities for the reader to undertake. The book has included eleven doctoral student's cameos, which are dispersed across the different chapters and each one is used to illustrate a point. It highlights the non-linear route that most PhD students traverse and is more orientated to the research process. As stated it does not see its brief to discuss research methods or methodology.

The target audience appears to be those undertaking postgraduate educational studies and the text is somewhat geared towards that occupational group. This observation I recognise may just reflect my sensitivity and heightened awareness of coming from outside the educational system, although choosing to study within the field. However, in its favour, the vignettes included do reflect the kaleidoscope of research student orientations. It includes doctoral students' tales that are drawn from different disciplines and have different approaches. It recognises that doctorates are undertaken by individuals of all ages and across the globe.

If like me when you find a book on a perceived gap area of knowledge or skills that reduces anxiety then you see it as worth purchasing; this is what I felt about this book. The EdD/PhD journey is unique; however, this book portrays that process by illuminating the experience. It has resonance with the journey I found I have travelled so far. Not only does it highlight the pitfalls but it has the added factor of suggesting what can be done. It takes a positive action stance which is so important to sustain the momentum required to complete.

Preface

An overview of the book is given in this section. Here the aim of the book is made explicit: to pass on information, give guidance in the form of suggestions, including the perceived effect of up managing supervisors. The contents of the book reflect the expansion of the routes of obtaining a doctorate.

Part 1: Embarking on a Doctorate

Chapter 1-3

It commences with the Historical aspect of doctorate and incorporates a section on the new postgraduate route of 'taught' doctorates, the EdD, which has mushroomed recently in the U.K; although it has been around for seventy years or more. The EdD it states is geared to the professional for whom the motivation is not just to work in academia. It may include those who wish to include research within their work brief or require doctorate skills, such as reflective and research skills. It acknowledges the utilitarian pressure in the change of the concept of the PhD and the government interest in identifying the need of transferable research skills, hence the development of more structured research training. It alerts us to the resultant tension of the issue of 'professional knowledge' v 'academic knowledge' and the danger of an overloaded agenda.

In this section reflexivity is advocated and the reader is invited to undertake a life history as a starting point to facilitate the process and identify researcher positionality. A framework is offered to embed a personal life history. The rational is that to engage in a reflective and reflexive way to produce an auto/biographical life history will locate where the doctoral student is coming from as a researcher. It will also orientate the reader of the thesis to the thesis writer's situated position and life/work trajectory.

The third aspect considered in this part is that of the affective perspective of undertaking a doctorate and how identity and behaviour can be transformed by the learning. They alert the reader of the implications on becoming a doctoral student and the creation of tension, particularly for the part time student. Learning to live with the confusion and tension is necessary as they point out these are the trigger for transformative learning. The text relates how the episodic highs and lows impinge upon the individual and the authors recommend the documentation of this process via a learning journal. There is discussion regarding keeping a log, or diary or journal. Included are suggested strategies and tips on studying.

Part 2: Conceptualising and focusing the Study

Chapter 4 and 5

Chapter 4, is concerned with the framing the research by exploring three key issues theorising, focus and research design. The aim is to ensure the doctoral student develops a sense of what they are doing and that they formulate a clear idea of what their research is about. It states that choice of area, focus and producing a research question is not straightforward, easy and that it is time consuming. However it does not just leave it in the air but continues to highlight the breadth of the issues that are to be confronted and resolved. Within the research design section it discusses the definition of boundaries and the necessity to establish the significance of the research.

Chapter 5, reviewing the literature includes the purpose, getting started, collection and storage, and portrays the concept of being critical. It also discusses referencing and decision

making regarding the termination of the literature review. Included in this chapter are sources of electronic bibliographical databases as well as research funding organisations

Part 3: Thinking about methodologies

Chapter 6 and 7

As stated the book does not discuss the actual methodologies but more importantly explores the issues, the purpose of which is to get the reader to be aware of the implications of method and methodology choice. It does not recommend one particular right way of undertaking research but advocates a reflective and reflexive approach when deliberating regarding methodology and method use? It also deals with ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as those associated with human nature and agency there is also a section on ethical considerations. What is different from most books of this type is the recognition and discussion of research as a lived experience, as a separate chapter.

Part 4: Writing the thesis

Chapter 8 and 9

In relation to writing three themes have been identified in this section, writing, the writing process and production values in the doctoral thesis. The argument put forward is that writing is a crucial part of the thinking and development process. Outlined are the different approaches, styles and genres. Although they admit that writing is difficult, painful and a struggling process, they advocate to start writing from day one. This they claim is to benefit from the drafting and redrafting process as thinking and writing is a symbiotic process; especially enhanced by seeking comments from others.

Chapter 9, leads on from the writing perspective of the thesis and addresses the production values in the doctoral thesis, differentiating the qualities between it and a masters dissertation. It illuminates the qualities of the doctoral thesis outlining the expectations of work at this level, discusses content, proportion and length, and also includes presentation.

Part 5: Presenting and sharing information

Chapter 10 and 11

Sound advice is given regarding the sharing of information of the text, when to disseminate, and considerations regarding journal articles and the process of converting the thesis into a 'publication'. This section I found to be a useful resource as it contains a bibliography for further reading, relevant web sites on computer software for data analysis, electronic databases for social sciences education and research funding organisation websites. The list of the references used in the text of the book could provide a useful starting point for the doctoral student and be a valuable resource for lecturers involved with postgraduate students.

Although it is possible to read the book from chapters one to eleven, if you were to operate on a need to know basis then the book could be used as a working document. The doctoral student could read the relevant chapter on reaching the various stages of the EdD/PhD. This possibility of dipping into each part with the relevant chapters could be used to sustain the student through from start to completion of their studies.

Another way the book could possibly be used is after reading the text it would be possible to extract from each chapter the succinct points in order to ascertain workable research

questions, to facilitate the development of a robust research study design, as well as defining suitable criteria of a good thesis. It could also be used by a group of doctoral students to use a basis for seminar work in the context of peer support.

I would sum up by saying that I think it validates the redefinition of a doctorate at the beginning of the twenty first century and reflects the thinking behind the changes and routes of doctoral studies. It was interesting to read other doctoral students' thought processes and their resultant outcomes, which resonate with my own experience. I would not hesitate to recommend it to other students whatever stage of their doctorate they have reached. I have also observed that it can be a quite different journey in other disciplines. Currently another member of my immediate family has embarked on a doctorate so this has provided the opportunity to discuss the book, testing its value. It has made me realise that although the target audience are individuals undertaking post graduate studies in the educational field this book appears appropriate for a wider audience.

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