

Research supervision for supervisors and their students:

Dan Remenyi and Arthur Money

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In the last couple of years, certainly in the UK, the PhD and the DBA have both been the focus of more academic attention. This has focused particularly on the way that PhD/DBA programmes are managed, on trying to ensure that research students complete their programmes of study (either completing them in a shorter period of time and, in many cases, getting students to complete them at all) and on improving the quality of the student's experience of the research process.

As a research manager with a foot in many camps on the professional circuit, there is currently much discussion about improving not only the effectiveness and efficiency of the processes that support someone actually completing a PhD but also ensuring that the PhD and the DBA both continue to meet the high academic standards that are expected of them. It is in this context that I will review the Remenyi and Money book.

The fact that the book is addressed at both students and their supervisors not only increases the market for this book but it also emphasises that both students and supervisors need to develop a more informed and shared understanding of what the PhD process is all about. The book covers the whole process in considerable detail - right from choosing a research question to helping the student to publish parts of their thesis postcompletion. Perhaps the most important features of this book are, first that it has been written by two authors who have both considerable experience in supervising PhD students and also in working with supervisors to improve their skills; and, second, that the book is full of incredibly helpful practical advice that is clearly grounded in experience.

Not only is the advice very sound, it is also presented in a very concise and accessible way. While it is still important that prospective students are confronted with issues about the various 'ologies' that they need to address (epistemology, ontology, methodology....), this book does not primarily seek to do that. Rather the book focuses more on addressing the practical and operational issues that often form the rocks on which many a PhD student and their supervisor have foundered.

The book comprises 22 relatively short chapters - though at 220 pages the book does adequately cover the field. The chapters are arranged to reflect the sequence of events as they normally confront a PhD student and cover important issues such as 'choosing a research question', 'choosing a research strategy', 'research ethics' and 'relevance, rigour and originality'. Each of the chapters is well written and each contains reference to a range of (often web based) support material that should help the student and the supervisor access insights to good practice from a wide range of international sources.

The fact that the book achieves width of coverage clearly affects the depth at which specific topics are addressed. For example, the chapters on research strategies and tactics present the student with a wide range of possible options but the depth of discussion on each of these options is necessarily limited. I felt that the signposting of students to texts on different research strategies and tactics could have been more exhaustive here.

While the book is of relevance to PhD students and their supervisors from a wide range of fields, the book is far more focused towards the social sciences generally and the business and management field (widely defined) more specifically. For example, the book does contain reference to (but not a detailed discussion of) various contemporary issues in business and management such as the rigor/relevance debate and debates about different modes of knowledge production (i.e. the Mode 1/Mode 2 debate).

The book should certainly appeal to newer research supervisors (particularly junior faculty who may have recently completed their own doctorates and who are looking to build their own research careers) and (certainly) intending and newer PhD students. Given that the book covers the whole PhD process, it could be used as a supervision aid throughout the life of the PhD both to forewarn the student of the delights to come and also to act as a checklist continually to review if key milestones have been achieved and standards have been met. Indeed, newer (and even more experienced) supervisors would be well advised to use the book as a tool to support their supervision: many of the topics and chapters in the book could effectively be used as issues for one-to-one discussions or themes for workshops in those aspects of a PhD or DBA that might be delivered collectively rather than individually.

While I consider the book to achieve its purpose and to provide first-rate advice to students and supervisors, I do have some points that later editions might address. First, the tone of the book seems to be more oriented more towards supervisors than towards students - a chapter focusing on choosing the right supervisor might be helpful as would a student's perspective on what to do when things are going wrong. Second, a more detailed analysis of 'how to put things right when they are going wrong' using anonymised case studies might be helpful particularly if this could be written from both student and supervisor perspectives. Third, a more thorough treatment of 'what contributes a theoretical contribution' would be useful as this is something that perplexes many students, supervisors and even examiners. Fourth, there are some well used, known and respected research texts that could be better signposted - as could documentation from the ESRC on their review of what constitutes effective research training for example. Finally, I thought that the issue of 'reviewing the literature and engaging with current discourse' could have been treated more explicitly as many students try to catalogue the literature rather than review, critique it and expose gaps and contradictions within it. A chapter that tries to synthesise what experienced examiners look for might also assist both students and supervisors as this would provide both of them with a context for 'reverse engineering' the thesis and evaluating various sections of the thesis.

However, while I feel that addressing the above issues would have improved the text, I do not consider them to be major flaws.

My overall view is that this is an excellent book that I would fully recommend to both students and supervisors: its excellence derives from its practical value in supporting both the strategic and more day to day aspects of the PhD; from its accessible and concise style; from the fact that it does much to demystify and debunk the PhD; and, from the fact that it has been written by two academics who both have considerable experience in supervising to completion. The book should become recommended reading for prospective and new supervisors and students and it will usefully complement other texts on research methods by providing a well crafted 'helicopter view' of the whole process.

Prof. Les Worrall
Associate Dean (Research)
Management Research Centre
University of Wolverhampton Business School
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The reviewer:

Professor Les Worrall (PhD) is Associate Dean (Research) at University of Wolverhampton Business School where he directly heads the Management Research Centre. He is a Council Member of the British Academy of Management; a member of the Association of Business Schools (ABS) Research Sub-committee and a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute. He has published extensively in the areas of public sector management; technology management and organisational change and development.