



Resource Review

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Review:

This book took me back to my first experience of supervising students who were starting work on their MA theses. I had anticipated conversations about the suitability of their proposed topics; about research methods and prioritising their next steps; and about structuring their writing. I was less prepared for the affective dimension of their queries: how to deal with the feelings that a small but significant number of students had about the experience of doing their research.

Some felt daunted by the work ahead. Some students felt frustrated by practical pressures, such the need to fit their research around paid work or the difficulty of finding somewhere quiet to work. Others made progress enthusiastically in their reading and data-collection but felt confused when it came to organising and writing up their research.

As you might expect from its title, this book offers valuable advice on many key aspects of research – as do others. What sets it apart, however, is the keen eye that its authors have for the experience of undertaking research and the feelings that can accompany it, particularly for new researchers. The chapter on writing up, for example, outlines 20 forms of procrastination – accompanied by suggestions of how to tackle them.

Another section provides reassuring responses to four common worries (which it seems only fair to summarise here). First, “if it’s new to me, is it original?” In short, it probably still is. Second, “I’ve just discovered someone has written this before.” Never literally true; disappointing but not debilitating. Then “it’s all a load of rubbish”. This usually means you’re bored, find writing-up hard, or have become so familiar with the ideas involved that it seems little more than common sense. Finally, “I’m coming across conflicting advice.” Often inherent in research; try to see this as a strength. These ring true, from times in my own research as well as supervision.

How to Research is a wide-ranging volume geared to those working in the social sciences and related areas, addressing the choice and focus of a topic; methods; reading for research; managing a project; collecting and analysing data; and writing up and beyond (eg dissemination). In fewer than 300 pages, it's impossible to cover all this ground in detail, but the authors have struck a useful balance between brevity and depth. Readers needing more can consult an annotated list of further reading at the end of each chapter.

Another plus for newer researchers and supervisors is the book's accessible approach. The section on research methods, for example, begins with an appreciation of one's "everyday research skills", such as reading, listening, watching, organising, questioning, reflecting. Exercises encourage readers to do something with the material in each chapter, and the first exercise in the book is an audit of skills, resources, knowledge and personality/temperament. This emphasis reminded me of the way in which experiential learning can often start most effectively with a focus on the learner's own experience.

Such exercises might put off experienced researchers, of course, but make the book a useful resource to accompany modules on taught programmes that involve research. It could also serve as a useful reference work to provide a succinct overview of a particular area – research methods in little over 30 pages, for example, or an outline of different sampling techniques in a couple of sides.

The volume includes numerous brief sections outlining individuals' experiences, scenarios, case studies, diagrams, lists, boxes and so on. Again this makes for easily digested information, but now and then this style punctuates the main text too frequently. Some chapters average more than one box every two pages – and this excludes the grey panels used to refer readers to a related section in another chapter (as many as nine times within three pages). Another downside of including novice researchers in the target readership is perhaps the occasional piece of advice that borders on the fatuous; I remain to be convinced that we really need "Hint: Many computer programs contain facilities for producing tables" (p248).

On a related matter, the four and a half pages on "using the internet" get off to a shaky start by inaccurately describing Outlook Express as a search engine (p109). Indeed, this section could usefully be strengthened and expanded – particularly to outline the use of online tools for research. Although the authors mention blogging as a way of keeping a research diary, they do not touch on social bookmarking tools such as del.icio.us to record, annotate and share web pages, for example; nor on web-based services that can manage bibliographic references.

Nearly half of the brief internet section is taken up with a list of key websites – inevitably consisting of examples rather than any more extensive listing. But however useful the BBC's site may be, it still seems odd to include it as one of three examples of internet gateways for social science researchers alongside SOSIG and HERO. The latter have a clearer focus on academic research – although this forms only part of the latter's remit (and what about Intute?). An online resource to accompany the book would overcome some of the restrictions on space (to include more international sources, too), and offer live links and scope for relatively simple updating.

Another area that probably deserves more attention is plagiarism, which gets one paragraph and one box. It would make sense, too, to include something more on assessment criteria near the start of the book. After all, much research by students will be undertaken for formal, summative assessment, and making sure your planned work fits the assessment criteria is essential. The main section on assessment is contained in the final chapter and focuses on the process(es) involved.

There are a few other niggles. Some boxes have the text cut off at the edge, for example, and grammatical slips could do with tidying up ("loose" instead of "lose" recurs several times). At least one chapter assumes that a reader has already

completed an exercise that appears at the end of the chapter. (One of the changes for this third edition was to move the exercises to the end of each chapter.)

None of these minor complaints detracts from core value of the book – but as the authors themselves note in their advice on writing up research, “readers are likely to be irritated, amused or put off by errors” (p244). Overall this is a valuable companion for supervisors and lecturers who teach modules on research – as well as researchers, notably those on the less experienced end of the spectrum. It’s earned a place on my shelves.