

vol. 56, no. 2, 2014

Published by NTEU ISSN 0818-8068

AUR

Australian Universities' Review



Help! I need somebody Help! Not just anybody ...

Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for supervision by Barbara Kamler & Pat Thomson.

ISBN 978-0-415-82349-4 (pbk), Routledge, 189 pp., 2014.

Reviewed by Franklin Obeng-Odoom

The deliberate study of the best ways to mint PhDs has been a recurrent theme in this journal (see, for example, volume 54, no. 1), and rightly so because it is a topic that strikes to the very heart of the future of research and the academy. *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision* joins this conversation. The book is in its second edition, an indication that it was well received in its first life. The version under review has been revised and updated, and responds to the growing need for a book on the complexities of supervising doctoral students, so it is deserving of a second round of review. The authors are well qualified to write the book: they have huge experience in running workshops and seminars on the topic and have published widely on the subject. While this is not the first book on supervision – indeed Moira Peelo (2011) has recently published *Understanding Supervision and the PhD* – it is unique for its main thesis.

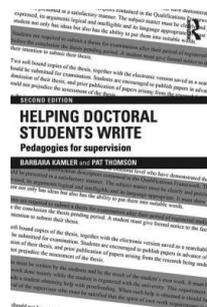
The book makes and defends the argument that doctoral supervisors should see their main role as encouraging students to write throughout the process of supervision. This implies that writing is regarded as a social practice, not as a technique, not as a series of tricks and not as the result of tips, but as a way of life. It is a thesis that agitates the established view in much social science supervision that leads students to create different stages in the dissertation-producing process, usually starting from reading, data collection, interpretation and analysis, before writing. This book, then, departs from others that encourage them to write up after all the work is done.

To emphasise this key proposition, the book is divided into nine chapters. Of these, 'Putting the Doctoral Writing Centre Stage' appropriately comes first. It is followed by 'Writing the Doctorate, Writing the Scholar' (chapter 2), in which the case for considering the writing process as a way of developing an academic identity is forcefully put and illustrated by a number of examples. Chapters 3 and 4, (respectively, 'Persuading an Octopus Into a Jar' and 'Getting on Top of the Research Literatures') address

what can be called the literature review imbroglio. They probe several pressing issues about the literature review: whether it is needed, how to do it, at what stage in the thesis to do it and what to call it. Chapter 5, 'Reconsidering the Personal', is a positive and normative assessment of the use of the personal pronoun 'I', the use of which generates a dilemma for many doctoral students and supervisors. Chapter 6 is 'A Linguistic Toolkit for Supervisors'; it provides grammatical and syntactical advice for supervisors as well as students. Chapter 7, 'Structuring the Dissertation Argument', is the chapter in which the book strongly puts the case for an argument-based model of the doctorate, that is, the view that the dissertation should be framed around an argument from beginning to end. Chapter 8, 'Publishing Out of the Thesis', responds to the current pressure to have doctoral students publish during their candidature, and the growing phenomenon of dissertation by research, while Chapter 9 closes the book by looking into ways of 'Institutionalising Doctoral Writing Practices' and giving examples of what has worked for others.

Engagingly written, the book is very readable. The use of quotations from doctoral students and supervisors makes the book lively, and the inclusion of figures and highlighted text effectively prevents presentation from being monotonous. Supported by 10 pages of rich and state of the art studies on the topic, this book is not only a firm platform but is also a reliable springboard for supervision.

Nevertheless, the book trips on a few occasions in its otherwise impressive sprint. While we are served by the recent research of Fiona Timmins and her colleagues, published in *Nurse Education Today*, with the increasing call for interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary research, it is surprising that the book under review is silent on the topic, preferring instead to be a book for most social science disciplines only in their silo forms. Also, while the topics covered in the book are comprehensive, how



they support the central thesis is not always evident. The argument to form writing groups, for instance, does not appear to be consistent with writing as an everyday practice, which the book advocates, while the omission of book reviewing from the various writing exercises recommended is unfortunate but consistent with current trends in supervision, as I pointed out in an earlier contribution to *AUR* (2014).

More fundamentally, the book assumes that all doctoral students are empty and they should be 'helped' and hence the subtitle: 'Helping doctoral students to write'. This is an alienating educational philosophy in which the know it all supervisor preaches to know little or nothing students on what is right and wrong. Assuming a banking model, to borrow from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), the doctoral student is assumed to be an empty bank account into which the supervisor must make deposits. In fairness to the book's authors, they do acknowledge that doctoral students eventually become more knowledgeable as they advance in their candidature; however, it is questionable to suppose that all students are empty at the start of the process. Many universities in the UK and Australia insist on a developed proposal that identifies relevant literatures and clear gaps, even before admission. While this proposal can change, its institution challenges the view that students are empty from the start. Besides, there are PhD students who were research-active academics or are academics at the time of enrolment. Indeed, most PhD students who win the limited scholarships in the present limited funding climate are fairly well published. For all these students, then, the assumption of empty vessels to be filled and weaklings to be helped does not necessarily apply.

On the other hand, there are many doctoral supervisors who are first-time supervisors, such as this reviewer, others who are supervisors but do not have PhDs, or PhD-

holding supervisors who may be knowledgeable but who are not advanced in their own research careers. For these categories of supervisor, the assumption of an all-knowing supervisor does not apply.

Overall, the book's thesis of writing as a social practice and argument for highlighting questions of identity for the doctoral candidate, its advocacy for the institution of support mechanisms for doctoral scholars, recommendations and advice on how to take an argumentative stance in the dissertation are not only highly crystallised but also crystal clear, persuasive and irresistible. There may be disciplinary differences about at what stage thesis writing can begin, but the case of this book is that an integrative and integrated approach to dissertation production should be adopted and this is meticulously and convincingly demonstrated. *Helping Doctoring Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision*, then, is a fine addition to the state of knowledge on dissertation supervision.

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