[Book review] Patrick Dunleavy, Authoring a PhD. How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation, 2007

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Book review

P. Dunleavy, *Authoring a PhD. How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 312p., £18.99 (pbk) – ISBN 1403905843.

Unless we decide to perceive it as an individual, idiosyncratic and almost intimate stage of research, writing should be subject to the same attention and detailing that applies to other aspects of social research. *Authoring a PhD* pulls together the thoughts, guidelines and advice developed over the years by LSE Professor Patrick Dunleavy in his seminar on PhD writing. Writing is a dimension to which he attributes 'around 40 to 50 percent of anyone's success in completing a doctorate'—a self-admitted 'extreme' view (p. 2). Dunleavy places his motivation for writing a full-fledged book on authoring in his initial observation that this crucial stage of any doctoral research faces a relative neglect within the methodological literature devoted to guiding social research (p. xi). His book develops beyond the call for simplicity, concision and clarity in writing, a call already turned into an excellent book by Howard Becker twenty years before (Becker 1986). Rather, Dunleavy establishes a clear link between the 'craft skills' of authoring and the management of reader's expectations on the one hand, and the handling of the whole research process on the other, stating the need to begin with clearly defined research questions.

Thanks to the coherent, well-thought out structure of the book, the reader will be able to dip in and out of the book as necessary. However, for the graduate student to take on board the notion that 'authoring' is integral to the entire research process, it would perhaps be best read cover-to-cover early on in the planning stages of the PhD, and then particular chapters referred to when needed at later stages. The text is interspersed with literary quotations, providing several opportunities to pause for reflection.

The first chapters cover issues of structure as they occur when 'envisioning the thesis as a whole' (ch. 2), and provide advice on how to begin authoring by discussing creativity, crucial for the graduate student who must show evidence of independent and original thought. Establishing a meaningful internal structure for the

thesis (ch. 3) and for its sub-entities (chapters or papers, ch. 4) is an equally complex task, approached mainly through exemplification.[1]

Within the next chapters, which focus explicitly on writing, most of the basic grammatical and referencing standardised guidelines (ch. 5) should be redundant to the graduate student. The practical tips listed in 'Managing the writing process' (ch. 6) prove much more useful, as Dunleavy's vision of writing as a 'multi-stage process' (p. 135) effectively impresses upon the reader a sense that good academic authoring is the product of comprehensive protocols rather than the emanation of ethereal talents normally attributed to fiction writers. Throughout these chapters, a particularly persuading aspect of the author's argumentation resides in his capacity to anticipate and successfully confront many reactions from his readership, especially when touching upon time-consuming practices that may seem counter-intuitive, or that come with high adaptation costs (like paragraph restructuring, pp. 112-113).

The following chapters respectively cover data visualisation, the last steps of PhD submission and examination, and publishing strategies.[2] The author provides a full chapter on an often-neglected part of research, the presentational aspects of data (ch. 7). The importance of data visualisation is acknowledged in disciplines that handle vast amounts of graphical and cartographical material, such as geography and other specialties which often resort to geocoding information systems. However, it is still an under-investigated side of most research, perhaps because the idea that professional, objective criteria apply to all forms of data visualisation is far from

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[1] At this stage, researchers working on an exploratory piece of research with any kind of organic methodology or 'data-led' analysis such as grounded theory (Strauss and Glaser 1967) may find some of Dunleavy's assumptions on structure discouraging and problematic, although not uninteresting.

[2] *Authoring a PhD* appeared dense enough to us to justify a co-authorship of this review, in order to engage more critically with the text. The main sections of this review were written when the authors were in their first and second years of doctoral research; consequently, the review was not written from a retrospective viewpoint, but rather the contrary.

widespread, which would explain why 'poor presentation is so endemic' (p. 158).[3] Dunleavy provides both the rationales and principles for this task, as well as several guidelines and visual examples. One might regret, however, that no reference is made to Edward Tufte's insightful – as well as fascinating – analysis of data visualisation.[4] Similarly, there is little reference to the presentation of more qualitative data, such as verbatim, drawings, field-notes, observational diagrams and photography. A missed opportunity as these data are often challenging to present in ways that successfully convey ideas to the reader and fairly represent the research participants.

Finally, the author's emphasis on the importance of the 'end-game' (ch. 8) and transition to further publishing (ch. 9) contains an implicit lesson on doctoral training. Specific attention is given to submitting and then defending the doctorate, as well as to the strategic stage of converting a doctoral manuscript into journal or book material.[5] Chapter 8, which covers how to finish one's doctorate, is an exceptionally strong section that wraps up and consolidates ideas developed earlier in the text.

Throughout the book, the authoring problematic is systematically approached through an assessment of various options, ending with an argument for one preferable option over the others. At times, however, this style can appear excessively prescriptive.This is probably the risk of offering grounded advice in an area where many are not willing to take too firm a stance,[6] and where methodological pluralism is widely accepted. The author's proposed principles of doctoral writing is a

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[3] For examples of deficient visualizations of data, see http://junkcharts.typepad.com/.

[4] See especially Tufte (1998) and other references at http://www.edwardtufte.com/.

[5] Other useful readings on this topic are Gerring (2004) on writing and Dowding (2003) on article publishing strategies.

[6] Silverman (2005, Section 5), for instance, does not dig as deeply in chapter microstructures, and does not comment as extensively on how to write clearly, apart from the mere recommendation 'know your message and stick to it' (p. 316).

double-edged sword: showing that the process is replete with more or less explicit rules may reassure uncertainty-stricken readers (perhaps those at the earlier stages of the PhD), although the amount of attention (and, more importantly, time) required to respect these rules might seem potentially unsettling.

Overall, the graduate student can expect far more from *Authoring a PhD* than a set of commonsensical guidelines on how to write properly. The author's approach to PhD authoring expands far further than stylistic and literary considerations and covers the (often psychological) dimensions of writing up one's research. The book effectively shows that doctoral authoring requires a specific state of mind and set of professional practices that both justify extensive training.

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