5-1-2011

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Abstract

Thomas and Hodges (2010) have written a very practical and indeed a valuable book on how to do research project design and management applicable to a wide readership. The book will be of particular importance to young researchers who are aspiring to hone the art of research and project management from design to completion. For the experienced, it's a book to read and reflect on. Discussing the critical elements involved in research, Thomas and Hodges use consultative-advising-coaching, empathy-towards-researchers and experienced-based approaches to reveal important core knowledge in research as a career whilst laying out the ground rules for effective research design and management. The practicality and utility of this book will benefit many researchers.

Keywords
Research Design, Research Project Management, and Research Praxis

Research Praxis from Design to Completion: A Review of *Designing and Managing your Research Project – Core Knowledge for Social and Health Researchers*

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The book *Designing and Managing Your Research Project – Core Knowledge for Social and Health Researchers* by David R. Thomas and Ian D. Hodges (2010) is rich in content, full of practical information with a simple, easy-to-follow layout. In the following essay I will very briefly discuss my background and position as a reviewer, followed by the review of this book. Finally, I will close with some concluding remarks.

Background

As a graduate student at a university, I am regularly involved in research. Though I consider myself a young researcher, my previous work experience in project and team-based research environments, studying at different universities and working with various supervisors, positions me reasonably well to relate and review the content of this book. Therefore, I use a reflective approach to amass the "core knowledge" shared by Thomas and Hodges (2010).

Review

According to Thomas and Hodges (2010), "Research is inspired and driven largely by the desire to solve or answer some kind of question or problem" (p. 240). The book overall is to be commended for its practicality and utility. The title of the book very vividly indicates what the readers can expect – nothing less than the core knowledge of research project management. A chapter-by-chapter review will add more weight to this claim.

To begin with, from reading the first two chapters, I could see that Thomas and Hodges (2010): (a) provide consistently, in a simple tone, some really valuable information in research project management; (b) show empathy towards all researchers, particularly the young and novice; (c) implicitly give a nudge on the "just-do-it" approach to qualitative research; (e) hint that reading chapter one carefully will be relatively sufficient to commence a research project, however the rest of the chapters are worth referring to along the way; (d) provide an exciting and in-depth look at the nuances of research; (e) give the praxis of a research project whilst admitting the amorphous nature of qualitative research as one will realize when going through all the chapters; (f) encourage researchers to be explorative and adopt a "learning-by-doing" approach; and (g) provide questions and exercises at the end of every chapter (except chapter one) to challenge the readers, as well as to prepare them for real life research projects.

In Chapter 3, "Developing Research Aims and Objectives," Thomas and Hodges (2010) explain the key aspects of how to set aims and objectives in a research design. Demonstrating this with an interesting case study, they highlight the importance of not only setting objectives but also doing risk analysis and being realistic in scoping a research project. In the next chapter, "Preparing and Writing a Research Proposal," Thomas and Hodges use a consultative approach in discussing how to prepare and write a research proposal. I was able to relate the information they share to my own experience and identify some gaps in my own proposal. I have learnt to use the information from this chapter as pointers to further improve other research projects that I work on. The layout they provide will be of significant value when writing proposals and/or vying for research project funding.

Chapter 5, "Getting Funding for Research," flows seamlessly from Chapter 4. Thomas and Hodges (2010): (a) provide simple, easy-to-follow instructions, such as clear "read-and-run-with-it" directives in designing proposals for funding; (b) provide readers with practical case studies, as is prevalent in other chapters; (c) while empathizing with researchers, do not shy away from discussing the fundamentals and setbacks often experienced when seeking project funding; and (d) provide website links to help new and experienced researchers learn about and search for research funds in demanding and competitive circumstances.

Chapter 6 is on "Research Ethics and Ethics Reviews." I am glad to see the book has an entire chapter on this topic, making the coverage of ethics comprehensive. The website links to sites describing ethics and codes of practice used in various countries will help researchers understand the ethical requirements and the relative distinctions. The authors present the complex nature of research ethics, showing some of the challenges of ethical practice in a qualitative research environment and providing strategies to conduct ethical work in qualitative field research projects.

The following chapter looks at how to do a literature review. I have learnt a great deal on writing literature reviews from this chapter, particularly the fact that doing a literature review, however small in size, is a research exercise of its own that follows generic research parameters. I have also learnt some of the new ways of doing a literature review. The chapter uses a more narrative and engaging approach, making the entire reading expedition stimulating and interesting. The appendix at the end of the chapter provides extra help that researchers will find of immense value.

Chapter 8 aims to provide "some key project management strategies" (Thomas & Hodges, 2010, p. 131). I look at this chapter as the "how-to" of project management. The chapter is definitely ideal for those involved in working on and managing projects as it points out some of the necessary skills and step-by-step strategies needed in a research/project management. Similar to Chapter 7, this chapter has an appendix containing a sample project plan that can be customized and used by researchers. Meanwhile, Chapter 9 discusses the software one can use in research. Thomas and Hodges have taken an empathetic approach as they consider the interest of novice technology users in research. With a hypothetical case study, they reflect on some of the challenges faced by new-to-technology users with suggestions to overcome the "digital divide" (p. 148). Though there are some aspects of using software that can be learnt along the way, Thomas and Hodges go the extra mile to explain some of the critical issues and finer points in their effort to prepare young researchers. The chapter ends with a list of website links on software useful in a research project. Indeed, I think this chapter could have also been equally well placed before the discussion of how to conduct a literature review in order to emphasize the importance of using software when doing a literature review.

Chapter 10 is on "Working with Colleagues and Supervisors." This chapter is a critical component of research project management. Thomas and Hodges (2010) highlight the value of working as a team, with suggestions for how to manage people and expectations in a team-based research project. They discuss the issues involved in managing research and how to overcome them. They discuss the dynamic nature of project and research management teams whilst providing some coping mechanisms and strategies for those working in a challenging team environment. Within the research context, Thomas and Hodges also hint at the importance of and strategies for working with research supervisors whilst giving various options for readers to consider under different circumstances. They implicitly persuade young researchers to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all type of approach to working in a team, and therefore understanding human dynamics becomes critically important in a team-based environment.

Chapter 11 is on "Communicating Research Findings." This chapter emphasizes the importance of communicating research findings once data have been collected and analyzed. The ways to communicate are multiple as Thomas and Hodges (2010) clearly point out. They give the "nuts and bolts" of sharing key findings, which I consider as core knowledge in helping young researchers. The detailed information presented in this chapter will definitely prepare researchers for future success. The ways of communicating and negotiating with various communication agents and publishers are realistically presented in this chapter as well. I could relate the ideas in this chapter to some of my personal experience and learnt from this chapter certain things that are important when communicating to different audiences or when preparing a communication plan. Thomas and Hodges also point to the need for researchers to be creative, patient, and receptive to feedback when sharing their research findings.

I consider the remainder of the book as providing an additional oomph for young researchers as Thomas and Hodges (2010) show the practical application of the core knowledge they have previously described in the text to a real life research environment. Chapter 12 discusses some guiding principles for research writing, and Chapter 13

addresses the organization and presentation of a research report. I consider the contents of these two chapters to be at the heart of research project management. In these chapters, Thomas and Hodges help researchers look at the task of writing reports holistically, realistically and pragmatically. With the provision of a clear structure and a template to follow, a researcher can use and customize the information for his/her research work with minimum hurdles. The core elements needed in structuring are neatly laid out and discussed comprehensively. The authors give some ground rules for organizing a research report which are amenable and easily adaptable for new research work. For researchers and students embarking on dissertation/thesis writing, these two chapters will definitely prove germane. The practical exercises given at the end of the chapters add further emphasis to the rigor and structure of a research project.

The book's final chapter is on careers in research. Thomas and Hodges (2010) are open in discussing the good, the bad and the ugly aspects of being a researcher. I think they have given an honest, rich and experienced-based opinion on choosing research (and project management) as a career. They point out the potential bumpy rides and not-so-glamorous aspects involved in doing research work or aspiring to become an independent researcher. However, they have a very clear intent not to discourage aspiring researchers; this is why they share and reveal some of the core knowledge often not shared to new and novice researchers or sometimes left to experience. Using a consultative-guiding approach, they provide valuable advice that will be appreciated by many researchers.

Looking at the title of this chapter, "Careers in Research," one might also add to it: "is this really what you [I] want to do?" This text enables the reader to reflect on all that is involved in pursuing research as a career. Thomas and Hodges (2010) could not be any more honest, explicit, and considerate in bringing to light the "real" journey of a researcher. The appendix section at the end of this chapter gives website links on academic and other research positions (p. 238). Before closing this chapter, the authors also add a section called "Concluding Ideas: Research Projects and Research Careers." This is a short piece (2 pages) where they explain how research work is integrated into various careers (p. 239-240).

Thomas and Hodges (2010) make every attempt to share experiences and information on the demanding yet rewarding role of a researcher. They wrap-up by reiterating the pragmatic and overarching objective of their book, which as I see it, is that research project management is an art and therefore "planning and carrying out a research project is a great test of all-round thinking ability and real world project management skills….for this reason, the core principles and skills … are likely to have applicability…for virtually anyone in problem solving or investigative tasks in the… social science" (p. 240).

The last section of the book is an appendix that consists of an example of a completed research proposal; it is included in the book to help young researchers to be comfortable and reasonably confident in commencing a research project. The example can be used as a guideline in doing research in a structured manner. Any researcher or student thinking of doing a research project will find this section valuable.

Conclusion

Instead of summarizing the aforementioned points, I would like to comment on two additional aspects of the book. First, the cover photo of a suspension bridge is a brilliant illustration of what to expect in the content, i.e., Thomas and Hodges (2010) have tactfully built a bridge between research design and completion. (To see the cover photo and additional information about the text, you can visit the publisher's website at http://www.sagepub.com/textbooksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book233465&level1=Course1 007&currTree=Courses&.) Second, the core knowledge provided in the book is based on solid experiences of managing research projects. Therefore, the book will be ideal for academic and non-academic researchers, teachers and consultants, among others. The authors' consultative-coaching-advisory and empathy-towards-researchers approaches in discussing the core knowledge in research project management are indeed commendable. Most researchers whilst reflecting on the content will find the book rigorous, relevant, simple and practical. Finally, I came to realize that successfully conducting a research project not only requires traits of discipline, commitment and perseverance but also requires one to be innovative and explorative. Thomas and Hodges have made every attempt to share some of their core knowledge to enable aspiring researchers to succeed in just this way.

References

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