

HRD Forum: Book Review

Harry Potter and the Scholar-Practitioner

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This is a review of *A Guide to Professional Doctorates in Business and Management* by Lisa Anderson, Jeff Gold, Jim Stewart and Richard Thorpe¹. For such an unassuming-looking volume, I found this book to be provoking and enjoyable. As a result, my review took longer to write than anticipated. The book has a helpful and quite comprehensive overview in the preface for those who are interested only in its contents. Therefore, rather than structuring the review chronologically, it is written in a more impressionistic and metaphorical style, one more in keeping with the action modes of research championed in the book.

Background

A Guide to Professional Doctorates was apparently written for me. Before you turn the page and abandon this review as hopelessly narcissistic, let me qualify that statement. The authors themselves situate the book at the conjunction of a number of communities, aiming it at those with an interest in the practitioner as researcher, those enrolled for a Professional Doctorate in Business and Management, and those supervising and examining their work. As well as being a recent DBA graduate and supervisor of a number of DBA projects, I am also an academic and practitioner who is interested in “the creation of professional and actionable knowledge through the use of action modes of research”. Because of these varied perspectives, I hope this review will provide insight to interested parties from a variety of communities.

DBA vs PhD

It was refreshing to encounter a book focused unapologetically on the DBA and one that sidestepped the tired old DBA vs PhD dyad. Novel and actionable methods of research, which are equally viable, equally valid, and equally doctoral, were brought into focus, managing to circumvent the hierarchical conception of knowledge that might arise as a result of more traditional constructs of knowledge accumulation. It focused instead on the wisdom that develops as a result of harnessing practice-based phenomena to suggest the appropriate research path.

As a researcher-practitioner working in academia, a common theme I have encountered when discussing my DBA with academics is the, generally unhelpful and unedifying, rigour-relevance debate. While practitioners readily embrace the creation of actionable research born out of a thorough exploration of ‘real world’ problems, a depressingly common academic perspective of the DBA seems to be of a ‘poor relation’ (for poor relation, read ‘slightly inbred but amusing

country cousin') of the PhD. This book helpfully avoids justification or apology. Rather, the authors celebrate its difference and highlight the unique strength and rigour of the DBA as well as its inherent value to an audience beyond academia.

Having situated myself within this community of practice and identified my potential positive bias, the book itself was informative and readable. The take-home message was the value of the DBA at the interface between research and practice and the encouragement of the academic community to appreciate the difference; to value DBAs alongside PhDs as different but equal. It was a thoughtful and well-informed tour of the DBA, taking in the why and the how, as well as the what.

Instead of competing, DBAs and PhDs were conceptualized at either end of a “continuum of practice”, situated instead by the positioning of the doctoral work according to the extent of the personal and organizational relevance, engagement, and development contained in the work. The construct put me in mind of Ollivander’s shop in Harry Potter, where, rather than a wizard choosing a wand, a wand might choose wizard. In the wizarding world, chemistry and ‘chosen-ness’ come about from the partnership of a particular wand with a particular wizard, based on the qualities, strengths and needs of both parties.

The best results, however, must always come where there is the strongest affinity between the wizard and the wand. These connections are complex. An initial attraction, and then a mutual quest for experience, the wand learning from the wizard, the wizard from the wand (Rowling, 2007: 402).

So, in an ideal situation, the prospective doctoral student would encounter their own Ollivander, under whose expert guidance, a similar type of alchemy might occur. In this case the ‘chosen-ness’ of the doctoral qualification emerging from the convergence of the phenomenon being observed or investigated, the existing scholarly ‘conversation’ in that area, the practice-based needs identified, and the experience and position of the student within that scenario. The metaphor may sound a trifle fanciful, given the pressures on all sides of the academic partnership, student, business and university, however, the insight contained in this book, genuinely applied with a constructive attitude, make me believe that such a choosing might be possible, and the resultant magic, might render that effort worthwhile.

The book’s underpinning value is one of criticality. It encourages the reader to increase “the variety of ways events can be understood” (Anderson et al., 2015: 112) and their engagement with problems and phenomena that, if they are to be fully investigated, do not have fixed diagnoses or cures. The inclusion of examples from a wide range of real DBA students and their research bring the theory to life and make it easier to apply the principles contained in the book to working with my students, in all their variety and complexity. Examples included instances where a student has flexed and adapted their emphasis or perspective as their research unfolded, rather in the way that a wizard might learn from a wand. Cases like these demonstrate the value and meaningfulness of actionable research where theory takes its “place as the servant of practice, providing meaning that is responsive and always developing” (p. 181).

Professional Doctorates and the Impact Agenda

Part of the value of this book is in the combined wisdom and experience of the authors. It represents a challenge to more traditional views of ‘doctorness’ and goes some way to redressing

the balance between the overt value placed within academia upon publication in high-ranked journals, and the lesser-prized but equally valuable engagement with business and influence upon practice.

The Stern review into the REF (2016) has called for a broadening in the way that research impacts are defined and encourages institutions to think about how they engage with society, in other words, the actionability of their research outputs. The emphasis of the DBA on developing rigorous research that can be actioned, and therefore create impact is vital. Where the lesser tendency of DBA students to publish in high-ranking journals has perhaps led to the qualification being viewed, in academic circles at least, as less important, the renewed focus on impact and actionable research means that the DBA is a degree whose time has come.

A Handbook?

I wish that this book had been available when I began my DBA as its discussion and guidance on research philosophy was clear and lacking jargon. Like the DBA itself, it sought to make a contribution to practice as well as theory and, as such, lacked the obfuscation of academic language while maintaining academic rigour.

As a supervisor of DBAs myself, there are elements in this book, for instance the explanation of theory, model, concept, framework, that go right to the heart of the DBA experience and can be difficult for a practitioner-as-researcher to fully grasp. I have found myself smiling and nodding as the book succinctly and elegantly explains what I have been trying to get across to a student during a supervision session.

Many potential doctoral students circle an organizational problem that concerns messy people-and-systems issues and, in an attempt to frame a succinct and manageable study question, are tempted to 'trim' the problem down to fit within more traditional methodological approaches. The chapters on action learning with their illustrating examples act as a searchlight into the unknown, providing an actionable route that could, instead, fit the research to the problem. Where the authors have not seen particular theories harnessed for a DBA, a clear rationale and helpful suggestions are made for application, and supporting resources suggested. This almost (but not quite!) made me want to go away and have another go!

While it could undoubtedly be used as a handbook to explain and equip, the book goes well beyond this remit, to question underlying philosophies, debunk rigid research constructs, and provide a tantalising glimpse into what might be possible to achieve with a sufficiently flexible mind-set.

Summary

While there is a large and varied repertoire of books available on PhDs, this is the most helpful book on the DBA that I have found. The contributions of the various authors are complementary and, taken together, provide a comprehensive perspective on the DBA, its history, strengths, and trajectory.

I will undoubtedly return to the book periodically to support my practice. As an apprentice of

Ollivander, I will also be recommending it to my doctoral students (both DBA and PhD) to inform and ‘loosen up’ their methodological thinking, and facilitate the all-important magic between wizard and wand, that brings doctoral research to life.

Note

- 1 Anderson, L., Gold, J., Stewart, J., and Thorpe, R. (2015). *A guide to Professional Doctorates in Business and Management*, Sage, ISBN – 978-1-4462-9832-9 (paperback), ISBN978-1-4462-9833-6, (e-book).

References

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Rowling, J. K., 2007, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. London: Bloomsbury.

The Reviewer

Dr Catherine Groves is Senior Lecturer at the Business School, Liverpool John Moores University. A chartered psychologist, Catherine had 20 years’ experience of enterprise and operational management before coming to academia. Her research interest is aimed at exploring the theory-practice gap between psychological theory and its application in a ‘real’ business context. She has a particular interest in supporting practitioners undertaking research within their own organizational setting.