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Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate as Seen from Two Frames

Wayne Perry

Northcentral University, wperry@ncu.edu

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Abstract

Immy Holloway and Lorraine Brown, the authors of *Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate*, explicitly identify their intended audience as “doctoral candidates who write their dissertations in English...” This review looks at the book from two frames, a professor who mentors doctoral students, and, imaginatively, as a student who is trying to write my first qualitative dissertation. I found the book has a number of strengths, most especially its broader focus than solely on a US Ph.D. However, the broad focus left many important details in the background. *Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate* is probably best seen as a helpful reminder to a student in the writing phase of the dissertation of what the student should already have learned and mastered in prior course work.

Keywords

Dissertations, Academic, Qualitative Dissertations, Dissertation Handbooks

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Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate as Seen from Two Frames

Wayne Perry

Northcentral University, Scottsdale, Arizona, USA

Immy Holloway and Lorraine Brown, the authors of Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate, explicitly identify their intended audience as “doctoral candidates who write their dissertations in English....” This review looks at the book from two frames, a professor who mentors doctoral students, and, imaginatively, as a student who is trying to write my first qualitative dissertation. I found the book has a number of strengths, most especially its broader focus than solely on a US Ph.D. However, the broad focus left many important details in the background. Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate is probably best seen as a helpful reminder to a student in the writing phase of the dissertation of what the student should already have learned and mastered in prior course work. Keywords: Dissertations, Academic, Qualitative Dissertations, Dissertation Handbooks

Like, I imagine, many readers of *The Qualitative Report*, I have had the joy and the frustration of mentoring doctoral students through the process of writing a qualitative dissertation. I am always looking for resources that I can provide my students that will make the process a bit easier and more enriching for them. That was the frame from which I read *Essentials of a Qualitative Doctorate* (Holloway & Brown, 2012). Actually, I read from two separate frames and I continued to alternate back and forth between them. My first frame was, as I have already indicated, as a professor who has to help my students with their qualitative dissertation. The second frame was as a student. I imaginatively put myself in the place of students that I have known and asked of the book the questions the students have asked of me. I wanted to know if this book would answer my (the student's) questions.

Wearing my professor hat, I did a quick scan of the book's contents and found that I was suitably impressed. The first author, Immy Holloway, is a professor emeritus at a university, and the second author, Lorraine Brown, is a senior lecturer at that same university. Both authors appear to have substantial qualifications to write about qualitative research. Furthermore, the book is part of a series entitled *Qualitative Essentials*, and the editorial board for that series includes some well-known names in the field of qualitative research, like Russell Bernard, Kathy Charmaz and John Engel. I was not at all surprised, then, to find that the table of contents suggested that the book would cover all of the relevant, important topics, such as “Finding a Topic and Selecting a Research Question,” “Proposal Writing,” “The Importance of Ethical Issues,” and “The Qualitative Research Process.”

The Introduction gave me further reason to be hopeful. The authors indicated that one of the distinctions between qualitative research and quantitative research is that qualitative research is solidly located within context. They richly illustrated that concept by locating the process of writing a doctoral dissertation in the larger context of a variety of English-speaking countries and disciplines. While they were explicit about a choice to use terminology more typical of US higher education, throughout the book they brought in differences that might appear in the UK, Canada, or Australia. I count this appeal to a wider, more international audience as a strength of the book.

The authors were also very explicit that they were not writing solely about a PhD dissertation. Their focus was on a broader range of doctoral level academic scholarship, and the illustrations that they peppered throughout the chapters brought this to life. If I were a

student, I believe I would find this helpful in helping me understand how to use my data in my dissertation to illustrate and support my arguments.

Reading the book from my student's frame, I found the authors' conversational writing style to be very attractive. Reading the book was more like chatting with an older sibling, or perhaps a more experienced professional peer. There was very little professional jargon, and what little did appear was always appropriately and contextually defined. The question/answer section at the end of each chapter gave me, the student, a chance to think about the implications of the material I had just read, and perhaps find the answer to a question I did not know I had until I read it.

On the other hand, as a "student" I found the book's broad focus to be a bit frustrating. There were quite a few generalities, and very few real specifics. The main purpose of the book seemed to be to remind me, a student, what I learned in my very first research methods course. The student in me found that very frustrating. My inner student was crying out, "With all that I have to read and write, why am I wasting time on this?" The professor in me wants to interject that the authors did include a number of helpful citations for further study, but my experience with doctoral students over the years is that they are so overwhelmed with the multiplicity of tasks that they are juggling that they will probably not have the time to chase down and apply the additional resources, no matter how useful they probably are. Actually, as a professor I found this a potentially useful teaching moment. I can easily see myself engaging one of my doctoral students in conversation about the student's frustration with the book, and using that to illustrate the frustration that readers of the student's dissertation may feel if it similarly lacks sufficient focus.

If I were to become very picky, I could also critique the authors' rather narrow selection of resources for their readers. For example, under the phenomenology section, they refer primarily to the work of Giorgi. Now, I personally favor Giorgi's style of phenomenology, but to overlook the impact of Canadian phenomenologist Moustakas is, I think, a short fall. Similarly, they primarily refer to Charmaz' style of Grounded Theory. Again, this fits well with my personal preferences, but not everyone will favor such a socially-constructed approach. I see this seeming contradiction - an excessively narrow focus on resources in the midst of so many generalities (a repeated phrase the authors use is, "...check with your advisor...") - as actually being complementary hues in the same palette. Consistently, the authors paint with a very broad brush, enabling them to touch on the essentials, but in the process omitting many of the details.

Overall, I am glad I read the book. I think it has some value for students as they try to produce their doctoral dissertation, but not as a primary resource. My primary resources will continue to be Rudstam and Newton (2007); Creswell (2009); and Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000). These give much more specific, helpful (in my experience) direction than the *Essentials* book. To be fair, though, *Essentials* accomplishes the purpose stated in the title (though at times perhaps unintentionally). It does give the essentials of a qualitative dissertation. The student, and the student's mentors, will simply need more resources to go beyond the essentials.

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Author Note

C. Wayne Perry retired in 2015 from full time teaching at Northcentral University, where he was the Director of Clinical Training for the School of Marriage and Family Sciences. He continues to teach part-time at Northcentral, and he continues to mentor students as part of their doctoral committee. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: 4200 Willowbrook Drive, Millbrook AL 36054-1996 USA; Telephone: 334-546-8476; E-mail: wperry@ncu.edu.

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