

CAREY DENHOLM AND TERRY EVANS (Ed.)
Doctorates Downunder: Keys to Successful Doctoral Study in Australia & New Zealand. Camberwell, Vic.: ACER Press, 2006. ISBN 9780864314299. Pp. 227.
and
Supervising Doctorates Downunder: Keys to Effective Supervision in Australia & New Zealand. Camberwell, Vic.: ACER Press, 2007. ISBN 9780864314307. Pp. 271.

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw & Ross Langmead

Darren:

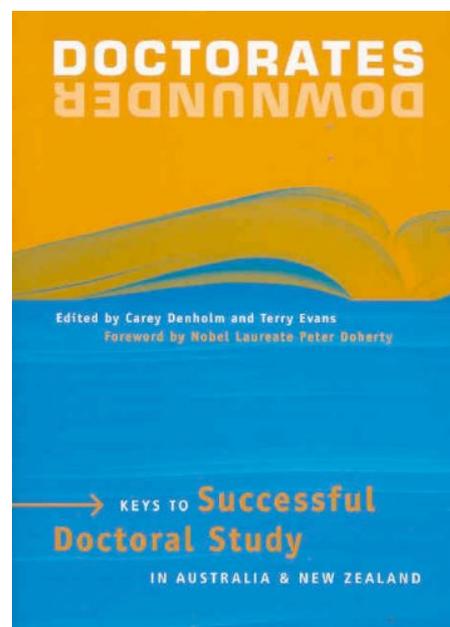
A Hagar cartoon depicts Hagar and Lucky Eddie marooned on a small island. Hagar asks Eddie why he has not finished their signal for help. In the next frame we see that Eddie has used stones to spell out “S” and “O” but not the final “S”. Eddie explains to Hagar that he has “writer’s block”.

Referring to this cartoon, Linda Conrad, one of the contributors to *Doctorates Downunder*, suggests that candidates should make sure they don’t find themselves alone on an island with their supervisor(s), doomed and unable to write effectively (p. 39). Conrad and the other contributors urge doctoral candidates and supervisors to make the most of resources, networks and good processes for doctoral study and supervision.

Among such excellent resources are *Doctorates Downunder* and *Supervising Doctorates Downunder*, both edited by Carey Denholm and Terry Evans. These two books are a pair, aimed at doctoral candidates in Australasia and their supervisors respectively.

Denholm has overhauled University of Tasmania’s Graduate Research program and identified key strategies for successful project completion. Evans has a long history (at Deakin University) of supervision and research into the doctoral experience, especially for part-time students. They have recruited sixty-five different writers — mostly Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies — to contribute sixty-one succinct and well-written chapters across the two volumes.

I started and recently completed my Doctor of Theology research with Dr Ross Langmead’s supervision. Ross guided me through admission, applying for a scholarship, proposing a topic, developing methodology, gaining ethics clearance, collecting data, sorting and coding it, drafting my findings, redrafting them, refocusing my structure, publishing initial findings, finding a second supervisor while Ross was on study leave, navigating through human ethics dilemmas, getting a necessary extension, further redrafting and editing the text to below the magic 100,000 word limit, and, finally, proudly submitting my thick document for examination.



Doctoral study is a long and involved process, requiring a variety of skills and knowledge and the motivation and tenacity to keep at it. Ross guided me through this process and it is no cliché to acknowledge my debt to him. I particularly appreciated Ross' clear explanations of processes, open communication about power issues, monthly meetings, constructively critical feedback on drafts, guidance on publishing and pastoral encouragement to keep at it. He described himself as simply a more experienced colleague alongside me, helping me to prepare to be examined by someone else.

The highlights of my experience are all discussed helpfully in *Doctorates Downunder*. Choosing a topic that matters and breaks new ground, discovering how productive ethnographic research methods can be, learning investigative skills and sharpening my capacity to think and write critically. The challenges I faced are also discussed, such as juggling work, ministry and family alongside doctoral study and starting a new job before finishing.

The chapters outline many of the things I've learned along the way, such as the importance of: a topic to be passionate about, the literature review, negotiating expectations with the supervisor, writing early and often, getting the research question clear, using oral presentations as a learning tool, publishing along the way and sustaining motivation.

The chapters on argumentation, research skills and writing, and how examiners assess a thesis were timely, read as they were towards the end of my candidature.

Robyn Barnacle sets out what is involved in being a critical researcher and pushes for imaginative research and constant questioning (pp. 95–103).

Jacqueline Rowarth and Pam Green are encouraging when discussing sustaining inspiration and motivation: "You wouldn't have been accepted into the doctoral program if you hadn't shown the abilities needed for completion; you wouldn't have been confirmed in candidature if you hadn't shown the required attributes. You can complete your own heroic journey" (p. 119).

Erica McWilliam has some timely advice on argumentation and developing paragraphs with a point, evidence and relevance. An argument is more than a mere assertion; nor is it made by mere citation: "An argument is generated when a point made by the author of the thesis is supported by compelling evidence from the field (or elsewhere), and the relevance of the point is then explained in terms of the overall line of argument" (p. 167).

Robert Cantwell explains how to think and write for a thesis, which he describes as "a singular profound and embracing idea that permeates all aspects of the thesis production" (p. 182).

Some chapters would have been helpful for me to have read earlier in my research. They alerted me to resources I could have used. I could have kept better records of advice, including recording supervision sessions (although Ross gave me complete notes of his comments). I could perhaps have made

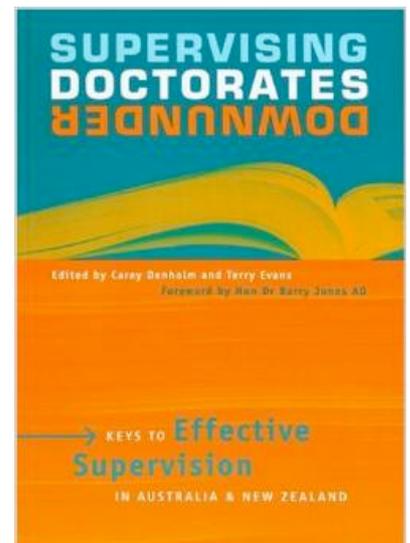
more of the research community and the ideas of my peers; it is for this purpose that the Melbourne College of Divinity puts on research seminars for postgraduate students. I would have benefited from forming learning plans early on in my research in order to acquire the research and disciplinary skills I needed. Finally, a few planned breaks in study might have helped.

There are also excellent chapters on topics that were not so relevant to me: part-time candidature, studying with a disability or chronic illness and the Australian context of doctoral study.

Ross:

Like parents, academic supervisors usually take on their role without specific training, learning positively and negatively from their own limited experience on the receiving end. That was my path into supervision, and I have looked for a book such as *Supervising Doctorates Downunder* ever since.

Following the successful pattern of *Doctorates Downunder*, Denholm and Evans have gathered thirty-three short chapters covering all one needs to know about doctoral supervision in universities in Australia and New Zealand.



After an introduction, there are sections on beginning the supervision process; planning; ensuring a positive candidate experience; issues of care; assisting in reading and writing; and the examination and beyond.

The early chapters on setting up the supervisory relationship are particularly useful. Clear expectations and matching styles are obviously important. As it happens, Darren's working style has matched my own and the path has been smooth. On the other hand, as an example, I have suffered from more than one student wanting to submit multiple versions of an early chapter before moving on to other drafts, and I have learnt to make it clear at the beginning that I strongly prefer students to keep moving on to new chapters, because their thesis will only develop as it takes shape as a whole, and my comments are inevitably limited and provisional until I have seen a whole draft.

Richard Ingleby's succinct chapter on setting up the research question contains several practical ways of helping students to sharpen their focus.

Kate Cadman and Margaret Cargill's chapter on providing quality advice on candidates' writing contains excellent advice on clarifying turnaround times, types of feedback and what candidates are expected to do with feedback. It has a useful list of questions supervisors might ask about the piece of writing, depending on whether the focus is upon its argument, its 'voice', its use of language or its presentation (p. 187). A former teacher of mine often told the story of the feedback he received on his first draft chapter from his supervisor, an eminent European biblical scholar. Scrawled across the front page was

simply, “Sunday School stuff!”. For all his scholarly stature, that supervisor could have benefited from Cadman and Cargill’s practical advice.

Another highlight is the chapter by Elaine Martin and Ron Adams on ‘Writing and Demystifying the Thesis’. It was an inspiring two-day thesis-writing workshop run by Ron Adams when he was at Victoria University that removed significant blockages for me in the later stages of my own doctorate. Amongst other gems, the chapter provides simple questions a supervisor can ask of candidates to clarify what they are on about.

The editorial standards of *Supervising Doctorates Downunder* are high, so I found it ironic that the chapter on editing and proofreading skills should begin its concluding paragraph with the following sentence: “By instilling in candidates a good use of written English means that, on completion, graduates can confidently express themselves in writing” (p. 94). I take it as a mere editing slip, by the way, and wholeheartedly agree.

Working in a theological rather than a scientific context, and in the Melbourne College of Divinity rather than in a large secular university, not all the chapters are useful to me. This is a strength of the book, however, as it will contain good advice for doctoral supervisors across the board in Australasia.

Supervising Doctorates Downunder is simply the most clearly written and most relevant text I have found for developing supervisory skills.

Darren and Ross:

These two books are outstanding resources for every doctoral candidate and supervisor. The editors have brought together a wealth of practical ideas from a wide spectrum of experienced supervisors. They have achieved a consistency of style — the chapters are accessible, succinct and practical. While the books emerge from the Australian and New Zealand context and are clearly most useful for ‘doctorates downunder’, they have a global applicability beyond the region indicated in their titles.

Darren Cronshaw completed a Doctor of Theology thesis with the Melbourne College of Divinity. Ross Langmead was Professor of Missiology at Whitley College and Darren’s doctoral supervisor. These reviews were originally published in Pacifica 24:2 (July 2011), 240-243.