

BOOK REVIEW

Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (R)Elations by Alison Bartlett and Gina Mercer

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As a course designer and instructor, a curriculum assessor, and as a newish researcher in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), I keep a small section of books in my library that clarify these facets of my work as a teaching graduate and situate them within my institution (the University of Kansas), my discipline, and the university sector. Alison Bartlett's and Gina Mercer's *Postgraduate Research Supervision: Transforming (R)Elations* is a valuable recent addition to this collection, one that I have already recommended to graduate colleagues in the humanities and the social sciences, to my faculty mentors at KU's Center for Teaching Excellence, and to faculty in the English Department where I do my research.

Reading Bartlett and Mercer's book amounts to holding one's assumptions, experiences, and attitudes up to the mirrors of 26 chapters, written by 55 sophisticated voices, each with its own revealing emphasis. The book is an elegant cross-section of theory-driven arguments, such as Tai Peseta's "Imagining a Ph.D. Writer's Body Grappling over Pedagogy"; literature reviews, such as Mandy Symons's "Learning Assistance: Enhancing the Ph.D. Experience"; data-driven case studies, such as Bob Smith's "(Re)Framing Research Degree Supervision as Pedagogy"; and fascinating new or hybrid genres, such as Gaylene Perry and Kevin Brophy's dialogue, "'Eat Your Peas': The Creative Ph.D. Thesis and the Exegesis." Some who read this review may balk at the work's age but its continued relevance stems from the foresight of its contributors and the fact that universities still have considerable room for growth on the issues they have raised.

Symons reminds us that graduate "students who are asked about their [research] supervision usually mention problems" (p.103), and reading this book may help graduates who are experiencing such problems diagnose causes and imagine feasible solutions. For some graduates, reading thoughtful identifications of the issues, such as Sheralyn Campbell's "Re-imagining the Gendered Self in Postgraduate Experience," may at least provide reassurance that whatever stressors they face are not imaginary, nor perhaps even rare. For me, Jo Balatti and Hilary Whitehouse's wry and incisive chapter, "Novice at Forty: Transformation or Reinvention?," identified a tension I've felt between having been a competent professional prior to graduate school and occasionally being treated as a novice based on assumptions about students (graduate students, after all, are students). One of the most challenging chapters, Jane Gallop's "Resisting Reasonableness," traces another student's similar malaise into a provocative

critique of the policy-driving taboo on advisor-advisee sex, suggesting that the advisor-advisee relationship is a form of true respect for an advisee, who, if dissertating, “is, by definition, at the very edge of student identity... no longer simply a student, already within the rite of passage to professor” (p.153).

A student need not be encountering career difficulties in order to appreciate this book. Even someone in a congenial, productive research partnership (where I see myself) with faculty may find this a worthwhile investment in recognizing her happy circumstances, as well as the institutional conditions that led to and sustain them. (A similar trajectory of thought prompted the book in the first place; see the editors’ introduction.) As a stakeholder in a university, exposing oneself to literature that exposit what has made a good experience good is a gratitude-inspiring and generally empowering move; arguably, it’s an act of good institutional citizenship that pays forward. Symons reminded me to thank the director staff at the Center for Teaching Excellence for its culture of mentorship. Macaulay and McKnight’s chapter underscores the crucial role that librarians and archivists have played in my coursework, comprehensives, and dissertation research. And Gough and Anders’s emphasis on methodology implies the value of my campus’s humanities research center, a hub for conversation on research methodology; they see shared methodology, as opposed to shared content interests, as a successful strategy for good research advising.

Making campus supporters of graduate research aware of the crucial role they’re playing empowers them to advocate for the resources needed to create and sustain supportive behaviors, programs, culture, and resources, and they will influence our universities long after well-supported graduates have become (well-placed?) alumni. To those in such roles these chapters may offer horizons for new initiatives; verbiage for departmental goals, values, or position descriptions; and possibly even insight that could lead to grant funding for enhanced support. If a teaching and learning center, office of graduate studies, or research center with graduate staff has a library or resource list, this book should be included.

A common observation in SoTL is that all too often instructors default to the sorts of pedagogy they experienced while students. To a faculty member who has never advised graduate work but is about to, to one who hasn’t had advisees in a while, or to one who has historically relied on conversations with colleagues and anecdotes shared in passing, it may come as a relief to realize that this book is available. To graduates it is a reminder that “the supervisory role [is] one of the hardest and most thankless tasks of an academic” (p.104) and that faculty are often adding this task to already-burgeoning queues of work. In sum, this work remains relevant and has the potential to renew university culture by enriching the relationships that comprise its network of researchers.