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Milestone Moments in Getting your PhD in Qualitative Research

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While the internet is full of blog posts and articles on how to get a PhD, the book Milestone Moments in Getting your PhD in Qualitative Research (“Milestone Moments” for short) definitely deserves to be highlighted on a list of hands on practical guidebooks for early stage PhD candidates and for persons considering applying for candidacy. The authors, Dr. Margaret Zeegers and Dr. Deirdre Barron from Swinburne University of Technology, draw on their own experiences as supervisors and deliver a book that both breaks down the dissertation process into tangible milestones and covers parts of the process, which are usually overseen in other guidebooks. The book is structured around twelve concrete steps or “milestones” in the PhD process and gives practical advice on how to manage each step. The authors give emphasis to the specific nature of qualitative research and how a young researcher might have to defend one’s choice of conducting qualitative research over quantitative. Each chapter also provides a real-life example from a student paper or dissertation chapter showcasing exemplary examples of how each milestone has been tackled and written. These extracts are accompanied with detailed annotations that help an unpracticed reader to see through the tricks of the trade and learn to evaluate one’s own and others writing. The practical approach of the book and the examples provide a comprehensible picture of what it means to get your PhD in qualitative research.

The book is divided in two parts. The first part covers the basis for getting a PhD. First, the authors discuss reasons for doing or not doing a PhD followed by chapters on confirming your candidature in a Viva Voce and getting an ethics clearance. The authors recognize that they are presenting the PhD process as it is set up in Australia and that there are differences in the traditions and regulations compared to other countries. Therefore, some of the milestones might not apply for all readers as well as the order of the milestones might be different. The seconds part of the book is more generally applicable as it focuses on actually conducting qualitative research, writing a dissertation on it and publishing from your qualitative data.

Each chapter in the book is structured in the same way presenting a milestone, describing why this is an important step in the process and how it could be tackled with practical examples and recommendations for more detailed readings. The chapters are not overwhelmed with detailed descriptions of different methods of analysis or techniques of data collection but rather provide a brief but thorough overview of methodological approaches relevant specifically for qualitative researchers. Certain sections reoccur in each chapter like; “an annotated example”, which provides an example of how the rules of the milestone have been followed in a real-life example; and “the words used” sections and in some chapters also “words not to be used” sections, which show sample sentences from academic texts and help the reader to understand the differences in the language used in qualitative versus quantitative academic writing. Furthermore, in most chapters the authors also provide “hot tips” for the reader. These are practical advice on things usually learned through trial and error. The reoccurring sections really add an even more practical stamp on the book.

One of Milestone Moments’ strengths but also its weaknesses is its accessibility. The authors avoid getting into the details of theories, methods and techniques in order to provide an overview for even the less
academically accustomed reader. The book does not answer all questions and cannot solely function as a go
to handbook on research methodology - nor does it attempt to do so. Towards the end of each chapter some
recommendations are made for further reading with descriptions of each recommended book. Milestone
Moments can definitely function as a quick reminder of what to consider in each step of the way of
conducting qualitative research and where to look for more detailed information. The chapter that I
personally found most beneficially and interesting is the chapter on Milestone 5: Methodology. This chapter
focuses on the philosophical side of a dissertation emphasizing how your philosophical approach influences
the choice of methods and techniques for your data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the chapter
introduces several philosophical approaches that might seem daunting for new PhD Students, such as
Poststructuralism, Critical Theory and Feminist Theory, as well as philosophers like Foucault, Derrida and
Lyotard, lowering the threshold for learning more about these interesting thinkers and approaches.

The book is a pleasure to read and the authors have done an excellent job in making the book accessible for
all audiences. I would recommend this book first and for most to people who are considering applying for
PhD candidacy and who would like to understand what it takes to complete a PhD. Also, this book can be a
good handbook for supervisors on reminding how to talk about the different steps in a PhD process in a
comprehensible way to applicants and new PhD students. For a more critical reader the book might seem as
university management’s work of propaganda. The milestones and the guidance is very much structured to
fit the current day requirements of PhD Students and academics in general. While this can be considered as
a good feature, I do recognize that some readers might find it irritating and prefer a freer interpretation of
the expectations put on PhD Students.

For me personally the book didn’t provide much new information. As a second year PhD student I have
already familiarized myself with the requirements of getting a PhD at my university and attended classes on
the different methodological approaches. However, as this book is not a detailed handbook but more of an
overview, its cut-to-the-chase presentation style makes completing a PhD seem very achievable, perhaps
encouraging readers who are still thinking about applying for a candidacy. In this way the book full fills its
mission.

References:
Zeegers, M & Barron, D (2015), *Milestone Moments in Getting your PhD in Qualitative Research*, 1st ed,
Elsevier, Amsterdam.