

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigor, journalistic flair

A PhD by publication or how I got my doctorate and kept my sanity

February 13, 2013 11.30pm EST

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A PhD is never easy but is there a way to make it easier? Phd graduate image from www.shutterstock.com

Doing a PhD is a difficult business. Long hours, personal stress, institutional pressure to complete on time – and all this for what?

Increasingly a PhD alone does not guarantee an academic career. We are expected to publish, teach and contribute to professional development. Oh and did I mention you have to publish, publish, publish?

However there is a way to publish and do a PhD - hopefully without perishing.

I recently completed my PhD by publication, which for me was a way of getting a doctorate while keeping my sanity.

What is a PhD by publication?

A PhD by Publication is just what it sounds like, instead of producing one large monograph, you produce a series of articles to be published in peer reviewed journals or as book chapters.

The normal format is four to five research papers bookended by a substantial introductory chapter and a concluding chapter. The thesis must still read as a cohesive whole and therefore despite the articles being stand alone pieces, they must also relate to each other.

The aim is that when they are read together they become more than just the sum of their parts.

It is a relatively new concept within the social sciences and humanities but has been around for a while in the hard sciences here in Australia. It is much more common in European Universities where it is often the standard approach for doctoral studies.

The advantages

There are many advantages to doing a PhD this way. One of the more self-evident ones is that it allows you to publish and finish a PhD – academically hitting two birds with one stone.

There are many pressures of doing a PhD that are taken away from publishing. PhD by publication focused my writing on achieving output and helped to avoid the trap of always pushing the publications to the side.

A PhD by publication also helps you to develop practical skills. Through my own process, I learnt how to write to journal editors, deal with rejection and pitch articles – all skills that are important for professional academic life.

This method also divides the PhD up into more manageable chunks – sometimes the hardest thing about a PhD is the enormity of the task it presents. But dividing it up into five discrete papers allowed me to see a way ahead making the PhD seem more achievable.

Last but not least, you can get both expert feedback and it can provide that “tick” factor. PhD students were usually high achieving undergraduate students used to receiving recognition and reward for their work. Entering the land of doctoral studies, you don’t get the pay off from your work until the end of many years and lack of recognition can be deeply un-motivating.

But each time something is published is a chance to celebrate and take a deep breath before moving on to the next portion.

The expert feedback you get during this process is also very helpful even it’s not always pleasant (see below). By the time your PhD goes to examiners it has already gone through a rigorous peer review process.

In times of PhD panic, it was comforting to think that my work can’t be that bad if someone had already agreed to publish it.

The disadvantages

Of course, though, there are some disadvantages to electing to do a PhD in this way.

Chief among them is the pressure to start publishing immediately. Publishing is hardly a quick process; it can sometimes take up to two years from submission to a journal long periods of fieldwork may not be compatible.

Therefore candidates taking this route need to start straight away. Aim to have your first paper finished within the first 6 months.

It's also worth recognising that this is not a format for the faint hearted. Rejections from journals can be brutal. You need to be prepared to take this on the chin and send it out again.

That said, this is a skill you need to develop for academia. Being exposed to it early helped me develop a thick skin and be humble about my work.

With the benefit of feedback, there's also the downside of extra work. You may often need to rewrite work for journal editors.

After all, editors have their own agenda and interests and in some respect you are writing for them and not for you. However this taught me to stand my ground with editors and defend things I wished to keep as well as framing things for different audiences.

Another thing to be wary of when considering a PhD by publication is that you need to understand that it's not a professional Doctorate. A Professional Doctorate recognises contribution to a profession and usually doesn't include the same level of original contribution or indeed a thesis.

PhD by publication is still examined to the same standards as a traditional PhD. However countering this assumption that it is not a "real" PhD is sometimes hard.

Finally, because you're likely to be treading new ground in your institution, there's not always a clear path before you.

I did my PhD in a department which was still sorting out its policy towards this format. As a consequence I needed the strong support of your supervisor and head of department to make this work (which I was lucky enough to have). You shouldn't expect a clear set of instructions here; guidelines and policies seem to vary between departments, disciplines and universities.

The up shot

The biggest advantage is that I have come out of my doctoral studies not only with a PhD but with a healthy publication record. This I hope will assist me when taking the next step in my career.

For me, PhD with publication provided a framework, a way forward from which I could see the path to submission. It provided me with a way to get my doctorate without worrying about the process. It allowed me the opportunity to contribute to debates while developing my ideas.

If academia is to expect Australian candidates to now finish their PhD and publish, then it should promote and encourage alternative formats such as this. It can only be good for both PhD candidates and the profession at large.