

Book Review

How to Do a Research Project: A Guide for Undergraduate Students, by Colin Robson. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007.

A problem for instructors and students alike is that many, perhaps most, introductory research methods texts are dreary, overly technical, weighty manuals that no one really wants to read. *How to Do a Research Project* is not one of these. It is a highly readable, engaging guide that provides the necessary technical detail minus the dryness.

Colin Robson is a senior researcher at the Centres for Applied Childhood Studies and Evaluation Studies at Huddersfield University. This volume follows his much credited *Real World Research* (Blackwell, 2002) and represents a comprehensive yet concise primer for anyone contemplating undertaking research. It is also a constructive resource for instructors and supervisors of student research.

The book is divided into three broad sections—Making Preparations, Doing It, and Making Something of It—taking the reader on a tour of the research process, which Robson refers to as a “little life” (p. 46). It follows the preliminaries of identifying a research topic, formulating a question, and selecting an appropriate method, to data collection, analysis and interpretation, and, finally, report writing. Drawing on his lengthy career in research and teaching, Robson interjects the mundane realities, potential pitfalls, and other considerations likely to arise during the research process.

The book begins with brief summaries of the rich panoply of social research approaches, including advantage and disadvantages of each, presented in “alphabetical order to avoid giving the impression that some approaches are superior to others” (p. 23). Robson makes a distinction between fixed and flexible designs; the prespecified designs typical of experiments and surveys, and the more fluid designs characteristic of ethnography and other qualitative approaches. This is a cogent way to classify the range of approaches to doing research for students.

Each chapter concludes with a text box listing “tasks” that review the core requirements essential to navigating each stage of the research process. This might seem elementary, but they effectively work to

remind the reader where he or she is in the overall process and help to orient new researchers in what can be an overwhelming undertaking. Additional text boxes highlight important considerations, such as, for example, “research topics to avoid” (p. 49), appropriate methods for different research approaches (p. 93), and projected time line for fixed and flexible designs (pp. 110-111) that have high practical value. After reading the text in its entirety, students will find these handy reference tools useful to return to when conducting a *live* research project.

Each section contains supplementary readings and a companion Web site (<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/researchproject>), which make this volume a more substantial resource than at first glance. With so much information now available on the Internet, Robson provides links to credible sources, including listing directories, databases, and online journals and texts. Included also is a valuable section on searching, reviewing, and summarizing the literature that will be useful for students.

If I were to make one small complaint, it would be aimed at the discussion on selecting a method. This is often a challenging and mysterious leap for students to move from research topic to choosing the most appropriate method. All too often students become adept in one method—survey research, for example—rather than developing the methodological versatility critical to social life research. Robson does provide brief summaries of the core data collection techniques, but a more intuitive discussion on the step from question to method is needed.

Nevertheless, for the novice or tentative researcher Robson’s commonsense style of writing conveys an intuitive grasp of the process that brings the reader into the “feel” of a project, breaking the research process down into logical, manageable stages, which is empowering and encouraging, rather than presenting the process as a daunting one that can dissuade students. His colorful use of expression, with such idioms as “sod’s law” (p. 113) and “drunkard and lamp-post situ-

ation” (p. 116) make this an, at times, entertaining yet serviceable guide.

This is a text for a specific audience, and it does well in its intended aim. Regrettably, guidebooks such as Robson’s typically do not end up being selected as the primary textbook for research methods courses. The reality of undergraduate teaching, at least in North America, is that students are subjected to and have come to expect to be burdened with large, usually expensive, all-encompassing textbooks containing reams of information rarely tapped at the undergraduate level.

In actuality, Robson’s book is ample to guide the novice through the course of a research project. My advice would be to read Robson’s book first—take advantage of the links and references recommended throughout—and then, if more advanced information is needed, seek out one of the many detailed research manuals available on library shelves. At a cost of \$24.95 (U.S./Cdn) this book is accessible to students and it is *not* just another dry, dull research methods textbook.

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