BOOK REVIEW

Using a book-club approach to support early researchers building their research program

by Anne Christin Rahn and Dawn Stacey

ABSTRACT

We used the book entitled, Developing a Program of Research, by Nancy Edwards and Susan Roelofs to support early researchers in building their research program at the University of Ottawa. Given the challenges of finding time to focus on our research program, we set up a series of four sessions every two weeks that required participants to read two chapters from this book in preparation for group discussions while concurrently building their own research programs.

INTRODUCTION

Developing a Program of Research edited by Nancy Edwards and Susan Roelofs (2018) can be considered an essential read for anyone starting a research career and who is open to guidance from very experienced and seasoned researchers on how they built and nurtured their programs of research.

OUR EXPERIENCE

Researchers were instructed to download (free of charge) or purchase a copy of the book. A full professor led the group with seven participants who were postdoctoral researchers, PhD students within their last year, and early career assistant professors. For each session, a different additional senior professor joined our group. We started with reading and deliberating on the first two chapters and agreed on the next chapters to read at the end of the meetings.

For the first two book club sessions, we focused on reading the four chapters in the “critical considerations for developing a research program” section. All four chapters helped establish a common understanding of the relevant aspects to reflect on when developing a research program. For the third session, we selected two chapters

AUTHOR NOTES

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from the section on examples of individuals’ “research programs.” At the last extended session, we read chapters from the sections on “research programs to research centres” and “funders’ perspectives.”

At the beginning of the meetings, we discussed the prepared chapters and content we found to be of special relevance. The discussions were further stimulated by the experiences of the senior professors. The early career researchers, building their research programs, discussed how the content applied to their individual challenges or situations and concurrently drafted their programs of research. In the second session, we discussed the titles and briefly shared the vision of our research programs. The fourth session was two hours to allow adequate time to discuss the readings and for each early researcher to present their drafted research programs, as well as obtain feedback from the group.

WHAT WE LEARNED

During the course of our sessions, it was possible for the assistant professor and postdoctoral fellows to draft their program of research. Although it was too early for the PhD students to draft their research program, they found the readings and discussions very helpful. All participants felt more inspired by taking part in the book club.

For future book clubs, we would make no changes to the concept, but recognize that the book club might be most supportive for early career researchers after completing their PhD or when writing funding awards for postdoctoral fellowships. We think, a small group of 7 to 10 is fitting for this book club approach to building a research program, because it gave all researchers the opportunity to participate in the discussions. For PhD students or other early career researchers, a “methods club” relating to the methods applied in the PhD or postdoctoral project might be another relevant topic for a longer-running book club.

In summary, the book is well written and provides the basis for a solid understanding of the issues related to developing one’s research program. The professors facilitating the sessions and the content in the chapters provided practical advice on how to navigate the early years of one’s research career. By the end of the four sessions, most early career researchers had a draft of their research program that was broader than the series of studies they were considering as they began this book club.

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REFERENCE