REVIEW ESSAY


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Engaging in Action Research is designed as a how-to guide for teachers and school leaders to encourage and support them as researchers conducting research in their schools and school districts. Its eleven chapters are logically organized to take the reader through the process of designing, planning, implementing, analyzing and reporting research intended to answer questions specific to the teacher’s or administrator’s professional role and immediate environment. Chapter one offers four case examples of individuals who have questions arising from their own observations and curiosities about student learning or interactions taking place in their own work environments and how these could lead to research projects. I found this an effective way to connect the reader to the initial stages of wondering that leads to action research and how it arises from everyday activities.

Chapter two outlines the nature of basic, applied and action research, the difference between method and methodology, and some types of qualitative and quantitative research. Chapter three shares some models of action research and the key first steps in the research planning process. Chapter four offers something that would be very useful to all post-secondary students: a step by step process of how to do a literature review, including how to organize your notes from the sources you have read. Chapter five focuses on designing the research method, highlighting five methods of data collection (interviews, focus groups, document analysis, surveys and observation) and writing a research plan; while chapter six uses the metaphor of planning a vacation to consolidate the learning from chapters one to five. Chapter seven is about project management: planning the practicalities of budget, schedules and research team personnel, guided by creating a clear set of project objectives and expected outcomes. Chapters eight and nine focus on collecting and analyzing data, offering practical tips and examples throughout. Chapter ten is a guide to writing the research report. I particularly liked the list of hints for report writing.
Chapter eleven is an unusual but welcome closing to the book: it provides the common sense hints and advice that everyone needs to hear when undertaking a research project. A short reference list is provided at the back of the book.

The strength of this book is that it meets its own objectives: it is a very practical guide for educators who can follow its well laid-out and comprehensive process to successfully complete an action research project. I like the way the authors identify the ‘front end’ of the research planning process, the iterative process where thinking and re-thinking is so important to designing a research question and the methodology that meets the researcher’s objectives. The examples and hints provided throughout the book enhance its utility and its appeal.

One criticism of the book is its tone and, occasionally, the level of its content. I recognize that the authors’ goal was to make the book accessible and reassuring, perhaps even motivational, to teachers who have not attempted to conduct action research. In an early paragraph in chapter three the authors articulate that one goal of the book is to lead the researcher “as simply and clearly as possible through the necessary steps”. However at times I found it too basic and general, simplifying key research issues in ways that can mislead the reader. For example, the subject of researcher bias is over-simplified, and it ignores the human bias inherent in all the choices made in quantitative research. The reader could handle a more sophisticated discussion of this important issue and should be exposed to it. Similarly the explanation of triangulation and of reliability and validity should be more nuanced and complex, introducing the pitfalls and challenges, in addition to the basics.

I think the authors wrote a book that is appropriate to the needs of the target audience. The mini-stories of educator-researchers actively working in school settings provide relevant case study examples throughout the text. Teachers and school administrators will find this a valuable resource to guide their research endeavours. I also feel that senior undergraduate students and graduate students with no previous research experience would find this a useful tool for thinking about and planning action research projects. I plan to share some of the excellent summary charts and hint lists with my graduate students.