REVIEW ESSAYS


Reviewed by Qingping Li, PhD, Associate professor in School of Foreign Languages, Central South University, PR China.

Many teachers think that their job is teaching, and researching is something that is far beyond their reach. But Craig’s book makes it clear that the environment where teaching happens is rich in research data. Equipped with a little knowledge in research methodology and data analysis, the teacher can become an excellent researcher, which in turn makes him a better teacher. The same is true of practitioners in other fields.

The primary goal of doing action research is to examine and improve practice in, but not limited to educational settings, such as schools and classrooms. But most teachers do not consider themselves researchers, which, to a large extent, hinders their professional development. Dorothy Valcarcel Craig’s recent book, *Action Research Essentials*, provides a comprehensive view of essential concepts, processes, tools and methodological issues in action research for teachers and practitioners in other fields, so that they can also embark on research and make better-informed decisions for improved practice.

Chapter 1 introduces key concepts in action research that is to be elaborated in later chapters. These include definitions of action research, steps and phases in action research, data types and triangulation, motivations for action research, and ethical issues in action research. Some concepts are universally applicable to any research, while some others are peculiar to action research. For example, action research is recursive: It starts out from experience or practical problems, but when findings are determined to lead to improved practice, the process begins anew. It is a field-intensive process in which the researcher acts as a participant observer, often working in collaboration with colleagues. But in experimental studies, the research process ends when conclusions are arrived at as contribution to existing body of knowledge, and the researcher is supposed to be separated from the participants.
Chapters 2-6 cover the pre-study phase, which includes finding the research focus, reviewing the related literature, designing research questions and identifying data sets. The research process begins with problem identification. Once the problem is identified, it needs to be narrowed down to a focus. This can be facilitated by some commonly used techniques, among which the reflective journal deserves special attention. It is kept by the practitioner, perhaps on a daily basis, and by revisiting it, he can easily focus himself on a research topic of interest and value. When the research focus is established the researcher needs to review the literature related to the research topic. Novice researchers tend to write descriptive reviews, while actually literature reviews need to be critical, analyzing methodologies in previous studies to identify possible flaws or biases and synthesizing results and findings in previous studies to find out how much is already known about the topic. As a result, a good literature review in action research “establishes a connection between previously conducted studies and the focus on the [present] action research study” and “make[s] a strong case that the study is needed” (p. 57).

Furthermore, the literature review also produces unanticipated themes and subthemes that add new interest to the study. By integrating these themes and subthemes with the original research focus, the researcher has to formulate overarching questions for qualitative-approach action research, and hypotheses for quantitative-approach research. As the author rightly points out, research questions and hypotheses “keep the study on track” (p. 90), since the practicing environment is rich in data and problems.

Well-written research questions can guide the researcher through the research project, ensuring that nothing is overlooked and data are systematically collected. Quantitative data can be parametric and nonparametric. Different types of data are amenable to different types of statistical analysis, for which the reader is referred to specialized books on statistics and statistical tests. For qualitative data, there needs to be coding and categorization for emergent themes; often inter-rater reliability needs to be established when analyzing the qualitative data.

As has been stated in many places in the book, “the practicing environment is rich in data”. For each overarching question in an action research study, at least three types of data are to be selected for the purpose of triangulation, which is especially important in a study that follows a qualitative approach. But the data or data sets that are chosen must be the most appropriate for the research purpose. Actually, the multi-measure method is encouraged in any research not only to reinforce the validity of research but also to increase meaningfulness of research, reduce error, and facilitate the comparability across studies.

Since action research is a reflective process, the researcher is encouraged to keep field journals to keep a record of ongoing observations and reflective entries. It is even necessary to ask participants to keep field journals so as to “provide insight for the researcher” (p. 142). Even though data collected through field journals may not be appropriate for quantitative studies, they are still highly recommended. Another use of field journals is for “recording ideas regarding possible research”, or “acting as a record for future research” (p. 139). When the study is under way, new questions, themes and
patterns emerge, which calls for the collection of other artifacts and electronic sources as data.

Up to now the researcher is ready to implement the study plan, which is the focus of Chapter 7. The implementation process is one of collecting and analyzing data. But before that, it is necessary to work out a data collection schedule, a detailed when-to-do-what plan from beginning to end, so as to keep the study on track. Analysis of qualitative data in an action research study can be carried out at three levels, that is, reporting, descriptive reality, and grounded theory. The last approach to analysis is most complex and most in-depth. But at all levels of data analysis, triangulation is obligatory.

The researcher working with qualitative methods has to examine perspectives in the inquiry and remove any possible biases and preconceptions before analyzing the data. Analyzing qualitative data involves assigning codes to what happens in the environment, creating categories for the emerging patterns, and examining data or data sets to define attributes for each category. When all patterns have been identified, all categories labeled, and all attributes assigned to all categories, the researcher begins to establish connections between categories and create meaning in the inquiry. At this point, the analysis process is complete.

Chapters 8-9 are devoted to the post-study phase, writing up the research report and working out the action plan. A complete action research process must include the sharing of research findings with a larger community of practice than the immediate working environment. The components in an action research report are similar to those in any other research reports. But in an action research report, special attention needs to be paid to audience, voice, mode of reporting and action plan. To action plan, one chapter (Chapter 9) is devoted. The action plan is “the direct result of the inquiry” (p. 220). Since the purpose of doing action research is to improve practice, the action plan is a must following the inquiry; at the same time, it “serves the purpose of continuing the inquiry” (p. 221), making action research a recursive process.

Since the book is designed for use by graduate students, professors and professional development trainers, it is written in the form of a textbook, with each chapter beginning with a statement of learning objectives, making it easy for readers to identify the focus of each chapter. And each chapter ends with a list of key terms, discussion questions, suggested topics and online activities for readers to review what is covered in the chapter and to practice essential skills in action research. Besides references, the book ends with a glossary and an index, making it easy for readers to understand the essentials of the action research and to search for relevant literature in action research.

But the book would have been better with some other information. For example, Chapter 6 is exclusively devoted to qualitative data, leaving the beginning reader with a false impression that action research is qualitative in nature. A short note about instrumentation for quantitative data might be better. It would also be desirable to include a section or a chapter about action research design, elaborating on participatory action research, collaborative action research, exploratory practice and case study.
The book is organized according to phases in action research, making it easy for readers to follow the thematic thread running through the whole book. Some useful websites are provided for readers to gain hands-on experience. But more editing efforts are in order, as there are some misspellings such as “though-provoking acts” (p. 43; bottom line). And in the last paragraph on page 101, “the researcher umbrella” might be “the research umbrella”. There is some ambiguous information. For example, the statement “Use of a Likert scale is a source of nonparametric data” (p. 109) is very confusing. Actually, use of a Likert scale is not inherently a source of nonparametric data, even though the use as exemplified in the book does produce nonparametric data. If the scale is formatted in this way: 

- disagree 1—2—3—4—5 agree, the numbers have numerical value and the data can be analyzed using a statistical procedure based on the mean.