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Book Review - Engaging in Action Research: A Practical Guide to Teacher-Conducted Research for Educators & School Leaders

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An On-line Journal for Teacher Research

Book review of *Engaging in Action Research: A Practical Guide to Teacher-Conducted Research for Educators and School Leaders*

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Parson, J., Hewson, K., Adrian, L., & Day N. (2013). *Engaging in action research: A practical guide to teacher-conducted research for educators and school leaders*. Alberta, Canada: Brush Education.

As might be expected, *Networks* regularly features reviews of books related to action research in educational settings. In a previous review (*Networks*, 15/1), Hartlep described *Voices from the Classroom* (Sargent, 2009) as a useful text for supporting educators interested in conducting action research, particularly teacher researchers who focus on improving classroom instruction. Hartlep suggested that the book might not have sufficient scholarly emphasis for those pursuing action research in order to contribute to scholarly literature.

In this review, I argue that Parson, Hewson, Adrian, and Day's *Engaging in Action Research: A Practical Guide to Teacher-Conducted Research for Educators and School Leaders* (2013) will appeal to a broader audience. Although the title suggests that the material is intended for school-based educators, the authors created a text that straddles both practitioner and academic worlds. In short, it provides a useful introduction to conducting action research in academic settings while simultaneously exploring the depth and complexity of the action research process. The text speaks to educators doing action research with the hope of contributing to a body of scholarly literature or as part of graduate program, yet it remains accessible to those who approach action research as a tool to improve instruction.

The authors intend *Engaging in Action Research* as a "brief, clear, and detailed look at how to complete your own self-directed site-based action research" (p. 5). To do so, they walk potential action researchers through the typical components of an action research project – from question development to literature review to methods and methodology to collecting and analyzing data to reporting findings. The step-by-step approach provides novice action research with a solid grounding in what action research is, how one might go about conducting it, and how to share the results.

The first two chapters set the stage for the rest of the book by demystifying the research process. Immediately, the oft-heard perspectives from teachers who generally define research as something that is done by outsiders or as failing to recognize the complexities of classroom are challenged as the authors show readers that, indeed, research is a conscientious and purposeful act of attempting to learn about something about teaching—placing classroom based action research squarely within the reach of all educators.

After assuring readers that an action research project is feasible, attainable, and most importantly useful, the remaining chapters take readers through the step-by-step processes of action research. Chapter 3 provides a basic overview of the essential components of an action research project and subsequent chapters provide depth and detail on how to develop and implement a successful action research project.

The authors provide information that allows readers to understand the primary purposes and action steps involved in each phase of an action research project without inundating readers with unnecessary details. Throughout the book the authors provide their audience with sufficient background to help readers determine what actions might be appropriate to their research interests, and the authors position teachers to work towards articulating nuanced and detailed descriptions of their data collection methods and analysis strategies.

The chapter on designing a research study is a good example. The authors provide a brief yet sufficiently thorough description of various data collection techniques commonly used by action researchers (e.g., interviews, focus groups, surveys, observation, document analysis) and describe when those techniques might be used. This chapter moves quickly as it avoids bogged down and drawn out discussions on details such as the appropriate number of options for a Likert scale survey, detailed suggestions for facilitating focus group interviews, or the nuances of crafting observational protocols.

Although the book maintains a balance throughout, the literature review chapter privileges traditional academic criteria for reviews including a focus on depth and breadth. An important step in designing an action research project is being familiar with literature and research relevant to your question. However, Parson and his colleagues may place too much emphasis the literature review when practitioners may be primarily concerned about conducting action research to improve their own classroom instruction. Educators are often most interested in the “action” dimension of action research and should not be intimidated by the authors’ recommendations or be swayed to conduct such a thorough literature review before developing a personally and professionally meaningful and valid action research project.

The final chapter focuses on the importance of pacing and serves as an appropriate bookend to the opening chapters that assure readers that an action research project is well within their reach. Useful suggestions on staying organized, maintaining energy and enthusiasm, writing throughout the journey, and drawing upon networks of supportive colleagues are shared - reminding the reader that, yes indeed, they can do this.

Parson and his colleagues have written a book that functions well as an introduction to action research for educators. Professionals who engage in action research will likely need additional resources and guidance on the specific data collection and analysis techniques that they choose for their projects. Hubbard and Power’s *The Art of Classroom Inquiry* (2003) or Lankshear and Knobel’s *A Handbook for Teacher Research* (2004) would be excellent companion texts that

could provide direction and depth on these topics. Overall, educators would be served well by reading *Engaging in Action Research* (Parson, 2013) as a primer to and overview of the action research process. In less than 150 pages the authors manage to provide a step-by-step guide through all of the essential components of a successful action research project. Their approach is accessible and appropriate for a wide range of educators, including teachers who are conducting research to improve their practice, conducting research as a part of a graduate program, or striving to contribute to the scholarly research in their field.

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