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One Slice at a Time: A Book Review of *A Toolkit for Action Research*

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Alber, S.M. (2011). *A toolkit for action research*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

The foundation of research is the collection and analysis of data. Graduate students spend countless hours learning the ontology and epistemology of their chosen methodology. But, what about teachers who want to be more systematic with researching their own teaching practice and students but have limited time and resources? Many teachers choose to complete action research projects in their classrooms, but most textbooks only devote a short chapter to both the collection and analysis of data. In my experience, the discussions in these textbooks tend to be too short without enough models or templates to guide teacher-researchers through what can be an overwhelming amount of information. Susan M. Alber's *A Toolkit for Action Research* fills the gap with this short, practical book containing literally hundreds of frames, tools and templates to steer researchers through an action research project.

There are five sections to the book, corresponding to the sections or chapters of a typical research project and write-up: 1) Setting the stage – purpose and research question 2) Review of literature 3) Methodology – implementation of project and data collection 4) Data analysis and display 5) Discussion, implications and conclusion. Since this is a toolkit, not a textbook, the explanations in each section are truncated and uncomplicated; but the strength of the book is the fill-in-the-blank frames, forms and templates. As an instructor for pre-service and in-service teachers using action research, I have found these forms to be priceless –

clear, concise and a huge time-saver. Many of the frames resembled ones I had created myself, before I discovered this book.

The first section of the book provide multiple frames to find and narrow the research topic, create a researchable question, and prepare to write a rationale for the study. The early frames include multiple questions about a teacher's own practice, professional growth, interests and themes in their teaching. The rest of the frames are various graphic organizers to develop and evaluate a researchable question and organize the content and rationale/purpose of the study.

The review of literature provides support for and understanding of the context of the study while shaping the methodology for the study. Alber's frames in section two help the researcher identify key concepts and words to investigate while providing a model for note taking and citation collection. The frames highlight the need for both an historical and current view of related research and the development of a theoretical perspective for the study. Toward the end of the section, Alber provides an example of organizing the review of literature through an outline and a mind map, along with a checklist for ethical evaluation of the literature review.

In my experience, the methodology of a study – how to plan for a study and systematically collect and record data – is the area many novice teacher-

researchers struggle with. Almost half of the tools provided in the book are dedicated to the methodology of a study. Beginning with frames to create thick descriptions of the setting, Alber also provides multiple ways to plan a study with key actions and documentation highlighted. Being an ethical and principled researcher is emphasized through two checklists – one for planning and data collection and another for informed consent and researcher bias. Both checklists are based on guidelines from the American Psychological Association and the American Educational Research Association. After the frames, Alber includes twenty-one data collection tools and forms such as interview protocols; research journals and field notes; time and event sampling; and running records and retellings. When collecting data, I have found that many teacher-researchers grapple with creating strong forced choice or Likert-type surveys. The discussion, templates and checklist for this type of data collection will help the surveys focus on the research question and generate useful data.

Analysis and interpretation give meaning to data and there are seventeen frames to assist teacher-researchers in making meaning from data in section four. The first ten frames sort data – by time, skills, themes, artifacts or powerful narratives. The next seven frames provide ways to interpret data including conversational and discourse analysis, word counts, length of utterances, theory generation, and handling of pre and post test scores. The second half of the chapter examines how to display data. There is a useful discussion of how to use different types of tables, charts, and graphic organizers to best illustrate an argument. The chapter closes with another ethical checklist.

Unfortunately, the discussion, implementation, and conclusion section is quite short with only three frames – an outline, ethics checklist, and editing checklist. In future editions, I hope the author expands this section as I have found that this is where the greatest learning happens – that is teacher-researchers articulate how the study has impacted their practice and how their view of teaching and learning has changed through the process.

I would strongly recommend this toolkit as a complementary text to more traditional action researcher textbooks like *The Art of Classroom Inquiry* (Hubbard & Power, 2003), which is my favorite, or *Teachers Taking Action* (Lassonde & Israel, 2008 – see review in [Networks, Vol. 12, Issue 2](#)). By eating the pizza one slice at a time (Alber's own metaphor), a typically overwhelming research study is broken down into easily accomplished steps with clear templates and examples. Two important, recurring themes through the book are a focus on the research question(s) and ethical responsibility in research. For teacher-researchers who think, "How am I ever going to accomplish this project?" Alber's accurate response is, "One bite at a time."

References

- Hubbard, RS, & Power, BM (2003). *The art of classroom inquiry: A handbook for teacher-researchers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishing.
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