



Using Action Research to Improve Instruction

By John E. Henning, Jody M. Stone, and James L. Kelly; Routledge: New York, NY (2009)

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The idea that teachers can ask scholarly questions about teaching and learning, and test hypotheses that answer these questions through research with their own students, has been a rich part of scholarly teaching for decades. A Google™ search for classroom action research results in more than 21,000 hits and ERIC lists more than 5000 articles and 26 books. So—what does this newest contribution to an extensive knowledge base have to offer?

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the book is reflected by its subtitle: “An Interactive Guide for Teachers.” Nearly every one of the 204 pages has one or more “Reflection” boxes. Each reflection engages the reader to pause, contemplate a question or example that relates to what has just been read, and to write an answer, perhaps in the provided space. Many of the questions are open-ended invitations to apply an idea from the text to a question or research plan of interest to the reader. Others provide the opportunity to interpret example data. Either way, the reader cannot help but be engaged in thinking rather than just reading, even if only reading through these boxes without taking the time to write out answers. Knowing that these prompts exist in the book means that the interested educator can return for more dedicated time in the future. And, yes, the answers (except for the most open-ended cases) are provided in the back of the book.

The authors, all on the education faculty at the University of Northern Iowa, wrote the book for an audience of K-12 teachers. However, higher-education instructors should not dismay. While some of the example research questions in the book are off target for the college classroom, the general principles are similar. Therefore, the book has much to offer for any teacher looking to use action research to make a scholarly assessment of learning. It is, however, more likely that college and university faculty would undertake action research as part of the scholarship of teaching and learning and may seek to publish their results. For such a reader, it is a case of user beware, because Henning and colleagues do not address institutional research board requirements.

All ten chapters are organized around repeated practice of a four-step practice in action research: plan, collect data, analyze, and reflect. The chapters are organized into five parts: an introduction to and planning for action research, techniques for observing students and teachers, quantitative and qualitative methods for gathering data and perceptions, approaches to analyzing standardized test and pre/post test data of learning gains, and communicating action-research results. Each chapter employs the plan/collect/analyze/reflect motif to guide understanding of how the content of the chapter applies to questions of interest to the reader.

Although there is an example action-research report in an appendix, the book provides very little insight into what action research “looks like.” The authors have done a very good job of outlining the steps and methods and the unique engagement of the reader through the Reflection boxes could certainly launch the curious educator into an action research project. However, I came away thinking that a newcomer to action research would strongly benefit from an annotated list of published examples. The two-page references-cited listing is not really adequate for giving the novice action researcher a clear pathway of next steps.

Overall, I found *Using Action Research to Improve Instruction* to be an effective introduction to this important scholarly activity. The interactive style of the book should be modeled by other authors. Few books succeed in providing “everything” that a diverse group of readers would want and I find this one somewhat lacking in examples, citations to follow up on, and slightly less appropriate for college instructors than the intended K-12 audience. Nonetheless, educators at all levels should find this book to be a stimulating introduction to asking, and answering, questions to make teaching, truly, a scholarly activity.