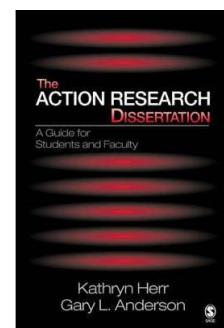


Book Review
***The Action Research Dissertation:
A Guide for Students and Faculty***

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Herr, K., & Anderson, G. *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty*. California, United States, SAGE, 2005. ISBN 0-7619-29916. 157 pages.

This book written by Kathryn Herr and Gary L. Anderson, presents a roadmap that acknowledges and gives credit to the complexity of action research. Kathryn Herr is a member of the faculty in the College of Education and Human Services at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey and has a professional background in social work and education. Gary L. Anderson belongs to the faculty of the Department of Administration, Leadership, and Technology in the Steinhardt School of Education, New York University and has done research on the field of educational leadership. Together, they have competently produced a thoughtful, broad, inclusive, and much needed overview of the process of creating an action research dissertation that would benefit not just students but their professors as well.

The authors tried to provide a definition to this emerging research method. In doing so, the authors traced the history of how this particular kind of research came about. Various studies that utilized this method were presented and their differences and similarities explored.

The authors also presented the dangers and shortcomings this research method possesses. Also emphasized were the challenges that a researcher will encounter in the conduct of one's research. Because action research dissertations are not the same as dissertations of a traditional nature, students and their committees need to be prepared for the unique dilemmas they may encounter.

Doctoral researchers are asked to deeply look not only at their own multiple positions and identities, but also those of the research collaborators. Named for what they are: political decisions with power dimensions that must be sorted out, worked through and articulated by the researcher, these difficult but necessary choice points of potentially life-changing knowledge creation are drawn out and identified. Furthermore, they took pains in pointing out the ways pitfalls such as intersecting multiple positions that bring conflicting allegiances or alliances or blind spots from unexamined beliefs could be avoided.

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A laudable aspect of this book is the effort the authors exerted in referring readers to dissertations that might serve as exemplars. It is indeed a good way to prepare to write an action research dissertation by going through papers of the same nature.

The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty fills an important gap in the action research literature by specifically addressing the growing practice of action research in master's studies and doctoral dissertations in colleges and universities throughout the world.

Content

The book has eight chapters.

Chapter 1 (Introduction: What is an Action Research Dissertation?) presents the differences between an action research dissertation and standard social science researches. While it shares certain similarities with traditional dissertations, it is different in that research participants themselves are either in control of the research or are participants in the design and its methodology. Indeed, it is fairly new and unique.

Of particular interest is the fact that it shifts its locus of control in different degrees from professional or academic researchers to those who have been traditionally called the subjects of research. It is further pointed out that action research is a cover term for several approaches, each with their own strand, and has emerged from various traditions.

Action research dissertations represent an important source of records and citations of action research studies as well as knowledge and information about various social practices.

Chapter 2 (Action Research Traditions and Knowledge Interests) traces the evolution of the various facets of action research and provides a background to situate how a particular thinking came about. It points out the fact that there may be as much variation across action research traditions as there is between action research and some mainstream approaches to research.

The various action research traditions given particular attention are as follows: Action Research and Organizational Development/Learning; Action Science; Participatory Research; Participatory Evaluation; Action Research in Education; The Teacher-as-Researcher Movement in Britain; The Practitioner Research Movement in North America; and Action Research as Self-Study and Autoethnography.

Also mentioned are the emerging approaches in the field of action research. These various perspectives are presented to provide guidance on what is the appropriate approach to the context of particular study. Moreover, the authors try to provide some sense of how these traditions relate to each other and where students and faculty can go for more extensive accounts.

Chapter 3 (The Continuum of Positionality in Action Research) discusses the various positionality, from an insider to outsider to the situation and the ensuing complexities faced by the researcher. A lot of concern is raised about the issues of relationship between the two, since transparency about them is vital in the assessment of issues of research validity as well as research ethics.

How researchers position themselves determines how they frame epistemological, methodological, and ethical issues in the dissertation. Aside from being either an insider or outsider, various collaboration arrangements are discussed to provide clarity to the issue. It also gives a clear illumination on the flaws of being an “outsider within stance” taken by the researcher. A clear discussion is presented so that researchers can avoid the pitfalls this stance presents. The authors do not in any way recommend any particular positionality as an ideal though.

The quality criteria essential to the conduct of an action research are discussed in Chapter 4 (Quality Criteria for Action Research: An Ongoing Conversation). Different sets of criteria are presented and their overlaps and differences pointed out. Among those suggested, as terms to describe criteria for good action research are quality, goodness, validity, trustworthiness, credibility, and workability.

The authors also note that positivists have tended to prefer validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) and naturalistic researchers have preferred trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, they opine that neither term is sufficient for action research because its action-oriented outcomes are not recognized. As such, the authors have chosen to use validity with qualifying adjectives, for reasons discussed at length in the chapter.

Towards this end, the authors have put forward the fact that the terminology one chooses to describe the methodology of a dissertation is ultimately a political choice, as it will depend on the extent to which a dissertation committee must approve the research.

Chapter 5 (Designing the Plane While Flying it: Proposing and Doing the Dissertation) proceeds to present issues of design and methodology.

From literature review to dissertation writing and defense, the authors provide aspects and elements researchers should consider making sure that the study would be able to withstand thorough and rigorous examination. It is acknowledged that good research has standards to live up to. That it should deal with issues of importance and try to find answers to vital questions pertinent to the issue; that it requires participation in a larger discussion about the issue; that a sound methodological approach with appropriate forms of validity be used in the conduct of study; and that it should provide some kind of evidence for inferences, draw implications, and make recommendations for future study and practice.

With this in mind, the authors posit that action research can also move beyond the standard stated above and will, ideally, intersect with one's own growth areas and principles and beliefs.

Chapter 6 (What Does an Action Research Dissertation Look Like?) provides an in-depth look at dissertations to show how researchers came out with their papers. Though dissertations vary widely in terms of content, style and organization, the chapter talked about how a paper was crafted out of a collaborative research effort.

In particular, two participatory action research (PAR) dissertations and one insider action research dissertation in progress were examined. The intent is to demonstrate how useful it is to see how others who have written action research dissertations have gone about their decision-making process. While these studies are very different dissertations and regard

very different research context, they all fit within action research's general precept. These studies fed back the knowledge they have gained into the setting under consideration and contributed to conversations taking place in the field of study.

Chapter 7 (Action Research, Ethics and the Institutional Review Board), presents ethical issues that must be kept in sight by the researcher and the role institutions play in its conduct.

From the design to the actual implementation of the proposal to the description and distribution of the data, ethical issues enter into every phase of an action research dissertation. In planning the research, it is best that doctoral students expect and think of likely challenges their participants might face in the research process and work to reduce any risks that potentially come with being a participant. It notes though that there is no fail-safe plan to avoid ethical dilemmas as the research develops. This is due to the fact that action research is a dynamic, evolving practice. It is suggested that it may be more important to have the ability to identify an ethical issue when it occurs so that it can be taken into consideration. The work, then, is not to anticipate every possible ethical challenge as much as to agree to take them up as they come about.

In Chapter 8 (Final Thoughts), the authors caution that action research dissertation is not for everyone. It is not for those who have low patience for vagueness and uncertainty. The authors suggest that researchers first do a "trying on" of the methodology, before making a decision. Should one pursue an action research dissertation, it is worth remembering that there may or may not be a happy ending, a so-called "successful change effort" to record. One's ultimate goal as a researcher is to document the records of working to gain understanding and initiate change in the context of study.

Finally, the authors encourage researchers to publish their works for the greater good.

Conclusion

This book provides very helpful insights on how to structure, carry out and present action research. By specifically addressing the growing practice of action research in graduate studies and doctoral dissertations in the academe, this book filled an important gap in the action research literature. It presents a wide and unhindered overview of the many faces of action research.

It is a tremendously useful resource for students and faculty with its discussion of the underlying choices from different perspectives that action researchers operating in a university degree program need to make and how such choices affect the quality of an action research project. It illustrated how action research is applicable for a dissertation and at the same time a deeply rewarding experience for both the researcher and participants. It helped students understand the various ways it differs from traditional studies and showed the unique dilemmas the students and their committees may face, such as validity, positionality, design, write-up, ethics, and defense of the dissertation.

It is an essential resource that speaks directly to doctoral students who embrace an action research paradigm; an articulate framework to understand different approaches to PAR, concrete examples from other students who have "done it," and practical advice, e.g.

dealing with dissertation committees, are sharp tools necessary in crafting a study especially with action research as the methodological focus.

This book indeed is for any researcher intent on embarking on an action research project in their own organization, and all students of organization studies, education, health studies, and community studies. It makes available informative, detailed, and well-organized resource that could guide one through the process of reflective inquiry. It sets doctoral researchers on their own search for meaning, clarity and coherence by creating venues for deep discussion.

By presenting relevant examples and clear analyses of its challenges, the authors have successfully shown the way through the arduous but equally worthwhile process of how to plan, execute and conclude an action research dissertation.

However, it should be noted that though highly useful, deciding on whether to conduct a participatory action research should not be taken lightly. It would pose a huge challenge, as competent advisers in this field are few.

References

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