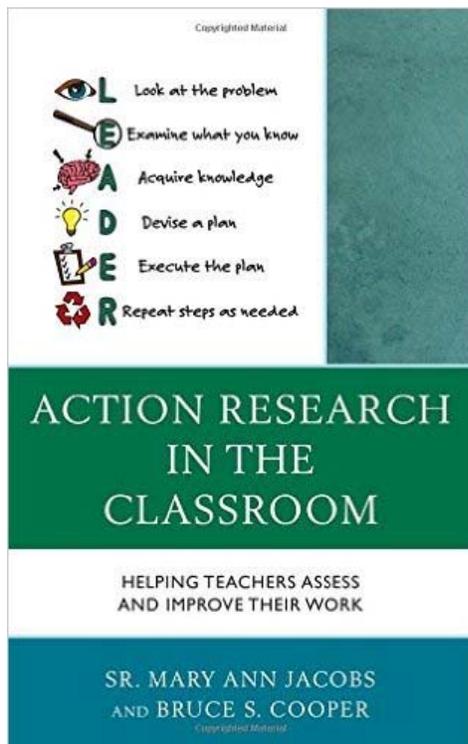


Book Review

Using Data to Improve Educational Practice

“Action Research in the Classroom: Helping Teachers Assess and Improve their Work” by Sr. Mary Ann Jacobs and Bruce S. Cooper

By Matthijs Koopmans



There are many ways in which research can contribute to the improvement of educational practice, and action research is one of them. Action research bridges the gap that typically separates research from practice by having practitioners conduct specific projects to address their own questions and improve their effectiveness based on the answers they obtain. One of the advantages of this type of research is that results are often immediately accessible and have actionable implications. Thus, action

research is a good tool for making improvements to the field based on evidence.

The appeal of action research has not passed unnoticed, and several good texts are currently on the market to explain the rationale and basics of conducting action research, focusing on a variety of environments such as schools, healthcare organizations, and for-profit settings. Where this book differs from the others is that both its tone and substance are targeted at school teachers. In one of the opening chapters, the book duly expresses its empathy with the challenges of that profession, and many examples are provided throughout the book about how action research might help address them. Examples of some of the topics are classroom management, effective strategies for organizing learning content, exam preparation, student note taking, and the evaluation of student work. The book also contains many tips and advice about how to carry out an action research project, from the development of proposals to the dissemination of findings, and everything in-between. In that way, the book represents a constructive attempt to empower teachers to build a stronger empirical basis for their decisions about instruction and student assessment.

The authors present a model called L.E.A.D.E.R. The acronym stands for: Looking at a problem, Examine what you know, Acquire knowledge, Device a plan, Execute the plan, and

Repeat steps as needed. The main body of the text presents an outline of this model, and one full chapter is devoted to each of these six steps (Chapters 5-10). While the nomenclature is different here, this cycle is essentially similar to what has been discussed elsewhere in terms of the necessary steps of conducting action research. The starting point of such studies is typically the encounter of a problem on the ground, and the endpoint is that practitioners learn from the data they collected, and repeat the cycle to deal with issues that remain unaddressed, thus allowing for ongoing formative research to improve practice. The book offers vivid examples of how this process might work, including snapshots of student work, an example of a research proposal, a screenshot of an ongoing literature search, as well as an itemized formal planning process. All examples are fully contextualized into educational policy and classroom practice, thereby leaving aspiring practitioners with a good sense of what it entails from a logistic standpoint to conduct this type of research.

While the steps described above are helpful in the planning and execution of an action research study, they do not necessarily guarantee its success. There are many ways in which action research differs from conventional research, but one of the essential commonalities is that to be of any use, it needs an explicitly formulated methodology to keep at bay such things as the selective use of results, uncorroborated claims, non-replicable findings, social desirability and other inauthentic data, lack of representativeness of people and settings, spurious causal relationships, unreliable instrumentation, invalid measurements, a choice of competing explanations of extant findings, et cetera. Research loses its value if there are problems in those areas. However, instead of providing a methodological framework for designing one's own study, this book merely

provides one for the evaluation of research done by others, a concern that would be tangential to most practitioners. There is very limited or no coverage of such capabilities as how to characterize a distribution of quantitative findings, formulating good research questions or hypotheses (the "questions ... [that] can help the researcher in formulating the research questions" on page 69 are not particularly helpful), instrumentation (surveys, observation protocols), or addressing the generalizability of findings across classrooms. Aspiring action researchers need support developing such skills, and the absence of a methodological discussion is therefore a remarkable shortcoming of this book, requiring a supplementary text for remediation.

"Action Research in the Classroom: Helping Teachers Assess and Improve their Work." By Sr. Mary Ann Jacobs and Bruce S. Cooper. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4758-2094-2

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About the Reviewer

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