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Book Review--Action Research: Improving schools and empowering educators (3rd ed.)

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Book Review

Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators, (3rd ed.)

Craig A. Mertler

Sage Publications, 2012

Reviewed by: Heather Lattimer, EdD

University of San Diego

As a university faculty member who teaches courses on action research to aspiring teachers and master's degree candidates, I was excited to discover an advanced copy of Dr. Craig Mertler's text, *Action research: Improving schools and empowering educators*, in my mailbox last spring. Now in its 3rd edition, *Action research* is one of the most widely read texts on action research and is especially popular in university-based courses. I had tried a number of different texts with my students in previous years, each with strengths and weaknesses. I was still searching for the "perfect" text and hoped that Dr. Mertler's work might provide some solutions.

Intended primarily for a graduate school audience, *Action research*, maintains an instructional tone throughout. Each chapter begins with a graphic organizer that lays out the chapter's contents, contains numerous examples, includes charts and graphs designed to clarify understanding, and concludes with questions and activities that support application and discussion within the context of a university course. The text is organized sequentially, like an action research study. Using questions to guide the reader through the material, the text begins with chapters that define and contextualize action research within the field of educational research in Part I – "What is action research?" The second section, Part II – "How do I begin my action research study?" addresses planning for action research and developing a research plan. Part III – "What do I do with all these data?" describes the process of collecting and analyzing data. The final section, Part IV – "I've got results!... Now what?" discusses developing an action plan, sharing and reflecting on the process of action research, and writing up results.

Throughout the text, there are a number of features that make the material particularly useful to graduate students and their instructors. In addition to the numerous examples of action research studies and data collection instruments embedded in the chapters, there are two narrative examples of action research, titled "Action research portraits," that develop alongside the discussion of action research processes in parts two through four. These studies, one conducted by an individual teacher and the other conducted by a team of teachers, help to provide insights into how the concepts discussed in the chapter could be applied in the field. These samples are further supplemented by a full-length action research report in the appendix and even more examples of action research in the book's accompanying website (<http://www.sageub.com/mertler3study>). On-line materials also include video-vignettes of the author and several practitioner researchers discussing action research, power-point presentations that highlight

content from the text, self-quizzes to allow students to independently assess their understanding, access to relevant research articles from SAGE's database, and links to useful databases. As an instructor who is sometimes challenged to support graduate students in navigating the conventions of research within a university context, I was particularly struck by the potential usefulness of the discussion of ethical considerations and the IRB approval process in chapter four (complete with sample consent and assent letters) and the targeted discussion of academic writing expectations in chapter nine. These resources are succinct, clear, and would be very useful to students engaged in action research as part of degree program.

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Unlike many texts on action research that primarily focus on qualitative research methodologies, *Action research* gives equal weight to quantitative approaches. This emphasis reflects Dr. Mertler's background as a quantitative researcher and adds greater texture and variation to the methodological approaches that are offered to readers. The chapters on developing a research plan, collecting data, and analyzing data each highlight quantitative as well as qualitative research approaches. In addition, many of the narrative examples, including both of the "Action research portraits" include quantitative data collection and analysis samples. I found the discussion of quantitative data collection techniques and the numerous examples of surveys, questionnaires, rating scales, and observation checklists particularly helpful as they demonstrated appropriate strategies for adapting approaches to the specific needs of K-12 classroom contexts. There were several areas where the text utilized fairly technical references, such as the Kuder-Richardson formula 21 in the discussion of validity and reliability and t-tests and chi-squares in the discussion of inferential statistics in the data analysis chapter. Although efforts are made to make this information relevant and understandable for the reader, it is questionable whether a teacher researcher without previous quantitative research experience would be able to fully utilize these approaches based solely on this text.

An additional limitation of this text is the limited use of primary voices. Although many useful examples are included in *Action research*, these examples are nearly all written in third person. We have very little opportunity to get inside the teacher-researcher's head to uncover the decision making processes, the dilemmas that are encountered in designing and implementing an action research study, and the reflection that should take place as a practitioner-researcher on the learning that results from engaging in this work and the implications for future teaching and research. Indeed, much of the chapter on "Sharing and reflecting" focuses on communicating the results of the investigation with a range of local, academic, and professional audiences, with only a single paragraph discussing the act of professional reflection. Additionally, I'd like to hear more from the students who are the subjects of the research on the impact that this process had on their learning and their interaction with the teacher. Action research offers the opportunity for

practitioners to engage with their students or clients as co-researchers, involving them in the inquiry process and thereby shifting the power dynamic and presenting new lenses through which to interact. My graduate students frequently report that this is one of the most powerful aspects of action research, yet this relational dynamic is largely absent from this text.

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Of greater concern in considering the use of this text with novice teacher researchers is that, although there is a significant amount of discussion of the importance of reflection thought the entire research process in the narrative portions of the text, many of the examples, and indeed the structure of the chapters themselves, do not demonstrate the recursive nature of action research. In his chapter

introducing the concept and structure of action research, Mertler shares multiple models of action research that prioritize the recursive construct including Stringer's interacting spiral (2007), Riel's progressive problem solving approach (2007), and Piggot-Irvine's spiraling action research model (2006). He goes on to cite Johnson (2008), in noting that a common characteristic across models is that "action research is a recursive, cyclical process that typically does not proceed in a linear fashion" (p. 17). However, the cyclical process is absent in many of the examples, most of which describe only one round of implementation and data collection. For example, in one of the first examples in the text, a research team of high school teachers decides to teach history using an experimental "backward" model to half of the groups of students while the other students follow the traditional chronological approach. At the end of the year, students are tested and data is analyzed. The teachers in the example then use this information to advocate for a general policy around history instruction. Although this is certainly a demonstration of teacher research, it does not appear to demonstrate the cyclical elements of multiple phases of implementation, data collection, reflection, and revision that characterize action research. Similar concerns are relevant in considering the overall structure of the text, which does not include a chapter on revising implementation plans in the midst of the research process. Indeed, in the chapter on developing an action plan, the plans that are developed could be characterized more as outcomes rather than as part of an on-going research process.

Although it is hard in any text, which are, by their very nature, linear in structure, to capture the cyclical process of action research, this text makes only limited attempts to demonstrate recursive design. As an instructor, I've found that this is one of the most difficult aspects of action research to teach to novice teacher researchers, many of whom come with a strongly held but very narrow vision of what research means. Because of this, it is critical that the texts that we use in class repeatedly demonstrate a cyclical approach. Although I found many positive elements in Mertler's text and would use it as a supplementary resource for some aspects of our

coursework and discussions, it is unlikely that I will adopt it as the primary text for the novice teacher researchers in my graduate educational research courses.

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Lattimer bio:

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