Review:

Sunil Khanna

Jean McNiff & Jack Whitehead (2006). All You Need to Know About Action Research. London: Sage, 274 pages, ISBN 1-4129-0806-X (pbk), £19.99

Abstract: This book serves as a comprehensive guide to action research. It provides useful information on how to undertake an action research project, write reports and disseminate research findings. Specifically, it explains how to identify a research question, map out an action plan, use appropriate methodologies and generate evidence from the data to test findings against the most stringent critiques. In doing so, the book provides justification for action research and its potential scholarly benefits. The book achieves most of the objectives set out by the authors in the introductory section. The strength of the book is reflected in the authors' skillful organization of key concepts in a manner that follows a logical order. Chapters, sections, and subsections respond to questions posed at the beginning of each section. The use of examples and case studies is especially helpful in educating researchers about all aspects associated with "doing action research." The book is written more for a practitioner-scholar than for scholar-practitioner. However, the book only marginally succeeds in contextualizing action research in the larger theoretical and interdisciplinary discourse.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

To review Jean McNIFF and Jack WHITEHEAD's book, *All You Need to Know about Action Research* was both gratifying and somewhat unnerving. I was delighted at the opportunity to express my views on a book written by two of the most prolific and well known contributors to action research. My excitement, however, was tempered by my realization of the enormity of the task I had undertaken. I am keenly aware that there is so much that has already been written about action research, especially about the methods and methodologies of action research, its theoretical underpinnings, and the relationship between action research and qualitative inquiry. Action research is an important multidisciplinary form of inquiry aimed at improving practice. Action research can be used for (a) generating questions, models, and make recommendations for improvement; (b) assessment; (c) testing existing or new hypotheses, models, and methods; and (d) contributing to theoretical development. Action research generally involves collection of data/evidence through the use of traditional

research approaches such as ethnography, community descriptive studies and key informant interviews. Considerable work has already been done on action research as a method of inquiry and its application to academic and applied areas (ARGYRIS & SCHÖN, 1978; WHYTE, 1991; CHERRY, 1999; GRBICH, 1999; REASON & BRADBURY, 2001). [1]

Jean McNIFF and Jack WHITEHEAD have been instrumental in the development of our understanding of action research and its applications. Earlier works by the two authors not only focus on the fundaments of action research, but also on its applicability to social research and educational theory and practice (McNIFF & WHITEHEAD, 2000, 2002, 2005). The book under review is yet another significant contribution by McNIFF and WHITEHEAD to action research. The book serves as a comprehensive guide to action research and provides information on how to undertake an action research project, write reports and disseminate research findings (McNIFF & WHITEHEAD, 2006, p.1). It explains how to identify a research question, map out an action plan, use appropriate methodologies and generate evidence from the data to test findings against the most stringent critiques. In doing so, the book provides justification for action research and highlights its potential benefits for practitioners of action research. [2]

2. Organization and Content

The book has twenty-five chapters organized into seven parts. The organization of the book follows a logical order—defining action research (Part I), how to conduct action research (Parts II-V), the significance of action research (Part VI), and its potential global influence (Part VII). Each part is further divided into chapters. [3]

The book is written for practitioners who are considering action research and/or already involved in action research. Readers will find easy-to-understand information in the book. Part I of the book has four chapters mostly devoted to conceptual background and theoretical paradigms commonly associated with action research. Part II has four chapters focusing on the role of action research in evaluation and its contribution to social theory. Chapters in parts III, IV, and V are more technical in nature. They focus on topics such as feasibility planning, doing action research, monitoring practice, validation and reproducibility. These chapters are useful for practitioners in the field in deciding what information about their research projects is important to document. Information presented in the chapters is well supplemented with examples. Chapters in parts VI and VII focus on writing and publishing reports and the potential of action research. The authors' approach is demonstrative of a growing trend of interdisciplinary action research. It reinforces the importance of looking beyond the limits inherent in a conventional disciplinary inquiry toward goal-directed action research. [4]

The authors emphasize that "… action research is an integrated practice, comprising of multiple practices, all of which contribute to everything else, so it is important to see the holistic connections and their potentials for generating further connections" (p.2). They note that this book is part of their own action

research aimed at encouraging "… practitioners to believe in themselves as they produce their descriptions and explanations of practice and produce accounts that will contribute to new learning" (p.4). The authors further note that:

> "We authors are writing this book using a different one than the one we use in our scholarly articles, which are written for a different audience. We are deliberately positioning ourselves as practitioners-researchers, and using the language of practitioner-researchers. This does not mean that we are avoiding scholarly issues—indeed, this book has dealt throughout with scholarly issues—but we are using a form of expression that is more appropriate for the community of practitioner-scholars than for the community of scholar-practitioners" (p.188). [5]

The above quotes define the purpose of the book and the intent of the writing style. However, the reader has to read through almost the entire book to learn about the justification for the writing style used in the book. [6]

In parts I and II (Chapters 1-8), the authors define action research and elaborate upon its significance not only for improving practice but also for contributing to theory. These chapters set the stage for the entire text highlighting the rationale and significance of action research. It is clear that the book is intended to lead a practitioner-scholar through all the stages of action research—from planning an action research project, conducting action research, and to using action research for evaluation. Chapter 1 begins by defining action research and discusses the action-reflection cycle. The authors advocate an understanding of the ontological perspective and boundaries as essential to developing different perspectives in action research. [7]

Chapter 2 focuses on the action researcher. It defines a practitioner in the context of SCHÖN's (1995) typology of professional landscapes, labeling academics as the occupiers of high ground engaged in producing conceptual theory and practitioners as occupying the swampy lowlands involved in everyday practices. The chapter makes a strong but brief case for the importance of practitioner knowledge. Chapter 3 describes the underpinnings assumptions associated with action research in a simple and straightforward manner. The chapter focuses on ontological and methodological assumptions commonly associated with action research. The narrative emphasizes that action research is value laden, morally committed, goal-directed, reflexive and relational. Chapter 4 provides an historical overview of the conceptual development of action research in the 1930s and 1940s to its current position in academic and practice-related research. In doing so, it helps researchers locate action research within different methodological and epistemological developments across academic disciplines. [8]

Chapter 5, the beginning of Part II, expands upon the information presented in Chapter 2 to further justify the rationale for action research. In this important chapter, the authors urge action researchers to see themselves as both practitioners and theorists. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on action researchers as practitioners and as theorists, respectively. This section ends with a proposal for new scholarship of educational inquiry for the advancement of practice. The

proposal strongly advocates for the inclusion of all practitioners who are involved in educational and development work. [9]

In parts III and IV (Chapters 9-18), the authors provide a step-by-step guide to conducting action research. In these sections, the authors discuss feasibility planning, action planning, doing action research and data collection procedures, including observation, written accounts, personal logs and diaries, questionnaires and interviews. The authors also discuss how to monitor. These issues are discussed primarily to focus on testing validity of action research. Each topic is discussed in details in a step-wise manner. For example, Chapter 9 discusses feasibility planning by emphasizing the need for a preliminary feasibility study to identify potential opportunities and constraints and to take stock of the needed resources for the proposed study. Subsequent chapters similarly provide relevant information in a readable and well organized manner on the above mentioned issues central to action research. In Chapter 10, the authors describe how to develop an action plan focusing on the starting points of an action inquiry and transforming these points into a series of questions. For example, the authors provide a list of questions that an action research should answer to link her/his feasibility study to the proposal action plan. The chapter ends with examples of expanded action plans. Chapter 11 focuses on topics discussed in previous chapters linking the starting points of an action inquiry with the actual carrying out of an action plan. Chapter tables highlight how research issues can be transformed into "How do I" action research questions. The following chapter (Chapter 12) provides two sample action research projects exemplifying steps—from feasibility study to developing action research questions—commonly associated with action research. The sample action research projects provide recommended frameworks as guidance. Chapters 13-15 focus on monitoring practice, collection, organization and storage of data, and, finally, turning data into evidence. These chapters in particular might be of interest to beginners in action research because they provide complex information on action research methods in an easily accessible manner. [10]

Part V (Chapters 16-18) deals with testing the validity and legitimacy of action research. The focus areas include implementing specific methodological procedures to ensure validity of data collection and inferences drawn and how to engage with the politics of knowledge. The authors do an excellent job in describing the validation process as it relates to action research. Chapter 18 focuses on strategies—understanding oppression and strategies for transfor-mation—to engage with the politics of knowledge, by making action researchers acutely aware of the importance of their research in shaping politics of knowledge. The authors discuss confrontation, negotiation, creative compliance and some of the strategies for engagement with the politics of knowledge. [11]

Chapter 19, "Telling Your Research Story," focuses on communicating results of action research to a wide and diverse audience. The authors expand upon HABERMAS' (1987) recommendations for effective communication. These include speaking comprehensively, truthfully, authentically and appropriately. Although the discussion is grounded in educational research, readers will find this chapter

especially useful on how to communicate their research to a wider audience. This topic is further elaborated in Chapter 22—Publishing and Disseminating Your Research; the focus in this chapter, however, is on forms of publication and contributions to knowledge bases. The authors discuss two knowledge bases, "… the traditional propositional one of those who still position themselves as professional elites, and the newer person-centered one of those how position themselves as practitioner-researcher" (p.220). Furthermore, the chapter provides detailed examples on how action research can make significant contributions to the merging of these two bases of knowledge. The examples are selected from the fields of education, communication and learning—specialty areas of the authors. The last two chapters in the book examine the role of practitioner-based action research in terms of developing new epistemologies and having potential global influence. The authors set out two specific goals for practitioner action researchers, "... to influence general thinking and the discourses through which that thinking is communicated and to influence policy formation and implementation that put in place the kinds of structures and process that support general thinking and discourses" (p.247). Finally, the chapters link the research process associated with action research to a step-wise understanding of the knowledge construction and policy formation. [12]

3. Evaluation

The book serves as a comprehensive guide to action research and to assist researchers in undertaking action research, write reports and disseminate their research findings. The book is not overburdened with theoretical jargon. It follows an engaging style using specific examples to highlight the salient aspects of action research. The narrative style—addressing the researcher as "you" — creates a personable narrative for readers. [13]

The book provides specific information on identifying a research question, mapping out an action plan, using appropriate methods and generating and testing conclusions drawn from the data collected. The strength of the book is reflected in the authors' skillful organization of key concepts in a manner that follows a logical order. Chapters, sections and subsections respond to questions posed at the beginning of each section. The use of examples and case studies is especially helpful in educating researchers about all aspects associated with "doing action research." The authors do an excellent job in providing extended examples of action research projects that demonstrate the concepts covered in the book. Undoubtedly, beginners and experienced action researchers will find this book useful. [14]

While the book achieves most of the objectives set out by the authors, at times it reads like a technical manual providing summary recommendations on how and why to conduct action research. Since the book is written for a practitioner-scholar than for scholar-practitioner, one can argue that topic-specific details needed to be sacrificed for clarity and brevity of the information. However, the authors are unable to clearly distinguish between the practitioner-scholar and scholar-practitioner. Their chosen criteria often appear arbitrary given the diverse

responsibilities held by professional and academics currently using action research. The authors themselves are acutely aware of this subjective categorization of professionals when they assert that practitioners have often been considered as "doers" involved in improving practice, but not as "thinkers" contributing to debates about theories of knowledge and policy. Such distinctions have often resulted in the exclusion of practitioners from policy making decisions and, conversely, dismissal of theory as irrelevant by practitioners. The authors further contend that such categorization is arbitrary at best and that action research and practice can lead to theory building. The book, however, only marginally succeeds in contextualizing action research in the larger theoretical and interdisciplinary discourse. In Chapter 7 (Part II), "Contributing to New Theory," the authors argue for the need to contribute to new theory and provide an overview of the new scholarship related to teaching and learning. The focus on the new scholarship in education is expected because both authors have expertise in this field. I feel, however, that the chapter does not adequately address even the key features of the so-called new scholarship. Similarly, the section entitled, "Theoretical Sustainability," provides a brief discussion of the recent theoretical currents, e.g., postmodernism, grounded theory (p.19). I have three problems with this section. Firstly, it is too brief to adequately discuss the complex theoretical currents such as grand theory and postmodernism. Secondly, in 2006, postmodernism, can hardly be called a "new theoretical movement." Finally, the book homogenizes descriptions of grand theory and postmodernism. Postmodernism can be described as a complex "condition" that marks a comprehensive critique of grand theory by employing varied techniques such as deconstruction and reflexivity. It represents diverse philosophical and disciplinary points of views. In response to the postmodernist critique of objectivity and detachment it would be useful for action researchers to consider their own position and that of their research and practice, not only during fieldwork, but also at the time of data analysis and report writing. Action researchers should be self-reflexive in order to understand the impact of underlying assumptions of one's motivations and training in research. They must be cognizant of the limitations posed by time and resources on their research. A noteworthy cornerstone of action research has been its attempt to remain open to many ideas and many points of view, representing several fields of inquiry, methods and methodologies. [15]

Action research is unique in the sense that it strives to bridge the gap between theory and practice among educators, policy makers, and professionals. Although, in many cases, such professional careers may overlap, action research has its strength nestled in its ability to bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the sciences and humanities with both rigor and passion, employing both method and interpretation (BROWN & JONES 2001). Action researchers employ methods based on the needs of topics and circumstances in the field, instead of needs based in disciplinary training and/or preferences. [16]

There is no doubt that action research has become a continuing preoccupation for the larger academic and practitioner communities. Herein rests the biggest challenge for action research—if, indeed, action research is to provide a model for practice and if, indeed, action researchers are committed to understanding

people's points of views and their everyday lived experiences, then action researchers will have to find replicable ways to build bridges across practice, theory and policy. The need to deepen the technical knowledge on action research must be comprehended in the context of its larger theoretical implications. While the book provides easily accessible knowledge about how to conduct action research, it does not provide a detailed discussion on the larger theoretical implications of action research. [17]

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Author

Sunil K. KHANNA is associate professor for anthropology. His academic training is in the fields of theoretical and applied anthropology. He is involved in research and intervention efforts aimed at reducing gender and ethnic disparities in health through improvements in access to and utilization of health services.

Contact:

Dr. Sunil K. Khanna

Department of Anthropology
Oregon State University
Corvallis, OR 97331
USA

Phone 001-541-737-3859

E-mail: skhanna@oregonstate.edu
URL:
http://oregonstate.edu/cla/anthropology/staff/khanna/

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