

Educational research primer

Anthony G. Picciano, 2004

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A notable trend in car design and production is ‘upsizing’. Successive editions of the same model of car become ever-so-slightly larger and more luxurious. For example, the latest Audi A6 model is now almost as sizeable as the (supposedly larger) A8, and even boasts a larger boot/trunk. The manufacturer’s idea behind this ‘upsizing’ is, presumably, to retain brand loyalty, as owners become more sophisticated (and wealthier). More recently, this ploy of ‘upsizing’ has led to the equally ingenious marketing tactic of ‘downsizing’—introducing a model that is smaller than the smallest existing model (and, at the same time, undercutting it in price). This bottom-of-the-size-pile model gets the beginning owner going, if you can excuse the pun (and onto, of course, the treadmill of ever-increasing size, and expense).

Publishers of textbooks on educational research methods appear to have caught on to this approach. As a well-known tome on research methods in education reaches its fourth edition of 414 pages, along comes a rival model of 150 pages (and costing about half as much). The question is, are hard-pressed research students going to go for the downsized model and, if they do, what do they get.

This ‘primer’ attempts to be an ‘accessible guide, designed as an introduction to educational research and statistics’ (back cover). Let’s take each part of this ambition in turn.

I certainly think this primer is accessible. One of the features that makes it so, and one of the features of the book that I like, is that it feels like a book written by a human being and that is about human beings (in my experience, not all books on educational

research methods come over in this way). For example, the introduction tells the story of how the book came about (a sensitive teacher of research methods trying to do a good job gets approached by publishing house). More significant, in terms of the subject matter of the book, is that each chapter begins with a story about some figure or other in educational research (including, for example, Gage, Piaget, Mead, etc). This adds greatly to the charm of the book and, I think, encourages the reader to delve deeper. Each chapter also contains well-constructed summaries of pertinent research papers that provide insight into what the researchers were trying to find out and how they went about this.

In terms of being an introduction to educational research and statistics, the book takes the approach of beginning with a chapter that provides an overview of the research process, followed by a chapter reviewing useful resources (such as online databases) and tools (such as tools for data collection, like questionnaires, and analysis, such as various computer packages). This is followed by chapters on qualitative methods (covering ethnographic, historical and case study research) and quantitative methods (dealing with descriptive studies, correlational, and causal comparative research). Further chapters address each of experimental studies, and action and evaluation research. A final chapter looks at writing up research. All this, in fact, takes just 100 pages. A further 36 pages are devoted to an appendix entitled 'A review of statistical procedures', enlivened by screen dumps from SPSS. The volume concludes with a glossary of terms and three pages of endnotes.

The book certainly lives up to its description as a primer. Less than two sides of a modest paperback on computer packages for analysis cannot do much more than say that such things exist. Similarly, devoting about four pages to the ethnographic method is not going to get anyone into the nature of hermeneutics. Yet the charm continues. The more time I spent with the book, the more I got to like it. This is the sort of book which, while recognizing that experimental research is frequently referred to as the 'gold standard', extols the virtues of quasi-experimental research as likely to be 'more practical to conduct in the field' (p. 74) (while acknowledging the less rigorous nature of such an approach). The inclusion of the appendix of statistical techniques also grew on me. At first, it struck me as an odd approach to adopt but, the more I made sure I referred to the book when thinking about research methods (and teaching such methods to students), the more I thought the combination of the appealing overview of research methods with this review of statistical methods might be just what beginning researchers are looking for.

This book is eminently approachable and readable, practical and helpful. The chapters are littered with useful tables summarizing key points in planning various approaches to research (for example, planning for historical research, planning for action research) and deciding approaches to sampling (such as sampling approach for evaluation research). The book cannot hope (and does not intend) to provide the sort of detail that larger works afford. Rather, the endnotes provide links to more detailed reading.

In an age of multiple-item ownership (one of my sons now has three bicycles all designed for different purposes—road, mountain, stunts), perhaps the age of the

single all-encompassing research methods tome is numbered. An alternative approach is now available—a readable and accessible primer to provide the sort of introductory overview that helps the beginning researcher make a start in identifying a suitable methodology, to be followed by more specialized texts giving the detailed insight into particular issues in adopting that methodological approach that is necessary for the best quality research. This primer is well worth checking out.

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