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# A Review of Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities

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## A Review of Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities

### **Abstract**

Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities by Lynn S. Norton provides a useful resource for those in higher education interested in using action research. Action research takes place when educational practitioners reflect on their approach to education and test pedagogical theories with research that is then presented for consideration within the institution and in the wider academic arena. After making a case for the use of action research as an important part of the scholarship of teaching and learning that should take place in higher education, the author discusses the steps for conducting action research— from identifying the problem to addressing quantitative and qualitative research approaches and publishing the results.

### **Keywords**

Action Research, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Higher Education

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***A Review of Action Research in Teaching and Learning:  
A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities***

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*Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities* by Lynn S. Norton provides a useful resource for those in higher education interested in using action research. Action research takes place when educational practitioners reflect on their approach to education and test pedagogical theories with research that is then presented for consideration within the institution and in the wider academic arena. After making a case for the use of action research as an important part of the scholarship of teaching and learning that should take place in higher education, the author discusses the steps for conducting action research— from identifying the problem to addressing quantitative and qualitative research approaches and publishing the results. **Key Words:** Action Research, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Higher Education

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Action research is a method for promoting change in education that has been used in K-12 settings for years. Lin S. Norton's (2009) book, *Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities* moves the discussion about pedagogical action research beyond school classrooms in the United Kingdom to examining its potential in higher education. Since action research has not been widely accepted in the mainstream research community, she first makes a case for using action research as a part of reflective practice and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Academicians with questions about how to motivate their students, encourage students to be more analytical or engage students in class discussions can use their research skills by using pedagogical action research to test new approaches in the classroom. According to Norton, action research can "improve teaching and learning as well as contribute to theory [that examines] the status quo of university practices and conventions" (p. 68). This intersection of theory, practice, and research is at the heart of Norton's book and makes it more than just a "how-to" book on pedagogical action research in higher education.

Norton (2009) begins by considering various issues and factors that impact those in the academic field who might be interested in conducting action research. For example, she examines academic critiques of what she terms the "conceptions of teaching research" (p. 7) as being somehow inferior to facilitating learning, and she questions the assumption that teaching and learning are actually at the opposite ends of the same scale. As Norton examines teaching at the personal or micro level, at the discipline or meso level, and at the institutional or macro level, she poses questions for the reader to reflect on at each step in the process. For example, at the micro level, she asks reader to consider the following questions: "(1) What are your conceptions of teaching? (2) Can you think

of any recent examples when you felt unable to put your conceptions of teaching into practice? (3) If so, could this be addressed in a pedagogical action research study?” (p. 7). At the departmental or discipline level, the reader is asked to consider the pressures exerted on professors by the department and what influences come from the discipline as practitioners. At the institutional level, questions are raised about institutional policies on teaching and learning and academicians’ responses to competing demands for research and teaching. Norton uses five cases studies to examine how various political issues can impact and shape possible solutions.

In the next couple of chapters, Norton (2009) considers the role of reflective practice and collaboration in action research in higher education. According to Norton, the academic professional needs to reflect on his or her work and to challenge “conventional wisdom” regarding how to approach teaching and learning in the classroom. Reflection can be used as a method for gaining new professional perspectives through transformative learning. The case studies provided in the chapter give concrete examples of how to reflect on the lessons learned as an intrinsic part of action research. Moreover, Norton argues that learning can actually be transformative when research and reflection examine conventional wisdom about what academicians think works and does not work, but she insists that it is important for this process to be done collaboratively rather than done in isolation. Or to frame the issue in another way, Norton suggests that collaborative action research can be akin to action learning. In the appendices, the author also suggests a number of pragmatic methods discussed in the literature on how to be reflective while conducting action research. These include keeping a reflection journal, studying and reflecting independently on one’s own practice, and participating in a study group or mentor-mentee relationship interested in reflective reading about the conventions of teaching practices.

Norton (2009) moves on to discuss a movement in higher education in Great Britain and more recently in the United States known as the scholarship of teaching and learning or SoTL. This movement more recently has gained momentum with the creation of the International Society of Strategies for Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) in 2004. Although this movement recognizes the need for academic practitioners to do research in their various disciplines, the principles of scholarship of teaching and learning also seek to motivate faculty to apply their research skills to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. Because action research has a dual focus on theory and research carried out by pedagogical practitioners rather than outside researchers, Norton argues that pedagogical action research is an important tool for academicians interested in SoTL. As Norton notes, “The whole intention behind the theoretical section of this book is to introduce [the reader] to some of the arguments and background knowledge if colleagues who do not think pedagogical action research is as valuable as subject research” (p. 50).

After laying a theoretical foundation for conducting action research, Norton provides a practical guide on how to carry out pedagogical action research that is based on her 20+ years of research experience. The rest of the book details for readers how to design and implement action research in what Norton (2009) calls the “spiral of action research” (p. 69). She sees action research as a five-step process: Identify the issue, think about ways to address the problem, do what needs to be done to correct the problem, evaluate the effects, and modify the way things are done to correct the problem. To illustrate how this method can be flexible enough to be used in a variety of setting and

can utilize a variety of methods, the author describes two very different approaches to a specific scenario. The first scenario uses a qualitative, interpretative approach while the other scenario uses an experiment with a positivist approach. Norton provides practical suggestions for research methods when doing action research that include everything from descriptive and inferential statistics in action research to the advantages, disadvantages, and ethical considerations of using a repeated measures design and even some considerations for finding valid and reliable instruments that can be used for action research. The fact that the author draws on real-life examples from her own research experiences is reassuring for novice researchers. For example, Norton describes (a) the Ideal \*\*\* Inventory used to allow individuals to identify the characteristics of whatever topic is being studied and then rate themselves based on the selected characteristics, (b) LOQ which is an alternative method for course evaluations, and (c) the Essay Feedback Checklist to provide a form of tutoring feedback as students write their essays. Just as helpfully, Norton also describes how an action researcher can take existing published instruments and modify them so they can be used in different situations. The appendices include additional resources including examples of a research protocol taken from her Write Now CETL research plan, a case study that illustrates how qualitative and quantitative data can be combined, ways to measure conceptions of learning, a participant information sheet, a consent form template, an ethics submissions template, and a budget.

Norton (2009) advocates what she terms a more “muscular” (p. 189) approach to addressing ethical issues. In fact, she devotes an entire chapter to the consideration of ethical issues that goes beyond just completing a perfunctory ethical checklist, and stating that researchers need to obtain informed consent, respect privacy and confidentiality, and do no harm to research subjects. Norton suggests that researchers need to look at the subtleties between the scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogical development, pedagogical research, and pedagogical action research. Lest this be seen as a “Pollyanna” attitude about doing research, Norton takes a systems approach that also examines the impact of politics in higher education on the ethical considerations at the micro, meso, and macro levels in universities. Norton also provides a case study of a pedagogical action research study in the appendices that she includes to illustrate some ethical issues. The example of an annotated abstract that was accepted for a conference provides readers with a concrete, real-world example of the types of ethical issues that an author should take into consideration.

In the final chapter, Norton (2009) returns full circle back to the importance of going public with pedagogical action research findings as an integral part of the process of the scholarship of teaching and learning. She has argued persuasively throughout the book that action research is a collaborative process, and in her last chapter, she states that “going public is vital as it opens your research to peer scrutiny and this is what makes pedagogical action research distinct from introspective, reflective practice or from the usual curriculum development” (p. 194). In other words, action research takes place when educational practitioners test pedagogical theories with research that is then presented for consideration within the institution and in the wider academic arena. She goes on to discuss promoting the findings within the institution as well as beyond the institution via conference papers, poster sessions, and journal articles. The appendices provide practical examples of an unsuccessful abstract and a successful abstract with frank comments about the author’s conclusions about why one proposal was accepted but not the other.

Other practical resources in the appendices include an example of a letter to the editor of a journal that accompanied a rewritten article and a response to reviewers' comments.

On the book's web page located at <http://www.routledge.com/books/Action-Research-in-Teaching-and-Learning-isbn9780415437943> you can read the first thirty pages of the text by using the handy "View Inside" feature located at the right side of the page. This "sneak preview" will give you an excellent opportunity to familiarize yourself with the author's approach to action research and to gain an appreciation of Norton's application of this approach within a university context. You can also get a feel for her pedagogical style by noting her effective use of the boxes containing "Reflective Questions" which engage readers by asking them to personalize their encounter with the text through their interaction with the series of queries.

*Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities* provides a careful and considered argument for using action research in higher education for academicians who want to be reflective practitioners and achieve change through the promotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The book is much more than a how-to book that examines each stage in the research process precisely because Norton (2009) grounds her discussion in terms of theory and practice. In the last analysis, it is Norton's combination of passion, pragmatic suggestions, and scholarly perspective that showcases action research's potential for furthering reflective practice and the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education and makes this book a valuable addition to the literature in the field of pedagogical action research.

### Reference

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### Author Note

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