

EITN Issue 17 Book Reviews

Edited by Sarah Cornelius and Claire Molloy, November 2009

Doing and Writing Action Research

J. McNiff and J. Whitehead

London: Sage (2009), pp. 208, Pbk., £19.99 ISBN 978-1847871756

Reviewed by Karen McArdle, School of Education, University of Aberdeen

When I first read the title of this book I expected the text to be about doing as well as writing action research. Looking at the index, I was disappointed to see it seemed to be about writing and very little about doing. For example there were chapters on writing at Masters level and then at Doctorate Level and on writing Research proposals. This put me off as I was looking for a good up to date text on action research for student use at undergraduate and postgraduate levels that dealt with philosophy and methodology; not so much about writing up. How wrong could I have been about this book?

This book is a highly sensitive yet accessible look at action research across a broad spectrum of topics from the perspective of writing. It provides a highly illuminating and insightful resource for postgraduate students in particular. I shall not hesitate in recommending it to my own students. What is so captivating is the looking back from writing at key critical facets of the action research philosophy and process such as authenticity and values, originality and the differences between ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts.

The way the book sets out its stall is contained in part of the definition it gives of action research.

“...action research is not just about professional education, or about doing projects (which is a stance adopted in many mainstream literatures), though these aspects are important. It is more a philosophical stance towards the world, an attitude of enquiry that enables people to question and improve taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting. Writing a high quality report

means appreciating these deeper issues, and showing your understanding in your writing.” (p.7)

The book is written in simple and accessible language without losing sight of the complexity of its subject, and includes discussion of the philosophies and problematics of action research. One example that I liked was the explanation of originality in discussion of doctoral work. It is concise and looks at originality right through the thesis. One aspect of the text I found particularly interesting was discussion of the contrasts between undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral programmes for the different levels of theoretical analysis along with the ideas about originality and critical engagement. The discussion of the criteria for a doctoral thesis is amongst the best I have seen with questions that could be used for the viva along with answers.

One new feature of the book is the use of textual references to illustrative websites. There is obviously the difficulty of ensuring that the book stays up to date. On the other side of the coin is the advantage of giving up to date examples and making use of live examples of research. The websites I visited were useful but I did not access them while reading; rather I finished the text and then went to the web which meant I lost the context of these sites.

Overall, this is a must have text for all those supervising or conducting action research at all levels in higher education. I shall be adding it to my reading lists.