



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Introduction to Research Methods in Education
Author:	Keith F. Punch
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Review:

So; a book on research methods in education; does this offer any new or different forms of information on the topic to guide or help those new to education? What new directives will be realized in the text? I will apply some of the content of the book to questions that arise and I encounter in my teaching and research on a day-to-day basis. I will be applying the copy to the domain of art & design. There are canons representing all of the disciplines within art & design; these are articulate, erudite and range from the well-informed and idiosyncratic principles of an individual from fine art to design management. Research within art & design has always been investigated by groups, individuals and various Schools. So, can this book help me to develop the artist or designer in being able to use a slightly different research method in the process of maturing their working practises? An initial scan as opposed to a read of the book presents the traditional lay out of an academic text, which is bland. The design of the book would not encourage anyone from an art & design background to pick it up and engage with the text. That is not the fault of the author. The whole design question might be acceptable within the Social Sciences; but not for a visually sophisticated reader.

The content of the book is detailed; anyone unsure of concepts or working practises within research can swiftly find a definition available with this copy. There are a number of key areas in research which can induce fear in those who do not have a lot of experience in research. For example, there are – it seems – many different uses and definitions of the terms, method and methodology in use at under and post graduate levels in higher education, within this book it means theory is about method (p.15), so, Keith Punch is to the point, there is no doubt concerning the context and meaning of the term. But, this isn't the only example where the author is able to cut

through the inflated language and terms often expressed in academic texts and presents clarity in the writing.

A common complaint that can be heard in the darker passages of higher education today amongst academics, is one that suggests that some students, a) produce work to meet an assessment criteria for a high mark and b) their work is often descriptive in character and lacks substantial critical analysis. I suspect that that the root of that problem lies elsewhere; but it is a problem that academics do encounter; these assumptions are challenged by this book. Keith Punch has devoted a whole chapter to the analysis of qualitative information. Implicit within the text is support of nurturing independent and informed thought, with the expressed purpose of building a sound foundation to understanding.

The author does not stop at analysing qualitative information. A discipline – unless it is for management purposes - which isn't seen in art & design education that often – is the area of statistics. Today, common sense suggests that staff and students need some knowledge of this area; not only does the author explain in detail how to construct an approach to quantitative research, he also presents clear information to the reader concerning key concepts and actions linked to inferential statistics. All of the common functions are included e.g. The mean, mode, standard deviation, etc; but what is of real value in his analysis of quantitative data is the lucid way in which he explains to the non-specialist, the analysis of variance, multiple correlations and factor analyses.

Summary:

The reservations that I have concerning the book have nothing to do with the author or the content. At the beginning of the text I referred to the design of the book. The only other criticism of the content is the lack of imagery, yes, there are good diagrams, but the pages are sometimes a little lifeless. Some of the concepts within the text should be illustrated; it would help the reader.

Reading the book from the perspective of art & design is a useful exercise in being reminded that there are other forms of research methods that can support staff and students in investigating a hypothesis, to produce results which have a literal, numerical and a cultural meaning. The verbose language often used in research is recognised and dismissed in favour of friendly and clear copy, which does not pontificate or procrastinate in meaning. The text is more concerned with the democracy of research, rather than the pomposity of some self-perpetuating vanity. The reader isn't allowed to get lost. The key word in the title is 'introductory', it is concerned with meaning and communication, but it also has depth, I suspect fuelled by many years of experience.

The author is clear in a number of areas, often laden with tautology. For example, he presents examples of ethnography, defines embedded, explanatory & exploratory design; he links concepts, data, conceptual and operational hypothesis with transparent prose which is refreshing to read. Within the copy there are two key points that are often missed in research and the author warns against them, these are: don't forget the topic coding and suggesting the avoidance of the single minded, one point 'perspectivist' who often adheres to one form of research, as though it is a fetish, rather than a way of working. In 2009 there shouldn't be room for the 'methodolatrist.'

The world of art & design has traditionally followed a process of ideas production from historical exemplars, for example, Lawson on, 'how designers think'. However, the cross-discipline approach to design and the arts today is producing real innovation from companies such as IDEO and the seminal academic work of Gillian

Rose on content analysis. This book should be read by young designers and artists at the start of their careers, because it also includes the underpinning theory and approaches to mixed methods of research, essential to any aspiring designer or artist. My summary of the book is simple; do yourself and your students a favour and buy it.