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Book reviews

Researching Education: Perspectives and Techniques

Gajendra K. Verma and Kanka Mallick

London: Falmer Press, 1999, 214pp., Paperback £14.95, ISBN 0 7507 0531 0

Generally speaking, I don't write book reviews, because I can't do the correct frame of mind. My immediate reaction to almost any book is delight and amazement that someone could sustain the effort, finish the work, let go the document and live with the ambiguities. I am simply full of admiration: I can hardly bear to think of looking for shortcomings when I know how much work will have gone into it. And then, of course, there's envy. So I can't quite remember why I agreed to this one, but there you go. After what I've said, you won't be surprised to find that I enjoyed the book: the purpose of the review, then, is to explain why.

The first half of the book comprises a series of chapters that analyse and discuss research from a variety of standpoints. The analysis is comprehensive, tackling the question of how educational research might be described and what are its characteristics in a range of ways. I was surprising to find this extremely engaging. The authors do not skimp on this part of the book, and in this thorough analysis lies a good deal of their originality.

In many ways, Chapter 1 is the least interesting of the first part of the book, but even here a canter of familiar ground holds unexpected insight. In it the authors introduce research in general through a discussion of both the *Methods of research* and of the concepts of *Theory, construct and model*. From this, they move to a discussion of research in *Social sciences and Natural sciences* and, interestingly, argue for a threefold division of the former into *pure or basic, applied or field and evaluation research*. By Chapter 2, the authors have got into their stride, and tackle *Mapping the domain* of educational research, identifying *subject-matter and perspectives*. Their categories of subject-matter (*Individual performance, Group performance, School performance, Management of schools, Interpersonal relationships, Curriculum and teachers*) are straightforward and informative. The *perspectives* offered (*Empiricism, Experimentalism, Quantitative/qualitative, Psychometric/sociometric, Interpretative*) are richer than the usual divisions and, if not completely convincing, are certainly thought-provoking. Chapter 3, 'Educational research – nature and process', takes another standpoint for analysis with a discussion of *Definitions*, including *trends and issues*; followed by *Operational strategies* and a *Classification of educational research*. Chapter 3 closes with a discussion of *audiences* and the *Evaluation of educational research*. You may feel that, by now, I would have had enough of multiple analyses of educational research. Not a bit of it; even under the (for me) rather dull title of 'Educational Research: a Short History', the pages ahead were full of interest! Chapter 5, 'Approaches to researching education', offers three broad categories of method: *Historical, descriptive and experimental*, with thought-provoking sub-categories.

The authors' own backgrounds are clear to see, especially in the second half

of the book where they begin the long haul of 'how to do it'. The book draws heavily on positivist research and is happy to discuss the more straightforward quantitative techniques. The authors are less comfortable with interpretative research, and although they make a valiant attempt to be even-handed, they don't show quite the same comfort and familiarity away from quantitative methods.

Is the book useful for students? Teaching research methods is dark and dangerous work because students need to have a view of the field and the theoretical issues before they get into action and, conversely and contradictorily, they need to have some practical experience of research before the theoretical debate makes sense. I would recommend this book as a companion to a research methods course.

HILARY CONSTABLE

The Adult University

Etienne Borgeois, Chris Duke, Jean Luc-Goyet and Barbara Merrill

Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999, 208pp., Hardback £60.00, ISBN 0 335 19908 9, Paperback £19.99, ISBN 0 335 19907 0

This book is concerned with broader participation in higher education (HE). It examines two interrelated themes (the future of the university in an era of mass HE and social inclusion) and draws on comparative research in two institutions (Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, and University of Warwick, UK). It seeks for a 'dialectic between the theoretical and the empirical' using an eclectic approach to a broad range and level of questions about access policies, student experience and the politics of institutional change. The Introduction outlines this 'complex sequence of issues'.

Chapter 2 examines our ideas about the modern university and analyses how such an institution actually behaves, with particular reference to access issues. The next two chapters are concerned with adult students' experiences in the institution. The final chapters, moving to a more general level, consider the nature and politics of innovation in universities, and reflect on future developments.

I found the book overambitious in scope, with the theoretical and empirical aspects never fully integrated. It is densely written and rather dry. However, it does provide a picture of the 'adultification' of HE, with some interesting theoretical reflections livening some chapters. Thus in Chapter 3, for example, we find an interesting analysis of the organizational characteristics of the university. Seen as a professional bureaucracy, with some additional peculiar characteristics, such as the academic demand for autonomy, the authors convincingly draw a picture of an institution with a 'high potential for conflict'. They are less convincing in their subsequent claim that in the decision-making process pressure is less often used than legitimization. (Pressure is defined as the power of an actor A over B which is proportionate to B's dependence on A. With legitimization, A's ability to influence B lies in A's ability to make his demands or decisions seem legitimate to B as complying with norms and objectives valued by B.) We are told that the case studies revealed few instances of pressure. We are not, however, given sufficient data to be convinced that the research was so structured as to bring to light instances of 'pressure', which is often likely to be covert or indirect or private.