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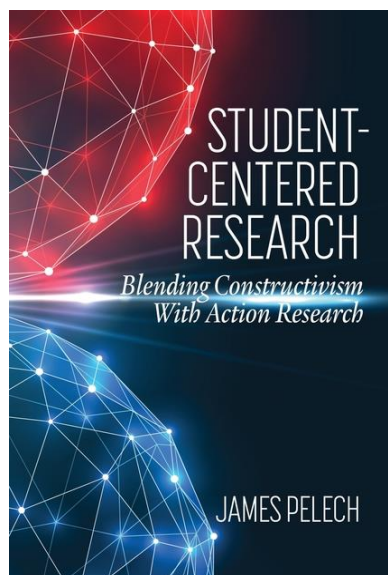
Pelech, J. (2021). *Student-centered research: Blending constructivism with action research*. Information Age Publishing.

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For decades, constructivism and action research have been ubiquitous in larger discussions and debates of theory and practice in education. In relation to constructivism, philosopher of education D. C. Phillips (2000) proclaimed that the “overwhelming consensus” at the turn of the 21st century was that “knowledge is constructed” (p. viii). In its own right, action research can be traced to the work of contemporaries John Dewey and Kurt Lewin in the 1930s and 1940s (Arhar et al., 2001, p. 48). Given the prevalence of both constructivism and action research in educational theory and practice, there is some precedent of combining



constructivism with action research, as “the same side of the coin,” since “action research fundamentally reflects constructivist thinking in its process and practice,” and since “both operate in a *search for meaning*” (Trunk Širca & Shapiro, 2007, p. 105 [authors’ emphasis]).

In *Student-Centered Research: Blending Constructivism with Action Research*, James Pelech builds upon this precedent, and his own career as a classroom teacher and then as a teacher educator and education researcher, in *blending* constructivism and action research, to create “a rigorous model of teacher inquiry” (p. 3). Pelech taught high school math for 30 years before joining the faculty of the School of Education at Benedictine University. In many ways, this book reads and feels like the culmination of Pelech’s long career of

helping secondary students learn, preparing teacher candidates to implement best practices in K-12 classrooms, and blending constructivism with action research.

In this book, Pelech defines *constructivism* as a “philosophy that supports the notion that knowledge is created, not transmitted to others” (pp. 2-3) and *action research* as “a formal and systematic process used by teachers and all stakeholders to improve student learning and teaching...a cyclic decision-making process that embeds feedback, two-way interactions, and the balancing of the scientific method with local knowledge, events, and teacher theories” (p. 38). Building upon these definitions, Pelech devotes the entire book to synthesizing the educational philosophy of constructivism with the pedagogical process of action research.

In order to achieve this synthesis, Pelech uses what could be called as a constructivist approach to organizing the book’s chapters to support the readers/teachers in ways that go beyond transmitting information. While Pelech defines constructivism in the opening of the book, he purposefully waits to define action research until Chapter 4. Instead of frontloading the book with theoretical justifications for action research and constructivism, Pelech seeks to engage the reader in the knowledge-creation of constructivism and the cyclic decision-making of action research through reader/teacher reflection. After a brief introductory chapter on the goals of the book, Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of teachers (the primary audience) in the learning of their students: “According to the research, the most influential factor in student learning is *you, the teacher*” [author’s emphasis] (p. 6). Subsequently, Chapter 3 then takes up the importance of teacher reflection. These early chapters ground the book and its approaches to teacher inquiry in reflective practices. For example, in Chapter 3, Pelech discusses the impact of written journals in helping teachers engage in the cyclic nature of action research. Furthermore, the entire book contains a series of “Learning Activities” designed for readers to create prior knowledge and to address “disequilibrium” (p. 59). In constructivist fashion, action research is not delivered as a discrete entity to be easily transmitted from writer to reader; rather, the knowledge that is created in action research is a social and collaborative process. Theories, theorists, previous studies—though included thoroughly and consistently as part of the delivery and action plan of the book—are not the focal point.

In fact, the titular concept of action research is not clearly unpacked until Chapter 4, “Examining Teacher Research,” which gives a concise model of action research. The chapter also sets up the “cognitive demands” necessary to conduct action research through the foundations of cognitivist theory: “As an action researcher, you must *construct* knowledge as opposed to receiving it or regurgitating it” (p. 41). Admittedly, I found myself looking back at the earlier chapters to assess why so much focus had been given to reflection. Yet, in doing so, I began to see more clearly the logic behind blending constructivism with action research. If knowledge is constantly being

constructed, then the reflective practices of action research serve as a vital means of assessing student learning and a teacher's inquiries into and adaptations to that learning.

In addition to the focus on reflection in the book, particularly salient and helpful are the 12 "Learning Principles" that are thoughtfully explained in later chapters, in which Pelech explains how epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge (i.e., How does knowledge come into existence?) inform constructivism and actions research. Each Learning Principle is organized through formatted headings and is clearly explained (i.e., Learning Principle 1: *Since knowledge is a subjective construction, people learn by creating their own philosophy, core values, rules, procedures, theories, and definitions*; p. 50). The Learning Principles are blended also with rationales for how they connect to action research. These "principle" chapters (Chapters 5 & 6) demonstrate one of the strengths of the book, in that these principles are built using rich secondary source material. Furthermore, most chapters of the book conclude with references that draw from cornerstone texts and studies on constructivism and action research from such disciplines and domains as education philosophy, psychology, and business administration.

While there are other texts that treat constructivism with a critical lens (Fosnot, 1996; Phillips, 2000) and action research with a more singular focus (Mills, 2018), Pelech keeps his focus on the primary audience: educators who are looking for a way to use inquiry and self-reflection to address their students' learning needs as the impetus for better teaching. Primary research and the assessment tools of action research are revealed as Pelech demonstrates his own implementation of an action research project on quizzes/quizzing in a college-level education assessment course. In my view, the primary strength of the work is that Pelech is adept at demonstrating the instruments or tools of his own action research as an authentic model for conducting action research through a constructivist lens.

According to Pelech, if teacher-researchers are to improve their students' learning, "we should strive to focus on a specific or authentic situation, not on proving a theory" (p. 70). This is where the author "walks the walk" in showing how to conduct this type of research. Authentic assessment and research methods emerge as important themes in Chapters 10 through 14. Concise and visually appealing, these chapters give the reader an authentic example of a constructivist action research plan. These "action plan" chapters offer examples of mix-methods data (although Pelech does not use this terminology) through an array of visual figures and tables to aid the reader-researcher. These tables and figures include quantitative data from the research project, student comments from informal and formal interview instruments, and—perhaps most importantly—authentic examples of in-class assessments that are geared toward constructivist learning.

The book ends with a brief and worthy discussion of validity in action research. While this chapter is helpful to new researchers who might not have experience with human subjects or institutional review boards, I found

myself expecting, and wanting, a final reflection on how to unpack the book's many features and messages. The relatively sterile, though pertinent, ending feels a little unreflective, inauthentic, or *unconstructivist*, so to say. I would have liked a final "call to action" for constructivist action research.

Perhaps, though, the book calls for the teacher-reader-researcher to do their own reflection, to re-examine the contents of the book in the context of their own students and teaching. In essence, that is the goal of *Student-Centered Research: Blending Constructivism with Action Research*—to engender a constructivist view of knowledge in teachers committed to inquiry on how best practices can meet their students' needs.

Pelech's book serves as a valuable resource to readers such as myself who use constructivist theory in our teaching and pre-service methods courses. In addition, the book would be useful to instructors who are curious how education theory and the authentic practices of action research can be blended. This book will likely not inform education theorists or doctoral students who are curious about the broader epistemological critiques or foundations of constructivism or action research. However, this book would serve well those K-12 teachers for whom standardized approaches to teaching are not serving their students' needs. Additionally, this book might make a positive impact on undergraduate teacher candidates or masters-level teacher candidates in an assessment course, like the one that is examined in this book.

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