



Unlock Research Research for Physical Educators

Research Reading Guide of the Month APRIL 2004

Locke, L.F. (2004).

Cynicism Wastes the Reader's Time.

Healthy skepticism (see the Reading Guide for March) is one thing, but disrespect is another. It has been my experience that cynicism about research and researchers is a problem for relatively few professionals in physical education – but it does exist and this brief homily is intended to serve as both analysis and warning.

If someone truly believes that most researchers are pursuing only their own self-interest by grinding out publications for the sole purpose of advancing career and academic status, by showing off their intellectual superiority to the rest of us, or even by promoting their pet notions about physical education, then reading research is not for that person. Those kinds of beliefs make it difficult or impossible to be open to new ideas, much less to treat as valuable the kinds of knowledge to be found in research reports.

It is not difficult to imagine how some people acquire such a cynical attitudes. In some cases they have been victimized by such stupid propositions as: "If you really were a good teacher you would be improving your practice and solving your problems by paying attention to research." Or, in other instances, cynics have been produced in introductory research courses by instructors who equated the understanding of statistics with intelligence. There are plenty of ways to get turned off to educational research and to be made disrespectful of the people who do it.

Sympathetic explanations notwithstanding, once in place, a negative disposition toward the uses of inquiry in matters of professional practice is difficult to alter – and corrosive in its influence. Although in most cases it will be preaching to the choir (as evidenced by the fact that you are here and reading these words), I want to state emphatically that most of my experiences with the research enterprise in physical education (and the people who work within it) have been generally positive and sometimes outright inspirational.

I have known hundreds of physical educators who have made research a regular part of their professional careers, and among those people the number I would suspect of serious and intentional academic sin is close to zero. The vast majority of research workers in physical education, as in other fields of inquiry, are honest scholars who receive scant rewards other than personal satisfaction for their labors. Of course doing research is related to their careers (and to the reward system within which many academics must function). We might sometime use UnlockResearch to have a long discussion about how research and publication does and sometimes does not play a helpful part within the professorial role, but until faculty job descriptions are redesigned (perhaps in ways that redefine the fundamental nature of scholarship) many of them will continue to hold research as an expectation.

In addition to making honest efforts to meet the stipulations of their academic contracts, the researchers I have know were people who held their public reputations dear. Many of them were sensitive to the fact that each publication puts them on the line with something very real at risk. Not only are there draconian mechanisms within the research community for failures of personal integrity in performing and explaining investigations, there is an invisible rating and ranking system at work that makes little allowance for having an occasional dumb idea – or, just once in a while, writing a truly unintelligible report.

As for bias, of course researchers root for certain outcomes as a study proceeds. Only a fool would not know the difference between findings that are congenial or hostile to a line of inquiry, and only the brain-dead would not care. All the scholars I have known could be counted on, however, to try and let the chips fall where they would (whatever the personal consequences) and in their reports to tell us exactly how it happened.

Does the human unconscious always present some risk to complete verisimilitude in telling the story of a study? You bet it does, and that is a fact with which researchers (and readers) must live. The best of them do so warily and always watchfully. Are there genuine cheaters in the business of research? Like the quick and the dead, the dishonest are always with us – in all walks of life – but the peculiarly public nature of research is a powerful deterrent to academic crime.

With regard to using research as a vehicle for displaying intellectual snobbery (or just plain, old fashioned showing off), I can make only two observations. First, as doing research would constitute a terribly expensive form of self-gratification, it is difficult to accept the interpretation that writing reports is a means of displaying superiority. And, second, I am persuaded that among the researchers I have known every one of them wanted their work to be understood. They may not have possessed great skills of communication, or they may have been addressing only a very narrow audience of insider colleagues, but their desire to be understood was clear and convincing. Accordingly, it is impossible for me to believe that any of them could actually set out to be obscure, or to deliberately make understanding any more difficult than absolutely necessary.

There can be no doubt that a good researcher must take some pride in sharing a sound piece of work (Who among us would not?), but if you read studies closely you will become aware of how often investigators have to admit to strategies that did not work as expected, have to display data that still confound them, and have to explain alternative interpretations that seem to undercut their initial assumptions in designing the study. If doing research is showing off, then it is from a very high wire – and mostly without a net.

My own position is that anyone who tries to do sound research and who makes a good faith effort to help me understand deserves my respect – not necessarily my agreement, but always my respect. Wary readers are just smart readers, but cynical and disrespectful readers are only wasting time. If you are like me, time is a scarce resource and not to be squandered.

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