



Research Reading Guide of the Month
OCTOBER 2003

Locke, L.F. (2003).

Have a Conversation.

One good way to get through (or around) things you don't understand in a research report, is to share the confusion! Whether you put caution flags in the margins or make note cards to record points that puzzle you, don't keep them to yourself. Find someone to whom you can describe (or show) the problem. If they also have read or are reading the same report – then so much the better. You may be astonished at how often someone, frequently someone with no more technical knowledge than yourself, can bring a fresh perspective and some clarification to a troublesome term, phrase, or sentence.

There are some unfortunate bits of folklore that have become attached to the task of reading research. Those include the preposterous idea that everyone except you can understand accounts of research, the equally silly notion that asking for help is a sort of social cheating, and the self-imposed handicap created by not using the collaborative study strategies that are commonplace in any other form of academic work.

No doubt, some of this misguided fantasy arises from the popular image of the lonely scholar sweating away in solitude over a giant stack of books and research journals. People who keep up with research in their specialty (of practice or scholarship) do read, of course, but most of the ones I have known also spend as much or more time talking with others about what they have read. In such conversations, it is inevitable that the talk frequently turns to what is unclear, problematic, or undecipherable in the report. As illustration, you should know that there has not yet been a report reviewed on this website for which I have not had to ask someone "What does this mean?" That may be as much a reflection on my density as on the quality of writing in the reports, but there it is. I have to talk to people to get complicated things straight in my head.

Whether in doctoral-level seminars, introductory research courses for undergraduates, in-service workshops, or as a consultant, I have found repeatedly that the sharing of simple conversation is the single most efficient agent for clarifying (and enriching) the consumption of research. If you want an exercise that builds research-consuming capacity at a remarkable speed, try devising and delivering 5-minute explanations of study reports you have read to a captive audience of one or two volunteers. Watch their eyes while you unfold the story of the investigation – there is no better device for detecting what you have really understood and what you only thought you understood! The conversation following your 5-minute effort may be painful, but it also can be a source of great illumination.

My advice to you is to find a friend, form a club, corner a colleague, or sign onto a physical education listserv (try NASPE-L, for example) and start a conversation about the research you are reading. You may be surprised by how often people in our profession will volunteer their assistance, and if you carefully return the favor when asked, you can cultivate a research circle that will work for fun and profit. Sharing the confusion is an effective way of reducing the confusion – and it can yield a lot more success and satisfaction than you might expect.

(Reading Guides from previous months are available in the unlockresearch archive. Simply click on the "Archives" button at the left of the main page.)