



Unlock Research Research for Physical Educators

Research Reading Guide of the Month OCTOBER 2004

Locke, L.F. (2004).

Reading Research Your Own Way – Continued.

Where We Left Off in September

This October Reading Guide will continue with the topic that was opened in the previous (September) issue of UnlockResearch. In that earlier discussion I indicated that both common experience and a growing body of evidence confirm that professional practitioners (such as physical educators) and active researchers (such as exercise physiologists) read research reports in very different ways. Those differences result from the particular kind of work done by members of each group, their reasons for reading, and the standards with which they validate what they find.

In sum, then, researchers and practitioners look for different things in a research report and have different uses for what they learn. As you will see, I, for one, am inclined to celebrate rather than bemoan the fact that there are different approaches to reading research. You will have to form your own conclusions.

Reading Research is Work You Can Learn to Do – Your Own Way

Because research reports are generally written by researchers for consumption by other researchers, they can be difficult for non-researchers to read and understand. Even when the topic of investigation involves some aspect of practice, the demands (and conventions) of research writing often make the text read like an insurance policy. Nevertheless, with diligence, practice, common sense guidance, and some tricks of the research-reader's trade, it is possible for practitioners to access the fruits of inquiry. They may do so either directly by consulting the reports appearing in research journals, or indirectly by reading annotations, translations, summaries, and syntheses such as those provided at this website.

Accordingly, I suggested last month that you should use the following guide:

“Find a report that you actually want to read, and then begin by consuming the contents in your own way.”

Behind that guideline were three simple propositions: (1) reading research on physical education can be worth doing, (2) it is essential, however, to have a good reason for expending the time and effort required, and (3) the best way to begin reading a study is by doing what comes naturally – that is, to unapologetically bring the interests, concerns, and standards that arise from the vantage point of your own work. Such advice, however, leads to some further questions. The first of those requires that I explain exactly how anyone can go about reading “in his or her own way.”

In the field of physical education there are three groups within which members might have some interest in that question: (1) *research consumers* (generally, practitioners such as teachers, coaches, and administrators), (2) *research producers* (who, thereby, also are authors of research reports), and (3) *professors* working in various kinds of preservice preparation and inservice professional development programs (for example, teacher educators). It is understood, of course,

that members within all three groups sometimes read research, albeit for very different purposes. I want here to address the consumers first, leaving researchers and professors for future issues.

How Physical Educators Can Read In Their Own Way

Consuming research "in your own way" simply means looking carefully for facts and ideas that interest you or that appear to hold some potential value in your work. That means both taking your time and paying attention to the entire story of a study rather than just to the findings. In research reports, if your mind is open to surprises, useful things invariably will turn up in unexpected places.

Crossing the Bridge from Research to Practice

In addition, it is natural (and proper) that you notice differences between the conditions surrounding the study and the context where you practice. The two can never be identical, of course, and such differences certainly don't disqualify a study from your consideration. What they do signal, however, is the need to make careful adaptations to the realities of your own workplace.

Because the investigator can't possibly be aware of what the physical and social context is like where you practice, only you can devise locally appropriate applications. In order to accomplish that transfer from one location and set of circumstances to another (from the research site to the practice site), it is important to pay close attention to how the report describes the conditions for the study.

And, once more, the devil will be in those details. Some ideas or procedures can be given a trial without making significant adjustments to what you found in the report. In other cases, however, it will be perfectly obvious to you (as the local expert on your workplace) that modifications would have to be devised before a research-based idea could be given a fair test. That keeps the burden of thinking through new kinds of practice squarely on your shoulders. Research can explore new territory, clarify old ideas, and even inspire your creative juices – but as the professional, only you can apply research to make better practice.

Who Has to Evaluate the Study?

Finally, if you are a teacher, reading in "your own way" means examining the report for content that might make you smarter about practice. What it does not mean, however, is that you must be responsible for determining that the research was performed correctly, or that the assertions in the report are fully certified by the data. You will have more than enough on your plate if you work hard to read and understand the report, and then think through the problem of possible applications to practice.

Accordingly, I suggest that you leave the final decisions about the adequacy of research to those who must be gatekeepers for the body of verified knowledge in our field. Because they must perform that vital evaluative function, researchers, journal editors, and peer reviewers have to read reports in "their own way." The scholarship of discovery is completely dependent on how well they do their work. Likewise, however, consuming research as a practicing professional is not a trivial assignment. No apologies need be offered for doing it in a manner that is appropriate to your kind of expertise.

The Importance of Common Sense

Yes, of course you should read with close attention to what makes sense and what does not, and if you note departures from what you believe to be sound design and method for inquiry, those should raise serious cautions about the credibility of the report. Whatever you do, however, hold your standards lightly and be aware that they must be relative and not absolute.

Don't Allow the Perfect to Drive Out the Valuable

When the task is finding things that might be useful in practice, waiting for the absolutely perfect

study is a fool's errand. There are no perfect studies in physical education and investigations with significant limitations frequently yield valuable insights into how the world works, as well as suggestions for the improvement of practice.

The Bottom Line

Given that explication of the guideline, I believe that if put to use its consequence would be a considerable reduction in the confusion and anxiety that sometimes attend consumers' efforts to read reports. Perhaps, if all of us could relax a little and each read in their own way, we also could learn more from those documents.

A Preview of the November Guideline

Next month, I will turn to the exciting topic of knowing when it is neither necessary nor desirable to read research reports. Stay tuned to UnlockResearch, there is more heresy to come!

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