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Abstract

O'Leary (2010) has written her book for the student; however, she delves beyond the "how to" of most introductory research texts. The author works to ground students in the theoretical and foundational aspects of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research, in addition to providing "real world" advice and common scenarios often encountered in the field. From determining an appropriate sample size to navigating political processes in evaluative research, O'Leary stays grounded in the practical, often re-emphasizing the importance of "doability" in planning and conducting any type of research.

Keywords

Research Project, Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods

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From “Clueless” to “Completed”: A Review of *The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project*

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O’Leary (2010) has written her book for the student; however, she delves beyond the “how to” of most introductory research texts. The author works to ground students in the theoretical and foundational aspects of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research, in addition to providing “real world” advice and common scenarios often encountered in the field. From determining an appropriate sample size to navigating political processes in evaluative research, O’Leary stays grounded in the practical, often re-emphasizing the importance of “doability” in planning and conducting any type of research. Key Words: Research Project, Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods

Zina O’Leary’s (2010) *The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project* is a comprehensive, yet comprehensible overview of the research process, designed to guide the novice researcher from “clueless” to “completed.” O’Leary has written her work for the student; however, she delves beyond the “how to” of most introductory research texts. The author works to ground students in the theoretical and foundational aspects of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research, in addition to providing “real world” advice and common scenarios often encountered in the field. From determining an appropriate sample size to navigating political processes in evaluative research, O’Leary stays grounded in the practical, often re-emphasizing the importance of “doability” in planning and conducting any type of research.

In the introductory chapter, O’Leary’s (2010) first task is to calm the nerves of the novice, noting that “Whether you are tackling a one-semester project at the end of your undergraduate degree or undertaking a PhD, the answer is the same. You do it one step at a time” (p. 1). O’Leary then goes on with impressive clarity to succinctly address the different theoretical frameworks (i.e., ontology, epistemology) and how they drive research practices. Acknowledging the need to have a firm grasp on the “heavy theoretical concepts” outlined in the first chapter, O’Leary offers useful recommendations for further reading (p. 10). Once the student is grounded in theory, O’Leary’s next step is to introduce the reader to the planning process. It is made clear to the reader that getting ready to start a research project involves a good deal more than choosing a topic and formulating a research question. Becoming familiar with university requirements, learning about the resources available, and negotiating expectations with one’s supervisor prior to initiating any research activities allows the student to initiate and conduct research activities within a preventative framework. O’Leary scatters relevant student anecdotes throughout to elucidate common pitfalls encountered when undertaking undergraduate and graduate research projects. These include such topics as procrastination, finding balance, and coping with difficult supervisory relationships. Examples and anecdotes are personal, engaging, and are likely to be viewed as relevant to

both the undergraduate and graduate student researcher. Although her book is aimed at assisting students, O'Leary offers practical advice and valuable information commonly overlooked by supervisors when attempting to guide students through the research process. For example, she notes that "assessing 'doability' involves more than just looking at the quality of the research design. It also involves looking at the full gamut of pressures and responsibilities that you as an individual need to manage" (p. 20).

Avenues toward achieving credibility in the research process, as well as ethical and legal implications of conducting research, are all competently and succinctly addressed under the same umbrella of "integrity" in the research process. O'Leary (2010) is careful not to probe too far into the minutiae of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, and instead examines the justification and importance of adhering to ethical, moral, and legal obligations. A useful credibility indicators checklist is provided to assist students with designing and maintaining a credible and ethically-sound study. Once the theoretical and ethical groundwork is laid, O'Leary does an exceptional job of emphasizing the importance of developing a good research question, stating that the research question is "absolutely fundamental to good research" (p. 46). "Doability" is stressed once again in selecting a topic that is relevant to students' field of study, for which there is adequate supervision, and that falls under university and/or funding requirements. The author introduces the "concept map" to aid students in narrowing their focus of study, in addition to the "four-step generation process" which provides a more linear alternative to formulating a "doable" research question.

The novice researcher is likely to find the most value in O'Leary's (2010) chapter on "Crafting a Research Proposal." Specific elements typically required of most proposals are covered; however, the real contribution is in her "been there, done that," pragmatic advice. For example, she observes, "The proposal is 'without a doubt, a sales pitch'" (p. 61). She predictably highlights the need to follow guidelines and stay within the requirements of the application. However, O'Leary goes one step further to explain why this is important; she asks, if you cannot follow the rules of the application, how likely is it you will follow the requirements of your research? Similarly, not only does O'Leary instruct the reader in how to conduct a competent literature review, free from common mistakes, she explains why it is vital to conduct an exhaustive review of the literature before undertaking any research project. "The production of new knowledge is fundamentally dependent on past knowledge" (p. 71).

Once O'Leary (2010) transitions into research design, she moves seamlessly and objectively among quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches. She first differentiates method from methodology, and emphasizes the need to determine a methodological design that will best address the research question and is "doable," based on your own experience and resources available. A diagram, designed to help the researcher delineate appropriate methodology through exploration of topic and determination of the research question, is provided; I found it to be both systematic and extremely useful. In addition to basic qualitative and quantitative approaches, O'Leary briefly touches on Evaluative, Action-Oriented, and Emancipatory strategies. Staying true to its "real world" utility, O'Leary's book also touches on the politics of research, particularly with regard to navigating political agendas in evaluative research. The inclusion of this is surprising but welcome since many students have little knowledge regarding research beyond the scope of their dissertations and/or classroom research

activities. Of particular interest to me was the “evaluation in the ideal world” versus “evaluation in the real world” table, which highlights the way evaluative research is meant to be conducted and the circumstances under which it is typically conducted. Chapters on sampling procedures, data collection, and analysis provide adequate depth for an introductory text and cover a surprisingly broad range of methodologies.

The Essential Guide concludes with a chapter on “The Challenge of Writing Up” in which the author instructs the reader on the writing process, offering both traditional and alternative formats. She methodically works her way through each section, consistently reminding students to seek and constructively utilize feedback through every step of the process. O’Leary’s (2010) final anecdote is her own. In order to demonstrate how painstaking the writing process can be, she uses her own experience of writing *The Essential Guide*; writing and re-writing, section-by-section, in order to get to the end result, which now comes across to the reader as “easy and natural” (p. 292).

O’Leary’s conversational style and friendly tone keep the reader interested and prevents *The Essential Guide* from becoming another too technical “how-to” book. The value of this book is in its accessibility and applicability. O’Leary’s practical advice and real-world scenarios are likely to keep the student researcher from making some of the most common mistakes and prevent future frustrations. While it is certainly not the only book student researchers will need, it is a book that is likely to serve as a trusted mentor throughout the research process, assisting the student in moving from “clueless” to “completed.”

Textual Features and Extras

To enhance learning of the material, O’Leary’s (2010) book includes a companion website, <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/oleary>, which provides a range of supplementary teaching and learning materials. These include powerpoints, video blogs, and a list of relevant journals. The book also provides useful internet resources throughout (i.e., <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>), in addition to usable and relevant checklists to assist students with the design and management of their research projects.

References

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Author Note

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