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## Baby Steps: A Book Review of Dorothy Valcarcel Craig's Action Research Essentials

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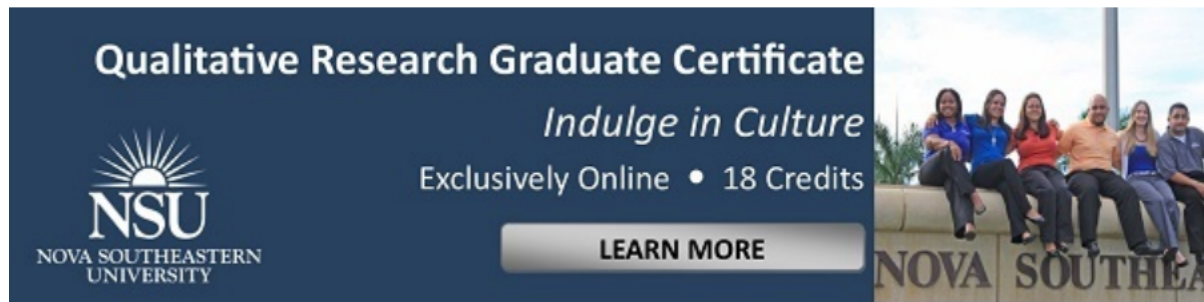
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## Baby Steps: A Book Review of Dorothy Valcarcel Craig's Action Research Essentials

### Abstract

Action Research Essentials by Dorothy Valcarcel Craig (2009) is an excellent resource for the emerging researcher; especially doctoral students in their first year of studies. Craig is successful in providing the reader with the essentials of action research while also addressing common challenges; one baby step at a time. In this review I will first explain the process of selecting and conducting the first reading of the book followed by identifying the author's objectives and intent. Then, I present a brief description of each chapter and note how their content relates to struggling research students' common challenges of the . I then put forth a quantitative description of one of the major strengths of the book, followed by online resources associated with each chapter.

### Keywords

qualitative research

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## **Baby Steps: A Book Review of Dorothy Valcarcel Craig's *Action Research Essentials***

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*Action Research Essentials* by Dorothy Valcarcel Craig (2009) is an excellent resource for the emerging researcher; especially doctoral students in their first year of studies. Craig is successful in providing the reader with the essentials of action research while also addressing common challenges; one baby step at a time. In this review I will first explain the process of selecting and conducting the first reading of the book followed by identifying the author's objectives and intent. Then, I present a brief description of each chapter and note how their content relates to struggling research students' common challenges of the . I then put forth a quantitative description of one of the major strengths of the book, followed by online resources associated with each chapter. **Keywords:** Action Research, Baby Steps, Doctoral Student

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Just as I can never hold my first born for the first time more than once, this will also be the first and last time I ever get to write my first book review. You may think likening the first moment of paternity to reading a book is a little intense, but allow me to explain why this book and the process of reviewing it has made such a drastic impact on my life one baby step at a time. When a child takes her first step, it is a profound accomplishment because of the developmental transition that it signifies. Likewise, I will explain how I took my first step on my journey to becoming an emerging researcher. This feeling of emancipation is partially due to the process of reviewing Dorothy Valcarcel Craig's book *Action Research Essentials* published in 2009 by Jossey-Bass. She is successful in providing for the reader the necessary support to feel more confident about doing research in general and action research in particular; one step at a time. I will first explain the process of selecting and committing to review *Action Research Essentials*, followed by explaining my approach to the first reading of the book. In the next segment of this review, I identify Craig's objectives and intent of writing the book, followed by explaining the content of each chapter. I then put forth a quantitative description of one of the major strengths of the book, followed by online resources associated with each chapter. I end this review with a brief section on potential readership then a summary and conclusion.

### **The Book Review Journey Begins**

I began this journey by heeding Chenail's (2010) recommendation to book reviewers to get immersed in the book, to reflect, analyze, and react to the text allowing for a transformation as you read. This is a style of reading that I cannot recall ever doing. Rather, I would fall prey to the "topical survey" (p. 1638) of a book (listing the content in a mechanical fashion) which Chenail likens to my favorite game show, *The Family Feud*. Chenail also suggests focusing the review by putting forth the grand tour question along with focus questions, borrowed from phenomenological inquiry. In this review the question that was burning inside me as I crawled towards competence was "can I garner the essentials from *Action Research Essentials*?" If so, will it help me focus my own research and alleviate some emotional and attitudinal struggles I face as a first year PhD student. The first step towards my transformation was selecting the book.

## **How I Selected *Action Research Essentials***

As I began my program of study, I was motivated yet stuck. I was inspired by the opportunities and potential to become a contributor to academia but stuck in where to begin. I felt an overwhelming need to gain foundational knowledge to build on. However, I also found myself partially paralyzed due to excessive analysis of various methods and the bombardment of new information. Although it is commonly held that the research question should be the first step that informs the research process, for me, the first step in this journey was deciding why I wanted to conduct research. The simple answer was to enhance the well-being of others. Thus, choosing to explore action research made practical sense since one of its major rationales is to “solve problems, address issues, and improve situations and conditions” (Craig, 2009, p. 6).

Choosing this book in particular was straightforward yet serendipitous. It was straightforward because of two priorities at the time. I was required to conduct a book review as a class assignment and was encouraged by my interim supervisor to increase my publications. Hence, I simply searched the call for book reviews section of *The Qualitative Report* and chose the only book on action research that was available for review to potentially submit for publication. As for the serendipitous finding, I was already in search of building my foundational knowledge on conducting action research (as opposed to theoretical knowledge) and thus the possibility of gaining the essentials from this book seemed like a rational decision but also invoked in me a feeling of reassurance. Whether or not I would commit to immersing myself in this book remained in the balance.

## **The Rationale behind Committing to Review the Book**

The next step in my journey involved skimming through the book to decide whether I would invest time in it or not as recommended by Chenail (2010). After reading the preface and introduction, I found Craig’s (2009) writing style, vision, and acknowledgement of some of the difficulties researchers experience as worthy rationales for committing to this book. Furthermore, since I aimed to use this book to draft the outline of my research dissertation, I found her generous use of examples, rubrics, and checklists to be exactly what I needed. Additionally, one of the reasons Craig wrote the book resonated directly with my situation. She explains that her experience with graduate students revealed that many were confused, lacked confidence in emerging as researchers, and were frustrated at not knowing “where to begin” (xvi). As a result, she wrote the book in a simple, comprehensive, and general manner to be utilized by a range of users across disciplines and at different stages in walking them through the research journey.

## **The First Reading**

Armed with the motivation to gain foundational knowledge and focus, I began the first reading trying to identify whether or not what Craig puts forth resonates with my experience as an experienced practitioner, in a sort of egocentric fashion. According to Craig, action researchers are encouraged to look at what they are involved in to “reflect on what they are thinking, and seek creative ways to improve their situation” (p. 10). This allows for any practitioner to continue their work while also engaging in research which I found to be extremely practical. This book travelled with me to various cities across Alberta as I did work in a couple prisons as well as a trip to Chicago. I recall reading the section called “identifying problems suitable for action research” (p. 31) as I crossed from one end of Chicago to the other passing by communities that have been devastated by crime. I believe it was at that

point that I felt a stronger connection to the text and an even greater commitment to the rationales for action research. In the next round of reading I focused on the content of the book in applying it to my own dissertation and how readers can benefit from my analysis.

## **Round Two: Reading for Application**

### **Objectives and Intent of the Author**

In *Action Research Essentials*, Craig focuses on providing the reader with the essentials of conducting action research and pays little attention to the theoretical background. Her vision for the book was to “create a text that encouraged students to become familiar with the action research process while engaging in inquiry in order to improve practice” (p. xv). Another aspect of her vision was to provide a text to be used in courses across disciplines and to possibly be “integrated into a research course as one component of the research process” (p. xvi). I believe she was successful in her intent by providing the reader with a comprehensible approach to understanding the rationale for action research, a step-by-step process for conducting action research along with gaining ethical approval from review boards, conducting the literature review, writing the report, and implementing the action plan. The examples she provides are indeed relevant for any reader. Nonetheless, if you are unfamiliar with action research, are overwhelmed in beginning the research process, struggle with the literature review, lack focus in designing a research, and/or are stuck in what methods to use for research, then Craig’s book is a good start for you. I will explain how Craig remains grounded in the practical throughout each chapter to address the aforementioned concerns and struggles.

### **Content of the Chapters**

Craig divides up the book into three phases after the introduction with the first being the pre-study phase covered in chapters 2-6. These chapters will be the focus of this review in the context of how Craig addresses the typical concerns of a graduate student and/or novice researcher. These concerns mainly include feelings associated with the lack of foundational knowledge and focus. The last three chapters address the implementation and analysis phase and the post-study phase. You can also preview sections of the book on the publisher’s website to see the diagrams for yourself and to skim through the table of contents to see the 81 sub-headings embedded in the nine chapters of this 248 page book.

In Chapter 1, titled “Introduction to Action Research,” the key concepts of action research are introduced and detailed in later chapters. Some of the concepts mentioned in this chapter can be applied to any research while others are unique to action research. For example, action research follows the typical inquiry process from identifying the problem to gathering and analyzing data, and reporting the results. Thus, if you are contemplating any research method (even quantitative ones) you can benefit from the details in the chapters. However, action research has two unique stages. Mainly the action research report and designing and implementing the action plan. The process of action research is a field intensive (researcher-as-instrument), systematic (especially in analysis), rigorous, reflexive, and structured approach that is practical in nature (it leads to action), participatory and collaborative, yet tentative (as further improvement can be made). In conducting action research, you can begin from a proactive stance in identifying potential problems or a reactive one in identifying existing problems.

Chapter 2 begins with the line, “Beginning the research process may seem overwhelming for readers new to action research or any other type of research” (p. 30);

perhaps akin to the shift from crawling to walking. In remaining grounded in practicality, Craig will walk you through focusing a research topic that is both interesting and of value. She even offers examples on interviewing others to get you started on choosing a topic. Other tools are elaborated on for narrowing the focus such as concept mapping and reflective journals. In Chapter 3, Craig identifies some issues novice researchers struggle with when writing the literature review. She states that one graduate student revealed to her that “the most difficult part of the research process was the literature review” (p. 56). This chapter can help any researcher with understanding how to do complete the literature review for any research from understanding the rationale behind it, analyzing the literature, and putting it all together. The use of various figures, tables, and exhibits will be useful for any reader; especially those developing the literature review for action research. I especially benefitted from the rubrics and pitfalls of getting stuck in the literature review. If you choose only one chapter to read from this book, I would recommend all students struggling with the literature review to read this one.

Chapter 4 challenged a strongly held assumption that I had. Craig states in the opening part that many who are new to research “assume that the research questions that began the inquiry process become the framework of the study. But in fact, that is ordinarily not the case.” (p. 84). She goes on to help the reader through designing the questions and then leading back to reviewing the literature once more. In Chapter 5, titled “Identifying Data Sets to Inform Inquiry,” the understanding of how the research question guides the process is clarified. That is, it flows from the researcher’s expertise in identifying the proper data to inform the research. She adds that the “best means of accomplishing this is to return to the research questions” (p. 108). She then provides an introductory review of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods with an in-depth explanation on quantitative action research. Even though in Chapter 5 the struggles are not identified explicitly, there is still an implicit tone of consoling the struggling researcher of malingering feelings of incompetence, especially since this chapter is laden with research jargon. In reference to my baby steps analogy, it is like the encouraging voice of a parent as a child struggles to stand and then takes the first monumental step. Thus, you will be able to rejoice after completing this chapter as you will begin to feel a sense of competence and focus in conducting an action research.

In Chapter 6, titled, “The Action Researcher’s Tools,” Craig identifies the practitioner’s field journal as a primary tool for action research with reflective practice on the journal entries as crucial to the process. Craig provides various explanations in a comprehensible manner on the importance of reflective practice on the action research process along with some basic elements of reflexivity for those new to the concept. As I read on, I noticed an interesting shift in Craig’s tone and intent. Craig’s tone no longer focused on struggles, confusions, and difficulties of novice researchers and graduate students but rather, she explains that fresh researchers and students begin to enter into “the early stages of research literacy” (p. 140). As if to say that if you have come this far in the research process then you would have overcome the challenges and started walking on your own. Truly, after immersing yourself in this book and reaching Chapter 6, you will probably feel relieved. I personally let out a large sigh of relief after completing Chapter 5.

The final three chapters involve the last two phases and are titled “Organizing, Coding, and Analyzing Qualitative Data,” “The Action Research Report,” and “Designing and Implementing the Action Plan.” Although I chose not to focus on these phases in this review, I will leave you with some final words of guidance from Craig. For analysis and implementation, Craig states that the “manner in which data are organized is not as important as a researcher’s organization style” (p. 164). She also cautions not to put data aside to analyze later but rather the key is to “collect, organize, analyze, code, reanalyze, and collect – and to do all of this on a continuous, ongoing basis” (p. 164). She also offers a great deal of

support on how to conduct the analysis as well as how to write the report, design, and implement the action plan.

### **A Quantitative Description of the Books Strengths**

After immersing myself in this book for an extended period of time, I have come to the conclusion that this book is simple but not simplistic. Simple in that the book is divided up into manageable parts; any chapter can be read alone, and a substantial amount of examples are given for application. The writing style also makes it an easy read for anyone. Craig explains a rationale for a quantitative approach to action research as being due to “the accountability demands placed on schools, universities, and other practitioner-based environments – all of which may prompt a quantitative action research study” (p. 109). Without delving into the quantitative/qualitative debate discourse, I acknowledge that quantitative descriptions can be convincing. For the quantitatively aligned reader, here is a quantitative explanation of how the structure of the book is the greatest testimony to its simplicity. The book has 248 pages (plus 24 pages prior to Chapter 1) divided into 9 chapters with 81 sub-headings and for each chapter there are summary, key terms, discussion questions, suggested topics, and online activities sections. Furthermore, each chapter is filled with figures, tables, and exhibits to facilitate understanding. In fact, the book consists of a total of 20 figures, 20 tables, and 46 exhibits. The author adds eight online references at the end of the book on page 235 involving ethical review board information. Although a disclaimer is available in the opening description of the book that websites may have changed or disappeared, I note that of the eight websites only four actually work. Throughout the book, Craig mainly uses her own voice based on her experience and education remaining grounded in the practical from the beginning to the end of her book. Out of the 35 references drawn upon, 31 are books, only one journal submission was referenced (her own work cited in Craig & Patten, 2006), and three online resources.

### **Online Supplementary Resources**

Craig’s (2009) book also provides complementary online resources. Although the publisher states that they can be found on [joseybas.com](http://joseybas.com), you will need to redirect to [wiley.com](http://wiley.com) to find the document that consists of useful information to supplement the text and provide practical applications. There is a *useful websites* section with links to 34 sites categorized under each chapter. Unfortunately 11 of these links are broken.

### **Potential Readership**

Although Craig’s book has been created with the intention of being applied broadly, I find the writing style and detailed explanation of main points to be most useful for researchers unfamiliar with action research, educators wanting to conduct or teach action research but don’t know how, first year doctoral students developing the foundations, and novice researchers. This book would also be a good resource to provide for research assistants, stakeholders, and collaborators in action research as a tool to orient them to the research process and expectations. However, for professors and experts in research, you may find the excessive detail tedious and possibly even off-putting.

## Summary and Conclusion

In sum, this review is both comprehensive and comprehensible in that the essentials are all covered in a way that any reader can understand. Reading this book will give you the essentials of action research and perhaps motivate you to consider conducting one in your own journey. I can state without hesitation that the vision Craig set out to achieve was successful for at least one reader. After applying Craig's recommendations to an essay outline for a class assignment one baby step at a time, the review I received from my professor was testimony to the application of this book in my life. When I presented my outline to my professor, she said "this looks more like the outline for your dissertation than an essay." Although it was said critiquing my lack of focus and going way beyond the requirements of the assignment, I celebrated inside my head and heart in that I transformed from a crawler to a walker.

In conclusion, not too long ago my son took his first steps, now he is running, climbing, and almost ready to jump. Similarly, I have taken my first steps to becoming an emerging researcher and partially due to the process of immersing myself in Craig's *Action Research Essentials*. Although much is needed before I can start running with a research project or jumping into the role of an academic scholar, I am pleased to state that after reading this book, I have learned the basic framework of conducting action research, feel more confident in my doctoral journey, and am ready to take the next steps.

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## Author Note

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