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On Time Well Spent: A Review of Helen Kara's Research and Evaluation for Busy Students and Practitioners

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Abstract

We all have those moments when we are assigned a new project or research assignment where we think, “Oh my goodness, I don’t even know where to start.” I wish I had this book 20 years ago to guide me through internal conversations and shed light on the research process. Kara weaves the conversation, not only from her perspective and experience but also of others who shared their thoughts and experiences. The book through stories, experiences, and tips creates a virtual friend that acts as a safe place to ask questions and see how others handled certain situations. As a full-time working mom and doctoral student, this book provided me with good nuggets of information that I can immediately apply.

Keywords

Research, Evaluation, Research Project Guide

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On Time Well Spent: A Review of Helen Kara's *Research and Evaluation for Busy Students and Practitioners*

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We all have those moments when we are assigned a new project or research assignment where we think, "Oh my goodness, I don't even know where to start." I wish I had this book 20 years ago to guide me through internal conversations and shed light on the research process. Kara weaves the conversation, not only from her perspective and experience but also of others who shared their thoughts and experiences. The book through stories, experiences, and tips creates a virtual friend that acts as a safe place to ask questions and see how others handled certain situations. As a full-time working mom and doctoral student, this book provided me with good nuggets of information that I can immediately apply. Keywords: Research, Evaluation, Research Project Guide

Introduction

I, like many others, live a very busy life – work, school, family – and trying to fit it all in and do it all well is very challenging (and sometimes next to impossible). The book, *Research and Evaluation for Busy Students and Practitioners: A Time Saving Guide* by Helen Kara, is the best friend book for researchers trying to do it all, and something I wish I had read sooner.

Kara's book speaks to those who have previously done research and evaluation, as well as to novices going through the concept of research, methodologies, approaches, how to's, researching, evaluation, project management, data and analysis, and the writing and dissemination process. Throughout the twelve chapters and subsequent examples she shares with the reader common challenges and methods to successfully navigate the process while maintaining a healthy work-life balance. The conversation with the reader is punctuated with cartoons and examples from others out in the field to provide a wide breath of understanding and levity.

The cartoons at the start of each chapter were something I looked forward to as I read the book. For the introduction, there's a starting guide map and a path to research city, which as you read the book is truly what Kara is sharing with us readers. What is research, why does it matter, what are the various ways you can go about completing it, and in the end what avenues are there for disseminating what you've learned. For some, research is part of an academic pursuit and for others it's becoming a necessity of the job as jobs and job fields have changed over the years. Kara covers big-ticket conversations about research from fundamental principles and practices to essential conversations such as ensuring proper data backup. Even after doing research in grad school and at work in action-type research, I found the tips that were bolded on the pages very helpful and good reminders. Thinking back to my first research project, I distinctly recall being petrified and not knowing how to do it, or if I would do a good job. I wish that I knew then what I know now and what is expressed constantly throughout this book - there is no one way to do research and the only way you're going to get better at doing research is doing more research.

In Chapters 2 and 3 Karen takes us on the path of understanding what research is and common methods. Again, the graphics at the start of each chapter so succinctly and graphically

sum up what Kara and her examples are going to talk about during the next group of pages. Philosophies, research methodologies, and approaches are often multiple doctoral level classes with topics such as statistics (I, II, III), Qualitative Research (I, II, III), Philosophy, and Research Methods to name a few. In this book, if you've never had those classes you can feel comfortable learning the lingo and applications through the explanations, examples and practice opportunities. If you have had some exposure academically to these topics, the chapters help to merge the concepts into a more useful process instead of separate subjects that they often are until you embark on your research proposal and project. We are walked through the process of understanding what research approaches are, from positivist to post-positivist to constructivist to action based to art based to mixed methods in a way that helps explain what the methodologies and approaches are and without needing to take a semester or two of research methods and philosophy; I wish I had these chapters to draw on as a cliff-notes of sorts during the early days of my doctoral studies. Knowing that many of her readers are practitioners, Kara makes a point to discuss Social Return on Investment (SRoI) and the seven principles that comprise it – stakeholders, understanding changes, value, material, not over-claiming, transparency and verification (p. 27) and maybe even more important the absolute necessity for following and conducting research in an ethical manner.

The introduction and first few chapters get us ready for the meat of research, where we are now able to think about the project and speak the lingo with enough respect for the potential cautions and challenges to not jump blindly in. Kara cautions us to take time to really know what the research will be and refine, refine, refine the research questions and approach, as these are the building blocks of the data for your research and methodology. She reminds us that talking to people, such as our friends and family, even if these people are not academics and every-day researchers about our research thoughts, plans and ideas is a great way to work out the kinks in a safe, nurturing environment – “test your proposal on a family member or friend, to make sure it is completely clear, before submitting it to a tutor, commissioner or funder” (p. 74). She ends the chapter with some examples of research funders and the reminder that first time acceptance and funding is not often the norm.

Research, good research, takes time – A LOT of time... Kara takes the time to not only broach this topic in many chapters, but dedicates a full chapter to the concept of managing a research or evaluation project. She discusses common pitfalls, challenges and ways to focus not only on completing the research or evaluation successfully but also on making sure we all take the time to focus on ourselves (mind and body) throughout the process. For those of us who are type-A, highly driven and who often work ourselves sick (or work until our family members beg us to take a break), these reminders help give us the permissions we may need or reminders we may need to take breaks, go out and play or just take a few more days for the process. She helps us keep on track though and ensure completion by providing gnat chart examples (see figure 5.1), time audits/schedule (see figure 5.2), and a what works and doesn't work table (see table 5.1) and above all celebrating the mini-milestones that come with making progress in the process.

Chapters six through nine address the literature gathering and review process, data collection and data analyzing. Everything from how to conduct a literature review and making the best use of the libraries and databases you have available to primary and secondary data discussions, to how to collect data whether you are using qualitative, quantitative or a mixed methods approach and the respective analysis approaches. I appreciated Kara's suggestion that reading outside of your discipline or concept can lead to novel questions and approaches – “rather than reading only from your own subject or discipline, think laterally about which bodies of literature might help to throw light on your research question(s)” (p. 101). Immersing yourself in the literature helps to make the initial connections and identify the gaps, something that can help you define or refine your research questions and subsequent approach and

methodology. Primary and secondary data both have their place in research and evaluation. Throughout these chapters, we start to see how they can work independently or together to help build and provide foundation for your own research. Secondary data is already compiled and doesn't require us to collect new data; whereas primary data is collected by us. With primary data, each of us as researchers needs to go out and get the data – whether it's quantitative through surveys, questionnaires or other measured data or whether is qualitative through focus groups, interviews, observation or other methods – Kara reminds us that no matter what, it's always best to run a pilot (p. 156).

The last three chapters of the book are the 'so what now' chapters. They walk us through how to analyze all of the data you've collected, how to write up the results and then how to get those results out to others to read, use and build upon. A great deal of care, time and effort has been put into the research and evaluation thus far and we are reminded to be vigilant in our analysis and write-up. Accuracy and not-overstating results or making causation statements if not supported by the data are areas that deserve great attention to detail when starting to round the corner and start to close-out the research and evaluation project. The writing process can be one of the most challenging parts "trying to write it up I found laborious. In my head I'd already done it. You don't get taught how to do it..." (p. 189). Kara has seen and heard much of this before and in an effort to help make us all feel more comfortable with the paralysis or anxiety that comes with writing up a project of this size, she has created a table of 'Regularly expresses myths about writing, with my responses,' see Table 10.1 (p. 190). I literally laughed out loud at some of the questions and responses and admit that I have thought some of these myself. Knowing that we are not alone and that this process is challenging but ultimately satisfying and fulfilling is helpful for us as we begin our first project or as we branch into another research method or research avenue. Lastly, focusing on disseminating the information and the various methods and approaches which are discussed we can refer to table 11.2 which discusses pros and cons of the various dissemination methods.

Research and Evaluation for Busy Students and Practitioners: A Time-Saving Guide is a must have for all who are just getting into research or who do research frequently. The exercises and feedback from those who shared with Kara, help affirm that the process of research and evaluation is worth the effort put into the process and her suggestions for keeping perspective throughout, so we can still have a life are essential for all researchers.

References

Kara, H. (2017). *Research and evaluation for busy students and practitioners: A time saving guide*. Chicago, IL: Policy Press.

Author Note

Stephanie Fitzsimmons is pursuing her PhD at the University of South Florida. Her research interests include: self-efficacy, gender differences in self-efficacy, STEM & self-efficacy. Stephanie has degrees and certificates in business, math, education and six sigma. She is the STEM Education Manager for a global security company. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: fitzsimmonss@mail.usf.edu.

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