

Foreword

Journal entry—November 5, 2005

A long time ago, Richard Schmuck told me, “Ellie, you must learn to turn frustrations into problems, because problems can be solved, frustrations can’t.” Oh, how his words changed my life—and no doubt the lives of thousands of educators nationally and internationally!

I remember when I first met him. I was a doctoral student at the University of Oregon in 1990 laden with a great deal of baggage. After many years as an educator, I left teaching to explore a career in business. The longer I stayed away from education, the more my heart ached to work with students again. When I came back to the classroom after a ten-year absence, something was different. I couldn’t decide what. Had the kids changed? the parents? my colleagues? or had *I* changed as I entered midlife? Why were the students so undisciplined? Where were the parents? Why were my fellow teachers on the phone selling real estate during their planning periods? Where was my youthful enthusiasm I had years before?

- I struggled because I simply did not have the skills to be a reflective practitioner. Indeed, I never even considered journaling. Was that like keeping a professional diary?
- I did not have focused strategies to analyze problems. STP? I thought that was something my husband used in the car!
- I certainly had no idea where to start to improve my situation through self-study. Wasn’t research something somebody else did from the outside in rather than the inside out?

Then I met Dick.

At the University of Oregon he taught me how to search for self-knowledge. As he does in this second edition of his book *Practical Action Research for Change*, he gave me the skills and knowledge related to the three components of continuous improvement. First, I learned to practice reflective thinking to get a better understanding of situations I faced and to prepare myself for new ways to take action. Second, I became a problem solver deeply entrenched in organizational development—a systematic way to create planned change. Then he introduced me to an incredibly powerful tool—action research.

Action research is a way for people within an organization to study their own situations individually and collectively, try new practices, evaluate those innovations, adjust, and try again. It is one big cycle of continuous improvement.

Action research is something we've done for years in our classrooms, schools, districts, and beyond. What we lacked was the formal structure to work methodically through issues. Dick gives us that structure in *Practical Action Research for Change*. I suppose it's like when the Good Witch told Dorothy that she didn't really need the ruby red slippers. She always had the power—she just needed to realize it. *Practical Action Research for Change* helps us realize the power within us to make education better for our children, teachers, staff, parents, and communities.

Action research certainly empowered me ten years ago when I was a school principal. I introduced my teachers and staff to the concept. The process became contagious. The more they learned, the more they wanted to know. Together we identified our current Situation, set specific Targets we wanted to reach, and designed the Paths we wanted to take to attain our goals. Action research became a way of life in our school. Our culture changed from a hornet's nest of complainers to a collaborative community of problem solvers.

Today action research is even timelier for educators. We are in a critical age of assessment and accountability. The federally mandated No Child Left Behind Act challenges educators to make continuous improvement based on data-driven decisions. Who best to collect that data than the people who live within the schoolhouse walls? *Practical Action Research for Change* details how to carry out proactive and responsive studies that inspire innovations and tackle sticky problems that need fixing. Educators must take control of their situations by formally studying them if they wish to control the outcomes.

In *Practical Action Research for Change* we learn how to control outcomes through example. Dick uses many easy-to-read cases showing how conducting action research provides insight into achieving educational goals. For example, in this second edition he draws on the work of students in the Arizona State University Leadership for Educational Entrepreneurs (LEE) program I founded and direct. LEE is an innovative, nationally recognized master's degree that bridges the MEd and MBA degrees. I specifically designed LEE for charter school leaders who need both education and business skills to promote student achievement successfully. *Practical Action Research for Change* showcases proactive and responsive studies conducted by the first cohort of LEE Fellows under the tutelage of Dr. Schmuck. Using the systematic data collection detailed in his book, those practitioner-scholars now boast of making a positive difference for more than 300,000 children nationwide.

We are enormously indebted to Richard Schmuck. His dedication to teaching action research is unparalleled. He captures the spirit of his classroom in the second edition of *Practical Action Research for Change*. For the educators Dick has taught, they will recognize his special way of entwining direct instruction with practical examples and journaling. For the educators yet to come, *Practical Action Research for Change* is a book they must read if they are serious about making a difference for kids.

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