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Action research within the field of adult education is a method for creating collaborative projects and action research “teams” that rely upon the collective skills and experience of teachers, researchers and participants in order to create adult programs that solve real-world problems while respecting the needs and expectations of adult learners. Adult Education programs that use action research have been effective at addressing traditional barriers to success for adults. These projects have a broad application to solve problems within local community-based education programs, traditional educational programs and within the workplace.

In order to better understand action research, it is helpful to first define it within the specific context of adult education then discuss ways that action research can be applied within the classroom, the community and the workplace. Since action research is used to solve practical problems, it is also important to consider the implications of using action research methods in different contexts (community, work, school) and to think about how we teach practitioners and researchers to create and carry out action research projects in the field. Adult education practitioners can use action research methods to solve real-life problems and to improve life outcomes for individuals through creating programs that address barriers to success and using the knowledge and experience found within collaborative teams.

Defining Action Research in Context

Lewin (1946) first defined the term “action research” as it applies to the field of Social Science 1946 in his article, “Action Research and Minority Problems”. More recently, Levin and Martin (2007) stated that action learning is a “strategic approach” rather than a single research method and defined its purpose as a way to create knowledge through the collaboration of participants and researchers in solving practical problems while maintaining “democratic” control over the issues (p. 220). Shifferaw and Burton (2008) offered a simplistic definition of action research (as it applies to Adult Education) as “a systematic inquiry of one's practice, the identification of issues and problems that one wants to change, and the actions that need to be taken in order to

bring about changes” (p. 111). Huang (2010) differentiates action research from qualitative research since action research requires working with practitioners and qualitative research is about practitioners and adult education practices (p. 94).

A broader view of action research is that it utilizes a form of experiential learning as the model for the action research collaborative team, thus maintaining the democratic control of the project. Action research uses these experiential structures to define a project team which then forms shared objectives and uses an interactive, participatory style (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994). Dirkx (1996) offered an adult education based conceptual framework surrounding workplace learning (from the perspective of human resource development) where workplace learning is increasingly seen as situational, contextual and collaborative (p. 44) – even democratic in nature; similar to the precepts of the model for action research projects. Garavan, McGuire and O’Donnell (2004) offer an interesting idea that comes from human resource development discourse which looks at the contributions of an “individual” versus looking from the point of view of the “organization” that can be applied to action research in adult education. A traditional adult education practitioner (teaching in the classroom, for example) is working as an individual, but when conducting action research the practitioner works collaboratively with a team on the project and benefits from the diverse knowledge and experience available.

Applying Action Research in Adult Education and the Workplace

Action research has many useful applications within the field of education and in the workplace. This research can be used to improve learning in the classroom and to create effective programs for change in the workplace. As a technique, action research requires little funding, minimal experience and a support team in order to be implemented which makes it an ideal problem solving strategy. Dick (2009) noted that action research and organization development have been linked as organizations employ this method to create change (p. 426). Maurer and Githens (2009) suggested that organization development move away from the traditional “problem solving” action research methods that generate solutions for specific problems as they arise and toward a more holistic type of action research focused on creating a dialog about problems and creating broader solutions (p. 276).

Shifferraw and Burton (2008) conducted practitioner-based action research in Washington DC adult education classrooms starting in 2003 in partnership with research professors from the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) Education and Social Work departments. The action research team assisted the “teacher-researchers” to design simple action research projects to look for ways to create positive changes within the classroom. Projects included developing strategies to improve reading, student attendance and class participation; designing effective ESOL teaching techniques; creating clear and consistent family literacy instructions and creating self-paced learning utilizing technology in Adult Education classrooms (p. 110). The purpose of the action research project was to provide an opportunity for professional development for the teachers to grow as researchers while also serving the needs of the adult education community. As such, the study is a good example of a useful pairing of theory and practice.

Kuhne et al. (1997) examined six adult education action research case studies which took place in different settings including a hospital, a museum, a prison, a homeless shelter, a church and a university. In all six case studies the practitioners shared an action learning class and served as the action learning team of each other’s projects. Each participant was asked to design and test an action research problem related to a practical problem in the workplace.

In the museum-based case study, the action researcher sought to shift instructor’s perspectives from a pedagogical point of view to that of one where they considered the expectations and needs of the adult learner’s taking their education and enrichment classes. The purpose of the religious action research was to design a program to increase attendance by adult church members at community and adult education programs offered by the church. The prison research project aimed to increase available staff to work in the prison environment teaching literacy skills in a rural community. The homeless shelter project sought to increase the intrinsic motivation of the residents in order to pursue higher levels of learning in order to better their lives. The university-based project focused on utilizing conference technology in order to provide experienced instructors to students in a rural area and the hospital-

based project attempted to increase compliance with hand washing requirements in order to reduce the spread of infection in intensive care units. It is clear from the varied action research projects and their applications within the workplace that action research has multifaceted possibilities for solving real-world problems.

Implications

According to Levin and Martin (2007) action research is a set of behaviors that is “learned in action, in reflections with others, in reflection on what is written (theory), and in discourse, [with further] interaction through language, especially written discourse. Taken together, these four components comprise the cycle of action and reflection that describe the progression of action research” (p. 223). Since it takes both an understanding of theory and application through practice, action research is something that cannot be learned in a classroom without an experiential component learned by working the field. Adult Education practitioners can learn the theory of action research within the higher education classroom, but must then practice the art of research “in action” and learn through the process of experience and from interactions and feedback from other practitioners.

Another implication for applying action research within the field of Adult Education is that the cornerstone of action research is to work towards solving practical problems. In the field of Adult Education this means that the context of all research is paramount. Adult Educators must consider issues such as creating solutions to social problems, minimizing barriers to adult education access, working within structured organizations and planning programs designed for adults in addition to the action research project itself (Levin & Martin, 2007). Ibanez-Carrasco and Riano-Alcala (2009) suggest that creating connections between work, community and education is key to fostering an environment where action research can be used to solve problems. The underlying belief behind the application of action research to solve problems in Adult Education is that collaboration and working with a team of individuals with varied experience and skill sets can produce better results than one individual working alone.

There is some concern about whether or not action research can be considered to be valid and reliable in the traditional, scientific sense of academic research. Each

action research project is reflective in nature and highly dependent on the setting and collective knowledge and experience of the project's action research team and therefore, not traditionally valid or reliable since the results cannot be generalized to any other project of a similar nature. However, Chandler and Torbert (2003) have offered a "27 flavor" typology in order to increase the validity of action research in the eyes of scholarly researchers by using first person (awareness), second person (conversation) and third person (organizing) experiences as a feedback loop for the action research team and to guide the action research process itself (p.139).

Summary and Conclusions

In 2002, Alan Knox wrote a call to action to adult education practitioners asking for the field of adult education as a whole to focus on returning to its collaborative roots. He asked practitioners to design action research projects to serve the needs of the local community, to share resources and to work together as a team to strengthen the field despite limited financial resources (p. 331). I think that, in order to survive as a unique field, adult education must seek collaboration with other supporting and related fields and focus on contributing both through practice and by adding to the body of scholarly research in the broader fields of education and work. Yorks (2005) also called for collaboration between adult education and other fields in order to create a collaborative social space and an environment conducive to solving problems.

Scholars have demonstrated that action research has broad applications for the workplace, the community and in the classroom. Action research, as a methodology, can provide a platform for adult education to remain true to its focus on individuals and improving life outcomes through education and increased opportunity while also solving real-world issues both in the workplace and within adult education programs by removing or effectively addressing traditional barriers to success.

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