Piloting an Innovative Adult Education Project Using Action Research: A Four-Step Guide

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In 2014, the Ontario Ministry of Education launched the provincial Adult Education Strategy (AES) to improve the educational outcomes of adult learners through the development of regional partnerships to foster increased collaboration, capacity building, and innovation in Adult Education (AE). The Eastern Regional Partnership for Adult Education (ERPAE) was one of seven regional partnerships formed to enact the three-year AES. During the final year of the strategy, the ERPAE piloted eight innovative AE best practice projects. As part of ongoing efforts to document their work, the ERPAE used an Action Research (AR) framework to design, execute, and report on their innovative projects. This monograph provides guidance to Adult Education professionals who wish to undertake similar innovative work using an AR approach. It begins with an overview of what Action Research is and then outlines the process for undertaking an innovative AE project in four steps: 1) select an area for innovation, 2) determine how to document the project, 3) implement the project, and 4) reflect and act on project results.

What is **Action Research?**

Action research is a form of applied research that is an attempt to *"study a real school situation with a view to improve the quality of actions and results within it" (Schmuck, 1997, p. 28)*. It is any systematic inquiry conducted by educational stakeholders (e.g., teachers, principals, school counselors, students) who desire to gather information about ways that schools operate in order to gain insight, develop practice, affect change, and improve student outcomes (Mills, 2000). The most common application of action research helps educators uncover solutions to complex problems (University of Lethbridge, n.d.). AR provides educators with a systematic process to consider and reflect upon options, implement possible solutions, and evaluate the effectiveness of enacted solutions. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2000) suggests it is a valuable form of inquiry for educators because it is:

PRACTICAL: Practical improvements are the focus,

PARTICIPATIVE: Teachers, administrators, teacher assistants, students, and parents can all be involved in meaningful ways,

EMPOWERING: All participants can contribute to and benefit from the process,

INTERPRETIVE: Meaning is constructed using participants' multiple realities in the situation,

TENTATIVE: There are not always right or wrong answers; rather, there are possible solutions based upon multiple viewpoints, and

CRITICAL: Participants look critically at specific problems and act as self-critical change agents.

In the final year of the AES, eight district school boards in the ERPAE used Action Research to pilot innovative AE projects. Each school board team worked together to identify an area for innovation based on need, decide how to collect and analyse project data, execute their innovation, and reflect on their data to inform future practice. What follows is a four-step guide to developing an innovative practice in AE, based on the collective experiences of ERPAE members. This process promoted intellectual engagement and professional growth in project participants (Mertler, 2017), as evidenced by firsthand accounts shared by ERPAE members throughout the project.

1 Select an Area for Innovation in Adult Education

The first step for any research project is to decide what is going to be studied (Mertler, 2017). The AES provided four mandates related to the adult learner's journey as areas for focussed innovation: 1) intake, assessment, and referral; 2) guidance and pathway planning; 3) prior learning and assessment recognition (PLAR); and 4) flexible delivery. The ERPAE developed a fifth regional AE mandate of raising awareness about Adult Education. Each of the eight district school boards within the ERPAE self-selected one of the five mandates on which to base an innovative pilot project. Given the diverse nature of AE programs in eastern Ontario, each school board team selected a project that aligned with their school board's priorities and, most importantly, helped improve educational outcomes for adult learners. For example, three school boards focused on raising awareness of their Adult and Continuing Education programs within their own board, in their community, or both. One vice-principal explained,

"We realized as a group, that we were unable to work on the other pillars or mandates of the ERPAE until we raised awareness within our board communities...our staffs [in] our schools could be some of our biggest advocates, if they knew what we did. They are the front line people who are hearing from parents that they [have] lost their job, or are thinking of returning to school...As a result, our project to raise awareness within our school communities as well as our community agencies was born" (Jennifer Lentz, Vice Principal of St. James Catholic Education Centre, Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario).

Another school board in a predominantly rural setting decided to focus its project on flexible delivery because of a gap they recognized in program delivery: many adults didn't have transportation to access their program locations. As a result, they focused on partnering with community agencies to offer itinerant sites. A third board focused on upgrading its PLAR processes to

make them more learner-centred and accessible. PLAR helps adults obtain their Ontario Secondary School Diploma by enabling them to earn credits for past work and life experiences. Once board teams chose an area for innovation, they developed a related research question(s) to help narrow the scope of their project. Good research questions are open-ended, often beginning with how and why, and are measurable. There are many possibilities for innovation in AE. The AES mandates provided a helpful structure for boards to select an area that was both relevant and instrumental for supporting adult learners.

2   Determine How to Document the Project

After selecting an area for innovation and formulating a strong research question(s), each team decided how data would be collected and analyzed to document their project. Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) suggest three main categories of data collection techniques for action research. First, whenever observations are made by educators, field notes or journals are useful to record what is seen and heard. Second, face-to-face interviews or questionnaires can be used to ask questions of individuals who are participating in the project. Third, existing records and documents can be examined. Data collected can be quantitative (i.e., information expressed numerically) or qualitative (i.e., information expressed in language) in nature, or a mixture of both. Essentially, quantitative data is summarized using numbers, whereas qualitative data provides context, description, and trends for a phenomenon expressed in a variety of ways. Of primary importance is that data aligns with and can answer the research question(s). The ERPAE district school board teams gave considerable thought to the data they planned to collect. Two school boards focused on raising awareness of their AE programs collected pre- and post-project website traffic numbers and learner registration data. This allowed them to compare numbers prior to project implementation with numbers after the project was put in place. School boards interested in understanding more about the learner's experience and the perspectives of their community partners developed questionnaires for them. For example, one principal explained,

"We created a student questionnaire to gain student feedback on the services, programing and resources they were able to access as a result of TR Leger School creating a hub in their home community. We created a community partner questionnaire to learn what community agencies knew about our services, programing and resources prior to the pilot project and to assess the effectiveness of our marketing during the pilot. We collected demographic data about our learners at each location" (Sandy McInnes, Principal of TR Leger School of Adult, Alternative and Continuing Education, Upper Canada District School Board).

For the most part, school board teams collected multiple sources of pertinent data to address their research questions and capture their project's impact.

3   Implement the Project

Successful implementation of a project requires detailed planning and purposeful action. Before school board teams executed their projects, they completed a project proposal template, including a budget, which ensured they had carefully considered the stages of project activity. Teams were given feedback on their proposals by the ERPAE Table representatives to strengthen project design and implementation. In many ways, the project proposal acted as a project action plan. In an action plan, a team works together to create a detailed plan to achieve one or more objectives. While there are variations of action plans, they tend to include the following components:

- WHAT actions will occur
- WHO will carry out the actions and who needs to know about the actions
- WHEN the actions will take place and for how long
- WHAT resources are needed for the actions

(Center for Community Health and Development, 2018)

A number of action plan templates are available online at no cost. By working collaboratively on an action plan, teams ensured there was shared responsibility and accountability for their projects.

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4 Reflect and Act on Project Results

Upon the completion of pilot projects, school board teams were asked to reflect on their Action Research results in report format. Overwhelmingly positive project results reinforced the need for innovation in AE and its benefits for learners. ERPAE school boards confirmed adopting the innovative practices they piloted in their AE programs. One school board even decided to expand its project to include additional itinerant sites for program delivery. Moreover, all eight school boards participated in an ERPAE meeting to present their project results to the partnership. The meeting increased awareness of innovative AE projects within the region and promoted resource sharing. One principal communicated, *"The project and final results affirmed that we must continually reflect on data. Then, change our practices accordingly to better serve our learners" (Philip Capobianco, Principal of St. Nicholas High School and Continuing and Community Education, Ottawa Catholic School Board).* For more information about innovative AE pilot project results for each of the eight ERPAE school boards, please see https://www. eosdn.on.ca/initiatives/adult-education-strategy.

Concluding Remarks

In addition to promoting innovative AE practices to support the educational outcomes of adult learners, the Action Research undertaken by the ERPAE developed capacity in its members. School board teams had a chance to work collaboratively within their boards to develop research skills, implement innovative AE projects, and affect positive change for their learners. An ERPAE member reported how the project facilitated his professional growth: *"I have had the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues from across our region on many initiatives, ranging from Adult Education program promotion to PLAR Assessments…We have begun to build our capacity locally, based on the regional and provincial capacity from which we have benefited" (Roger Ramsay, Quinte Adult Education Coordinator, Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board).* Innovation in Adult Education guided by Action Research is practical, empowering, and timely.

Acknowledgment

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