

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

---

Adult Education Research Conference

2000 Conference Proceedings (Vancouver, BC,  
Canada)

---

## Issues of Action Research and Adult Basic Education

Rosemarie Mincey

*University of Tennessee, USA*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mincey, Rosemarie (2000). "Issues of Action Research and Adult Basic Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/roundtables/25>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

# Issues of Action Research and Adult Basic Education

Rosemarie Mincey  
University of Tennessee, USA

**Abstract:** *A three-state action research (AR) project with adult basic education (ABE) instructors led to the development of new approaches for documenting outcomes and new insights about the process of conducting AR.*

## Project Framework

Through collaborative inquiry, reflection, and change-seeking activities, action research (AR) offers a wide range of research possibilities; as a method of inquiry, among other uses, it may be used to address and solve practical problems and improve operations. The method “consists of a family of methodologies that pursue outcomes of both action (change) and research (understanding). It uses a process which alternates between action and systematic reflection, or achieves theory-practice integration by some other means” (Action Research International, 1999, <<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/ari/ari-auth.html>>).

Particularly within the last decade, AR has emerged as a potential source for improving education in many ways, and has been used in exploring issues surrounding adult basic education (ABE). An instance when AR proved to be useful was in addressing performance accountability issues in ABE. From federal and state directives, program activities at the local level, and within the individual classroom, there is current mandated emphasis in the U.S. for ABE programs to document outcomes. ABE learner accomplishments have traditionally been measured with external academic validations, and this is still prevalent. However, some changes that learners undergo are more internal, and it is these changes – the “invisibles” – that often have no existing processes for measurement and documentation to suggest life changes.

In an attempt to increase understanding of how ABE programs might better document the outcomes of changes in ABE program participants’ lives, an AR project was developed to address this concern. The purpose of this project, entitled *Documenting Outcomes for Learners and Their Communities:*

*Developing Performance Accountability at the Local Level*, included performance measurement activities to document indicators and measures of impacts of ABE program participation. The total project consisted of three to six ABE program teachers and administrators for each team (one each located in the states of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee), facilitated by the staff of a university-based adult literacy research center.

## Issues and Considerations

Several unanticipated challenges were encountered during the action research process. These mainly dealt with time constraints, divergent decisions about what was to be documented and how, and with standardization. Briefly, several major issues we confronted included:

### *Accountability*

Clarification of the concept of accountability and responsibilities among team members and with students, regulatory agencies, and systems of state ABE program bureaucracy took more time than anticipated. A lack of clarity about the data collection forms used for program accountability (and why used) led to development of definition tools used to identify work focus (student or program inputs, instruction, student or program outputs, or student outcomes, etc.). As facilitators, the amount of documentation required for three different programs in as many different states, beyond the coordination this entailed, was a consistent task we faced in our own accountability efforts.

### *Buy-in*

There were essentially two levels of “persuasion” at work. As facilitators, it was our task to convince the

practitioner researchers that the extra work required of them for the project (and the adaptations required within their schedules) would be beneficial both professionally and programmatically. The practitioners, in turn, had to “sell” the project activities to the learners, which was not a simple process. Some learners were at first reluctant to record their learning activities outside of class, as extra forms to fill out appeared to be more “homework.”

### *Time Management*

Each team member had to consider the limited in-class time resources of their work, and adjust their schedules for collecting evidence and documentation required for a research project of this nature. Intra-program coordination was not easy for the teams, as the instructors often taught different skill levels and had widely varying schedules (morning and evening classes). While the Kentucky and Tennessee teams serve one county in one facility each, the Virginia program is regional, serving a seven-county area in facilities ranging from public housing developments to correctional facilities, providing both logistics and time management considerations.

### *Different Needs/Different Results*

Because each programs’ needs were different, the responses to address these needs differed as well. The Virginia team aligned their documentation process with state requirements, and developed a checklist of possible outcomes, called “Do/Set/Met,” that indicates learner activities (e.g., a job promotion, opening a checking account, being more involved in children’s schooling, etc.). The Kentucky program

chose to focus on documenting outcomes in one life domain shared by its learner community: being a better parent. The Tennessee program selected the concept of “Taking Responsibility for Learning,” or TRL, as their program emphasis, developed documentation of how this occurs within the program, and collected information from learners about their TRL activities outside of class.

The AR process provided the practitioner researchers with several new tasks. These included actively becoming more aware about program documentation, creating spaces for increased student feedback and involvement, and designing measurement tools, customizing these to be more specific to their own programs and local communities instead of only compiling the more “generic” information required for state and federal agencies. As facilitators, we felt firsthand the divergence between theorizing about AR and actually “doing” it. AR is not a static process, but is indeed one of reflection and action; at some point, although never disappearing completely, the theoretical gives way to the practical, and this project has created some useful solutions for documenting local program outcomes. Practitioner participants agreed learning about other aspects of learners’ lives outside the confines of the classroom had provided them with an opportunity to “get to know students better.” The enhanced perspectives and understandings gained by all project participants underscore the importance of AR as a means of inquiry and change within personal, professional, and community-building endeavors.