

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO PLANNING, REFLECTION, AND DOCUMENTATION

1. Introduction

The information you document should be **useful** to you in shaping your program and **meaningful** to both program participants and the field. It should reflect your experiences, the meanings you attribute to them, and your plans for future actions.

To promote this type of documentation, we are using a *collaborative, locally-controlled* approach to outcomes-based program planning and documentation, employing the principles of **participatory action research** (PAR).

PAR is an approach to research and learning that uses different methods to address issues or possibilities identified and defined by a community. It is ultimately about the improvement of practice and the creation of knowledge in social groups. It creates new ways of working, interacting, and knowing.

2. The 5 Characteristics of Participatory Action Research

PAR is:

- **Participatory**—It is owned and controlled by the community. (The community may choose to hire outside evaluators to assist with their evaluation efforts, but the community maintains control over the process. Evaluators or researchers offer one of many perspectives that the community considers in its efforts to document and interpret what is happening.)
- **Defined by a need for action**—A community initiates the project to address an issue or act on a possibility, and the action is guided by that goal. The research is assessed based on the extent to which it helps the community reach that goal or, in some cases, to redefine the goal. The research is, in the best cases, creative and transformative.
- **Useful and meaningful**—PAR creates knowledge that is useful and meaningful. It validates local knowledge. It recognizes that participants are capable of analyzing the situation and developing solutions to the challenges that face them. It also questions common assumptions about what counts as knowledge. It recognizes that knowledge is the meaning that people attribute to their experiences.
- **Reflexive about the creation of meaning**—The research team questions its own activities regularly. Why do we do research? Who benefits from it? Who uses it, for what purposes? Who is included or excluded from the process?
- **Flexible and iterative**—The shape and focus of the research may change as participants focus and refocus their understandings of what is really happening and

what is important to them. Throughout the process, new questions, understandings, and directions may arise and reshape the course of action. The research proceeds through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. (PAR generates “possibility theory” instead of “predictive theory.”)

3. A Framework for Participatory Action Research (the 4 phases of developing a collaborative inquiry process)

1. Forming a collaborative inquiry group
 - Engaging a diverse group of community members
 - Developing the inquiry project
 - Framing the research question
 - Designing the research project
 - Establishing collective leadership
 - Reflecting on group processes
2. Creating the conditions for group learning
 - Agreeing on a constitution for collaboration
 - Repeating cycles of action and reflection to generate learning
3. Acting on the inquiry question
 - Putting plans and designs into practice
 - Keeping reflective records
 - Respecting ownership of group ideas
 - Questioning honestly
 - Practicing dialogue and reflection
4. Making meaning (capturing and interpreting the group’s experiences)
 - Understanding the experience
 - Selecting a method for interpreting diverse experiences
 - Avoiding common assumptions and questioning dominant values
 - Checking validity by considering multiple perspectives and methods
 - Celebrating meaningful collaboration
 - Communicating to the public arena

Continue the cycle by reconsidering the group, recreating the conditions for group learning, and so on.

4. An Example of Participatory Action Research within ADI

The Northern Lakes Center for the Arts (Amery, WI) implemented a four-part multidisciplinary arts-based civic dialogue project that focused on the use and abuse of area rivers and lakes and involved the publication of writings by local writers, the composition and performance of a new piece of music, the production of a play dealing with water pollution and civic dialogue, and the creation and dedication of a fountain. The project was designed to engage many of the small community’s residents, including

the mayor, who served as a dialogue facilitator during some of the post-performance discussions.

The project director and other team members developed their research questions and then contacted the ADI evaluation coaches for assistance in designing the Center's evaluation of the project. After a long conversation about the project's goals and activities, the coaches proposed an evaluation plan that the director then took back to the project team. The team agreed that the plan met their needs, and so the evaluation coaches and project director began collaborating to develop the data collection instruments. The instruments included an audience questionnaire tailored for each of the four art and dialogue activities and protocols for focus group interviews with the dialogue facilitators, artists, civic leaders, and audience members. The evaluation coaches drafted the instruments based on their conversations with the director, who then reviewed and revised the instruments and gathered feedback from other team members. Once the instruments were finalized, the project director and ADI liaisons used them as planned, noting problems and challenges along the way (e.g., that some of the survey respondents failed to complete the second page of the survey). The coaches and team members continued to modify the instruments after each of the arts projects.

The project director and his team then began analyzing the data they had collected. One of the dialogue facilitators, a high school senior, had recently completed a statistics course and was eager to assist with the analysis of survey data. She created a survey database, entered the data, and conducted the analyses. She and other team members then analyzed the content of the focus group interviews, which the team had recorded and transcribed.

At this point, the team noticed several challenges to their interpretation of the data. For example, they noticed that while they had observed all of the audience members participating in one of the post-performance dialogues, the survey data revealed that some of these individuals did not feel that they had participated in the discussion. The project director contacted the evaluation coaches to discuss these issues. Together, they developed several possible explanations for the discrepancy between the data sources. It was possible that the audience members defined "dialogue" and/or "participation" differently than the project team did. It was also possible that while these audience members did speak during the dialogue component, they did not feel that the discussion addressed their main concerns or went far enough. After discussing these possibilities, the director and team members agreed that clarifying the issue would require going back to those audience members and asking for more information, which was not possible at that point. The situation exemplified a key aspect of participatory action research, which is that different community members will experience things differently and assign different meanings to them. The director agreed that he would need to describe this challenging situation in his final report. The coaches and director noted that, were there another round of program implementation and evaluation, they could add an open-ended follow-up question to the survey item on participation (e.g., How do you define participation in dialogue?).

Overall, the project director and team members reported that the evaluation was a positive, empowering experience for them. They recognized and used their local

expertise—from their capacity to make critical design decisions to their ability to analyze both quantitative and qualitative data—and sought outside help when needed, keeping in mind that the outside help provided one of many perspectives on their evaluation activities. The collaboration among the coaches, director, and team members benefited from open communication, a commitment to flexibility and the iterative process of evaluation design and implementation, and a shared focus on determining the information that would be most useful to the project.