

Action Research Project Summary

Numbers and Narratives: Adding up Stories of Success in Adult Literacy

Bow Valley College

Calgary, Alberta

Research Question

What characteristics of the relationship between Calgary Learns (funder) and two Bow Valley College adult literacy/basic education programs (service providers) support mutual accountability and how can these characteristics be strengthened or nurtured?

Objectives

- Develop and test a tool for funders and providers to assess the level of mutual accountability between them
- Demonstrate the advantages of a collaborative approach to improving accountability
- Strengthen relationships and communication between delivery programs, Calgary Learns and the provincial funder, Alberta Advanced Education and Technology
- Identify areas of strength in the accountability system and build upon them

Team Members & Responsibilities

Project Manager	<i>Audrey Gardner</i> , Coordinator, Centre for Foundational Learning, Bow Valley College Overall project management; tool administration and data analysis
Practitioner-Researcher	<i>Ian Kennedy</i> , Educator, Bow Valley College Tool administration and data analysis
Funder	<i>Jeannie Finch</i> , Grants Coordinator, Calgary Learns Input on and review of tool; testing the tool from funder perspective
Research Friend	<i>Merrill Cooper</i> , Social research consultant Research methodology support; drafting of the mutual accountability assessment tool

Methods

As a team, we developed and designed the participant selection, the assessment tool and the method of data collection and analysis through a series of steps, including:

1. Meetings to explore and discuss accountability and mutual accountability, and determine our research method; ongoing meetings throughout the project to determine next steps, dialogue and reflect
2. Ethics review application and approval
3. Literature review on mutual accountability. This review was used to inform the development of the research brief, *Mutual Accountability and Adult Literacy*.
4. Development of the assessment tool
5. Invitation to participate in the project
6. Interviews with participants before testing the tool

7. Testing of the tool
8. Interviews with participants after testing the tool
9. Data analysis
10. Report draft and review by team
11. Completion and submission of final report

Challenges

This action research project was a learning process for all the team members as well as other participants. Challenges were evident throughout:

- It was difficult to pin down the concept of mutual accountability. “Mutual” might imply a relationship between two parties, but it really has to be multiple to work.
- Team members had not previously worked together in this way and some had not worked together much at all.
- The original work plan was continually being adjusted, partly because accountability can be quite nebulous as a concept and practise, but also because of changes in coordinators in both programs during the research.
- Changes in individual participant schedules prompted adjustments to the original work plan.
- The project had to grapple with staff changeover of the literacy program coordinator role in both pilot programs during the research process.
- Lack of time restricted planning and trying out the tool. Team members also did not have enough time to support each other learning about research methodology and process.
- Team members played multiple roles in the research project (e.g. the funder was interviewed and reviewed the final report; the project manager conducted interviews and was interviewed).

Findings and Voices from the Research

The findings from the interviews are organized into three areas: participants’ understanding of accountability and mutual accountability; characteristics of mutual accountability; and the potential of the mutual accountability assessment tool.

1) Participants understanding of accountability and mutual accountability

Participants indicated that accountability means responsibility, demonstrating that the work is being done within the parameters of what was committed to, and that it is for the benefit of learners. Regarding mutual accountability, participants emphasized that the responsibilities are shared, that there is a partnership, and that respect, trust and open communication are critical.

[Mutual accountability is] shared responsibility, a relationship of respect and collaboration towards the betterment of the community. (funder)

Mutual implies two people, me to them, and respect between the two. They will listen to input from me. I like to try to think like a funder. We have mutual roles and responsibilities. The funder is responsible for providing guidelines and for listening to feedback or input from the programs they fund. (service provider)

2) Characteristics of mutual accountability

Participants were asked to identify the characteristics of a good relationship between funder and service provider. We present responses in relation to characteristics of mutual accountability laid out in Merrifield’s *Contested Ground: Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education*.

a) Negotiated between stakeholders

Most participants said communication, flexibility, respect and trust are necessary for successful negotiation about expectations, indicators of success, information flows and capacity building.

Openness, respect, opportunities for joint dialogue, being proactive & responsive, understanding our work, asking them to explain what we don't understand. (funder)

When I think about the funder and accountability I think about what they might measure differently from the service provider. We may have different views of success. (service provider)

We need to couch assessment in adult learning principles where we honour student safety and comfort regarding assessment... We should not put responsibility for the program on learners. (funder)

b) Responsibility matched with an equal enabling right

All the participants noted the importance of knowing and fulfilling one's accountability responsibilities. Regarding enabling rights, most participants referred to learners.

My own thought on mutual accountability is that each side has responsibilities and rights. In a similar way I have to make the best match for the student but also look at what the volunteer needs to get out of the experience. I'm looking at both needs. (service provider)

c) Clear and agreed upon expectations

In response to questions about roles and expectations, some participants indicated the importance of knowing one's own role in order to know what to expect of others in a mutual accountability relationship. Most participants stated that respect, trust and open communication are necessary to establish clear expectations.

You have to be clear about your role. It is unrealistic to think that all relationships are good/easy. You have to work with what you've got. The roles in the relationship set the parameters of the relationship. I feel strongly that you have to learn that you are in a professional role. (service provider)

Transparency, honesty, respect, compassion, the ability to impart education or knowledge around expectations. (funder)

d) Capacity to hold others accountable

Some participants indicated that they appreciated the efforts made by the funder to build capacity.

...(the funder) has good communication, provides information, a real willingness to answer questions and help you through the maze...It's a terrific and important concept. It is hands on often enough and it made you feel you could do your job without being overburdened with accountability details, so having midpoint and end reports is very sensible compared to weekly or monthly . . . (service provider)

e) Negotiated information flows to improve services

Some participants indicated that trying out the mutual accountability tool helped them question their assumptions about the direction of information flows.

...the whole concept of what you count and how it is counted and the value that the funder and service provider place on the learning that occurs so the information that is collected does not just have to go up the food chain. (service provider)

I'd like to offer a richer reporting back to the service providers on what we learn from their reports to us – aggregating the report data and returning it to them. From service providers: I'd like a more clear sense of the specific impact of our funding that we can then report to our funder and to the community in general (funder).

3) **Potential of the mutual accountability tool**

Participants liked the tool. They said it highlights the importance of relationship and increases awareness and appreciation of each other's workload and responsibilities (funder-service provider). They indicated that, with further testing and revision, it has the potential to offer benchmarks or standards not only for the adult literacy field, but across the voluntary sector.

[the tool] really clarifies roles and responsibilities on both sides. I'm pleased that service providers would get a sense of how much we do behind the scenes. Our work is really onerous. It's difficult and it's complicated but it's very, very thoughtful. We don't make our decisions lightly. (funder)

Some participants appreciated that the tool included questions for both funder and service provider, so that the reader can get a sense of each other's responsibilities.

What I really appreciated about this tool was having the mutual responsibilities right in front of you. When you look over to the other side you get a really quick sense of where the burden lies and how much they already have on their plate. The most valuable things about this tool were to review funder responsibilities and up the ante on places where we could be doing it better. (funder)

Outputs

- A tool to assess mutual accountability practices for both funders and providers. The team recognizes that additional testing and refining of the tool is needed.
- Research brief on mutual accountability.

Outcomes

- In producing and testing the tool, a better understanding resulted among team members and research participants of the difference between accountability and mutual accountability.
- Pilot participants appreciated that the tool was both an organizational self-assessment tool and a vehicle for funders and providers to communicate, plan and work together to improve their accountability relationship.
- Some suggested that the tool could be used for new program planning and staff training
- Participants also felt that the tool could easily be used by funders and organizations outside of adult literacy.