Participatory Action Research is a phrase applied to a method of research in which the test subjects are also involved as co-researchers.

“Participatory Action Research involves everybody in the process at all levels,” said Jeanie Peck, one of four instructors in the Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Service Learning class at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities. PAR has been used extensively in the class.

“IDASL has changed significantly since it started in 2001,” Peck said. “Things have evolved because of individual feedback from stakeholders over the years.” The class used to be more academic, while its current focus is more on advocacy and awareness.

In the PAR model, client-participants are part of the issue and part of the solution. Stakeholders in CPD PAR research include people with disabilities, their family members, agencies, decision makers and others who bring an outside perspective.

“All individuals that have a stake in the systems that are being changed have direct and ongoing input into the changes,” said Alma Burgess, another instructor. “They are all experts from their own perspective.”

PAR focuses on problem-solving to create knowledge through action.

“Only by doing can you learn what does and doesn’t work,” Burgess said. Actions are researched, changed where needed and researched again. Research is the critical reflection of an action which generates knowledge.

A typical PAR cycle involves four steps: taking stock, setting goals, developing strategy and documenting the process.

When taking stock of an issue, researchers ask questions like where do we start, what has been done before, what needs to be done differently, are there new priorities or issues, what are the different perspectives and how to best utilize the perspectives of the group.

The goal-setting step determines what the researchers want to accomplish, and strategies detail what needs to be done to accomplish that goal, who is going to do what and when.

The documentation process allows researchers to determine if the strategies are successful.