

ASHE CONFERENCE

I found it very difficult to find any common threads among these three papers. They all deal with adult learners, but that has become a very broad field for research, and perhaps that is what these three papers illustrate best. One is about research on individuals. In the second paper, the unit of study is a university, and then the third, the topic for investigation is the space between two organizations. Struggle though I might, I can find no synthesis. The message, I guess, is that adult learning has come of age--posing numerous questions for investigation and attracting researchers from a variety of perspectives.

I will work from the paper on individuals through the space between organizations which is, to my edification and enlightenment, spanned by something called a "boundary spanner," and into the heart of a private university and its views of the phenomenon of adult education from the perspectives of traditional academic administrators. My general approach will be to approach and comment and to raise questions, some of which I am sure are answerable, and some of which are think probably rhetorical.

The paper by Julie Hughes and Steve Graham is another piece of an ever-more complicated literature on adult development. No one said adult development was simple, and sure enough, it isn't. Anyone who has tried to construct a map of where we are and what we know about the developmental processes of adults had better start with a three dimensional matrix with plenty of space for multi-dimensional expansion. Thus, it was with some disappointment that I learned that this paper was going to try to complicate my research life further rather than to simplify it. I believe

that we need to try to classify the types of adult education that are investigated today if we are ever to build upon the work of others in what has become a distressingly jumbled field.

There are basically two broad streams of research on adult development. One concerns the phases of the life cycle; the other concerns stages of adult development or maturity. This paper today belongs basically in the group studying the phases of the life cycle, which looks at the responses of adults to the happenings of their lives--leaving home, establishing independence, becoming an adult, settling down, reviewing life in retirement, etc. The distinctive contribution of this line of research on phases of the life cycle is to show that there are patterns of behavior appropriate/in our culture-- to certain age groups.

Although many people call this stream of research adult development, I think we are well served to distinguish it from the other major stream of research which studies growing levels of maturity or adulthood and is commonly referred to as stages of development. Names associated with this stream of thought are Jane Loevinger on Ego Development, Larry Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan on Moral Development, and Bill Perry on Intellectual Development. The very helpful conventions beginning to emerge now among researchers on adult development is to refer to age-linked phases of the life cycle, on the one hand, and to stages of adult development which are not age-linked but which represent growing levels of maturity on the other.

I am placing the Hughes/Graham paper in the phases of the life cycle group--although I am not sure they would agree. I don't see Hughes and Graham as developing a "Alternative conceptual framework" which is the hope that they express in their paper. I rather hope that they are not developing an alternative conceptual framework for two reasons:

1. We have all together too many alternative conceptual frameworks now, and what is needed, I think, is more synthesis, and more building on or into the work of other people.

2. Hughes and Graham offer the rationale that the need for an alternative framework is that existing theories do not account for individual differences. I would contend, however, that if theory is to be of practical use, it cannot be so complicated that it describes individual differences. The point of a model or theory is to over-simplify so that the inevitable differences among people can be understood by identifying patterns or categories of behavior.

It seems to me that their insights of cycles within multiple cycles as people adjust and adapt to new roles is helpful as a research construct and perhaps useful in interpreting individual behaviors. That is perhaps enough of a contribution without claiming an alternative conceptual framework or a theory that accounts for individual differences.

Now let me move into the question of boundary spanners as raised by Wayne Smutz. I must say that had I not been assigned to respond to this paper today, it would have, on the basis of its title alone, fallen into that New Yorker category of "papers I've never finished reading." I think even Wayne must admit that "differential performance of formal boundary spanners in the formation of university/professional association inter-organizational relationships" is not exactly an attention grabber.

I am glad, however, that I did persist because I learned a lot of interesting things about boundary spanners. The project at Penn State as Wayne describes it, is an extremely interesting one. There is a basic question today as to whether continuing education departments should do continuing education or whether the departments themselves should assume that responsibility. One of the problems with departments is that they have not been entrepreneurial, have not made the connections work, and have not managed programs very well.

I wonder what the task of a boundary spanner is. Do they perceive themselves as changemakers? As continuing education program designers? Or what? What are their instructions? To span boundaries? To build programs? To influence policy? To change perceptions?

I do not find it suprising that people tend to communicate what they know best (continuing education in this case). If they are not told to be politicinas or changemakers, their task is to set up continuing education programs. Hence, it seems to me that the more confident they are, the more they would tell others what they are doing.

Who are the non-academics? Isn't a professional organization likely to be much smaller and less complex than a university?

This may account for more communication on the part of non-academics and also the use of more complex information--i.e. Indeed, isn't the extent of friendship an important variable? I suspect you would communicate more complex information to a friend than to an acquaintance.

Non-academic boundary spanners communicate more, more complex information, and more to organizational leaders--all of which may be a function of the size of the organization. Also non-academics would be more likely to be continuing education experts. That's what a professional organization is. A university is many more things (the fact that professional organizations generate revenue lends credence to this view, p.27).