

Kansas State University Libraries

**New Prairie Press**

---

Adult Education Research Conference

---

## Reflections: 50 Years of Change in Adult Education Research and Practice

Janet K. Poley

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](#)

---

This Event 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).

# **Reflections: 50 Years of Change in Adult Education Research and Practice**

Janet K. Poley

International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame (2002)

Professor Emeritus University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Past President/CEO The American Distance Education Consortium

## **Introduction**

### **Why Adult Education?**

I grew up on a farm in Nebraska as the daughter of a father who was farmer/opera singer and self-taught engineer and a mother who was a teacher and artist. My mother commuted by bus to the university to finish her undergraduate degree and in later life by car over icy roads to get a masters degree. My uncle was run over by a tractor but paralyzed from the waist down took distance education courses by mail to become an accountant instead of a farmer and used distance education and a simulator to become a commercial airline pilot. I will never forget the first day I saw a working television and later was astounded by the educational potential of the Internet. After becoming a home economist/nutritionist and an educational broadcast journalist I decided that I was most passionate about helping create a future of adult learning opportunities. My only regret is that 50 years has passed and I feel as though I'm just getting started.

### **How Lucky I Was to Meet Howard McClusky, Wes Meierhenry and Roger Hiemstra to Start the Journey**

I was 20 and just beginning what became my lifelong career in adult education. It was 1965 and as a young woman involved with the civil rights and women's movement I believed that anything was possible if we worked to improve things. The Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service hired me to plan and produce education radio and television programs for our Nebraska Educational Television Network. Our resources were minimal, we worked from the basement of the speech and theatre building, all was black and white with no editing. But we had a statewide audience interested in learning and through mail and phone calls we knew we were reaching a lot of people. We also worked closely with our Extension Specialists on campus and our county agent. Between 1965 and 1973 we went "color", we could edit out our mistakes, we could produce in the field and on homes, parks, museums, farms and ranches. We began to learn how mass media at that time could scale our to reach more adult learners. I also began to teach communication to undergraduates and develop research and evaluation tools to assess our impact with these new tools.

My formal beginning with Adult Education began in 1973 with a visit to Wes Meierhenry (IACEHOF), Department Chair of Adult Education and known for his work with educational media. I learned later from Roger Hiemstra (IACEHOF) and Associate Professor and eventually a member of my committee and professional colleague that unnamed others in the Department weren't sure they wanted "that little girl" as a PhD student. But I was accepted and Wes advised me to start with a class in Adult Education History being taught that semester by Howard McClusky,(IACEHOF) visiting professor at the University of Nebraska from the University of Michigan. Little did the class know, because he didn't tell us, that he was a founder of Adult Education in the United States and his ideas were critical to the development of the Extension

Service in Michigan. He was the first president of the Adult Education Association of the United States in 1951. He came from a background in educational psychology and went on to develop his "theory of margin" - the need to balance stresses and demands (load) on a person with his or her coping resources (power). His knowledge, expertise and experience came from psychology, mental health, public health, youth education, community develop and educational psychology. As he aged he became more interested in educational gerontology and advocated for "limitless human potential throughout life."

It was a compelling learning experience to have this first class from the person who knew everyone connected to the field personally. We felt like we got the "inside story" on the way it really was in those years before we wandered into this profession.

There is a wonderful description of McClusky and his work on the web written by Roger Hiemstra. I recommend it to those of you didn't know him and his work. He was an outstanding synthesizer with respect to adult psychology and learning and he actively called for an instructional body of knowledge specific to the adult condition:

In 1965 he wrote, "Data from various sources are providing a growing case for a differential psychology of adults. Already it is clear that the pattern of abilities increases in difference from adolescence through early adulthood and on into the middle and late years. Moreover, we cannot assume equivalence of stimulation and motivation in these successive stages of change. More research is greatly needed, but it must be conducted with concepts and instruments that are most relevant to the unique features of the adult condition. For example, more work needs to be done on an appropriate criterion of adult intelligence, on "age fair" tests, on devices that get beneath the surface of the adult personality."

In 1971 he said, "Our thesis then is simply that education becomes the generic term for the teaching-learning process which in all its variety and manifold settings constitutes the major instrument which our society has devised for reducing the number and damage of dysfunctional responses and for increasing our capability for coping creatively with change."

I cringe when I think of the large number of meetings held over the past many years discussing "what should we call it?" - adult learning; distance education; distributed education, personalized learning, adapted learning and more! Early on I adopted McClusky's notion that education in all its variety and manifold settings was fine. My thought let's has always been, "Let's get on with it!"

McClusky's Theory of Margin seems as relevant today as then. Some have called him a "Man for All Times". I also want to mention the importance of the Adult and Continuing Education Handbooks over the years. They are a source/resource for picking up on themes for research as important or maybe more important than some of today's research topics. The most recent 2010 version edited by Carol E. Kasworm, (IACEHOF) Amy D. Rose and Jovita M. Ross covers a lot of material and is well written. Using the older conceptualization from McClusky, Knowles, Houle and others along with the material in the Handbook someone could create a map/guide to research in the field. If we could pull together a framework constructed from best scholarship in this field including the gaps and need for future study, we could have a very positive impact on future research, policy and education practice. This could be combined with current crosscuts such as media, the Internet in education, demographic changes, cultural identification and relevance, educational pathways, building 21st century skills and matching educational needs to real jobs in the workplace. ( The more quickly we can align our research with the huge problem of "Evaporation of Real Middle Class Jobs" the more relevant we will be. ) The United Kingdom has a line of research in this area showing that adult education does make

a difference and Sweden does as well. This is just one example of how we could use what we know from research, explain it to others and build upon it for the future.

Fifty years is too long to go into detail and the material below is, has and should continue to be of interest to this community. We all stand on the shoulders who went before us and many of these research lines were created and developed by the members of the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame. Time doesn't permit full discussion of the context and the areas so I have resorted to a "fast food version" of half a century of work. It won't be fully complete or satisfying but I present it as "food for thought."

## **Headlines, Highlights and Abbreviations: 1965 - 2015**

### **THEN**

World Population: 3.7 Billion; Median Annual Income: Less than \$1000

1960 - 1970 Context and Adult Education Initiatives:

Civil and Human Rights Movement; Viet Nam War; End of Colonization; Social Change Research and Action; Educational Media; Andragogy; Empowerment Strategies; Self-Directed Learning; Extension Program Planning Models; Needs Diagnosis; Evaluation Methods; Emancipation Pedagogy; Training and Facilitation for Development; Learning at the Backdoor; Open University

1960 - 1970 Demographics:

U.S. Population reached 200 million with 55 million classified as rural-increased urbanization; African American population moves north - 12% of population; Spanish Heritage Population - 3%

1960 - 1970 U.S. Median Income:

\$6000; Inflation Adjusted: \$43,000

1960 - 1970 Educational Attainment:

High School Graduate: 1960-41%; High School Graduate: 1970 - 52% (20 - 24 year olds 78% High School Graduates); African Americans - 31% (20 - 24 year olds 62% High School Graduates); Hispanic Heritage: 36 % (20 - 24 year olds 58%)

### **INBETWEEN**

1980 - 2010 Context and Adult Education Initiatives:

Change from Emphasis on Equality and Social Justice to Pluralism, Inclusivity to Diversity contrasted with Homophobia, Racism; Sexism; Religious Paranoia; from Individual Learning to Organizational Learning; From War to Peace and Back to War in Iraq, 9/11, War on Terrorism; Increased Need for Veterans Education and eArmyU; Accessibility; International Development and Normative-Re-Educative Strategies; Economic Globalization; Environmental Stress; Roll-Out and Rapid Adoption of Internet and Automation of banking, trading, work, education; legal and illegal immigration to the U.S.; End of Good Middle Class/Working Class Jobs as Previously Known; Bifurcation of workforce and jobs - Service/Low Skill and Information Intense, High Skill; Increase in Prison Population; Increasing Wealth Gap; Baby Boomers Edge

to Retirement; Rapid Increase of Hispanic Births Accounting for Majority of Population Growth; Adult Learning in the Social Context; Multiple Ways of Knowing; Knowledge Actively Constructed from Interaction with Ones World; Networks and Communities of Practice; Rapid Growth in Distance Education and Online Learning, including Penn State University Masters Degree in Adult Education; Organizational Transformation; Cultural Identity and Learning; Pathways to/through Lifelong Learning; Engaged Learning; and More

## **TODAY**

Cost and Affordability of Public Education - Who Pays? Community College for Free and Lower Costs through Disaggregation; Public Good Versus Private Gain? Access to Learning Opportunities; Scaling; Net Neutrality; Accessibility; Education for Those Who Serve; Role of Foundations: Gates and Lumina; Regulation and Enforcement; Federal and State Policies; Quality Standards; Outcome Assessment; Certification; Workforce Skills; Badges; Accreditation; Effective Teaching and Learning Strategies for Different Cultures and Populations; Personalization and Adaptive Learning; Big Data - Data Analytics - Privacy; Adult Education Health and Well-Being; Pathways that Work and Lead to Work; Inclusivity; Bullying; and Adult Education for the Incarcerated

What role can Adult Education Researchers play in addressing the criticism of the writings of David Brooks, New York Times Columnist that he writes about the rich as people, while the poor are numbers?