

## A Preliminary Investigation of Complexity Theory's Potential to Redefine and Reinvigorate the Field of Adult Education

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### Abstract

Complex adaptive systems inherently fill niches, as one niche is filled another niche is created, hence these systems are never stable. This roundtable explores utilizing complexity theory to reimagine the future of adult education graduate programs.

*Keywords:* complexity theory, adult education, graduate programs

### Summary

This preliminary investigation uses Waldrop's (1992) tome on complexity theory to generate a discussion on reimagining and redefining the future of graduate adult education in higher education. Graduate programs were first developed at Teachers College in the 1930s, and slowly evolved to the professionalization of adult education in the 1980s where most if not all faculty hired into graduate adult education programs had terminal degrees in the field. As the number of graduate programs grew, this inbreeding arguably has resulted in stagnation of new knowledge reflecting the social construction that faculty for the most part had similar if not the same preparation and training. Today, most adult education graduate programs have either faded away or been reduced to one or two faculty, living on the margins within their institutions. And as faculty retire at these small programs they often are not replaced, resulting in a once thriving program being left to die. In 2022, there are less than a dozen thriving programs—“thriving” is defined for this discussion as having more than two tenure-track faculty, and continuous replenishment when one retires or leaves their position. This scenario begs the question: What does the future hold for adult education graduate programs?

This singular research question is explored through the theoretical lens of complexity theory using Waldrop's (1992) insightful book, *Complexity*. I begin by asking is our field of study “a self-organizing structure” (p. 33) where all major graduate programs are essentially identical, based on the mid-twentieth century notion of adult education graduate programs as defined by the likes of the University of Wisconsin and Northern Illinois University-type programs that paved the early pathway but are now defunct? Is the future limited by reproducing only what we know and do today, and if so are we doomed to live on the margins in higher education where we are only valued as long as we are able to pay our way with student tuition? And, how do we as a profession move forward understanding that each university program has a life cycle that is separate and unique, and as such one universal model that can be applied to all graduate programs will not serve our profession well and may ultimately lead to diminishing returns?

Using complexity theory, I posit that we need to understand how externalities and differences are the driving forces that will shape the future of adult education graduate programs. Though it may be wise to have professional standards as defined by the Commission of Professors of Adult Education where most if not all programs are similar, such a path may also

continue the stagnation and lack of stability many programs now experience by stifling new visions and curriculum.

Simplicity is essential to capture this nuanced futurist ideal of “increasing returns” and question the “conventional wisdom” that is eroding our foundation (p. 42). Questions surround this notion of simplicity such as what is the definition of adult education or learning. Can it be something as simple as any event where adults learn? Or do we need to get mired in the muck of formal vs. informal vs. nonformal learning? Or the complexities of transformational vs. transactional learning? Or the discourse on mandatory vs. voluntary adult education? Or the dichotomy between human resource development and *virtuous* critical thinking? What is the essence or kernel of this definitional conundrum facing adult education? The tighter boundaries we place on our field, the less complex and more static we become, which in turn reduces our potential to grow and flourish as well as our potential to make a difference.

Complexity theory embraces fluid boundaries that are not limited by concrete definitions, institutional mores and professional standards. Simplicity that is not tightly bounded may allow us to see the future in new ways that allow for changing externalities. Waldrop's story of Brian Author's path to envision economics in a new way is a lens through which we can reimagine, define and redefine, the future of adult education. Instead of diminishing or decreasing returns the outcome is “increasing returns” (p.133). Complex adaptive systems inherently fill niches, as that niche is filled another niche is created. Hence these systems are never stable but always changing, and the organism in order to survive is always looking for new niche to reside. “In fact if the system ever does reach equilibrium, it isn't just stable. It's dead” (p. 147).

If adult education is viewed as an economic system, which is easy to argue, then transferring Author's lessons from economics to education, though uncharted, is potentially bountiful. In order to remain dynamic, the challenge is to keep our boundaries fluid and continually seek new niches and opportunities to exploit, just as a parasite is always looking for a new host. This means we must ask: Why do we teach what we teach; what traits and talents are necessary in the next generation of adult education faculty; why are graduate adult education programs structured the way they are, and why, in a global sense, do we do what we do as adult educators? The challenge is to see who we are today, and imagine who we want to be tomorrow. Complexity theory is one tool that might enable us to reimagine ourselves in new ways.

An outcome I hope to achieve during this roundtable presentation is to generate dialogue among colleagues that continues after the conference on how we can shape the future of graduate adult education programs in a rapidly changing environment.

## Reference

Waldrop, M. M. (1992). *Complexity*. Touchstone