

# A Critique of "Guidelines for Better Staff Development"

How solid is the research  
that claims adults need concrete  
learning experiences,  
and does any of it justify  
the additional time needed?

MARIE A. FONZI

In the February 1980 issue of *Educational Leadership*, Fred Wood and Steven Thompson discuss current problems of inservice education and recommend ways to solve them.

After contending that the nature of adult learners and adult learning is not considered in the structuring of inservice programs, they list 11 accepted generalities about adult learning that inservice implementers should incorporate. However, the main thrust of their paper is directed at what they call "the two most significant new pieces of information on adult learning uncovered during the last decade." According to Wood and Thompson, these are:

1. More adults than formerly believed are operating at Piaget's concrete operational stage rather than formal operations stage (Wood and Thompson, 1980, p. 376).

2. Adults prefer to learn in informal social situations where social interaction

takes place among the learners (Wood and Thompson, 1980, p. 377).

Because of their discoveries, Wood and Thompson perceive a need for on-site experiential workshops. However, based on my analysis of their cited research, there is no justification for their conclusions.

#### Key Finding 1—Concrete Operational

In their original work, Inhelder and Piaget implied that formal logical operations would be universally achieved during adolescence, between 11 and 15 years of age. Formal operations are expressed in a child's ability to think in adult logical terms (Inhelder and Piaget, 1958).

*Marie A. Fonzi, a learning disabilities teacher at Miami Shores Elementary School, is a doctoral student in the Florida International University/University of Florida Cooperative Curriculum & Instruction Program, Miami, Florida.*

Disagreeing with Inhelder and Piaget's implications, Wood and Thompson cite an article by Joe W. McKinnan (1976) in support of their statement that "First, it appears that a higher proportion of adults than formerly thought may be operating at what Piaget calls the concrete operational stage rather than formal operations stage of intellectual development. This suggests that direct and concrete experiences where the learner applies what is being learned are an essential ingredient for inservice education. Abstract, word-oriented talk sessions are not adequate to change behaviors" (Wood and Thompson, 1980, p. 376).

The McKinnan chapter to which the authors refer, and on which they base their recommendations for concrete inservice experiences, deals exclusively with research on first-year college students. Research results suggest that "about 5 percent of students entering

college cannot cope with abstract propositions" (McKinnan, 1976, p. 111). An experiment was conducted with a random sampling obtained from first-year English classes in seven representative colleges. Students were tested with seven tasks used to identify formal operational thought. Experimental and control groups were set up. The experimental group was given a new course designed to develop logical thought processes. The course resulted in 15 students moving into the formal operations stage of thought.

The "implication is that many first-year students are not yet capable of abstract formulation of concepts without additional concrete experiences" (McKinnan, 1976, p. 126).

Wood and Thompson apply these results to mature adults and make suggestions for inservice education based on the unfounded generality that this one experiment can be applied to most adults.

They further claim that McKinnan's research lends "considerable support" to the proponents of experiential learning, a category that includes Wood and his associate John Neill (1978), and Morris Keeton and associates (1976).

In an earlier article, Wood expounded on advantages of learning through an experiential approach, as advocated by James Coleman in the Keeton book (Wood and Neill, 1978). However, Wood failed to cite the disadvantages of an experiential approach and the advantages of using an information assimilation approach, both of which Coleman discussed.

In fact, Coleman, in pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of both information assimilation and experiential types of learning, concluded that "knowledge in this area is primitive" (Coleman, 1976, pp. 53-58). He recommended a mixture of both types of learning but admitted that "the investigation of these matters has a long way to go" (Coleman, 1976, p. 60).

Of utmost importance, said Coleman, is the difference in time required for learning using these two approaches. The information assimilation process is as time-efficient as the experiential is time-consuming (Coleman, 1976, pp. 53, 54, 56).

The clinical workshop that Wood and Neill pointed to as a model of effective inservice lasted 15 days (Wood and Neill, 1978, p. 116). The time allotted to most inservice programs is usually measured in hours rather than days.

Wood and Thompson may question whether time is truly saved if no learning takes place through use of an information assimilation mode of teaching. However, there is no basis for their assumption that many educational practitioners are incapable of learning at an abstract level.

In fact, even with the time required for experiential learning, some participants are not able to generalize from their particular experiences to a general principle applicable in other circumstances (Coleman, 1976, p. 57).

#### Key Finding 2—Informal Learning

Wood and Thompson say their second key finding, based on research by Rapoport and Tough, "suggests that adults prefer to learn in informal learning situations where social interaction can take place among the learners" (Wood and Thompson, 1980, p. 377).

It appears that their research has negated reading as an enjoyable adult method of learning. Besides leaving that impression, Wood and Thompson's statement also gives no consideration to the place of personality types in preference for social interaction.

Actually, my survey of these books fails to show support for Wood and Thompson's statement.

The Rapoport book, *Leisure and the Family Life Cycle*, deals with use of leisure at various life stages. Although they discuss increased socialization sought at the young adult stage of development (16-29 years old), the authors never allude to a preferred learning style (Rapoport, 1975, p. 120).

The Tough readings, likewise, provide nothing on which to base their statement. Tough's *Why Adults Learn: A Study of the Major Reasons for Beginning and Continuing a Learning Project* deals not with *how* adults learn but with their motivation for learning.

In *The Adult's Learning Projects*, Tough lists both positive and negative aspects of learning in groups (pp. 136-139). He finds that group learning is less efficient than one-to-one learning and may not fit individual needs and goals. Learners also may not want others to see their ignorance, errors, or poor performance.

It is difficult to accept Wood and Thompson's recommendations that more inservice programs should be experiential and in the normal work setting (1980, p. 377) when their argument is based on such a shaky foundation. EL

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