

**CROSSING SCHOLARLY DIVIDES:  
BARRIERS AND BRIDGES FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS ATTENDING  
SCHOLARLY CONFERENCES**

Diane D. Chapman  
Teaching Assistant Professor of Training and Development  
North Carolina State University

Colleen Aalsburg Wiessner  
Assistant Professor of Adult Education  
North Carolina State University

Janet Morton  
Nancy Fire  
Leslie Stevenson Jones  
Deke Majekodunmi  
Doctoral students, Adult and Community College Education  
North Carolina State University

**Abstract**

Scholarly conferences are one mechanism by which doctoral students can enter into their profession as practitioners and scholars. Unfortunately, research about the effectiveness of this career development strategy is limited. This paper explores learning experiences of doctoral students at a scholarly conference. Theories about learning communities, communities of practice, and knowledge creation frame student experiences. Special attention is given to how legitimate peripheral participation describes interactions of students with the scholarly community of practice during the conference. Recommendations for students, faculty, other scholars, and program planners are given in order to promote improved access to and participation in the scholarly community. Such changes can provide doctoral students with a smoother transition from academic learning to learning in the scholarly community of a professional conference.

Attending a professional conference is one way doctoral students may explore their chosen profession as they pursue academic careers and find ways to enter into and become involved in their professional communities. Professors often encourage their doctoral students to begin this development by becoming members of professional associations relevant to their career and disciplinary foci. These professional organizations often hold conferences that may serve as potential gateways. Yet, little is known about what students experience as part of a professional, scholarly conference. For these reasons, The New Learning Project, a group of researchers from North Carolina State University, included students in the purposeful sampling of conference participants they interviewed as part of their research at the 2005 International Research Conference of the Academy of Human Resource Development in Estes Park, CO. The

purpose of this article is to describe the students' conference experiences as revealed through those interviews.

The goals of scholarly conferences often include creation of new knowledge and inspiration for new research. Yet, participants often leave conferences with the impression that there was no real exchange of learning, let alone new knowledge creation or emergence of future research ideas (Graham & Kormanik, 2004). This leads us to question the quality and substance of the doctoral experience at professional conferences. How easy is it to enter into the life of a profession through conference participation? What factors facilitate or hinder participation in a scholarly community? How do doctoral student expectations compare with their actual experiences at conferences? The literature provides little empirical research to answer these questions. Through addressing them, we hope to identify ways to reduce barriers to entry into academic and professional fields.

### **Background of the Study**

The Academy of Human Resource Development's (AHRD) mission is to "encourage systematic study of human resource development theories, processes, and practices; to disseminate information about HRD; to encourage the application of HRD research findings; and to provide opportunities for social interaction among individuals with scholarly and professional interests in HRD from multiple disciplines and from across the globe" (AHRD, n.d., ¶1). In addition to providing research journals as a membership benefit, AHRD offers three annual international conferences to "discuss research and forge relationships that foster cooperation and collaboration" (¶2). Further, the organization fosters research-to-practice linkages by including papers that incorporate research findings into practice.

During the 2005 International Research Conference of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD '05), researchers conducted the New Learning '05 Project (Hatcher, Wiessner, & Storberg-Walker, 2005; Hatcher, Wiessner, Storberg-Walker, & Chapman, 2006; Chapman, Wiessner, Storberg-Walker, & Hatcher, 2007; Wiessner, Hatcher, Chapman, & Storberg-Walker, 2008). The research questions that guided this initial study were:

1. *What* new learning occurred as a result of the conference?
2. *How* did the new learning at the conference happen?

A variety of data collection methods from several sources were used in order to construct an overall story of the learning experiences of conference attendees. Data was collected through individual New Learning forms, researcher observations of sessions, pre-and post-conference interviews of scholars, practitioners, and doctoral students, and exit interviews of selected conference attendees.

This paper analyzes original data collected at the conference that has not been included in previous publications, specifically, the pre- and post-conference interviews that were conducted with graduate students attending the conference. Through analysis of the student interview data, the purpose of this paper is to describe the experiences of doctoral students attending a scholarly conference. The following research questions guided our work:

1. How did doctoral students describe their experiences of a scholarly community through their conference participation?
2. What factors assisted or hindered student access to the scholarly community?
3. How did initial student expectations and actual experiences compare?

### **Theoretical Frameworks for New Learning**

The AHRD New Learning '05 study was grounded in the theoretical frameworks of learning organizations, knowledge creation, and communities of practice. Because this paper is focused on analysis and findings of doctoral student interviews, the additional framework of legitimate peripheral practice is used to frame student experiences.

#### *Learning Organizations*

Learning organization theory centers learning within the boundaries of an organization such as AHRD. Chinowsky, Molenaar, and Realph (2007) suggest that learning organizations have five characteristics. First, leadership is exemplified by the ability of organizational leaders to champion the integration of new knowledge, to encourage experimentation, and to proactively seek a shared mission. Second, process and infrastructure focus on the ability to exchange, manage, and institutionalize knowledge and commit resources to the endeavor. Third, communication supports free knowledge sharing by eliminating barriers and supporting communities of practice in the pursuit of organizational improvement. Fourth, education focuses on the organization's ability to value education, distribute knowledge, and promote education. Finally, culture entails support for new ideas and cultural change.

#### *Knowledge Creation*

Another foundation for New Learning research is knowledge creation, often a stated goal of scholarly conferences. Knowledge creation may occur in individuals or within groups in organizations. According to Krough, Ichijo, and Nonaka (2000), knowledge construction is tied to the feelings and beliefs of the people constructing the knowledge; individuals and groups need care and nurturing from their organizations and from each other to be able to create new knowledge. Constructing new knowledge "involves planning for new knowledge creation through creating and employing new strategies and structures, embodying processes in action with others" (Hatcher, Wiessner, Storberg-Walker, & Chapman, 2005, p. 1338).

#### *Communities of Practice*

Communities of practice (CoP) are "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139). Wenger and Snyder further state, "Communities of practice can drive strategy, generate new lines of business, solve problems, promote the spread of best practices, [and] develop people's professional skills" (p. 140). The AHRD conference meets these criteria for a CoP as an opportunity for participants to share expertise and meet to interact and learn.

### *Legitimate Peripheral Participation*

Considering a scholarly conference as an example of a CoP, we used the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), as a lens through which to view the conference experience of doctoral students. LPP provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (p. 29)

Any newcomer to a group or collective of people is naturally on the periphery of the group, which provides the newcomer a place to observe, a way to practice being part of the community, and a means to access the workings of the CoP. Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, and Unwin (2005) built on Lave and Wenger's (1991) work in LPP and communities of practice by presenting evidence that when newcomers are able to participate in activities appropriate to full participation, they can cross the boundaries of the CoP. They also found that experienced workers, or community members, can learn through engagement with newcomers. "Where things work well, bringing in newcomers is a valuable strategy in enhancing the on-going learning in a community of practice" (Fuller et al., p. 64).

Hay (1996) takes a postmodern perspective toward LPP, while building upon the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). Hay finds that the traditional apprenticeship communities presented by Lave and Wenger nest the expert within the CoP, thus not allowing newcomers true access until they can see the world of the community through the eyes of the experts and perform exactly as the experts perform. This protected center of the CoP only serves to prevent new thought from the newcomers entering into the CoP. In addition to the traditional route towards the center as an apprentice, Hay (1996) offers four ways that a newcomer can become a member of the community through LPP: (a) create or be a part of the creation of a new CoP, (b) become a part of several CoP, (c) find new and creative ways to change the practice from a peripheral position, and (d) find new and creative ways into the center of a CoP from a peripheral position.

### **Scholarly and Professional Conferences**

Hilliard (2006) relates learning at conventions to CoP. Interestingly, she cites New Learning '05 at AHRD (Hatcher et al., 2005) as an example of how the two can be connected. Stating that associations "tend to focus more on what should be learned rather than how it should be learned" (p. 45), Hilliard advocates intentional integration of CoP to model adult learning principles and enhance participant learning. We relate her work to students and CoP through her interpretation of Lave and Wenger's (1991) work, where she claims that it is the *role* of veterans to make ways for newcomers to become involved in the CoP and to help them move from periphery to center. She places the emphasis on the responsibility of veterans rather than on the initiative of newcomers.

Hilliard (2006) identifies three challenges prevalent in conferences: focusing on content rather than delivery, preferring information dissemination over professional practice, and losing the learning through lack of use or application. Interactive, applied, and continuous CoP offer means for learning that counteract these challenges. Hilliard provides principles for effective integration of CoP as a conference learning tool: (a) design for evaluation, (b) create dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, (c) invite varied levels of participation, (d) develop public and private community spaces, (e) focus on value, combine familiarity and excitement, and (f) create a rhythm for the community.

Few resources focus on conference *learning*. Most publications are dated and speak primarily to planners or logistics. Ilsley's (1985) edited resource, a primary text on conference design in adult education, dates back to 1985. In it, Boucouvalas (1985) identifies a central conference challenge, "Will participants choose to be conference consumers, or will they remain mere conference attenders" (p. 43)? While attenders are spectators, consumers create their own agendas with intentionality in order to gain what they want from a conference experience. Although an advance from reactivity to proactivity, this consumption viewpoint frames conferences as commodities and conference participants as individually focused rather than connected to other learners. We would advocate that attenders should evolve to consumers on their way to becoming constructors.

Meyer (1985) focuses on student participants and their professional socialization and adult development through conferences as well. She asks, "How do newcomers work toward establishing a professional identity while they are still developing their knowledge of that field" (p. 57)? She advocates that "Some form of experiential learning complementing classroom education helps a student become socialized into a field through controlled experiences and guided participatory observation" (p. 58). She advocates establishing faculty and peer contacts, making a conference presentation, and volunteering to work on the conference. Not surprising, she points out that these initiatives mirror the activities of professionals in conference contexts. Having a role gives students a vantage point from which to participate and a beginning point for contact and experiences that can lead to moving from the periphery toward the center of a CoP. Both Boucouvalas and Meyer consider conferences a setting for experiential learning, arguing that experiential learning presupposes active participation.

Faculty can facilitate the involvement. Meyer (1985) advocates encouraging students to attend scholarly and professional conferences, submit conference presentation proposals, meet scholars and practitioners that connect to students' research, and plan ahead for meaningful participation and learning. "If the newcomer recognizes that he or she is in a transition and actively engages in exploratory behavior, career growth, or change is easier to manage...Faculty and seasoned professionals can help students and newcomers simply by remembering what it is like to be in a transitional stage" (Meyer, 1985, p. 67).

### **Research Design**

The aim of this study was to understand the needs and challenges faced by doctoral students as they attempt to access their scholarly community through conference participation. In this qualitative study, participants were studied in a naturalistic setting (Marshall & Rossman,

2006), the conference context. As a case study, this research focuses on the bounded phenomenon of doctoral students attending the 2005 AHRD conference in Estes Park, CO, with the unit of analysis being students.

### *Data Collection*

The focus of this paper is the pre- and post-conference interviews of doctoral students at the conference. A lack of published research in the area compelled the researchers to select a qualitative, interview-based methodology. The qualitative approach allowed us to uncover outcomes and experiences that we had not anticipated. In addition, the pre- and post-interview approach allowed us to obtain a truer picture of expectations as compared to actual experiences, much more than a simple post interview (Patton, 1990).

Because of the lack of published research about the doctoral student experience at professional conferences, a qualitative, interview-based approach was selected. While a quantitative approach may have added the ability to compare pre- and post-interviews statistically, it would not allow for unanticipated outcomes or probing for information about those outcomes.

The interviews relied on a purposive sampling of doctoral students in order to obtain a range of points of view. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed for analysis. “This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Participants were asked a range of questions related to their attendance and participation in the conference, their expectations for the experience, and the learning that occurred.

Four doctoral students, who were at the dissertation stage of their studies, participated in both pre-and post-conference interviews. The interviews lasted for approximately an hour each and were recorded with the permission of the participant. The sample consisted of two males and two females, two from the U.S. and two international participants. The interviewees signed informed consent forms and were assigned pseudonyms. Each was an adult learner who had been involved in practice prior to returning to school. The interviewees were nominated by AHRD scholars. Jean was a first time attendee at AHRD. Alek was attending for his second time. This conference was the third time Meredith had attended and the fifth time for Theo.

### *Data Analysis*

Two sets of codes were developed for the New Learning Project data analysis. Organizational and disciplinary codes were related to the content of Human Resource Development (HRD), and literature-based codes were developed from the three conceptual areas of learning organizations, communities of practice, and knowledge creation (Storberg-Walker, Wiessner, & Chapman, 2005). These coding schemes were used for initial coding of the student interviews. Subsequent open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) allowed for the expression of concepts and ideas that emerged from the study and were not specifically captured by the initial coding framework.

We read the transcripts individually and then shared our initial coding schemes. Multiple iterations of reading and coding of transcripts by project members provided inter-coder reliability. As coding proceeded, we added additional codes and tallied code frequencies to aid identification of significant themes from the data, realizing that frequency alone would not necessarily point to the most important themes. Using a white board and the software program Inspiration, we diagrammed ideas and possible themes and developed concept maps to document and verify common conceptualization of the data. We also developed an Excel spreadsheet that related research questions to codes and provided a narrowing of the focus. Throughout the coding and theme development process, we were diligent to provide equal inclusion and treatment of all voices represented in the interviews, an approach central to New Learning research.

### *Verification*

Our study procedures suggested by Creswell (1998) to promote rigor and trustworthiness: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation, (b) triangulation, (c) peer review and debriefing, (d) clarification of researcher bias, and (e) rich, thick description. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation occurred through researcher involvement in each aspect of the conference and extensive time spent with the data collected. Triangulation of the data occurred as we analyzed documents such as conference proceedings and the organization's Web site for evidence that would confirm or contrast with transcript data. Interview participation of two primary researchers at the conference provided additional insights about the context in which the doctoral students experienced the scholarly conference.

Peer review and debriefing took place both in the faculty research team meetings and among the student researchers involved in this project. Clarification of researcher bias was explored as a group and then noted in the limitations section. The findings convey rich, thick description. This study's participatory processes also contributed to its validity (Merriam, 1998). Primary researchers, research assistants, participant co-researchers, and the Academy participated in this collaborative research project. The AHRD board supported the research, members nominated interview participants, and attendees submitted data forms, contributing to a collaborative picture of what was learned at the conference.

### *Limitations*

The student interviews used for this analysis were part of a larger data set that included interviews of students, practitioners, and scholars. Because of this broader initial focus, the number of participants in any one category was limited. Additionally, four of the authors of this article are graduate students, and it was important to be aware of our subjectivity and potential biases when analyzing graduate student data. As a qualitative study, no generalizations may be drawn from the data, although the varying viewpoints offered suggest many opportunities for further research.

## Findings

Although limited in number, the interviewees represented a range of viewpoints, experiences, and expectations about scholarly conferences. The five themes emerging from this analysis are attendance goals, learning and interaction styles, student expectations, advantages and barriers for integration into the profession, and conference arrangements and logistics. In addition to the description given next, exemplary quotes are provided in the Appendix.

### *Attendance Goals*

Pre-conference comments about attendance demonstrate interviewees' varied viewpoints, experiences, and expectations in the reasons they expressed for conference attendance. Jean, a first-time participant aimed for "Just getting acclimated to conferences – academic conferences – I've done the business type conference things, and I've pulled conference together for people, but I've only gone to one other academic conference." Meredith stated, "I like coming so I can see people that I don't see otherwise. I kind of get out of my everyday environment. And so that is one reason I like the conference, that piece of renewal." A third student, Theo, said, "I expect to learn something from the regular session, but one of the main purposes is to come here and visit with colleagues and work on joint papers. I think that's the biggest part of the learning for me – having informal discussions." Alek, the fourth participant, had multiple reasons for attending. His goals included to network with experienced people, to see how "other phenomena are related to community development" and to "highlight the progressive nature of HRD within the Islamic world."

Expectations varied among the doctoral students as some focused entirely on attending the sessions, while others looked forward to attending and participating in the informal communications at dinner and other types of gatherings during the conference or in the after hours. Recommendations from both advisors and fellow students motivated students to attend the conference. Jean stated, "My advisor is active in AHRD. Of the students who I talked with last year that did the conference thing – you know, went to a lot of different conferences – they all agreed AHRD was the one that you needed to go to, especially if you had anything to do with distance [learning]."

### *Learning and Interaction Styles*

Learning and interaction styles reflect another variation in attendees. One participant said, "I'm very much an introvert...I don't ask a lot of questions in sessions...I need to get away and think about it" (Jean). In contrast to this focus on individual learning and reflection, Theo highly valued participation with others, saying "I like to see the sessions too but I think the main part is talking to people and doing stuff...the informal things" (Theo).

Varied styles are further reflected in how the doctoral students approached conference participation based on prior experience. For example, Jean, the first time scholarly conference attendee just wanted to get "acclimated" whereas Theo, a multiple time attendee "realized I would not enjoy a conference if I was not presenting any papers." In addition, the students with



less conference experience were more likely to study the proceedings in order to select sessions to attend, while the more seasoned attendees were there for making “connections” and “learning from others.”

Some students described learning strategies with which they approached the conference. Jean stated, “For the last couple of years I’ve known what my research area was going to be...the things I seek out in a program guide are things that are related to my research.” She explained that she learned more by attending a conference than by reading on her own. “It’s enhanced learning. It’s enriched learning. You can’t read everything and you’re not going to know this information for a while because it probably isn’t published yet. So you’re learning it at the very beginning of it. And later on you may read papers or journals, but you’re getting it at the first blush.”

### *Student Expectations*

Expectations about the conference included making connections, encountering ideas that would assist them in their research, and engaging in dialogue with others. Students focused on “collaboration, cooperation, building bridges...[making] connections” and having “constructive dialogue” with people who represent “diverse backgrounds, whether ethnic, cultural, or religious or all of the above” (Alek).

An interesting expectation that surfaced was the expectation that the AHRD conference would evidence the best practices of HRD. For example, “I don’t understand how an organization for HRD, where we are teaching people how to run meetings and how to do things, and every year our opening session drags on for hours...If we are supposed to be experts in this area, and helping other people not do it like that, why are we doing that?...We should be modeling what we’re teaching” (Meredith).

Post-conference reflections provided insight into the doctoral students’ experiences, both positive and negative, as they negotiated the terrain of the conference. Their tacit or explicit awareness of an AHRD CoP was evident. Several of their comments reflected themes within the lens of legitimate peripheral participation in a CoP, one of the literature bases used for coding. In commenting, “The questions from the audience gave me real insight into what people are struggling with,” Theo was reflecting from the periphery of the CoP. By stating, “If there was something in there that I decided I want to see, I’ll follow up with the presenters and ask where stuff came from,” Meredith indicated planned entry, and a move from the periphery toward the center. Alek stated, “I spoke to one of my colleagues about accreditation and I was scolded by him.” This experience reflected a tension that developed among people at the periphery, as he was reminded of the acceptable viewpoint on the issue within the CoP.

In discussing a participant’s challenge to comments in a pre-conference session, Meredith said, “The good thing about this conference is that that’s allowed. I mean, people are pretty receptive to a challenge...and this culture accepts that.” Reflecting on heated comments during a large group session, Theo said, “It’s not a real fight, but it’s like a scholarly fight.” Both of these students indicated understanding of engagement in the ongoing scholarly debate within the CoP.

### *Advantages and Barriers for Integration into the Profession*

Students encountered both advantages and barriers during their conferences experiences. Orientation was a positive experience Jean, the first time participant:

Actually, it was very comforting. The people were very friendly...They seemed like they understood people who this was their first time. A lot of times when people have been going to conferences for a long time they forget what it's like for someone, even if you're an older person, how uncomfortable that can be. And they seemed to really get that. So it was encouraging...As they were talking about things, you could see everyone's shoulders just sort of relax a little bit and ease down into their chairs.

Another advantage for doctoral students at the conference was the ability to meet people that shared their interests, which often led to the possibility of collaborative work. For example, Meredith said, "Today a couple people said that they want to talk to me more about my stuff." However, it is interesting to note that most of the collaborative linkages they referred to were with others that were also on the periphery.

One perceived barrier expressed by students was the potential of students to feel disempowered as they attempt to enter the scholarly CoP. As Theo observed, "Some people are more entrenched in their discipline than others...it's harder to convince them of something that's important or that needs some attention for research."

### *Conference Arrangements and Logistics*

Student participants made many comments about the logistics of the conference. For example, "I think the fact that the conference was organized in three different hotels, which are quite spread out, [was] a problem" (Theo). They expressed repeated concern regarding tight scheduling and lack of time for reflection. "This conference is so intense...starting with the keynote at 8:15 [a.m.] And you don't end 'til 8:00 at night...there's no time – no breathing room" (Meredith). Theo summarized this concern by saying, "this year the physical environment of the conference wasn't as conducive to learning as previous years...where people could kind of congregate." The lack of time and space for interaction and reflection potentially impacts how people relate to each other within a CoP.

### *Summary of Findings*

We can summarize what was learned through our analysis through the following statements. Doctoral students came to the conference with varied expectations. The students' professional development needs were reflected in the multiple ways they attempted to access the scholarly community. The level of experience with past conferences impacted the level of preparation and what students looked for from the conference. Learning and interaction styles further impacted conference participation and subsequent feelings of inclusion. Disciplinary entrenchment by senior scholars led to feelings of disempowerment for students. Lack of time and space for interaction and reflection became a barrier for students. Meeting others with shared interests for potential future collaborations created a bridge for continued participation. The students in this study began to understand the nature of scholarly discourse.

Doctoral students at the conference were trying to understand how and what they needed to do to gain entrance into the “scholarly huddle” that they perceived. Whether browsing through the conference program to locate presentations of interest, entering into discussions after sessions and presentations, or engaging in informal conversations, the doctoral students each sought to understand the landscape of the scholarly community and to decipher access to it.

In academic environments, doctoral students learn through classes, seminars, course-related research, fellow students, and faculty members. As they anticipate transitioning from academia to the professional world, conference attendance represents an opportunity to continue their learning in a new context. Learning how to learn from conferences and incorporate that learning into one’s professional practice can then become a key factor in the continuing professional development expected of both scholars and practitioners.

### Discussion

Doctoral students attending scholarly conferences exist on the periphery of the scholarly community for the most part. Students attending for the first time probably have the greatest challenge in gaining entry to the scholarly community. Those with prior conference experience and prior connections with other attendees experience more success in making additional connections and entering into collaborative relationships. Expectations, approach, and personal characteristics all affected the conference experience of doctoral students in this study, who for the most part, found more barriers than bridges across the “scholarly divide” and into the scholarly CoP. Organization and structure of the conference itself was a notable barrier.

There were encouraging student forays toward entering the scholarly community. Using Hay’s (1996) conceptualization of the ways a newcomer can become part of the legitimate periphery of a CoP, we found that the doctoral students demonstrated travel along these paths. Although none of the students spoke of being part of an apprentice experience, Hay’s first path toward the center of a CoP, they did experience the other four paths. One participant, who was a practitioner and doctoral student, joined others to form a new committee for practitioners within AHRD, an example of being part of a new CoP. A second attendee was part of several communities of practice as he participated in multiple conferences in both HRD and other fields. A third student found a way to change the practice of the community from the peripheral position of a doctoral student by co-organizing a pre-conference that involved the AHRD CoP. Another attendee found a way toward the center of practice from the periphery by preparing a paper for presentation, commenting, “When I started writing this paper, it was approved, and things just proceeded in the right direction” (Alek).

It appears that faculty scholars can serve as either bridge or barriers in helping or hindering graduate students as they attempt to access scholarly communities of practice. Barab and Duffy (as cited in Hilliard, 2006) name three characteristics central to communities of practice and relevant to educational processes. They share a dynamic nature aimed toward both collective and ongoing development. A *common cultural and historical heritage* involved “a collective knowledge base that is continually negotiated anew through each interaction” As *interdependent systems*, communities of practice work toward shared goals. Third, a *reproduction cycle* facilitates ongoing development as “communities replenish themselves as

new members move” from periphery to the core (Barab & Duffy, as cited in Hilliard, 2006, p. 48). Interestingly, these characteristics require core CoP members to either be open to people or ideas from the periphery or to actually facilitate their movement *for the benefit of the CoP*.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to metaphors as a means for making sense of qualitative data. “Metaphorical imagery can provide a useful way of thinking about and interpreting textual data... This is accomplished through comparison or analogy. At its simplest, a metaphor is a device of representation through which new meaning may be learned” (p. 85). The metaphor of a bridge is an image that was used by students involved in this study. Students’ initiative is important in moving toward fuller participation in the CoP, *and* they need bridges to help them across professional and scholarly gulfs that exist. The metaphors of bridge and barrier offer some interesting insights when further explored. *What kind of bridge* facilitates participation in a CoP, crossing the scholarly divide from student to scholar practitioner within a professional conference and organization? Members at the core of the CoP can view themselves as personally creating access, or they can use all the means possible to create avenues for crossing the divide students face.

Students involved in this study expressed the need for or appreciation of a variety ways of connecting. They stated the need to bridge theory and practice in building their future careers. They valued new connections they were able to make with ideas that furthered their dissertation research. These connections included access to scholars whose work they were using, paper presentations on similar topics, networking that helped them identify others who are interested in similar topics, and dialogue that resulted in the potential for new collaborations. They also attempted to span gulfs in understanding, such as cultural differences in HRD internationally or gender differences not often recognized in career development research.

Scholarly conferences and CoPs need many of the qualities found in the metaphor of a bridge. They need purposeful construction, technological support, flexibility, room for progress, and ample access and egress points. There are associated costs, requiring an investment in order to create, maintain, and continually improve these valuable infrastructure conduits. Scholarly conferences and CoPs need the same things in order to bridge students into their midst.

### **Implications for Students, Faculty, and Conference Organizers**

Although most of the recommendations derive directly from the doctoral students, we also suggest a few strategies that became evident to the researchers as we worked with the data. These strategies may not have been recognized by the participants. In order for doctoral students to maximize learning and participation at a scholarly conference, we recommend that they plan in advance for learning at the conference, practice self-reflection during the conference, and make efforts to engage fully in the activities of the conference. As Meyer (1985) advocated, students need to approach conferences with intentionality and to plan and manage their self-directed learning.

Faculty mentors, and those that are already members of the scholarly community, can facilitate doctoral student transition from the periphery towards entry to the scholarly community through advanced preparation, mentoring, coaching, and co-authoring and co-presenting papers.

Apprenticeship is one of the ways faculty members in leadership positions can use to facilitate movement of students from the periphery to the center of the CoP. This role is the responsibility of long-term members of the community practice. Additionally, the CoP needs to be aware of its own entrenchment and resistance to change. Ideally, it can recognize and welcome new perspectives and contributions that newcomers to the scholarly community have to offer, a critical feature of the vitality and continuance of a CoP.

Recommendations for conference planners include offering opportunities for online discussions in advance of the conference, pairing people up with others of like interests, and creating more subgroups. Conference planners can also allow more time in the schedule for reflection and informal discussion, encourage scholarly debate that is respectful and diplomatic, pay more attention to effective presentation skills, and give feedback following the conference to participants who take the time to offer insights and evaluative comments. As stakeholders in the conferences, organizers should see student perspectives and identify student needs as part of planning processes.

Students recommended locating the conference in one area, instead spreading it across multiple sites. They hoped planners would provide a more conducive environment for the conference, especially places for informal meetings and discussion, both scholarly and social. Finally, they suggested arranging the schedule to allow participants more time for reflection and informal discussion.

Creative and structured approaches exist for recognizing and facilitating conferences as sites promoting students entry into the scholarly community. Courses can be offered during conference, with meetings at one's home institution, before and after the sessions. In their own institutions, faculty members can advertise calls for proposals, hold sessions to help students see examples of proposals or receive feedback on their proposal drafts, and encourage students to present their research at conferences. Moreover, advisors need to balance scaffolding, bridge-building, and exploring independently for doctoral student participants. Students who spend all of their time in an institutionally-related group or in conference activities focused solely on students, may actually become limited, rather than facilitated, in their access to the scholarly community.

Interestingly, we discovered that there is a need for more opportunity for student-experienced scholar interaction and connection throughout the conference to help facilitate entry of doctoral students into the scholarly CoP. Ironically, student-only classes and receptions can actually serve to isolate rather than integrate students. One student, when asked by one of the interviewees if he would be attending a graduate student reception, said, "If I do that I will miss out on the opportunity to network at the reception where all of the leaders in the field will be. I think that is more important."

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

"We must explore the issue of learning how to learn from conferences" (Boucoulas, 1985, p. 55). In the 23 years since Boucouvalas made that statement, and since Meyer (1985) recommended strategies for professional development in conference contexts, few studies have

been published on the topic. The following recommendations are some of the ways we suggest research on this topic should be extended.

A comparison of data collected from both doctoral students and scholars would give a broader perspective of the student-scholar interaction within the CoP. The New Learning methodology could also be applied to conferences in other academic disciplines to give a fuller understanding of doctoral student experiences at scholarly conferences. Further study with the specific purpose of exploring LPP at scholarly conferences would also be especially useful to further elucidate of the process whereby doctoral students can move from the periphery into more active roles in the scholarly community.

Doctoral students, post-docs, and new professors would benefit from further study regarding what is required to bridge the “scholarly divide” and to enter into the scholarly CoP. The interaction of seasoned scholars with upcoming scholars can be mutually beneficial and add to the vitality of any scholarly discipline. In this spirit, the doctoral students involved as research participants and those that participated in preparing this research report offer new ideas to the scholarly community and to CoPs that gather in conferences.

### **Conclusion**

To encourage the dynamic evolution of an organization or CoP such as AHRD, it is necessary to continually create new knowledge and lenses for viewing knowledge. Participation of doctoral students, that are soon to be full participants in the CoP of the organization, can stimulate this process. Doctoral student dissertation research, done under the watchfulness of the experts in the CoP, becomes the new knowledge of the future, advancing the field of HRD to new levels. Through care and nurturance, not entrenchment and resistance, the scholarly community can become open to the valuable participation of newcomers who attend scholarly conferences with great interest in learning about and contributing to their future CoP.

### **References**

- Academy of Human Resource Development. (n.d.). *AHRD mission*. Retrieved November 14, 2007, from <http://www.ahrd.org/>
- Boucouvalas, M. (1985). How to profit from attending a conference. In P. J. Ilsley (Ed.), *Improving Conference Design and Outcomes* (pp. 43-56). New Directions in Continuing Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chapman, D. D., Wiessner, C. A., Storberg-Walker, J., & Hatcher, T. (2007). New learning: A different way of approaching conference evaluation. *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, 5(4), 261-270.
- Chinowsky, P., Molenaar, K., & Realph, A. (2007). Learning organizations in construction. *Journal of Management in Engineering*, 23(1), 27-34.
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Fuller, A., Hodkinson, H., Hodkinson, P., & Unwin, L. (2005). Learning as peripheral participation in communities of practice: A reassessment of key concepts in workplace learning. *British Educational Research Journal*, 31(1), 49-68.
- Graham, P., & Kormanik, M. (2004). Bridging the conference gap: A challenge to enhance the research practice dialogue. *Human Resource Development International*, 7(3), 391-394.
- Hatcher, T., Wiessner, C. A., & Storberg-Walker, J. (2005). New learning '05: What new learning emerged from the 2005 AHRD conference and how did it happen? In M. L. Morris (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 2005 International Research Conference of the AHRD* (pp. 1338-1345). Denver, CO: AHRD.
- Hatcher, T., Wiessner, C. A., Storberg-Walker, J., & Chapman, D. (2005). How a professional conference created new learning: A case study. *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on HRD Research & Practice in Europe* (no. 223). Leeds, UK.
- Hatcher, T., Wiessner, C. A., Storberg-Walker, J., & Chapman, D. (2006). How a professional conference created new learning: A case study. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 30(4), 256-271.
- Hay, K. (1996). Legitimate peripheral participation, instructionism and constructivism: Whose situation is it anyway? In H. McLellan (Ed.), *Situated learning perspectives* (pp. 89-100). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.
- Hilliard, T. W. (2006). Learning at conventions: Integrating communities of practice. *Journal of Convention and Event Tourism*, 8(1), 45-68.
- Krough, G. V., Ichijo, K., & Nonaka, I. (2000). *Enabling knowledge creation: How to unlock the mystery of tacit knowledge and release the power of innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ilsley, P. J. (1985). Improving conference design and outcomes. In P. J. Ilsley (Ed.), *Improving conference design and outcomes* (pp. 87-92). New Directions for Continuing Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2006). *Designing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998) *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Meyer, S. (1985). Maximizing the conference experience for first-time participants. In P. J. Ilsley (Ed.), *Improving conference design and outcomes* (57-68). New Directions in Continuing Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Storberg-Walker, J., Wiessner, C. A., & Chapman, D. D. (2005). How the AHRD 2005 conference created new learning: Preliminary results of a case study. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 16, 547-555.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wenger, E. C., & Snyder, W. M. (2000). Communities of practice: The organizational frontier. *Harvard Business Review*, 78(1), 139-145.

Wiessner, C. A., Hatcher, T., Chapman, D. D., & Storberg-Walker, J. (2008). Creating *new learning* at professional conferences: An innovative approach to conference learning, knowledge construction and program evaluation. *Human Resource Development International*, 11(4), 367–383.

## Appendix

### Exemplary Quotes Related to Findings

Theme	Quote
Attendance goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “There is a motivation to write a paper and present it and share it with the academy. There is another piece you look at and you make sure it fits. And I’m talking about the whole system. You know...when we clap we use both hands...It’s more about learning from others than sharing things with others” (Alek).</li> <li>• “That also reminded me that my own research is going to begin, so I should keep my eyes open. So whenever I attend any symposium that addresses my study I would like to learn from unintentional mistakes that are uncovered by these researchers; assumption that we as researchers make, so that I could adjust them in my study” (Alek).</li> <li>• “For me there’s a tie-in between how the organization develops and how a person develops. I want to see what the new theories are or what the current research is going into that on career development specifically because there’s not a lot out there on women. I’m not sure what the real new stuff is. So I figure this is going to be a great place to find out who’s doing what and where it’s headed” (Jean).</li> </ul>
Learning and interaction styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Whether it’s classes for school or work-related, I need time to process. I can’t – I’m not the kind of person that can hear something and respond immediately. I just need to think on it” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “I don’t want to be king or queen of anything. Because the day that I say I am an expert, it would add arrogance to my personality. And I believe that to be the worst thing that I would do. So that’s why I use the term journey; that you are never perfect. As soon as you think that, you’ve reached your plateau. There is something new to challenge you” (Alek).</li> <li>• “I think I’m a pretty analytical person. So for me, just in the pre-conference, for example, just looking at the handouts before the session started I was able to say, ‘Oh, this is going to be really applicable.’ Or, ‘I would need to find out more about this.’ And so looking at the visual, I’m a very tangible person also...I had to buy proceedings because proceedings just do it for me. Looking through the handouts for that session really is what I guess triggered me to stay interested and stay engaged” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “You talk to people that ask you questions in the session when you’re presenting. You try to talk to them afterwards and say, ‘Hey, did I make sense? Was it clear?’...Actively searching for feedback” (Theo).</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “So when that light bulb goes off, that’s when I take the notes” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “At one session there was a diverging viewpoint on the definition. That didn’t get resolved but people respected each other for having different definitions of the same thing...They respected each other because they saw from each other that they came from different perspectives. So they looked at that particular point of view and put it in perspective. I think respect is the way to go. I mean, you can discuss something but should be anything like a wall or something...If you’re doing that, then you’re having some kind of tunnel vision” (Theo).</li> <li>• “I think finding the boundaries of the discipline and being on those boundaries – and see where things connect or don’t connect – that’s really important” (Theo).</li> </ul>
Student expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I don’t think you come to a scholarly conference without expecting to learn something. I don’t think you’d commit the time and energy and money to a research conference if you didn’t hope to learn something from it” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “That’s how I take all of the sessions. How is it going to help me at this point in time, where I’m in the middle of dissertation writing, how it is going to help me further along” (Meredith)?</li> <li>• “I think these conferences present an opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds – whether ethnic, cultural or religious or all of the above – to take the initiative and share with people, share with learners because we are all learners here, what phenomena mean in their culture, and their religion, and their belief system” (Alek).</li> <li>• “There’s a lot of common ground here and it’s up to academics to sort of keep pushing that; pushing the envelope just a little bit” (Jean).</li> <li>• “It’s real interesting having people on the practitioner side. Which I wouldn’t have expected, again, being a scholarly conference and in the past hasn’t had a whole lot to offer practitioners. [There] may have been a few people that have done their research practitioner-based thing, but there hasn’t been anything designated. And I was beginning to wonder if this was the right conference. So I’m interested to see how those sessions all go” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “It’s really important to engage in a constructive dialogue...When I say constructive it does not mean that there’ll be two or three parties with respective interests and they keep on defending those. More like you present your perspective and then you’re open to being challenged by yourself and other” (Alek).</li> <li>• “The perception is that academics get into sort of the rut. And they present sort of the same types of things. So it’s refreshing that, especially when it come to human resource development, that you’re interested in what’s new, what’s coming out...Knowing that there’s somebody just looking at new stuff is just, “Oh! Yeah! This is really good.” We’re not all trying to live back in the 50s. Encouraging” (Jean).</li> </ul>

<p>Advantages and barriers for integration into the profession</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think those who are in a position to support young scholars, if they are really open minded and are willing to learning new things, then it’s a journey...in which everyone basically benefits” (Alek).</li> <li>• “Being part of this project makes me feel more connected to the community of practice...It would be something that I would be able to share with my advisor and teacher, for example. I would be able to build on it. Maybe I would get an opportunity to apply the same model, or use the same work in some other area” (Alek).</li> <li>• “I knew I was applying for a couple of hospital-based jobs. The keynote gave a handout and I have all the notes that I wrote on the back...And I carried it with me to my interviews in case it came up as a topic...It’s just a one page, but it was important – about creating a foundation of trust as a priority...I have a full page of notes that I thought might come up as something to talk about in the interviews” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “Since then I’ve gotten involved in that committee...I think that’s why I was kind of wondering whether I’d get involved or not...And by being involved on the committee will keep me...involved at least a little bit longer to feel it out over the next couple of years and see where it goes. And hopefully I can be a part of making that happen” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “I think there is a gap that needs to be addressed. And basically I’m talking about the communication; the way people are supposed to communicate because there might be a certain dominant culture. That would be perfectly all right in this particular culture. However, when you are in a company of people who are from various parts of the world – what sort of impression you create...So it’s like creating a division, a dichotomy...You don’t realize that you are not concerning one person. You are concerning a community that looks up to the individual” (Alek).</li> <li>• “The orientation here – it was like, ‘Approach people. Go up to – if you don’t know someone by name...don’t be afraid to go up and talk with them because in this conference people are very approachable. So don’t be shy’” (Jean).</li> <li>• “Yesterday was a student reception from seven to eight. A very good opportunity for learning; to come together...Several students decided to go out for dinner with either their own professor, advisors, or just as a group. The attendance of students at the reception was low. And it was sad...It would have been a good opportunity to network with other universities and so on. And I think that was an opportunity that people could have capitalized on, because when you are with people of your own level – and I’m talking about reflection level – you feel more comfortable in approaching it as when you do not know...On the one had you can argue that I have the right to make my choice. Okay, but then you adhere to the consequences. I think you would respect that people have expended time and effort” (Alek).</li> </ul>
--	---

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I got involved in one particular preconference. There’s a lot of colleagues that are strongly interacting. I got a nice research working relationship with a colleague out of that...I think the pre-conference is an excellent venue for these informal discussions” (Theo).</li> </ul>
Conference arrangements and logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I was sitting at the pool talking with a colleague who I hadn’t seen in a year. And fortunately I didn’t have my laptop out at that point because someone dove in the pool and splashed stuff all over us. It’s not exactly an ideal set-up for learning outside of the classroom...The pool area is not a real suitable area to have in-depth discussions” (Meredith).</li> <li>• “There’s a lot of nature you see as soon as you step outside of your hotel. I think that adds calmness to the environment. People might get up early in the morning and breathe in some fresh air and reflect on their interactions, their reading” (Alek).</li> <li>• “I think they should pay explicit attention to effective presentation skills. Because some people [do not] have all of the skills they need to present. The paper can be brilliant, but you still have to get it across. So some people need a little bit more of those skills” (Theo).</li> <li>• “It would really help if the facility is big enough to accommodate all persons. Because then it’s easier – kind of at ten at night you go downstairs in the lobby and there are some people sitting there and you can engage in a dialogue at night” (Alek).</li> <li>• “We’ve been saying that this is an international HRD conference. Maybe I am missing something, I haven’t seen anything specific that would highlight the international part...Are they genuinely interested in understanding and learning from HRD internationally? So what is international? What’s the significance of the word international?...I think that there are many scholars with extensive international experiences...I think this is the time when we can really recognize our own people” (Alek).</li> <li>• “I think you need to have lots of room for informal discussion outside the formal sessions...Because if you get a chance to talk over lunch or over dinner about these problems or issues, sometimes new ideas for new, interesting research arise. I find that very important” (Theo).</li> </ul>