

# Themes of Adult Learning and Development in Human Resource Development

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**Abstract: This hermeneutic study explores the practices and philosophies of Adult Education and Human Resource Development, so that integrated communities of practice maybe created by understanding the ways in which adult education theory informs the field of HRD.**

According to Dirkx (1996), Human Resource Development specialists hold various perceptions of their field as a form of adult education, some seeing it as interchangeable and others arguing its distinctiveness. There continues to be a wide gap separating learning theory and common training practice (Stamps, 1997), regardless of the widespread acknowledgment that learning is at the center of all adult education and training (Tuijnman, 1996). Perpetuating the gap is the argument, based on the bottom-line focus of Human Resource Development (HRD), that the purpose of HRD is improved performance (Swanson & Arnold, 1996). In contrast, Adult Education (AdEd) embraces the goal of bringing about learning, whether for the benefit of the organization or not. The historical meaning of adult education was to help fully realize a democratic vision in society (Dirkx, 1996), a purpose that potentially could be interpreted as incompatible with the focus of workplace learning.

The gap that apparently exists can be summarized as follows: If workplace learning were considered HRD, then the purpose of training and organization development would be improved performance, and the focus would be on fulfilling the organization's needs; if workplace learning were considered adult education, then the purpose of training and organization development would be learning, and the focus would be on the individual. If the fields of AdEd and HRD, while recognizing their differing needs, focus on their similarities, an opportunity exists to forge an alliance, the potential result of which is a synergy that integrates the theories and practices of the two fields for the benefit of both the individual *and* the organization (Peterson & Provo, 1996).

The emerging paradigm reveals a view of work that is developmental, participatory, and self-authorizing, if not democratic. Considerable emphasis is placed on contextual or situational learning, in which worker-learners are collaboratively engaged in both problem-posing and problem-solving ... When HRD is framed within the context of the emerging paradigm of work and as a form of adult education, it will then see itself as being about the business of fostering learning environments in the workplace. (Dirkx, 1996, pp. 44, 46)

Maki (1996) referred to the need to develop a citizenry of the workplace. According to Stamps (1997), *communities of practice* a term, he notes, that was coined by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave in their 1991 book, *Situated Learning* (Cambridge University Press) are possible when work and learning are integrated. The core principles of the communities of practice perspective are that (a) learning is social, and (b) learning happens on the job. Thus it is learning that gives rise to communities of practice, which are a way of thinking about how work gets done.

The purpose of this hermeneutic study was to explore the potential for the two fields of Adult Education and Human Resource Development to come together for the benefit both of the organization, whose primary need must focus on performance, and of the individual, whose primary need focuses on personal development. Thus the specific research questions were as follows: (1) What is the practice of Human Resource Development (HRD)? Of Adult Education (AdEd)? (2) How do the fields of AdEd and HRD relate to one another?, and (3) Is there an opportunity for creating integrated communities of practice?

### **Background**

According to de Moura Castro and de Oliveira (1996), even though education and training have been considered polar extremes--education focusing on the development of the mind and training focusing on the mastery of manual endeavors--good training can include conceptual development and education is more meaningful when it is contextualized in some practical activity. Instead of competing, the two fields (occupational training and conceptual development) should help each other in the process of learning because theory and practice are not the extremes of the same continuum. Training should not be considered lacking in theory and conceptualization and education should not be considered impractical (de Moura Castro & de Oliveira, 1996).

Human Resource Development and Adult Education Defined. As with any field, multiple definitions and descriptions of HRD have evolved. HRD has been described as organized learning experiences provided by employers within a specified period of time to bring about performance improvement or personal growth (Nadler & Nadler, 1989); as the field of study and practice responsible for fostering a long term work-related learning capacity at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Watkins, 1995); and as the improvement of individual, group, and organizational effectiveness through the integrated use of career development, organizational development, and training and development (McLagan, 1993).

Definitions of Adult Education also have evolved over time. Lindeman (1926) perceived the education of adults in relation to society, suggesting that the purpose of adult education is bilateral-- changing individuals to adjust to changing social functions because changed individuals have a collective effect in changing society (Lindeman, 1926). A frequently cited definition describes adult education as a process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, or skills (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Such a definition could hold up within the context of HRD. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that to some extent, the definitions of the two fields reflect the various philosophies associated with each.

Philosophies of Human Resource Development and Adult Education. Behaviorist conceptions of learning have been predominant in training. A behaviorist perspective ties observable behavior to an environmental stimulus using reinforcement as the main paradigm, such that learning requires the sequential mastery of behavioral elements (Lowyck, 1996). The behaviorist approach to learning is reflected in HRD settings when actions are rewarded based on measurable behavior (e.g., performance) more predominantly than in adult education settings, in which cognitive growth is more likely to be the framework for learning.

The focus of a cognitive orientation is the internal mental process within the learner's control, which is enhanced when related to concepts which already exist in the individual's cognitive structure (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Cognitivism is shaped by three underlying assumptions about the process of learning: (a) individuals construct their own learning from an experience, (b) cognitive meaning develops as individuals interact with their environment, and (c) prior experiences direct perception and thus might limit learning (Grippin & Peters, 1984).

Humanist theories consider learning from the perspective of the human potential for growth. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1991), a humanist orientation would reject the notion that behavior is predetermined either by the environment or one's internal subconscious. Humanism suggests that while individual's perceptions are centered in experience, individuals have freedom to pursue their unlimited potential for growth and development.

Human Resource Development and Adult Education as Integrated Fields. There exists a blurring of boundaries between the field of adult education and other fields (Merriam & Brockett, 1997). While some would claim that aligning with other fields will contribute to a loss of identity for adult education, others would suggest that to do so is to capitalize on the logical link between adult education and other fields. According to Willis (1996), adult education theory and practice have emerged as necessities in order to understand and practice HRD. While adult education and business and industry may have differing goals, they share a common objective--learning for a productive and informed citizenry, whether a citizenry of the community or citizenry within the context of the workplace (Maki, 1996). Even Swanson (1996) suggests that perhaps the two sides have more in common than was first thought--that they may, indeed, not be in conflict. Those who adhere to a performance orientation do so not in an attempt to deny the dignity and worth of employees or to deny that learning is a necessary component of performance; but rather that it is simply to ensure that the HRD process contributes to the organizational goals of the system within which it operates (Swanson & Arnold, 1996).

A collaborative relationship between individual learning and organizational performance may not be quite so *simply* achieved. Certainly, there are opportunities for building a collaborative environment in the workplace through incorporating adult learning strategies, but for adults to be successful in this process, they must be involved in the development of their learning plans and the evaluation of their performance (Quinn, 1996).

According to Lowyck (1996), organizations need to move toward cognitive-oriented training approaches. Cognitive-oriented training approaches would focus on the complex and continuous interaction between learning characteristics (prior knowledge and cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies), complex tasks, the learning environment, and assessment of learning outcomes in

terms of learner control, meta-cognitive activity, and transfer. Such an approach could be interpreted as humanistic.

Need for the Study. In the past, workplace learning was primarily skills training that was based on immediate job needs; in the future, it will be integrally tied to performance and production (Watkins, 1995). Thus a more strategic view of workplace learning goes beyond skill-based performance that can be directly and immediately evaluated (a behavioral approach) to include learning (a cognitive approach). Spikes (1995a) suggests just such an integrated approach, emphasizing on-going, integrated learning over the life span of the employee--a combination of training and lifelong professional development.

Influenced by multiple and rapid change in technological, social, political, ethical, demographic, cultural, and ecological arenas, industry evolutions require high-level behaviors among individuals and groups. These behaviors, in turn, require more training and organizational strategies focused on optimal learning output (Lowyck, 1996). This complex environment suggests the need for a collaborative training-learning model, one which can be initiated when the two fields of adult education and human resource development understand the intricacies, goals, and needs of one another--when the two fields unite in humanism.

### **Methodology: Hermeneutics**

The primary task of hermeneutics is to interpret meaning in human experience by conversing with texts or with others in a verbal exchange for the purpose of gaining insight or understanding; in short, hermeneutics makes sense out of everyday action. Understanding allows for new meanings to be recognized, valued, and integrated into life. Meaning can be derived from understanding how values, ideals, concepts, or events relate to each other, the self, and a larger whole. Whenever a question about meaning arises, there is a hermeneutic problem. Hermeneutic research is guided by an interest in understanding what shapes our lives (Hultgren, 1989).

In hermeneutics, the "conversation" should continue until an interpretation is found to be meaningful and misunderstandings have been uncovered and dealt with. Since subjectivity is important and must not be denied, there must be an attitude of openness to what others have to offer (Gadamer, 1975).

The challenge faced by the interpreter is not knowing all the meanings embedded in a text or conversation, so the questions become refined and lead to many affirmations, denials, and raising other related questions in order to raise consciousness and affirm or alter meaning. Thus the interpreter has to reconstruct meanings of texts in order to project answers to the questions posed. But there is no absolute answer. Asking important questions is the first step in hermeneutics.

Success of a hermeneutic study is a matter of the degree of completeness and sense of satisfaction that a meaning has been developed and refined. Readers must assess the quality of insights into meanings. Questions a reader might ask include whether or not the insights have any value to practice, whether the meanings seem forthright and sincere rather than rhetorical

and pedantic, and whether the work stimulates further questions and conversation. However, the reader must keep in mind that in hermeneutic studies interpretations cannot be proven.

Since the goal of this study was greater understanding of the meaning behind the conceptual relationship between adult education and human resource development, the research was hermeneutic. It was the "interpretive study of the expressions and objectification (texts) of lived experience in the attempt to determine the meaning of them" (van Manen, 1990, p. 38).

The text used for interpretation in this study consisted of 109 cases--interviews conducted by students taking a graduate-level class surveying the fields of human resource development and adult education at the University of Minnesota, a midwestern, research-oriented, doctoral-granting public institution. During Winter, 1996; Spring, 1996; and Fall, 1997, students interviewed practitioners in the fields of adult education and human resource development for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the two fields. Most of the 109 cases comprised one interview with an HRD practitioner and one interview with an Adult Education practitioner, but one case comprised 4 interviews. The total number of interviews was 220. The majority of *interviewees* were female, perhaps a reflection that the majority of *interviewers* were also female, representative of the gender breakdown in the classroom and the program.

## **Results and Discussion**

The overall theme that emerged is that the focus of HRD and Adult Education falls somewhere on a continuum between learner-centered development and organizational improvement. In fact, when the fields were contrasted, they were contrasted based on those orientations. While organizational philosophies and individual philosophies appear to drive existing practice, the interviews also revealed that practitioners envisioned and sought opportunities to create integrated communities of practice that represented a humanist point of view.

The focus of HRD practitioners was optimization of organizational bottom-line goals. This focus seemed to reflect a behaviorist philosophy and was represented by statements such as the following:

"The HRD initiatives tend to focus on skills or information needed to perform a particular job."

"HRD focuses on training to increase production, and thus, company profits."

Adult Education practitioners focused on the goal of individual development. This focus appeared to be most consistent with a cognitive philosophy and was represented by statements such as the following:

"[The] mission is to teach students how to learn by developing critical thinking skills and a natural curiosity of the world."

In reference to a GED program: "[The program] provided skill-building around higher critical thinking and even worked to engage the learners in attempts to confront the systems not working in their interests."

Some interviewers chose to emphasize the distinction between the two fields, as represented by the following statements:

"The distinction lies between the individual compared to the group, gains in self-development compared to gains in corporate efficiency and productivity."

"It seems as if Human Resource Development offers training for the benefit of the organization, while other adult educators outside of the business world offer education for the benefit of the person."

It is the juxtapositional and transpositional relationship summarized by the following statements that form the basis for suggesting that opportunities do indeed exist to forge integrated communities of practice for the improvement of the human condition:

"Both [fields] suggest there is an on-going undercurrent toward continual development-AdEd in terms of life-long learning, and HR in terms of managing on-going change in the business environment. "

"Adult education and human resource training and development are very similar. They are based on a common goal of improving the quality of life for an individual."

"Learning enhances the quality of the individual's life by improving his or her job readiness and security, while at the same time serving the wider society by adding to the pool of skilled workers."

"Any enrichment by the adult will benefit the organization and the more empowerment bestowed on the learner, the greater benefit will be to the organization *and* [italics added] the adult learner."

Some goals articulated blended philosophy, more Humanistic in nature. This blended approach, which also lends support for the potential to develop communities of practice, was represented by statements such as the following:

"The more the individual is viewed as a member of the larger community, the more the personal needs of the individual appear to be addressed."

"Ad Ed has a broader scope with its goal of education for the progress of the whole person, looking at what the learner needs to perform in society as a whole as well as in the work world."

"In both organizations, the learner is seen as an individual embedded in the larger society."

"What is interesting is that educational institutions are being challenged to become more productive and to prove or justify themselves, while corporations are discovering that skills like creativity, communication, and psychology are increasingly important in the workplace."

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

We conclude that a false dichotomy has been created between HRD and AdEd, between the organization and the individual, and between performance and learning. While AdEd and HRD may have different goals, they share a common objective--learning for a productive citizenry. The two fields have complementary theories and practices that benefit both the individual and the organization. If learning is at the heart of HRD and organizational change (Willis, 1996), then the contributions of adult education theory must be embraced.

As women, people of color, non-native English speakers, older workers, and members of multiple generations comprise the workplace, complementary and reinforcing work and human resource practices are needed. In the past, workplace learning consisted primarily of skills training based on immediate job needs; in the future, it will focus on fostering long-term, work-related learning capacities (Watkins, 1995). Thus a more strategic view of workplace learning goes beyond skill-based performance that can be directly and immediately evaluated (a behavioral approach) to include learning (a cognitive approach) toward the strategic alignment of goals. Spikes (1995a) suggests just such an integrated approach, emphasizing on-going, integrated learning over the life span of the employee-- a combination of training and lifelong professional development. This complex environment suggests the need for a collaborative training-learning model, one which can be initiated when both fields understand the intricacies, goals, and needs of one another - one in which the fields unite in integrated communities of practice.

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