Continuum of Alliance: A Proposed Model for Understanding the Relationship Between Adult Education and Human Resource Development

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Continuum of Alliance: A Proposed Model for Understanding the Relationship Between Adult Education and Human Resource Development

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Abstract: The relationship between Adult Education and Human Resource Development has been modeled or described in various ways but continues to evolve. Building on existing conceptions, we present an alternative model for understanding the fields as distinct and yet complementary.

Keywords: adult education, human resource development, critical perspectives

The work of Adult Education (AE) frequently overlaps with Human Resource Development (HRD), but the relationship between the two fields, ideal or actual, remains a topic of conjecture, controversy, and territorialism. Some have compared the relationship to a rocky marriage (Belzer, Bierema, Cseh, Ellinger, Ruona, & Watkins, 2001), while others advocate for cooperation around shared critical perspectives (Hatcher & Bowles, 2013; 2014).

Despite their differences, AE and HRD programs are increasingly being asked to align curriculum, share faculty and students, and, in many cases, even merge. As the complexities of these processes continue to unfold, it is important for scholars and practitioners of both fields to reevaluate and learn to articulate the similarities, differences, and relationship between AE and HRD. Typically, AE is thought of as individual learning, often for social justice or empowerment, while HRD is generally couched in the context of the workplace and emphasizes outcomes and performance. We ask: are those qualities of AE and HRD still accurate and, if so, what are the implications of those qualities for researchers, scholars, practitioners, and students?

The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical and contemporary nature of the relationship between AE and HRD, engage in a meaningful dialogue about the implications of current trends, and propose a model of affiliation that accounts for the complexity of underlying issues. This paper focuses on contemporary and aspirational future perspectives on the relationship between AE and HRD. We draw from and evaluate existing literature to build a revised and reimagined model of the relationship between the two fields.

Existing Models

The historic relationship between AE and HRD has been thoroughly addressed in the literature (e.g. Bierema, 2000; Cunningham, 1993; Kuchinke, 1999; Swanson & Arnold, 1996). In this paper, we wish to emphasize recent conversations that incorporate a contemporary perspective and account for the evolution of the fields in recent years. In particular, we draw from two more recent issues of New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development (Volume 25, Issue 4 and Volume 26, Issue 1) addressing this topic.

In their introduction to the special issues, Rocco and Smith (2013) suggested a model of the relationship should “emphasize a primary focus of AE and HRD. A primary focus of AE is to research and theorize how individuals learn, while a primary focus of HRD is to research and theorize how learning takes place in organizations (i.e., organizational learning)” (p. 2). In Figure
1, we present a model for of the AE/HRD relationship derived from Rocco and Smith’s (2013) suggestion. This model implies the main differences between AE and HRD derive from the context in which they are applied. AE focuses mainly on education for individuals while HRD emphasizes organizational settings. The two fields overlap with respect to learning in group contexts—groups being loosely conceptualized as two or more individuals. Individual learning is often contained in classes or other similar settings which organizational learning functions through the efforts of employee or participant groups.

Figure 1. A model of AE and HRD affiliation based on Rocco and Smith (2013).

From another perspective, aligned with Cunningham’s (2004) work, Hatcher and Bowles (2013; 2014) suggested critical theory and perspectives could become the bridge between the two fields. AE’s social justice emphasis makes AE an important partner for critical HRD (CHRD), which shares those values. Yet while CHRD is gaining momentum among HRD academics, it has yet to reach its full potential or be wholly accepted by AE scholars. Jacobs (2014) characterized the relationship in this way: “AE appears less threatened by HRD and more comfortable with continuing on in its own areas of strength, which in the end are complementary to the HRD field. In turn, the HRD field has gradually softened some of its harder edges related to achieving organizational performance, seemingly at all costs, and integrating other perspectives that recognize the need for greater learner involvement” (p. 14). If one considers social justice as the primary strength and perspective of AE, then Jacobs’ characterization seems to support that of Hatcher and Bowles. Figure 2 is a model of the relationship between AE and HRD based on affiliation through critical perspectives and social justice. Note that the entirety of the overlap between AE and HRD exists within the critical perspectives circle, represented by the solid black region of Figure 2. Jacobs’ model suggests AE and HRD have nothing in common aside from their critical perspectives.

Arguably, these models do not fully capture the breadth and complexity of AE and HRD, neither individually nor in relation to one another. While traditionally presented as a subset of AE or in the context of tension and discord between fields (Belzer, Bierema, Cseh, Ellinger, Ruona, & Watkins, 2001), AE and HRD have grown to a point where existing models must evolve to keep up with these dynamic and changing disciplines.
Proposed Model

A model encompassing the various contemporary facets of AE and HRD scholarship and practice is needed to fully represent the complexity of the AE and HRD fields. We urge students, faculty, and practitioners in both fields to think more in terms of collaboration or a spectrum of values and behaviors, and less in terms of hierarchy, dominance, or separation. To reframe the relationship, we must extend and reconceptualize the connections between AE and HRD to incorporate recent and emerging trends in theory, practice, and funding. Hence, we present AE and HRD on a multi-dimensional continuum of sorts, as complementary and yet distinct fields, sharing some priorities and contexts, but not others, and varying by sub-discipline. A continuum model of alliance creates the opportunity for each to draw from the strengths of the other. For example, AE’s emphasis on social justice benefits HRD and aligns with CHRD, while HRD’s concentration on organizations generates new sites for AE practice.

In our proposed model, shown in Figure 3, we present three questions related to the values and purpose of AE and HRD and possibilities regarding the ways each field might generally be perceived to answer each question. The three guiding questions are meant to help assess the purpose, power relations, and broader societal implications of any AE or HRD work. We envision that AE generally operates on the left end of each dimension and HRD on the right (no political implications intended) but location along each dimension will vary according to the theoretical framework, context, or priority of a given instance. Our conception of the status quo is intentionally very broad. Depending on the context in which AE or HRD principles or practices are applied, status quo could be interpreted as the status quo in society, communities, or organizations.
By applying the proposed model, we have a means to locate the theories and specialties from each discipline in relation to one another and create an opportunity to better consider ways in which researchers from each field might collaborate. In Figure 4, we present the ways some AE and HRD sub-disciplines or theoretical perspectives might be represented with a general, broad interpretation. For example, in Figure 4a, by locating both andragogy and talent development similarly on the third dimension with regards to the status quo, we perhaps have identified one venue for interdisciplinary engagement. As a second example, Figure 4b, AE critical perspectives and CHRD both advocate for social justice and seek to question or challenge the status quo. They might benefit one another by generating new sites for shared application, bringing CHRD into more individual contexts and AE critical perspectives into organizational contexts. Finally, Figure 4c shows a comparison of communities of practice and organizational learning. While these two topics do not directly overlap, the communities of practice, generally applied in AE contexts, may be more adaptable to HRD contexts than other AE perspectives. As such, perhaps organizational learning, a strongly traditional HRD concept, may bring in aspects of communities of practice. Certainly these examples are meant to be the start of a conversation and reconceptualization of the relationship between AE and HRD. Other scholars may choose to locate theories, practices, and concepts differently than we have.
Figure 4. Examples of how some AE and HRD sub-disciplines and theoretical perspectives could be located on the three dimensions of the proposed new model.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Understanding the relationship between AE and HRD is crucial to the academic and practical futures of both fields. By understanding and articulating a clear relationship between them, scholars can make the important step of creating and maintaining space for their growth and development, both shared and collaborative. AE and HRD programs are increasingly being asked to align curriculum, share faculty and students, and in many cases even merge. As the complexities of these processes continue to unfold, it is important for adult educators to reevaluate and learn to articulate the similarities, differences, and relationship between AE and HRD.

Similarly, as the funding climate shifts for universities in general and education in particular, it becomes imperative that programs support one another. Within colleges of education, AE and HRD are often the odd duck programs that do not engage in K-12 teacher certification. Making the case for our programs to deans, provosts, and university presidents becomes a larger strategic and political conversation; a clearer conception of alignment and alliance for AE and HRD, such as the model we present in the paper, may serve to support both fields in navigating the complexities of higher education as well as expanding the opportunities for collaborative research and scholarship.

As junior scholars of AE and HRD, we witness the tension between fields but do not experience it ourselves. In particular, we wish to move forward by conducting research to bridge the gap between fields and, as in the present work, apply our scholarship to make meaning of the
continuum of possibility that exists between AE and HRD. As such, we advocate for collegial cooperation and growth for both fields.

References