Irreconcilable Differences: Critical Feminism, Learning at Work, and HRD

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Abstract: This study explored the contradictions among critical feminist theory, Human Resource Development, and the reality of women=s experiences. Missing from the HRD literature, with its managerial focus, is the centrality of workers', particularly women's experiences of HRD and the gendered nature of work itself.

Theoretical Framework

Our inquiry is grounded in critical feminist theory. Feminist theory is interested in inquiry focused on agency, power relations, shifting positionalities, voice, individual experience, and socially constructed knowledge (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1996; Tisdell, 1995). Although feminist theory is often oriented around the dynamics of gender, it is inclusive of the interests of others who have been marginalized by race, class, sexual orientation, language, and the practices and politics of educational systems (Lather, 1991). Despite the agenda of inclusiveness, feminist theory has been described as lacking wholeness, due in part to the dominance of relatively privileged white women scholars (hooks, 1989; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996). Critical educators, however, define their field as epitomizing the democratic ideal and accept responsibility to work toward social justice and democracy (Cunningham, 1992; Kincheloe, 1999). Feminist and critical theory come together to disrupt the status quo in a myriad of learning environments by examining individual experiences as phenomena. Therefore, a critical feminist perspective considers issues of power as well as bringing out elements of affect, social justice, marginalization, and contextual links among both students' and instructors' social, political, historical, and cultural locations (Collins, 1990; Lather, 1991).

Research Design

Reflecting on our own experiences as workers and educators, we have found that the literature on work and learning, especially critical scholarly work, has helped us understand how the various dimensions of power operate in our own particular places of work (e.g., Butler, 1997; Graham, 1995; Hart, 1992, 1996; Stalker, 1996; Townley, 1994). This critical reflection has also forced us to ask hard questions about the role education plays in the workplace. For example, who controls the goals, objectives, and definitions of learning and work, and for what purposes? Why does the assumption that workers personal objectives, visions, and points of view can and should be in alignment with management continue to go unquestioned? Is it ethical to impose HRD on workers for the purposes of organizational efficiency, productivity, and maximization of profit? Can the instrumental goals of training, the ongoing hierarchies of work, and the sustained balance of power relations in the workplace really be aligned with a feminist perspective?

Following the work of Bartunek and Louis (1996), we designed this study as an insider/outsider team research project. Epistemologically grounded in the assumption that knowledge is a human construct and thus located in an interpretive paradigm, the basis of "insider inquiry" is that researchers are participants in the situation being studied and that how insiders and outsiders work together is of major importance. In particular, our research team is composed of people who differ in their physical and psychological connectedness to the research setting and focal questions being examined. The team assumes both responsibility and shared authority for the study, meeting weekly to discuss issues and analyze the data.

Our study was conducted at two sites. We followed the process for selecting key informants suggested by Patton (1990). At the first location, a manufacturing firm in northeastern United States, informants consisted of eight female hourly workers and the female training manager. The hourly workers' perspectives were those of women engaged in the production process. At the second site, also in the Northeast, two work units were examined by the study -- one provided student services and the other instructional design services. This organization provided educational services including focuses on higher, continuing, informal, and professional education. One of the researchers worked at this site as a team leader and another as an instructional designer. Worker-informants included female clerical staff and professional staff. The two sites provided an excellent opportunity for an in-depth examination of key workplace learning issues across a broad spectrum of types of work and workers.

Our ongoing study began with a research team of three female adult education doctoral students and a male adult education faculty member. All four of us had interests in, and experience with, workplace learning issues. At least one "insider" was employed in each of the two work sites where we conducted our research. For this specific study, the team consisted of three members all of whom work inside one of the two research sites. Having spent four years working together within a more or less traditional insider/outsider paradigm, we were comfortable with the processes and procedures we had worked out among the four-member team and, subsequently, a three-member team. However, as we considered what critical feminist perspectives on the workplace consisted of, the underlying structure and implications of the gendered nature of organizing our insider/outsider processes came to the surface. The two female members of the research team were "insiders" and the male participant was not, highlighting the complex issues of gender, voice, and power we were struggling to understand. Within our insider/outsider group of three, we now found ourselves confronting and opening for exploration the multi-layered aspects of the gendered nature of work at this micro-level as well as through the context of this study.

At the manufacturing facility, we began with observing activities on the shop floor and then conducting semi-structured interviews with hourly workers. We observed and talked to workers about their jobs, their educational background, and the ramifications of workplace training initiatives. In addition to interviews with white, middle-aged, female workers averaging seventeen years on the job, we had complete access to workers on the shop floor, observing the manufacturing process and conducting informal interviews. Interviews were also conducted with the plant training manager, the site's "insider," who was keeping a reflective journal.

This six-month critical ethnographic study was based upon reflective journals of the researchers, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. We collaboratively designed the study including input from some of the participants, collected data, and interpreted results. Within a critical ethnographic paradigm, journal entries were examined, evaluated, and critiqued. Participation in formal HRD classes as well as informal and incidental learning activities were observed, field notes kept, and interviews recorded. Providing a rich database, journal entries became a means of writing as a way of knowing and a way of viewing HRD practice through interaction among researchers, written narrative, and the workplace as text (Fulwiler, 1987). Through participant observation and interviews, researchers had available on a daily basis, and in a social context, some of the reality-constituting interpretive practices through which women made meaning at work.

HRD Practice and Feminist Perspectives

The study identified numerous areas of contradiction between a critical feminist perspective on work and learning and the practices of HRD. Because we cannot do justice to all the issues that emerged, we would like to discuss some of them and raise others, hoping to bring these unexamined perspectives forward for future discussion and research by workplace educators.

At both sites we observed, as is the case in many workplaces, a flattening out of organizational hierarchies and intensification of work. In training terms, flattening out was described by educators at both research sites in positive terms as a way to bring decision-making opportunities to those who actually do the work thus giving them ownership in the processes of work. One way this was done was to have the women themselves do the training of new hires and fit that responsibility into their already full schedules. However, the women workers were much less positive about this development. The women pointed out that in practice this meant increased work and more responsibility without any real voice in what they thought was important. For example, one woman stated that:

I think that right now they've [management] gotten themselves in a predicament where they need people and they don't have them . . . I don't think you should be running flat out at a job and trying to teach somebody how to do it also.

In fact in our observations, reflections, and interviews we saw a consistent theme of work intensification. Clerical staff at the second site, for instance, were asked to develop and deliver training in their area of expertise without any adjustment to their ongoing job responsibilities. Moreover, the staff had no illusions about how their jobs were changing. All this discussion of empowerment and letting workers engage in the decision making process meant more work but with no recourse to refuse or even question the additional tasks and assignments and no organizational understanding of women's perceptions of their familial responsibilities. Our two research sites provided cases in point. In the factory, workers had just been trained in continuous quality, the expectation of teamwork and cooperation, and the value of loyalty to the company. However, one woman on second-shift was permitted to see her daughter - dressed and on her way to her high school prom - only during her regularly scheduled break time and in the factory cafeteria. At the second site, clerical workers discussed at length the work they now were required to do that had

previously been done by professional staff and/or managers. Their additional duties were assigned without benefit of increased pay or even management's acknowledgement of their new responsibilities.

The feminist concept of voice becomes important at this point. In this environment the only acceptable voice is a cheerful, positive one. If a woman does not exhibit those kinds of attitudes and behaviors then she is seen as deficient as a team player, a non-cooperative individual, and an employee unwilling to take the additional responsibilities of increased worker decision making. These processes are, of course, defined by the organization and reinforced by HRD courses. Thus, after being told she had been enrolled in a transformational leadership class, one woman considered questioning the course's purpose and value but had second thoughts because " . . . again, still, and seemingly forever, I'm going to be seen as negative, cynical, skeptical, uncooperative and not a team player. "Another worker, told that she was not a team player and needed to work on becoming a "cheerleader for management," commented sarcastically, " . . . guess I better break out the short skirt and pompoms."

As we were analyzing our data, several scenarios similar to those described above materialized. We began to connect these themes with feminist literature on work and learning. Specifically, organizational flattening is part of the argument asserting that our educational systems, despite data showing workers are more highly educated than at any other time, are both the cause of and the solution to current economic issues. In particular, decision-making and continuous improvement processes located throughout this flatter organizational spectrum supposedly demand higher-skilled, better-educated workers even though the design and organization of work indicates growing numbers of de-skilled jobs which do not draw upon or emphasize the requirement, or human capacity, to think and reason (Cyert & Mowery, 1987; Hart, 1996).

Mechthild Hart's (1996) work is one source of scholarship that discussed these issues. Hart described the disturbing aspects of the feminization of poverty, particularly in terms of its relationship with the sexist division of labor. The problem, according to much of the mainstream business and HRD literature (Handy, 1984) consists of a poorly educated workforce exacerbated by the entry of a higher percentage of women, minorities and immigrants into the workforce. One implication is that with a lower percentage of white men in the workplace there is a less than adequate base of human capital to apply to the current issues and needs of American business. The implication, and the ideology, of this position is clearly that non-male and non-White workers are less valuable and an across-the-board equating of women's work with low-skilled labor. Ironically, skills attributed to women as "natural" (patience, attention to detail, manual dexterity) such as work with microchips, have now become viewed as higher-level skills, commonly compared to brain surgery, for which men are being retrained.

In addition, flatter organizations also have the effect of pushing more work to lower levels, levels where labor is cheaper and where the workforce becomes more polarized (Hart, 1996). Although some groups of women have found more highly-skilled work, many have been forced into lower-skilled minimum wage jobs. Gender, sexual orientation, age, class,

and racial lines remain the points of polarization along with unequal distribution of skills, pay, and types of positions available (Hart, 1996; Schor, 1998). Our study suggests that HRD contributes to increasing the polarization through its deployment of generic skills in courses offered to workers. Examples of these types of courses include *Negaholics: How to Handle Negativity in the Workplace*, *Defining Your Role in a Changing Office Environment*, *Time Management: Regaining Control*, and *Thinking Power*. These classes, because they place the emphasis on the individual as deficient, help to create a docile, flexible, adjustable workforce that prepares workers to be resources rather than human beings. Furthermore, such classes devalue women's experience when they specifically describe women, particularly older women, as workers who resist change and insist upon maintaining and valuing their work-related experiences over generic skills, performance reviews, testing, and categorization of tasks. Modern work organizations devalue and attempt to discard workers' need for continuity, their rooting of work in life and personal experience, their sense of self, and a connection to others -- all characteristics traditionally described as feminine. Employers often use training courses to help erase these characteristics. Moreover, training in new organizational structures, such as the flatter corporation with less-secure permanent positions and growing numbers of part-time jobs, helps to solidify worker expectations for low pay, poor work conditions, fewer benefits, increasing workloads, and lack of job security. According to Hart (1992), "the new workers will be 'working like women' whose 'flexible working patterns' have already made them into the preferred labor force in many instances" (p. 98-89). We saw a strong connection between our current research and what Handy (1984) noted 15 years ago: "It is ironic that just as women have begun to win their fight to lead the kinds of lives that men lead, those lives are beginning to shift towards the pattern from which women are escaping" (p. 162).

Our previous studies as well as this study exemplify some of these points. For example, at the manufacturing facility, testing, job re-evaluation, and training deployed via the HRD unit were used to further maximize profits by creating new job classifications that kept the mostly female workforce at near minimum wage levels. In another case, when the need for product dipped, senior workers, who had higher pay levels, were sent home while temporary workers, those with a lower hourly rate, continued on the job. In a third instance, two women juggling demanding full-time jobs and the raising of young children discussed the conflict they felt between the commitment to their jobs within a collaborative work team environment and the second job awaiting them at home each night. They commented that there was often more comfort and support within the work environment than they found at home, where they began their second full-time job at the end of the day, often stressed and always tired. Research conducted by Hochschild (1997) indicates that these are not unusual tensions, with parents often voluntarily working longer hours on the job or taking work home, resulting in *task interest* consuming larger segments of time and commitment. However, "volunteering" to work longer hours can be caused by more than simply finding the work environment more supportive than the challenge of raising a family.

Conclusions

We believe that our study raises some compelling concerns for those involved in HRD and workplace learning. We concur with others who have found the underlying concepts of HRD to be inherently anti-feminist and possibly anti-democratic (e.g., Butler, 1997; Calas & Smircich, 1993; Fenwick, 1998; Fletcher, 1994; Graham, 1995; Townley, 1994). Feminist theory and feminist pedagogies are antithetical to a practice that locates people within economic systems that see humans as resources. Thus attempting to place feminism in the context of HRD fails to address the fundamental challenges feminist scholarship poses to discursive practices located within a human capital approach to knowledge production. The feminist concept of voice is essentially absent in a workplace where an employee is afraid to question management decisions for fear of being labeled as not being a team player and where employees cannot bring their experiential knowledge to bear because it would be seen as resistance to organizational norms and practices. Although in HRD literature (Bierma, 1998) and in HRD classes the concept of voice, the acquisition of equality and agency, and the valuing of individual experience is occasionally recognized as a feminist construct, the effects of feminist theory in HRD are virtually non-existent. So-called feminism in HRD is constituted by conveniently adding feminine attributes and ways of knowing to traditional male roles and jobs. In HRD, the concept of voice is distorted because it obscures and deflects issues of power. HRD theory does not confront or challenge the centrality of power and its understanding of the concept of feminist theory is at best rhetorical and self-serving. Moreover, the rich ethnographies of women in the workplace reveal that many of the assumptions mainstream education, training and development hold about why women work and how women work in the office or on the shop floor are flawed. The very notion of who defines what productive work is, as well as how that work is rewarded, becomes central to any understanding of work and the role of knowledge production. Failure to tap into this research leaves human resource professionals and educators with an incomplete understanding of the relationship between work, gender, and knowledge production. Potentially this failure may also lead to designing workplace learning programs that have the unintended outcome of becoming oppressive systems, hidden in the rhetoric of so-called worker empowerment.

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