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## HRD on the Margins: Exploring Resistance to HRD in Adult Education

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**HRD on the Margins:  
Exploring Resistance to HRD in Adult Education**

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**Abstract: This paper examines the debates and critiques surrounding HRD and confronts myths about HRD philosophy and practice. We argue that the HRD field is "marginalized" in adult education and reflect on both the problems this situation creates and the possibilities of ever bridging these two fields.**

**HRD on the Margins**

The study of marginality and commitment to eroding it are hallmarks of adult education theory and practice. Adult education's interest in marginality, however, seems to be selective where HRD is concerned. There is little space on the agenda for HRD at adult education research conferences. Conversations about HRD tend to be less constructive than combative. Expressing an interest in HRD can be risky as it opens one up for unsolicited, often inaccurate critique. Because of these unwelcoming dynamics, many adult educators who are interested in HRD have moved to circles that are more hospitable and allow them a voice, and in the process, the voice of adult educators and their influence on HRD is being increasingly lost.

It is ironic that adult education marginalizes HRD since this behavior defies both the philosophy and practice of adult education. Although HRD is often accused of embracing money and management motives, the truth is that the HRD function is significantly marginalized in organizations. Furthermore, the majority of HRD professionals are women. Adult Education's marginalization of HRD does little to help students who find themselves in the "trenches" striving to address the difficult process of organizational learning and development. While we are not asking that adult education embrace every tenet of HRD, we feel that critical reflection on the profession's behavior toward and treatment of HRD is imperative. By silencing this increasingly important aspect of adult education, we are doing a disservice to the profession, students, and most importantly stakeholders in the educational process. Seemingly, the HRD field is like unwelcome guests at dinner. Although they have a place at the table, they are merely tolerated, offered insincere niceties, and talked about in unsavory terms when they depart. We agree with Willis's prediction that, "What the future of HRD becomes may have everything to do with what practitioners and academics currently think it is, and further, whether they will

acknowledge a sense of belonging to it. Collective action on behalf of HRD as a field, and HRD status as a discipline, depend on such perceptions and commitments" (1996, p. 32).

## **Background**

Human resource development (HRD) is an emerging field. As HRD establishes its theoretical and practical bases, debate rages among adult educators about whether or not HRD belongs in adult education. The number of universities awarding postgraduate degrees in HRD-related subjects has increased over 100 percent in the last decade (Kaeter, 1995), while adult education programs are shrinking. "HRD enrollments are among the fastest growing in schools of education, where the 'training of...HRD professionals is now the 'bread and butter' activity" (Gray, 1997, p. 80 in Kuchinke, 1999). This robust academic picture appears to be further testament to the importance of HRD in the dramatically changing world of work.

Yet, despite the significant investments in work-related learning and the increasing demand for academically prepared HRD practitioners, there is considerable resistance within the field of adult education toward HRD. The tenuous relationship between adult education and human resource development (HRD) has been the continued focus of much scholarly debate (Bierema, 2000, Cunningham, 1993, Dirkx, 1996, Kuchinke, 1999, Swanson, 1996, Willis, 1996). Contentious topics that often fuel this debate include the root disciplines that inform HRD, the purpose of HRD, the practice of HRD, and the ethics of HRD.

Scholars embracing a social justice and emancipatory orientation within the field of adult education argue that "we need as educators to be critical of workplace education" (Cunningham, 1993, p. 24) because the potential for adult education to serve "as a force to transform society" (p. 24) is denied when workers are conceived as human resources and human capital and the relationship between education, work, and life is exploited within an economic frame of competition and production. When seen in this light, critics contend that HRD is not adult education. When HRD can serve as a democratizing force in the workplace, under certain conditions, HRD may be conceived of as adult education. Can and should these positions be reconciled?

Other concerns articulated within the field of adult education embrace the purpose of HRD. Does HRD exist to improve organizational performance, or to develop individuals? Although learning and performance are often viewed as dichotomous, might HRD practitioners view them as integrated and attempt to foster both? Critics assuming that HRD practitioners blindly carry out the performance goals of the organization at the expense of learning, portray HRD practitioners as potentially "critically non-reflective" and "irresponsible." Questions of purpose then give rise to questions about the ethical implications of HRD. Despite established codes of ethical conduct within the HRD and organizational development arenas, critics often use poor practice examples to represent HRD practice. Critics also assume that HRD serves to marginalize the organizationally disenfranchised. Are HRD practitioners naive or willing conspirators who are co-opted by the organization into jeopardizing employees' human spirit and potential in the name of the corporate bottom-line?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the popular critiques levied upon HRD that often position HRD professionals as being behavioristically focused, performance driven, non-reflective, uncritical, capitalistic, unethical, and exploitive of the organizationally disenfranchised. Following an examination of these critiques, we will explore the possibilities of how some of these philosophical and practice-based differences between HRD and adult education can be bridged.

## HRD Myths

### *Myth # 1: HRD Professionals are Capitalist Sympathizers*

Some adult educators assume that adherents of HRD profess unconditional allegiance to the human capital theory perspective. For instance, Schied, Carter, Preston, and Howell charge that the HRD profession is prisoner to its history and view human capital and human relations theories as the key influence in HRD with their imprudent claim that "Embedded within human capital theory, in some quarters HRD has become synonymous with workplace learning" (1997, p. 404). Yet, it is generally acknowledged that HRD is informed by several disciplines. For example, Willis (1996) suggests that "there is considerable agreement that adult education; instructional design and performance technology; psychology; business and economics; sociology; cultural anthropology; organization theory and communications; philosophy; axiology; and human relations theories, principles, and practices have all become a visible part of the HRD milieu" (p. 32). Still, there is often the tendency for critics to focus exclusively on human capital theory, or to narrowly conceive of HRD practice in highly behavioristic terms. Accordingly, the images of HRD professionals as "capitalist pigs" and "Pavlovian trainers" are often construed.

There are several problems with the assertion that HRD is synonymous with capitalism. First, it is irresponsible to lump an entire field under one label. HRD is a complex multi-disciplinary field that is constantly changing in response to multiple stakeholders. Stereotyping the philosophical orientation of the many HRD scholars and practitioners is disrespectful, and no more accurate than doing so for the profession of Adult Education. In fact, in a recent analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of HRD, Gilley, Dean, and Bierema (2001) illustrate how philosophical perspectives ranging from human capital to radicalism are represented in the scholarship and practice of the field.

Another flaw in the belief that HRD professionals are capitalist sympathizers is centered on the unit of analysis for critique. Seemingly, HRD is categorized as such because of its work with organizations. However, this too is flawed for a few reasons. First, there is an underlying assumption that HRD only happens between the walls of corporations. This perspective ignores the important HRD work that is happening in non-profit organizations, governments and communities. What many critics of the human capital influence on HRD assert is that it is futile to work within the system to change it. We disagree. Second, this myth simply does not hold up when it is recognized that HRD is one of the few professions in organizations that most deeply cares and works for groups and individuals. One of the tenets of HRD is to work both from within and outside organizational systems to promote change that is beneficial to all stakeholders. Indeed to do that requires a constant balancing act and many struggles to find "win-win-win." It also demands that HRD professionals cultivate a true systems perspective. HRD is

often wrongly critiqued by people who focus largely on HRD roles in training processes, and yet this too ignores the systemic and broader issues that HRD must face. HRD is not only concerned with training, but also career development and organization development. Ruona (1999) demonstrates that many theoretical and philosophical orientations serve to guide HRD practice. However, despite the multidisciplinary nature of HRD, scholars often question whether HRD is a subset of adult education, if adult education a subset of HRD, or if HRD is a field unto itself.

#### *Myth # 2: HRD Professionals Embrace Pavlovian Behaviorism*

Amplifying the myth that all HRD professionals embody an exploitative, capitalist perspective is the myth that they also embrace Pavlovian Behaviorism and seek to control employees through training and conditioning. Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) charge that work in the old capitalism was alienating characterized by workers being forced to sell their labor, with little mental, emotional, or social investment in the business. Today, they view management's expectation for employees to invest their hearts, minds and bodies fully in work while at the same time thinking and acting critically, reflectively, and creatively. The authors acknowledge that this "new work" offers a less alienating view of work and labor in practice, but they suggest that it can also amount to a form of mind control and high-tech, but indirect coercion. The authors suggest that this high tech, kinder, gentler coercion happens through training. Schied, Carter, Preston, and Howell assert, "It is the use of human relations techniques that form the central struggle over control in the workplace. From this perspective, HRD can be seen as a system of control embodied in a relatively new economic theory, human capital theory, and an old approach to controlling workers, human relations theory" (1997, p. 405). These myths assume that there is one technology for addressing HRD issues: behaviorist training. In reality, there are hundreds of organizational interventions (Cummings and Worley, 2000) and several philosophical orientations (Ruona, 2000) alive and well in HRD.

#### *Myth #3: HRD Has No Ethics?*

One of the contentious topics that often fuel the scholarly debate triggered by the tenuous relationship between adult education and HRD is that of ethics in HRD (Bierema, 2000, Cunningham, 1993, Dirkx, 1996, Kuchinke, 1999, Swanson, 1996, Willis, 1996). The question under scrutiny is "Are HRD professionals guided by ethical standards in their practice?"

HRD professionals have discussed the ethical issues involved in our profession (Dean, 1993; DeVogel, Sullivan, McLean, & Rothwell, 1995; Paige & Martin, 1996). During the 1996 Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) conference, Marsick (1996) and Jacobs (1996) started a discussion on the need for a code of ethics that continued at the 1997 and 1998 AHRD conferences. In her reflections after the 1996 AHRD conference, Marsick (1997) called for a code that "should be a living entity that is solidly anchored in enduring principles but lends itself to discussion and interpretation over time" (p. 91).

The AHRD Standing Committee on Ethics and Integrity was formed in 1998 to develop a code on ethics and integrity, and the "Academy of Human Resource Development Standards on Ethics and Integrity" was published in 1999. Burns, Hatcher and Russ-Eft (2000) addressed the need for a casebook on ethics and integrity to raise the awareness of HRD professionals of the ethical standards of the profession and to help them examine how ethical standards apply to specific situations. The publication of the AHRD Standards on Ethics and Integrity (Academy of Human

Resource Development Standing Committee on Ethics and Integrity, 1999) and a special issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources on Ethics and integrity in HRD: Case studies in research and practice* (Aragon & Hatcher, 2001) shows the deep commitment of HRD professionals to an ethical profession.

While both the fields of HRD and organization development have established, published codes of ethics, ironically, the field of adult education has none. That is not to say that there are not ethical principles that the field is based upon, but that the field has not made identifying a unifying code of conduct a priority.

*Myth #4: HRD Professionals do not Deeply Reflect on Practice, Theory, or Philosophy*

Another myth surrounding the growing profession of HRD is that the profession does not deeply reflect on its practice, theory, or core beliefs. The last 10 years, however, demonstrate steadily increasing attention to philosophical issues.

There has been a consistent call for work in this area from many of HRD's leading scholars. Chalofsky (1992) called for the conceptualization of the core of the profession comprised of philosophy and mission, theory and concepts, and roles and competencies. In a later writing, he stated that "the essence of why HRD exists as a profession-its purpose, values, and ethics-provides the foundation for professional practice of the field" (Chalofsky, 1998, p. 180). This call has been echoed by many others throughout the last 10 years, including Marsick (1990), Watkins (1991), Ellinger (1998), and Barrie and Pace (1998) who stated that "we may need to discover the foundational principles, as opposed to commonsense descriptors, that give HRD its philosophical base" (p. 39).

Kuchinke (1996) described, compared, and contrasted different goals of HRD and their underlying ideologies, focusing solely on the concept of human development to elucidate alternative philosophies of HRD. In 1998 Barrie and Pace conducted a philosophical analysis, framed within a liberal education mode, to approach and describe the field of HRD. They argued that the key concepts of "learning" and "performance" could be elucidated in much the same way that differences between education and training were explained as part of analyses of philosophy of education. The utility of this kind of analysis, they argued, was that making some progress in analyzing these concepts would ultimately make a preferred model of HRD clearer.

Most recently a monograph entitled, *Philosophical Foundations of Human Resource Development* (Ruona & Roth, 2000) was introduced. In it Ruona (2000) shares the findings of a research study that sought to uncloak core beliefs in HRD by exploring assumptions and beliefs of 10 scholarly leaders in the field.

*Myth #5: The Critiques Represent the Majority of HRD Practice*

HRD has received sometimes-deserved critique, but unfortunately the profession is often damned by its worst performers. What is never mentioned in many of the critiques is that often the program being evaluated is flawed and one that no responsible HRD professional would support. There are countless examples that could be reported here, but one of the most recent is Howell, Carter and Schied's (1999) critical ethnography of a manufacturing facility where women were involved in training programs. While they had some important findings about the gendered

nature of work and training programs, little information about the HRD intervention is provided and their analysis of HRD as synonymous with training is laden with its own problems. Researchers are quick to critique HRD before they are even fully cognizant of what the process entails. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) make the same error, by using an abhorrent training examples to make their points. Until HRD efforts that are of high integrity and systemic are objectively evaluated, the critiques will lack credibility or useful information for improving HRD practice.

*Myth #6: HRD Cannot Influence the System*

The information age, the power of knowledge, and recognition of people's role in gaining competitive advantage brought the HRD field out from its marginalized role of offering individual training to that of supporting individual learning, the integration of learning into the workplace, the development of learning teams and organizations and facilitation of organizational development and change. As organizations have to change more frequently and sometimes radically in order to maintain their competitiveness on the global market, HRD professionals are seen more often in the role of strategic business partners in the change process.

The theory and practice of strategically aligning HRD as a major organizational process having strategic business contributions has been the topic of many books published in the last decade (Chalofsky & Reinhart, 1988; Hendry & Newton, 1993; Brinkerhoff & Gill, 1994; Pfeffer, 1994; Rothwell & Kazanas, 1994; Phillips & Rothwell, 1998; Rothwell, 1998; Price & Walker, 1999; Walton, 1999). Their purpose was to describe the strategic roles of human resource development in organizations and strategic planning, to develop the ability of HRD professionals to think strategically and holistically about the organization and the environment within which it is situated and gain understanding on how to influence change.

Continuous inquiry in understanding the challenges facing "change agent" HRD professionals (Kalata & Wentling, 1999; Leimbach & Ceh, 1999; Anthony, Jeris & Johnson, 2000; Watkins, Marsick, Honold & O'Neil, 2000) give a glimpse on how HRD professionals influence the system and present lessons learned for better practices.

*Myth #7: HRD Lacks an International Perspective*

The interdisciplinary nature of HRD described so metaphorically by Willis (1996) as well as the open space created by the intensive globalization of the world economy, triggered by the development of science and technology, allowing the migration of people across national boundaries in search of the "ideal" employment opportunity or political environment raise new challenges for HRD professionals. More and more professionals "fly off to learn from each other" in an attempt to understand each others' issues. Seeking this understanding is even more important in the light of studies (Rijk, Mulder and Nijhof, 1994; Odenthal & Nijhof, 1996, Valkeavaara, 1998) that showed the culture-bound nature of HRD.

In Finland and other Scandinavian countries human resource development is seen as a special area of adult education which is closely related to working life and new ideas in the HRD field are quickly followed and adopted into local HRD needs and practices (Valkeavaara and Vaherva, 1998). Valkeavaara and Vaherva also acknowledge the changing role of HRD practitioners from deliverers of training to facilitators of change and lifelong learning in organizations. HRD is



called to adopt a proactive role towards the change in society and in the work organizations. As the authors explained "Our job as adult educators is to promote both change orientation and continuity but also to give room for critical reflection on the change discourse itself" (p. 17).

*Myth #8: The Primary Role of HRD Professionals is Educating Adults*

There have been at least 20 definitions of HRD forwarded and analyzed (Weinberger 1998) and most of them describe a role heavily focused on training and adult education. In 1989, Nadler and Nadler defined HRD as "organized learning experiences provided by employers within a specified period of time to bring about the possibility of performance improvement and/or personal growth" (p. 6). However, 1989 also revealed a very different truth for the people who were actually practicing in the field of HRD.

That study of practitioners explained that the three key roles HRD professionals were working in could be classified as (1) training and development, (2) organization development, and (3) career development. This is an important marker in HRD's history, because since 1989 and the emergence of the knowledge economy those roles have multiplied and diversified rather than being refocused back to only training.

Watkins (1998) discusses the more complex reality in which HRD professionals exist: "Actual titles for human resource development practitioners vary enormously, and job responsibilities are more often combinations of one or more of these three roles with other assigned personnel roles such as organization designer, personnel specialist, or employee assistance counselor."

HRD simply cannot take the technical-rational paradigm of separating practice from theory (Schön, 1983). HRD is an applied field, and to serve its practitioners well, HRD must tune-in to the real-world roles they are being asked to fill. It must help them prepare for those roles by developing the proper diverse skill sets, and building an interdisciplinary knowledgebase that will serve the profession well.

*Myth #9: HRD Exploits the Disenfranchised According to Race, Gender and Class*

HRD has been accused of exploiting people based on race, gender and class. In fact, there is a growing recognition among several HRD scholars of the importance of critically evaluating HRD practice and scholarship (Bierema and Cseh, 2000). While we acknowledge that any educational endeavor, including HRD, can be exploitative, HRD in and of itself is not. There may be practitioners and organizations that engage in questionable practices, but the field as a whole cannot and should not be labeled as an exploitative undertaking. The difficult work of making HRD more accountable and inclusive is underway. Considering that HRD is a younger field than adult education, it is to be expected that much of the research to date has focused on methods, evaluation and philosophical foundations. The field is entering a new phase of evaluating its purpose and impact as described elsewhere in this paper, and we believe that there will be even more critique and change in the future.

*Myth #10: HRD is a sub-set of Adult Education*

Throughout the years we have engaged in many a debate about HRD's heritage. Typically the discussion revolves around whether HRD is a sub-set of various academic disciplines. For

instance, a common question is whether HRD grew out of a more established discipline such as Adult Education? The quick and obvious answer is that "yes, it has." However, that same answer can just as readily be stated by other strong and rich disciplines such as Vocational Education, Human Resource Management, and Industrial-Organization Psychology. Willis (1997) lists well over 20 "information files" that HRD practitioners use to support their work and states that "HRD practitioners and theorists will take from whatever disciplinary resources they need at any given time" (p. 666).

### **Epilogue: Bridging Adult Education and HRD, Karen Watkins**

As I ponder the question of how to bridge the values chasm that now divides adult education and HRD, I am struck by Mark Twain's comment when told that the transcontinental lines were completed that would enable Maine to wire California. Twain replied, "But does Maine have anything to say to California?" In fact, over the 18 years that I have been in adult education and human resource development, I see the chasm widening. Adult education increasingly speaks of inclusiveness-meaning including people who are different-but still within the value frame of adult education. I have seen HRD move to become more and more distinctive in its own right, now a major academic entity in multiple discipline homes and little allegiance to any one of them. Theory development in adult education has moved more to a post-modern critique and human resource development theory development continues with a few bursts of post-modernism but still dominated by the modernists. So perhaps we have reached that point in a marriage of irreconcilable differences? Often this conversation ends with ponderings of whether HRD should "divorce" its spouse.

On the other hand, what would be different were we to seek marriage counseling? It would seem to me that we would need to renegotiate our relationship. As is so often the case, that renegotiation would likely have to do with power (with who decides what our curriculum will be). We have built separate programs within our programs because we could not come to a marriage of minds. We have increased the distance between the two areas by creating and attending different "churches" (in this case academic or research conferences). Those of us who attend both churches already are boundary spanners, bridges between the two worlds. It has been left to me other boundary spanners to be bicultural. I described what it was like to be HRD within adult education at AERC and adult education at AHRD with its increasing performance orientation to a colleague and she was amused at the realization that I was marginalized in both places. Frankly, it is not really all that funny if you're living it.

Real bridging would ask more of us to present in both conferences. We would incorporate both kinds of courses in the adult education curriculum, not only non-HRD courses in adult education and not only HRD in the HRD curriculum. We would create a culture of safety and acceptance for students with interests in literacy, social action, AND organizational training and development. We would problematize both corporate oppression and the oppression of post-modern critiques of organizations. In short, we would entertain multiple realities, multiple truths.

But real bridging is hard. It may be that our values frames have already solidified and we are already looking around for a new life partner. If we do decide to get a divorce, it will be interesting to see who gets what property. Will adult education get to own theory about how adults learn and develop---or has psychology already taken that? What about program

development? Will that stay with adult education or migrate to instructional design? What about theories of educational and organizational change? Will adult education retain any of that or let it go with HRD? What about issues of multiculturalism, race, class, and gender? Will HRD leave these courses behind? What of the students who do HRD work in government, hospital, non-profit, and corporate settings? Will adult education have a strong student base when these students are gone? Will HRD students want to leave adult education? Or perhaps they can have joint custody of the children.

In other venues I have argued that, for the sake of the children, we need to be connected. I believe that we are a fate-sharing group and both HRD and adult education are enhanced by this connection. Perhaps it is time to challenge that assumption. Perhaps our children are worse off caught in the crossfire of our differing assumptions and values. In this session we have raised a number of issues about the myths that adult educators hold about HRD and attempted to illustrate that these are indeed myths. Yet, the prevalence of these views suggests to me that we are like a voice in the wilderness. While the only interest in bridging between these two areas of study is coming from those of us who already bridge them, it would seem obvious that the time of reckoning has already come and we were simply unaware. A common statement of recently divorced people is, "I was living alone and didn't know it." Perhaps we are already living alone.

The metaphor of marriage and divorce, however, is all together wrong and that continuing to think of HRD as a marriage between disciplines may fundamentally impede its progress (Short, 2000). Rather it would be better to acknowledge HRD as a child of a diverse set of parents. In so doing, the child would be expected to learn about its heritage and be grateful for all of it- including the parts from the "other" parent's family. The child would be expected to deeply hold and integrate core values of each parent, rather than compromise the "other" parent's set of values and beliefs. Willis's (1997) assertion is that HRD will use whatever resources it needs to thrive and succeed perhaps fittingly characterizes the teenager that HRD is now- a teenager that is passionately open and focused on the possibilities and the needs of the world and yet at the same time still struggling to figure out its own capacities, belief systems, foundations, and how it will fit in the world. Developmental theory would recognize this as a healthy and normal stage for a teenager and encourage this interdisciplinary odyssey. These disciplines together that have produced a multitude of HRD scholars and practitioners who are rich in their diversity, and have given HRD a strong interdisciplinary heritage on which to grow. This metaphor of child also, of course, has implications for the parent. As a recognized "parent" of HRD, Adult Education must reflect on its role. Does a parent's job ever stop? What are the duties of this position we call a "parent"? How does a parent effectively use its influence as the child matures? How does a parent nurture the growth of an independent and successful child?

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