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## **Education as Function of Productivity: An Hermeneutic Study of Standards on Ethics and Integrity in Human Resource Development Texts**

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**Abstract: This critical hermeneutic analysis of the AHRD Standards on Ethics and Integrity and six HRD textbooks identifies unexamined assumptions and silences related to the practice of HRD.**

### **Overview**

The Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) recently adopted a document titled *Standards on Ethics and Integrity* whose intent is to ". . . provide guidance for HRD professionals engaged in practice, research, consulting, and instruction/facilitation/ teaching" (AHRD, 1999, p.1). The Academy, the largest and most influential academic organization concerned with HRD, argues that these standards provide ". . . both universal principles and limited decision rules" (p. 1). In effect, by attempting to set standards for ethical behavior, the Academy seeks, as the document notes, to ". . . control work-related conduct" (p. 1). Briefly, the Standards are organized around seven principles: competence, integrity, professional responsibility, respect for people's rights and dignity, concern for others' welfare, and social responsibility. The document then discusses specifics that attempt to ". . . provide standards of conduct and set forth a common set of values for HRD professionals" (p. 1). However, codes of ethics and standards serve other social and political functions as well.

### **The Social and Political Functions of Ethics and Standards**

Bledstein (1976), Carlson (1988), and Cunningham (1988, 1992) have noted that formalizing codes of conduct for practice are a primary way in which fields become professionalized. In his critique of a code of ethics for adult educators, Carlson (1988) addresses the issue of professionalization and its connection with social control: "The slippery path of professionalization leads to the monopoly by an elite over an area of practice" (p.166). Standards and codes become ways in which fields of practice define what constitutes knowledge and who controls that knowledge. Bledstein (1976) in his classic study of the rise of the first professions noted that attempts at defining and controlling knowledge resulted in a process by which ". . . clients found themselves compelled to believe on simple faith that a higher rationality called scientific knowledge decided one's fate. The professional appeared in the role of a magician casting a spell over the client and requiring complete confidence; and the client listened to words that often sounded metaphysical and even mystical" (p 94). Bledstein concludes that all subsequent professions have followed the footpath tread by these first organizations as a means to shape ". . . monopolistic control of an area of social interaction" (Carlson, 1988, p.165.). The fundamental issue, hidden behind the rhetoric of codes and standards, is who has the power to determine what constitutes ethical action? It is this question of power that becomes paramount.

As Cunningham (1988) has stated, ". . . ethics is being socially defined in the political arena of practice. Our personal values, our social roles are socially constructed and defined by our socially constructed reality. The reality . . . is defined and controlled by groups that are dominant" (p.139). Thus, "[c]odes of ethics freeze the oughts in time and space, tend to decontextualize normative behavior, privilege those in power positions, and inhibit the ability of individuals or groups to reconstruct social reality" (Cunningham, 1992, pp. 107-108). As noted in the standards themselves, "Adherence to these standards . . . adds to the further definition and clarification of HRD as a profession" (AHRD, 1999, p.1). For adult educators, it is important to critically investigate the social, political, and epistemological bases of educational and professional standards.

By codifying and setting boundaries for the behavior of HRD practitioners, AHRD *Standards* provide insight into the expected practice of HRD professionals. The social and political function of the Academy's *Standards* must remain in the forefront when adopting, analyzing and implementing HRD texts, policies, and practice. It is in this form of analysis that questions about ethics and integrity from differing perspective and from a variety of interests can be addressed. Using the recently developed document on AHRD *Standards* as a template, this study examined how the discourse of standards and ethics plays out in texts used in core HRD graduate courses. The overarching purpose of this investigation was to expand the continuing discussion of ethics through critical hermeneutic analyses of key literature within HRD.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Critical theory, cultural studies and hermeneutic analysis informed this study. Critical theory is concerned with power (Carspecken, 1996). Different forms of power define whose voice is accorded importance within communities, institutions and society. AHRD Standards cannot be examined without looking at elements of culture, history, and configurations of power. It is within these relationships and complex configurations of power that workplace education is shaped and the ethics and values are created. Cultural studies provide a means of understanding interpretations in context. This research was based upon a critical approach to integrating academic knowledge into the lived experiences of people (Frow & Morris, 2000). This integration meant examining whose experiences relate to representations within the texts. Thus the researcher's task involves taking into account the broader context and the complexities of peoples' lives, not just an instrumental notion of work.

Critical hermeneutics is a complex process of interpretation and evaluation. Critical hermeneutic "methods" are not simply successive independent steps of inquiry or methodological rules but are, rather, interpretive practices that interact with one another, the text, language systems, ideological frameworks, socio-political contexts, and positionality of the interpreter (Madison, 1990). Hermeneutics is interested in bringing out and speaking from tensions, uncertainties, and ambivalence while affirming its own discursive, contextual location within language, culture, experience, and history (Jardine, 1992). The aim of the hermeneutical task is neither one of techno-rationality nor relativism, but one of striving for uncovering obstacles which may result from myopic and limited points of view.

The inherent attributes of hermeneutics are educational and epistemological because of the "calling forth" of the assumptions, presumptions, and ways of knowing which surround the daily lives of human beings. It is a form of inquiry open to a generative renewal that is profoundly interested versus "disinterested" and therefore links up "essentially rather than accidentally with education" (Jardine, 1992, p. 120). This essential link to education elicits thoughts of Freire's contribution of the notion of critical consciousness and education as a means, in this study, to scrutinize the conditions under which workers operate and uncover the generative themes that shape those conditions. The generative themes within a culture are pivotal ontological and epistemological features in critical analysis. The idea of generative themes is an avenue for exploring and employing words, narratives, phrases, and idiosyncratic ways of speaking or talking which bring to the surface concealed issues and problems affecting a group. The identification of generative themes which are relevant and meaningful to a group are preparatory work that assists in understanding and revealing a group's social reality, an activity constituting the very condition of human inquiry (Gadotti, 1994).

### **Research Design**

Following Ryan & Bernard (2000), a purposeful sample of texts used in core graduate level courses at universities offering a graduate degree in HRD or closely related field were selected for analysis. These texts formed the grounding for the narrative analysis undergirding the three theoretical approaches (critical theory, cultural studies, hermeneutic analysis). The texts informed the research about patterns of language, identity, ideology, and hegemony as the precepts of critical cultural studies and the hermeneutic process continuously questioned statements, concepts, categories, subjects treated, and perspectives offered. During the collection phase, data were read, re-read and a formative coding scheme was used. The data were then grouped into detail-level "meaning units." In the summative phase of coding, the categories and descriptions were more interpretive and led to thematic searching for relationships, a search for patterns, and explorations of gaps and emphases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research examined complexities involving the core, structure, and context of how AHRD Standards are represented. These representations are hermeneutic because of the inseparability of understanding and interpretation, the combining of "the phenomenological task of description with the interpretation of meaning" (Leavitt, 1994, p.16). From this analysis the following questions were addressed: How is ethical conduct defined and discussed in the literature? What socio-political and ideological messages are encoded in the texts incorporated in HRD classes? What epistemological elements, messages, patterns, and themes are embedded in the texts?

### **Findings: The Loudness of Silence**

In 1970, the term "human resource development" was defined by Nadler and Nadler (1989) as learning experiences, specifically training, education, and development, organized and provided by employers during certain periods of time in order to encourage improvement of performance and/or personal growth of employees. The term HRD has unfolded as an overarching concept for adult learning in the workplace, a way to organize learning for performance change, as well as an emerging discipline. About the mid-1980s, the emphasis of HRD shifted to competency models, a focus on technological changes, and integrating training, career, and organization development as a means to improve employee effectiveness. Around 1989, growing concerns about the

economic aspects of HRD accented systems approaches, and the emergence of organizational and individual learning. Finally, during the 1990s, HRD specialists emerged not only as teachers, facilitators, and learning specialists, but also as strategic advisors, systems developers, organizational design and change consultants, career counselors, researchers, and performance consultants. As a result of the ways the field has taken shape, today's HRD practitioners seek organizational leverage and leadership in all aspects of human resource practices including elements that involve human morality and ethics (McLagan, 1996).

In this ever-evolving venue, however, questions about education - including for whom, for what purpose, and for whose benefit - must be raised because HRD is typically paid for, constructed, and delivered under the auspices of an employer. HRD has not explored in depth its own historical and socio-economic basis, the ramifications of representing human morality and ethics in corporations, or the endemic conflict of priorities and values between employed and employer. Therein lies a profound contradiction for HRD practice and theory, for employer-driven HRD provides management significant measures of worker control in contradiction to, or concurrent with, HRD's claims assist in developing a productive and empowered workforce.

In reviewing the chosen texts, we found most remarkable the absence of discussions on ethics, values, and integrity except in the area of research processes and treatment of human subjects. Rothwell and Sredl (1992) include a chapter on ethics that does go beyond basic principles of human subject standards, delineating thirteen major ethical issues. However, Rothwell and Sredl's discussion identifies the strongest values as organizational - stemming from three major sources: 1) Individual values of chief power brokers and decision-makers; 2) Experiences and past actions of the organization; 3) The nature of the business (p. 196). Moreover, ethics are equated to illegal activities. "Ethics has emerged as a matter of growing concern to corporate America. . . . Nearly 66 percent of the largest U.S. industrial corporations have been cited in one or more illegal incidents between 1975 and 1984" (p. 189).

Marquardt and Engel (1993) highlight the importance of global HRD because it teaches employees to operate within an international frame of reference. Global HRD's training and development benefits include "1. Improved abilities to identify viable business opportunities; 2. Reduced waste of resources on ill-conceived ventures; 3. Increased competitiveness around the world; 4. Improved job satisfaction and retention of overseas staff; 5. Less business lost due to insensitivity to cultural norms; 6. Improved effectiveness in diverse business environments" (p. 5-6). There is no discussion about ethics and values vis-à-vis globalization and its social ramifications, but embedded within there are assumptions about ethics and values. For example, the assumption is that globalization is good because it benefits corporations and organizations.

DeSimone and Harris (1998) note that all HRD programs are efforts to change employee behavior. However, they do not discuss the ethical implications of changing people's behavior - an absence that uncovers a disconnected, instrumental view of HRD practice. Therefore, one problem with leaving the more complex ethical implications of behavioral change unexamined is that HRD professionals can, in fact, be competent, ethical, and full of integrity without having discussed what is inappropriate. This lack of concern disconnects the field from notions of people's rights and dignity, concerns for social justice, issues of income disparity and a living wage for all the world's workers, and recognition of the overriding power of the bottom line.

These HRD texts, consequently, are empty, almost amoral, discussions of behavioral change with no references to the standards the field has set for itself or the complexities they claim to address.

Knowles, Horton and Swanson (1998) state in their *Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*: "Care must be taken to avoid confusing core principles of the adult learning transaction with the goals and purposes for which the learning event is being conducted. They are conceptually distinct, though as a practical matter may overlap considerably. Critiques of andragogy point to missing elements that keep it from being a defining theory of the *discipline of adult education* . . . not of *adult learning*. Grace, for example, criticizes andragogy for focusing solely on the individual and not operating from a critical social agenda or debating the relationship of adult education to society (Grace, 1996). This criticism reflects the goals and purposes of adult education. Human resource developers in organizations will have a different set of goals and purposes, which andragogy does not embrace either" (p. 2). Accordingly, adult learning is not about goals, but about transactions. We find, and believe, adult learning is *all about goals*. Their perspective is, at best, disingenuous. The authors continue: "It is beyond the scope of this introductory book to address the many dimensions of the theoretical debate raised in academic circles. Our position is that andragogy presents core principles of adult learning that in turn enable those designing and conducting adult learning to build more effective learning processes for adults. It is a transactional model in that it speaks to the characteristics of the learning transaction, not to the goals and aims of that transaction. As such, it is applicable to any adult learning transaction, from community education to human resource development in organizations" (p. 2). This HRD text, and the field of practice, intermix learning with goals and claim that HRD professionals take a neutral stance. Yet when discussions of the AHRD Standards are examined, they have been defined *within* an organizational context *for* specific goals and purposes. In the context of planning, implementing and evaluating the learning process itself, values are embedded. It cannot be a neutral or goal-less process (transaction) because to engage is to bring to the table values, ethics, politics, and power.

Gilley and Maycunich (1992) name 25 deadly *sins* of HRD professionals, none of which address ethical issues. Examples of deadly sins include: 1. failing to develop a philosophy of HRD dedicated to achieving organizational results; 6. failing to develop a systems approach to organizational change and development; 17. failing to identify organizational and performance needs; 19. failing to design and develop performance improvement and change interventions that maximize organizational performance; 24. failing to improve the image and credibility of HRD within an organization. The use of language is organizational, instrumental management rhetoric. They fail to design interventions that explore and help achieve ethics and integrity in the field.

One of the conclusions we came to after reading these texts was that an HRD practitioner could operationalize all seven principles, all thirteen ethical issues, all three major values, avoid all 25 deadly sins, etc., and still be unethical and act without integrity. Much of these authors' discussions on ethics revolved around issues of research confidentiality and human subject protection - issues obvious to researchers. The discussions were geared to achieving organizational goals and maximizing human performance regardless of ethics. Absent were tough issues such as questioning the integrity and ethics of emotionally and psychologically manipulating workers for the benefit of the organization. Where for example are suggestions for

training programs that address corporate damage to the environment, courses that seek to highlight corporate responsibility for employee, community, and global society, programs to examine runaway individual and corporate acquisitive materialism, or training that assists employees to democratically and fully participate in organizational decision-making.

### **Implications**

For adult education, this study raises troubling questions. Our findings question whether the AHRD *Standards* are partially a diversion, a way to obscure useful activities of dissenting, fostering competing dialogues, developing real intellect, facing issues of democracy, equality, and social justice. The study asks whether standards help create a sustainable society - a society that satisfies its needs without diminishing the prospects of future generations. Critical workplace educators argue that the context in which HRD practitioners work includes notions of integrity and ethics regarding the purposes of products and services produced, and how those products and services are produced. Finally, the study suggests concerns that must continue to be addressed by adult educators if standards are to reflect the complexity of learning within the new workplace.

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