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Tara Fenwick  
*University of Alberta*

Laura Bierema  
*University of Georgia*

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# “Corporate Social Responsibility”: A Site for Critical Learning in Workplaces?

Tara Fenwick, University of Alberta & Laura Bierema, University of Georgia

## Abstract

**Abstract:** *Notions of social responsibility have become fashionable in businesses. While clearly a marketing ploy for some, for other firms CSR appears to represent a genuine commitment to new practices and organization-wide learning. Encouraged by these positive cases, we explored the extent to which CSR might create a site for critical learning in workplaces.*

## Overview

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be defined as “treating the stakeholders of the firm ethically or in a responsible manner” (Hopkins, 2003, p.1), where stakeholders include employees, customers, competitors, communities (local, national, global) and the natural environment - as well as investors. The CSR commitment is to foster ecological sustainability and social development, often by recognizing a ‘triple bottom line’ of these stakeholders, local government, and interest groups including environmental, religious, ethnic, and trade groups. For about 15 years now and accelerating since the 1994 international recognition of the CAUX principles for CSR in 1994, the promotion of corporate social responsibility has influenced significant learning and change in organizational policies and practices, claims Hopkins (2003). Others have shown that CSR has also produced international measures of corporate ethical practices, attracted federal resources in Canada and the US, and focused serious media attention on socially responsible practices – or the lack of them – among businesses both large and small (CBSR, 2001; King, 2002).

For adult educators interested in workplace education, CSR appears to signal an important site for critical learning about what it means to be a global and local citizen. Potentially this learning might extend throughout a workplace. It might engage managers and supervisors at different levels, educators and human resource developers, professional/technical staff and front line workers who are charged to envision and implement socially responsible work practices. Or, CSR may represent corporate smoke-and-mirrors, yet another image-making technology that camouflages entrenched corporate resistance to systemic change for more just, equitable, life-giving and sustainable workplaces.

This paper explores the question, *To what extent might corporate social responsibility foster sites for critical learning in the workplace?* The data include interviews with nine human resource directors in organizations professing commitment to CSR, in two very different socio-cultural-political environments: five in Georgia, US; four in Alberta, Canada.

## Theoretical Framework

This study was prompted by our search for evidence of critical learning fostered in workplaces that were not initiatives of labour education. Critical learning might be defined here by drawing from Brookfield’s proposed theory of critical adult learning in the workplace, combining ideology critique with pragmatism “to democratize production to serve the whole community, and . . . to reconfigure the workplace as a site for the exercise of human creativity” (p. 5); a project requiring a “defensive flexibility” and “a self-critical, self-referential stance” (p. 5). Kincheloe (1999) called for workplace education that contributes to a more just, equitable, life-giving and sustainable workplace. These purposes incorporate critique to expose existing power relations, subjugations and inequities in the name of efficiency and profitability. But

moving beyond critique, critical workplace learning is committed to objectives proposed by Martin (2001) for 'social purpose education': change for more justice, equality and democracy.

While some examples exist of critical action learning (Foley, 2001) and critical workplace education (Nash, 2001) aligned with these principles, and while a notion of 'critical human resource development' has generated some rhetorical development (Fenwick, 2004; Sambrook, 2003), there is little empirical evidence of workplace-sponsored learning opportunities that promote these purposes of critical learning. The growing interest in corporate social responsibility signalled, we felt, a possible site where such learning may be transpiring. Corporate social responsibility is a commitment by business to foster sustainable development. In 1994 in Caux Switzerland, two key principles were adopted to guide corporate social responsibility internationally: *kyosei* from the Japanese, meaning to live and work together for the common good, and *human dignity*, referring to the sacredness or value of each person as an end, not simply as a means to fulfill others' purposes. Practices of CSR promote ***environmental sustainability; support for local community*** (towards its sustainability and better quality of life for its citizens); ***employees' rights*** (for equity, fair wage, freedom of speech, decent living conditions, personal fulfillment and development through work); ***suppliers, competitors, customers' rights*** (for honesty, fair dealing, security of property, freedom from coercion); ***transparent and honest accountability*** (clear, accurate, transparent, appropriate, timely reporting of products, services, operations); ***legal and honest operations*** (regulatory compliance beyond the letter of the law toward a spirit of trust); and ***global citizenship*** (to foster sustainable development, justice and peace in foreign countries, respect integrity of local cultures) (Crowther and Raymann-Bacchus, 2004; Hopkins, 2003).

However as Henderson (2002) argues, CSR may be nothing more than an ideological movement that intimidates businesses into pseudo-compliance: the lack of clear CSR criteria may open business decision-making to 'irrationality' and political lobbying by special interest groups. In his popular documentary and book *The Corporation*, Bakan (2004) argues that corporations as they currently exist can not be socially responsible, for the corporation is bound by law to put shareholders' interests above all others: "The law forbids any other motivation for their actions, whether to assist workers, improve the environment, or help consumers save money. . . . Social and environmental goals are and must be strategies to advance the interests of their companies and shareholders; they can never legitimately be pursued as ends in themselves" (p. 35, 46). Clearly the possibility for critical learning through the pursuit of CSR is ambivalent.

### **Research Methods**

Representatives from four organizations with offices in Alberta and five with offices in the US were invited to participate. Organizations were selected from lists of socially responsible firms posted by national agencies supporting Corporate Social Responsibility. In each organization, an interview was arranged with a human resource development (HRD) manager willing/able to discuss the specific CSR practices adopted. We chose to focus on the HRD area rather than general management for two reasons: (1) we believed that HRD, of all managers, should have comprehensive knowledge of the learning activities of the organization, and their influences by philosophies such as CSR; and (2) we wanted to explore the embeddedness of CSR ideals in the internal practices of the firm, particularly its treatment of employees. These internal dimensions might include promoting employee rights, equity, justice and agency, and involving employees in understanding CSR principles and engaging CSR activities. While the CSR tale might be easily displayed through marketing practices such as donations to community events or advertised use of 'green' suppliers, the inner story better reveals the potential of CSR commitment as a site for critical workplace learning.

Individuals were asked their meanings of corporate social responsibility and its practices as it was being implemented in their organizations, activities and challenges of implementation, key outcomes/benefits of these activities to workers and local communities, and the learning involved, for individuals and for the organization, related to these CSR activities. Transcripts were analyzed interpretively to understand participants' meanings and experiences helping others learn CSR within their cultural-political contexts. Themes were also coded and analyzed critically to explore unitarist assumptions, contradictions, absences and subjugations, normative discourses, prevailing ideologies and power relations constituting meanings of CSR.

### *Themes from Alberta Firms*

Four Canadian companies in which we interviewed an HRD manager included a leading national bank, a multi-national petrochemical processing firm, an oil refinery, and a cooperative outfitter firm (10 stores in Canada) retailing gear for wilderness recreational sports. The websites and literature of these organizations presented similar expressions of CSR. All professed commitment to principles of environmental sustainability (balanced with economic viability), support for local community, transparent accountability, and generally conducting themselves as 'good corporate citizens' by acknowledging stakeholders besides shareholders. Clearly the products and clientele of each firm varied significantly, and appeared to have influenced the wide scale differences in organizational culture and values that we detected in the interviewee's descriptions of practices and processes. These organizational differences in turn may have affected the dramatic variation appearing in interviewees' expressed meanings of CSR, and their understanding of the possible role of HRD, including their own responsibility.

The bank HRD manager, called the "Learning CEO", focused on high accountability, low risk, public scrutiny and detailed results measurements. Concern was to bring all employees (across Canada) to a consistent skill standard delivering financial services that had been utterly transformed by technology. Little mention of CSR was made, beyond its acknowledgment as important and a suggestion that we should really speak to the Public Relations department to find out about the bank's CSR practices. However there had been major commitment to establishing employees' learning as central to the organization, a strategy that enabled the traditionally marginalized HR department to become positioned on the inside, "*connected to the lifeline of the business*". While learning for work was envisioned in a strictly technical sense, evidently much care had been lavished to devise full, equitable and personalized accessibility for all employees to comprehensive learning opportunities: online, in workshops and retreats, through coaching and peer groups. Clearly workers' actual treatment and engagements would require closer study. However, the entire system indicated—in rhetoric at least—genuine respect for employees' existing knowledge and employee control over when, where and what development they undertook. "*The philosophy we have applied since we've changed our strategy to what it is today is employees have ownership for their own development. The manager doesn't have ownership of that, it's the employee... they own it at the end of the day.*" Here is a small glimmering of social responsibility, albeit not a site for the transformative learning possibilities of CSR.

The petrochemical plant appeared similar in its conservative culture, performance-driven employee development, and limited integration of understanding of CSR principles internally. Emphasis was on achieving isomorphism with a US head office (absolute consistency of policies and skill standards) and occupational safety: for the HR director the three most important issues were "*everybody home at the end of the day safe, no accidents and no environmental emissions,*" because an "incident" impacts the staff, the community, the

environment, and the company. Like the bank, emphasis in employees' learning was technical: skill development through e-learning and coaching, and results evident on the job. However, there was evident leakage of CSR notions into the director's sense of HR. Employee development extended to training and policies in "ethics" for all employees, and promoted mutual respect, financial responsibility, an accident-free, violence-free and drug-free workplace. The director was also the only one of the three big firms to emphasize "respect and responsibility" and "diversity" extending beyond job performance: "*We need to respect each other for ... our race, our culture, our sexual orientation ... and how I expect to be treated in the workplace ... We need responsibility also in the company to negotiate and push back and say, hey I've hit my limit.*"

At a major oil refinery isolated near a small city in northern Alberta, HR focus was on two things: staff contributions to the number of barrels produced and good community relations, particularly with neighboring First Nations communities. The HR manager could describe a wide variety of environmental and community outreach CSR activities reported annually by the company, but admitted there was "not much" CSR integration in internal employee affairs or employment relations. "*I thought man, I've never thought of it as a link. Cause I have to say that in all the literature that I've read about corporate social responsibility it comes from things really operational like safety... like environmental footprint... I think, like in our sustainability report there's two questions on training.*" Employee learning yields a "cycle of benefits" that can take years—too long for evidence-based CSR in annual reports. The most socially responsible initiative a company could take for employees, this director suggested, would be credentialing them for the services they provide: in other words, assuming interdependent responsibility with other firms for workers' right livelihood. He lamented the current practices of training and promoting people within, then turning them onto a job market demanding formal credentials.

In stark contrast to the other companies, CSR principles were woven throughout HR operations of the outfitter. Born in 1971 of a philosophy of cooperative principles and connection to the environment, this firm tended to attract its staff from its enthusiastic customers. "Ethical decision-making", a core process in its vision of "leadership in a just world", involved all staff in choices from paper purchase to store design for sustainability. Staff development was plentiful, including outdoor treks to "play with" and test products, workshops held for one another in wilderness expertise, and staff focus groups to assess new suppliers (who must meet CSR standards) and determine new store directions. The HR manager emphasized recruitment: "*We're looking for people that are passionate about the outdoors and passionate about the environment and I think when you hire with those traits, they're usually pretty self motivated to come in and learn all they can about it.*" CSR appeared to evolve naturally from this combination, supported with company funds. "Paid project days" were available to all staff, for involvement in community outreach projects of their choice. On-site "SR Coordinators" worked with staff to develop SR initiatives for the store's own communities, which were electronically "tracked" and shared across stores. CSR success was attributed to the staff, who are "*stoked*" on this organization: "*Ninety percent of the people that are there are interested, they're focused, they're asking good questions, giving great feedback and they're using the stuff, and this is what they're doing in their lives every day ... they're getting out and they're actually ... living the lifestyle that they're learning about.*"

### *Themes from US Firms*

Seven firms were contacted in the US for participation in this study. To date, three US participants have been interviewed and data collection continues making the findings

preliminary. This section will discuss two overarching themes: gatekeeping and success factors.

Several people posed as gatekeepers making it difficult to gain access to HR people in both Canada and the US. Simply arranging an interview on this topic proved problematic. When both of us broached our study to potential participants, the general reaction was one of puzzlement. We were usually “corrected” by potential HR participants who redirected us to public relations (PR) or marketing. They were befuddled about why we wanted to talk with them when the marketing and PR folds were “responsible” for CSR. Even lengthy description of our intentions failed to sink in on many occasions. In one instance, we were referred to a US recruiting manager’s supervisor who was suspicious about our intentions. She also referred us to marketing and PR group but eventually agreed we could talk with her subordinate if we wanted to, adding *“I’m still not sure you are speaking with the right person”* after a 15 minute phone call explaining the study. In another organization, the HR person forwarded us to their legal department to discuss the study. In four instances, the HR people never even followed up after telephone and email messages inviting their participation. Even the secretaries diverted us to PR and marketing, and in one case a secretary flat out refused to let us talk with her boss, the Vice President of Recruiting for a consumer products company that has an international reputation for social responsibility. She forwarded our call to the Public Relations group. A home improvement company asked that we run our research request through their Organization Effectiveness department to evaluate it and make sure it complied with policy. We found irony in the reality that US companies repeatedly denied private access to HRD personnel to discuss their very public CSR initiatives. We can only surmise that perhaps HR employees are already so marginalized that they are not permitted to speak about their companies’ policies and do not view CSR within their purview.

We were also able to interview a person who works in CSR, but not in HRD, who offered particular insight into why HR is ineffective at implementing CSR. Bruce is the Manager of Social Responsibility and Organizational Learning for an automotive company with a strong CSR commitment who laments, *“The sustainability in corporate social responsibility in the hands of human resources could be the ultimate botch job.”* He is frustrated by HR’s ownership of education noting *“if it’s people, it’s theirs [HR’s].”* Bruce views HR as taking a micro, functionalist approach to its work which is opposed to the organic and macro approach needed if sustainability is to permeate the organization. To Bruce, *“social responsibility ... is a more organic approach [that] requires a different [approach]”* that integrates all functions toward working on sustainability issues. He also thinks HR functions from a “program” mentality rather than a process mentality because programs are something HR can own to gain power. On a brighter side, he believes HR is positioned to influence the organization through education and succession planning, but he does not see it happening.

Bruce also defined companies that are serious about CSR. He noted that philanthropic works are not enough. Companies truly committed to CSR will have a specific department responsible for sustainability and *“if they’re smart enough, they make sure HR people weren’t involved.”* Additionally, they will publish an annual report of social responsibility and sustainability performance. Mary Ann, an HR representative from a major computer company believes that CSR works best when *“The CEO mandates it...and employees have input.”*

## Conclusions

Our preliminary findings are disappointing. We found a wide range of meanings and applications of CSR among organizations and HRD practitioners, which appear related to a firm’s culture, products and vision. The sole example of social responsibility principles woven

authentically through a firm's external and internal operations was a cooperative outfitting retailer, started with a vision of justice, cooperation and environmental protection and recruiting like-minded staff. But in fiscally conservative or large corporations, CSR focus was external: environmental and community concerns pursued through publicly visible, measurable actions. For internal staff and development issues, CSR so far had not penetrated most HR consciousness – in fact, HR managers did not see connection between their own work and the wide-ranging CSR initiatives undertaken by their own companies. Yet certain social responsibility themes were evident in HR's emphasis on learning, ethics, staff wellness and well-being, employees' control of learning, emphasis on respect, diversity and responsibility. These emphases appeared to be genuine, evident in policy and programs as well as rhetoric. So while CSR clearly has not opened sites for critical learning in HR in the sense of challenging power relations and regulatory technologies, perhaps we should not overlook drifts of apparent HR change to notions of human dignity and the common good. In corporate environments that traditionally marginalize HRD and press 'productivity and shareholder gain', these drifts may be worth celebrating and encouraging.

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