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## Recommended Citation

Kim, Junghwan; Joo, K.P.; Joo, K.P.; and Schied, Fred M. (2010). "The Limits of HRD: Retrieving the Meaning of Workplace Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2010/papers/40>

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# **The Limits of HRD: Retrieving the Meaning of Workplace Learning**

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper is to critically review the perspectives of HRD and its relationship to workplace learning by clarifying existing conceptual ambiguity and suggesting alternative approaches that incorporate various perspectives on work, workplace, and workplace learning.*

## **Problem and Purpose Statement**

The original purposes of Human Resource Development (HRD) were related to both individual and organizational success based on learning and performance (Gray & Herr, 2009; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). Namely, the comprehensive breakthrough of HRD initiatives lies in how the efforts are performed in the balance between the learning/ performance of the individual and of the organization. Thus, from HRD's inception and evolution into both a practical and an academic field, 'learning' and 'performance' have been regarded as two key components for the ontogeny of HRD (Nadler & Nadler, 1989) and the efforts to simultaneously consider learning and performance have thus occurred in the HRD field.

In this regard, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), the large practitioner arm of HRD, has sought to incorporate the notions of 'workplace learning' (WL) or 'workplace learning & performance' (WL&P) as key elements of HRD (Bernthal et al., 2004). Accordingly, HRD researchers have attempted to expand the domain of HRD by incorporating WL and WL&P into the academic discourse of HRD (Bernthal et al., 2004). Moreover, many HRD scholars consider HRD as an overarching phenomenon that includes such activities as informal learning and social activities that incorporate learning as sub-categories. This all-encompassing conceptualization moves beyond the 'training and development' notion of HRD (Bernthal et al., 2004; Knowles, et al., 2005).

However, the HRD field has not addressed its limited underlying assumptions that fail to capture the complex and comprehensive meaning of WL. Although much research has attempted to build HRD theory and to discuss theoretical legitimacy (Alagaraja & Dooley, 2003; Garavan et al., 2004; Holton III, 2000; Lynham, 2000), what remains opaque is the conceptual boundary between HRD and WL. As research outside the narrow confines of the HRD field has shown, WL needs to be understood in a more theoretically balanced view that recognizes the diverse contexts of work and workplace (Hart, 1992). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to critically review the underlying assumptions of HRD and its relationship to WL by clarifying existing conceptual ambiguity and suggesting alternative approaches that incorporate various perspectives on work, workplace, and WL.

## **HRD's Perspectives on Workplace Learning**

HRD is defined by various viewpoints that locate HRD at the level of nation, society/ community, team, and individual, as well as organization (Garavan et al, 2004; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). Learning is a major strategy to accomplish individual/ organizational

performance and goals (Gilley, et al., 2002; Nadler & Nadler, 1989; Ruona, 2000), and thus organizations make enduring efforts to connect individual/ organizational learning with organizational performance. In this sense, HRD has been largely discussed from two perspectives: the learning paradigm and the performance paradigm (Kuchinke, 1998; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). It is obvious that the learning paradigm in HRD has been influenced by theoretical foundations of adult education. By contrast, the performance paradigm proves that theoretical foundations of adult education are still insufficient in capturing the whole notion of HRD (Bierema, 2000; Spencer, 2006) because this paradigm is based on human capital theory (HCT) and managerial perspective (Kuchinke, 1998), which are in some ways contradictory to philosophical traditions of adult education.

HCT is rooted in the assumption that an investment in training and education can contribute to economic enhancement. This theory fundamentally assumes that human beings are passive constituents of organization and that educational interventions provided by organizations are basically geared toward economic improvement. In this regard, education is considered as a service for economic development, a subordinate component (Kuchinke, 1998; Spencer, 2006). Thus, in HCT, humans and education are just subjects of control and investment for economy. Similarly, the fundamental perspectives of human resource theory (HRT) are aligned with the HCT's point of view that looks at humans as subjects to be managed through systematic approaches (Spencer, 2006). In the context of corporations, the main concerns of HR managers are more often than not the profitability of training and education for the organization rather than individual employees' self-realization and development. Although recent HR approaches have evolved into broadened foci on employees' participation, flexibility, competency etc, it is inescapable that from HRD's fundamental underlying assumptions, HRD embodies a management-oriented point of view (Klein, 1989; Spencer, 2006).

These perspectives persist in the field of HRD. Viewing human beings as passive and instrumental tools is grounded in behaviorism (Marsick, 1988). From this viewpoint, 'training' rather than 'education' or 'learning' is more frequently quoted because employees are regarded as mechanical subjects to be controlled, and thus exploited as manpower by their organizations (Kuchinke, 1998; Marsick, 1988). Hence, according to HCT and HRT, the primary value of employees is attributed to organizational performance, and consequently, the main purpose of any educational activities cannot be detached from the organization's orientation toward increasing employee effectiveness and efficiency for profit.

The performance paradigm as broadly accepted in the HRD field is fundamentally rooted in HCT and HRT approaches. According to the performance paradigm, organizational values either implicitly or explicitly are embedded in educational activities within organizations. Accordingly, learning remains only as a means to accomplish organizational performance (Swanson & Holton III, 2009). The concept of performance from this organizational perspective is intimately associated with outcome-oriented terms such as results, accomplishments, and operations (Gilley, et al., 2002). Therefore, how to relate the improvement of employees' performance to organizational productivity is the core interest of the performance paradigm whose logic is parallel to HCT and HRT (Kuchinke, 1998). Realistically, the performance paradigm is obviously an important concept in terms of sustainability of organizations, since there is keen competition in the global economy (Gilley et al., 2002).

HRD scholars and researchers constantly claim that the original purposes of HRD can be fully accomplished by balancing the learning and performance paradigms. In addition, they argue that individual learning is a key for organizational performance, and the result of learning must

be assessed using a long-term perspective (Marsick, 1988; Watkins, 1991). By the same token, recent approaches to WL in HRD have moved away from the dichotomy between learning and performance, striving to fuse them into a more or less seamless process (Kuchinke, 1998; Bernthal et al, 2004; Swanson & Holton III, 2009). From this perspective, WL includes such activities as on-the-job training, social learning, and informal learning, as well as various types of formal training and educational programs (Knowles, et al., 2005). Furthermore, HRD tries to cohesively connect learning with organizational performance in an organic organizational HR system, a largely strategic approach (Bernthal et al, 2004).

However, while HRD scholars promote individual development within an organizational milieu and take into account the various contexts of learning, HRD is still defined and conceptualized as the process that assumes individuals belong to an organization. Even studies that claim to provide a gendered analysis of HRD (Bierema & Cseh, 2003), or suggest a “critical” framework for understanding HRD (Fenwick, 2004) remain locked into viewing HRD and WL as an organizational process. In addition, the entire process of HRD is still seen as a subordinate system located within a higher-level system - usually Human Resources (Swanson and Holton III, 2009). Thus, the role of HRD is a source of power, and it exists as a mediation to control workers in the HR system of organization (Schied et al., 2001). As mentioned above, this perspective emphasizes the material characteristics of humans as resources. Under these assumptions, however, it is more than likely that diverse contexts of WL and workers’ individual and subjective values will be excluded. In other words, these approaches still have limits when attempting to accomplish the original purposes of HRD in workforce education, and consequently preclude further productive discussion in relation to WL as a field of inquiry in an integrated way.

### **Work, Workplace, and Workplace Learning**

Two recent handbooks from the fields of adult education and HRD include WL in either a section or a chapter. (i.e., Biech: 2008; Jarvis, 2009) Yet, their approaches to WL demonstrate sharply contrasting perceptions that prevail in the two disciplines. In the first section of the *ASTD Handbook for Workplace Learning Professionals*, WL is conceptualized in light of how learning can be efficiently managed and successfully connected to organizational performance (Biech, 2008). A series of chapters in this book maintain the organizational and managerial viewpoint of WL that focuses mainly on formal training geared toward performance improvement on both individual and organizational levels. In contrast, the notion of WL is presented in line with the interplay between work and learning in the *Routledge International Handbook of Lifelong Learning* (Jarvis, 2009). Employing a critical lens toward the current discourse of WL, one contributor attempts to present various aspects of work and the workplace that inform human learning (Olsen, 2009). These two handbooks reveal the contrasting underlying assumptions of these two disciplines in dealing with WL and pertinent phenomenon. It is helpful to note these counter standpoints in order to shed light on the limits of HRD for retrieving a more authentic meaning of WL.

Aside from the aforementioned imbalance of HRD theories and paradigms, HRD’s mischaracterization is attributed to a more fundamental deficit. HRD’s interpretation of WL is based primarily on the assumption that learning takes place in the workplace. Likewise, the major body of HRD research that concerns WL has discussed systematic processes and outcomes of HRD initiatives ‘within the organization.’ However, as Olsen (2009) noted “workplace

learning is not just an attribute of the workplace and the work itself (p. 115).” This necessitates a more sophisticated and comprehensive conceptualization with regard to WL, and thus we pose several fundamental problems of the HRD’s confined conceptions of WL.

First, the range of epistemic connotations of ‘workplace’ varies depending on the context in which it is used as well as those who employ the term. However, current trends of WL in HRD rely heavily on learning within a systematically organized workplace, mostly a corporation. This limited application of WL normally privileges corporate settings over seemingly “trivial” daily lives, which consequently excludes other important works occurring in unsystematic, informal circumstances. This prevalent connotation in relation to HRD and WL has misled researchers insofar as they conceptualize WL without contextualizing various types of work and workplaces.

Second, our working life bears significant relation to the other arenas of our life. In other words, a working life is complicatedly interwoven with outside-work lives as well as previous experiences at home, in school, and in society. The exclusion of subjectivity, such as personal non-work experiences, in the discourse of WL misleads us as to the nature of WL, forming stereotypes of work and workplace. Put differently, the stereotypical image of workplaces where manual labor and formal services are performed stifles profound considerations about the complexity between work and non-work life. Therefore, it is necessary to extend the focus of studies on WL from the organized work and workplace to subjective and creative processes in our daily lives. This enables us to take holistic and ecological approaches to WL, which can guide a more comprehensive inquiry.

Furthermore, highly developed technologies provide an alternate way to view one’s work-life relationship. More specifically, careers are no longer considered a linear progression from home through school to the workplace; technological development has broken the conventional boundaries of time and space. Accordingly, we can more thoroughly account for the notion of WL when we legitimately take our personal lives into consideration. This necessitates a sophisticated approach to personal subjectivity as well as the contextual dimensions of workplace when defining WL in order to overcome HRD’s stereotypical approach to work and workplace. Although how to define WL and identify its attributes remains controversial, there is convergent agreement among researchers and scholars in related fields that the notion of WL should be conceptualized based not just on work itself or attributes of a specific workplace, but also on the subjectivity of individuals and groups of workers (i.e., their personal experiences, personality, emotional commitment, knowledge, skills, etc.).

Third, work adds meaning to life and is a valuable means by which individuals become significant beings in society. In other words, work provides identity and a diversity of both visible and invisible values to workers at both individual and societal levels (Ciulla, 2000). In this sense, the workplace should be understood as a place not only where workers exert their efforts oriented toward accomplishing organizational goals, but also where they may seek self-realization, and economic/ social justice. Thus, it is very important that workers find meaning at work and in the workplace which facilitates meaningful learning and brings out creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Creativity in the workplace is a core value for the growth and adaptation of organizations as well as the development of workers (Mumford & Simonton, 1997).

Fourth, most HRD studies tend to underestimate the significant role that the social organization of work plays in the conceptualization of relationship among work, workplace, and learning. It is, therefore, imperative to correct this misconceptualization alongside a close

investigation of societal and historical backgrounds surrounding work. Namely, we need a careful consideration of multilayered interrelationships among societal, organizational, and individual factors that impact work and the workplace. Furthermore, in order to shape a more genuine discourse of WL, it is necessary to examine various (i.e., managerial, organizational, individual, and critical) views on learning. These perspectives necessarily entail different ontological and epistemological approaches to WL from the HRD approach. Thus, it is important to broaden our perspectives by identifying more fundamental constituents of WL (e.g., the general nature of capitalism, internal and external contradictions in the workplace, the effects of complex interrelations within organizations), which enables us to illuminate how WL can be legitimately and comprehensively perceived.

To this end, WL manifests itself in the interdisciplinary body of knowledge and theoretical inquiry that draws from adult learning, management theory, industrial relations, sociological theory, labor studies and so forth (Bratton et al., 2004). Therefore, expanding our knowledge of work and workplace is a prerequisite to developing WL as a field of inquiry. Accordingly, WL is seen as through the lens of an integrated understanding, starting from articulating the notion of work and workplace to taking managerial, organizational, worker, union, and critical perspectives on learning within as well as outside the context.

### **Toward Integrated Approach to Workplace Learning**

We argue that it is vital to retrieve the original meaning of WL, whereby the genuine notion can be established in the related field. Despite claiming the learning paradigm, the HRD's approach to WL has been skewed toward the organizational, managerial perspectives due to its theoretical foundations and the limited application of the concept. Subjective and creative aspects of WL and various contexts of work and workplace have been inadvertently excluded in the major body of the WL discourse. In order to improve and extend the field of inquiry, an integrated, but dialectical, approach is needed, which encompasses both objective and subjective domains of WL. In so doing, we can systematically investigate not only performance-related issues but also creative processes of human beings in relation to WL. In addition, learning both in and out of the workplace and the relation between work and life should be significant agendas in the WL research.

All in all, this study provides practitioners and scholars with an integrated approach to thinking about workplace learning that goes beyond a systemic approach that does not differentiate between work, the workplace, and WL for workers and organizations. Our approach suggests that it is necessary to retrieve the original meaning of workplace learning through synthesizing learning for work, through work, and about work, as well as balancing theoretical foundations. Moreover, this approach implies that adult education, especially in its sociological, historical, and critical forms, needs to become a touchstone for HRD practitioners and scholars.

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