

Bridging the Great Divide: Exploring Resistance to HRD in Adult Education

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Keywords: HRD on the Margins, Adult Education, Foundational Issues

This paper examines the debates and critiques surrounding HRD by uncloaking myths about HRD philosophy and practice that seem to commonly held by professionals in the field of Adult Education. We argue that the HRD field is “marginalized” in adult education and reflect on both the problems this situation creates and the increasing need to bridge these two fields.

During a recent Adult Education conference, participants were asked to identify metaphors for how they viewed both the fields of HRD and adult education. Several slogans emerged. These slogans included, “Learn and Earn,” “The Buck Starts Here,” “Cheerleaders for Management,” and “Corporate-centered, rigid, and individualistic.” The Adult Education slogans were characterized as being “learner-centered, flexible, collaborative,” “A Journey of Learning,” and “Education for Life.” These slogans tend to embody the views adult education holds toward HRD. These rather narrow views sometimes function to marginalize a growing field.

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. HRD also straddles often competing interests between employees and management.

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.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the commonly held myths that may portray HRD professionals as being behaviorally and performance focused, potentially irresponsible and non-reflective, economically focused on the bottom-line, exploitative, and possibly of questionable ethical practice. Following and examination of these myths, 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

According to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993), a myth is:

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A traditional story, either wholly or partially fictitious, providing an explanation for or embodying a popular idea concerning some natural or social phenomenon...; A widely-held (esp. untrue or discredited popular) story or belief; a misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth; an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person, institution, etc.; a person, institution, etc., widely idealized or misrepresented. (p. 1874).

Our goal is to identify myths that negatively portray or characterize HRD and HRD practice. These myths are either explicitly discussed in Adult Education literature or seem to be commonly held although not explicated. Whether explicit or not, these myths ultimately position HRD on the margins of adult education.

Myth # 1: HRD Professionals are Capitalist Sympathizers who Abuse Behaviorist and Humanistic Practices to Exploit Workers

Some adult educators assume that adherents of HRD profess unconditional allegiance to the human capital theory perspective (Cunningham, 1993; 2000; Scheid, Carter & Howell, 2001; Welton, 19xx). For instance, Schied, Carter, Preston, and Howell (1997) suggest 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 claim that “Embedded within human capital theory, in some quarters HRD has become synonymous with workplace learning” (p. 404).

There are several problems with the assertion that HRD is synonymous with capitalism and human capital theory exclusively. First, it is reckless 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 discourteous, 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 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.

Finally, while human capital theory may be one theoretical lens to utilized in HRD, Swanson (1998) has acknowledged that there is no universal view or agreement on the theory or multiple theories that support HRD as a discipline. In fact, it is generally acknowledged that HRD is a discipline that draws upon many theories and is informed by several disciplines. Willis also 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 economic and behavioristic terms. Accordingly, the images of HRD professionals as “capitalist pigs” and “Pavlovian trainers” are often construed.

Myth # 2: HRD Professionals Embrace Exploitation

Amplifying the myth that all HRD professionals embody an exploitative, capitalist perspective is the myth that they also seek to control employees through training and conditioning, or through humanistic initiatives that coax employees into participative or employee empowerment programs. Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) charge that work in the old capitalism was alienating and 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 (1997) 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” (p. 405). These myths assume that there is one technology for addressing HRD issues: 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 fuels the scholarly debate triggered by the tenuous relationship between adult education and HRD is that of ethics in HRD (Bierema, 2000; Cunningham, 1993; Dirx, 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 been actively engaged in discussion of the ethical issues involved in our profession (Dean, 1993; DeVogel, Sullivan, McLean, & Rothwell, 1995; Hatcher, 2002; Paige & Martin, 1996) for at least 10 years. 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. 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 uncover core beliefs underlying HRD by exploring assumptions and beliefs of 10 scholarly leaders in the field.

Myth #5: Poor Practice is Representative of the Majority of HRD Practice

HRD has received sometimes-deserved critique, but unfortunately the profession is often condemned 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. We must be critical of the critiques noting the type of intervention reported and analysis. Much of the critique assumes that HRD is synonymous with training. This view is laden with its own problems indicating that researchers are quick to critique HRD before they are even fully cognizant of what the process entails (For instance, Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) use an abhorrent training

examples to discuss “the new work order”). 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 traditional 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 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

Some have charged HRD for lacking an international perspective and discipline. Once again, there is ample evidence to the contrary. The interdisciplinary nature of HRD described so metaphorically by Willis (1996). The open space created by the intensive globalization of the world economy, triggered by the development of science and technology, has offered people the opportunity to migrate across national boundaries in search of the “ideal” employment opportunity or political environment. This raises continuous challenges for HRD professionals whom work in organizations that are increasingly becoming globalized and multi-national. 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 literature (Rijk, Mulder and Nijhof, 1994; McLean & McLean, 2001; Odenthal & Nijhof, 1996, Valkeavaara, 1998) that has shown the culture-bound nature of HRD.

For example, 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.

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

There have been at least 20 definitions of HRD forwarded and analyzed (Weinberger 1998) and most of them do indeed describe a role/responsibility related to 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. McLagan’s (1989) 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 explosion 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” (pg. 58).

HRD has not taken 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 has and will continue to 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, 2003). 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

As we ponder the question of how to bridge the values chasm that now divides adult education and HRD, we are 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 years that we have been in adult education and human resource development, we 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. HRD has become more and more distinctive in its own right, now a major academic entity in multiple disciplinary homes and yet has 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 is 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 that we would need to renegotiate our relationship. As is so often the case, that renegotiation would likely have to do with power (in issues, for instance, such as who decides what HRD curriculum will be). We have built separate programs within our Universities because we could not come to a meeting of the 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 those few boundary spanners to literally be bicultural. One of us recently described to a colleague what it was like to "be HRD" within adult education and yet "be adult education" in HRD" —she was amused at the realization that HRD 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 span the boundaries of both fields. We would incorporate both kinds of courses in our curriculums. 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, and 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 the best of what adult education has to offer 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?

In other venues we have argued that, for the sake of HRD professionals, we need to be connected. We believe that we are a fate-sharing group and both HRD and adult education are enhanced by our connections. Perhaps it is time to challenge that assumption. Perhaps HRD professionals are worse off caught in the crossfire of our differing assumptions and values. In this article 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 us

that we are like a voice in the wilderness. While the little 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 HRD is already living alone?

On the other hand, Short (2000) asserts that the metaphor of marriage and divorce is all together wrong and that continuing to think of HRD as a marriage between disciplines may fundamentally impede its progress. Perhaps, instead, 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 that 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 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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