PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT EDUCATION , HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT, AND THE EMERGENCE OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This article presents a perspective on the relationship between adult education and human resource development of the past two decades and the subsequent emergence of workforce development. The lesson taken from the article should be more than simply a recounting of events related to these fields of study. Instead, the more general lesson may be to illustrate again the dynamic of how applied fields of study emerge. That is, as societal issues of importance occur, existing processes and information are often used out of necessity by practitioners to address the issues, which in turn promotes reflections mostly from the academic community about what was done. For some professionals, the evolving cycle is painful to experience because it often calls for fundamental change in their known intellectual territory. Alternately, such change should be embraced to ensure the continuing societal relevance of the field of study.

Merriam and Brockett (1997) define adult education (AE) as the activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults. From this general definition, the field of AE generally professes to serve the broad purposes of social justice, individual self-development, and workforce preparation and advancement for individuals and organizations (Elias & Merriam, 1995). Clearly, these goals encompass the learning of adults in widely varying contexts. Reconciling them within a single intellectual framework – adult learning – has become a major issue of contention for many AE academics and practitioners. Indeed, the emergence of human resource development (HRD) in the 1980s, which generally emphasizes the workplace side of adult education, has forced many AE professionals to reexamine their field and, in some instances, reexamine their affiliation with the field.

Although sharing many of the same historical roots and perspectives about adults and adult development, AE and HRD diverge in some critical ways. Human resource development can be defined as the process of improving organizational performance and individual learning through the human accomplishments that result from employee development, organization development, and career development programs. From this definition, human accomplishment, as opposed to adult learning per se, is the driver to achieve organizational outcomes. For many, this relationship forms the foundational basis of the HRD field. That is, learning is critical, but not always necessary for the desired human accomplishments to occur. An assumption of the

HRD field is that organizations must continuously seek to improve their performance to remain viable and competitive and that the accomplishments of people contribute much to that end.

Clearly, this perspective of HRD contradicts foundational perspectives of AE. What is often lost in this perspective are discussions about the individual's sense of control over learning goals and decision making about what should be learned in the first place. Until recently, few organizational managers would view personal enrichment and self-actualization as appropriate aspects of their HRD strategies. From an AE perspective, HRD often appears to be overly functional and purposeful, imbalanced towards the needs of management, and, for some, promoting the view of individuals as merely being 'cogs' in a global capitalist grand scheme. Fundamentally, the question has been rightfully asked: If HRD is able to make people become more efficient and effective on their jobs, who really benefits from these outcomes and who really suffers? Unfortunately, the behavior of many managers has done much to reinforce these slanted views of HRD. Skepticism abounds when an organization implements a quality management system with much fanfare, only to announce soon afterwards that the facility will be moved to an off-shore location.

From an academic perspective, HRD was seen by some as an immediate threat to the existence of AE. Students became attracted by the professional opportunities in organizations, with their promise of higher compensation and advancement than those afforded by most AE positions in public agencies. Similarly, faculty members were attracted by the opportunities to generate funded projects with organizations, not to mention the opportunities for personal consulting. In addition, HRD promised involvement in a broader perspective of organizational change, which was lacking in the AE literature. The wave of programs evolving from an AE to an HRD focus caused some to question the survival of the field as an academic field of study.

Interestingly, from an HRD perspective, the struggles on-going within the AE field were puzzling, to say the least. For instance, self-directed learning in an HRD context is assumed to be circumscribed by the needs of individuals in the context of the organization's needs. Self-directed learning from an AE perspective may become more complicated because of the broader range of referents. Thus, issues of heated discussion in one field were taken as assumptions in the other: HRD was about improving organizational learning and performance, so it was assumed that the organizational mission in large part guided the learning needs of employees. How else could the accomplishments that result from HRD programs become tangible and measurable? Thus, the needs of individuals were important, but their learning needed to be judged in terms of fit within the referent of the organization. Balancing this perspective has been a better understanding that individual performance is dependent on a sense of involvement, decision making, and personal ownership, constructs taken from the AE and organizational behavior literatures.

As the dust has settled somewhat after nearly 20 years of discussions, it is instructive to review the current situation. Philosophical issues still divide the two fields: many of these differences might be bluntly characterized as the relative professional emphasis on adult learning in the workplace. Aside from this continuing distinction, there appears to be greater overall acceptance for differing views within AE – how else could one explain my own current contribution to this journal? In addition, AE appears less threatened by HRD and more

comfortable with continuing on in its own areas of strength, which in the end are complementary to the HRD field. In turn, the HRD field has gradually softened some of its harder edges related to achieving organizational performance, seemingly at all costs, and integrating other perspectives that recognize the need for greater learner involvement.

The Emergence of Workforce Development

Ironically, as AE and HRD have made strides toward mutual understanding, workforce development has emerged as a societal entity of interest. The irony is that HRD is now undergoing some of the same internal philosophical struggles – though perhaps not at the same level of intensity – that AE experienced previously. For one thing, workforce development represents an interest in schools and youth in terms of preparing for work, which has been absent in the HRD literature previously.

Workforce development has been defined as the coordination of public and private sector policies and programs that provides individuals with the opportunity for a sustainable livelihood and helps organizations achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the societal context (Jacobs & Hawley, 2005).

The term workforce development is being used with increasing frequency among education practitioners, policy makers, and scholars alike. Workforce development has evolved to describe any one of a relatively wide range of national and international policies and programs related to learning for work. For example, many professionals involved in administering secondary vocational education programs, welfare-to-work and other public assistance programs, and regional economic development initiatives now use workforce development, or related terms such as workforce education to describe their services. Several recent pieces of state and federal legislation in the United States use the term to describe various youth vocational training, adult training and retraining, and related employment initiatives.

As a result of these legislative and policy changes, many states in the U.S. – including my own state of Ohio – have included the term in naming various governmental coordinating boards, initiatives, and task forces (Grubb, et al., 1999). To a varying extent, AE and HRD professionals have begun to use the term in the context of their fields as well (Bates & Redmann, 2002; Jacobs, 2000).

There seems to be no single reason to explain why workforce development should be used to describe such a wide range of activities as youth in career centers, adults in career centers, adults in community colleges, or adults in organizations. One prominent realization is that the success of any one societal program or initiative depends on the connections to other programs that otherwise would have been considered in isolation from each other (Hawley, Sommers, & Melendez, 2003). For example, vocational educators have increasingly found that secondary-education programs for youth depend more and more on organization-based training programs. Adult retraining programs depend more and more on the delivery of community-based social services. Adult educators have concluded that helping individuals acquire new sets of basic skills requires substantial investment in integrated skills rather than literacy programs alone (Comings, Reder, & Sum, 2001; Murnane & Levy, 1996).

In brief, workforce development represents a greater awareness about the connectedness of systems. Societies rely on their major institutions, such as schools, community colleges, universities government agencies, and unions, organizations, among others, to acquire human competence. Sustaining national and organizational well-being depends more and more on having human competence available, and those areas of human competence will likely change on a continuing basis (Judy & D'Amico, 1997).

Workforce development is not simply about public sector programs to promote the acquisition of skills. Indeed, workforce development might entail both profit and non-profit institutions to achieve a wide range of outcomes. The scope of involvement in workforce development can be organized around four different areas of focus: education to enter or re-enter the workforce, improving workplace performance, responding to changes that affect workforce effectiveness, and life transitions related to workforce participation.

Education to Enter or Re-enter the Workforce

Workforce development clearly covers the traditional systems of vocational-technical training, including initial training, cooperative education, or apprenticeships that are designed to prepare people for an initial job or career. The educational or training programs that provide these services differ from country to country. In the U.S. these programs are primarily provided through secondary level career and technical education, while in Germany and a relatively small number of European countries this initial training is delivered through apprenticeship programs run through businesses (Buechtemann, Schupp, & Soloff, 1993; Culpepper, 2003; Silverberg, Warner, Fong, & Goodwin, 2004).

This distinction between school-based and employer based initial training is significant and has a strong relationship to the quality of schooling (Middleton, Ziderman, & Adams, 1993). Additionally, this focus encompasses what the U.S. labels second chance educational programs (Grubb, 2001). These programs are designed to provide adults with vocational skills, literacy, and numeracy training and offer assistance in making the transition to schooling. In the international context, these programs are broader, offering entrepreneurial training or non-formal education and the systems for providing second chance training are less well developed.

Improving Workplace Performance

Human resource development in companies, and the associated infrastructure in higher education, consulting, and the non-profit world, is focused on improving skills in firms to support improved productivity. These lifelong learning systems are a critical part of workforce development, as most of the training that occurs after initial vocational preparation happens within the context of corporations or in response to business needs.

Both in the U.S. and developing countries, the state plays a critical part in supporting HRD in firms. In Germany where corporatist relationships link business, labor, and education statutorily, the state can fundamentally design the infrastructure that supports training (Gill & Dar, 2000). In other countries, such as Korea, Thailand, or the United States, the state supports

business investment in HRD through re-training activities (Hawley, 2003; Moore, Blake, Phillips, & McConaughy, 2003) but does not legislate training activities.

Responding to Changes that Affect Workforce Effectiveness

Much of the difficult work within organizations includes activities that respond to explicit changes in skills requirements, such as increases in the use of technology or the reorganization of work processes (Levy & Murnane, 2004; Osterman, 1999). As Levy & Murnane (2004) recount, the use of technology fundamentally alters job design, skills needed, and educational requirements.

More fundamentally, training is not the solution for every human performance problem. Organizations respond to changes in workforce effectiveness through organizational development as well as classical strategies through training and development.

Life Transitions Related to Workforce Participation

Adult education has an integral role to play in workforce development, and adult learning and development theories are the foundation for teaching and learning systems in many workforce development programs. As the skills required to work have increased significantly, AE has been asked to provide not only literacy or basic vocational training, but integrated services that ensure mastery of advanced vocational skills as well as assistance to enable individuals to make a successful transition into the workplace (Askov & Gordon, 1999; Comings et al., 2001; Imel, 2000).

The life transition aspect of this issue relates directly to the demographic shift that is occurring. In many advanced capitalist countries, companies are being forced to turn to older workers to supply needed labor, as the proportion of the labor force of traditional working age is declining (Stein, 2000). Therefore, firms and educational organizations alike are being forced to engage more actively with older workers to support their training needs as well as to ensure that they have adequate transition into and out of the workforce.

The four issues cited above raise important questions about the goals of workforce development. To what end does workforce development exist? Traditionally, workforce development focuses on individuals, emphasizing goals such as increased earnings or occupational mobility. An expanded definition of workforce development might add the emphasis on corporations, merging in organizational outcomes like improved productivity. Neither of these goals or the outcomes are radically different from those emphasized currently by vocational education and training. Workforce development programs and professionals consistently try to achieve outcomes that have a broader impact on communities, states, and nations. The extensive projects from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Jobs Initiative in the 1990s led to the documentation of workforce development on a regional scale in the United States. Many of these programs had only small numbers of trainees, but achieved some significant system wide changes, resulting in a better infrastructure for workforce development in communities (Giloth, 2004).

Thus, workforce development is further distinguished from adult education or human resource development by its explicit focus on economic development. The standard operating procedure for international development holds that human capital can best be strengthened by basic skills training, such as elementary school education (The World Bank, 1999). This truth has a long history, and in fact has been debated extensively in the academic literature (Largo, 1996; Wilson, 2001). An alternative perspective holds that the interconnections between education and employment mandate strong programs at the school and firm level to build a strong workforce, strengthen services to employers, provide reimbursement for incumbent worker training, and generally support job oriented development (Giloth, 2000).

Admittedly, not every workforce development program might achieve different levels of outcomes. But, if economic and social well-being is the goal, workforce development planners should strive to view the broader context in which their programs exist. In this regard, Kaufman (1998) suggests that greater attention should be given to the mega-level – or societal level – of educational planning Taking on any view that restricts the level of planning makes it less probable for any one set of outcomes to be fully realized.

Implications

The emergence of workforce development has influenced both adult education and human resource development in at least five ways. Indeed, the conceptual reach of workforce development has touched both fields in demonstrable and beneficial ways.

First, workforce development has made possible purposeful collaborations with programs involved in adult basic education and literacy, employability skills, and career exploration. It has also brought unlikely partners together such as groups of adult educators, Chambers of Commerce, and organization managers. In addition, such collaborations have opened new avenues for research in adult education, particularly in terms of the impacts of adult education programs. Recent research suggests that adult workforce programs that engage in formal collaborations produce steeper earnings increases in training participants than those that are trained in adult programs with informal collaborations (Hawley, Sommers, & Melendez, 2003). The achievement of immediate program goals – such as the number of participants and graduates from a training program – is only one way of determining program success. Long-term and financial criteria should also be considered in terms of the impact of the program downstream.

Second, workforce development forces the consideration of broader sets of program goals. HRD has sometimes been criticized as being too narrowly focused on organizational outcomes. In the same way, adult education has been criticized for being too narrowly focused on individual learning as an outcome. Workforce development is a programmatic response to a societal need and, thus, should not be limited in scope to a specific organization or should be designed to benefit one set of individuals only. Rather, workforce development seeks to bridge individual, organizational, and societal interests in ways that meaningfully benefit each other. Educational professionals and policy makers working in various settings – organizations, agencies, and schools – should plan workforce development programs, keeping in mind that the programs should connect somehow with another level of related goals.

For instance, government-sponsored dislocated worker programs should logically have their own program goals and they should have explicitly stated societal goals beyond the program goals, even though the societal goals cannot possibly be controlled to the same extent as the program goals. Planning and accountability systems developed by the California Employment and Training Panel shows off the benefits that come from engaging in sustained planning for employer supported training that takes into account societal and individual objectives as well as corporate goals (Regional Technology Strategies, 1999). Nevertheless, reconciling different sets of goals is a defining feature of an integrated perspective.

Third, workforce development has provided a conceptual frame for integrating varying bodies of knowledge and theories, such as systems theory, economics, and psychology. Several works have proposed conceptual frameworks for adult education and human resource development respectively (for example, Jacobs, 1990). Workforce development introduces the possibility of combining perspectives such that theory development in one field can be integrated with theory development in another field, for the eventual enrichment of both fields. Deriving theory from one field to other fields has the potential to yield much new information, which would not be available otherwise. How to encourage such scholarly exchanges within the context of workforce development is an issue of critical importance.

For instance, when unemployed individuals engage in job training, many of them do not in fact complete the training, even though they understand this activity has the potential of helping them return to the workforce. Unfortunately, the variables that affect training persistence, for one thing, have not been studied to any extent. A current study in progress under the auspices of the National Adult Learning and Literacy Center will provide needed results about the factors that facilitate persistence in adult literacy and adult basic education that may be applied to other areas of workforce development practice (Comings et al., 2003; Reder & Strawn, 2001).

One could argue that such topics, largely a part of the adult education literature, could also be considered within the boundaries of human resource development theory and research. But, they have not been studied simply because the phenomenon does not occur in organization settings.

Fourth, workforce development has the potential of encouraging scholars from both adult education and human resource development perspectives to consider wider sets of research problems and dependent variables. For instance, the source for most research problems in HRD is organizations. Thus, if the problem in mind cannot be found to exist in organization settings, then the HRD researcher must reconsider the problem or seek out a new one. The basis for using organizations as the sole referent for HRD research problems constrains research unnecessarily.

However, most HRD research problems have societal roots beyond organizations that could be addressed in a range of social settings, other than organizations. And, by looking only in organizations to confirm hunches or arm-chair hypotheses, the researcher may miss out on investigating issues of interest, that otherwise would have been overlooked. Skills shortages have roots and solutions beyond organizations. Organizations such as community-based agencies and educational institutions have critical roles in helping organizations meet skills shortages. The

New York based "Wildcat" program, for instance, has trained entry level financial services workers for a number of years, working both with business and social service organizations (Schlefer, 1999). In the health care field, a business sector with one of the most obvious shortages, non-profit providers and educational institutions have played substantial roles in training entry level workers (Pindus & Nightingale, 1995).

Finally, the emergence of workforce development has implications for graduate education. While it is true that professionals need to have both an identity of their own roles – HRD specialist, adult educator, or vocational educator, it is also true that such professionals need to understand the broader context in which these individuals do their work. Thus, we believe that there is less room for silo thinking among professional groups, especially when the economic and social well-being of a community is at stake. Everyday demands require that areas of practice become more blurred and less distinct, which is desirable for achieving a wider range of workforce development outcomes.

This realization has implications for graduate education. More often than not, programs of adult education and human resource development have been placed together for the sake of administrative convenience. Unfortunately, when these programs actually come together, it becomes apparent that they have as many areas of difference as areas of commonality. The question of concern becomes – what is the underlying theme that in fact ties them together. Workforce development represents a programmatic core that might provide a unifying theme for graduate study, since it seeks not to limit the influence of any one field of study. Instead, it recognizes the equal importance of the fields in contributing to broader societal goals. Having each field maintain its academic strength is the essence for achieving workforce development goals.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the issues that distinguish adult education and human resource development. The paper also discussed the emergence of workforce development, which has occurred in the context of discussions about the distinctiveness between the fields. While workforce development cannot be considered necessarily as a unique field of study, it is a recognizable global phenomenon. At this point, workforce development represents a set of emerging practices more than a coherent body of knowledge. However it is considered, there has been a demonstrable impact on both adult education and human resource development. By its very nature, workforce development has served to integrate adult education and human resource development in ways that either field could have achieved alone.

As stated, perhaps the larger lesson taken from these on-going changes is that fields of study are not static entities. They are part of the larger dynamic of societal change. Thus, fields of study must naturally adjust themselves, in large part, based on societal needs. Such volatility is necessary to maintain a relevant voice. From today's vantage point, those past heated discussions about the distinctiveness between adult education and HRD pale in contrast to the global economic and social issues we now face. Paradoxically, to solve today's complex problems, scholars must be intent on developing their own independent scholarly communities.

But they must understand the need to cross into neighboring scholarly communities, since no one field has all the answers.

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