

The History of Workplace Learning in the United States and the Question of Control: A Selective Review of the Literature and the Implications of a Constructivist Paradigm

Brian A. Altman
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Anderson (1980) and Harris's (2000) examinations of the history of workplace learning and training in the United States highlight issues of power and control in the determination of what training is provided to workers. This paper reviews these two texts and considers the implications of a constructivist paradigm in addressing the dilemmas of power and control in the determination of workplace training that are raised by these two authors.

Keywords: Workplace Learning, Control, Constructivism

In their chapter on the history of technical training, Swanson and Torracco (1995) raise the complex issues of power and control between management and workers in the determination of what training is to be provided. This paper is a selective review of two other accounts of the history of workplace learning and training in the United States that further emphasize issues of power and control in the determination of what training occurs, and place these issues at the center of their analyses. These two texts are Carmell F. Anderson's (1980) dissertation at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, titled *An Historical Approach to the Relationship between Adult Education and the Workplace: Path to Empowerment in the 80s*, and Howard Harris's (2000) *Defining the Future or Reliving the Past? Unions, Employers, and the Challenge of Workplace Learning*, Information Series no. 380, authored for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

Anderson (1980) covers the history of public adult education in the United States, the training of workers in which workers were in control, and the training of workers in which the company was in control of that education. While Anderson writes from the adult education vantage point, rather than human resource development (HRD), the material that Anderson covers and the conclusions drawn are of interest to HRD professionals. Harris (2000) examines the history of workplace education and training in the United States from the late 1800s to the present, with specific reference to the control of the employer versus the involvement of the worker. Harris highlights the rise and fall of Taylor's scientific management philosophy and connects this movement to training. Both authors have a related, though somewhat different suggestion for how we might envision a positive future for workplace learning and training.

Anderson (1980) and Harris (2000) both advocate for greater worker empowerment, seeing this as involving a shift in power from management to workers. Drawing from the issues raised by these two authors, this paper explores the implications of a constructivist paradigm in determining what training takes place, which can transcend a zero sum game view of workplace power.

Problem Statement

For Anderson (1980) and Harris (2000), a central problem in the history of workplace learning in the United States is the power and control held by management in contrast to the power and control held by workers in deciding what training is provided to workers. Anderson (1980) and Harris (2000) both provide suggestions for the future of workplace learning and training, and how this problem of power and control should be addressed. This paper will consider the implications of a constructivist paradigm in addressing the dilemmas of power and control in the determination of training that are raised by these two authors. In order to provide a context for these suggestions and implications, this paper will also highlight aspects of the extensive history that Anderson and Harris describe.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivist learning theory will serve as the theoretical framework for this paper. Constructivism "posits that learners construct their own knowledge from their experiences" and that each person makes an "internal

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construction of reality” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, pp. 264-265). Further, Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler (2000) note that “constructivism does not claim that the world does not exist, only that what we know of it is ultimately our own construction” (p. 18). Novak (1998) suggests that educators “must understand and engage the learner’s existing relevant knowledge, both valid and invalid ideas” (p. 224). Drawing from these scholars, constructivism suggests that we each develop our own knowledge about and understanding of the world based on our own individual life experiences, and that training must take this knowledge and understanding into account.

Leading scholars in HRD have invoked the constructivist theory of learning. Swanson and Holton (2001) include constructivism as one of five metatheories of learning in their *Foundations of Human Resource Development*. A few of the participants in Ruona’s (2000) landmark study of the core beliefs of scholarly leaders in HRD expressed a constructivist view of learning. Also, Kuchinke and Han (2005) suggest that researchers examine and connect constructivist and behaviorist paradigms with regard to workplace training. In advocating for a critical constructionist HRD, Callahan (2007) challenges HRD professionals to consider the degree to which they incorporate the “personal and contextual expertise” (p. 80) of employees in planning training. Finally, Dirkx (2005) advocates a constructivist approach to workplace learning, including employee involvement in determining their own training needs. Dirkx argues this point of view in the context of enhancing employees’ experience of meaning in work. In line with these arguments by Callahan and Dirkx, constructivism will be used in this paper with specific reference to the process through which training is determined.

Carmell F. Anderson’s An Historical Approach to the Relationship between Adult Education and the Workplace: Path to Empowerment in the 80s

Anderson (1980) examines the role of adult education, as workers (specifically in the textile, coal, steel, and automotive industries) and managers struggled for control in the workplace environment in the period since 1920. A key feature of Anderson’s analysis is the issue of who was in control of workplace education. For Anderson, workers’ control of their own education helps to bring about positive social change.

Workers in Control

Anderson (1980) argues that it is important to look at unions for education of workers that can be under the workers’ control. For example, organizations in the women’s worker movement such as the Women’s Trade Union League, formed in 1903, and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, formed in 1916, developed educational programs for labor leaders (Anderson, 1980). Grattan (as cited in Anderson, 1980) lists 19 unions that had educational programs by 1940, from the United Automobile, Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) to the United Textile Workers Union, CIO.

Prior to World War II, labor education involved training labor leaders and providing vocational skills to a lesser degree, whereas after the war, labor education began to focus on the workers themselves, and their needs both inside and outside of the workplace (Anderson, 1980). Educational programs in unions in the 1970s included programs to develop the whole person (including liberal arts and leisure activities) and education focused on social change through public policy (Anderson, 1980). In describing UAW worker education programs, Anderson (1980) notes that after World War II, “education as persuasion was replaced by education for political conformity” (p. 61). Emphasis on “revolutionary ideology” (p. 61) gave way to a view that “the established capitalistic system was to be accepted, but it would be necessary to strive to affect certain modifications in an evolutionary manner” (p. 61).

Company in Control

Anderson (1980) also examines the history of labor and management education in the United States that is under the control of the company. The first period, characterized by apprenticeships, ran from the colonial period to the Civil War. The end of the apprenticeship period was ushered in by the coming of factories (Anderson, 1980).

In the late 1800s, according to Anderson (1980), as industry came into contact with immigrants with different cultural practices in the workplace, it worked to ensure the kind of workforce that would meet its needs, “docile and obedient” (p. 75). Further developments during this period included corporation schools, laws to promote industrial education in schools, and the beginning of management education (Anderson, 1980). The corporation schools gave management the control in how workers would be trained. Among the examples provided by Anderson are two in the automotive industry. In 1914, Ford Motor Company initiated the Ford English School for Foreigners, which was extremely successful in both numbers of learners and according to Ford (Evans, as cited in Anderson, 1980), reduction in production department accidents and the need for funding for interpreters. General Motors Corporation formed its own undergraduate college, the General Motors Institute, in 1919 (Anderson, 1980).

The period between 1920 and 1970 saw the expansion of business education in higher education, and the training departments within organizations, which were now serving a larger proportion of employees (Anderson, 1980). Anderson suggests that general education programs for employees showed that management viewed workers

as people rather than only part of the production process. After 1970, education in the workplace gained further legitimacy and was seen as human resource development (Anderson, 1980).

Vision of the Future

Anderson (1980) urges an emphasis on worker empowerment, to give workers additional power of social control. However, Anderson laments that this is unlikely to happen in the current technological and capital environment in the United States, and instead sees a more successful solution in removing the division between education and work. In Anderson's vision, workers would be paid to engage in education between periods of employment, to meet both the individual need of the worker and the needs of society for a workforce that meets changing skill requirements. Workers would also receive social and organizational support to participate in education.

Anderson (1980) sees adult education as being an economic necessity, because a workforce that is not trained to meet the changing skill demands of the workplace is a drag on the national economy. Looking to the future, Anderson sees the business community as maintaining control through its educational activities, both at the organizational and societal levels, and that efforts to enhance adult education for the workforce will be dictated by corporate desires. However, for Anderson, adult education needs to go beyond helping people adapt to change, to helping bring about positive social change. Anderson's positive vision that adult education can bring about involves empowerment of individuals to take control from capitalist elites, promote beneficial public policies, and work together for the common good.

Anderson (1980) also takes a constructivist turn. Anderson argues that adult educators must attend to "reality as it is perceived by [the workers]" (p. 74). The implications of the constructivist position will be examined more fully in the final section of this paper.

Howard Harris's *Defining the Future or Reliving the Past? Unions, Employers, and the Challenge of Workplace Learning*, Information Series no. 380

Harris (2000) examines workplace learning, who is in control of that learning, and the role of the worker in particular. Harris traces the history of what he refers to as "employer-dominated education and training" (p. 4). Corporate schools arose in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Corporations were becoming involved with Taylor's scientific management approach (Harris, 2000). According to Harris, under this approach, also known as Taylorism, managers and engineers would precisely specify the way work tasks should be accomplished. Workers' input was not important and workers needed only be trained in these specific tasks. Workplace education favored supervisors and managers, as they were the ones who needed to manage and control the way that work was done (Harris, 2000).

By the late 1970s and 1980s, Taylorism began to lose favor as organizations struggled with the challenges of increased global competition and technological change (Harris, 2000). Profits and productivity were declining. Organizations began to look overseas for other management models and incorporated flatter organizations and greater empowerment of workers (Harris, 2000). This had a significant impact on workplace learning; as workers needed to become more empowered, these additional duties required additional training in the kinds of skills that were not needed under Taylorism (Harris, 2000). Now workers need problem solving and interpersonal skills (Office of the American Workplace of the U.S. Department of Labor, as cited in Harris, 2000) and "analytical, quantitative, and verbal skills" (Lynch, as cited in Harris, 2000, p. 9).

According to Harris (2000), it was in this period also that the field of HRD emerged to take a role in addressing the needs of employers in training their workers. Harris describes the interest in the learning organization, spurred by Peter Senge's book *The Fifth Discipline*, published in 1990. Out of the learning organization idea, Harris describes the emphasis on self-directed learning in the workplace.

However, Harris (2000) notes that for many organizations, worker empowerment has changed "the nature of work" (p. 19) and may allow workers more input, but it has not given them additional power to make decisions. Decisions are still made by management. Furthermore, his review of the literature suggests that training for employees is far more limited than would be suggested by the philosophical shift away from Taylorism. The challenge that Harris raises is that organizations may state the need for training in the post-Taylorism approach, but not actually devote the resources for the training.

Harris (2000) argues that organizational learning has run up against a financial barrier; organizations want trained employees but do not want to bear the cost for that training. For Harris, one possible solution worth exploring is worker-centered learning. Worker-centered learning occurs when workers themselves have a say in what they will learn in the workplace (Harris, 2000). Along the same lines as Anderson (1980), Harris suggests that unions are important in allowing for workers to have this power. In tracing the history of union-led training, Harris concludes that prior to the 1970s, unions were generally not as concerned with training for their rank-and-file

workers, viewing that as management's responsibility. Rather the unions were interested in training union leadership. However, as the sweeping changes in the 1970s of global competition and technological innovation occurred, unions began to attend more to workers' training needs (Harris, 2000).

Harris (2000) describes programs in the automotive, glass, telecommunications, and healthcare industries in which unions and management worked together to create training programs with more worker input. In each program, Harris concludes, there is "a focus on the long-term vocational interests of individual workers" (p. 44) and the individual employee determines his or her participation. Harris writes that worker-centered learning has twin goals:

It prepares individual workers to function in a complex economic environment through the attainment of varied technical and personal skills. At the same time, it should move them toward an active role in rebuilding and strengthening the movement that helped to create opportunities for learning that meets their specific needs. (p. 35)

Harris suggests that although it is rare, successful worker-centered learning can lead to the elusive worker empowerment. This parallels Anderson's (1980) emphasis on social change.

Ultimately, for Harris (2000), the success of worker-centered training depends on management giving up some power, though he sees management as being reluctant to do so. He suggests that more rigorous research is needed to study worker-centered learning, so that it can be evaluated more carefully.

Comparison and Discussion

Both Anderson (1980) and Harris (2000) would like to see greater worker empowerment, although they come at it from different vantage points. For Anderson, worker empowerment is part of an improved society that adult education should work to bring about. Harris sees employers having engaged in efforts to empower their workers, but that in many cases this has not resulted in workers having greater decision making power. For Harris, empowerment will be realized through worker-centered learning.

Anderson (1980) sees adult education for the workforce as dictated by corporate desires, and that worker empowerment will lead to them gaining control from corporate interests. Harris (2000) is in agreement in arguing that management will need to give up some power to workers in worker-centered learning. Both look to unions as a way for workers to have greater control over their workplace education.

Anderson (1980) takes a constructivist position, arguing that adult educators have to attend to the workers' perceptions of reality. Anderson also sees a solution in removing the division between education and work, which will meet the needs of the individual as well as society.

In examining the analyses and conclusions of Anderson (1980) and Harris (2000), this author is reminded of Fenwick's (2005) warning to avoid "slipping into naturalized illusions of unitary worker/manager interests" (p. 236). In suggesting the empowerment of workers to gain power from capitalist elites (Anderson, 1980) or that management will need to cede power to workers (Harris, 2000), it appears that Anderson and Harris are implying the kind of unitary worker and manager interests that Fenwick describes. Following Fenwick, a solution to the issue of power and control in workplace training has to allow for a variety of views for both management and workers.

Furthermore, Anderson (1980) and Harris's (2000) arguments about power shifting from management to workers appear to be based on an assumption of a limited pool of power, a zero sum game. For workers to have more power, management must give it up. An alternative conceptualization is possible. Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins (2005) offer a compelling view that leadership is not a matter of a zero sum game of agency between leaders and followers, but rather a dynamic of co-constructed social identity and social reality. For Reicher et al. leaders and followers are engaged in an interdependent partnership. Leaders and followers both need the other. For example, in order for a leader's view to prevail, it must be accepted by followers.

Finally, with a rate of union membership of only 12% in the United States in 2006 (United States Department of Labor, 2007), a solution involving unions will not fit the needs of most Americans. A solution to the dilemma of power and control in determining training in the American workplace would ideally be able to serve the majority of employees who are not affiliated with a union.

Implications of a Constructivist Paradigm

Drawing on the constructivist theoretical framework suggests implications for the determination of training in the workplace. In particular, following the constructivist turn that Anderson (1980) advocates for adult educators would provide alternative ways of conceptualizing the problematic aspects of power and control raised by Anderson and Harris (2000). As noted above, Anderson writes that adult educators must attend to "reality as it is perceived by [the

workers]” (p. 74). In this constructivist stance and the call for empowerment, Anderson’s view is very much in line with Novak’s (1998) theory of education, “meaningful learning underlies the constructive integration of thinking, feeling, and acting leading to empowerment for commitment and responsibility” (p. 15). As this section will indicate, utilizing a constructivist theoretical framework can address the three aforementioned issues regarding “naturalized illusions of unitary worker/manager interests” (Fenwick, 2005, p. 236), a zero sum game view of workplace power, and the limited reach of union centered solutions.

From the constructivist vantage point, it is acknowledged that both workers and management have different constructions of reality, and that these differ among individual workers and managers as well. In other words, individual members of the organization make different meaning from their personal experiences in the world. Thus, the constructivist framework, almost by definition, eliminates the notion that all workers and all managers have the same interests.

Following this line of thought and given that workers and managers have different constructions of reality, it can then be further acknowledged that workers and managers collectively and individually would differ in their views about what workers need to learn. Workers would likely have different ideas for what they need to learn in comparison to what managers feel is needed. And workers and managers’ opinions will differ amongst each other regarding what workers need to learn.

It is worth considering the implications that would arise if workers and managers were to take the constructivist view that Anderson (1980) advocates for adult educators. The central theme in this view is an understanding that people differ in their constructions of reality, how they see the world. From this premise, four implications can be seen.

First, under the constructivist viewpoint, workers and managers would consider that they construct reality differently from each other. This is a core tenet of constructivism. Constructivism differs from positivism in that while positivism suggests that there is “one verifiable truth,” constructivism suggests that each of us constructs knowledge differently (Novak, 1998, p. 83). This is a difficult idea to accept, given the influence of positivism (Novak, 1998). However, if operationalized in a workplace, constructivism would mean that managers and workers would not believe that the way they understand their organization is the only way to understand it. They would believe that others in the organization have different views not because they are wrong, but because they have constructed reality differently based on different individual experiences inside and outside of the organization.

Second, this constructivist view would be extended to the issue of training for workers. Workers and managers would consider that these different constructions of reality include beliefs about what training is needed for workers. This is particularly sensible given that workers have individualized experiences in their jobs, and hence different ideas about what training would be helpful. Managers have different concepts of what the organization, department, and individual employee would need in terms of training as well.

Third, managers and employees would consider that one cannot know others’ constructions of reality about the need for training without their input and dialogue. It is unrealistic for one person to expect to be able to guess how another person has constructed knowledge about what training workers need. Discussion is necessary.

Fourth and crucially, both managers and workers must entertain the possibility that their individual needs (for performance, profits, learning) are more likely to be met through a training program that involves an understanding of the other’s constructions of reality, instead of attempting to impose one’s point of view on the other. This would be the kind of meaningful learning described in Novak’s (1998) theory of education cited above, and it would be so for all involved. Based on Reicher et al.’s (2005) understanding of leaders and followers, managers and workers would co-construct a new social reality, one which incorporates constructivist understanding and practices.

In this constructivist practice, managers would then ask workers what they need in workplace training because managers cannot know otherwise how the workers view the world. Workers would have a say in their own workplace education, which is Harris’s (2000) worker-centered learning. As Dirx (2005) advocated, with a constructivist approach to workplace learning, workers should have greater involvement in the process of determining their training needs. This practice aligns with Noe’s (2008) recommendation that employees be involved in training needs assessment and Hatcher’s (2006) desire for a more democratic workplace in which employees have a greater voice in decision making.

With this constructivist perspective, training should then be designed to be congruent with both the workers’ and management’s realities. This strategy would serve the resource and cost concerns of managers, because to create training that does not incorporate the workers’ constructions of reality would, from a constructivist education point of view (see Novak, 1998), be suboptimal at best and a waste of resources at worst.

Under this constructivist paradigm, all individuals have the power to construct meaning. Both workers and managers are empowered in this way. Therefore, the notion of power being shifted from one group to the other loses its value. The zero sum game view of workplace power in determining what training is provided to workers is

replaced by the new constructivist practice. Furthermore, both unionized and non-unionized workers could gain a say in their workplace training, as this view need not be limited only to unionized workers.

Managers and workers could have a training regime in which all involved are motivated by their own interests to create training that meets the needs of all. Managers would have the benefit of more effective and targeted use of training dollars. Workers would have input into their own workplace training. And HRD professionals charged with planning, implementing, and evaluating the training could benefit from a transcendence of the zero sum game view of workplace power.

Following the suggestions of Kuchinke and Han (2005) and Callahan (2007) noted earlier, further research could be done to investigate the existence of constructivist approaches to the determination of workplace learning programs. A place to start might be to ask questions of executives, managers, and workers to assess their reactions to planning training from a constructivist vantage point, and whether they see it meeting their individual and collective needs. Perhaps the implications of a constructivist view of the determination of training programs could influence the next chapter in the history of training in the United States.

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