

Adult Literacy: Issues and Directions Impacting HRD

*Don F. Seaman
Susan A. Lynham
Texas A&M University*

*Wendy E. A. Ruona
University of Georgia*

*Thomas J. Chermack
University of Minnesota*

It is no longer realistic or viable for HRD to be isolated from the broader context of workforce development. Organizations, where HRD has been traditionally situated, have begun to realize the ominous workforce challenge that lies ahead—especially related to ensuring literate and skilled adults in the future. It is very important for HRD professionals to “tune into” these emerging trends because they will affect our roles and responsibilities.

Keywords: Literacy, HRD, Survey

HRD has been defined as “a process of developing and/or unleashing human expertise through organizational development and personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance” (Swanson, 1995, p. 207). While this may characterize our past, it does not necessarily characterize our future. There are developments afoot in the United States that are beginning to demand a more integrated, coherent system of workforce development. It is no longer realistic or viable for HRD to be so isolated from the larger context of workforce development of which it is an integral part.

Organizations, where HRD has been traditionally situated, have begun to realize the ominous workforce challenge that lies ahead. Despite the recession that dominates our economy currently, the Office for Technical and Adult Education predicts that

a net total of 23 million new jobs will be created in the next 10 years if the trends of the last decade continue. New job growth and retiree replacement together will produce a need for 18 million new baccalaureate degree holders by 2012. At current college and university graduation rates, the available new college degree holders will fall 33% short of demand. (D’Amico, 2002, pg. 2)

If these predictions are realized, it is nearly a guarantee that organizations will have to adopt a more proactive and involved role in ensuring an educated workforce. Like a domino chain, this will also likely affect the roles and responsibilities of HRD professionals as we are asked to respond to the need for qualified workers in areas of high demand.

Furthermore, adult literacy continues to emerge as a major challenge for organizations.

Adult literacy is defined in the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 as “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute, and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family...and in society” (Meeder, 2002). The findings of the most recent national survey of adult literacy were published in the early 1990s. That survey found:

40 million American adults (ages 16 and older) functioning at the lowest level of literacy, and 90 million functioning at the two lowest levels. These individuals are not equipped with the skills they need to work effectively in the high-skill jobs that increasingly characterize our economy. (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, pg. 3)

Recent studies have shown that low literacy skills cost business and taxpayers \$20 billion in lost wages, profits and productivity annually (Meeder, 2002). Furthermore, companies surveyed in the AMA’s “Corporate Concerns” study ranked developing and improving workforce skills as the 8th most important corporate concern out of a possible 25 issues in 2001 (American Management Association, p.1). Also, 65% of the small business owners surveyed in the “Voices from Main Street: Assessing the State of Small Business Workforce Skills” study said that improving the quality of workforce skills and education was very important (American Express, Small Business Services, p.2).

Thirty eight percent of these small businesses reported that they already participated in local workforce skills improvement programs.

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It is very important for HRD professionals to “tune into” these trends that are emerging and that will undoubtedly affect organizations in the coming decade(s). One important part of this effort will be to better understand the issues and challenges facing adult literacy professionals since adults are the primary focus of HRD’s work.

Purpose

The purpose of this manuscript is twofold: 1) it presents a review of the relevant literature regarding the issues and future trends prevalent in the field of Adult Literacy and 2) it presents the results of a survey conducted during Summer, 2001 which sought to elicit what 14 experts in the field of Adult Literacy thought would and will be the most significant challenges as the field moves forward in the 21st century.

Research Question

Thus, the research problem can be summarized in the following research question: what do experts in the field of Adult Literacy presume will be the most significant challenges as the field moves forward?

This paper begins with a literature review of relevant sources concerning general trends in Adult Literacy. This literature review is intended to provide a backdrop given that many HRD professionals may be unfamiliar with the current ideas and debates in the diverse field of Adult Literacy. It is from this backdrop that we, the researchers began to inquire in an exploratory nature what several Literacy experts may suggest are the core challenges on the horizon for the field and its professionals.

Part One: A Review of the Relevant Literature in Adult Literacy

Recent literature around Adult Literacy has included a focus on “information literacy” (Miller & Slater, 2000). Further, technological innovations have made information access the most fluid it’s ever been, although the expertise for making sense of this information and applying it in a useful way are quite another story. It seems that technology will likely be the most obvious driver for change in the realm of Adult Literacy, and for that matter, education in general. While technology will likely have a profound impact on the administration and evaluation of Adult Literacy, it is not the only factor in considering the future of the field. Other driving forces such as changing demographics, cultural issues, accessibility, and economic conditions will all have a direct impact on the ways in which people become literate.

Defining literacy is another sensitive topic. There appear to be two distinct views with regard to the definition of literacy; those pushing for a specific, crisp definition, and those who prefer the lines to remain a little bit blurry around how far the notion of literacy extends. There is one point on which both sides agree: literacy is big – encompassing a wide and increasing variety of contexts (see Barton, 2001 for a discussion of these definitional views).

Changes Since 1990

In earlier years, adult literacy programs focused upon basic reading, writing, and numeric skills, including English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) and preparing for the General Educational Development (GED) test. The decade of the 1990’s began the report from Secretary’s Commission for Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1991) that stimulated concern about skills that adult literacy programs needed to develop in their students. The report argued that several new basic competencies needed to be included in adult literacy programs, including the ability to process information, understand basic systems found in everyday life, and solve simple problems which adult constantly face. This stimulated changes in adult literacy teaching practices (Murname and Levy, 1996). However, we are still trying to determine how adults with limited ability to read and write lead their lives in this print-based society, especially when many are not enrolled in literacy programs (Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, & deMarrais, 1997).

As the 21st century begins, the residents of the U.S. find themselves living and working in a new, more complicated economy - one built on a foundation of information and communications technology. This new economy provides advantages to people who possess both educational credentials and strong basic skills, where a high school diploma, without further education, no longer leads to a career with a good future (Kasworm, 1990; Sum, Fogg, & Mangum, 2001). The influence of technology cannot be overstated, especially in the adult learning classroom where computer-assisted instruction is believed by some educators to surpass all other forms of instructional methodology (Fletcher-Flinn & Gravatt, 1995).

Everyday living is becoming more complicated. Changes require adults to use their literary and math skills to acquire information for decisions about health care, finances and retirement, to name a few. For example, a recent review of the research literature suggests that a positive correlation exists between literacy skills and good health (Rudd, 1999). More than ever, citizens need strong skills to understand school issues, laws and codes, zoning

regulations, proposed legislation, and the platforms and qualifications of political candidates. They need to know how to gain access to administrators, policy makers and police, to unite and advocate for change, to inform one another, to negotiate among themselves and with those in power, to use their power of votes, and to seek and hold positions of power themselves (Kaplan & Venezky, 1994)

Contemporary Issues

Literature around Adult Literacy suggests five contemporary issues of specific importance, namely, 1) immigration, 2) corrections, 3) special learning needs, 4) volunteers, and 5) learning across cultures. This section examines each of these issues in brief and explores implications for Adult Literacy as a field.

Immigration. Immigrants represent 45 percent of the estimated net increase in the nation's population in the last decade and immigration has become a determinate factor in population growth (Camorata, 2001). In fact, the U.S. may now be dependant on these immigrants for future increases in the size of its workforce. The rise in the numbers of adults seeking English skills who have enrolled in literacy classes in some states has almost overwhelmed the system and those enrollees dominate program enrollments as well as the lists of those waiting to enroll (Revuelto, 1999). These adults face the task of learning English, while acquiring both educational credentials and high levels of skills to reach income levels adequate for viable family support (Loollock, 2001). There is no reason to believe this trend will decrease anytime in the near future.

Corrections. The need for adult literacy education in the correctional setting has also increased in recent years as the numbers of state prison and county jail populations continue to grow. "It is the problem that most educators do not know about, most politicians do not acknowledge, most corrections officials are unprepared to deal with, and most tax-payers resent having to pay for" (Newman, Lewis, & Beverstock, 1993 [need page number here]). There are efforts to determine what kinds of learning experiences will enable inmates to achieve the learning necessary to be successful outside the incarcerated setting (Batchelder & Rachel, 2000), but data to document achievements are lacking. However, for future planning purposes, one of the greatest issues is the inability of correctional facilities to accurately report the on the number of inmates participating in adult literacy and their progress, especially county jails (Sherman and O'Leary, 1994).

Adults with special learning needs. "The Americans with Disabilities ACT" (ADA) mandates that educational institutions provide academic accommodations, including appropriate educational programs, to persons with disabilities. Although the numbers of adults with special learning needs has begun to increase in recent years, there is some speculation they have always been there, but adequate screening instruments have been sadly lacking (Polson & White, 2000). Some efforts have been made to correct this situation, but more are needed in the future (Mellard, 1998; NIFL, 1998). How to meet the needs of this population should be an important future concern for adult literacy educators.

Volunteers. With tighter budgets and a large population to serve, there has been an increasing emphasis for adult educators to use more volunteers. Even in the 1980's, volunteers were used extensively in adult literacy programs, especially in school-based and community-based programs (Wu & Carter, 1986). Many tutoring programs in community-based agencies provide excellent services to adults who want to improve their reading and writing proficiencies. It is clear from the literature and from the large number of literacy programs in this country that experts believe basic reading and writing skills are important for survival and success in today's world. (Ginsburg, 1997). But can volunteers be counted upon to provide the comprehensive services needed in adult literacy education?

Learning across cultures. This concept, the theme of a recent issue of *Adult Learning*, has become a focus for adult educators. Adult educators have fostered learning in various cultures within the U.S. for many years (Mullins, 1999), but there is now an emphasis to extend even more beyond the borders of this country (Bélanger, 1998). This need was reinforced by the Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning that advocated developing alliances among nations to share knowledge and other resources in an international effort to promote adult learning at all levels. However, in the future, how will this be done, and by whom?

The Future: How Will Adult Literacy be Perceived?

Planning for the future is always a formidable task. Through the planning process, educational programs are developed, modified and refined, essentially defining the nature of adult education practice (Mills, Cervero, Langore & Wilson, 1995). However, planning should be based upon the reasonable thinking of leaders who have some history and professional experience in the field, and the breadth of knowledge and skills to develop a logical approach to the probability of events occurring that will further shape adult literacy education. This will be difficult when most of those in need of services are not being reached. Some research shows that at present, the adult education and literacy system is serving less than 20 percent of the potential student population (Comings, Sum &

Uvin, 2001). However, attempts must be made to develop a future scenario to guide those who will be planning and implementing adult literacy education programs.

The United States and its many communities need the help and commitment of all their citizens. A lack of basic skills that narrows the range of an individual's opportunities for social participation and reduces the likelihood of a good income can lead to frustration and anger. People with high level of basic skills are more likely to develop future oriented perspectives that help them invest in constructive activities that can support improvements in the social and political system (Behrman & Stacey, 1997).

Given this brief overview of what is happening in the literature of Adult Literacy, an important additional question involves what is happening in the practice of Adult Literacy. And more specifically, what do some expert practitioners think about the future of Adult Literacy? Considering the amount of uncertainty that has presented itself in the field, a collection of the thoughts and views of prominent Adult Literacy experts presents the opportunity to learn a great deal about the profession and illuminate the areas that are not receiving attention.

Part Two: The Results of a Research Project on the Future of Adult Literacy

The following section of this paper presents the findings from a qualitative research project designed to elicit what 14 experts in the field of Adult Literacy thought would be the most significant challenges as the field of Adult Literacy moves forward in the 21st century. The theoretical framework, methodology, and findings are presented. Then, the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and some implications for HRD.

Theoretical Framework for this Research

The study was situated in the context of scenario planning. Scenario planning has been defined as “a process of positing several informed, plausible and imagined alternative future environments in which decisions about the future may be played out, for the purpose of changing current thinking, improving decision making, enhancing human and organization learning and improving performance” (Chermack & Lynham, 2002, p. 372).

There are many methods for conducting scenario planning, however, The Centre for Innovative Leadership (1995) identified six steps, which mirror most of the methodologies available publicly today. These are: 1) identification of a strategic organizational agenda, including assumptions and concerns about strategic thinking and vision, 2) challenging of existing assumptions of organizational decision makers by questioning current mental models about the external environment, 3) systematically examining the organizations external environment to improve understanding of the structure of key forces driving change, 4) synthesis of information about possible future events into three or four alternative plots or story lines about possible futures, 5) development of narratives about the story lines to make the stories relevant and compelling to decision makers, and 6) use of stories to help decision makers “re-view” their strategic thinking.

The first step of the scenario planning method is to elicit the strategic insights of leaders in the field. These include tacit and explicit ideas of what is strategically important, what drives (or should drive) the success of the organization, and concerns and anxieties about the future (van der Heijden, 1997). In an effort to surface the strategic agenda, assumptions and vision of those in leadership positions in the field of Adult Literacy, this research elicits the views of people who are actively creating and shaping the profession, thus completing the first step described in the scenario planning process.

Methodology

Fourteen participants were surveyed. These participants were selected purposively as experts in the field of Adult Literacy (Patton, 1990). The participant pool included members of the National Institute for Literacy, the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, the National Center on Adult Literacy, among other important institutions involved in the study and practice of Adult Literacy. This was intended to be a participant pool consisting of people in leadership positions representing the most active groups in Adult Literacy in the United States as measured by prominence in the literature, funding, and program activity.

A verbal agreement and verification of participant e-mail addresses was completed during face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, or written correspondence prior to the administration of the surveys. Each participant was sent the same survey electronically as an e-mail attachment, and asked to respond within an eight week time period. Participants were asked to answer 10 open-ended questions regarding the nature of the field, factors that may be influencing the field, and their opinions on the potential issues affecting the future directions of the field.

The initial response rate included seven participants out of fourteen. Follow up was conducted with the non-respondents by a reminder e-mail message. The final response rate included all targeted participants. This study reports themes that emerged from the participant responses.

Data Analysis

Data from the surveys was combined and the authors of this chapter inductively analyzed the data to identify emerging themes using a constant-comparative method of data analysis (Guba, 1978). This method included (a) coding the data to identify the large array of potentially important concepts and ideas and then (b) comparing each piece of data with others to generate meaningful themes supported by the data. We enacted Guba's (1978) method via a rigorous method for analyzing data in Microsoft Word developed by Ruona (in-review).

Guba (1978) suggested noting recurring regularities in the data and sorting them into categories. "Categories should then be judged by two criteria: internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity" (1978, p. 53). Internal homogeneity refers to the extent to which the data that belongs in a certain category hold together, while external homogeneity concerns the extent to which differences among categories are clear (Patton, 1990). The researcher then works back and forth between the data and the categories, verifying the meaningfulness and differentiation of the categories (Guba, 1978).

From this first stage of analysis, common themes began to emerge in participant responses. The themes were captured on 3x5 cards. The project team established internal and external homogeneity (Guba, 1978; Patton, 1990) through an iterative process encompassing data analysis, category creation and lively debate. Originally, an unmanageable number of themes emerged with some themes appearing in more than one category to reflect different perspectives on the same idea. Through an iterative process of cycling between the data and the categories, the researchers refined the meaningfulness of the themes that emerged and made adjustments (collapsed or expanded categories) as was directed by the data (Guba, 1978).

Emerging Themes

Several overarching themes appeared through the data analysis that led to the formulation of four major categories. The four categories included: 1) funding, 2) technology, 3) access and 4) fragmentation of the field. Each of these themes will be summarized and supported by comments taken directly from the survey responses, as it was the overall aim of this study to give voice to what several Adult Literacy experts think and feel about the future of the field. It would not be feasible to provide *all* participant responses related to these four themes. Therefore, the intent of this portion of the paper is to provide some illustrative examples of expert opinions that constitute the themes that have emerged in this study.

Funding. Funding was perhaps the most prominent issue revealed in the survey responses and this should not come as any surprise. The issue of funding was closely tied with the first question on the survey. We asked experts what things they would want to know about Adult Literacy over the next 10-15 years.

- 1) *"Is there policy backed up by legislation and funding that supports the lifelong learning approach for adults in this country similar to some European countries who pay for adult to go to training, higher ed with a sabbatical to do it?"*
- 2) *"Level of support – not only financial but that, too – for adult literacy from national and state leaders as well as general public and traditional levels of education (i.e., K-12 and higher education)."*
- 3) Several respondents also discussed an overall lack of government funding. In response to the second question on the survey -- what things may lead to the collapse of Adult Literacy as a field of practice, some experts responded:
- 4) *"Lack of adequate funding to provide high quality instruction to adults who, in many cases, have failed in the K-12 system to gain adequate basic skills or who had adequate skills on graduation from high school but have been left behind due to changes in work and community environments"*
- 5) *"Too many states fail to provide adequate support to their literacy programs while expecting every higher levels of accomplishment. We then collect performance data that is unsupportable and distribute it as if it was valid and reliable to policy leaders. This is a "house of cards" that is in imminent danger of collapse."*

Funding is not decreasing in its importance to the field of Adult Literacy. With ever-increasing budget cuts in nearly all forms of educational systems, it appears as though Adult Educators of all sorts are not likely to find their funding shortages solved anytime soon. What is clear is that Adult educators are finding more and more ways to stretch their current funding (Ginsburg, 1997), although the time frame through which they will be able to sustain such careful considerations of expenses is unclear.

Technology. Technology is re-shaping lives in innumerable ways. Adult Literacy is no exception. While funding shortages provide ever-increasing challenges to the field, technology may be one approach to lessening the burden. We asked experts what things would help the field of Adult Literacy grow and thrive over the next 10-15 years. Some responses included:

- 1) *"Wonderful facilities, accessible to those learners who want to be there in a variety of ways: traditional classrooms, technology, TV, palm pilot, etc."*

- 2) *“We will have built service delivery systems in which all components essential to student and program success are present and well supported by federal, state and local funding sources.”*
- 3) *“Sites that are open year round – basically 24/7”*
- 4) *“Learning centers in every community.”*

Technology may very well be one major contributor in the event that Adult Literacy thrives over the next several years. By providing the ability to reach more of those in need of Adult Literacy services than ever before, technology allows an increasingly inexpensive outlet and tool for Adult Literacy experts.

Access. Access was frequently mentioned as a core concern about Adult Literacy in participant responses. Particularly relevant to low-income segments of the population, and sections of the United States, access is broadened really only by technology. Therefore, many experts have considered universal access the high standard and goal for the field of Adult Literacy.

- 1) *“Have we succeeded in providing every interested and motivated under-educated and limited English proficient adult with a successful educational experience that equips them for the next round of challenges in their lives – and thereby greatly reduced the number of eligible adults who are not benefiting from our services?”*
- 2) *“I think it would be an acceptable option to other equivalent forms of education and integrated into the established system of secondary and postsecondary education. It would also be integrated into workplace education. Therefore, individuals would be able to access literacy skills education in the workplace, community, postsecondary institutions and secondary institutions without feeling stigmatized for being a low-literate learner.”*

While technology may aid in providing more access than ever before, it will not solve the access issue in its entirety. Further means for providing access in low-income, or remote locations must be developed and examined.

Fragmentation of the field. Several experts expressed concern about the make-up of the field of Adult Literacy itself. Some urged for some form of professional certification, and others discussed merging with workforce education efforts. The point expressed may also relate to varying ways of defining Adult Literacy. With such a large and inclusive customer base, not only is it difficult to define Adult Literacy, but ambiguity can be confirmed among its practitioners (Barton, 2001). Comments related to the fragmentation of the field seem to indicate a general concern that a lack of cohesiveness and a joint sense of purpose could contribute to increasing difficulties in the pursuit of a fully literate society:

- 1) *“It is difficult to determine an advantage and a competitive position for a field that tries to be all things to all people (for example: religious ed, military ed, adult basic ed, ESL, and workforce training).”*
- 2) *“Adult literacy instructors have to understand and be able to apply adult education theory to practice with specific adult populations and from different cultural perspectives.”*
- 3) *“I don’t like to think of them as “competitors” since the ultimate goal of providing education is the same, but in a sense the other facets of the education system – especially k-12, which sometimes seems threatened by the adult literacy system’s existence. (If all kids got what they needed in school, our system would not be needed, or so the argument goes...)”*
- 4) *“There is a great danger that other education and training systems will develop their own literacy-like systems to meet their particular needs. In fact this is already happening. Perhaps it is the right way to go. If so, the only competency that will distinguish literacy is a specially trained workforce – which it does not really have now. That is, literacy will consist of a body of expertise and a cadre of people produced by colleges and other training centers and applicable to various needs, rather than a distinct service system.”*

The reality seems to be that Adult Literacy has a very diverse customer base that changes according to the context in which it is operating. Additionally, the field is inextricably intertwined with other forms of education systems, that at different times, perform some of the same work. Workforce training and education, k-12 education, and adult education in general are all other fields that share some of the same goals as Adult Literacy.

Discussion

This study has attempted to provide some expert views on the future of Adult Literacy. In hopes of prompting further debate and dialogue about the field, these expert views have been presented in the form of four general themes concerning the future of Adult Literacy, namely, 1) funding, 2) technology, 3) access, and 4) fragmentation of the field. These issues are clearly motivated and influenced by social, technological, economical, environmental, and political forces that are far beyond the control of any organization.

Survey participant results suggest five contemporary issues of specific importance, namely, 1) immigration, 2) corrections, 3) special learning needs, 4) volunteers, and 5) learning across cultures. While the expert opinions do

not mirror the prominent issues in the literature, considerable overlap is evident. For example, increased immigration into the United States is clearly affecting technology and access situations. Further, funding affects learning for special needs populations and also those with cultural and linguistic barriers.

While there can be no clear single direction for the future of Adult Literacy, this study has hopefully brought some prevalent issues from the minds of several Adult Literacy experts. A clear, single direction for the future of Adult Literacy is perhaps not a desirable outcome even if it were possible. What is possible is that the field of Adult Literacy and its practitioners and scholars will learn much about themselves through thoughtful reflection and dialogue about the future.

Implications for HRD

Clearly the issue of adult literacy is an issue of concern for and challenge to any profession focused on developing human skills and knowledge for the purpose of improving learning and performance, a focus that most definitely includes the HRD profession. In the age in which we live, where access to knowledge and skills are fundamental to social, community, and workplace performance, HRD has no choice but to integrate the issue of adult literacy into its frame of practice and inquiry. Adult literacy may in the past have been labelled as a societal issue beyond the realm of most organizations and therefore that of HRD. Today, however, there is just too much evidence, as suggested in this paper, to support that the issue of adult literacy is an issue of workforce and workplace development.

Horwitz (1999), in an article on the emergence of strategic training and development, highlights the significance of the “transfer of learning, new knowledge and the notion of intellectual capital...” (p. 180) as critical to the competitive success of organizations in the emerging age of a global economy. He further points out, and also highlighted in this paper, that labor markets are becoming increasingly open with the ability to transport skills across country borders, placing even higher demands on competency requirements of the new labor force. Whether a developed or underdeveloped nation, a prerequisite for the development of human capital, and the leveraging of that capital for competitive and societal success, must be a growing level of adult literacy. With the fast pace of change in job knowledge and skill requirements on the rise, the emergence of previously unimagined industries and their demands for completely new labor competencies, the increasing transportability of labor skills across national and international boundaries, the ability of adult workers to re-skill and multi-skill quickly and effectively has become a critical workforce requirement to organizations seeking to remain competitive in a global economy. This increasing gap between demand and supply for skilled and competent workers is clearly being impacted by increasing levels of adult illiteracy and is indeed demanding a more integrated, coherent system of workforce development.

HRD can no longer ignore the challenge of adult literacy to organizations. Nor can it ignore its role in being more proactive in the development of and contribution to the ‘supply’ of an educated workforce to the broader workforce system. Indeed, HRD can expect to be increasingly challenged to extend its theory, research and practice to the address of adult literacy, of adult education and development, in both specific and broader workforce contexts. To do so, though, HRD will need to expand its roles and responsibilities beyond that of the single organization or network of organizations.

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