EXPLORING THE LINKS BETWEEN ADULT EDUCATION AND HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT: LEARNING, RISK-TAKING, AND DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE

Thomas G. Reio, Jr.
Associate Professor
Leadership, Foundations, and Human Resource Education
University of Louisville

Abstract

Learning is indeed an integral component of adapting successfully to an ever-changing world, one full of intriguing possibilities and insidious barriers. Democratic societies establish educative systems where learning and development is promoted to advance a citizenry of skillful problem solvers, knowledgeable decision makers, incisive risk takers, and proactive participants in the democratic process. Learning and its unequivocal support are thus vital for an evolving democratic society where its citizens are mindful of and committed to the social good. The fields of adult education (AE) and human resource development (HRD) play particularly significant roles in providing quality learning and development opportunities for adults, yet both are underrated in terms of their contributions to society as a whole. In this paper, I explore AE and HRD as closely related, but underestimated parts of a greater educative system. Both fields' perceived marginal role as educative system participants may be a function of unnecessarily fractious debates among scholars and practitioners in their respective fields. Unfortunately, differences and not similarities are promoted too often at the expense of useful cooperation and one unified voice.

"...if life is learning; learning is life..."

Edward Lindeman (1926, p. 55)

A number of recent scholars have explored the relationship between adult education (AE) and human resource development (HRD), with most agreeing that there were more similarities than differences between the two fields (e.g., Hatcher & Bowles, 2006; Yang, 2004). Similarities include being multidisciplinary and applied, sharing similar theoretical and philosophical foundations, believing that learning is a vital component of almost everything we do, and desiring to provide quality adult learning experiences. Differences include the purpose and focus of learning and emphasis on individual or organizational outcomes and on individual development or organizational development. While there is evidence that the two fields are collaborating more closely to address economic initiatives designed to improve workforce productivity and "learning for work" (Jacobs, 2006, p. 23), little mutual interest seems to exist in facilitating social justice and active participation in democratic processes (Asen, 2004; Bierema, 2000). As an alternative to further detailing the differences between the fields, which, if continued, may lessen the credibility of both as voices representing adult learning needs to the

lay public and policy makers (Ellinger, 2006), like Johansen and McLean (2006), I concentrate on the similarities.

In this paper learning and risk-taking are employed to explore the commonalities between the fields and their links to democratic discourse. Risk-taking within the context of learning is defined as a way of framing the world, where it is "imaginative, inventive, uncertain, and goes beyond the ordinary and predictable in ways that can titillate, excite, and very often frighten.... oriented toward some uncertain and wished-for future" (Lightfoot, 1997, p. 1). Much of the literature perceives risk-taking in a more negative light (e.g., Zuckerman, 1994) because of its link to potential peril and danger (Weller, Levin, Shiv, & Bechara, 2007). Nevertheless, following previous research that suggests that taking risks is a vital part of learning (e.g., Asen, 2004; Biesta, 2007; Dewey, 1916; Reio & Lasky, 2007; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003), this paper focuses instead on its possible positive influences on learning and development in individual, organizational, and societal contexts.

Similarities between AE and HRD

Adults engage in learning wherever they work, play, recreate, and live. The field of AE has emerged to meet adults' diverse learning needs throughout the world (Knowles, 1990; Yang, 2004). Much of AE in western cultures is concerned with how adults learn and develop throughout the lifespan, within the context of a strong democratic tradition and social justice (Yang, 2004). However, AE's social emphasis has waned in recent years (Hill, 2006), as international and national policies and programs are increasingly aligned with learning for work initiatives (Jacobs, 2006). To address this alignment, the field of HRD has emerged over the past 30 years to meet organizational needs for skilled workforces through training, career, and organizational development activities and programs (McLagan, 1989). Like AE, HRD focuses on promoting learning, but learning that is related to attaining organizational and not necessarily individual performance goals. Lee (2007) argues, however, that HRD should be viewed holistically because it plays out on both a global and local scale, as traditionally does AE. Thus, mounting evidence suggests that both AE and HRD are becoming increasingly interrelated fields, not less so.

Multidisciplinary and Applied

Both fields are clearly multidisciplinary and applied, drawing from multiple disciplines to guide research and practice (Ellinger, 2006; Hatcher & Bowles, 2006; Jacobs, 2006; Smith, 2006; Yang, 2004). Swanson (2001) hypothesizes that psychology, economics, and systems theory are the three foundational disciplines in the field of HRD, although it is not clear how systems theory is a separate discipline. Chalofsky (2007) argues that HRD draws upon as many as eight disciplines: sociology, anthropology, psychology, management, education, economics, physical sciences, and philosophy. I would add a ninth, political science, because little of what we do can be separated from the political context within an organization and also society. Willis (1996) and Yang (2004) further propose that adult education is another discipline that HRD draws upon for guiding its research and practice. Clearly, the indication is strong that both fields are multidisciplinary, applied, and closely linked because both build upon many of the same disciplines (Yang, 2004) and use many of the same conceptualizations, but to varying degrees.

Similar Philosophical Roots

AE and HRD also share similar philosophical foundations (Johansen & McLean, 2006; Yang, 2004). Yang proposes that AE and HRD are founded upon six philosophical foundations: liberalism, progressivism, humanism, radicalism, behaviorism, and human capitalism. Five of the six originate from educational perspectives (Zinn, 1991), with only human capitalism being the exception. All six are reflected in each field, but to differing extents. Yang suggests humanism and radicalism tend to prevail in AE, while behaviorism and human capitalism are more strongly linked to HRD. Both fields seem to embrace liberalism and progressivism equally, although it is not clear how and why. Yang does stress, however, that in AE the purpose of learning is developing human potential, whereas the purpose of learning in HRD is geared toward performing occupational roles and tasks. Yang also notes both an individual and social focus of learning, with humanism, liberalism, and behaviorism more focused on individual learning, and radicalism and human capitalism more attuned to the social implications of learning. Human capitalism emphasizes learning as a means to improving individual and organizational performance and outcomes, whereas radicalism emphasizes learning as a means of challenging the status quo, where for example, in capitalist societies the few are privileged at the expense of the many.

The Philosophical Foundations of Risk-Taking, AE, and HRD

Although it might be argued that each aforementioned philosophy embraces certain degrees of risk-taking as a necessary means to optimizing learning and development, scholars have done little to explore this interesting notion. From the progressivism tradition, however, where observation and experience are valued as an important means to learning and participating appropriately in democratic discourse, Dewey (1916) proposed a relation between thinking and risk:

> Since [sic] the situation in which thinking occurs is a doubtful one, thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating. . . . It is seeking, a quest, for something not at hand . . . . It also follows that all thinking involves a *risk* [emphasis added]. Certainty cannot be guaranteed in advance. (p. 148)

Thus, Dewey theorizes that thinking and learning are linked through taking risks. In the process of thinking or reflecting about a problem and subsequently solving it, there can be considerable uncertainty, and this uncertainty engenders taking risks to solve the problem. The individual risks seeking new information, exploring new strategies, and investigating heretofore untested hypotheses for the sake of reaching a conclusion. By taking risks to examine and solve a problem in a novel way, learning ensues. As an alternative to being satisfied with what we already know, we strive to know more about what we do not know, and, according to Dewey, this is the only way we can come to know or learn. It is remarkable that scholars have neglected to further explore this notion. The exception is the neo-behaviorist theorist Daniel E. Berlyne (1960) who proposed that thinking is an exploratory behavior, the result of having one's curiosity aroused in the face of uncertain, doubtful, complex, or discrepant information.

Radicalism, by its nature, at least implicitly embraces risk-taking as a way to challenge the conventional wisdom of social, economic, political, and educational systems that perpetuate

social inequity and irresponsible social behavior. These systems converge in all aspects of life — from the home to the workplace to the community — to debatably constrain the social good (Hatcher & Bowles, 2006; Milner, 2007) and quell democratic discourse (Reich, 2007; Siegel, Weinstein, & Halperin, 2004). Radicalism and critical theory play a significant role in leading change efforts in both AE and HRD, although it is far more prevalent in the field of AE (Bierema, 2000). Radical theorists to date have made little inroads into business and industry and thus the field of HRD, yet there is evidence that its influence is increasing in scholarly circles (Hatcher & Bowles, 2006).

Learning, Risk-taking, and Democratic Discourse

Being curious and seeking information and acquiring new knowledge and learning is the foundation of human existence (Berlyne, 1978). To be sure, we must learn, develop, and adapt to survive as a species (Piaget, 1952; Weller et al., 2007). Without being proactively curious (i.e., wanting to know more) and seeking information about divergent, ambiguous stimuli associated with rapidly changing environmental contingencies, learning and subsequent adaptation is far less likely (Reio & Lasky, 2007). We must accommodate and encourage risk if we are to explore strategies for solving salient day-to-day problems and thereby learn (Biesta, 2007; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). By taking appropriate risks, we can experiment with new ideas, try new approaches, and create and learn in environments where such behavior is embraced. Indeed, individuals, groups, organizations, cultures, and even societies must be open to taking suitable risks for the sake of thinking and learning, as learning is the key to productive, adaptive behavior (Biesta, 2007; Dewey, 1916), an informed citizenry (Asen, 2004; Lindeman, 1926), and deliberative democracy (Reich, 2007).

Learning is both a process and a product, formal and informal that contributes to optimal human functioning in most if not all human endeavors. Learning is vital to developing job-, family-, and culture-related skills and knowledge and taking risks is an integral part of learning and developing such skills (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). Biesta (2007) notes

> Yet even if one engages in neatly organized forms of learning, there is always a risk. Not only is there a risk that you will not learn things you wanted to learn. There is also the risk that you will learn things you couldn't have imagined you would learn or that you couldn't have imagined that you would have wanted to learn . . . . To engage in learning always entails the risk that learning may have an impact on you, that learning may change you. This means that [learning and therefore] education only occurs when the learner is willing to take a risk. (p. 10)

Further, Wain (2006) suggests that educational culture should embrace risk-taking instead of "perfection" because perfection-oriented learners become afraid to take risks; they fixate on performance rather than mastering goals.

In the workplace, risk-taking creates opportunities for learning and development through engagement in activities ranging from participating in cross-functional workgroups to leading the development of new innovations. In management development activities, for instance, managers are encouraged to take appropriate risks by exploring new skills and procedures and innovatively applying them in their respective work contexts to align with the goals of the organization.

Managerial risk-taking and experimentation might take the form of changing operational practices, altering existing procedures, engaging in democratic decision-making, and developing vendor and community partnerships.

In a family context, parents develop their parenting skills through engaging in risky give-and-take processes such as allowing their children to spend the night at a friend's house or trusting an adolescent with the family car (Lightfoot, 1997). Siblings develop critical negotiating skills when risk asking to borrow a treasured article of clothing from an older sibling or bargaining to trade favors. Further, teenagers risk stepping out of their comfort zone when baby sitting, mowing a lawn for a neighbor, or volunteering to participate in community projects.

Risk is an inherent part of learning culturally-relevant skills as well (Asen, 2004; Denney, 2005; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). In dyadic learning situations teachers, trainers, and mentors risk opening themselves to the learner for the sake of developing trust. In turn, building trust allows both members of the dyad to experiment with and take new risks and co-construct new knowledge with the tacit understanding that "mistakes" are not problematic, but opportunities for learning (Asen, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). The reciprocal social trust building, operating in the context of respectfulness and the willingness to change one's mind is relevant, especially in learning situations where the educator and learner might vary according to gender, ethnicity, and age (Reio & Lasky, 2007). In this light, the learning of culturally-relevant skills, such as dressing and acting appropriately, participating in social activities like a debate, behaving responsibly at an office holiday party, and acting constructively in democratic processes can be facilitated optimally. The process of building trust, taking risks, and developing new knowledge also occurs at the group, organizational, and community level (Asen, 2004). In a far broader sense, risk is inherent when attempting to build trust and facilitate learning among various cultures and societies as they collaboratively address pressing global environmental, political, technological, and economic change (Siegel et al., 2004).

In democratic societies, educative systems are created to perpetuate learning, distribute knowledge, and equip the general public with the tools for being active, constructive, and competent participants in democratic citizenry (Asen, 2004; Dewey, 1916; Reich, 2007). For a democracy to work optimally at home, work, and the community, its members must feel it is safe to risk asking questions, seeking answers, wondering about things, and thinking divergently. Challenging conventional wisdom, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts should be the norm, certainly not the exception in a democracy (Dewey, 1916; Lindeman, 1926; Siegel et al., 2004).

AE and HRD as Part of the Educative System

The traditional parts of an educative system – pre-schools, K-12 schools, and colleges and universities – are formal learning venues designed primarily for our youth and young adults. Learning, however, is lifelong (Ellinger, 2006; Houle, 1961; Knowles, 1990), mostly informal (Watkins & Marsick, 1992), and an integral part of creating and adapting throughout the lifespan (Lindeman, 1926; Reio & Choi, 2004). AE and HRD are clearly important parts of a nation's educative system (Jacobs, 2006; Smith, 2006), having significant impact on the social good. Both fields complement each other in providing continuous learning and development opportunities to adults. Both design and deliver learning endeavors to meet individual,

organizational, and societal needs for a highly skilled workforce and an informed citizenry. Both make important contributions to the shifting demands of a global economy and meeting the challenges of participating in a deliberative democracy. Through engaging in AE and HRD activities, adults acquire the educative tools to sharpen and develop new skills, learn new ways of thinking, and create new knowledge useful for being productive citizens.

In the past, AE in the United States has played seemingly a far more integral role in national, state, and local legislative initiatives concerning the encouragement and expansion of educational programs for adults, including training of teachers who teach adults. It is only recently that HRD has been called upon by legislators to speak for the workforce side of adult education (Jacobs, 2006). Increasingly, there is an indication that AE and HRD are working productively together to enhance economic development through workforce development initiatives.

Still, as important and fruitful as workforce development has become, and with increasing overlap between traditional AE and HRD activities, the lack of a unified voice to legislators and the lay public is troubling. There is little evidence suggesting that AE and HRD are making significant efforts to being collaboratively *proactive* in addressing individual or societal learning needs for an informed citizenry, a citizenry well prepared to be fully participative members of a democracy. While AE and HRD may be called upon to assist in legislation making efforts, neither sufficiently initiates legislative efforts themselves to promote the social good, be it for developing vital workforce skills or democratic discourse. This state of affairs is unfortunate and results in the considerable contributions of AE and HRD being decidedly undervalued. As Ellinger (2006) suggests, the fields of AE and HRD are in danger of being marginalized to other fields or co-opted by larger fields like business or economics without more cooperative efforts. Proactive plans to establish a unified voice for advocating and supporting appropriate risk-taking for the purpose of optimizing skill development, lifelong learning, and democratic discourse may be a way to increase the status and visibility of both fields.

Conclusion

If we subscribe to Lindeman's (1926) view that "life is learning and learning is life" (p. 55), we need to think of productive ways of making this a living philosophy of an educative system and a democratic society. As active parts of an educative system, the fields of AE and HRD could play a leading role in embracing risk-taking and the ensuing learning they promote as a means of stepping from the comfort of the status quo toward situations where adult learners' beliefs and values are tested and found to be valid. By testing beliefs in the context of reciprocal social trust, individuals can take new risks, try new approaches, think in heretofore unfamiliar ways, and ultimately construct new knowledge. Facilitation of this learning process is useful not only for individual and organizational learning, but also for active and constructive democratic participation. AE and HRD need to speak as one proactive voice to the public in general and policy makers in particular, bringing together the social, economic, moral, and political support needed to be the educators of adults, with one voice that stimulates curiosity and interest and the thirst for knowing more for the benefit of all.

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