

Refereed Articles

Adult Education and Human Resource Development: A Symbiotic Relationship?

Robert E. Grubb, K. Virginia Hemby, and Donna L. Conerly-Stewart

Abstract

In an effort to eliminate program redundancy and to stabilize the future of adult education (ADE) programs in smaller universities, a symbiotic relationship with Human Resource Development (HRD) should be established. A questionnaire was designed and distributed to a sample of 195 members of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), Region 9, selected at random from a current membership directory. This questionnaire was designed to determine the perceived needs of trainers concerning requisite competencies desired in a graduate degree program in HRD so as to establish the desire for inclusion of adult learning principles. The top 20 competencies reported by practitioners as desirable in an HRD graduate program are included, of which a minimum of 5 of the first 10 listed relate directly to ADE.

Introduction

The growth of training in the corporate sector has resulted in a surging popularity in Human Resource Development (HRD) programs in the university setting (Geber, 1987). Business leaders have long realized that the cultivation and preservation of any resource is beneficial to the fiscal outlook of the company. Human Resource Development is certainly no exception and may, in fact, be the most vital asset the company utilizes:

Robert E. Grubb is Assistant Professor, Marshall University; K. Virginia Hemby is Assistant Professor, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; and Donna L. Conerly-Stewart is Associate Professor, The University of Southern Mississippi.

Today more than ever before managers realize that the long-term success of any organization is tied closely to employee training and development. To be prepared for rapidly changing conditions and normal attrition, each organization must provide training for its employees. Thus, training is a continuing process that spans the employee's career. (Donaldson & Scannell, 1993, p. 1)

However, in the drive for program creation, has an opportunity been overlooked by the failure to incorporate adult learning principles into these human resource development programs? Moreover, do organizations believe that adult learning theory has a place in the training and development arena? If so, should adult education (ADE) become an integral part of human resource development (HRD)? Commonalities exist in the history of ADE and HRD beyond their shared focus in the education of adults, as is evidenced by the fact that in their respective developments both have suffered from a public lack of clarity. Otte (cited in Geber, 1987) states that the main obstacle for establishing standards in university HRD programs stems from the lack of a common body of knowledge in the field. Moreover, adult education literature, as stated by Hake (1992),

continues to be characterized by ongoing self-conscious ambiguity surrounding the disciplinary identity of the academic study of adult education. . . . whether adult education constitutes a scientific discipline in its own right, or whether it is to be more properly understood as a field of social activity which can be best approached in terms of the contributions of a number of academic disciplines. (p. 69)

Depending upon the individual researcher's interest and interpretation, the argument can be made that the fields developed in a parallel manner or that an integration of the fields occurred and separation of the two is not possible.

Defining HRD

The paucity of information regarding the development of HRD is not the result of a lack of sustained scholarly effort but is due in large part to the lack of a clear definition of the field itself. As late as 1987, while more than 300 different HRD degree programs existed, no universally accepted method for describing them was available. These HRD programs tended to be offshoots of other university departments (such as

education, communication, and business) and were most often shaped by the preferences of the professors who founded them (Geber, 1987).

The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) uses the term HRD in its literature and activities, and the organization has defined it officially as “the integrated use of (1) training and development, (2) organizational development, and (3) career development to improve individual, group, and organizational effectiveness” (Gaudet & Vincent, 1993, p. 139). Nadler and Nadler (1989) introduce a specific three-part definition of HRD in 1968, a definition “which has been evolving ever since” (p. 6). They define human resource development (HRD) as: “1) organized learning experiences provided by employers 2) within a specified period of time and, 3) to bring about the possibility of performance improvement and/or personal growth” (p. 6).

However, as Nadler and Nadler (1989) point out, “the term HRD is not registered or copyrighted, so it is possible for people to use it any way they wish. Unfortunately, this practice has added confusion to the field and will probably continue to do so for some time” (p. 5).

Regardless of the existing confusion within HRD programs, some sustaining similarities do exist. Enrollment in HRD programs is based on the need of the organization and the individual, with the supervisor of the learner and the HRD practitioner making the decision for the learner. In actuality, the learning is not totally voluntary on the part of the individual. Thus, in HRD the control of knowledge rests in the hands of the organization.

Defining ADE

“Asked to define adult education, the man or woman in the street might conjure up senior citizens learning financial planning, immigrants studying English, middle-class housewives discussing the great books, and the like” (Courtney, 1989, p. 15). In fact, the universe of adult education is so vast, including continuing education, lifelong learning, independent learning projects, community education, community development, and the like, that “it is rare to come upon a single sentence that will do justice to the full range of this phenomenon or that will satisfy the many different kinds of practitioners who call themselves adult educators” (p. 15). One of the most popular definitions of adult education emerged when Liveright and Haygood (1969) carefully crafted the following:

[ADE is] a process whereby persons who no longer attend school on

a regular full-time basis . . . undertake sequential and organized activities with the conscious intention of bringing about changes in information, knowledge, understanding, or skill, appreciation and attitudes; [sic] or for the purpose of identifying or solving personal or community problems. (p. 8)

Today adult education encompasses a plethora of education and training arenas as evidenced by Rachal (1988). In fact, as a field of study, adult education remains broadly defined. However, certain consistencies emerge with each working definition proffered: "the voluntariness of learning, the commitment to growth, and the deliberate structuring of activities as essential features of any enterprise called adult education" (Courtney, 1989, p. 17).

ADE versus HRD

The relationship that adult education shares with other fields has often been challenged, with the outcome being unfavorable to the field of ADE. The purest form of adult education has been tainted with modernistic terminology, evoking argument from those who would not have the discipline defiled by the addition of titles or the merging of departments. Debates abound concerning the future and/or fate of adult education (Peters & Kreitlow, 1991). In light of the popularity of HRD programs, colleges and universities have either chosen to eliminate their ADE programs (for example, Syracuse) or to establish Educational Human Resource Development and/or Human Resource Training programs in their stead (for example, Texas A & M). In fact, some Adult and Continuing Education and HRD departments often view themselves as competitors instead of potential partners (Smith, 1989). This elimination and renaming of programs is a matter of grave concern for some adult education purists. According to Deshler (1991), numerous members of the profession vehemently denounce human resource development as a branch of adult education and, in fact, consider it to be the antithesis of pure adult education. The major flaw in this contention, however, resides in the fact that adult education has not existed solely in isolation from other disciplines. As noted by Liveright (1964) in an earlier ADE publication, "Because of the nature of the profession, much of the content of a graduate program must at this time be based upon and borrowed from other disciplines" (p. 100).

Adult education has continued to exist, not in the absence of other

fields of study, but in conjunction with them. In educating apprentice bookkeepers in the early 1700s, business education became a partner with adult education. One could not teach the craft of bookkeeping to an adult without the knowledge of the trade imparted through business educators. Certainly agriculture is another example of the blending of adult education principles with the talents of a rural agrarian society. While the individual farmer assuredly learned a great deal about crop rotation and animal husbandry, this learning process did not occur solely by means of tradition. Farming techniques and those techniques associated with livestock production have most assuredly benefitted from the training and guidance of the Cooperative Extension Service, and even the most gifted homemaker has profited from the facilitation of the Extension's home economics branch. Numerous other examples of the integration of adult education precepts in the areas of government, civic, and religious organizations, as well as the military, exist.

To truly appreciate how deeply ingrained in the web of learning and how vastly diverse the principles of adult education are, one need merely reflect upon the proliferation of self-help publications. This explosion of self-help publishings is clearly an example of self-directed learning, which is one of the fundamental concepts of adult education. "There is evidence that adults learn more deeply and permanently on their own initiative than with traditional teacher-oriented classroom approaches. Indeed, a prime characteristic of the adult learner is the need and capacity for self-direction" (Knowles, et al., 1984, p. 300).

Therefore, rather than establishing or fostering a competitive environment, it is to the mutual benefit of both fields of study to establish a new relationship, one which is interdependent. This symbiotic relationship would conserve both fiscal and temporal resources by allowing areas of needless redundancy to be discarded. In essence, training facilities, colleges, and universities would benefit by the merger of adult education principles and human resource development practices.

Methodology

In an attempt to demonstrate the viability of including adult learning principles in HRD programs, a survey was undertaken to ascertain HRD practitioners' opinions. A survey of training professionals who were members of the ASTD, Region 9 (Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, Alabama, and Georgia), was undertaken to determine those requisite competencies which should be included in a master's degree program in HRD. Through

this method the researchers sought to determine if the competencies included any adult learning principles (Conerly, et al., 1992). A questionnaire was designed using the 31 training and development competencies identified in the ASTD study published in *Models for Excellence* (ASTD, 1983). The resulting questionnaire was pretested through a pilot study of ASTD members in Mississippi and refinements were made. Using a random numbers table, the revised questionnaire was distributed to 195 members of ASTD Region 9. Following the initial mailing, 46 (24%) usable questionnaires were returned. A follow-up mailing of 146 questionnaires produced an additional return of 9 (6%) usable responses. The initial and follow-up mailings produced a total of 55 (28.2%) usable responses.

Each respondent completed a Survey of Human Resource Development Personnel. This questionnaire was designed to determine the extent to which subjects believed a list of given competencies and skills should be included in a master's degree program in HRD. Results of the surveys were tallied and frequencies and percentages were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Of 43 listed competencies/skills listed on the questionnaire, the top 20 identified by the respondents demonstrated the importance of adult learning principles in an HRD program (see Table 1).

Findings

An examination of these 20 competencies is most revealing. In the first 5 competencies adult learning principles occupy the top 4 positions: 1) Adult Learning, 2) Presentation Techniques, 3) Facilitation, and 4) Needs Assessment. According to the respondents the most important competency in a master's degree program in HRD is listed as "adult learning" with a resounding 90.9% in agreement. Even as many as 86.8% of the respondents agreed that training in needs assessment is vital. These areas historically receive extensive focus in traditional adult education programs. However, there are certainly areas in which strong agreement over HRD theories is evident as well. Human relations training is significant to the respondents, 85.4% of whom either strongly agree or agree that this competency should be included in the program. Also, group dynamics and oral communications were highly rated, with approximately 82% of the respondents believing these areas are important enough to be included in the curriculum for a master's program in HRD. Notwithstanding, when the top 10 competencies are examined, a minimum of 7

Table 1
Twenty Highest Ranked Competencies and Skills that Should be Included
in a Master's Degree Program in HRD

Competencies/Skills	SA/A	DS/D	UND
Adult Learning	90.9	9.1	0.0
Presentation Techniques	90.4	15.0	7.5
Facilitation	87.0	11.2	1.9
Needs Assessment	86.8	9.4	3.8
Human Relations	85.4	14.6	5.5
Group Dynamics	81.8	8.9	9.1
Oral Communications	81.5	13.0	5.6
Measurement & Evaluation	81.4	13.0	5.6
Objective Preparation	79.3	15.1	5.7
Management	78.1	10.9	10.9
Training & Development Techniques	77.8	9.3	13.0
Project Management	75.9	16.7	7.4
Feedback	75.9	11.2	13.0
Ethical Issues	74.5	9.1	16.4
Classroom Teaching Techniques	74.1	14.9	11.1
Understanding Training & Development	74.0	9.3	16.7
Questioning Techniques	74.0	13.0	13.0
Instructional Design	73.6	15.1	11.3
Written Communication	72.2	6.7	11.1
Negotiation	70.3	14.9	14.8
Performance Observation & Analysis	70.3	18.6	11.1
Team Work	69.8	15.0	15.1
Marketing	69.1	12.7	18.2

Abbreviations: SA/A = Strongly Agree/Agree; SD/D = Strongly Disagree/Disagree; UND = Undecided.

are clearly identified with ADE graduate instruction. Clearly, these responses establish the desire of the respondents for an HRD program which encompasses ADE principles and HRD practices.

In reviewing graduate catalogs from various universities (Texas A & M, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville), a strong case can be made for the merger of course work in the areas of adult education and human resource devel-

opment. This review demonstrates that the integration of the instructional design and evaluation techniques of adult education provide the perfect complement to the personnel management techniques and task analysis training of human resource development.

Conclusions

Given the current fiscal crisis in higher education sweeping the nation, not only is it in the best interests of the student and the educational institution but also of the business community to eliminate redundant programs. Across the country premier adult education programs have been closed at major educational institutions due to a lack of student enrollment, inadequate funding, and current political environments. In 1995 Harrison surveyed 83 randomly selected institutions offering adult education programs as listed in Peterson's *An Overview: Graduate & Professional Programs 1993*. Of those 83, 19% ($n = 16$) had phased out or discontinued their program in adult education (p. 201).

While adult education programs are waning, human resource development programs have exploded (Geber, 1987). At this juncture their growth potential seems unlimited. Clearly, adult education and human resource development individually have a great deal to offer; however, the creation of a dynamic new life for the mutual benefit of both disciplines offers the greatest benefit. Since the data obtained demonstrates that HRD practitioners clearly desire the inclusion of learning principles associated with adult education in any HRD graduate program, the conclusion can be drawn that rather than risk the extinction of pure adult education programs, ADE should cultivate its relationship with HRD. Texas A & M University, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and The University of Tennessee at Knoxville are splendid examples of the blending of human resource development competencies and adult education learning principles. These institutions have, for the most part, preserved the niches of purity of each academic discipline while blending them into a cost-effective and highly productive program.

Adult education should embrace the component competencies of human resource development and blend these competencies with instructional design and learning techniques to insure appropriate practices for adults in all training arenas. Simultaneously, human resource development departments need to realize the value of adult learning principles and the integral role these principles may play in human resource development and training. While purists may decry such a merging as con-

tamination rather than symbiosis, this adaptation to the environment insures the survival of adult education as well as secures the adequate preparation of human resource development graduates for meeting the needs of the adult workforce.

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