Toward a Critical HRD
In Theory and Practice

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Drawing from critical management studies and critical pedagogy, this article proposes principles and practices to support the emerging critical human resource development (HRD) field as one stream among existing theories and practice of HRD. A critical HRD would challenge the subjugation of human knowledge, skills, and relationships to organizational or shareholder gain and focus on transforming workplaces and HRD practice toward justice, fairness, and equity. Because both HRD practices and critical perspectives themselves are so diverse, a critical HRD must be formulated in sufficiently broad terms to encourage a variety of conceptual developments including discursive, gendered, materialist, and anti-racist lines of analysis. Theoretical dilemmas of a critical HRD are discussed, such as ideological contradictions between the radical orientation of critical theory and the managerialist or performative frames to which much HRD practice is accountable. Possible configurations of a critical HRD are described, as these might play out in contexts of HRD practice.

Keywords: human resource development; critical pedagogy; critical management studies; workplace learning; emancipatory learning; reflexivity

The field of human resource development (HRD) practice and research describes itself as emphasizing three major areas in workplace organizations that arguably overlap adult education’s focus on learning: training and development, career development, and organizational development (De Simone, Werner, & Harris, 2002). Indeed, schools of education are where HRD programs boast the fastest growing enrollment (Kuchinke, 2002). However, adult education theorists have taken up an antagonistic position to the HRD field through a sustained attack from diverse critical perspectives. But what if these energies were diverted to support a space within HRD to nurture critical questions about power, interests, and equity and to articulate critical challenges of oppressive organizational structures and knowledge legitimation? A critical HRD stream would not presume to supplant existing conceptions of HRD in a totalizing fashion but would develop as one among the multiple paradigms coexisting in this pluralistic field. A critical HRD might even open a middle space in schools of education—a site where those

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committed to critical perspectives in adult learning, workers’ lives, organization studies, leadership, and human development could inform and support one another’s research and practice. In this middle space, critical adult educators might find fruitful alliances with their HRD colleagues toward just, equitable, life-giving, and sustainable work.

EXISTING CRITIQUES OF HRD

Critics of HRD challenge the field’s supposed allegiance to human capital theory (Baptiste, 2001; Coffield, 1999; Collins, 1991), the consequent commodification and subjugation of human development to exploitive organizational interests (Cunningham, 1993; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Hart, 1992; Howell, Carter, & Schied, 2002; Spencer, 2001), and the concomitant deployment of HRD technologies wielding soft control through surveillance, classification, normalization, deficit assumptions, cultural engineering, workers’ self-regulation, and learning demands (Fenwick, 2001; Schied, Carter, & Howell, 2001; Townley, 1994). There is also a certain “preemptive cringe” (Coffield, 1999) of critics toward any project appearing to merge learning with market or managers.

The HRD critique has been voiced so many times in adult education literature with so little opening for dialogue or future possibilities that some deadlock has resulted. Critics justifiably have been accused of limiting their diatribes to the converted; furthermore, they are often removed from practical difficulties of organizational dynamics and insulated from difficult debate with business and management interests (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). Graduate students of HRD are presented with an apparently unbridgeable schism between academic critical theorizing and employment as HRD practitioners in organizations. Furthermore, erroneous assumptions of an identifiable HRD have created an illusionary entity that is unified and fixed as an impenetrable opponent—a perspective that fails to recognize its heterogeneous and fluid character.

Yet HRD theorists have themselves noted problems in their periodic reviews of the state of the field. Although multiple theoretical paradigms have emerged in HRD literature including psychological, intervention, and systems or complexity perspectives as well as economic theory (Ruona & Lynham, 1999; Swanson, 2001) and although the profession increasingly incorporates notions of ethics, integrity, and sustainability (Hatcher, 1999; Lee, 2001; Swanson, 2001), some conclude that HRD research still is dominated by a positivistic paradigm. In 1998, Chalofsky argued that HRD had yet to reach the level of a mature profession because practice was based on guesswork, outdated thinking, or what the client wants rather than on research-based theories. More recently, in setting out current challenges facing the HRD profession, Short, Bing, and Kerhahn (2003) conceded that, despite their commitments to ethical engagement and socially responsible workplaces, HRD professionals are more than ever expected to deliver shareholder value through employee performance.
In their review of 600 articles presented to the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) from 1996 to 2000, Bierema and Cseh (2003) concluded that

HRD focuses little on issues of social justice in the workplace or larger social context. Women's experiences as well as those of other diverse groups is [sic] ignored, as are asymmetrical power arrangements. Gender/race/ethnicity is not used as a category of analysis—even when data are collected by gender. Organizational "undiscussables" such as sexism, racism, patriarchy, and violence receive little attention in the literature yet have considerable impact on organizational dynamics. Finally, HRD research has only weakly advocated change. (pp. 23-24)

Bierema and Cseh (2003) ended with a call for critical perspectives in HRD practice and research: for greater focus on how HRD might reproduce power relations in organizations, for questions about who benefits from HRD, and for strategies that address gender and equity issues. The first explicitly critical session at an AHRD conference was held in 2002 with the intent of unpicking assumptions and challenging "the predominantly performative and learning-outcome focus of the HRD field" (Elliott & Turnbull, 2002, p. 971). The U.K. Critical Management Studies (CMS) Conference inaugurated a human resources management stream in its 2003 annual conference; the call for articles expressed puzzlement that HRD "has largely slipped outside the gaze of critical management analysts," particularly given "its multifaceted and ubiquitous nature" (CMS, 2002, para. 3). Presenting at that conference, Sambrook (2003) argued the importance of bringing discourses of "being critical" to bear among current conflicting eclectic discourses of HRD without privileging the critical iconoclast pitted against the HRD "other."

The purpose of this article is to support and amplify these nascent beginnings. Given that HRD writers describe their field as "in search of itself" (Kuchinke, 2002), a "becoming" rather than a static ontology (Lee, 2001), the conditions appear to be fertile for encouraging a stream of critical HRD. This is not an act of reifying HRD; the HR field is already well established and growing and appears committed to a continuous self-critical search for discriminating and robust theories and practices.

**DEFINING CRITICAL**

Obviously, the meaning of *critical* requires definition. In analyzing the confusion resulting from proliferation and fragmentation among diverse critical perspectives in organization and management studies, Antonacopoulou (1999) synthesized common themes into the following definition: providing voice for the repressed and marginalized, exposing assumptions and values, revealing the use of power and control, and challenging inequities and sacrifices made in the name of efficiency, effectiveness, and profitability through a self-reflexive critique of rhetoric, tradition, authority, and objectivity. This position obviously draws from
ideology critique but also reflects feminist and poststructuralist emphases on difference, equity, and language and pursues organizational democracy rather than revolutionary social change. In a similar vein, Brookfield (2001) integrated ideology critique with pragmatism in his definition of a critical theory of adult learning. The central concern, he concluded, is “to democratize production to serve the whole community, and . . . to reconfigure the workplace as a site for the exercise of human creativity” (Brookfield, 2001, p. 5). This is a project requiring a “defensive flexibility” and “a self-critical, self-referential stance” (Brookfield, 2001, p. 5). These dimensions of challenging ideology, recognizing hegemony, and unmasking power with self-reflexivity, pragmatic flexibility, and purposes of democratic reform advocated by Antonacopoulou and Brookfield are at the core of what is meant by critical in this argument.

The following discussion proposes principles and examples to continue the dialogue toward a critical HRD space that might invite participation of both critically minded HRD professionals and adult educators. But because HRD is a of practice, this discussion also must undertake to confront the enormous difficulties and deep contradictions of enacting critical HRD in contemporary organizations. These difficulties largely may be anticipated in what many would argue are the diametrically opposed interests of working people (labor) and organizations/management (capital). The fundamental contradiction of melding an emancipatory perspective with a practice embedded in the exploitive labor relations of a capitalist market may ultimately mitigate against a sustainable field of critical HRD. However, as will be argued later, there are sufficient if infrequent examples of critically oriented development work going on now in organizations to suggest that sites of critical HRD already exist in practice if not in name, however peripherally. Furthermore, recent work in CMS suggests radical shifts under way in rethinking management, work, knowledge, and certainly organizations. A critical HRD would contribute a necessary perspective to this work and derive strength from it toward the continuing reconceptualization of developers entangled within the complexities of workers’ lives and organizational webs.

TOWARD A CRITICAL HRD: SOME FOUNDATIONS

Precedents for a critical approach to HRD exist in CMS, a small but vigorous field within management research and education (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1996; Clegg, 1989; Fournier & Grey, 2000) that challenges fundamental inequities, oppression, and violence in organizations wrought through the apolitical, economically focused, instrumental, and unitarist reasoning of mainstream management science. CMS remains marginalized in the United States, argued Grey and Willmott (2002), pointing to the historical “grip of positivism” (p. 414) and lingering aversion to Marxist thought in U.S. management research. However, outside the United States, notably in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia, CMS is becoming a distinctive institutionalized movement, evident in its widespread
installment in business schools of the academy and "a proliferation of conferences, workshops and textbooks utilizing the banner of CMS" (Grey & Willmott, 2002, p. 411). CMS is not without internal tensions and practical difficulties, but it appears to have successfully created and sustained a space for activity that its promoters argue to be important: formulating challenges to managerial orthodoxy and organizational inequities, connecting pluralistic critical perspectives committed to organizational democracy, and exploring viable critical practices of management within existing organizational constraints (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Grey & Willmott, 2002). Given certain common interests shared by HRD with organization and management studies, it makes sense to begin the conception of a critical HRD by examining approaches and dilemmas experienced by CMS while retaining the autonomy and unique purview of the HRD field.

CMS suggests that organizational critique such as a critical HRD can survive if it is located in the academy as a field of study and practitioner education. But given HRD’s primary existence as a field of practice, like CMS, a critical HRD stream must also maintain close links with organizational contexts and commitments. Otherwise, critical HRD might relegate itself to railing, elitist disregard for practitioners’ knowledge, platitudinous solutions, or research that but swipes the surface of real complexity.

What separates critical from noncritical will remain as contested as it is in management studies, adult education, and other social sciences. Because both HRD practices and critical perspectives themselves are so diverse, critical HRD studies must be formulated in sufficiently broad terms to encourage wide-ranging conceptual developments by focusing on discursive, gendered, materialist, anti-racist, or other lines of analysis. Within this broad rendering of critical studies in HRD, positional distinctions must not be confused. For example, labor process critics or Marxists might argue that anything short of revolutionary action for worker control of the means of production is not emancipatory, others advocating critical social learning and praxis may argue for broader recognition of complex identities and diverse interests beyond class, and poststructural critics might contest altogether such realist assumptions about organizations for ignoring the discursive construction of workers, production, and emancipation.

This same theoretical pluralism flourishes in CMS, a pluralism that Fournier and Grey (2000) characterized according to two main lines of tension. One is essentially an ontological tension concerning the nature of power: Unresolved tensions fuel continuing debates between those arguing for a materialist understanding of power based on Marxism and those devoted to more discursive analyses of circulating cultural power. Another tension concerns the nature of scholarly engagement with practice. Fournier and Grey showed that although CMS writers argue over whether a pragmatic orientation dilutes critical integrity or whether a purist academic stance is self-righteously elitist and insular, practitioners juggle uncomfortably with both pragmatism and purism. Obviously the conflicts between and within
critical orientations are more complex and far reaching, but a full explication of these is not germane to this argument.

Suffice to note that among these orientations, certain common principles may be advanced for a critical HRD. Drawing from CMS and critical pedagogy, a twofold position is proposed. First, a critical HRD fundamentally opposes the subjugation of human knowledge, skills, relationships, and education to organizational gain and goals that are primarily economic or instrumental. Second, a critical HRD is devoted to the transformation of organizations and HRD practice toward, in Kincheloe's (1999) view, a more just, equitable, life-giving, and sustainable workplace. Working from these two principles, the following four dimensions are proposed for a critical HRD as a site for study and practice:

1. **Political purpose: organizational reform for justice, equity, and participation.** The primary purpose of a critical HRD would be reform—of both workplace organizations and development practices directed toward individuals and groups. Although this is not unique within HRD studies and conduct, a critical HRD would work toward reform aligned with purposes of justice, equity, and participation. Specific purposes might advance social transformation through naming mechanisms of cultural power, fostering resistance, and supporting collective action. A primary first step in such reform is to help expose and reverse those dimensions of HRD theory that may be complicit in unjust, inequitable, or life-draining commodification of human minds and souls.

2. **Epistemology: workplace as contested terrain.** In a critical HRD, workplace organizations are conceptualized as contested terrains of relations and knowledge concealed by unitarist illusions of homogeneous identities, alignment between worker/manager interests, and false naturalization of imperatives such as globalization, competition, and performativity. Social and organizational positions crisscrossed by different genders and sexes, knowledge, ethnicities, generations, histories, and cultural commitments are carefully examined. This diversity is not cast as difficult people requiring management but understood as the source of both organizational ingenuity and sustainability as well as suffering and oppression.

3. **Inquiry: focused on power and history.** Explanations of human or organizational development in a critical HRD would center on power and control issues and seek to understand how sociopolitical processes historically have come to constitute elements that appear to comprise structures that appear inevitable: performance measurement, human development, and shareholder value.

4. **Methodology: exposure, iconoclasm, and reflexivity.** Practices to be encouraged through a field of critical HRD would expose and challenge prevailing economic ideologies and power relations constituting organizational structures of inequity. Familiar critical questions about whose interests are served by development, how knowledge is constructed, what knowledge counts, and who influences its assessment would underpin pedagogical activities. Reflexivity, both philosophical and methodological, is central to critical perspectives to challenge the ironies of those committed to equity imposing emancipatory efforts on the so-called oppressed as well as exposing the controlling apparatuses normalized in existing HRD technologies.

To pursue a critical human (resource) development, these dimensions must somehow be brought together with the broader HRD objectives of individual development and organizational change.
opment, organizational development, and career development within workplace organizations. This is where the most difficult questions emerge about the viability of critical HRD.

**DILEMMAS OF A CRITICAL HRD**

Several dilemmas immediately appear in constructing theoretical and practical foundations for a critical HRD stream that enacts these purposes of justice, equity, and participation; assumptions of the workplace as contested terrain; inquiry focused on power and history; and methodologies of exposure, iconoclasm, and reflexivity. These dilemmas are threaded across all four dimensions, for in theory and practice, political purposes, epistemological assumptions, inquiry foci, and methodological approaches become blended. The following discussion of dilemmas, therefore, treats these four dimensions as integrated.

*Contradiction of performance orientation with critical purposes and methods.* A glaring dilemma exists in the signifiers comprising HRD, as Schied (1995) and others have long pointed out, that reflect the origins of HRD as performance enhancement. Humans objectified as resources, argued Schied, are continually reconstructed in an exploitive and alienating relation with their so-called developers. Furthermore, *development* signifies a hierarchical rather than cooperative relation where the other is constituted in the developer’s gaze as progressing from incompleteness to wholeness. In the tradition of HRD, this process has been driven by organizational performance needs and conducted through technologies of control, as Townley (1994) described HRD practices. Radical commitments denounce this hierarchical management of human learning and subjugation of human lives to organizational productivity and support worker-centered definitions of meaningful work and growth. Furthermore, radical educative approaches aim not to develop humans’ exchange value but to liberate them from exchange relations. This liberation is not conducted through imposed technologies but through participatory dialogues in dialectic with collective action. Thus, there appear to be profound ideological contradictions between the radical orientation of critical dimensions and the performance-development orientation of much mainstream HRD practice.

*Potential subversion or appropriation of radical purpose, inquiry, and methods.* Perhaps worse, critical practice may be subverted by being domesticated through management declarations of support for nonhierarchical structures and continuous learning to explain reengineering efforts. This is most evident in populist management literature positioning itself as resistant to rationalization, hierarchical authority, and control-and-compete models but advocating instrumental reengineering that, in fact, reifies the old problems of inequity and undemocratic power relations. Radical calls for change are lost when confined to spaces for so-called worker voice without substantive avenues for change or used as yet another tool to subjugate
workers (as in the use of worker confessionals presented as so-called democratic dialogues). As Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) noted, workers are usually quite constrained in terms of the actions they could take, the decisions they could make, and the influence they could have despite organizational resolves for empowered, self-directed teams and a thinking workforce. Amid prevailing structures of authority, critical practice can be quashed by punitive management measures. Further, empowerment as a concept has long been co-opted in popular management literature for purposes of building human capital. Those exercising empowerment outside core values and prescribed procedures soon discover the tight leashes and potential backlashes undergirding rhetoric calling for organizational transformation.

**Incommensurable assumptions.** Some critical theorists (i.e., Holst, 2002) might argue that emancipatory educative practice within capitalist institutions is completely untenable and that what emerges would always be a domesticated shadow of critical struggles against oppression, exploitation, and inequity. Others arguing the same incommensurability but with different intents have shown that trying to pursue a critical practice within organizational contexts is inordinately difficult, and they point to legions of wounded warriors who have tried (Brooks, 2002).

It is all very well to say that critical studies and practice should be married, but without further theorizing of fundamental contradictions and their political play in workplace organizations, little may be gained except perhaps further disillusion or duplicity. A critical HRD must address these very contradictions by drawing from critical studies already flourishing in professional fields of economics, management, law, and social sciences for insights and hope. At the same time, critical HRD must align itself with people’s needs and experiences working in organizations. To disengage from practice, confining critique to the academy or to carefully controlled research that samples but does not involve practitioners and their knowledge, is to commit the old sins of hermetic scientism. Those who might defend such an exclusive posture in the name of intellectual integrity still must find ways to understand the complex relations and needs of workers and to move beyond naive prescriptions.

**Inadequacies of critical conceptualizations.** A further dilemma may be anticipated through contemporary critiques of critical educative approaches. These have highlighted the inadequacy of conceptualizing singular groups in the workplace intentionally wielding domination and control or understanding clear binaries to separate managers and workers as if these were unitary and fixed positions. In the workplace, these assumptions are insupportable amidst complex variations in interests and power produced by occupation, education, language, race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. It is more difficult than it may seem to point to clear centers and peripheries in organizations or power situated unambiguously in any one position. Too often managers are portrayed as homogenous or unproblematically as the
oppressors. The fixed, rational agent-subjects upon which much critical theory rests have been persuasively contradicted both by theoretical postmodern critique (Edwards & Usher, 2000) and by the increasing workplace flexibility of jobs, identities, and knowledge.

Finally, emancipatory educators assuming powerful positions as self-elected social doctors are generally accepted to be a significant problem within critical theory itself. As Alvesson and Deetz (1996) pointed out, "The irony of an advocate of greater equality pronouncing what others should want or how they should perceive the world 'better' is not lost on either dominant or dominated groups" (p. 195). Feminist educators in particular have shown the patriarchal relations that can be reproduced in critical education. In some ways, the zealous critical educator is no less presumptive or damaging in terms of fostering human well-being, learning, and liberation than the well-intentioned HRD practitioner.

Potential dilution of critique in practice. In CMS, this dilemma is voiced in debate between those advocating for developing a practical critical agenda and those worried that such engagement dilutes the critical project. Among those seeking a practical agenda are Grey and Willmott (2002) who asserted that the point is to transform management practices in tandem with transforming business schools, encourage managers and students to think critically about leadership, and show opinion leaders (politicians, policy makers, regulators, and senior executives) how critical analysis reveals contexts and configurations of work organizations within global and national political economies. Alvesson and Willmott (1996) argued that engaging critical theory within organizations helps avoid replacing old, instrumental, unitarist management dogma with new critical ideology. Critical projects worked through messy organizational realities also avoid, wrote Alvesson and Willmott, a theoretical tendency toward simplistic iron-cage depictions of organizations or broad utopian visions that ignore micro-problems and possibilities persisting in organizations.

In addressing the difficulties of enacting a critical theory of adult learning in sites such as workplaces, Brookfield (2001) suggested reengaging the ideology critique of critical theory with pragmatism focusing on the experimental improvement of contemporary conditions. His argument is that the latter's unanticipated contingency and openness to continuous reformulation helps ensure the flexibility and responsiveness of critical practice to its circumstances such that it neither establishes a new orthodoxy nor neglects its own reflexivity. Although critics worry that the contexts of practice are inherently conservative or promiscuously eclectic, thus returning us to the problematic possibility of eroding the power and integrity of critical practice, Brookfield asserted that a critical pragmatism offers a "flexible pursuit of beautiful consequences" (p. 20). In the context of work, these might include democratized production and a workplace reconfigured for freedom and human creativity constructed through multiple experiments, ways of reflecting, and focuses of critique.
Practical difficulties of implementing critical HRD. However, the question of how to integrate critical theory with organizational practice continues to cause trouble. Fournier and Grey (2000) identified three themes to guide practice within CMS that suggest fruitful directions for the concrete practice of critical HRD. Non-performative intent is the first, questioning the alignment between knowledge, truth, and efficiency. Performativity means, following Fournier and Grey’s interpretation of Lyotard, “the intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input” (p. 17). Although some may argue that performativity actually structures organizational existence, Fournier and Grey were most interested in highlighting their argument that “non-critical management study is governed by the principle of performativity which serves to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency” (p. 17). Second is denaturalizing mainstream management theory and mainstream understandings of existing social and organizational arrangements, division of labor, and management authority as natural and inevitable. Third is reflexivity, which, when exercised continually by critically educated managers, may help germinate more liberating practices and more widespread critical cultural analyses of existing conditions. Specific possible enactments of these three in HRD activity will be discussed further on.

In fact, a critical HRD may experience fewer contradictions and peer disparagement than CMS in undertaking the agenda that CMS is attempting to pursue. After all, human resource developers are in a different position than management in most organizations—they often have more immediate formal commitment to worker well-being and their interests are not directly tied up with preserving control or current hierarchical relations. Furthermore, the tradition that HRD has established for itself in its brief history is a fluid coupling of academy-based theorizing and knowledge production with organizational practice and experimentation. Indeed, this very fluidity may have contributed to a certain vulnerability of HRD as an academic discipline perceived with skepticism and even open attack by other disciplines.

**NEW CONFIGURATIONS: CRITICAL HRD IN THE WORKPLACE**

Nonetheless, the survival of a critical HRD is not possible without clear strategies, mindful of the considerable dilemmas, for defining and constructing critical practice within the workplace. What might notions of emancipatory and radical actually look like when linked with individual, career, and organizational development? As a practice, critical HRD is difficult to envision fully without dissolving into utopian prescriptions. However, sufficient concrete examples of critical workplace practice exist, as reported in the fields of CMS, labor education, and critical workplace education, to suggest a viable way forward. Four approaches will be outlined here: emancipatory action learning, emancipatory projects, critical workplace education, and HRD reflexivity. These approaches will emerge in different
being. Alvesson and Willmott (1996) argued that this sort of *micro-emancipation* as they term it—that is, small projects that target specific oppressive practices—does catalyze change toward more just organizational structures. As an example of the complexities of such work, Meyerson and Kolb (2000) described a participatory feminist project they undertook to both promote gender equity and to increase organizational effectiveness. They reported great difficulty in sustaining their critical gender focus for reasons related as much to research design as to underestimation of powerful organizational discourses. Yet the researchers’ analysis revealed partial success in their critical agenda. Of their three-layered approach of critique (of dominant gendered discourses and processes), experimentation (with concrete changes to interrupt gendered practices and improve work effectiveness), and narrative generation (constructing collective stories of the change process), the narratives opened a fruitful site for critical learning. Both workers and some managers participated in critical questioning of these collective narratives and then generated subversive narratives and alternative scenarios that moved toward some initial changes in gendered organizational structures.

Tosey and Nugent (1997) offered another example of a micro-emancipatory project. Their study showed how a shift from problem-focused to critical inquiry-focused forms of action learning helped transform the management team of a failing small manufacturing company to think creatively about strategy and to change the way they related to one another to be more supportive, caring, and challenging. These examples do not attempt radical transformation of existing structures approaches but suggest that critical practice may require selective trials in small spaces of particular organizations.

The practical barriers as well as the possibilities of *doing* critical HRD can be also glimpsed through the practices of those who are already *doing* critical workplace education. Their analyses of this difficult work point to the tensions of questioning structures within organizations focused on measurable outcomes and the openness to questioning of those footing the bills for workplace education. Nash (2001), for example, described her participatory approaches to workplace literacy education as a delicate negotiation of liberatory activities within existing workplace and training structures. She wrote, “Use every opportunity to inquire about how the workplace runs and how it affects our lives” (p. 190); for example, when mapping workplace processes, have learners investigate why work is organized the way it is, what history and priorities it reflects, and what imaginative alternatives might be generated. Like Nash, Barndt (2001) described critical education with workers in terms of emphasizing connections as well as encouraging people to work participatively to name their conditions and to make their worlds by reclaiming production. Barndt’s practice engaged people in participatory photo-story making in contexts such as English education in the workplace. Tensions of this work are inevitable: Barndt detailed these and showed how she engaged them directly and creatively as contradictions. Lakes (1994), another critical workplace educator, showed ways of politicizing vocational education in schools as well as work...
organizations to empower youths and workers as critical learners and thus as potential catalysts for the democratic transformation of industry. A frequently referenced resource among these and other radical workplace educators is *Learning Work* in which Simon, Dippo, and Schenke (1991) described critical education through work-based projects and internships rooted in Freirian pedagogy.

The real question to be confronted by those who develop a critical HRD is not *if* it can be done—examples abound showing that radical participatory development may be undertaken anywhere—but what might be its consequences and whether these are ultimately beneficial. The weighing of consequences is an ethical-moral undertaking, not an instrumental one. So to decide if a practice of critical HRD is possible or sustainable, one must determine how to judge what purposes are most worthwhile, what costs are bearable for these purposes, and exactly what counts as a benefit for the few as well as for the many.

Finally, self-reflexivity is one of the prominent recommendations for HRD reform as a field of theory and practice offered by Townley (1994) in her in-depth poststructural analysis of the subjugation wielded by contemporary human resource practices. In particular, Townley exhorts HRD researchers and professionals to deconstruct the oppressive effects exercised through what are taken-for-granted HRD practices: surveillance and thus regulation of workers through performance appraisal and classification, repression of diversity through standardized measurements and training of workers, and workers’ self-regulation promoted through discourses of continuous learning and quality management. All of these practices render workers knowable and thus subject to control in ways that everyone involved accepts as utterly natural. In all of its initiatives for individuals’ and organizational development, Townley emphasized that HRD must remain critically attentive to issues of voice, equity, differential interests, and the manipulative power embedded in its own practices.

Perhaps this reflexivity will offer the most important starting point for a critical HRD stream in promoting questions about itself: What does it mean to be human in an organization? What is wrong with the presumption of developing or managing the development of humans? Who is naturally excluded in such practices? What other ways can humans and their work be understood than as resources for organizations? Living out a critical orientation to HRD in organizational practice as well as in academic study and education is clearly complex. Yet despite the contradictions and difficult negotiations, these complexities appear to provide an important site for the further evolution of organizational, career, and individual development in work and its possible rethinking as part of the radical shifts arguably occurring in the intersected worlds of work, organization, management, and knowledge.

**CONCLUSION**

Existing critique of HRD, management, and workplace education has opened important questions and sites for resistance to the more controlling subjugations of...
human resource technologies. Unfortunately, some of this critique is unfair, inaccurate, or couched in such inflammatory terms that it succeeds only in polarizing all sides. The critical, theoretical underpinning is sometimes blind to its own colonizing agendas and to the heterogeneity of existing HRD theories and practices. This is not to deny that there is much to disparage in certain configurations of HRD. But in the interests of providing a way forward that does not succumb to simple dualities, a critical HRD would take up position as a legitimate stream of human resource research, education, and practice within the broader field of HRD. This stream would dedicate itself to workplace and human resource reform by navigating a difficult meld between central commitments of critical pedagogy and critical social action with the tenets of individual, career, and organizational development in work-based contexts. Critical HRD would pursue activity as a field of study, an approach to practice, and as preservice education, cautious of Fournier and Grey’s (2000) warnings about becoming a token voice or “degenerating” into (uncritical) activism, leading to quick dismissal from wider HRD worlds of theory and practice. Sustenance can be drawn from both CMS and critical adult education as well as from political allies in social movements. As Welton (1995) insisted,

The potential of the workplace as a site for emancipatory learning remains at least partially open . . . introducing public spheres of discussion and decision-making into the sphere of socially necessary production [involving] educators arguing for non-coerced, free communication pertaining to the organization, control and purposes of work. (p. 152)

Welton (1995) maintained that such a possibility exists only for a relatively small percentage of employees whose workplaces demand increasingly complex forms of knowledge and call for exercise of autonomy and collective responsibility. If this small percentage happens to be human resource developers acting in various roles (facilitators, planners, boundary spanners, job redesigners), a great deal of influence on other spheres of workers and managers is possible.

Immediately, difficult questions appear that guarantee a rich future of study and experiment. A first task presented by this discussion will be to explore apparent fundamental contradictions between managerialist performance and radical orientations neither representing human resource managers as the unequivocal oppressors nor slipping into naturalized illusions of unitary worker/manager interests or the existence of unproblematic safe dialogic spaces among them. Particular vigilance might be needed to keep distant from current soft humanistic management recipes for empowerment—what Alvesson and Willmott (1996) disparaged as “a fatally crippled, ideologically polluted version of ‘emancipation’ that merits harsh critique” (p. 229).

In pursuing these issues, we might discover fundamental reasons prohibiting a middle space of critical HRD where adult education and HRD could converge. Dialogue across these fields ultimately might be unproductive or near impossible. But
in its trial, we venture into unexplored networks that are at least likely to open greater respect and voice for each other's positions, humility for our own myopia, and joint responsibility for shared problems.

NOTE

1. As one reviewer of an earlier draft of this article pointed out, action learning is considered to be only one of several "action inquiry technologies" (see Brooks & Watkins, 1994), including action research and action science, that are now commonplace in human resource development (HRD) practice. These ostensibly use strategies of critical reflection (in the sense of Argyris & Schon's [1978] double-loop learning) intended to reveal organizational "undiscussables." Thus, although not necessarily aligned with a radical agenda, such HRD technologies could be understood as already leaning in a critical direction.

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