Understanding Workforce Development:

Definition, Conceptual Boundaries, and Future Perspectives

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Abstract

Workforce development has increasingly come to describe a relatively wide range of learning-for-work activities and programs. Unfortunately, no one definition adequately defines its meaning. One view is that the term merely represents a better way of describing career and technical education. An alternative view is that the term harkens us to consider a different perspective on the entire learning-for-work enterprise, broadly speaking. The purposes of this paper are threefold: 1) discuss the need for a broader view of learning for work based on the convergence of five streams of influence, 2) propose a definition of workforce development and articulate understandings about workforce development, and 3) discuss the future implications of workforce development on practice and theory. The perspective taken is that whatever learning-for-work programs occur in schools, organizations, or agencies are, in fact, mutually dependent on each other.

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This paper proposes the need for a more integrated view of working and learning in societies. Further, the paper proposes to define workforce development consistent with that integrated perspective. *Workforce development* has emerged to describe a relatively wide range of activities, policies, and programs. For example, many professionals involved in administering secondary vocational education programs, welfare-to-work and other public assistance programs, and regional economic development initiatives now use workforce development to describe their services. Several recent pieces of state and federal legislation use the term to describe various youth vocational training, adult training and retraining, and related employment initiatives. As a result of these legislative and policy changes, many states – including our own state of Ohio – have included the term in the naming of various governmental coordinating boards, initiatives, and task forces (Grubb and Associates, 1999).

The term also describes an extensive array of training and educational programs available to state of Ohio bargaining unit employees (Jacobs, Skillings, & Yu, 2001). Previously, such joint employer-union supported learning opportunities might have been viewed as an employee benefit.

The author wishes to recognize the contributions of Joshua Hawley, assistant professor, Workforce Development and Education, The Ohio State University.

Finally, perhaps in response to these other changes, several graduate programs – including our own at Ohio State University – now use workforce development instead of vocational-technical education as part of their program's name.

Not surprisingly, there are fundamental differences when interpreting the meaning of workforce development. One view is that the term merely describes how one prepares to enter an occupation. That is, workforce development becomes a proxy for career and technical education. An alternative view is that the term harkens us to consider a different perspective on working and learning, broadly speaking. That is, the term signals a growing awareness that previous conceptualizations in this area are inadequate to address emerging challenges. Programs that might occur in schools, organizations, or agencies are, in fact, mutually dependent on each other when considered from a broader societal perspective.

In spite of its emerging prominence, workforce development has not undergone sufficient scrutiny in the scholarly literature. It seems important that such discussions now occur across many audiences. The purposes of this paper are threefold: 1) discuss the need for a broader view of learning for work based on the convergence of five streams of influence, 2) propose a definition of workforce development and articulate understandings about workforce development, and 3) discuss implications of workforce development on practice and theory.

The overall goal of this paper is not necessarily to propose a definitive perspective on workforce development. Rather, the goal is to begin a much-needed scholarly discourse about its meaning and implications.

Need for an Integrated View

This paper proposes the need for a more integrated view of the learning for work enterprise in societies. Previously, activities, polices, and programs have been unnecessarily distinct from each other, particularly in the U.S. Consider that vocational educational educators have mostly focused their attention on young adults in school settings. Human resource development professionals have mostly focused their attention on organization settings. Adult educators, when focused on adult learning for work, have traditionally focused their attention on agency and community settings.

While it is important to maintain the distinctiveness of these fields of study, it is also important to consider them as being highly interrelated in the context of five related historical streams: 1) globalization, 2) technology, 3) new economy, 4) political change, and 5) demographic shifts.

Globalization. Thomas Friedman (2000), the political commentator, has boldly asserted that today's "global" world came into existence upon the fall of the Berlin Wall on October 11, 1989. This event made it possible for the unrestricted flow of people and information across all national borders, from which all other human transactions could follow. There seems much truth to this proposition. In contrast to previous eras of global economic development, the current situation has occurred rapidly and at a level of intensity not experienced previously.

As a result of globalization, there is unprecedented connections between the world's markets and a qualitiatve increase in the way that countries interact in markets. Consider that internationally recognized standards, such as ISO 9000, allow even the most remotely-located manufacturing operations in China or Vietnam to compete with modern production facilities

located in more developed countries. Thus, in spite of current events that might suggest the pitfalls of having open borders and markets, competition will remain a global phenomenon for the foreseeable future.

Technology. Technology comes in different forms, and each has affected the extent and rate of globalization. In terms of communications technology, globalization could not occur without an efficient vehicle by which to send and receive information across great distances. The use of microchips, satellites, and the Internet, enables the immediate access to information regardless of physical location. Without this ability, developing countries would be incapable of becoming service-providers and producers on an equal footing with companies in developed countries. Communications technology allows companies to invest in and locate operations closer to where the specific human talent and cost-effectiveness might exist. For instance, the emergence of customer call centers and data processing operations in India and Ireland to serve the U.S. marketplace illustrates how technology makes distance transparent. Customers are usually unaware the origin point of the service delivery, but they are aware of the quality of service they receive.

In the same way, manufacturing technologies enable organizations to manage their operations better, resulting in higher quality standards and lower costs to consumers. Technological change is particularly important, because changes in technology work with planned workforce development to increase the productivity of workers/firms in all sectors (Rosenzweig, 1995; Foster, 1996).

New economy. The new economy is generally defined by free-market capitalism. Global competition will maintain cost pressures on products and services, thus ensuring a sustainable cycle of high efficiency, high quality, and low inflation. Increasingly, these assumptions have

been put into some doubt first by the Asian currency crisis in 1997 and then by the current economic downturn in the equities markets and large-scale company bankruptcies. The new economy has also been tempered by the growing awareness of the changing global demographics. Over the next 30 years, most developed countries are faced with increasing numbers of individuals receiving retirement benefits and decreasing numbers of individuals actually working and making contributions to retirement accounts. Such a financial system where outlays exceed inputs cannot be depended on for any length of time. The new economy has been open to continual debate and some keen observers, such as Peter Drucker (1993), have even expressed skepticism whether the new economy really existed in the first place.

Regardless, the point remains that changes have occurred in the nature of financial interactions, if for no other reason than the influence of globalization and technology.

Political changes. Important political change has been observed in both domestic and international politics. For one thing, there seems a reduced reluctance – and almost encouragement – for economic partnerships to occur among governments, non-profit organizations, and the private sector. In the past, these sectors preferred to maintain an arms-length from each other, particularly in the U.S. As a result, governments seem less uncomfortable with being involved in decisions that have market consequences.

Recent international political changes include the emergence of the European Union as a single marketplace, greater openness of many countries to foreign direct investment (FDI), legislated transparency in national financial systems, and an overall movement towards democratization and private ownership.

China provides an illustrative example of this process. As it has entered the World Trade Organization (WTO), Chinese officials recently announced it would sell shares of its railway

system, without placing any limits on ownership, as a means to finance upgrades to the rail system and the eventual construction of a modern highway system (*The Economist*, 2001). Involving foreign ownership in such large-scale public projects depends on having reliable domestic financial systems and the belief that such decisions reflect the best interests of the people.

Demographic shifts. Finally, two major worldwide demographic influence the nature of workforce development (Carnevale & Fry, 2001). First, the most powerful of these is the retirement of the baby boom generation. For instance, the U.S. workforce, which has grown in size by more than 50 percent over the past 20 years, will slow its growth dramatically over the next few decades. To replace these individuals in the workforce will not be easy without increasing the quality and quantity of educational experience given to succeeding generations.

The second demographic shift, which conflicts with the first shift, is the movement from the smaller Generation X cohort to the much larger Generation Y cohort. As a result, the larger Generation Y cohort will likely find problems in finding adequate training and educational opportunities, given the funding cutbacks of the early 1990s in both the private and public sectors. These individuals will not be able to make substantive contributions to their respective societies without access to training and education.

These five global streams have challenged all nations to respond in fundamental ways – upgrading transportation infrastructures, improving communications systems, and revitalizing public schooling. Of interest here are the national and organizational responses in providing individuals opportunities to acquire the appropriate competence for work. It has become increasingly clear that the well-being of nations – considered from both economic and social perspective – is dependent in large measure on the human resources of the people (Ashton and

Green, 1999). Similar to human capital, human competence has been defined as the *potential* to achieve certain valued accomplishments (Gilbert, 1978; Jacobs, 2001).

The term human competence is preferred since the term can have both economic and development implications. Economic implications are the relative financial values placed on the outomes achieved when using the competence. Development implications are the actions needed to change existing levels of competence to meet needs, regardless of the nature of the work.

That is, human competence applies to all work, not just limited to skilled-technical occupations. Jacobs (2001) describes a taxonomy related to human competence that ranges from the novice, specialist, advanced specialist, expert, and master levels.

Societies rely on major institutions for their citizens to acquire human competence, such as schools, community colleges, universities government agencies, unions, organizations, among others. Clearly, these various institutions have been linked in some way, such that schools and unions have traditionally been looked upon to provide skilled workers. And, since the 1960s, the federal government has funded various training programs – CETA, JTPA, and Welfare-to-Work – to ensure that individuals had the skills to become employed. However, the close articulation among these various institutions has become especially critical. Sustaining national well-being depends more and more on having human competence available, and those areas of human competence will likely change on a continuing basis (Judy and D'Amico, 1997). If not viewed appropriately, the consequences on individuals and communities are oftentimes immediate, long lasting, and harsh.

Consider that when Bethlehem Steel announced it would close its Johnstown, Pennsylvania, steel fabrication operation in 1977, this decision marked the beginning of the end for high-volume steel production in the U.S. Needless to say, this rural western Pennsylvania

community was devastated by the subsequent job loss, from which it has yet to recover fully. In 1950 over 20,000 workers in this community were employed in steel mills, primarily belonging to the Bethlehem Steel and US Steel companies. Today both of those companies are long gone from the area and have been replaced by some small specialty steel manufacturers employing less than 3000 people, operating only with substantial redevelopment subsidies from local, state, and the federal governments.

One lesson from this experience was the need to connect societal partners at the onset, which did not occur in this situation.

In sum, these five historical streams suggest the need for a more integrated view of working and learning. Integration suggests that a system view be undertaken as a means for ensuring increased understanding. System theory provides an appropriate way to view such events as it has been used to frame other fields of study, most notably human resource development (Jacobs, 1989; 1990). However, these previous conceptualizations have limited their focus on single complex phenomena, such as human performance in organization settings. Future understandings of work and learning depend on understanding complex systems, such as organizations, and the interrelationships among complex systems – including countries, organizations, labor unions, and groups of people. These integrated understandings should both anticipate economic and societal changes and troubleshoot on-going situations. Recent history is replete with such failures to do otherwise.

Defining Workforce Development

The literature offers several definitions of workforce development. For instance, Harrison and Weiss (1998) state that workforce development consists of a constellation of

activities from orientation to the work world, recruiting, placement, mentoring, to follow-up counseling and crisis intervention. They state that training is but one element of workforce development. This definition is consistent with the perspective of the Urban Institute, which states that workforce development systems provide a broad range of employment and training services, as well as targeted assistance to employers (Pindus & Koralek , 2001).

Similarly, the National Governors' Association defines workforce development as the education, employment, and job-training efforts designed to help employers to get a skilled workforce and individuals to succeed in the workplace. Grubb (1999) further states that workforce development provides individuals with the occupational preparation necessary for employment, including technical, basic, and academic competencies.

In practice, workforce development is often used in connection with career and technical education, which has generally replaced vocational education in the U.S. Although there has been a name change CTE continues to emphasize the training and education of youth in secondary schools. Lynch (2000) identified four themes that frame much of the discussion surrounding career and technical education, which include: 1) needed reform in high school vocational education, 2) ground career and technical programs in high school reform, and 4) improve the image and upgrade vocational education into a new and improved career and technical education, and 4) prepare high school graduates both for workplaces and continuing education. Furthermore, CTE implies a continuing emphasis on *technical* occupations to the apparent exclusion of professional occupations, such as physicians, teachers, and engineers. Moreover, CTE does not include those activities such as soft skills training or job placement services, key issues of workforce development more broadly.

Adopting CTE has done much to both sharpen and broaden vocational education. It has sharpened understandings through a better definition of its true nature. It has broadened understandings by embracing a wider range of occupations that fit under its umbrella. Still, CTE maintains a relatively limited lens from which it views societal issues. Indeed, an over emphasis on youth training and education would be counterproductive if the population in developed nations continues to age as it is predicted.

Another related term in use has been the emerging notion of workforce education. Although broader in intent than CTE, workforce education seems limited in scope compared to workforce development. Gray and Herr (1998) define workforce education as ". . . that form of pedagogy that is provided at the pre-baccalaureate level by educational institutions, by private business and industry, or by government sponsored, community based organizations, where the goal is to increase individual opportunity in the labor market or to solve human performance problems in organizations" (p. 4). The definition raises the following issues of concern. Similar to CTE, the definition of workforce education sets its frame on the pre-baccalaureate education level only.

One wonders whether other forms of education – regardless whether degree seeking or not – would be included in the definition. The definition does recognize that learning for work occurs beyond the school setting, including governmental agencies and organizations, and that the goal of workforce education is on issues of importance beyond considerations at the individual level. However, in doing so, the definition fails to recognize that non-training and – educational solutions, such as improving business processes, can be used to address workforce issues.

Clearly, no definition assumes a sufficiently integrated perspective of working and learning. Thus, a proposed definition of workforce development is the following:

Workforce development is the coordination of school, company, and governmental policies and programs such that as a collective they enable individuals the opportunity to realize a sustainable livelihood and organizations to achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the history, culture, and goals of the societal context.

Figure 1 provides a framework from which to view the proposed definition. The framework shows that workforce development consists of interactions between the need to encourage a culture for learning and working for economic opportunity and foster the achievement of exemplary goals, management, and design in organizations. The goal of these two is to achieve social and economic goals consistent with the context.

From this information, workforce development comes to focus on four societal issues:

1. How schools and agencies prepare individuals to enter or re-enter the workforce;
2. How organizations provide learning opportunities to improve workforce performance;
3. How organizations respond to changes that affect workforce effectiveness; and,
4. How individuals to undergo life transitions related to workforce participation.

The proposed definition suggests that, to be most effective, workforce development programs, in part or whole, should ultimately be responsive to societal-level economic development and social goals. Thus, workforce development is a programmatic response to a societal need and, as such, should not be limited in scope to a specific organization or should be designed so that only one or another set of individuals succeed. Rather, workforce development seeks to bridge the individual, organizational, and societal interests, in ways that meaningfully benefit each other. Such a proposition would seem difficult to achieve in practice.

This understanding of workforce development raises the importance of partnerships across entities. Collaboration is necessary because workforce development programs are explicitly provide for organizational as well as individual goals. For example, Hawley and Taylor (2001) evaluated the workforce development programs run by employer associations, which coordinate the involvement among educational institutions, businesses, and other organizations to provide services to individuals seeking employment.

Research on collaboration in workforce development, particularly studies dealing with the provision of services to low skill workers, has shown that collaborations are an important part of the institutional infrastructure of workforce development, enabling organizations to development different aspects of the workforce program, including recruitment, curriculum, job training, placement, and post-placement services (Harrison, 1998).

It is important to note at the outset that workforce development activities are not simply public sector responses to human resource development issues in organizations. While early conceptions of workforce development was largely thought of in the context of implementing government programs to promote the acquisition of technical skills, such as the Joint Training Partnership Act, more recent understandings have been expanded to include both public and private sector activities and involve a wide range learning opportunities. This expansion in scope distinguishes different understandings of workforce development.

Central for understanding workforce development is how one conceives the term *workforce*, which includes the following five groups of individuals (Jacobs, 2000):

1. Individuals who are emerging into being employed, most prominent of which are young adults.
2. Individuals who are currently employed full or part time.

3. Individuals who are undergoing transitions in their employment, such as job seekers, the unemployed, and returnees to being employed.
4. Individuals who have been employed at one time but are not currently employed, such as those in prisons and retirees.
5. Individuals who have been recruited from other locations for employment, such as guest workers, immigrants, and invited permanent residents.

One could argue that this list lacks needed precision since it potentially includes almost every adult in one or more group. The goal is not to restrict inclusion but rather to describe categories that represent as many adults as possible. Workforce is not a proxy for adulthood in all cases, but our thinking is guided by the realization that all adults at some point in their lives participate in or have a relationship with being in the workforce. Such an insight is critical for a complete view of workforce development and its implications.

For instance, during World War Two, many women were hired to work in manufacturing production operations, a hiring decision that had not ever happed before in US industry. As the war ended, most of these women were replaced by returning servicemen. Although the women were employed for brief periods only, they represented a unique workforce development challenge that would have important consequence at both the societal and organization levels. The federally sponsored Training Within Industry (TWI) project came about in large part to address the issue of private-sector organizations hiring and training individuals who had limited industrial work experience (Dooley, 1945).

The following list illustrates examples of workforce development programs that have relatively defined outcomes and which link to broader societal expectations:

- Schools delivering adult education, basic skills training, or high school equivalency programs;
- Schools delivering vocational education programs for youth.
- Labor unions conducting dislocated worker training and apprenticeship programs;
- State-sponsored one-stop centers connecting individuals with job search training and skills training;
- Intermediary organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce, becoming involved in school-to-work partnerships.
- Organizations offering employee development, career development, and organization development programs.

Admittedly, not every workforce development program by itself can achieve broad outcomes. But, if workforce development is the goal, planners should strive to view the broader context in which each program exists. In this regard, Kaufman (1998) suggests that greater attention should be given to the mega-level – or societal level – of educational planning. Taking on any view that restricts the level of planning makes it less probable for any one set of outcomes to be fully realized.

Implications for Future Practice and Theory

There are critical implications for practice and research when considering workforce development. Specifically, implications for practice are the following three related points:

First, educational professionals and policy makers working in various settings – organizations, agencies, and schools – should plan workforce development programs, keeping in mind that the programs should connect somehow with another level of related goals. For

instance, government-sponsored dislocated worker programs should logically have their own program goals and they should have explicitly stated societal goals beyond the program goals, even though the societal goals cannot possibly be controlled to the same extent as the program goals. Nevertheless, reconciling different sets of goals is a defining feature of an integrated perspective of workforce development.

Second, professionals should select criteria for judging the effectiveness of programs using both proximal and distal criteria. That is, the achievement of immediate program goals – such as the number of graduates from a training program – is only one way of determining program success. Long-term criteria should also be considered in terms of the impact of the program downstream.

Finally, professionals need to have both an identity to their own roles – HRD specialist, adult educator, or vocational educator – plus an identity to workforce development in a broader sense. Increasingly, there is less room for silo thinking among professional groups, especially when the economic and social well-being of a community is at stake. Everyday demands require that areas of practice become more blurred and less distinct, which is desirable for achieving important a wider range of workforce development outcomes.

In terms of theory and research, there seem two major implications. First, there is now the possibility of developing theory and framing research studies that recognize the interrelationships among social phenomena. Scholars in one field would be encouraged to borrow theoretical perspectives from related fields. For example, career and technical education researchers could rely on the return-on-investment perspectives from the human resource development field. Deriving theory from one field to other fields has the potential to yield much

new information, which would not be available otherwise. How to encourage such scholarly exchanges within the context of workforce development is an issue of critical importance.

Finally, the emergence of workforce development has encouraged the rethinking of graduate education. More often than not, programs of human resource development, adult education, and vocational education have been placed together for the sake of administrative convenience. Unfortunately, when these programs actually come together, it becomes apparent that they have as many areas of difference as areas of commonality. The question of concern becomes – what is the underlying theme that in fact ties them together.

In many instances, workforce development can successfully become the required unifying theme for graduate study, since it seeks not to limit the influence of any one field of study. Instead, it recognizes the equal importance of the fields in contributing to broader societal goals. Having each field maintain its academic strength is the essence for achieving workforce development goals.

Conclusion

The challenge of all civil societies is to respond to external events for the benefit of its citizens. Many countries face the same challenge of responding to issues related to working and learning. This paper proposes that workforce development policies, programs, and activities should be considered from an integrated perspective. No other current perspective offers the same promise of ensuring economic well-being and social justice.

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Figure 1: Workforce Development Framework