

“Making Space” for the voice of labor within a NHRD discourse.

*John David Truty
Northern Illinois University*

A panel discussion intended to extend the articulation and expand the meaning of NHRD. Within this discussion questions will be asked of the discussants that are intended to provoke, amongst themselves and audience, possibilities for future research intended to enhance and extend an evolving notion of NHRD. This panel will have a composition that is strongly from within a labor perspective that is, labor and community activism, industrial-labor relations and labor union representation.

Keywords: NHRD, Labor representation,

This panel discussion is intended to stimulate discussion of the emerging discourse of NHRD amongst the panelists and the audience; and to provoke thought over research agendas and new theory building in the area of NHRD that will draw more predominately on labor perspectives of the issues.

Participants:

*Dr. Julie Brockman
Michigan State University*

*Chris Kutalik
Labor Notes Co-director, editor*

*Dr. Gary McLean
University of Minnesota*

*Dallas Selles
UNITE-HERE*

*Suhail Zidan
OCSEA/AFSCME Local 11*

The volume of *Advances in Developing Human Resources* ADHR (6:3 2004) is a major work that is shaping a concept being referred to as national HRD (NHRD), or the use of HRD as a national policy. While not providing a definition of NHRD per se, the articles and the accompanying analysis by the volume editors give form and provide substance of a nascent discourse and its expansion.

The materials present a picture of what was currently within the frame of NHRD. It reports on what had been done, and from that, models of possible future success are being shaped. Great care has been taken to recognize the difference in national, regional and local character and therefore express the possible, within the current boundaries established by what “is”.

Cho & McLean (2004) extract from these series of case studies a list of attributes that will move a nation along the path of HRD as policy, calling them Attributes of Excellent HRD. From each of these national cases they are able to distill desirable outcomes, which are referred to as Outcomes of Excellent NHRD.

These outcomes are generally positive steps to a more just world, and it is difficult to take exception with any. Given the context in which the discourse of NHRD is being framed, (i.e. this academy and its publications) there appears to be an effort to extend the study of human resource development from the workplace into greater society itself. This extension appears to legitimate other actors. Many of these actors tend to be marginalized voices in the community (unskilled, those relegated to poverty, women and other minorities) that unless supported with resolve, the dominant power structure will keep silent, and they will remain among the “missing voices”.

John David. Truty © 2006

What appears to be missing, and possibly silenced, is the unfiltered voice of the worker/citizen. In many industrialized nations there have been programs where workers have had some input or influence in the decisions that are being made in the workplace. In these programs there is much evidence to show that the worker participation has enhanced labor/management cooperation and has produced improved efficiency, productivity and profits (Kochan, 1984). Some have framed these efforts as industrial democracy. Over time industrial democracy has held two fundamental tracks; the first addresses issues of fairness, control, and a meaningful existence at work. The second addresses issues of governance that includes the notion that the workplace (and the means of production) is part of greater society. Therefore all stakeholders, on somewhat equal footings, share in the decisions that affect the workplace/workforce within society (Bluestone & Bluestone, 1992). It is in this second notion where the “missing voice” must be addressed within NHRD. Because this volume of articles, and the included analysis, and subsequent discussions will have a significant influence on future work in the field, it is important to ask critical questions that will provide space for the missing/silenced voice in an expanding discourse on social justice within NHRD.

Questions for NHRD’s Excellent Attributes

NHRD became operationalized through leadership, methods employed, and support of the powerful actors within society. Therefore I will start by asking for some clarifications or comments on the conclusions drawn in the final chapter of *Advances*. From page 387 I have taken the liberty of organizing these attributes of excellent NHRD into four thematic groups: Leadership, Method, Structural, and Social. I will comment on two of these groups:

Leadership –

Excerpted from pages 387-389

“Leadership in excellent NHRD will be interdisciplinary.”

“Leadership will consist of the very best minds available (not limited to cronies, political friends or politicians, civil servants, and not necessarily even just citizens of the country *unless* they are truly the best minds available).”

Questions:

- Where leadership should be drawn from?
- Beyond business or government leaders do community leaders (formal and informal) have a place at the table?
- What does “best minds” mean (does it include Gramscian organic intellectuals)?
- And who/how would that be determined?

Social –

Excerpted from pages 387-389

“It will not be constrained by the culture of the country but will still consider country culture. This is another tricky situation that must be handled wisely.”

“Social factors must be addressed. When workers and potential workers are confronted with poverty, illness (such as HIV/AIDS), family abuse, discrimination of various sorts, political oppression, and so on, it will be impossible for the population to thrive and for NHRD policies to succeed.”

“Work-life balance will be encouraged with family-friendly policies. There must be recognition that with a holistic perspective of HRD, economic development alone is not enough. This is one of the major problems in a country such as South Korea, where long working hours mean absence from the home and discriminate against women moving into the workplace.”

Questions:

- The writing seems to indicate generally working within the accepted social structure though comments like “not being constrained”, “addressing social factors”. It does not seem to advocate changes in the current social structures of nations. Is there space within the NHRD discourse to entertain these changes, evolutionary (reform) or revolutionary (radical)?

- Does NHRD have an active role in social change, especially the research and theory building (i.e. what is chosen to be researched, what ideological schools are drawn on)?
- Does adult education, in the form of more critical points of view, fit into this context?
- If “economic development alone is not enough” and a “more holistic perspective is required” how might NHRD researchers and activists support that?

Questions for NHRD’s Excellent Outcomes

With these attributes it is probable that the stated set of outcomes will follow. These outcomes lend themselves to certain rough groupings; workforce outcomes, educational outcomes and societal outcomes.

Workforce Outcomes:

Excerpted from pages 389-390

“The “right” mix of people will emerge from excellent NHRD. Creative approaches will be needed to attract people to occupations and preparation programs that are not deemed to be socially acceptable, for example, plumbers, construction workers, hotel workers, and the like.”

“There will be increased legal and encouraged flow of labor across national boundaries to seek labor market equilibrium. This will likely continue to be fought by developed countries that have a disproportionate share of the world’s economic wealth.”

“There will be progress toward full employment without underemployment.”

Questions:

- These outcomes appear to be structured to respond to large business/economic forces; that the workforce is an employer controlled function. Will NHRD, as national policy, drive nations along an economic path regardless of the social costs?
- The “right mix” of emerging workers seems to smack of social engineering. There is an appearance of “public relations” spin on the creation of socially acceptable jobs. If there are notions of socially unacceptable jobs, then the reversal of those impressions should be managed by which groups?
- NHRD would encourage the flow of labor across borders and that would seem to have a negative affect on the family structure. Is there a balance or a better way?

Educational Outcomes:

Excerpted from pages 389-390

“Functional illiteracy will be eliminated—among youth and adults.

The quality of primary and secondary education will improve and be more comprehensive in its curriculum; teachers will be adequately paid, and appropriate facilities and supplies will be provided.”

“The quality of higher education institutions will improve as their quantity decreases; again, faculty will be adequately paid, and appropriate facilities and supplies will be provided. In addition, academic freedom will be affirmed and carried out with the blessing of the political system.”

“Less money will be spent in traditional forms of HRD, such as remediate basic education, proprietary schools, and long-term degree programs for which there is little demand, whereas increasing funds will be available in nontraditional forms of HRD, such as online learning, structured on-the-job training, apprenticeship programs, and so on.”

Questions:

- There appears to be two thoughts here; one which addresses fair pay for teachers/instructors. The second appears to take on the hallmarks of “learning for earning”. Is NHRD’s educational component designed for economic advancement that holds any other benefit as coincidental?
- “Academic freedom” and the “blessing of the political system” sounds problematic. As much freedom as conformity will allow. Will NHRD support human rights initiatives? Fair Trade Initiatives? Union formation?
- Is there room for critical thinking, critical pedagogy (ala the Frankfurt school or Freireian/Hortonian ideology) to be applied within this framework?

McLean (2004) provides several reasons for the importance of NHRD (pg. 272-73). Of these reasons there were several that spoke to the broadening social value of NHRD:

“If the cycles of welfare, poverty, violence, unemployment, illiteracy and socially undesirable employment are to be broken, integrated and coordinated mechanisms for people to develop need to be provided.”

“Beyond economic, HRD has the potential to improve the quality of work life.”

“The impact of AIDS/HIV on the workforce, especially in developing countries, is potentially damaging to the present and future workforces as well as the economy of the countries. A response is required to diminish the incidence and impact of AIDS/HIV. National HRD policy is one approach that is being used to do this.”

This would seem to extend NHRD beyond the workplace. It would seem that the impact of NHRD on economic development would not be contained there. Affecting the quality of life, in its most fundamental aspects, would appear to be one of NHRD's strongest potentials. Because the potential for change in society is great with NHRD as national policy, all voices must be included (unsilenced and present). Because the potential for change in society is great with NHRD as national policy, powerful actors may want to silence, subvert, discredit those voices.

Format

Introductions (10 minutes)

Brief introduction by panel leader regarding topic, and agenda.

Panel members introduce themselves (1 minute each)

Dr. McLean: brief description of NHRD (5 minutes)

Panel Discussion (50 minutes)

Questions from above will be asked. The intention is to stimulate thinking around these critical issues so that the panel broadens the constructed meaning of NHRD.

Open discussion (30 minutes)

Open the session to the entire room moving focus from the questions to the comments. With the comments, chair and panel members engage the group to suggest areas where research could be focused, suggest research projects.

References:

- Bluestone, B. & Bluestone, I. (1994). *Negotiating the future: A labor perspective on American business*. Basic Books, New York.
- Cho, E. & McLean, G. N. (2004). What we discovered about NHRD and what it means for HRD. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 6(3), 382-393.
- Kochan, T.; Katz H. & N. Mower (1984). *Worker participation and American unions: threat or opportunity?* W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research Kalamazoo, Mich.
- McLean, G. N. (2004) National Human Resource Development: What in the world is it? *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 6(3), 269-275.