# RE-LEARNING AT WORK: UNDERSTANDING THE HR CORPORATE CONNECTION

**Bruce Spencer**
Athabasca University

**Abstract:**

*This commentary asserts that the link between corporate human resource management (HRM) and workplace learning is more often as not ignored if not assumed in the work and learning and adult education literature. The purpose of this opinion piece is to examine this nexus critically and look again at HR perspectives and supporting arguments; to review issues of post-industrial society, globalization, and organizational culture; and to draw some tentative conclusions for our work.*

**Résumé**

*Ce commentaire affirme que le lien entre la gestion de ressource humaine (GRH) dans les entreprises et l'apprentissage en milieu de travail est le plus souvent comme pas ignorer s'il n'est pas incorporé dans les travaux et l'apprentissage ainsi que dans la littérature d'enseignement pour adultes.Le but de cet avis est de démontrer un examen critique de ce lien et de revoir les perspectives des ressources humaines et les argumentations qui les supportent; de passer en revue les questions de société post-industrielle, de la mondialisation et de la culture organisationnelle et enfin tirer des conclusions provisoires pour notre travail.*

## Introduction

To reveal the link between human resource management (HRM) and workplace learning and expose it to examination sometimes feels like breaking the spell cast over the wonderment of learning at work. Perhaps the fear is that this exposure will reveal that there really is no new suit of clothes, after all — what we have is not so much a new semi-autonomous phenomena of workplace learning, but a new variant on an old theme of workplace social relations: boss and worker; employer and employee; supervisor and supervised; human resource manager and human resources; workplace coaches or leaders and workplace learners.

To explore this further I want to discuss the topic with occasional reference to an HRM approach to work and learning as revealed in a typical HRM textbook. The most

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/*
*La Revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
*21,1 September/septembre 2008 47–61*
ISSN 0835-4944 

popular text in Canada at present is *Canadian Human Resource Management: A Strategic Approach*, by Hermann Schwind, Hari Das, and Terry Wagar (2007); its popularity is probably due to the fact that all authors are Canadian (it is not a Canadian version of a U.S. text) and it is very current in its content. In many ways, this textbook is comprehensive and wide-ranging, and it draws extensively on Canadian material. The introduction to the text discusses the strategic importance of HRM and human resource planning and it serves as a useful introduction to the field and to the way it is viewed today. However, similar to most introductory textbooks (in most developed countries) authors Schwind, Das, and Wagar are not particularly reflective about the context of HRM or critical of its purpose. Their perspective represents the dominant corporate view of economy and society (see endnote on other HRM texts). The authors discuss the importance of HRM and why HRM has come to play such a central role in private- and public-sector organizations. The thrust of the book is that HRM and workplace learning are not only necessary managerial functions, but also vital for organization success. A critical workplace learners' perspective on HRM is not offered in the textbook.

**HRM Perspectives**

HRM as a field of study has attracted some criticism. While it might generally be agreed that organizations should, for example, observe basic employment equity and health and safety legislation, some critics argue that the HRM function is too often used to ensure only minimum compliance. A more severe criticism could relate to the company's products (e.g., cigarettes) or use of natural resources (e.g., clear–cut forestry), and might argue that all HRM does is ensure workers' compliance in these harmful company activities.

The recent development of HRM as a central plank in company policy, designed to give companies the cutting edge vis-à-vis the competition by involving workers more in company activities, has heightened another criticism. HRM has always been concerned with maximizing the output from employees, and recent attempts to increase the involvement of workers in some aspects of company decision-making are designed ultimately to maximize company output and profit. Therefore, this application of HRM is essentially consensual in its method of operation: it assumes that there are common interests between employers and employees (a unitarist view) and denies that sometimes there might be divergent interests (a pluralist view), or that employees in one company might have common interests (some would say class interests) with workers in other companies (a conflict view). For some critics, HRM is necessary only because, in a historical sense, labour (human resources) has been separated from owning and controlling the productive process, and, therefore, needs to be managed.

The fact that many companies now recognize labour unions and involve HRM specialists in formulating and administering labour agreements does not undermine this critique; in fact, it underscores the point. In negotiations, the function of the HRM department is to support management negotiators, and after completion of the agreement, HRM will try to ensure worker and union compliance with the contract and prevent any further encroachment on management rights.

Some commentators argue that current HRM practices are much more humanistic than the alternatives, and that work in many modern companies is fulfilling — certainly more so than in earlier times. The authors of the textbook share this perspective, but readers should be aware that this viewpoint is not a universal one. It represents a perspective or an opinion that happens to coincide with the dominant ideology of North America, and perhaps the global economy. There are, however, alternative viewpoints; for example, some critics hold that most work in modern society is dehumanizing, that the competitiveness of modern organizations leads to the development of less fulfilling social relationships, and that the strategic HRM function supports this dominant and destructive activity.

The Schwind, Das, and Wagar (2007) text goes on to explain the "two greatest challenges" facing Canada are the "global trade challenge" and the importance of "productivity increases." Mastering these are seen as essential if Canada is to have a prosperous future (the same could be written for every country from an HRM perspective: note how the country name is used as a surrogate for the working population in these discourses, just as prosperity for a company is treated as prosperity for workers). It also discusses changes toward a knowledge economy and assumes a shift toward a post-industrial society. Other texts may approach an introduction differently, but based on my experience these approaches have now become common elements within mainstream HRM textbooks; the trends and changes are assumed but rarely examined.

## Globalization and Productivity

No one will deny the importance of economic globalization, particularly in respect to the freedom for corporations to move around financial capital and locate production facilities worldwide. However, the impact of globalization is often overstated as a way of suggesting that global economic forces cannot be contested by national governments or citizens either acting alone or in concert with other nations and peoples. It should also be remembered that Canada has always been a trading nation; it was developed economically to serve the needs of Britain for furs, wheat, and lumber, and today trades most of its exports to the U.S. with resource and extraction industries still being dominant in that trade. Both of these points are essentially missing from the introduction to the textbook.

Another aspect that is not discussed is the combined impact of economic activity on the health and safety of workers and on the environment. Canada may lead the world in asbestos production, but it also has more workers dying painful deaths due to exposure to asbestos dust. Nickel and zinc production come at a cost to the environment, as does the production of newsprint (all these industries are highlighted on page 5 of the textbook with the negatives ignored). Many would argue that government should toughen safety, health, and environmental legislation because organizations, if left unregulated, will not incur the costs needed to meet the needs of Canadians. It is argued that they did not do so in the past and, if these organizations are self-regulating, will not do so in the future (the importance of government and supra-government organizations such as the EU's environmental regulations is now more widely argued; see Freedland, 2006).

It is worth remembering that the Canadian economy is a collective term used to describe all economic activity taking place in Canada. It includes all firms and services whether or not they are Canadian owned and controlled (for example, Wal-Mart and McDonalds stores in Canada are included even though they are U.S. owned and controlled), it encompasses publicly provided services, co-operatives, not-for-profit organizations, privately owned family firms, and publicly owned (shareholder-owned) corporations. It is misleading to refer to a kind of corporate Canada view of economic activity (encompassing all these diverse organizations and activities) and to suggest that increases in overall Canadian productivity is a key to economic welfare. Some of these companies may be moving resources across borders without fully accounting for them, while others may outsource, no matter what productivity increases are achieved, simply to access cheap labour elsewhere. This outsourcing can include services as well as production and knowledge jobs as well as brawn or sweated labour. Even if there are overall increases in economic well-being there is no guarantee such benefits will be equitably distributed.

## Industrial and Post-industrial Societies

As you read more mainstream HRM literature you will come across many references suggesting that we now live in a post-industrial, post-modern, or even post-capitalist society compared to a few years ago (for most authors the changeover occurs in the late 1970s). Accounts vary but the suggestion of a fundamental shift in the way the economy is structured also refer to an information age or a new knowledge-based economy as being dominant, and to the nature of work as having been transformed from Fordist or Taylorist (typified as factory assembly line jobs, very specific, routine with few learning opportunities) to participatory, flexible, multi-tasked, knowledge-rich jobs.

The more these writers discuss this change, the more extensive and real it seems. But we should always ask ourselves a number of key questions: What exactly is the extent of this change? How has it impacted upon the life and work of ordinary people? Who benefits from this discourse? Has ownership and control of the economy changed?

For example, it is worth reflecting on the changes that have taken place in the Canadian economy. Yes, Canada has moved from being dominantly a primary producer of agricultural produce and raw materials to an industrial nation and now to a predominantly service sector economy, but not as definitively as it might seem. If we look at the changes in terms of the contribution of the primary sector (agriculture, mining, fishing, etc.), the secondary sector (manufacturing and construction), and the tertiary sector (services, personal and financial, entertainment, etc.) to gross domestic product (GDP), the major decline is within the primary sector of the economy. Agriculture, fishing, and traditional mining have all declined as a proportion of GDP. The secondary sector is still important and the value produced within it continues to rise in real terms. We do not eat, live in, drive or wear knowledge; the so-called knowledge economy may affect the way all of these things are produced but they still are produced either in Canada or elsewhere. Also noteworthy is the stability of extraction activity — oil and gas, wood (and pulp production), and mining (after allowing for the decline in coal and iron ore) — in real value terms within GDP, and the importance of these in Canadian trade (for example, half of all Canadian oil and more than three quarters of natural gas production are exported). Canada trades about 30% of its GDP (the Schwind, Das and Wagar (2007) textbook refers to 44% of GDP "coming from exports" on page 6, a figure they got from *Time* magazine, but that figure is not borne out by other sources or indeed by the authors' pie chart on page 15, which they constructed from Statistics Canada figures) and more than two thirds of that trade is with the U.S. Canada is part of the global economy — as noted above it always has been, from the export of furs to wheat to oil and gas, and the import of other foodstuffs and manufacturing goods — but the overwhelming majority of goods and services produced in Canada are consumed in Canada (similar to the situation in other developed economies). (Details, statistics, references, and further arguments about the significance of these changes can be found in Spencer, 2006a and 2006b).

Another key question is whether the nature of work and organizations has changed that much for the majority of workers and for others who experience them. Do fast food or e-commerce employees (whether or not they are described as associates or partners) have a very different or more satisfying job than factory workers? Is there more or less job security in the economy? Can that be described as flexibility or should it be described as a lack of corporate commitment to the workforce? Are the key decisions in the organization (be it public or private) taken at the top or are they shared with the workforce in some way? A recent six-country study argued: “In most cases, employee representatives are merely informed of upcoming changes by management with no input into decision making” (Freeman, Boxall, & Haynes, 2007, p. 177). Who owns and controls the organization? Who gets rich from its activity (for example, the senior executives at Enron or Conrad Black at Hollinger), and is society or the environment harmed in any way as a result of its activity? The textbooks on HRM are often light on the discussion of these issues, preferring to concentrate on progressive HRM practices as if there are no real issues of power and control, and as if all organizations are neutral, acting only for the benefit of all the stakeholders and society. Readers should not suspend their critical understandings and their everyday experience of the real world when reviewing this literature. (In fairness to Schwind, Das, and Wagar (2007), they do occasionally mention the limitations of some corporate employee involvement strategies from a worker’s perspective — for example, from employers “stressing the system” (p. 471) — but they quickly move on.)

It is worth repeating the findings of a 2003 report by Statistics Canada (Beckstead & Gellatly) charting the changes in the Canadian economy. It acknowledges that less than 20% of the total workforce is employed in knowledge occupations — and many of these are old knowledge occupations, such as physicians, dentists, engineers, lawyers, etc., rather than new ones (pp. 35–36). Only one in eight new service jobs outside of the information communication technology ICT and science areas can be described as knowledge jobs (p. 37). It’s important to acknowledge that all workers have knowledge that they apply at work, but Statistics Canada notes things that workers have been reporting for some time: the opportunities to apply knowledge at work is in decline, deskilling rather than re-skilling is the norm, and workers’ knowledge is underemployed. While there may be specific skill shortages, generally Canada has a knowledgeable workforce but not the jobs to match it (Livingstone, 1999) — a situation mirrored in other Western countries and multiplied ten times over in many developing economies. The cosy HR and workplace learning assumption that most future employment will involve knowledge work is questionable.

## Productivity Revisited

Where does all this leave the productivity debate? The importance of labour productivity in growth, competitiveness, and trade is often asserted and is closely allied to the workplace learning agenda in the HRM literature, but it is very rarely examined. Productivity in different sectors of the economy can vary enormously, and as a generalization, the more capital a worker has to work with the more productive she or he will appear to be. As a result, manufacturing activity appears to be more productive than most services. If companies maintain technology investments, workers’ productivity can rise; if they run down a plant, move processes overseas, and/or close plants, labour productivity falls. There is also the question of the value of the product as measured by the market; an interesting example is provided in Alberta’s oil sands. Some of the older technology in this industry uses as much as two units of energy to produce three, but that net gain of one unit of energy can be valued highly in the volatile oil and gas market. In addition, the huge pieces of capital equipment employed in the oil sands results in high labour productivity in the production process (not related to learning, as such). Sticking with this example, it should be noted that most of the environmental and social costs associated with oil sands production are not borne by the companies — they are externalities in economic terms — and they are not accounted for in productivity calculations. Joel Bakan (2004) quotes leading U.S. businessman Robert Monks (a twice-run Republican Senate candidate) as saying, “‘the corporation is an externalizing machine in the same way as a shark is a killing machine.’” He argues it is not “‘malevolence’” but simply what corporations do and is “‘potentially very, very damaging to society’” (p. 70). Ray Anderson, another successful businessman, had a similar revelation about how the modern day corporation was an “‘instrument of destruction . . . externaliz[ing] any cost that an unwary or uncaring public will allow it to externalize’” (p. 71). Anderson set about making wholesale changes in the way his company produced carpets; unfortunately, his example remains an exception. It’s important to note that HR professionals’ and corporate trainers’ jobs are to support such harmful activity and win employee loyalty to corporate goals.

I recall a conversation with an academic at a conference held in Stirling, Scotland, on European work and learning issues. He was convinced that improved labour productivity would give the EU a competitive advantage over Canada and that was all that mattered; he seemed to give no thought about workers’ living standards, problems of overproduction, transnational corporations, sustainable development, etc., nor could he see that the logical outcome of this fierce competitiveness for workers generally was a spiralling downward toward greater work intensification and lower wages.

Perhaps the productivity-linked workplace learning argument is so important to HRM writers because of the central role it gives to HRM via human capital theory. The argument here is that if workers can increase their own human capital via training, workplace learning, and, as argued more recently, investments in emotional labour, then productivity can rise. HRM is then key not peripheral, as it once was, in the corporate world. The HRM director can sit at the top table with the CEO (the issues involved in human capital theory have been discussed elsewhere; see Spencer 2006a, pp. 30–32). For example, the 2007 Conference Board of Canada publication, *Learning and Development Outlook: Are We Learning Enough?* (Hughes & Grant), argues:

> Canada’s productivity is lagging behind that of its competitors. One strategy Canadian organizations are using to meet these challenges is the renewal and upgrading of their workers’ skills. By spending on TLD

> to build workers' skills, organizations seek to create enough additional human capital to make themselves more competitive. (p. 1)

But they also report low spending rates on training, learning, and development (TLD) by Canadian organizations because most companies' training needs are modest — which is a reflection of the nature of most work and capital investment in Canada: few skilled workers need apply.

### *"Our Employees Are Our Most Valuable Resource"*

This has become the mantra of modern corporations — Schwind, Das and Wagar (2007) claim that four of the top five strategic priorities of corporations identified by leading CEOs are HR-related. What is not clear is how many companies actually believe it or act as if they really mean it. From an HRM perspective, the mantra places the functions of HR departments right at the centre of corporate activity, so writers on HRM can perhaps be excused for not wanting to subject the statement to close scrutiny. If the statement is true, then HRM really is important. However, when a company gets into trouble, it usually downsizes; often the first action is to lay off or sack workers. The work may then be outsourced, never to return. These actions may be partially determined by market circumstances, but whatever it is that is driving company policy, whenever this happens, it should call into question the assertion that "employees are our most valuable resource."

Some organizations may well believe that the company's competitive advantage depends on a happy and committed workforce and may work towards that end (full-time employees, higher skills, job flexibility, workplace learning), but others may equally believe that tight control of labour costs combined with close supervision over employees is the road to success (low paid, part-time employees, routine jobs); both approaches can work "equally well" (Bratton, Helms-Mills, Pyrch, & Sawchuk, 2004, p. 71). Being an HR professional in the first organization may well be more satisfying than in the second. It is worth adding that survey material reveals that empowering workers does not generally affect the corporate bottom line as imagined by many authors, although more say and participation at work can influence employee loyalty (Freeman et al., 2007).

It may be the case that the organization works hard to involve its employees — perhaps referring to them as "associates" or "partners" and developing open door policies, etc. — but it does not follow that they will be well-rewarded. An article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Zimmerman, 2004) under the headline "Costco's Dilemma: Be Kind To Its Workers, or Wall Street?" contrasts Costco's more generous salary and benefits package to that of Wal-Mart's "parsimonious approach to employee compensation." According to the article, some analysts and investors claim Costco's generosity to its employees is at the expense of shareholders and that shareholders' interests come first (in law, shareholders have no responsibility to other stakeholders). Wal-Mart is renowned for its policy of driving down supplier costs regardless of the impact that has on the workers in less developed economies who are making the products for its stores in North America. Its aggressive marketing (big box stores), low wage policies, and anti-unionism have met opposition in North America, but its shareholders are happy: earnings per share are significantly higher than at Costco. Again, HRM professionals work in both companies.

### *Learning Organizational Culture*

I have discussed previously the importance of understanding that workers have always learned at work; this is not a new phenomena. What they have learned has always been diverse; for example, it ranges from learning about the job and how to do the work, to how to relate to fellow workers, supervisors, and bosses (the social relations of work), to gaining understanding about the nature of work itself and how work impacts society (Spencer, 2006a, 2006b).

It is also important to note that workers, generally speaking, have always tried to make meaning out of their work experiences. It's difficult for someone to spend eight hours a day, five days a week, doing something in a totally detached way, and even more difficult if a person hates every minute of it. Read any account of workers describing their work and this becomes clear. Workers have always wanted to do a good job, even if that job is menial; the new emphasis on workplace learning should not mask that pre-existing situation. In addition, a recent survey of workers in six primarily English-speaking countries reported that workers in all countries want to have a greater say in company decision-making and participatory processes (Freeman et al., 2007).

However, workers are encouraged to learn about what is useful for the employer. It is clear that some of their learning may contribute to a "culture of silence" (Freire, 1970), to an acceptance of the way things are. Workers may learn to accept the dominant ideology that supports management rights; for example, the idea that we are all part of a global economy and must strive to out-compete others to survive. This is the mantra taught to HR managers — "there is no alternative." (A good example of this workplace learning is provided in the Michael Moore film *Sicko* when he interviews a couple of former U.S. insurance/HMO executives who explain how they learned to deal with clients making insurance claims. Basically, they learned how to undermine these claims and make them ineligible. As one interviewee explained, the more they learned and the more successful they became at preventing claims, the more they were rewarded with higher salaries.)

To ignore power and authority at work is to ignore the realities of what it is to be an employee. Organizational culture is determined by management, and learning about that culture is learning to accept it. It is worth repeating that this perspective is also evident in Senge's (1990) early claim that these new HRM policies create a "sense of shared ownership" and control of the enterprise (p. 13). This perspective was restated recently by Eric Newell (former chairman and CEO of Syncrude Canada Ltd. and chancellor of the University of Alberta) when he commented, "'really, what we are trying to do is engage people to get them thinking like owners of the business'" (quoted in Schwind et al., 2007, p. 471) All this may appear innocent but a "sense of ownership," however, is not the same thing as workers actually owning and controlling. It is also indoctrination.

John Storey, a leading business school professor in the U.K., has commented that the "management of culture" has become a distinguishing feature of HRM, and dates the "remarkable trend" away from "personnel procedures and rules" to the "management of culture" to be the early to mid-1990s (2001, p. 8). He further comments that "managing cultural change and moving towards HRM can often appear to coincide and become one and the same project". Corporate cultural management is "perceived to offer the key to unlocking of consensus, flexibility and commitment".

The idea behind this shift in managerial strategies is clear: consensus would displace conflict (and collective bargaining), flexibility (a "substitute term for greater management control," (Storey, 2001, p. 8)) would increase productivity, and commitment would lift labour performance higher — "committed employees would 'go the extra mile' in pursuit of customer service and organizational goals." To achieve all of this means changing a whole set of workers' behaviours, attitudes and values, displacing a pluralist (with different interests that sometimes coincide and sometimes conflict) and quasi-democratic culture (with unions challenging management decisions in collective bargaining) with a unitarist (with everyone in the organization assumed to be sharing exactly the same goals) and a pretend democratic culture (with claims of empowerment and teams). Workplace learning, therefore, needs to be understood as a new HRM control strategy, not a value-free activity.

I have noted previously (Spencer, 2002) the importance of Keith Forrester's (1999) observation that the increased competitive pressure on management to improve the quality and quantity of labour input can result in "new forms of oppression and control in the workplace" rather than empowerment or increased worker control (p. 88). Forrester's observation is supported by a study of workplace skills training policies in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, which found that "the resulting reforms have had a remarkably unilateral effect: they move control over and benefits from skill training away from individuals and unions and into the hands of private capital" (Jackson & Jordan, 2000, p. 195). Evidence from the U.K. would also suggest that strong union organization is needed to take advantage of more expansive workplace learning opportunities and even the new legislated union learning representatives are in danger of becoming corporate or state rather than worker conduits for learning (Shelley & Calveley, 2007).

In my opinion, few of those who write about workplace learning adequately deal with the criticism that they largely ignore these issues of power and control. For example, David Boud and John Garrick (1999) in their introduction to *Understanding Learning at Work* discuss some of the negative impact of workplace learning's "market driven emphasis," but also argue for the close connection between "productivity and the operation of contemporary enterprises" without viewing this as a core contradiction (p. 5). A classic example of this attitude is found in Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins' (1999) chapter in the same book; they spend 13 pages "envisioning new organizations for learning" and then turn to a number of key criticisms; they do their best to undermine these in a couple of pages without dealing with the key issues raised by the critics before concluding with the desire to create a learning system "tailored to the needs of the industry, the organization, the division, and the individuals who work in this organizational culture" (p. 214) — as if these fundamental criticisms had never been raised!

Corporate allegiance to the primacy of shareholder and CEO interests (bolstered by the legal framework; see Bakan, 2004, for a damning condemnation of corporate behaviour rooted in corporate law and structures), and to the central purpose of increasing profit margins (bolstered by dubious economic theory), relegates the concerns and needs of other so-called stakeholders to minority roles. The central contradiction of private enterprise remains: large corporations create hierarchies of control and power and are driven by the profit motive; these control, power, and profit relations create the social relations within work and society — those of employer and employee, boss and worker. Society's social classes result from these dominant work relations; it can be argued that with the shrinkage of well-paid manual and office jobs — described as the middle class in North America — even in developed economies, society is polarizing into a large working class and relatively small elite. A veil may be drawn over these contradictions at times with the rhetoric of managers as leaders and coaches and workers as associates or partners, but unless ownership and control change and become genuinely more equitably distributed, nothing fundamentally has changed. It is noteworthy that Schwind, Das, and Wagar (2007) do not consider the question of power relations as important to HR — it is treated only as an industrial relations perspective — and they do not even reference Canadian author Bakan's book or film.

Changes at work are often exaggerated to suggest the move from Taylorism to teams and that employee empowerment is more advanced than it actually is. More astute researchers have argued that Taylorist measurement and control at work remains or has been expanded (for example Hennessy and Sawchuk, 2003, discuss the deskilling and "industrializing" of frontline social service workers following the introduction of new technology into their jobs). Taylorism may have changed in form but its essential purpose has not. As Tony Brown (1999) comments:

> Most descriptions contrast team production to the "scientific management" principles of Taylor. In fact the tendency is in the other direction — to specify every move that a worker makes in much greater detail than before. Management chooses the processes, basic production layout and technologies to be used. Speeding up the pace of work is an intended consequence of standardising production, services or software. (p.15)

All of this is made possible by applying new technology in the new workplace. Many jobs can be described as white collar and as linked to new technology; some are being dispersed into the home (teleworkers) and are not required to be completed at a particular time or in a specifically designated, employer-owned space. These jobs are described as post-modern and post-industrial. The appearance of worker control over when and how much work is undertaken is illusionary, however, as the new computer-based work comes with constant monitoring and feedback to the employer — far exceeding what Taylor was able to do with his stopwatch and clipboard. What we have today could perhaps be described as a more differentiated or post-modern Taylorism.

It has also been argued that the knowledge required to engage at work successfully has changed from simple know-how to "work process knowledge" — knowledge that "links know-how to theory," a kind of knowledge that was not available in the traditional Taylorist workplace (Boreham, Samurcay, & Fisher, 2002). Exactly what this theory to be learned is remains unclear. Furthermore, it is unconvincing to argue that workers did not previously possess something akin to work process knowledge (assuming that we can agree on a definition and on its existence; let us assume it implies an understanding of the production process beyond a particular worker's own job), although it might be the case that few of them ever got to apply it. But is the real purpose of work process knowledge to turn workers away from understandings of ownership, authority and control, and toward accepting managerial objectives and employer ownership of value added in the production process?

We live in societies (some would argue in one global society) in which the gap between the richest and the poorest, between those who live full lives in the economically developed countries and those who live "half lives at best" in the less developed countries, is growing (Honderich, 2002, p. 6). Many workers in developed countries have experienced a decline in the value of real wages, and they must struggle to stay abreast of inflation even at low inflation rates, while the incomes of the rich continue to climb. The following quote is from *Macleans* magazine (Canada's oldest current affairs publication and a proponent of free enterprise):

> From 1970 to 1999, the average annual salary in the U.S. rose roughly 10 per cent to US$35,864, says Paul Krugman, a professor at Princeton University. At the same time, the average pay package of Fortune magazine's top 100 CEOs was up an astonishing 2,785 per cent, to US$37.5 million. "There is no rationale but avarice and greed," says [John] Crispo. "I believe in the pursuit of self-interest, but look at what they do: they rob us blind." (2002, p. 1).
>
> [John Crispo, a retired University of Toronto business professor and outspoken champion of corporate freedom and free trade, has long been associated with the private enterprise think-tank, the Howe Institute.]

How important is this inequality? Sam Pizzigati (2004) in *Greed and Good* argues it's "the root of what ails us as a nation [referring to the U.S.], a social cancer that coarsens our culture, endangers our economy, distorts our democracy, even limits our lifespans" (p. vii). He goes on to say that CEOs:

> have never (in practice) really accepted the notion that empowering employees makes enterprises effective. Empowering workers, after all, requires that power be shared, and the powerful, in business as elsewhere, seldom enjoy sharing their power. The powerful enjoy sharing rewards even less. Corporate leaders have never accepted, either in theory or practice, the notion that enterprise effectiveness demands some sort of meaningful reward sharing. (p. 167)

## Learning Organizations

With all the rhetoric surrounding new workplace organization, the knowledge economy, and the claim that we live in a post-industrial, even post-capitalist, global economy, it is easy to forget that the basic structure and purpose of large corporations have not changed. (Unless you want to argue that the modern "corporatocracy that exploits desperate people and is executing history's most brutal, selfish, and ultimately self-destructive resource-grab" is a new post-1970s phenomenon (Perkins, 2006, p. 255).) Once we acknowledge that there are different interpretations of workplace learning, and that organizations are not unitary but pluralist in nature, we can begin to examine different interests and outcomes.

Laurie Field (2004), a proponent of organizational learning for 10 years, has rethought his commitment to the idea. He considers that the weakness in the conception of organizational learning stems first from a confusion and ambiguous use of the terms organization and learning; second from the focus on "learning associated with technical and economic interests"; and third from the assumption that organizations are unitary (pp. 204–205). He concludes that "whole organisations rarely learn. A great deal of what has been referred to in the literature as 'organisational learning' is actually learning by shared-interest groups within organisations" (p. 216).

Others have gone further. Mike Welton, a one-time advocate of the value of workplace learning as "development work" (1991) has commented that "harnessed to the money-code the business organisation is actually learning disabled. It is intensely pressurised to learn along a single trajectory: to enhance shareholder profits and interests" (2005, p. 100). If Welton's judgement appears harsh, see Perkins (2006) for an insightful insider view of global corporate behaviour.

There is some interesting new information in a 2007 Conference Board of Canada report (Hughes & Grant, 2007) that might suggest the learning organization is on the wane: Canadian companies have moved away from describing themselves as learning organizations, although the reasons for this change are unknown. It could easily be that the management fad has passed, that companies are back to describing themselves as oil companies or insurance firms rather than as learning organizations. (The report suggests it's more to do with the recognition of what's involved in being a learning organization and some companies are not there yet, but they have no evidence to support this view).

Another problem in the HRM and much of the mainstream work and learning literature is the tendency to treat all organizations the same. This partly reflects the imposition of business rhetoric on non-business organizations such as public services, universities, hospitals, and non-profit and non-governmental organizations; all are seen as dealing with clients or customers within the context of a business plan and having to apply business principles to the bottom line. Scant regard is paid to the notion of the public good or the quasi-democratic structures that govern these organizations and distinguish them from corporate capital. Given nurturing circumstances and organizational structures these organizations may well be capable of more democratic and less hierarchical control involving citizens, workers, their unions, and managers. The workplace democracy claimed for corporate learning organizations is never compared to the non-profit sector's inclusion of worker-owned cooperatives, with workers participating in major decisions such as appointing the CEO and holding him/her accountable to the worker-owners (Salamon, 2003).

As noted earlier, being a worker in a learning organization is not a guarantee of job security. It may be true that the company's competitive position depends on a more effective and intelligent use of its human resources, but this does not mean that a corporate decision about location or product development will benefit a particular workgroup, or that the rewards from the collective effort will be equitably distributed amongst the workforce. Even in cases where employees are given a small stake in the company, they can lose: in the Enron case, employee shareholdings were locked in and became worthless, while some of the senior executives bailed, taking their inflated funds with them. The decision to close a work site, for example, may have absolutely nothing to do with how that particular workforce has performed nor how committed they were to the learning organization.

## Conclusions

In relation to Canadian workplace learning literature, it must be acknowledged that there has been an explosion of scholarship in the last decade. Some valuable work has taken place; for example, identifying issues (Bratton et al., 2004) and examining marginalized groups (Mojab & Gorman, 2003) and relating these to critical perspectives. Other careful work has explicated theoretical models (Fenwick, 2006), but while this and similar studies may acknowledge different interests, they still reduce workplace learning to a list of knowledge issues to be resolved. In the process, they treat it almost as a reified value-free activity, independent of the profit motive, with the hope that "perhaps somewhere can be struck a balance between employees' and employers' interests in creating the goals of workplace learning" (Fenwick, 2006, p. 195); i.e., an HRM unitary perspective on work and learning. While this may be an honourable objective and possibly applicable to the non-profit and voluntary economic sectors, it is difficult — in light of the analysis above — to see where exactly workers', citizens', or third worlds' interests figure in the corporate HRM conception of the goals of workplace learning.

Adult education discussions of workplace learning need to acknowledge the real issues of equity, power, authority, control, and ownership largely ignored in the HR corporate perspectives and much of the work and learning literature. Adult education needs to promote independent workers' learning opportunities, as envisaged by many early adult educators, in order to advocate for a more real empowerment and a more genuine workplace democracy.

***Note on other HRM texts:***

Nelson publishes a number of HRM texts including: *Human Resource Management: First Canadian Edition* (Mathis Jackson, & Zinni , 2008); *Managing Human Resources: Fifth Canadian Edition* (Belcourt, Bohlander & Snell, 2008); and *Essentials of Managing Human Resources* (Stewart, Belcourt, Bohlander & Snell, 2007). They all include at least one Canadian author, with Stewart et al. being the liveliest text, but all three fail to examine learning at work in an analytical, let alone critical, way.

The same can be said for Pearson's current HRM texts: *Human Resources Management in Canada* (Dessler & Cole, 2007) and *In-Class Edition of Management of Human Resources* (Dessler & Cole, 2005). Of the traditional Canadian editions of texts that I am aware of, only Dryden's publication by Stone and Meltz raised a number of questions about managerial rights, but even then these were muted and the original authors have retired, leaving the Falkenberg et al. version (1999) as more mainstream.

A couple of U.K. texts are more critical in orientation: *Human Resource Management: Theory and Practice* (4th edition) (Bratton & Gold, 2007) and Storey, 2001 (cited below), but there are no equivalent Canadian texts.

**References**

Bakan, J. (2004). *The corporation: The pathological pursuit of profit and power*. Toronto: Penguin Canada.

Beckstead, D., & Gellatly, G. (2003). *The Canadian economy in transition: The growth and development of new economy industries*. Ottawa: Minister of Industry.

Boreham, N., Samurcay, R., & Fisher, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Work process knowledge*. London: Routledge.

Boud, D., & Garrick, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Understanding learning at work*. London: Routledge.

Bratton, J., Helms-Mills, J., Pyrch, T., & Sawchuk, P. (2004). *Workplace learning: A critical introduction*. Aurora, ON: Garamond Press.

Brown, T. (1999). *Restructuring the workplace: Case studies of informal economic learning*. Sydney: Centre for Popular Education, University of Technology.

Fenwick, T. (2006). Work, learning and adult education in Canada. In T. Fenwick, T. Nesbit, & B. Spencer (Eds.), *Contexts of adult education: Canadian perspectives* (pp. 187–197). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Field, L. (2004). Rethinking 'organisational learning.' In G. Foley (Ed.), *Dimensions of adult learning: Adult education and training in a global era* (pp. 201–218). Crows Nest, New South Wales: Allen and Unwin.

Forrester, K. (1999). Work-related learning and the struggle for subjectivity. In *Researching work and learning: A first international conference* (pp.188–197). Leeds: School of Continuing Education, Leeds University.

Freedland, J. (2006, November 3–9). Market rule will cook us all. *Guardian Weekly*, p. 5.

Freeman, R., Boxall, P., & Haynes, P. (Eds.). (2007). *What workers say: Employee voice in the Anglo-American workplace*. New York: Cornell University.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Hennessy, T., & Sawchuk, P. (2003). Technological change in the Canadian public sector: Worker learning responses and openings for labour-centric technological development. In *The third international conference of researching work and learning* (pp. 111–119). Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere.

Honderich, T. (2002). *After the terror*. Edinburgh: University Press.

Hughes, P., & Grant, M. (2007). *Learning and development outlook: Are we learning enough?* Toronto: Conference Board of Canada.

Jackson, N., & Jordan, S. (2000). Learning for work: Contested terrain? *Studies in the Education of Adults, 32*(2), 195–211.

Livingstone, D. (1999). Exploring the icebergs of adult learning: Findings of the first Canadian survey of informal learning practices. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 13*(2), 49–72.

*Macleans*. (2002, December 30). Crooks in the boardroom. *Macleans*, cover story.

Marsick, V., & Watkins, K. (1999). Envisioning new organizations for learning. In D. Boud & J. Garrick (Eds.). *Understanding learning at work* (pp. 199–215). London: Routledge. .

Mojab, S., & Gorman, R. (2003). Women and consciousness in the "learning organization": Emancipation or exploitation? *Adult Education Quarterly, 53*(4), 228–241.

Perkins, J. (2006). *Confessions of an economic hit man*. New York: Plume Books.

Pizzigati, S. (2004). *Greed and good: Understanding and overcoming the inequality that limits our lives*. New York: Apex Press.
Salamon, L. (2003). *The resilient sector: The state of nonprofit America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
Schwind, H., Das, H., & Wagar, T. (2007). *Canadian human resource management: A strategic approach* (8th ed.). Whitby, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
Senge, P. (1990, fall). The leader's new work: Building learning organizations. *Sloan Management Review*, 7–23.
Shelley, S., & Calveley, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Learning with trade unions: A contemporary agenda in employment relations*. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate.
Spencer, B. (2002). Research and the pedagogics of work and learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 14*(7), pp. 298-305.
Spencer, B. (2006a). *The purposes of adult education: A short introduction*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
Spencer, B. (2006b). What workers learn at work – today and yesteryear? In L. English & J. Groen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 25th annual conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education* (pp. 215–220). Toronto: York University.
Storey, J. (2001). *Human resource management: A critical text* (2nd ed.). London: Thomson Learning.
Welton, M. (1991). *Toward development work: The workplace as a learning environment*. Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
Welton, M. (2005). *Designing the just learning society: A critical inquiry*. Leicester, U.K.: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
Zimmerman, A. (2004, March 26). Costco's dilemma: Be kind to its workers, or Wall Street? *The Wall Street Journal*, p. B1. Retrieved February 1, 2008, from http://online.wsj.com/article_email/0,,SB108025917854365904-INjeoNplaV3oJ2pan2IbauIm4,00.html