

# Andragogy and Social Capital Theory: The Implications for Human Resource Development

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**The problem and the solution.** This article portrays a perspective from andragogy, individual learning, and social capital theory as a contribution to the discussion on the relationship between adult learning theory and human resource development (HRD). Andragogy and social capital theory may offer a contribution to transforming the traditional workplace into a conducive learning environment, emphasizing the importance of social networks, partnerships, collaboration, interaction, and knowledge sharing. Social capital provides the network of meaningful relationships that helps learning integrate into the day-to-day work environment.

**Keywords:** *andragogy; social capital theory; adult learning theory*

## Position and Chain of Reasoning

The concept of knowledge productivity describes a process that entails signaling, identifying, gathering, absorbing, and interpreting relevant information, using this information to develop new capabilities and to apply these capabilities to incremental improvement and radical innovation of operating procedures, products, and services (Kessels, 1995, 2001). In fact, the process of knowledge productivity is a way of facilitating learning of individuals, embedded in the social context of organizational teams. In this context, the statement that andragogy, individual learning, and social capital form a foundational perspective for human resource development (HRD) in a knowledge economy is based on the following chain of reasoning: HRD plays an important role in an emerging knowledge economy, as human beings are the main knowledge producers. In a knowledge economy, growth is based on improvement and innovation of work processes, products, and

services and is a result of knowledge productivity. Knowledge productivity requires personal involvement and individual learning, in a favorable social context. To enable knowledge productivity, the work environment should transform into a conducive learning environment. Innovative knowledge work requires critically reflective work behavior of emancipated professionals. This inevitably leads to employees whose shared interests, passion, responsibility, reciprocal appeal, and career awareness will challenge traditional power positions and maybe even shareholders' property. To better understand these developments, a renewed interest in adult learning will emerge, as it has a long tradition in social, critical, and emancipatory learning. Therefore, when HRD is to play a prominent role in an emerging knowledge economy, it needs to rediscover andragogy and social capital theory as part of its foundations, as they offer valuable assumptions on self-directed, individual learning and the social network for collective knowledge productivity. This perspective should be seen in the broader context of the emerging knowledge economy, which implies that traditional economic factors, such as monetary capital, physical labor, and raw material, are becoming less important in comparison to the capability of adding value through knowledge development, improvement, and innovation (Drucker, 1993). The performance of firms and institutions in a knowledge economy will be judged on the basis of their knowledge productivity. These notions of developing knowledge and making it productive are closely related to HRD, if not at the core of it. The argument that HRD in a knowledge economy will build on andragogy and its strong interest in individual learning, in a context of high-level social capital, is further elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

### **Work-Related Learning and Learning-Related Work**

Kogut and Zander (1996) proposed an important and relatively new perspective on organized economic activity, in which they see a firm "as a social community specializing in the speed and efficiency in the creation and transfer of knowledge" (p. 503). The basic assumption is that in an emerging knowledge economy, the character of work will change and will take on more of the nature of learning processes. Then, learning and development are not prerequisites for doing the job and for improving performance, but learning and development are integrated elements of doing the job.

This type of work-related learning cannot be planned, organized, controlled, monitored, and assessed in a commonly accepted managerial way. It is even questionable whether our way of thinking in terms of strategy, management, and performance improvement will be valid in a knowledge econ-

omy, as the traditional perspective on work and learning is very much based on the scheme of planned and controlled production in a standardized and efficient way.

In a knowledge economy, in which improvement and innovation are required for long-term survival, standardization is not the goal but the extraordinary, the surprising, the artistic. This assumption does not only affect managerial thinking but also will have an influence on our perception of the role of almost every employee and knowledge worker. As a result, one of the arguments in the upcoming debate is that the required knowledge for improvement and innovation is basically an individual, subjective competence. However, the authors will argue that learning in teams and a conducive organizational learning climate provide the necessary social context for individual knowing. The knowledge economy will probably request the autonomous, independent individual to undertake learning for personal growth (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), whereas this will happen in a context of communicative rationality: a process of reaching understanding through the cooperative negotiation of common definitions of a situation (Habermas, 1984). Here, the paradox of emancipation comes into play. Howell (2001) observed that when workers become active participants in process improvement, they also take on more responsibility. In doing so, they inevitably start questioning whether their interests match the interests of the organization.

Knowledge development, improvement, and innovation require a high level of personal involvement of employees. This capability cannot exist without critical reflection and emancipation. Following Brookfield (1987), Freire (1970), Habermas (1984), and Van Woerkom (2003), emancipation is understood as the critical questioning of dominant values and the capability to influence these values. Emancipated employees will critically examine the corporate goals, the ethics of governance, and shareholder property of their knowledge work. In a knowledge economy, corporate success and individual emancipation will be difficult to separate. However, are top managers and shareholders able and prepared to pay this price for sustainable economic growth?

### **Individual Knowing at the Basis of Knowledge Productivity**

From such a perspective, it is evident that the focus in HRD should shift from the organization to the individual, to individual learning, objectives, motivation, and conditions. If individual knowing is at the center of the knowledge-productive workplace, it should also be accepted that "you cannot be smart against your will" (Kessels, 2002, p. 46). Then, work-related learning inevitably comprises reflection, learning from mistakes, critical

opinion sharing, challenging groupthink, asking for feedback, experimenting, knowledge sharing, and career awareness. These characteristics of critical reflective work behavior, as described and investigated by Van Woerkom (2003), point toward an emancipated, autonomous professional as the main protagonist in a knowledge-intensive work environment.

When the knowledge economy thrives on the basis of individual learning and critical knowing, this has major implications for organizing work, creating knowledge networks, and promoting professional development. Such work environments should encourage employees to become self-directed learners "to pursue their interests, to find personal meaning, and to adapt to and change their life circumstances. . . . Adult learners are assumed to be capable of framing their own choices, reflecting on their options, and making responsible, informed decisions that serve their interest" (Percival, 1996, p. 138).

The notion of self-directed, individual learning forms the core of andragogy. For the design of workplaces that are primarily learning environments, Ten Have (1975), who was the first to introduce the term *andragogy*, offers a valuable framework for interventions promoting adult learning. Knowles (1980) and Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (1998) further developed the set of assumptions on which andragogy has been based. Important elements are the facilitators' responsibility to help adults move from dependency toward increasing self-directedness; the use of personal experience as a rich resource for learning, especially when related to real-life tasks and problems; the development of competence in a meaningful way; and the dominant role of intrinsic motivation and self-esteem.

Although the andragogical approach does not provide a clear delineation between what can be considered adult education and what cannot (St. Clair, 2002), its set of assumptions, stated several decades ago, still offer helpful guidelines in designing a work environment that is conducive for learning and knowledge development.

## **The Roots of Adult Learning Theory**

This way of reasoning brings us back to the roots of adult learning theory, focusing on individual learning experiences (Lindeman, 1926); critical consciousness and liberation (Freire, 1970); interventions for promoting well-being (Ten Have, 1975); emancipatory learning and critical theory (Habermas, 1984); critical, reflective thinking, and analysis (Brookfield, 1987); the direct facilitation of the development of individuals through improving the educative quality of their environment (Knowles, 1980, 1990); and lifelong learning and the new educational order (Field, 2000). These key issues played an important role in the development of adult education and of andragogy in specific.

The case for a critical and individual development perspective, leading to the emancipation of knowledge workers, may reveal strong reminiscence of the radical and politically engaged adult educators of the 1970s. However, the argument developed here is not a naïve U-turn to a socialist, communist, or anarchistic past, in a period of economic crises, following the collapse of an over-enthusiastic free market play. Nevertheless, serious critique has been presented when it comes to the one-sided emphasis on adult learners as detached from their cultural and historical contexts, capable of controlling and directing their learning, and developing according to their own idiosyncratic path or potential. In particular, andragogy had the tendency to focus on the individual, separate from the social context, promoting self-direction and personal autonomy, irrespective of the context (Pratt, 1993). When applying andragogical assumptions to the role of HRD in an emerging knowledge economy, the importance of the social structures (Mezirow, 1981) within a working community (Kogut & Zander, 1996) definitely need further attention. Social capital theory might offer this missing component in the traditional andragogical assumptions.

### **An Economic Necessity for Individual Learning and Social Capital**

In the current time frame, it is challenging to investigate the characteristics and requirements of an emerging knowledge economy and its implications for individual development in the context of work-related learning. Such analysis might lead to fresh hypotheses stating that imposed performance goals, power-based managerial positions, and the concept of property of knowledge-intensive companies by anonymous shareholders inhibit knowledge productivity. The new literature on technological change, improvement, and innovation emphasizes an evolutionary process, which takes the form of the steady accumulation of a tacit capability through work-related learning processes. Thus, public knowledge can be exploited effectively only by firms that develop learning processes embodied in a form of social organization. Even economists start to acknowledge that successful linkage between science, research, and technology requires face-to-face contacts in communicating the results of complex learning processes that embody a tacit element (Cantwell, 1999). Our analysis leads to the conclusion that improvement and innovation stem from individual learning, embedded in a favorable social context. Here, the basis for social capital as a prerequisite for individual learning finds its origin.

The basis for the defense of these statements resides in an economic necessity for an individual, andragogical approach to HRD, with a strong emphasis on the emancipated and autonomous professional. This position is not restricted to the highly educated service worker; even industrial workers

must be cooperative, responsible, creative, and autonomous (Salling Olesen, 2000). One may argue that the cultural shift from social solidarity and collectiveness to individual lifestyles and independent membership could hamper the socially embedded process of knowing. The social context of an organization should counterbalance the potential risk of unilateral self-centeredness of the individual and should foster networks that find their cohesion through mutual attractiveness, reciprocal appeal, shared interest, and passion of their members (Kessels, 2001). Traditional virtues like obedience and loyalty do not propel improvement and innovation. Human capital as a resource for organizational performance will not be enough. It needs to be supported by social capital based on shared responsibility, integrity, trust, respect for human dignity, and environmental awareness (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001). All these elements require high levels of critical individual learning.

### **Social Capital as a Resource for Performance**

Social capital can be understood as “the resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions . . . and social capital can also be envisioned as investment by individuals in interpersonal relationships useful in the markets” (Lin, 2001, p. 25). Lin’s (2001) definition clearly indicates that individuals need access to social networks to perform well. It also implies that individual investment in building these social networks is an economic necessity. According to Storberg (2002), social capital differs from other types of capital in that it is neither an individual asset (like human capital) nor a business asset (like traditional capital). Rather, social capital develops among individual actors in the meaningful relationships they create together. In the words of the OECD (2001), social capital is different from physical and human capital in that it is relational, mainly a public good shared by a group, and produced rather indirectly by investments of time and effort. It is related to mutual trust among individuals, which can take the shape of social bonds, bridges, and linkages. Work organizations are increasingly considered to be key sources of social capital, emphasizing the importance of the social networks, partnerships, collaboration and interaction, and knowledge sharing they provide. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) defined social capital “as the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit” (p. 243). Social capital facilitates the exchange and combination of explicit and tacit intellectual assets, which leads to the creation of new intellectual capital, expressed in improvement and innovation. In view of the expected benefits of social capital (well-being on individual, organizational, and societal

levels), it seems worthwhile to pose the question of what contribution HRD can make to the building of social capital.

### **The Role of HRD in Building Social Capital**

According to Storberg (2002), "HRD scholars and practitioners are in a unique and favorable position to work toward integrating multidisciplinary research on social capital" (p. 495). This is because HRD is an emerging and applied field that uses multiple frameworks and systems thinking to solve real-world problems. HRD scholars are well positioned to develop practical theories and instruments to elaborate on the conceptual work around social capital. There is a need for instruments to diagnose, measure, and improve social capital. Related theories that may be helpful for this challenge include Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice, the learning-network theory of Van der Krogt (1998), and the ideas around Model-II organizational learning developed by Argyris and Schön (1996). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) distinguished three highly interrelated dimensions of social capital: (a) the structural, (b) the relational, and (c) the cognitive dimension. From an andragogical perspective, of particular interest is the relational dimension as it describes the kind of personal relationships that people have developed with each other over time. Among the key facets in this relational dimension are sociability, approval, prestige, trust, norms, obligations, expectations, identity, and identification. The relational dimension of social capital facilitates knowledge creation and sharing, as it offers access to valuable knowledge networks and fuels motivation for collaboration. Here, andragogy and social capital meet most prominently, and HRD has the potential to further develop this intricate dimension.

Besides the theoretical advances that HRD can make in this area, HRD practitioners also seem well placed to contribute to the building of social capital, both within organizations and for the broader community. Practical contributions from HRD practitioners within organizations include:

- bringing people together, especially from different backgrounds and with different viewpoints;
- building communities of practice;
- helping individual employees gain access to social networks;
- sustaining and counseling social networks;
- making (gains in) social capital explicit;
- developing a language for people to recognize (gains in) social capital.

At the broader community or societal level, HRD practitioners can contribute in the following ways to the building of social capital:

- raising the educational level of employees;

- helping employees learn and develop as persons;
- promoting social networking skills in employees;
- furthering diversity and environmentally aware policies, democratic principles, and equal opportunities.

Perhaps more than any other profession, HRD practitioners may use their adult learning principles to contribute to the building of social capital at the organizational and societal level.

### **HRD at the Core of a Learning Society**

HRD is not an exclusive corporate interest. More than ever before, individuals want to master their own lives and expect to contribute to the economy and society. The International Labor Organization (2002) places the individual at the center of the knowledge- and skills-based society and reports impressive growth results in Danish enterprises that combined learning activities and innovation. In Sweden, the Adult Education Initiative (AEI) is the largest adult education investment initiative ever undertaken in the country and explicitly puts the focus on the individual. In Europe, the development of individuals as active citizens of society is given a central place in statements of learning and education objectives (Commission of the European Communities, 1996). Learning opportunities and decent work underpin individuals' independence, self-respect, and well-being and, therefore, is a key to overall quality of life. The European Council held a special meeting on March 23-24, 2000 in Lisbon to agree on a new strategic goal for the Union to strengthen employment, economic reform, and social cohesion as part of the knowledge-based economy. Investing in people is the focal point in the Union's policies, not only to play an important role in such knowledge economy but also to resolve existing social problems of unemployment, social exclusion, and poverty. Economic growth, innovation, social cohesion, and lifelong learning are considered as inseparable (Lisbon European Council, 2000). The 2002 European Council in Barcelona stressed the importance of education and training in the achievement of the Lisbon ambitions by setting a new overall goal: "to make Europe's education and training systems a world quality reference by 2010" (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). These policies put HRD at the core of a knowledge economy and a learning society.

### **Implications for HRD research**

Although the notions of the knowledge economy and social capital get ample support in the policy arena, further research is needed to provide a scientific base for judging the claims being made. So far, the topic of social capital has been relatively under-researched in the field of HRD. A first



important task in this respect is to develop measurements for (gains in) social capital. How can social capital be made explicit, recognized, and measured as objectively as possible? A second crucial area of research is governance, management, and development of social networks in and around work organizations. These are the main carriers of social capital, yet we know relatively little about the way they may be supported and employed effectively. The work of Wenger (1998) on building communities of practice can be regarded as an important inspiration for this type of research. Combining the first and second lines of research, a third area is research into the impact of the development of social networks on social capital in the company. How and to what extent can HRD affect organizations' social capital? And, finally, a fourth line of research should stretch beyond corporate boundaries to study the impact on the broader community and society. What is the contribution of HRD to the advancement of diversity, equal opportunities, workplace democracy, and so forth? How does the development of social networks within the organization help employees raise their educational level, their learning and networking skills, and their development as persons who are part of a larger community? Ultimately, the reciprocal relationships between individual growth, corporate well-being, and community development in a knowledge economy need to be better understood. The notion of social capital and the ideas from social capital theory are useful in contributing to providing that understanding.

## Conclusion

Andragogy and social capital theory offer a combined and interesting perspective for learning and development in a knowledge economy. They provide assumptions on the facilitation of learning in the workplace, the strong motivational aspects of self-directedness and autonomy in competence development, and the network of meaningful relationships that helps learning integrate in the social context of the day-to-day work environment. This article elaborates on the argument that andragogy and social capital theory are paired and should be considered as part of the foundations of HRD. There will be a specific reference to the critical and emancipatory aspects of the adult learning tradition. Such a position is not instigated by political convictions but is a result of the analysis of the characteristics of an emerging knowledge economy.

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