This paper seeks to examine postmodern organisational thinking and to review the practice of human resource development in organisations in terms of postmodernism. In doing this, postmodern views on truth and perception, discipline and power, diversity and differences, and the struggle between pre-modern, modern and postmodern discourses, are discussed. It is suggested that human resource development functions can be used as a coercive, disempowering tool designed to reinforce existing organisational and social power structures. In contrast to this, meeting the challenge of the emerging postmodern organisation means that human resource development practitioners must consider the need to develop personal wisdom, values and knowledge in their organisations, to recognise differences, remove inequalities and create opportunities for marginalised voices to be heard.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, postmodern debates have dominated cultural and intellectual discussions in a range of fields. The growth of new types of information, technology and knowledge in contemporary society have produced what has been termed the 'postmodern era' (Best & Keller 1991). More recently, postmodernism has started to enter the realm of organisation studies and the term is being used increasingly (Parker 1992; Carter & Jackson 1990). My aim in this paper is to review how postmodern thought and the emergence of the discourse of postmodern organisations influences the way the human resource development (HRD) function in organisations can be viewed. When discussing human resource development, I am referring to the organisational practice of having a group or function that is responsible for facilitating and monitoring learning in the workplace and attempting to increase the organisation's learning capacity (Watkins & Marsick 1992). Narrowly defined, this includes activities such as employee induction and orientation, training, management education and career development.

To start this review by making a concise and decisive definition of 'postmodernism', 'postmodern' or 'postmodernity' would be problematic. These terms have been associated with a range of meanings (Hassard 1993) and are the subject of significant debate (Bagnall 1994a).
This debate results from the essentially ‘preparadigmatic’ (Bergquist 1993) or ‘antiparadigmatic’ nature of postmodernism. Postmodernism represents a crisis in modern culture rather than another modernist cycle—this crisis is not yet resolved. As Bergquist points out, ‘the central challenge for postmodernism is to retain a healthy scepticism about all purported truths—including the “truths” offered by the postmodernists themselves’ (Bergquist 1993, p.19). Postmodernism is not a discretely identifiable set of ideas or beliefs, but rather implies a questioning of the categories of knowledge (Chia 1995) and offers alternative explanations to those taken for granted in the dominant narratives of power and interests (Goodell Jr 1992).

To review postmodernism and human resource development, I will not define postmodernism, but rather examine four major themes that have emerged in postmodern organisational thought and reflect on their impact on HRD. These themes being:

• the subjective nature of ‘truth’ and the interpretive nature of perception (Bagnall 1994a, 1994b);
• discipline and power (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982);
• diversity and difference in human systems (Lyotard 1984; Boje & Rosile 1994);
• the struggle between the pre-modern, modern and postmodern (Boje 1994a, 1994b).

Following this examination, I will present a more general discussion on its implications for organisations.

**Truth and perception**

Postmodernism is based on a critique and rejection of the modernist notion ‘absolute rationality’. Modernism claims that all social problems can be solved through the use of science. In management terms, this translates as the discovery of techniques and practices that will provide ‘truths’ that are true in all circumstances (Carter & Jackson 1990). The modernist premise is the belief that there exists a firm external reality that is ‘out there’ to be discovered, used and exploited for the benefit of society.
Postmodern thinkers have argued that modernist scientific approaches have not achieved the promise of solving social problems and question the existence of absolute truth. Bagnall (1994a) sees postmodernist culture as being informed by the belief that all perception is interpretive in its nature. Interpreting the world around us is a matter of value, not a matter of fact. Rejecting the notion of timeless truth and meaning, postmodernism sees meaning as being individually and socially constructed from a perception of the 'real world'.

Cunningham (1990) criticises modernist management development as being based on classroom empiricism implemented using seemingly practical techniques such as simulations, tests and questionnaires. This supports the view that a trainer is teaching truths about management. He goes on to say that postmodern management development should concern itself with the development of 'wise' managers who can integrate values and knowledge. Looking at this practically, management education needs to question modern ideas of the pre-defined versions of right and wrong and focus on the development of wisdom rather than the learning of truths. In conclusion, Cunningham sees that through self-managed learning methods, management education should provide structures to allow managers to come to terms with their own values and ideals, appraise their experience and set goals as the basis for action and problem solving.

Interestingly, Cunningham focusses closely on management development. However, the notion of management is a modernist construct. White and Jacques (1995) point out that in the modern organisation, the task of 'managing' to get the work done is the task of a specific sub-class of employees called management. In the postmodern context, they question whether management could be more than just the work of these managers. From this point of view, we can see that HRD's latent role of facilitating the development of wisdom is not reserved for the modernist management elite and is of value to potentially all members of the organisation. Postmodern organisations are not characterised by two easily distinguished groups of managers (who make decisions and give orders) and workers (who mechanically enact decisions and follow orders). Instead, conformity to a 'cult of efficiency' is replaced with the deconstruction of conformity and a framework of differences (Boje 1994a). In order to manage the differences, values, knowledge and wisdom can be recognised throughout the organisation.
Accepting the modernist view that there exists an externally verifiable social truth leads organisations to promote the knowledge, understanding and acceptance of that truth. This is done through a process of indoctrination and superficial consensus. Recognising this, Letiche (1990) expands to say that training in organisations has as its focus the reinforcement of a positive consensual message sanctioned by the organisation over and above the encouragement of learning. Training becomes a mechanism for creating conformity, promoting a false sense of meaning and ensuring mindless compliance. The people in organisations become passive participants rather than actors.

**Discipline and power**

Foucault sees that the rationality of modernism is a coercive force that represses people's social and psychic existence. The modern era has seen the growth of regimes of power and knowledge that are designed to control human behaviour (Best & Keller 1991). In organisations, discipline objectifies people and makes them the 'instrument of its exercise' through procedures of work distribution and training. This combines into 'examinations'—the central technique for exercising disciplinary power at work. Such examinations are exercised through the surveillance and total observation of workers to ensure that they are enacting the detailed prescriptions set for how they should behave at work. Failure to conform results in disciplinary action (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982).

Power in the modernist organisation is exercised to reward conformity and penalise resistance. In contrast, Lyotard (1984) valorises the postmodern ideals of heterogeneity, plurality, innovation, local rules and prescriptions agreed by participants. Rather than through modernist compliance mechanisms, blind acceptance of 'universal truths' and conformance to social consensus, knowledge is produced by dissent, the questioning of existing beliefs and the creation of new ones (Best & Keller 1991).

An example of human resource development rooted strongly in modernism is competency-based training. As Minister for Employment Education and Training, John Dawkins (1989) stated that the labour-market reform then being enacted included the establishment of
competency standards within each occupational classification. Following the establishment of these standards, people were to be trained and tested against them. He also said that creating this nationally consistent 'methodical outcome-oriented approach' would constitute a great leap forward. Obviously, this view is fiercely modernist. Its basis is the idea that 'competence' is defined as a form of truth that is so measurable and definite that it can be defined, packaged, injected into people through training and subsequently tested. No doubt, the objective of this is to produce a workforce of disempowered, socially-created people-machines ready to fulfil the agenda of modern society's power holders. This notion of competency-based training is fundamentally the same as the behavioural objectives model used extensively in the 1960s and 1970s (Cunningham 1990). This model is criticised as being more concerned with the brainwashing and indoctrination of socially-approved goals than with education and learning (Stenhouse 1975). Postmodern thought vehemently challenges the values of such training methods in favour of a value and knowledge-based approach.

In the modernist organisation, HRD can be an instrument of power designed to promote consensual messages and to reinforce obedience and conformism. In this way, training has the objective of creating people-machines who mindlessly adhere to the work procedures and social norms that are prescribed to them.

Diversity and differences

The achievement of consensus is an 'idealistic illusion'—human systems are, in fact, groupings of individuals characterised by difference. These differences are often identified with narrow socially-defined diversity categories such as sex, race and class. Such categorisation can, in turn, lead to a 'strategy of domination'. People in one category exert authority over the others and create oppressive hierarchies in organisations where specific forms of diversity have more power and status that others. The modernist search for consensus is then merely an oppression of the dominant discourse over the more marginal discourses (Boje & Rosile 1994). HRD's goals are often based on creating homogenous corporate cultures and leading people down pre-defined learning paths. These goals can represent an oppression based on the espoused views of 'management'—the powerful elite of organisational life.
Foucault sees that organisations can be like prisons that use discipline to reduce the difference and increase the sameness of the inmates. In looking at and analysing organisations, he suggests we need to focus both on those things that are the same and those things that are different (Burrell 1988).

Modernist organisations are organised around the notion of consensus, the passive acceptance of ideas and beliefs, tolerance and inactivity. The danger of this, according to Letiche, is that it represses true choice and pushes out individuality. In modernist organisations, individuals are coerced into accepting the cultural norm as espoused through organisational mouthpieces such as HRD departments—the pursuit of consensus leads to the outcome of non-commitment. Postmodern approaches enable us to see training as able to facilitate freedom of thought and action that allow trainees to interpret the trainer’s message in their own way instead of being required to adhere to it (Letiche 1990).

The goal of human resource development in the modernist organisation has been interpreted here as being one of promoting oppression through a false sense of consensus, homogeneity, learned dependency and maintenance of the status quo power structure. What, then, is the role of HRD in a postmodern view of organisations? Boje and Rosile (1994) see that postmodernism challenges management practitioners to see their own entrenchment in the modernist structures surrounding difference and diversity. They make three specific recommendations:

- Gain an awareness of the voices and stories hidden by the seemingly ‘objective’ categories of diversity.
- Create opportunities for people to discuss difference and the system of diversity in the organisations.
- Examine the role of training and other interventions on promoting the existing system of inequality.

Such an approach is aimed at empowering the articulation of diverse voices, thus allowing for an ambiguity, heterogeneity and discord which remains suppressed in modernist monological forms (Jeffcut 1993).
Pre-modern, modern and postmodern struggles

Postmodernism has a tendency to be defined either as a theoretical perspective or a historical periodisation (Hassard 1993). The empirical evidence does not support the idea of a radical historical break, but postmodern concepts do make us aware of certain cultural trends (Alvesson & Olaf Berg 1992). As Boje (1994b) discusses, postmodernism is not a new era that has replaced modernism, but rather it represents a struggle for dominance amongst the competing discourses of the pre-modern, modern and postmodern. In organisations, this goes beyond the rhetoric and parlance used to describe a fad-by-fad adoption of the latest buzzwords by managers, to the true heart of an interparadigmatic struggle. Boje and Winsor (1993) see contemporary management devices such as total quality management (TQM) as being neo-modernist, neo-Taylorist mechanisms. They are designed to enhance modernist performativity and surveillance practices, while being shrouded in the language of the postmodern. Winsor (1992) also points out that coming to grips with the end of the industrial/Fordist era in post-industrial Western economies has largely been done by adopting one ‘solution’ after another. There has been no real redesign of the basic structure of organisations.

In terms of learning in organisations, Boje (1994a) sees the pre-modern era as being characterised by discussion through a framework of customs and conformity, the telling of stories to support tradition and cohesion, respect for elders as holders of knowledge, and development through masters, craftsmen, apprentices and guilds. In the modern era, organisational learning relates to hierarchical stratification of authority, the pursuit of efficiency and performativity, focus on progress and a focus on functional knowledge. The postmodern discourse of learning is more a matter of clarifying learning through a framework of differences, deconstructing ‘political correctness’ and reflective discussion of diversity. Elements of each of these three discourses can be seen to exist in organisations.

Postmodernism attempts to include the voices of those marginalised and exploited by pre-modernism and modernism, instead of accepting and passively conforming to the grand narrative promoted by members of a dominant diversity category. Boje (1994a) also sees postmodern learning
as a plurivocal dialogue concerned with deconstructing the narratives of racism, sexism, anti-ecology and bureaucracy.

HRD practitioners must realise the sociological importance of their role in the transition and conflict between the pre-modern, modern and postmodern discourses in their organisations. By accepting a postmodern stance, HRD can seek to create opportunities for the voices of marginalised and oppressed groups to be heard. In doing this, managers and HRD practitioners can come to terms with where they stand in terms of the dominant discourse of their organisations. Boje recommends nine ways by which organisational learning can synergise aspects of the three competing discourses (see Boje 1994a p. 452). He focusses on learning, sustainability, self-governance of work, an understanding of the oppressiveness of modernism and freedom and respect for individuals and groups.

Discussion and conclusion

In one view, human resource development has an aura of benevolence and egalitarianism in organisational life. It can be seen to represent a way that organisations promote and encourage the growth and learning of the individuals who work there, in an effort to lead to organisational and social improvement. Alternatively, training for rigidly-defined social truths, conformity, consensus fabrication, minimum resistance and a pre-packaged homogenous culture needs to be questioned in the practice of HRD in the modern organisation. ‘Modernism finds ways to cloak itself in the rhetoric of liberation’ (Boje & Winsor 1993)—HRD can well be one of these cloaks.

To take the challenge of the emerging postmodern organisation, HRD practitioners must consider an evaluation of their role in the organisation and seek to allow people to create the opportunities to gain their own knowledge, to recognise differences and to remove inequalities. HRD can take steps to allow opportunities for the marginalised voices to be heard in a forum of mutual respect, heterogeneity and individuality. Bergquist (1993) talks of the commitment of the postmodern organisation to inquiry, learning from mistakes and reflective action and the open discussion of this type of learning.
Postmodern learning in organisations avoids a narrowly-focussed activity designed to allow powerful subgroups to dominate and oppress other groups, where HRD can be seen as a way of imprinting predetermined truths and behaviours on the members of an organisation. Postmodern HRD has the potential to recognise learning as a liberating activity that permits all voices to be heard, promotes open discussion and encourages the development of knowledge, values and wisdom. In the conflict of the pre-modern, modern and postmodern discourses in organisations, HRD can also play the role of action-agent. It can promote change and equality as well as opening up the real stories and myths in the organisation. The 'totalisms' manifested in official accounts of the organisation from narrow points of view need to be deconstructed and alternative interpretations and voices need to be brought out of the closet (Boje 1994b). Then, organisations can take into account their unique multi-cultural nature, instead of focussing on strong meta-cultural ideals (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994).

HRD, however, is not independent of the organisation. In a modernist organisation, all members are coerced and encouraged into consenting and conforming to the organisational grand-narrative supported by the power structure. Modernist companies will seek to have modernist HRD departments focussed on spreading the organisational 'gospel'. The challenge of postmodernism is to break free from this, but to choose to oppose from within is a courageous step.

References


