

Postmodern Garage Sale

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The purpose of this article is to question the utility of postmodernism as a contender for the time and attention of serious human resource development (HRD) scholars. Although there appears to be silence in the HRD literature, I am not alone in this challenge of postmodernism. Edward O. Wilson, renowned scholar and author of *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998b), offered the following blunt analysis: "Postmodernism is the ultimate polar antithesis of the Enlightenment. The difference between the two extremes can be expressed roughly as follows: Enlightenment thinkers believe we can know everything and radical postmodernists believe we can know nothing" (p. 41). "Scientists, awake and held responsible for what they say while awake, have not found postmodernism useful" (p. 42). Wilson (1998a) went on to say,

The greatest enterprise of the mind always has been and always will be the attempts to link the sciences and the humanities. The ongoing fragmentation of knowledge and the resulting chaos in philosophy are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship. (p. 41)

Postmodernism is expressed more explicitly still in deconstruction, a technique of literary criticism. Its underlying premise is that each author's meaning is unique to himself; neither his true intention nor anything else connected to objective reality can be reliably determined. His text is therefore open to fresh analysis and commentary from the equally solipsistic world in the head of the reviewer. But the reviewer, too, is subject to deconstruction, as is the reviewer of the reviewer, and so on in infinite regress. (p. 41)

The critical aspects of postmodern theory are generally traced to Marxist and neo-Marxist theorizing (Hatch, 1997). Postmodernism is a term created within the field of architecture (Jencks, 1977). And, beyond a small percentage of notables, postmodern architecture has not done all that well in its reach toward disorientation. Still, postmodernism clearly has influenced other disciplines—including organizational science and HRD (Hatch, 1997).

One of the contemporary personalities of postmodernism is designer Michael Graves. Most readers in the United States have seen more of Graves's work than they wanted. Target stores throughout the nation have

been hawking Graves's postmodern-design toasters, clocks, dinnerware, and so forth—all have the look of being predestined for garage sales.

In my assessment, Grave's best work was the structural metal framework that surrounded the 550-foot-high Washington Monument as it was being refurbished. Target Corporation paid for the framework. The framework was beautiful, I contend, because it followed the exact profile of somebody else's outstanding creation. Robert Mills designed the Washington monument in 1838. I live in the Twin-Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, where Target Corporation is headquartered, and they tried to donate the construction framework that surrounded Washington to Minneapolis and St. Paul (minus the Washington Monument itself). Citizens rejected it. By itself, it held minimum appeal (even some "free" items at a garage sale are ignored).

For sure, Target Corporation is a good citizen, and you cannot always look a gift horse in the mouth. They also paid for a Michael Graves-designed band shell on St. Paul's Harriet Island in the middle of the Mississippi River. I can spin around on my home office chair and look out over the band shell. Although I bet it will win a design award by some obscure design group, I am quite confident it will not come from people who must perform from the postmodern band shell. I stood on the stage. It provides no protection, provides no acoustics, and is not inviting. As I look at this postmodern structure that is supposed to get its meaning from its surroundings, I shake my head—the wavy metal roof edging (from the river . . . get it?) and the twin erector set towers that hold the whole thing up (it is near an extinct site of American Hoist Corporation's crane and hoist factory . . . get it?). Although the band shell is simple, it is not elegant. Although it is different, it is not revolutionary in any way. The immaturity and impracticality of the band shell design make it destined for a postmodern garage sale (or the architectural equivalent of a redesign a few years from now after there has been adequate appreciation conveyed to the Target Corporation by the city of St. Paul).

The contextual present reality mantra of postmodernism, like Graves's band shell, gets a bit much after awhile. This is particularly true when the analysis and synthesis of selected data by a single scholar have all the definitiveness of a "black box." We should not be disarmed by the postmodernists' pride in their lack methodology—a methodology that does not go much beyond being critical.

Do I think that the challenge of postmodernist thinking can add value? Absolutely. I personally believe in dialog and debate. I heartily believe in challenging the status quo and being critical. At minimum, unsubstantiated theory—like postmodernism—probes and prods. Patterson (1983) informed us about the utility of unsubstantiated theory:

Eventually, however, a theory must be supported by experience or experiments that confirm it. That is, in addition to its consistency with or ability to account for

what is already known, a theory must generate new knowledge. However, a theory that is disconfirmed by experiment may lead indirectly to new knowledge by stimulating the development of a better theory. (p. xx)

Even with the potential of postmodernism, I am not inclined to fundamentally rely on postmodern thinking. To be clear, most scholars and most practitioners are not inclined toward postmodernism. Steven Brookfield (2002), a highly respected adult learning scholar, recently wrote the following:

Within major adult education research journals and at major research conferences, critical theory and postmodernism are influential theoretical discourse. Yet, when we look at the field of practice, adult education's apolitical emphasis on personal development programs or on the incorporation of human capital perspectives allows the andragogical paradigm to reign supreme. (p. 96)

Most adult education practitioners find no utility from the vocal discourse from a small band of postmodernist scholars in adult education. Closer to home, I have never met a postmodern CEO. It may be an oxymoron to have a decision maker in business and industry committed to postmodernism. Trust me, the CEO of Target Corporation promotes and sells postmodern design products using rational-empirical methods.

To be sure, postmodern thinking has a role in the scholarly world. Quite frankly, I find postmodernism very provocative in that countertheories provoke new thoughts, clarity, and revisions. Even so, the rhetoric of postmodernism tires me more quickly than other forms of talk. It is similar to quickly getting tired of Michael Graves's toaster designs. The overall situation reminds me of Robert Persig's (1974) *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, which advocated that everything that was presently known was not actually known, or of no utility. Persig (1991) wrote a follow-up book 17 years later titled *Lila: An Inquiry Into Morals*. In his new book, he informed readers that what he wrote in *Zen* was wrong and that there was essential "good" in the traditional views of life. He advanced the idea of static and dynamic quality and the tension between the two. He went on to emphasize that dynamic quality by itself becomes chaos and that static quality is required to search out and adopt the dynamic quality that proves to be worthy. For example, the results of postmodern feminist criticism can ultimately raise the bar about the integrity of human beings—not just women—and that will be the lasting contribution.

In conclusion, the chaotic, never-knowing, and situational reality of postmodernism is provocative and of questionable utility. Until the postmodern rhetoric around any phenomena is substantiated by the requirements of sound research, its designs and theories cannot be trusted. Most postmodern ideas are destined for scholarly garage sales. The few that are retained will be of high value because they expand our knowledge.

References

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