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# Engagement or Irrelevance? HRD and the World of Policy and Practice

One of the most attractive features of the discipline of human resource development (HRD) is its constant lively sense of debate. Since its emergence in the mid-1970s as a new area for inquiry and serious research, the field of HRD has been characterized by a sense of openness and debate that is often lacking in other, older disciplines. In this, HRD parallels its sister discipline of human resource management (HRM). Although some continue to argue that HRD is a part of the broader human HRM debate, few HRD scholars seriously question the fact that HRD has emerged as a legitimate field of enquiry in its own right supporting a large and growing body of research, research associations, a number of international journals and specialist conferences worldwide. However, there is a strong undercurrent of doubt in the efficacy of the discipline in HRD and HRM. Rosemary Batt (2006) questioned the impact of HRM as a discipline by highlighting its obsession with grand theory at the expense of investigating the practical issues that concern managers and workers in modern workplaces. It is my belief that the same can be said for HRD. Although we have conducted interesting and lively debates on the nature of HRD and its place in the modern organization, this has been a debate conducted by insiders largely for the benefit of the HRD academic community. Meanwhile, the world of policy making and practice has moved on, and we have failed to have an impact on either. Why is this so?

Part of the reason may be found in the nature of the HRD debate in recent years. In a summing up of the current directions of HRD research, Stewart (2005) identified a number of themes that have recurred in the HRD debate. A major theme identified by Stewart is the unresolved and ongoing debate over the identity of HRD. There are broader and narrower conceptions of HRD with some commentators taking their point of departure from the seminal work of McLagan (1989) and the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) in the 1980s that established HRD as the major segment of the HR wheel encompassing training and development, organizational development, and career development; others have taken a far narrower view equating HRD with training and development and little more. In more recent times, the emphasis in research has been on the strategic dimensions of HRD and its relationship to overall business development—very similar to modern conceptions

of human resource management (Boxall & Purcell, 2003). This confusion of identity still exists (Lee, 2003). A second major theme touched on by Stewart has been the debate, very strong in the United States, over the purpose of HRD (Holton, 2002). Is HRD about learning, individual development, and emancipation, or is it about improving the performance of organisations through the enhancement of the skills and abilities of individuals? Although the performance paradigm may have achieved some ascendancy in this debate, a cursory glance through recent articles in HRD journals shows that the humanistic, learning paradigm is still very influential. Although few would dispute the relationship between individual development and organizational performance, enshrined for instance in the literature on organizational learning (Stewart pointed to the shared assumptions of these paradigms), they each suggest strongly contrasting purposes for HRD and for HRD research. At its most basic, the performance paradigm implies a unitarist position with the performance of the organization underpinning the welfare of workers whereas the learning paradigm has a more pluralist and liberationist connotation. A final theme, though not one identified by Stewart, has been the relationship of HRD to HRM. In some ways, this is a restatement of the earlier theme of the identity of HRD. McLagan's (1989) HR wheel seemed to place HRD firmly within the broader field of HRM, at least insofar as practice in organizations was concerned. However, developments in practice and theory cast doubt on this assumption. In practice, many organizations have split HRD activities from other aspects of HRM. Thus, organization development departments have been established in many organizations reporting to the CEO quite separately from the HR manager and/or director. The concept of learning and development has become very common in the United Kingdom and Australia and often exists separately from HRM in organizations (A. Smith, 2006).

A very similar debate has been occurring in the field of skills in recent years. Skill has become an important area of policy making since the late 1980s in most developed countries. Governments around the world have accepted the argument, based on human capital and new growth theory, that the future prosperity of nations will be based on the education, training, and skills of people at all levels in society. Thus, the past 20 years have seen the reform of vocational education and training systems in many countries to make the education sector more responsive to the needs of industry and employers for skill. These reforms have been informed by a quite sophisticated debate on the nature and role of skill in modern societies and by significant research efforts. The debate generated by this intellectual activity has covered very similar terrain to the HRD debates. Thus, the nature of skill has been a major subject of debate. The traditional understandings of skill as technical and job specific have been challenged by the growing emphasis on behavioral or "soft" skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving and aesthetic skills (Grugulis, Warhurst, & Keep, 2004). Changes in the nature of

work and employment have seen a growing emphasis on employability skills as opposed to traditional technical skills. The issue of performance and the role of skills and training in lifting organizational and individual performance have been particularly acute because they go to the heart of government policy and employer practice. Despite the evidence of a strong link between skill levels and organizational performance, many researchers are calling into question the direct impact of skills in the workplace and therefore the thrust of vocational training policy to increase the supply of skills when employers may not create the jobs that require such high levels of skill (Keep & Payne, 2004). Finally, the relationship of skills and training to HRM and high performance work systems has become a significant arena for research and debate. Work in the United States on high-performance work systems has shown how skills and training are a key component in increasing organizational performance, especially when bundled with complementary HRM practices (Applebaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000). This conclusion has also been reached by European and Australian researchers leading to an emerging consensus on the role of skills in modern HRM.

It is remarkable that these two debates, concerned with essentially the same issue, that is, the role of HR in the modern workplace, and covering very similar conceptual ground should be conducted in almost complete isolation from each other. In vain does one search the recent HRD literature for references to the work of key researchers in the skills debate such as Lisa Lynch, Peter Capelli, Ewart Keep, or David Ashton. For HRD researchers it is as though the skills debate was not happening. Similarly, major HRD theorists are seldom referenced in the skills debate. Nor is this an example of the old U.S.–Europe divide—the two camps ignore each other on international scale. Even in my own country of Australia, there is little dialogue between HRD and skills researchers. Although this hermetic isolation may be interpreted as a problem for both groups, I believe it is much more of a problem for the HRD academic community.

The fact is that the skills debate has moved well beyond the confines of academic interaction and has captured the greater policy debate on education and training in a way that the HRD debate has failed to do. In the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia the skills researchers have been able to wield a high level of influence on the development of skills and training policies that have had a major impact on the role and function of HRD within organizations. One only needs to consider the impact of the work of Ewart Keep, not only in his native country of Britain but also worldwide, to realize how deeply engaged skills research has become with policy making and organizational practice. To illustrate how powerfully the skills debate has affected the HRD arena, an example from Australia might be appropriate. Under the influence of research in the early 1990s that highlighted the importance of developing skills in authentic workplace environments, the Australian government introduced a new system of qualifications-based training, known as

Training Packages, which bear broad similarities to the National Vocational Qualifications of the United Kingdom. Recent research in which I was involved investigated the impact of Training Packages and qualifications-based training on the training and other HRM practices of Australian organizations (E. Smith, Pickersgill, Smith, & Rushbrook, 2005). The research found that the new skills policy had led to the emergence of a new “learning and development” practitioner in Australian industry who blended a deep understanding of corporate HRD with knowledge of the Australian vocational training system and was able to broker sophisticated HRD solutions for Australian organizations involving publicly financed training and organization-based HRD initiatives.

This has been an important change in the HRD landscape in Australia; however, it has been driven by the skills debate rather than by HRD research. In this case, HRD research lags developments in the field that are emerging in response to other forms of research. Yet HRD has much to offer policy development in the field of skills. Many policy makers in skills and vocational training have only a very limited understanding of HRD at the organizational level. They often do not understand how skills and training fit with the broader organizational issues of change management, career development, performance management, and business strategy. One of reasons for the failure of many government policies that have attempted to increase employer investments in training and skills, such as training levies for instance, is that policy makers do not understand the intricate nature of HRD as it operates in many organizations. This is a gap that HRD research should be filling. With well-developed theories of HRD systems in organizations, HRD researchers could be exerting far more influence on developments in policy and in organizational practice than is currently the case. Moreover, engagement with the wider world of policy and practice through the diverse perspectives offered by HRD will strengthen theory development in our discipline.

Instead, the HRD debate seems to be turned inward to the HRD academic community rather than facing outward to the world of policy and practice. This is, of course, a major generalization, and I am aware of many exceptions to this observation (the work of colleagues in the Netherlands springs to mind). However, by comparison with skills research, HRD research has made a far smaller impression. The emergence in recent years of a stable of high-quality HRD journals has led to the development of a very sophisticated theoretical debate in HRD and the publication of rigorous, well-grounded, empirical research. Perhaps it is time some of this work reached a broader audience through publication in influential, non-HRD journals. Perhaps it is time that we worked with, rather than in isolation from, colleagues in similar areas such as skills research to produce a more informed body of knowledge that could have a more direct impact on HRD policy and practice in the future. Time perhaps to shed adolescent concerns with identity and get on with the real task of

making work and workplaces more fulfilling and productive for everyone. This is my hope for the future of HRD research.

—Andy Smith  
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