10th International Conference on Human Resource Development
Research and Practice across Europe Theme: HRD: Complexity and
Imperfection in Practice
10th - 12th June 2009 Newcastle Business School, Northumbria
University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Paper 10.1-Symposium: Possibilities and Limitations in Theorising HRD: A
European Perspective

Contribution: What is Human Resource Development

Key Words: Defining HRD, Definitions, OD, Coaching

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Introduction

This paper has three purposes as a contribution to the symposium. First, we examine the arguments for and against defining HRD; second we look at some of the extant definitions and offer one of our own; finally we provide some speculative views on the boundaries of HRD. Achieving these three purposes will hopefully stimulate debate on answers to the question ‘what is HRD?’

Defining HRD

Over the past 40 years or more HRD has been conceptualised and defined in many different ways both in the USA and Europe. As McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2001) observe, the process of defining HRD is proving to be frustrating due to the lack of clear boundaries and parameters, elusive due to the lack of depth of empirical evidence for some conceptual aspects and confusing due to confusion over the philosophy, purpose, location and language of HRD. As an academic field HRD remains “segmented, incomplete, lacking comprehensiveness and coherence with diverse theories and models offering competing explanations” (Garavan et al, 2007, p.3). Consequently, it appears to be open to differing and ambiguous interpretations. However, some writers welcome and support this and even claim it is essential. For example, Mankin (2001) contends that academics and practitioners should embrace HRD as an ambiguous concept because that is what makes HRD ‘distinctive. Lee (2001) further argues there is a strong case on philosophical, theoretical and practical grounds for not defining HRD.

Despite Lees’s cogent arguments there have been well over 20 definitions of HRD offered since the 1960s (see Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2008 and Weinberger, 1998). Additionally, in recent years there have been various for movement towards some level of consensual definition in order to continue to build the field (Kuchinke, 2000; Ruona, 2000; Wang and McLean, 2007). However, attempts by professional associations in the UK for example to provide definitions and specifications have not been helpful. The definitions and occupational standards produced by the CIPD and ITOL are UK centric, do not embrace the complete field of knowledge and professional activity that constitutes HRD practice and nor do they reflect what is taught on a wide range of HRD related postgraduate degree programmes in UK universities. Nor do they embrace much of what is understood to be HRD in other countries. All of that said those engaged in practice can have no valid claim to full professional status or regard themselves as part of a genuine profession without a defined body of
knowledge. For these reasons and in the hope and expectation of arriving at a consensus that may become as near universally accepted as possible we consider it worthwhile for both HRD scholars and professionals to continue searching for an answer to the question, ‘what is HRD’. As Gold, Rodgers and Smith (2003) argue, sooner or later HRD will need to determine the core elements of its base knowledge, and there will need to be some agreement about what the HRD field actually is and where the boundaries lie relative to other fields.

Definitions of HRD

We do not have the space here to repeat let alone analyse the large number of currently competing definitions of HRD and so a very brief summary is all that can be given. Most definitions encompass learning and development. There is some variation in the level at which this is said to occur and so of analysis with some definitions including individual and organisational levels while others include community, national and global levels. Another common focus is change and improvement in potential and/or performance. A variation is that some definitions emphasise work, occupational and professional potential and performance leading to economic and financial outcomes and benefits while others emphasise personal and social development leading to moral, political and cultural outcomes and benefits. The most recent academic work on critical HRD is an example of this latter emphasis.

Following Wang and Mclean (2007) who adopt a similar approach we offer an ‘all embracing’, ‘catch all’ but ‘non-definitive’ statement of the concept of HRD;

‘HRD encompasses planned activities, processes and/or interventions designed to have impact upon and enhance organisational and individual learning to develop human potential to improve or maximise effectiveness and performance at the individual, group/team, organisational level, and/or to bring about beneficial behaviour change and improvement within, across and/or beyond the boundaries (or borders) of for profit, public sector or third sector not for profit organisations, entities or any other type of personal, work, community, society, culture, political or nation based host system.’

The statement is long and cumbersome and that probably illustrates the nature of HRD more accurately than the actual words! It is though offered to provoke discussion and debate and, as indicated, is not intended to be definitive.
The Boundaries of HRD

As we have argued here there are a number of challenges to defining HRD. One of the most significant is associated with setting boundaries. At the previous symposium on this subject one of the present authors argued confusion with for example HRM, LO AND KM. Recent work by the other present author with other colleagues (Hamlin, Ellinger and Beattie, 2009) has added OD and coaching to the list of concepts and areas of professional practice which, depending on position adopted, either form part of or have separate but perhaps overlapping boundaries with HRD. The debate about the place of OD is of course long established but the debate about the place of coaching is much more recent. It no doubt seems axiomatic to some that coaching is part of HRD but that view is not universal (Ibid).

Resolving these boundary disputes presents a serious challenge for HRD, OD and coaching professionals as well as for academics working in these fields. We envision that dialogue is needed to achieve resolution. This might include an examination of and reflection on the apparent trajectories of development as ‘silo’ fields of professional practice and on the possibility of convergence into a single unified field. In turn, this might ultimately lead to recognition across all three domains of a need to create ‘a new’ integrated profession and discipline that embraces all aspects of people and organisation development. Should this happen a label other than HRD may be needed to designate the ‘new’ domain. In the meantime we suggest those currently engaged in theorising HRD should be clear whether OD and coaching are inside or outside the focus of the HRD identity lens they are using.