Discourses in HRD: Complexity, continuity and contradictions

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Abstract

This paper explores the discursive practice of HRD and the role of the HRD practitioner. The role of the HRD practitioner is circumscribed by the organizational context and the extent to which policy and practice are accorded strategic commitment and priority. This functionalist view of the role of the HRD practitioner can be complemented or even challenged by a rather more constructivist one in which practitioners can be seen as actively involved in the discursive construction of meaning and values pertaining to the HRD arena, both for themselves and for those organizational members who participate in HRD interventions. This exploratory working paper is based on an interpretative research process involving 20 HRD professionals with the purpose of uncovering contradictory discourses of HRD with which professionals engage to both advance the ‘cause’ of HRD with different sets of stakeholders and to rationalize the role of HRD to both organizational members and themselves. The key findings are that this is a complex and multilayered process, influenced by organizational settings, personal values and perceptions of the role.

Key words

HRD professionals, interpretative enquiry, social constructivism, HRD role and function
Introduction

Prevailing literature suggests key determinants of HRD can be understood in terms of its integration with wider HR practice (appraisal, reward, career advancement) and also the extent to which it has senior management support (Woodall and Winstanley 1998; Gold et al 2010). In this construction HRD policy and practice is effectively advanced by practitioners according to organizational contingencies and drawing predominantly on vocabularies associated with functionalist concerns. Elsewhere however, it has been argued that the HRD arena is one in which there are a competing range of stakeholders with a plurality of interests (Burgoyne, 1997) which can be conceptualised in rather more political terms. Within this conceptualization, HRD practitioners can be understood as a specific set of stakeholders in the HRD arena promoting HRD policy and practice from a range of personal, organizational and professional interests. As noted by Garavan et al (1998),

“HRD can be construed by different groups of organizational actors in different ways...These include strategic, processual, practical and functional meanings” (Garavan et al. 1998: 114).

Sambrook has observed the value of exploring HRD from discursive and social constructivist perspectives (2000; 2007) but Mabey and Finch-Lees (2008: 77) have suggested that such research is as yet rather limited. Nevertheless there is an emergent body of research suggesting that HRD professionals deploy a variety of discursive devices from which to advance the case of HRD (Clarke et al. 2008: 833). More recently Kellie (2012) suggests that in addition to presenting organizationally acceptable discourses, HRD practitioners also adhere to discourses that are more values-orientated, linked to personal belief systems, ethical concerns and material interests. For example, perhaps subscribing to what Gold and Smith
(2003) call the ‘learning movement’ which in some cases may also be attached to emancipatory and humanistic discourses of learning. This discourse posits learning as the means by which individuals achieve personal and social enlightenment in ways circumscribed by ‘enlightenment’ views of knowledge and progress. Alternatively, HRD practitioners may adhere more strongly to more performative discourses of strategic HRD to advance not only HRD practice but as a means of justifying their own professional positioning within the organizational context (Legge et al 2007).

Consequently practitioner discourses concerning HRD can be understood as multi-layered, orientated on the one hand to justifying HRD policy and practice in organizationally acceptable vocabularies and on the other, in terms of the specific concerns, values, principles and ethics privately adhered to by practitioners. Moreover this conceptualisation of discursive complexity offers the possibility that private rationales for HRD can be understood as complementary to public ones or perhaps, more significantly, from a critical perspective they can in some cases be contradictory. For example, when a private belief in HRD’s emancipatory potential is a key personal driver but where HRD practice serves to reinforce organizational inequalities, how do practitioners make sense of their roles amid such contradictions? It is this complexity that is the chief concern of this paper. Thus the aims of this paper are to:-

- Identify and explore the discourses drawn on by HRD professionals to advance the arguments for HRD practice and interventions in a range of organizational environments
• Examine and analyse the extent to which the organizational settings in which HRD professionals are located impacts on the nature of ‘public’ or organizational rationales for the practice of HRD

• Surface the complexity of competing discourses which serve to both justify and advance the case for the HRD role and practice and to explore the extent to which these are both complementary to and contradictory with HRD practitioners personally held beliefs

• Discover and analyse the means by which private and public discourses concerning the role and practice of HRD are reconciled or not in practitioners ‘sense-making’ processes.

This paper begins with a discussion of the assumptions underpinning the use of ‘interpretative’ enquiry and shows to how it contributes critical insight. Further, the paper draws on constructivist discourses of HRD in paying attention to the intricacies of motives and meaning-making on the part of the respondents. In developing these findings, the paper highlights the perceptions of the HR professionals for elaboration and evaluation before drawing conclusions for theory and practice.

The methodology and methods

The methodology for this research emanates from a constructivist epistemology (Cunliffe 2003) in taking the subjective experience and meanings of HRD social actors as the basis for generating empirical material. Moreover it is aligned to conceptualizations of HRD that Mabey has identified as ‘symbolic’ paying attention to the multiple meanings that are attached to HRD activities (Mabey, 2003: 431). Consequently the research undertaken for this project is inductive and exploratory and has depended upon the collection of qualitative data from a sample of HR practitioners from a variety of organizational contexts, both public and private sectors. The authors have access to professional networks of HRD practitioners
locally and nationally from which a sample of 20 has been drawn. The data collection process has proceeded in the form of semi-structured interviews commensurate with the conduct of qualitative research. The interview process has involved free flowing semi-structured discussions of between one and two hours in length. This has facilitated the pursuance of a biographical and exploratory account of respondents’ beliefs, experiences and stories (Simpson 2008). The data analysis proceeded through the scrutiny and coding of the transcribed material in the search for themes. This process provided a rich source of data for analysis generating some common themes amongst the respondents for example the significance of organization (senior management) commitment to HRD activities and the ‘embeddedness’ of HRD in the wider HRM context. However what was of most interest concerned the distinctiveness of each of the stories of respondents as they uniquely interpreted organizational contexts, developed viable discourses and rationalized the HRD outcomes for themselves and others. In order to ‘do justice’ to this distinctiveness this paper selects four out of the twenty respondents to examine in greater depth, for purposes of anonymity they are disguised in the reporting of the findings.

**Conceptual context**

Functionalist accounts pay attention to the way that HRD acts to further organizational ends in preference to but not necessarily mutually exclusive of individuals’ goals and interests. Indeed because such a perspective is premised on a consensual world view it would follow that these are not necessarily conflicting agendas. However, on closer examination it can often be found that individual and organizational benefits are not always commensurate with one another (Antonacopoulou, 1999). There are many factors that can impinge on the efficacy of HRD to translate individuals learning into organizational gains. Though it could be suggested that there some possible means by which this can be enhanced, for example
better integration into HR systems and more strategic priority accorded to them (Mabey, 2002), but these issues are not easily addressed against the backdrop of the politics of organizational life. Moreover the exploration of HRD’s functional effectiveness may also suggest other more covert meanings at play in the HRD arena prompting the value of a more ‘fine-grained’ exploration of the empirical material (Weick, 1995). Consequently this paper emphasises the concerns paid attention to in a constructivist discourse of HRD (Mabey and Finch-Lees, 2008: 23). Drawing on and developing an interpretative enquiry (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000) involves, in the first instance moving away from the universalistic and ‘common sense’ manageralist and utilitarian perspective of HRD. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) have observed that the prevalent assumptions of traditional science act as a blockage to revealing alternative interpretations to those which seem most immediately apparent.

In drawing on constructivist discourses of HRD the enquiry begins to appear to take less account of what is self evident and familiar and put forward less obvious meanings and motives. Roles are played out in unpredictable as well as predictable ways as social actors invest their own meanings in their undertakings and enactments which may be very different from those intended for them by the ‘authors’ of scripts. Thus the HRD professionals here adhere to normalised understandings of the role of HRD and those of the HRD arenas of which they are a part but they also invest meanings, according to their own values motivations and concerns. Garavan et al (2007) have argued that the field of HRD in both theory and practice is becoming enriched by the inclusion of multiple theoretical perspectives which move beyond the ‘dominant neo-positivist paradigm’ (Garavan et at 2007: 4) a call that is emphasised by Valentine (2006) who more strongly argues for a more critical / postmodern contribution to surface the political, moral and cultural implications of HRD as well as more instrumental ones (ibid pg 27).
Searching for alternative meanings implies looking for less predictable themes and patterns and examining the multiplicity and contradictory nature of such meanings for themselves and other stakeholders. What are the implications of this for HRD practitioners and other stakeholders? This question implies a more micro-political examination of the empirical material prompting a closer examination of what these actors say and do. For the purpose of this paper, the discussion here focuses on four specific HRD professionals who are each considered in turn to situate their perceptions in their organizational contexts. Each case is elucidated on before turning to a deconstruction of emerging themes relating to the HRD arena and the aims of this paper.

**Emergent findings**

The HRD professionals who constitute the focus of this paper are: Wanda (East Council), Alison (North Council), Robert (Caravan Co), and Jack (Glass Co). In naming them, attention focuses on their identity and agency, drawing them as active participants in the construction of meaning and not simply as organizational mediators of HRD practice.

Wanda (East Council): adhering to an ‘individual growth’ discourse

Wanda had come to her HRD current role from working in adult education and was very focused on values concerning individual development. The HRD function at East Council could, on the face of it, be considered to be highly integrated into HR upstream and downstream practices with good senior management commitment (Mabey, 2002). She very much subscribed to the discourse of emancipatory education (in a general, rather than a Frierian way) in which personal development through education is a route to personal fulfilment, freedom of choice and ultimately happiness. Much of how she frames her HRD role concerns the way in which HRD interventions can deliver on these outcomes and how
these are equally as important for her as what the organization might get out of it: speaking of a management development initiative she says

“I am very focussed on individual development and it’s thrilling you know when people like Dawn and Eve, despite everything, they got to the end! And it’s changed them you know they are so much more confident and it’s important that people get that from the programme. It has to be about individuals too it can’t just be about the organization”

For her this gives rise to certain tensions, so for example when she describes the way in which some managers are unable to get access to the programme she expresses feelings of discomfort and anxiety. In one such case she recounts the situation of a potential applicant who had been persistently blocked by a line manager who refused to signal, through the appraisal process, the manager’s suitability to apply for the HRD programme in question.

“It’s not fair sometimes, it can just depend on who your line manager is. I said to her you’ve got to get yourself into X’s department, he’ll get you on it. It can be quite political really. I am glad not to be part of the selection process. I don’t want to be associated with those politics”

This draws attention to some unsettling dimensions of HRD in which it can be seen as the means by which it acts to privilege some, and by implication disadvantage others in regard to accessing a symbolic and real organizational resource (Kamoche, 2000). It is a dimension which arouses uncomfortable feelings in contradiction to the beliefs to which she subscribes. A further way in which HRD interventions challenges her beliefs concern the extent to which development interventions may raise peoples’ expectations and aspirations for what they might subsequently do with the learning when they attempt to make changes back in their own departments as is sometimes the case.
“I think the worst thing for the participants is that it is very frustrating for them because they have got this level of assurance, confidence, in what they are deciding and in what they think is best but then of course they come up against brick walls. Things are not necessarily being done in ‘best practice’ ways, so there are a lot of tensions from that point of view, like X but he just keeps crashing into the wall over and over again. He thinks things should be done this way but it’s not happening so he is really frustrated by his managers, so yes there are definite tensions for them”.

In this, Wanda is acknowledging that despite all the positive rhetoric advanced for the HRD programme in relation to claims that individuals can become instrumental in initiating ‘change and best practice’ this promise is not always fulfilled at a local level. Whilst these tensions are experienced by individual participants they are also experienced by Wanda as party to a process which promises to facilitate one thing but sometimes fails to deliver. Promulgating a ‘best practice’ vision of the organization as opposed to its messier, political reality also comes through in an example of a teaching scenario in which the focus was the organization’s appraisal process:

“A classic example was when we were doing something on appraisal and so we said right, bring along your objectives and we will use those as a starting point for discussion, everyone is supposed to have SMART objectives set though the EDR (Employee Development Review) process, but when we looked at them there was nothing SMART about them whatsoever – very vague and woolly- it hadn’t occurred to me that the EDR wasn’t really happening, so here we are saying things are like this, but then its not like that at all. Some line managers are very obstructive”
Wanda makes sense of this in terms of ‘organization blockages’ which is a perspective she feels more comfortable with, hoping in the long term that these will be ironed out as the ‘old guard are replaced or retire’. There is however, another less comfortable aspect of this which is to do with the more collusive role that HR might play in conspiring with processes and practices which act to sustain a ‘false’ view of the organization. This is a possibility and a tension that she recognises and suppresses quite explicitly by focussing on those managers who don’t have such negative experiences, as she states:

“I just try to focus on the good that comes out of the programme”

Gold and Smith (2003) have identified the prevalence with which HR professionals draw on a discourse of ‘personal empowerment’ as a means by which they make sense of their role and this provided Wanda with a powerful means by which to focus on the more ‘positive’ aspects of the process and the programme.

“So they get through and that’s great, people who actually would never have even dreamt that they could be ‘achievers’ and you see them at the awards ceremonies with their families, they look so proud of themselves and I feel proud for them. It’s just so rewarding. It’s lovely, really lovely.”

There is a powerfulness and prevalence of the discourse that unquestioningly advances a view that ‘learning is a good thing’ (Contu et al. 2003; Coffield, 1999) and this provides strong narrative within which Wanda locates her motives and meaning. The ‘learning movement’ (Gold and Smith, 2003) discourse facilitates an optimistic and unproblematic relationship between learning and development, thus enabling her to downplay the potentially rhetorical and deceitful aspects of the HRD arena and thereby aligning its purpose and potential within her own value system. Wanda’s belief that this HRD programme is essentially fulfilling individuals’ objectives despite the sometimes contrary evidence is underpinned by the fact
that whatever else is achieved or not, individuals will at the very least get some formal recognition out of it and this very ‘fact’ evidences the individual’s benefit from the programme and enables the continuance of the ‘individual / personal development’ values that she adheres to.

Alison (North Council): discourses of organizational learning

She had been employed at North Council for three years and had been disappointed and frustrated by its rather traditional and transactional culture. Similar to Wanda, Alison worked as part of a team of HR professionals but unlike Wanda’s context the training and development function was not so integrated with strategy and was reactive rather than ‘organizational development’ orientated. Alison was solely responsible for the organizational development HRD initiative discussed here. She took great pride in this initiative which she had set up and lobbied her senior HR manager for. She had and provided the arguments for it to be accepted and supported by the corporate management team. When it was agreed it became her responsibility to make it work operationally. It was she who introduced the organization’s competency framework into the HRD programme and she who managed the day to day operations of it. She was its champion, it was her ‘baby’, she was extremely enthusiastic about it, very professional in getting it started and the force of energy behind it. She had recently acquired a professional HR qualification (CIPD) and believed qualifications were a route to the professionalization of managers.

In all her observations Alison articulates a strategic purpose for the HRD programme. She refers to it as a response to the national agendas of ‘best value’ and the ‘CPA’, she ascribes its role in developing not just individual managers but the ‘collective capacity of management’, she refers to it in relation to ‘knowledge transfer’ and that in its facilitation of ‘reflective learning’ it should be about ‘doing something new with it’ in the workplace. In these ways Alison, more than any other of the HR professionals draws heavily on the classic
discourse of organizational learning (Senge, 1990; Schon, 1983) and organizational
development (Schein, 1989).

Additionally Alison drew heavily on a discourse of ‘best practice’ in the way that she argued
for the HRD programme and rationalised its purpose not just in terms of the way that it
should address organizational objectives but also in the way that it could serve to
professionalise and support managers in their roles, for example when discussing poor
managerial performance she observes:

“Actually I have quite strong feelings about that because I see the impact of bad
managers, they make peoples’ lives at work either great or terrible and people will
often talk negatively about ‘the organization’ when they are really talking about their
relationship with their line managers. I think people want to be good managers but
they don’t always know how to be a good one”.

In this way the HRD initiative was to serve the purpose of supporting individuals in their
managerial roles and identities and to address the tendency for individuals to be more
concerned with their ‘functional’ or vocational profession (such as engineers or social
workers) to the detriment of being good managers and impacting negatively on those they
manage. In this she understands HRD in its ‘socialisation’ prospects as an aid to transmitting
organizationally desirable qualities and practices not just in treating their subordinates better
but in the ethical delivery of public services:

“We as an organization are failing in delivery of public services, and that’s the
bottom line, the liberal in me thinks people should do things how they want to, but
that’s matched by an intense frustration of people who just will not - they take the
money for being a manager but they don’t demonstrate any managerial action – so I
see this as a way of managing those managers”
Additionally, she identifies the HRD initiative, in concert with the organization’s competency framework, as instrumental in achieving a certain kind of managerial professionalism consistent throughout the council as an attempt to:

“try to get some consistency, because we have had a big issue with consistency, some of the feedback from the Corporate Governance report focussed on this, we have got pockets of excellent practice but its incredibly patchy. So while we don’t want to create like, robot managers it is about saying, this is what we have as an expectation. And it’s not just people managing other people it’s about planning, it’s about decision making and taking risks.”

These are high aspirations for the HRD arena powerfully and emotionally put. Moreover they suggest that when the participants suspected that the programme was initiated as a ‘corrective’ to improve poor management practice they were not altogether incorrect in this assumption. Certainly the initiative, in embracing North Council’s competency framework, was aspired to galvanize a different kind of management and leadership style to address the problems that Alison pinpoints in discussing her experiences of middle managers’ transactional orientations:

“They [the managers] were very passive, very reactive, and their management role was a secondary activity that they might get round to it after their technical work. Management for them was about checking peoples’ leave card and ‘were they at their desk at 9.00 o’clock?’ Even two years ago things like ‘managing performance’ even at an individual level was not something that people had as an expectation. So I guess it was about trying to move, find a way of moving people towards a more professional management role.”
It is difficult then to reconcile these aspirations towards, organizational learning and learning transfer, reflective practice and culture change as possible or achievable in the context of North Council amongst other observations that imply very low levels of senior management commitment to the programme and no integration of participants’ learning within the organization.

In this scenario it is very apparent that, in its enactment of HRD, the reality of the North Council played out in stark contrast to the meanings ascribed to it by the HR professional here. Moreover, in the absence of any significance attributed to any workplace benefits and the general indifference to the participants’ progress by anyone other than themselves. Nevertheless she is convinced of the necessity of the programme as a vehicle through which managers’ can achieve personal development and despite the earlier ‘corrective’ undertones she subscribes in this to a humanist discourse:

“*Its a good opportunity for a lot of people who really wouldn’t normally get it. People come into the organization and just start doing their jobs, but this (programme) it gives them something else and a chance to get a qualification. Its a big thing, really it is*”

The lack of evaluation of the HRD benefits of the initiative, other than at an anecdotal level, points to some deeper concerns in this example. In the first instance it can be concluded that the investment in HRD here is justified at the level of an ‘act of faith’ in so far as it is assumed more than evidenced that such an intervention is of itself a good thing in relation to both individual and significantly organizational benefits. This is despite the fact that individual participants were cynical about the reasons behind the introduction of the programme as ‘correcting’ poor management practices and adhered to it for purely personal gains in qualification acquisition. Implementing HRD as an ‘act of faith’ (Mabey & Finch-
Lees, 2008) is generally underpinned by assumptions that learning, any learning, is inevitably a good thing in and for itself and we see here again the pervasiveness of learning discourse which promulgates a humanist dimension. This is however at odds with this HRD professional’s rhetorical aspiration for the programme that it should serve to socialize a particular ‘type’ of manager, one that conforms to the organization’s policies competencies and notions of good practice (Lees 1992).

At North Council the organization and the HRD intervention proceeded along parallel lines not connecting with each other in beneficial or negative ways but in other contexts the gap between rhetorical aspiration and actuality may not be quite so benign as we shall see in Robert’s case below.

Robert (Caravan Co): adhering to a strategic HRD discourse

Robert came to Caravan Co from a background in the armed forces (RAF) and in the public sector. This is relevant to how he made sense of the HR function generally and his own role in the company. His previous experience had been acquired in a context where the role was generally accorded a greater degree of importance and where HR policy was developed in relation to ‘good practice’ principles and mostly adhered to or complied with.

Caravan Co was something of a ‘culture shock’ with regard to which the HR function was minimal in terms of the importance, compliance and general respect it drew from all functions and levels. Robert was ambitious with regard to his role and very focussed on making a difference at Caravan Co. He saw himself as having a progressive orientation to ‘best practice’ principles and strategic orientation to HRM and HRD, a perspective that was hard to enact at Caravan Co. This facilitated a predisposition (Fox 1997) that formal education, as opposed to ‘learning on the job’ was a legitimate vehicle for management and organizational development. Regarding the HRD initiative under discussion here, once he
committed to adopt it, he invested meaning and value in it at a number of different levels, many of which were to do with his conception of his professional role and the development of the HR function at Caravan Co.

His motives for the HRD initiative were framed predominantly in the language of strategic HRD concerning the need for senior management to have a clearer strategy; the current cadre of middle managers to be more professional; for more adherence to good practice; for the programme to contribute to culture change and to facilitate more compliance with HR ‘good practice’ as he saw it. The programme would, he hoped, assist a complete cohort of managers to see the strategic nature of HRD and attribute it more importance.

The discourse of strategic HRD provided a strong narrative within which Robert could pursue some of his own goals concurrently with those of the organization. He had no difficulty with the prospect of management development’s rather more coercive potential; rather he takes this as ‘common sense’ from a strategic HR perspective. How he understands the benefit to the company is legitimately prioritized as the strategic justification for the programme.

“It’s my job to get that across (having a supportive culture) and one of the levers for doing that is the programme, to get people to buy into the culture and change, anyway my attitude is that we need to change the behaviours (i.e. through management development) but if we don’t do that then we need to change the people (i.e. replace them) otherwise we’re stuck, if we need change then we need different behaviours and attitudes, we need to change the environment and that is what the programme is about”

This is a powerful observation, rather starkly put, but it represents one underlying aspect of many of management development’s ulterior motives. Lees (1992:90) for example shows that there may be many underlying reasons for management development that would
generally not surface in formal documentation and particularly not those which have the
effect of social control. Behind the scenes though Robert is frank about the significance he
attaches to getting some compliance to his idea as to what’s good for the company:

“I said to the MD, that across the organization there is a very fragmentary approach
to appraisal, training and recruitment, its all very ad hoc and I really thought about
the programme as a way of getting people thinking like I am thinking. I thought about
this programme because it’s the only way to get the changes that I am interested in.”

There is also another issue at play here as Robert admits to his own agenda as part of this
particularly in relation to retaining external recognition of Caravan Co’s HRD credentials

“At the end of the day I had my own agenda, and it’s about me achieving my own
objectives, getting them to take ‘best practice’ more seriously, but the only way we
were going to get any change is if they understand more about the business and the
corporate objectives, we’ve got the Caravans Co Business Plan and we need to
achieve this by what I understand as ‘best practice’.”

It is interesting that Robert should identify his own goals as aligning with those of the
company whilst sustaining the view that it is the participant managers, who are potentially
undermining the company objectives. The discourse of strategic HRD is drawn on to
underline the relationship between ‘good practice’ and achievement of business goals and at
the same time reinforcing the HR position as concerned with corporate objectives at the
strategic level and not concerned merely with operational issues.

Writers elsewhere (Legge et al. 2007) have observed that the language of strategic
HRD/HRM can be utilised as a device to elevate the HR role and invest its occupants with
greater esteem and importance than they might otherwise accrue.
“Such language with its close association with business strategy is a godsend for the HRM function looking for status and credibility” (Legge et al, 2007: 454).

Certainly this was an aspect for Robert who was keen to be seen as a more strategic player in the organization. Discursively constructing the HRD initiative as a strategic initiative was a means by which he ‘talked up’ the programme and its role and together with that of his own.

Robert invested the HRD initiative with meanings derived from the discourse that frames HRD as a strategic activity despite his belief that decisions were not taken strategically. Also it was clear that the meaning Robert articulated for the programme was evidently not shared by other organization members who regarded it as ‘a distraction from’, as opposed to a ‘contribution to’ the achievement of corporate goals. This was evident in his frustration that the programme was not universally supported.

“So what I believe is that every manager needs to be on the programme whether they want to be or not. I think some people basically feel threatened, and there again the senior management team don’t seem interested in putting their foot down. A lot of what happens at that level is driven by individual agendas and opportunism but that is reflective of the culture. They don’t operate as a team. It [a concern with organizational development] has got to happen at all levels really”

It became clear to him throughout the programme that its role was not achieving the desired ‘culture change’ that he envisaged and one consequence of this was that as participants became more knowledgeable and confident they recognised the organization’s limitations in relation to ‘good practice’ and became a more influential and critical force against Robert, holding him responsible for the organization’s imperfections.
“I am thinking ‘what have I created’? These managers have started to be critical of the way some things are done, basically challenging the culture which is a good thing in some ways but some senior managers see their authority being undermined and they do not like it.... in some ways they (programme participants) have become quite a powerful force but not always a force for good. Change is OK but what about when changes ‘bite the hand that feeds’? Once people start to get developed its hard to draw parameters around it, you don’t know where it’s going to go and it can be quite dangerous when it comes back on your own doorstep”

Furthermore, the participants’ attempts to initiate change back in the workplace were unwelcome by other more senior line managers who were reluctant to let go of an ‘empire building’ and ‘nepotistic’ culture. The challenges the participants brought into this scenario had consequences for themselves but also for Robert when they found themselves the subject of criticism from senior management. Far from bringing the rewards of strategic inclusion and greater recognition for the HR role and himself, the HRD programme increasingly attracted negative perceptions of the participants’ attempts to enact change. This had the consequence of associating Robert with an HRD intervention that was increasingly construed as a drain on costs and culturally disruptive.

The meanings Robert originally attached to the programme were not only ‘not shared’ by the participants but neither were they shared by other powerful and influential stakeholders. He became increasingly vulnerable and isolated as he was becoming perceived as the instigator of an initiative that was ambivalently tolerated. Other important stakeholders distanced themselves from the idea that it made a meaningful strategic or operational contribution to the organization as they questioned its costs and efficacy.
Roberts’s adherence to the discourse of SHRD in which the ‘unitary’ notion of the necessary causal relationship between management development and organizational benefit led him to understand the actions and behaviours of the participant managers as being ‘developed’ in ways that were beyond or outside of his expectations. He regarded them as ‘deviant’ and ‘out of control’. In making sense of it in this way Robert is relying on prevailing functionalist discourses concerning management development which ultimately do not equip him with a more political reading of the organization and leave him vulnerable in the face of other organizational contingencies.

Jack (Glass Co): advancing HRD discourse politically

In the case of Glass Co, the HRD initiative for which he was responsible enjoyed a high degree of integration with other aspects of the organization but it did not enjoy high strategic priority despite having the support of some of the senior management team. Every change in the top management team brought a fresh question mark over the continued support for the programme. Jack, an experienced HR manager with many years service in the company was respected by long standing members of the senior management team. He placed a high value on management development believing it to be a good thing in its own terms but also an important priority was about the extent to which it could be seen by others to relate to organizational objectives. Jack adhered to the notion that the development of individual managers and organizational development were entirely compatible aims. He strongly related to a discourse of the commensurability of individual and organizational development (Pedler et al 2006).

“the management development and organizational development part of the job is what makes it worthwhile, you know the whole HR thing in this environment is tough – everyone thinks you’re a drain on resources. They see the value, of course, and the company has a professional outlook to HR but at the end of the day you’re a
He was well aware that the company’s orientation towards production efficiencies rendered HRD very much low priority activity. The fact that the HRD programme here was credentialed with an MBA qualification was contentious among some board members, firstly, because it made the programme more costly and secondly, because the managing university-related aspects of the programme were seen as a time consuming nuisance. This was partly about bureaucratic requirements and partly because of the additional energies that were required to manage the expectations of potential participants. Jack suspected another motive of reticence, even jealousy, among some of his colleagues who were not MBA qualified themselves and who may have felt threatened or exposed by those who were. Jack’s account emphasises the political way in which he championed the programme by taking actions and promoting it in a language that would facilitate its acceptance in the organizational context.

Firstly, he took every opportunity to produce and circulate documentary reports on positive programme outcomes at senior management board meetings, (e.g. financial savings from projects or celebratory events). This kept the programme’s profile high in terms of the way that it met organization agendas. Wherever possible he focused on the tangible and financial outcomes to tie the programme discursively to corporate objectives. In formal forums within the company he downplayed his own belief in ‘personal development for its own sake’ and drew on the language of ‘return on investment’ to make the business case for the programme.

Secondly, he took steps to ‘manage meaning’ by ‘masking’ those aspects of the programme he believed to be most contentious amongst some stakeholders (ie that participants would benefit from qualifications).
Thirdly, he was conscious that the programme had a history, and a ‘good story’ particularly amongst managers who have benefitted from it through qualification and promotion and amongst those that aspire to. He observed that, when there had been some doubt over the programmes survival, it was the lobbying from past participants that had been influential in retaining it. Jack used individuals from this group as a network to promote the value of the programme and to mentor those coming through it.

Fourthly, he knew that the project work was frequently the aspect of the programme most easily identifiable as producing tangible outcomes. One way to capitalize on this was to involve senior as well as line managers in the project presentations and to be involved in discussions about the projects’ relative merits. He negotiated with the university delivery team to allow the line and senior managers to be party to evaluative discussions on the relative merits of the work-based projects.

Finally, Jack is a long standing friend with two members of the senior management team with whom he regularly plays golf. He uses this opportunity to talk up the programme, the participants and the university whenever he can and tries to use them as strategic allies.

It can be seen from Jack’s experience that he considers the arena in which the MD/ME programme exists is not overtly hostile but neither is it entirely supportive. Burgoyne (1997) uses the metaphor of the ‘battlefield’ in which to consider the plurality of interests at play in the management development arena and applying it here we can see that Jack surveys the ‘theatre’ and identifies friendly and enemy forces. He identifies strategies and tactics to strengthen the allegiances where possible (senior manager golf buddies and past participants) and camouflage the programme from its potential ‘enemies’. In this approach he is drawing on his skills and abilities to consider arenas in which to discursively construct the programme.
in line with corporate objectives and company values, recursively iterating the programmes inherent value and contribution to Glass Co.

Clarke et al (2008: 833) have observed the way in which HR professionals draw on their own personal dispositions and skills to advance the cause of development even where the circumstances are not especially favourable to it. Personal values and qualities play a role in the political defence of HRD interventions enabling the mobilization of commitment for HRD in circumstances where support for it is fragmented and patchy. At Glass Co Jack influences and networks amongst his peers, senior colleagues and past students to rally support and as a counter to those views which seek to question it. He intervenes discursively with the language of accountancy and investment to resonate with more performative agendas recognising that this discourse rather than that of ‘development for its own sake’ is more likely to influence opinions and actions. Acting politically often involves an inter-play of overt and covert meanings and motives in building and sustaining the case and legitimacy for HRD activities (Clarke et al 2008: 835).

**Discussion**

In the above accounts it is possible to identify some emergent themes concerning how these actors make sense of the HRD arena. ‘Making sense’ of HRD in these contexts implies the active construction of meaning, for themselves and for others and we can discern some competing discourses at play in this process.

The HRD professionals can be seen to inhabit their roles and worlds in different ways. In part this seems circumscribed by the organizational context which frames the purpose that HRD should serve, even if only at the level of rhetoric. This is not the only factor influencing how the HRD professionals ‘make sense’ of the arena. They differently draw on values relating to underlying assumptions about individual and organizational learning. Wanda,
Alison and Jack, though in different ways, are inclined towards the discourse of the ‘learning movement’ in which learning is posited as unproblematically a ‘good thing’ (Contu et al, 2003). Gold and Smith (2003) have observed that this is common amongst HRD professionals to draw on this discourse to ‘advance the case for’ management development. I would argue something more than this. The discourse of personal development/personal learning as ubiquitously ‘good in itself’ is one that can inform and ‘produce’ particular values and worldviews concerning social phenomenon and imbue them with meaning. Robert, on the other hand is more motivated by instrumental concerns to do with defending his own organizational position. Attempting to consolidate and enhance his own role, foregrounding self preservation and more self-interested outcomes, in an arguably hostile context. Consequently he draws primarily on the discourse of strategic human resource development to make sense of what the programme should mean and his adherence to a unitarist perspective fails to equip him with the means by which to make sense of managers’ development when it delivers more than or differently from what was intended.

It can be argued however that they make sense of the HRD interventions ‘behind the scenes’ in terms of personal values and motives, it is also the case that in the public domain the prevalent means by which the programmes are discursively constructed is through the unitary language of SHRD and the achievement of corporate goals. In the case of Jack, this is very evidently about legitimizing and justifying the HRD programme and additionally, in the case of Robert, about talking up his own role and seeking to extend his own legitimacy through that of the programmes strategic contribution. The language of SHRD can be seen as a powerful narrative in promulgating the performative dimensions of the HRD interventions and marginalizing other, less organizationally acceptable discourses but ones that HRD practitioners may nevertheless relate to at the level of personal values and motivations.
Conclusion

These accounts point to the way in which the arena of HRD is one comprising both emotional (Vince, 2002) and political (Coopey, 1995) dimensions. The HRD initiatives serve their own as well as organizational interests but the accounts also show that there is nothing ‘concrete’ about the internal legitimacy of the HRD activities. Rather, there is a sense that the meanings of such interventions are emergent, temporary and subject to other competing discourses concerning for example, ‘value for money’ and ‘return on investment’. Especially in the cases of Glass Co, Caravans Co and North Council, HRD interventions required the active agency of the HR professionals to argue for and defend them in performative terms and to act politically within the organization to achieve this. There is a strong sense that their own agency plays a significant part in sustaining the programmes as they work, with differing degrees of success at promoting HRD’s internal credibility. This emphasises the ‘micro political’ aspect of the programmes in which competing interests are at play and require attention and management of the HRD professionals. This is most evident in Jack’s account where he orientates himself and his role politically to forge allegiances and consolidate perceptions of the programmes efficacy and legitimacy through the conscious deployment of political and discursive resources (Clarke et al 2008).

Mabey and Finch-Lees (2008) have noted that constructivist discourse of HRD privileges the way in which those involved make sense of their actions and roles. In looking more closely at the HRD professionals here we can see that this paints an altogether more complex picture of the HRD activities and how they make sense of them in relation to personal values and political contingencies by observing that there are competing priorities and discourses at play in the arena. It can be observed that performative discourse of HRD framing such activities as organizationally instrumental are drawn on to justify and rationalise such activities in the public arena. Whether or not these find organizational acceptance is circumscribed by
organization priorities which immediately politicises the HRD practitioners’ role in their potential to draw on vocabularies that relate to those priorities. Moreover, this is further extenuated where stated organizational priorities ‘espoused values’ are distinct from ‘values in practice’ where for example HRD practitioners may advance ‘good practice’ narratives whilst a competing agenda may simply be at odds with this as in Robert’s case above. One issue here is the extent to which HRD professionals are equipped to identify narratives that are commensurate with organizational ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ priorities to serve themselves and recipients of HRD activities in appropriate ways. An equally pressing issue is the extent to which issues of power and unequal resources in organizations serves to enlist HRD in ways that privilege some organizational members’ interests over others and how does HRD act to reinforce or disrupt these power relations. For the purposes of this paper we can see that HRD professionals individualise these dilemmas and seek their own means of reconciliation (or denial) but further consideration for practitioners and scholars is required of HRDs implications for issues of ‘justice and fairness, inclusion and exclusion, power and politics’ (Kuchinke 2007: 137), such a call focuses on HRD’s contribution to ethical and moral practice in organizations.

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