



VIEWPOINT

The current state and status of HRD research

Jim Stewart

*Department of Human Resource Development, Nottingham Business School,
Nottingham, UK*

Abstract

Purpose – Establishes a connection between the concepts of “learning organisation” and “human resources development”.

Design/methodology/approach – A brief and broad overview of the current state of human research development research.

Findings – One conclusion to be reached is that the subject is healthy. Another conclusion is that human resource development research is developing the potential to lead in fundamentally changing the nature of organisation, management and work. A final conclusion is that the concept of human resource development and that of the learning organisation have much in common.

Originality/value – Provides possible links between the concepts of a learning organisation and human resource development.

Keywords Learning organizations, Human resource development

Paper type Viewpoint

An introduction and rationale

I want to begin this Viewpoint by establishing a connection between the concepts of “learning organisation” (LO) and “human resources development” (HRD). The idea of LO has a connection with that of organisation development (OD). I have argued previously that the LO ideal can be seen as the ultimate articulation of the goals and values of OD (Stewart, 1996). Whatever view is adopted on that argument, many readers of this journal will I think agree that change programmes intended to transform organisations into forms based on the principles of the LO ideal have many characteristics in common with OD programmes. This is perhaps especially the case in relation to the values which inform the design and implementation of such programmes, and which form a defining principle in the desired organisation form. We know that HRD has a clear connection with OD. As far back as the early 1980s OD was argued to be a central component of what was then the emerging notion of HRD (McLagan, 1983). More recent theorising on HRD (McGoldrick *et al.*, 2002) and empirical research on the practices of HRD (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2002) both support the argument that OD constitutes a component of HRD. So, if HRD encompasses OD and if OD in turn is connected in some way with the notion of the LO, then there is a connection between the concept of the LO and that of HRD.

This rather neat syllogism is not though the only grounds for accepting a relationship between the two concepts. A more obvious argument can be built by simply focussing on the common concern with “learning”, which is central to both concepts. Learning at the interrelated levels of individual, team and organisation is seen as a critical focus in most, if not all, definitions and models of the LO ideal. The



occurrence of learning is though not sufficient. Learning needs to be promoted, valued, shared and continuous to meet the requirements of being or becoming a learning organisation. In my view, those same characteristics are part of what defines the nature and purpose of HRD (Stewart, 1999). Indeed, my analysis suggests that interventions in learning processes at each of the three levels are what constitute HRD. And, it is commonly the case that HRD practitioners pursue similar goals to those associated with the LO ideal (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2002). That being the case, the concept of HRD must have some sort of connection with that of the LO.

Having established the relevance of examining current research in HRD in these pages I will now proceed to review the situation in Europe. I make that geographic qualification because my review is based primarily, though not exclusively, on three projects and associated publications that I have personally been involved with over the last three years or so. This is not to claim personal exclusivity or supremacy of knowledge and understanding. It is simply because each of the projects brought together and involved a broad collection of active researchers and writers on the subject. The first was an EC funded project in seven European countries which lead to the book edited by Tjepkema *et al.* (2002); the second was a University Forum for HRD (details at www.ufhrd.org) project which lead to the collection edited by McGoldrick *et al.* (2002); and the third was a UFHRD initiated and ESRC Funded Research Seminar Series which has culminated in three edited volumes, two of which have now been published (Lee, 2003; Stewart and Beaver, 2004).

Current knowledge and understanding of HRD

The first thing that can be said is that HRD, perhaps in common with the LO concept, remains both a confused and contested concept (McGoldrick *et al.*, 2002). As a focus of academic enquiry HRD draws on a wide range of disciplines; economics, sociology and psychology for example; and has more or less direct connections and relationships with a range of management ideas and functions; for example strategic management, leadership and human resource management (McGoldrick *et al.*, 2002). This eclecticism in both academic foundation and application of professional practice provides a rationale, if not an explanation, for the lack of a universal definition or understanding of HRD (see also Lee, 2003). However, this state of affairs in the subject is not necessarily something to be lamented or overcome. These are at least three reasons for welcoming diversity and dispute in attempts to conceptualise HRD. They may equally apply to debates within and about conceptualising the LO.

The first reason is that diversity and dispute provide a richness in both the focus of and approach to HRD research that would be lacking if one perspective established hegemony. This richness is perhaps most evident in the volume edited by McGoldrick *et al.* (2002) The case for there being value and benefit in variety, diversity and dispute is also examined by those editors in their own contribution (McGoldrick *et al.*, 2002). The second reason for diversity and dispute is that HRD practice occurs in a great variety of different contexts. One particular example of that variety is small as opposed to large organisations. A number of chapters in the book *HRD in Small Organisations* (Stewart and Beaver, 2004); for example those by Hill, by Taylor *et al.* and by Smith *et al.*; present a strong case that the meaning of HRD commonly associated with practices found in large enterprises has little relevance or application in small organisations. Taken together though, the research reported in the chapters of that

book also illustrates the mistake of assuming that even the shared characteristic of “smallness” will lead to similarity of experience. Thus, even small organisations provide a rich variety of contexts.

The third reason for welcoming diversity and dispute relates to what might be termed “taken for granted assumptions” informing HRD research. Recent and current research suggests that those assumptions regarding the empirical nature of HRD may need to be questioned. Perhaps of more importance, some research suggests that assumptions relating to the normative purpose of HRD are also open to challenge. There is an established debate, especially in the USA, related to this matter which is focussed on the relative merits of “learning” versus “performance” purposes for HRD (see Woodall *et al.*, 2002 for references). However, that debate is rather narrow in the sense of accepting a common starting point of a given status quo. The work of Hamblett *et al.* (2002), Rigg *et al.* (2002), Rigg and Trehan (2004) and Smith *et al.* (2004) provides a counterpoint to the “taken for granted assumptions” that inform both the “learning” and “performance” camps, and indeed all of what might be termed “mainstream” treatments of HRD. Such work questions and challenges the empirical utility and normative value of mainstream theorising and research in HRD. And it does so partly on the basis of alternative intellectual and theoretical resources. Without an eclectic and diverse approach to the subject there would not be space for the questions and challenges raised by these and other writers.

New perspectives

The kinds of questions and challenges just referred to are in part related to issues immanent in the notion of “ethics”. The ethics of HRD is a relatively recent area of research and writing, and there is variety and diversity within that singular focus (see Stewart, 1998; Hatcher, 2002). However, the focus is arguably of growing interest and of increasing attention. Recent contributions include Hatcher (2002) in the USA, and Beattie and McDougall (2002) and Stewart (2003) in the UK. It seems to me that HRD is in and of itself, however defined or conceptualised, an ethical endeavour in the sense that moral choices are at the heart of its practice. My hope and prediction is that ethical theory will continue to increase in its impact and influence on HRD research.

A related perspective which arises out of the questions and challenges raised by Hamblett *et al.* (2002) for example is that provided by critical theory. This term can of course encompass different meanings but it is now fairly well established in management studies as referring to perspectives which again question conventional understanding on any of a number of grounds (see for example, Thomas, 2003). This broad understanding of the notion of critical theory is of growing relevance to HRD and is being increasingly applied in HRD research. For example, a new book edited by Carole Elliott and Sharan Turnbull to be published in 2004 in the Routledge Studies in HRD Series takes a critical theory perspective as its focus and as its title. The 2003 Critical Management Studies conference had a stream with the title “Critical HRD”. Selected papers from that stream will be published in the autumn of 2004 in a special edition of *Journal of European Industrial Training*, guest edited by Stewart, Rigg and Trehan. Taken together with the interest in ethics, this emerging focus on the application of critical theory can be taken as an indication of the growing maturity of HRD theory and research argued by McGoldrick *et al.* (2002).

A European perspective?

With the exception of Hatcher (2002), all of the writers referenced so far are European. This may suggest a distinctiveness and coherence in European views when compared with those in for example the USA. There is some justification for such a position (Woodall *et al.*, 2002). However, to sustain that position a degree of homogeneity in the understanding of HRD across Europe would be required. As Woodall *et al.* (2002) point out identifiable and separate European regions, and indeed individual European countries, have their own political, economic, social and cultural traditions and contexts which have an impact on and influence HRD theory and practice. This conceptual analysis finds support in the empirical work reported by Tjepkema *et al.* (2002). It is also supported by discussions at a number of European conferences over the last three years or so (www.b.shuttle.detwifo/ehrd/portal.htm). It seems therefore that diversity across Europe extends to both theory and practice. There is no single European model, or understanding of, HRD that can be contrasted with models developed elsewhere in the world. In any case, it also seems unlikely that there are singular models in the USA or Japan for example, (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2002).

One area of research and theorising therefore that may be discounted as having value in the near future is that which seeks to produce comparative analyses of different regions of the world.

Some conclusions

So, what emerges from this brief and broad overview of the current state of HRD research? The first conclusion to be reached is that the subject is healthy. This is evidenced in part by the quantity of research currently being published. More importantly, it is also evidenced by the diversity of perspectives being adopted in that research. Those perspectives which question and challenge established conventions are of particular note. It might be argued that HRD is mirroring the development of management studies more widely as an academic subject in moving into more critical studies. It is an interesting question whether such a development path is “normal” or even inevitable. Does the history of research on the LO support an affirmative answer to that question? Perhaps a future viewpoint might address that question. My personal and perhaps provocative answer is in the negative. But, whatever the answers to those two questions, my prediction is that HRD will continue to mirror management studies in that there will remain significant space for conventional as well as critical treatment of the subject.

Accepting that last point, I think a second conclusion is that HRD research is developing the potential to lead in fundamentally changing the nature of organisation, management and work. I judge this to be a long-standing aspiration if not ambition of work on the LO. I also judge progress in that arena to be disappointing. In addition, what I have in mind is not related to the omnipresent reference to learning, development and employees in mission statements and strategy documents. It is rather in opposition to such references. To be (more?) controversial, I think the values implicit in most conceptualisations of the LO are more likely to be realised and practised through the impact and application of the emerging themes in HRD research than through research on the LO concept.

A third and final conclusion is that the concept of HRD and that of the LO have much in common. Both are human constructs which provoke debate and dispute and, at their best, dissent in work organisations. And, out of that debate, change in the

material conditions of work are made possible. Both concepts have the potential for real (beneficial) effects on the real experience of real people (no postmodernist I!). I believe that researchers and writers working with both concepts should never forget that potential.

A final thought – a battle of the acronyms?

A previous Viewpoint in this journal examined the relationship between organisational learning and knowledge management. This seems to be an additional emerging theme in the literature, (see Sharma, 2003). Both of these concepts have clear relationships with both the learning organisation and human resource development. So, we can now add OL and KM to LO and HRD. One illustration of the connections occurred recently when I was teaching a session on the LO to a group of Masters students. One of them interrupted when I was talking about the relationship between OL and LO with the questions “But the learning organisation idea has been taken over by knowledge management, hasn’t it?” Part of my response to the question was to point out the connection between HRD and LO as argued in my opening paragraphs. The overall purpose of my response was to argue that each term is simply a construct to provide help with understanding processes which constitute part of the wider social process we label with the construct “organisation”. My sense of the wider literature on these constructs of OL, LO, HRD and KM is that in general, researchers and writers have strong personal and political, as well as intellectual, attachments to particular concepts and terms. My sense of practitioners is that they find a proliferation of concepts, terms and acronyms unhelpful. Strong attachments to them also do not exist among practitioners. My closing point therefore is that we do not let out strong attachments get in the way of realising the potential suggested in my third and final conclusion.

References

- Beattie, R.S. and McDougall, M. (2002), “Ethical issues in HRD research”, in McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J. and Watson, S. (Eds), *Understanding Human Resource Development: A Research Based Approach*, Routledge, London.
- Hamblett, J., Holden, R. and Thursfield, D. (2002), “The tools of freedom and the sources of indignity”, in McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J. and Watson, S. (Eds), *Understanding Human Resource Development: A Research Based Approach*, Routledge, London.
- Hatcher, T. (2002), *Ethics and HRD*, Persens Publishing, Cambridge, MA.
- Lee, M. (Ed.) (2003), *HRD in a Complex World*, Routledge, London.
- McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J. and Watson, S. (2002), “Researching HRD: philosophy, process and practice”, in McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J. and Watson, S. (Eds), *Understanding Human Resource Development: A Research Based Approach*, Routledge, London.
- McLagan, P.A. (1983), *Models for Excellence: The Conclusions and Recommendations of the ASTD Training and Development Competence Study*, ASTD, Washington, DC.
- Rigg, C. and Trehan, K. (2004), “Now you see it, now you don’t: comparing traditional and discourse readings of HRD in small organisations”, in Stewart, J. and Beaver, G. (Eds), *HRD in Small Organisations: Research and Practice*, Routledge, London.
- Rigg, C., Trehan, K. and Ram, M. (2002), “Using action research to explore the development needs of second generation Asian small business”, in McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J. and Watson, S. (Eds), *Understanding Human Resource Development: A Research Based Approach*, Routledge, London.

-
- Sharma, R.K. (2003), "Understanding organisational learning through knowledge management", *Journal of Information of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 2 No. 4.
- Smith, V., Thursfield, D., Hamblett, J. and Holden, R. (2004), "Employee-led development in SMEs: positioning practice", in Stewart, J. and Beaver, G. (Eds), *HRD in Small Organisations: Research and Practice*, Routledge, London.
- Stewart, J. (1996), *Managing Change through Training and Development*, 2nd ed., Kogan Page, London.
- Stewart, J. (1998), "Intervention and assessment: the ethics of HRD", *Human Resource Development International*, Vol. 1 No. 1.
- Stewart, J. (1999), *Employee Development Practice*, FT Pitman Publishing, London.
- Stewart, J. (2003), "The ethic of human resource development", in Lee, M. (Ed.), *HRD in a Complex World*, Routledge, London.
- Stewart, J. and Beaver, G. (Eds) (2004), *HRD in Small Organisations: Research and Practice*, Routledge, London.
- Thomas, A.B. (2003), *Controversies in Management*, Routledge, London.
- Tjepkema, S., Stewart, J., Sambrook, S., Mulder, M., ter Horst, H. and Scheerens, J. (Eds) (2002), *HRD and Learning Organisations in Europe*, Routledge, London.
- Woodall, J., Alker, A., Macneil, C. and Shaw, S. (2002), "Convergence and divergence in HRD: research and practice across Europe", in McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J. and Watson, S. (Eds), *Understanding Human Resource Development: A Research Based Approach*, Routledge, London.

Further reading

- EHRD Portal ((n.d.)), "Resources of HRD in Europe", available at: www.b.shuttle.de/wifo/ehrd/
- Lee, M. (2003), "The complex roots of HRD", in Lee, M. (Ed.), *HRD in a Complex World*, Routledge, London.
- McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J. and Watson, S. (Eds) (2002), *Understanding Human Resource Development: A Research Based Approach*, Routledge, London.