Citation:
Holden, R and Griggs, V (2008) Teaching the Politics of HRD: problems and possibilities. In: 9th International Conference on HRD Research and Practice across Europe, May 21-23, 2008, IESEG School of Management, Catholic University of Lille.

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:
https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/715/

Document Version:
Conference or Workshop Item (Accepted Version)

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please contact us and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Ref 5.12

Teaching the Politics of HRD: problems and possibilities
Working Paper

Rick Holden,
Leeds Business School, Leeds Metropolitan University
Email: r.holden@leedsmet.ac.uk

Vivienne Griggs,
Leeds Business School, Leeds Metropolitan University

Keywords; HRD; teaching, learning, politics

Abstract

Problems and possibilities. The 'Politics of HRD' presents challenges to any teacher of HRD. Yet at the same time it potentially provides a perspective or window through which a rich understanding of HRD can be achieved. Appropriately positioned within current thinking about teaching critical HRD this paper discusses one initiative to address the challenge through the research and development of a series of focused case studies. Progress and 'findings' to date are illustrated and discussed. Alongside the generation of rich and distinctive material we note our own self-development through the project in terms of our relationship with Critical HRD. Whilst outcomes appear to offer the potential for innovative practice interesting questions remain; most notably concerning the 'connection' between the sorts of material we have generated and ourselves in the position of teacher/tutor.

Introduction

There is a political dimension to any organisation, whatever its size or sector. In terms of the teaching of HRD this dimension provides a perspective through which issues concerning access to training and development, systems of training and development, roles and responsibilities for learning, and the management of knowledge and skill within an organisation generally, can be understood. However, the extent to which this dimension can be effectively addressed within the 'constraints of the classroom' (Rigg et al, 2007) is problematic. The paucity of 'fit for purpose' materials is one such constraint. Of course, this cannot be divorced from a wider set of classroom problematics (expectations, curriculum ownership, teacher-student relations). This said it is our focus in this paper.

The paper unfolds as follows. First we locate the issue in the broader notion of how organisational politics and power might be approached in the classroom. Useful perspectives and issues are identified within the debate and discussions around the teaching of 'critical HRD'. Although we differentiate our position and purpose somewhat from the more radical critical HRD thinkers nevertheless the problems of teaching critical HRD resonate firmly with our experience. The remainder of the paper reflects our efforts to work through a particular initiative. Our work to date is described and illustrated. Subsequently in the final parts of the paper we discuss outcomes to date and reflect, critically, upon the contribution we feel they can make to the teaching of the politics of HRD and including, importantly, the contribution of our own self-development.

The Politics of HRD

Every organisation is made up of people who have varied task, career and personal interests. This allows us to understand an organisation as a political entity (Morgan, 1998). Much conventional, traditional HR and HRD management education and training programmes have adopted, consciously or unconsciously, a functionalist or 'managerialist' perspective. Managing has been taught as a technical activity In more recent times this has been challenged by the emergence of 'critical thinking'. Critical HRD embraces organisational issues including power, politics, ideology and status; the "undiscussable issues" according to a review of papers presented to the AHRD (Bierema and Cseh, 2003). Whilst a degree of consensus appears to exist in terms of issues of focus this is less evident as regards purpose. For some (e.g.Hughes,2000) critical HRD is about change and change of an emancipatory or liberating nature. For others (see, for example, Githens, 2007) the key purpose is to 'problematise'; in other words to seek out the tensions, the difficulties, the complexities which might characterise HRD; challenging and questioning assumptions, traditions and what is often 'taken for granted'.

From the outset of our project we used the term the 'Politics of HRD'. Intuitively, we felt this captured the essence of our teaching difficulties and our aspirations for how they might be addressed. If we could more effectively integrate the 'Politics of HRD' into our teaching of HRD and ED, if we could provide insight into this dimension of organisational life we would be doing a better job. Better according to our standards and aspirations. Our view, and whether working with undergraduates, postgraduates or professionals, is that our role is, to use Githens' s

words, 'to problemetize'; to 'map the terrain of HRD and provide critical insights'. Interestingly, though, this latter description
are the words of Valentin (2007) describing the challenge for *critical HRD*.

The semantic niceties of critical HRD v the 'Politics of HRD' aside, the problems we have identified in engaging students with the political dimension of HRD organisational practice resonate with those of other commentators. For example, expectations and assumptions of participants (Marsick, 2002), particularly established HRD professionals; professional body constraints (Valentin, 2007; developing an appropriate language (Marsick and O'Neil, 1999); superficial v depth reflection (Brookfield, 1994; Reynolds, 1998); 'fit for purpose' materials (Valentin, 2007) and our own capabilities as teachers/tutors(Valentin, 2007).

The Research Project

A legitimate criticism of the traditional HRD curriculum is that it assumes management is a rational process, "objective, politically neutral, simply concerned with methods to ensure control and efficiency in organizations" (Valentin, 2006). In this model, HRD delivers competitive advantage through delivering skills to improve performance. In our teaching, we discuss a move from training to learning, and a transition to a more strategic HRD process. The HRD specialist influences the organisation's goals and becomes involved in the process of knowledge creation and sharing. But what of our students? Is this a phenomenon they recognise, or classroom rhetoric removed from their organisational experience? The aim of our project was to enhance our teaching with real life case studies highlighting the practice of HRD in organisations. The intention was to demonstrate to our post-graduate students (generally working in HR) an understanding of both the value of theory and also of the tensions and limitations to putting this into practice; and for our undergraduates and MA students (often nternational students without experience in the field) to equip them with a genuine insight into organisational realities rather than a somewhat dry and limited glimpse through textbook cases. The case examples we hoped to generate would enable critical reflection on the curriculum topics and cultivation of a discerning debate.

The research project considered the role of learning within organizations in two ways. The first stage of our study was an exploration of specific learning and development initiatives within a range of organizations. The second stage was of a series of interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, covering topics such as: the positioning of HRD, the conflicts and tensions, roles and responsibilities and career pathways. It was not intended that the material illustrate ideal behaviour or best practice. Rather, we were seeking to present realistic, issue based problems, but offer no closure to the dilemmas and questions faced by the participants and the organisations they represent. Such open ended scenarios can be especially valuable in revealing the complexity of the problems encountered; in illuminating and clarifying personal values and professional standards; and the very real tensions facing management as part of their day-day, week by week roles and responsibilities. A critical approach is 'not a matter of getting a simple story straight because there are not simple stories to get straight' (Harley and Hardy (2004), cited in Valentin (2007).

The Case Study Organisations

The cases were identified from a convenience sample of the researchers' contacts. The organisations were selected where our prior knowledge indicated an interesting picture of HRD. Organisations came from the public, private and voluntary sector and included both small and large organisations. This selection was intended to provide a more in-depth investigation of learning issues rather than be in any way representative or generalizable to a wider population. Organizations had the option to remain anonymous but positioned in terms of their size, sector and ownership.

The interviewees were with people with an HR role within the organization, relaying their perception of the issues. It is acknowledged that this represents a limited viewpoint and excludes the opinion of other stakeholders. However, as the aim is not to offer prescriptions but determine the complexities and conflicts it was felt that engagement with HRD practitioners was an appropriate start point.

We faced the possibility that practitioners would resist engagement in a critical examination of their organisation, but largely our requests for involvement were well received. The people we approached were overwhelmingly supportive of our desire to integrate organisational experience into HRD modules and work in partnership to forge greater connections between what students learn and the world of work. The greater the restrictions on HRD, the more the practitioners were eager to share those barriers and frustrations and tell their story – albeit anonymously "if you tell them I said this I'll be sacked". The hesitation came more from organisations who were going through change and aspiring to create stronger learning cultures. The sensitivity here demonstrated a view of the value of HRD and therefore the danger of creating a negative perception of their practice because of the potential impact this may have:

Our vision is for a Learning Organisation isn't necessarily where we are at the moment and there is an element of sensitivity about this. As an outsourcer we need to be cautious about external messages that are portrayed about us..... give the assurance to my HR Director that we wouldn't be exposing ourselves.

On this interesting insight in itself we turn to discuss, briefly, what might loosely be termed the 'findings' from our series of case study investigations.

Findings

We set out to investigate the 'Politics of HRD' and our findings did confirm that negotiating these politics was a large part of the HRD role and had a huge impact on the HRD strategies adopted.

In a reflection of the CIPDs Learning and Development Survey, Wain (2007) notes "the much-heralded overthrow of old-fashioned, directive training by more learner-led methods hasn't been fully realised yet". We found much to support and illustrate Wain's view. Whilst we did encounter an almost textbook example of the transition of training to strategic HRD (cf

McCracken and Wallace, 2000) in a regional building society there was also clear evidence of organisations 'trapped on the low road' (Keep, 2004). One case, a logistics company, provided a prime example of what Keep terms 'low-wage, low-cost route to competitive advantage'. The business was reactive in nature, with a clear focus on winning new business, competing on cost and flexibility. There was little investment in training and development and the HR Manager faced a difficult task, how do you promote the role of HRD when the current low skill, low cost strategy is successfully expanding the business? Related to the low skill workforce was the issue of learning needs of new migrants (see also, for example, McKay, 2006). Where government funding was available for language training this was provided to the workforce, but the training had currently come to a standstill due to changes in funding.

Key relationships in the organisation had a significant bearing on the level of support for HRD. Senior management resistance (in a number of cases, particularly where the senior team were largely home grown) and lack of line management buy-in (evident but less prominent) but also instances of 'friendly fire' where the resistance came from HR. The latter was a call centre type company where the new L&D manager had been well received by the line managers but was receiving obstruction from their own management chain. She recounted a scenario where, following a reorganisation of the L&D team to create space to move away from traditional training delivery to a more strategic and business focused role, resource was removed from the L&D team and re-allocated elsewhere in HR.

Closely linked to the issue of support within the organisation was the cultural fit of HRD. One case in point was a local charity, which had a strong counselling culture in line with the services they provided. In terms of their staff this manifested itself in a strong people orientation, treating everyone as individuals. One outcome of this was a reluctance to adopt any generic HR policy and procedures and which hampered any strategic approach to HRD. In this case the HR adviser felt her attempt to introduce Investors in People was ignored rather than rejected. Another example was a retail business where an attempt to introduce a training manager to the business had failed and the HR manager attributed this to the extrovert nature of trainers not sitting comfortably with the introverts in the organisation:

we are a company of process and procedure by nature because we are run by a lot of accountants…..it was just a battle, it was just awful, you've got to remember a training manager is a lively extrovert …here it is like working in a bank.

How do HRD managers try and prevail in the face of these limitations? The text book often talks about HRM and HRD driving change but in our case study organisations often the reality seemed to be more a case of pursuing an opportunistic process, taking small steps and constantly 'chipping away' at the barriers. This is not to say that HRD managers had no clear tactical strategy for where they could make an impact and begin to change perceptions. Some illustrations of this were identifying allegiances and sources of power, to try and get a voice or support at the top table. The 'call centre' L&D Manager negotiated resource from line managers, so people were loaned to L&D, trained in training and counselling skills and then returned and thereby effectively 'importing' skills to the workforce. A clearly pragmatic approach was also evident from one of our respondents who commented 'the HR function we have here is operational HR, it is not text book!'. At times also the pragmatic combined with the aspirational .

On the basis of a depth insight into the training needs of lunchtime supervisors in one set of a local authority's schools, the recommendations tried to incorporate workplace learning and coaching to address time and investment restrictions.

In sum we consider our interviews have produced unique insight. It has provided us with a resource which, we would suggest, is not available to us through the use of a text book case, however well meaning. Importantly we are able to 'read between the lines' of our case study material.

Innovative Approaches to Supporting HRD Learning and Development?

We draw this paper to a close with a number of inter-related 'reflections' on work to date. The very nature of these means we end with questions rather than conclusions as such.

First, we would argue that our process was innovative: we took the teacher out of the classroom and have taken the case study out of the textbook. We accessed real issues and live tensions. Reynolds (1999, cited in Trehan, 2004) argues that the function of management education "should not be to help managers fit unquestioningly into the roles traditionally expected of them but to assist them in engaging with the social and moral issues inherent within existing management practice." Hopefully the insights of our cases will enable us to engage students in this debate. Clearly, the challenge now is for us to take this back to the classroom. The 'constraints of the classroom' have not gone away and there may be a danger that the pressures and difficulties noted earlier may combine to limit or even strangle the innovative quality of what we have generated.

Our second 'reflection' stems from the first but also from the rigours of preparing this paper. Our initial engagement with the 'Politics of HRD', with hindsight, might be most be most appropriately positioned at the 'soft' end of critical HRD; a fairly traditional critical approach, investigating and questioning practice. However, our findings reveal for us the potential value of a more radical critical HRD debate: issues of power and practices that perpetuate the existing imbalances, 'the experience of work to wider social, political and cultural processes' Reynolds (1998). Our cases to date illustrate issues about which we were aware but perhaps lacked real insight. Listening to an HR manager discuss at length her experience where "we are women and, you know, all the directors are men" provided for *us* an illuminating discourse. In other words, the process we have undertaken has offered insight for ourselves in addition to the generation of material for potential use in a teaching context. This leads, with degree of natural progression, to our third and final point.

There is little doubt that the project has provided useful self development for ourselves. Our work to date represents a process of critical reflection on our practice. Indeed, it might not be presumptuous to suggest that we have engaged in a form of critical action learning; "where knowledge is produced through the dialogue created in the process of problemetisation and questioning, and where the context for the learning is the workplace" (Anderson and Thorpe (2007). In terms of our workplace we sense a different relationship with the material and with the student beginning to emerge**.** This, we feel, has some way further to go. However, it permits us to

raise a concluding question. Is it this process, perhaps more so than our case material, which offers the most promising basis from which innovative teaching of HRD will emerge?

References

Anderson, L. and Thorpe, R. (2007) Putting the 'C' in HRD, in Rigg, C. et al (eds) *Critical Human Resource Development*, Prentice Hall

Bierema, L.L., and Cseh, M. (2003) Evaluating AHRD research using a feminist research framework, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 14(1), 5-26

Brookfield, S.D. (1994) Tales from the dark side: a phenomenology of adult learning and teaching, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 13 (3), 203-216

Callahan, J.L (2007) Gazing into the crystal ball: critical HRD as a future of research in the field, *Human Resource Development International*, 10(1), 77-82

Corley, A & Eades, E (2006) Sustaining critically reflective practitioners: competing with the dominant discourse, *International Journal of Training and Development*,10(1), 30-40

Fenwick,T. (2005) Conceptions of critical HRD: dilemmas for theory and practice, *Human Resource Development International*, 8(2), 225-238

Githens, P. Critical action research in human resource development, in Nafukho (ed) Academy of Human Resource Development Conference Proceedings, AHRD

Keep,E. (2004), Trapped on the low road?, *Adults Learning*, 15 ( ), 16-17

Keep,E. et al (2006), Adult learning in the balance, *Adults Learning*, 18 (1), 8-13

Kuchinke, K.P (2001) HRD university education: an international research agenda, *Human Resource Development International*, 4(2) ,253-261

Marsick, V. and O'Neil, J. (1999) The many faces of action learning, *Management Learning*, 30(2), 159-176

Marsick, V. (2002), Informal strategic learning in the workplace, 2nd International Conference on HRD Research and Practice Across Europe, University of Twente.

McCracken, M. and Wallace, M. (2000), Towards a re-definition of strategic HRD, *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 24(5), 281-290

McKay, S.(2006) Learning needs of new migrants, *Adults Learning*, 18(1), 10

Monaghan, C.H & Cervero, R.M. (2006) Impact of critical management studies courses on learners' attitudes and beliefs, *Human Resource Development International*, 9(3), 379-396

Morgan, G. (1998), *Images of Organisations*, Sage

Reynolds, M. (1998), Reflection and critical reflection in management learning, *Management Learning*, 34(2), 183-200

Rigg, C., Stewart, J. and Trehan, K. (2007), *Critical Human Resource Developemnt*, Prentice Hall

Trehan, K (2004) Who is not sleeping with whom? What's not being talked about in HRD? *Journal of European Industrial Training*,. 28(1) 23-38

Valentine, C. (2006) Researching human resource development: emergence of a critical approach to HRD enquiry, *International Journal of Training and Development*, 10(1), 17-29

Valentin, C. (2007) How can I teach critical mangemtn in this place? A critical pedagogy for HRD: possibilities, contradictions and compromises, in Rigg, C. et al (eds*) Critical Human Resource Development*, Prentice Hall

Wain, D., (2007), Lies, damned lies and a few home truths, in Reflections on the 2002 Learning and Development Survey, CIPD