Citation:
Holden, R and Griggs, V (2010) Power and influence in Human Resource Development: teaching the politics of HRD on a professional programme. In: Critical Perspectives on Lifelong Learning Conference, Leeds, UK.

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Power and influence in Human Resource Development: teaching the politics of HRD on a professional programme

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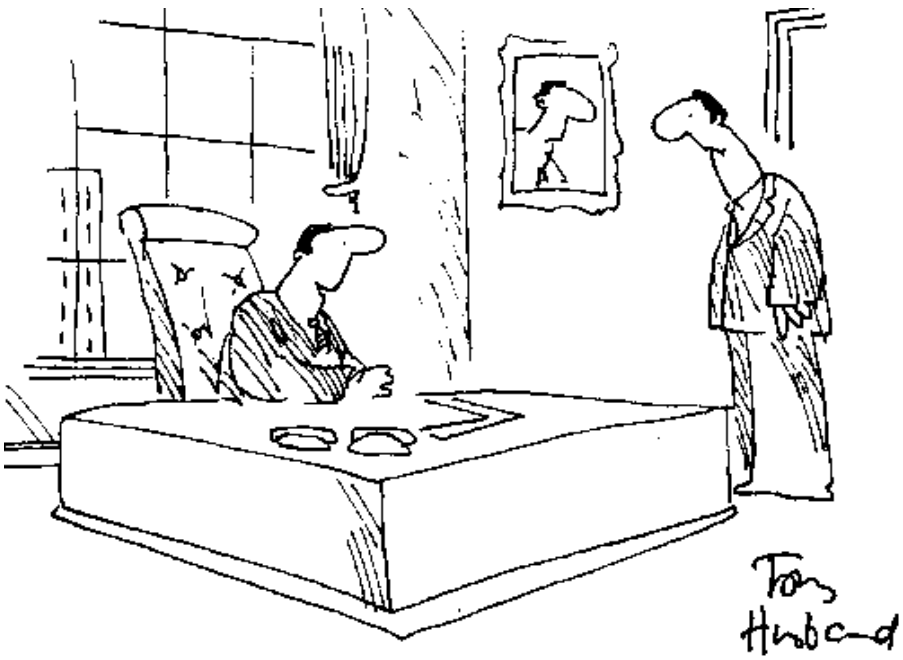
Abstract

Addressing organisation politics is problematic in all parts of the management curriculum. It alludes to the dark side of organisational life and requires engagement with contentious issues of power and interest. Yet, at the same time, it potentially provides a critical perspective or window through which a richer understanding of management can be achieved. Set in this context it provides a challenge for curriculum and associated professional development. This paper reports upon a research based teaching and learning initiative undertaken in the context of one branch of management, human resource development, and considers its application for other professions. The initiative sought to raise the profile of the politics of HRD within the curriculum. The paper discusses the research undertaken to generate teaching material and how we have subsequently deployed this research within a process of curriculum development. Outcomes are discussed at two levels. First, conventionally, in terms of our use, for example, of a number of depth case studies within the curriculum. Secondly, in terms of the impact of the initiative upon our own self development and professional practice. It is in respect of the latter where we lay claim to more 'benefits'; though questions are raised about the ease with which such benefits may be transferred into curriculum and professional development in higher education management teaching more generally.

Introduction

There is a political dimension to any organisation, whatever its size or sector. Through his cartoon, published in Private Eye, Tony Husband captures, in a comical, yet insightful way, a feature of organisational reality: the politics (Figure 1). How best to introduce and teach the politics of organisational life to students of management provides a good example of one of the many teaching problems/ challenges facing staff in today's business schools both in the UK and internationally. Buchanan and Badham (2008) note that organisational politics are often side stepped in management education; seen as a negative force rather than one that might help us understand more effectively the realities of managing in a complex world. Only recently, they note, has organisation politics become a focus of sustained academic research, adding that it is rare to find organisational politics taught in business and management schools as a professional competence. Yet, they argue, an understanding of political behaviour offers insight into the management of change, innovation and



'You're an evil bastard, Gilroy. I like that.'

Figure 1

organisational effectiveness. At one and the same time, therefore, it is a highly pertinent field of enquiry in terms of both curriculum and tutor professional development. The focus in this paper is specifically one sector of the management curriculum; human resource development (HRD) with questions raised about the potential to adopt the approach in other professional teaching.

The paper reports on a research based initiative to address the teaching and learning of the politics of HRD. The initiative began as a relatively conventional search for quality case material to assist us in providing a critical perspective on HRD practice. It turned into a more complex journey of teacher professional development, highlighting a number of key tensions in terms of problem based curriculum development. The paper unfolds as follows. First we locate HRD within the broader notion of how organisational politics and power might be positioned within the curriculum. Useful perspectives and issues are identified within the debate and discussions around the teaching of 'critical HRD'. Subsequently we outline our initiative in terms of research methodology. Discussion then turns to an assessment of the contribution of the research to teaching and learning. First in terms of how we have utilised the research based case material to illustrate a number of key 'political' dimensions within HRD practice. Secondly, in terms of the impact of the initiative upon our own self development and professional practice. It is in respect of the latter where we lay claim to more significant impact, though questions are raised about the ease with which such benefits may be transferred into curriculum development in higher education management teaching more generally.

Teaching HRD

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), through its professional education programme, seek a defining influence on the practice of HRD in the UK. The CIPD 'Professional Standards' map out what are seen to be the required knowledge and operational skills for the work of a 'People Management and Development' professional and form a basis for which all education programmes and curricula must adhere. Specifically, in relation to HRD the CIPD note the need for professionals to "continuously relate their operations and advice to wider human resources and business policy and practice in their organisations" (CIPD, 2005). They must also act as "business partners, creating and maintaining collaborative and business-focused working relationships with those most involved in, and affected by, planned learning and development processes" (CIPD, 2005). However, such aims and objectives are portrayed as unproblematic and uncontested (Valentin, 2007) with minimal acknowledgement of possible inherent contradictions and conflicts of interest.

Thus much conventional, traditional HR and HRD management education and training programmes adopt, consciously or unconsciously, a functionalist or 'managerialist' perspective. Managing HR and HRD is taught as a technical activity, a rational process, "objective, politically neutral, simply concerned with methods to ensure control and efficiency in organizations" (Elliot and Turnbull, 2005; Valentin, 2006,). In this model, HRD delivers competitive advantage through delivering skills to improve performance. Team work may be extolled as a virtue of the organisation where everyone is meant to pull together, yet the organisational world is as likely to be characterised by competition, conflict and antagonism as it is by co-operation (Fineman and Gabriel, 1998). It is in this context that an understanding of power and influence becomes important for any HRD curriculum. 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; Pfeffer, 1992). Pfeffer (1992) argues that to be successful in getting things done in organisations it is important to understand the relative power and influence of the various participants and comprehend the patterns of interdependence. He suggests that power comes from being in the 'right place' - but in relation to HRD professionals what exactly is the 'right place' ? It is through an understanding of the politics of HRD that we can better position the status of the function and those occupying roles within the function. Stewart and McGoldrick (1996:p193) capture the value of such for practising HRD managers when they note that "a strategy for consolidating and augmenting influence is virtually imperative if the HRD department is to survive". One outcome, for example, of the relative power and influence of HRD within an organisation is likely to be 'who gets' training (see also, for example, Keep, 2004, 2006; TUC, 2005). A further political dimension is that of gender. Recruitment into HR is still dominated by females yet males are more likely to occupy senior HR positions (Tasker, 2006) . Such issues should not be side stepped in the teaching of HRD.

Critical HRD, has emerged as that strand of research and teaching which embraces organisational issues of 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’.

However, in a teaching context, critical HRD, is something of a double-edged sword. It provides, a perspective, as noted above, 'to problemetise’ (Githens, 2007), to ‘map the terrain’ of HRD and provide critical insights (Valentin, 2007). It 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, Stewart and Trehan, 2007) is problematic, raising important questions about the capability of teachers/tutors to respond appropriately. The paucity of ‘fit for purpose’ materials is one such constraint. The materials offered in the standard textbooks provide an insufficient basis for a critical HRD curriculum (see also Valentin, 2007).

However, this particular problem nestles within a wider set of more complex classroom problematics (expectations, curriculum ownership, teacher-student relations) which this very topic, it might be argued, tends to highlight more than any other. A key challenge is the introduction of a theme such as the politics of HRD into a curriculum largely ‘owned’ by the CIPD. The ‘politics of HRD’ does not neatly fit into the curriculum as, for example, the topic for Week 3. Wherever and however it is introduced it is likely raise tensions. Expectations and assumptions of participants are often such that the curriculum is somewhat detached from reality. There is a body of knowledge (professional body determined) to be learnt. As Clegg and Palmer (1996) note “To be told there is not one best way when what you want is an answer is not immediately helpful even while it may be illuminating”. The politics of organisational life are an unfortunate evil, with negative connotations, something the independence of the university and the ‘professionalism’ tutors should be able to rise above, (cf the ‘undiscussable issues’ , noted above). Requests for students to explore and discuss the politics of their organisation may be viewed as a request to ‘wash one’s dirty linen in public’. As Quick (1988) notes there is often a belief that an interest in power stamps one as being “not nice”. A different discourse is at play. Marsick and O’Neil (1999) talk about the need to develop an appropriate language to understand this dimension of organisational life, illustrated powerfully by one of our respondents in her account of her ‘allies’, her ‘battles’ and her ‘struggles’. A further difficulty is one that is the source of much discussion and debate, namely how to encourage students to engage in depth, rather than superficial, reflection (see for example, (Betts, 200;; Reynolds, 1998; Brookfield, 1994). Interestingly, the politics of the tutor-student relationship surfaces here. Is it legitimate to assert our view that this is ‘good for the student’ (see also, for example, Fineman and McClean, 1984) ? And all of these constraints operate in a context of a student body which tends to reflect an uncomfortable mix of part-time students generally working in HR and fulltime students, often from overseas, with limited work experience in the field. It is perhaps unsurprising in the face of such difficulties to find a paucity of ‘fit for purpose’ materials. Nonetheless, it was this very overt and tangible gap that drove us to take some action.

The research project

The aim of our project was to enhance our teaching with real life case studies highlighting the 'political' practice of HRD in organisations. The intention was to demonstrate the value of a political interpretation of HRD issues and practice with a genuine insight into organisational realities rather than the somewhat dry and constraining glimpse available through textbook cases. The case examples we hoped to generate would facilitate the cultivation of a discerning and questioning debate and generate critical insights, by providing an appropriate 'lens' through which to view HRD practice.

The Case Study Organisations

The cases were identified from a convenience sample of the authors' 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 generalisable to a wider population. Organizations had the option to remain anonymous but positioned in terms of their size, sector and ownership. In all eight case studies were researched and this paper draws specifically on six – a large bookmakers (Case A), a medium sized charity (Case B), a medium sized motor vehicle dealership (Case C), a building society (Case D), a small logistics company (Case E) and one section of a local education authority (Case F).

The interviewees were HR professionals with a clear HRD brief 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 was not to offer prescriptions but determine the complexities and conflicts it was felt that engagement with professional HRD practitioners was appropriate.

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),).

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. On this interesting insight in itself we turn to discuss what might best be termed the outcomes from our series of case study investigations and which incorporates both the overtly useful material generated and our own journey of development in analysing and utilising such material.

Discussion of outcomes

Developing a Critical Perspective in HRD Teaching: the significance of the political dimension.

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. We accessed real issues and live tensions. Reynolds (1999) 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." We illustrate below a number of the insights obtained through the research interviews, together with how we have sought to transfer this into the curriculum and our teaching.

One of the strengths of the dialogue was the 'voice' of the key respondent. The story was far more colourful in their own words, providing a genuine insight into real issues. By way of example, we draw from three of our respondents below:

> You won't find anything I do here in text book I can assure you of that….
> They didn't have a clue about HR or about how it might assist expand the business…they just wanted an HR woman…you know just to do the disciplinaries.
> It was just a battle, it was awful…. a training manager is a lively extrovert, with post it notes everywhere, piles of paper all around and you come here and it's like working in a bank. If you're not an introvert, if you're not an accountant, you don't fit
> (Case C)

> This place is run by gamblers….
> There is lots of whispering behind the scenes lots of whispering campaigns at the very senior level…and so you are like piggy in the middle…..

> It is my primary frustration in this organisation that training and development have no profile what so ever and is not seen as the leader of change….
> We have a budget for sending people flowers if they are poorly but we do not as a training team have a budget for printing stationary or with a stationers to actually produce materials!
> (Case A)

> There is not a lot of commitment….training is seen as a thing that has to be done but it is not real work to the overall call of the organisation…it is not seen in any strategic sense as advancing the organisation…….
> I am ineffective without senior management back up. I mean I can send as many E-mails, training flyers, whatever...until I am blue in the face… I am ignored most of the time
> (Case B)

This 'voice', this discourse, has been integrated into the curriculum in two main ways. Firstly, with anecdotal reference to the interview dialogues thereby providing real examples to illustrate theory and current issues. It helps us demonstrate, for example, that key political relationships in the case study organisations had a significant bearing on the level of support for HRD; that senior management were sometimes resistant and a lack of line management buy-in created tensions for HRD. In response to these barriers HRD managers had some clear tactical strategies 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'. Thus, we were able to use our knowledge of the organisations to access this hidden political perspective and to introduce a questioning and critical dimension to discussions.

Secondly, we have used a more detailed examination of a number of the cases to enhance delivery of particular modules and particular sessions within modules. For example:

Within the 'core' module 'Learning and Development' we address different organisational contexts and the impact of these on HRD practice. We have introduced Case B, the charity, highlighting issues of the cultural fit of HRD. The organisation has a very distinctive culture with a strong counselling ethos. The aim is to explore the reality of HRD in organisations and in doing so highlight tensions which emerge in terms of the theory – practice relationship and which professionals in HRD roles must address. The case scenario describes the introduction of HR and the attempts of the Personnel Officer to address its low status and lack of influence within the organization. This enables students with experience in the public and private sectors to see the distinctive challenges for the HRD role in assisting voluntary sector organisations achieve their organisational objectives.

In the same module we have written a case study which we call 'Dinnerladies'. This is drawn from Case F, the local education authority. We use 'Dinnerladies' to illustrate some of the complexities of issues regarding access to HRD. The scenario describes an investigation into the training needs of lunchtime supervisors within primary

schools in one authority providing an example of a group of workers who are unskilled and have limited access to training and development. The case provides a means by which we can introduce the students to a wider debate about HRD; one that goes beyond organisational borders, raising questions about the social, political and ethical issues that are reflected in the scenario. Students are encouraged to consider issues related to groups of low skilled workers and the impact lack of training has on their level of power and influence within the workplace.

Again, in the same module, but this time specifically for our full-time students, a video interview with the HR Director of Case D, the Building Society, is shown. This group of students are predominantly international, often with little work experience within HR. The depth of the case provides some measure of substitute for this. It explores how the director sought to develop and strengthen the positioning and influence of the role of HRD in delivering the organisation's strategy and provides a best practice example of HRD in action. Importantly, though, students are asked to problematise 'best practice' and to reflect critically on the interplay of personal and organisational politics in achieving the outcome depicted in the case.

In 'Advanced Learning and Development', an elective module, a debate regarding gender politics is initiated through the experience of the HR manager in Case C, the motor vehicle dealership where our respondent despairs that not only is her organisation run by accountants but that they are all men! Her testimony of a senior manager saying "why can't you girls do it…you know my managers are busy" and her view that " they think we are like three cackling witches coming, you know, nagging them" provides a powerful glimpse of how gender issues may play out in professional practice.

Finally, we note the specific input to a series of skills workshops; a required component of the CIPD programme and which sits alongside all of the mainstream HR modules. One such workshop has been developed as a direct result of our research. It addresses the skills associated with power and influence, raising themes such as formal authority, reputation, performance, and interpersonal influence. Our case material provides the apposite context. It helps 'sensitise' students to scenarios where political processes and political skills are to the fore and thus facilitates the progression to their own diagnosis and subsequent skill development in such areas.

Curriculum Development: Tutor capability

The curriculum enhancements discussed above represent one dimension of the outcomes from this research initiative. They are important and give the modules an engaging quality, a critical dimension with a high degree of credibility and legitimacy. However, there is a second more significant, impact which relates to our own professional development.

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 problematisation 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 students beginning to emerge. Three, inter-related, facets to this can be identified.

Our initial engagement with the 'politics of HRD', with hindsight, might be most appropriately positioned at the 'soft' end of critical HRD; simply ensuring questions were asked in relation to current 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. Insight into the difficult decisions about who gets training (Case E) in a cash strapped small business were invariably based on power issues. Listening to an HR manager discuss at length her experience where "we are women and, you know, all the directors are men" (Case C), provided for us an illuminating discourse. Similarly, the description of the action of HR as "friendly fire" in terms of conflicts between HR and HRD in Case A was revelatory in the sense that even within one function little is neat and tidy and consensual.

Secondly, in relation to process. The research and the depth case material produced have provided us with a confidence in adopting more of a critical pedagogy. As a result of getting much closer to how conflicts and tensions are played out in reality we feel more comfortable dealing with ambiguity; raising awkward questions; posing problems etc in relation to such interpretations of practice.

Thirdly, it has been important for us to acknowledge that we are not somehow outside of the politics of HRD. It must include us. As tutors we are invested with a degree of positional power. We determine how the CIPD standards are interpreted and delivered within the curriculum. However, the research process revealed the need to question our reliance and dependence upon the textbook, the formal body of knowledge, and to develop a 'critical' reading of these standards.

Issues and implications

Towards a critical management curriculum

Whilst our focus has been the politics of HRD it is not unrealistic to suggest that the politics of marketing, of finance, of general management, offer similar insights into the realities of organisational life. The use of case studies to illustrate organisational realities is widely employed in management teaching possibly indicating an opportunity to engage with our methodology though it is perhaps most appropriate to occupational areas with a people orientation.

Importantly, though, what this research and reflection has demonstrated to us is that the development of a critical management curriculum is more than updating materials and introducing a new case study here and there. It is a about tutor relationship with material and students. As Valentin (2007) notes "the authority of the tutor comes from knowledge of content and process; they must seek to divest themselves of the authority of status and see themselves as partners in a process of enquiry". It is this notion of 'partnership through enquiry' that marks this research, this journey of professional development, as significant. Through a series of case study interviews

with practitioners addressing the 'politics' of organisational life we have not only generated useful course material but taken some important developmental steps in terms of a more mature, critical, relationship with both the curriculum and our students. Although our context has been HRD the nature of this development offers real value for other management disciplines. Herein though, lies a twist.

Use of 'dark side' cases…best in our hands ?

Our research, our case study interviews, enabled us glimpses of the darker side of organisational life. This is not easy landscape to capture. Nor is it easy to subsequently 'translate' into neat and tidy course materials and module sessions. Our cases extended to several pages of transcriptions, and interesting visual images and glimpses of cultural symbols. Reducing this to a one page case study there is a loss. Of course this is a problem in any case study where classroom constraints push tutors towards the use of short, quickly read case material. Mini case studies have their place in the management curriculum (Duassage, 2008) but the issue of depth is a problem, we suggest, which has a particular impact within the teaching of organisation politics. Issues are not black and white, rather they are nuanced, sensitive, personal, context specific. Importantly, there needs to be a degree of reading between the lines. Thus, the case material can be effectively used by ourselves but less so by other tutors who cannot easily re-create our closeness and depth of insight. The language is added factor. We note the point of Marsick and O'Neil (1999), above, as regards learning the language. Again, there is a loss in translation.

It would be disingenuous to suggest there is no value in the case studies we have drawn for a wider body of tutors engaged in 'professional' teaching. Indeed, in our own institution they are being used by other tutors and are not necessarily confined to HR/HRD modules. However, our point is that the value is maximised with us. Thus, the value of the self development, our professional development, is not easily 'shared' with a wider professional body within the School or similar tutors more broadly.

Conclusions

The politics of HRD warrants centre stage in the HRD curriculum at postgraduate and professional level. Our research, our case study interviews, enabled important glimpses of the darker side of professional practice within organisational life; yet ones that offer a valuable antidote to the functional, 'orthodox' perspective that dominates the curriculum. Importantly the case study data generated gives us powerful resource to counter some of the 'constraints of the classroom', not least our own invigorated, more critical, relationship with the HRD curriculum

The likes of Grey and French (1996), Rigg and Trehan (2004), Jamalai and Olayan, (2005), argue powerfully for change in the management curriculum, away from a focus on the transmission of knowledge, divorcing theory from practice, towards a capacity to think critically, reflectively and independently. Similarly, Buchanan and Badham (2008) note research that suggests political skill may be a better indicator of managerial performance than other indicators such as leadership or emotional

intelligence. The potential, therefore, for the sort of curriculum (and professional) development, discussed in this paper, elsewhere in the management curriculum would seem substantial. For any management education programme that purports to address theory and practice, the challenge of managing change, managerial effectiveness etc. this is surely a key curriculum enhancement. Yet this is easier said than done. The politics of organisational life is not an easy landscape to capture. It almost goes without saying that we couldn't have reached the stage we have without the research work; getting closer to the practitioner's world. The changed relationship with the curriculum is a critical outcome and is integrally related to the process undertaken. Herein, though, lies a problem. It is doubtful if the level of tutor professional development achieved through this exercise can be 'short circuited'. The teaching materials produced are best utilised in our hands. It is our relationship with the curriculum that has developed and matured through the research undertaken. Our claim that the HRD curriculum has been enhanced as a result of our engagement with the politics of HRD is, we consider, a strong one and to which in large part this paper is testimony. It provides a strong position from which to ask questions about other aspects of the management curriculum….. and lay down a challenge in terms of the sorts of professional development that may make a real difference.

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