Critical reflection at work: tales from a reflexive insider

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Track: Critical HRD-The role of HRD in economic crisis: global (macro) and local (micro) perspectives on HRD as co-conspirator, disinterested profession or facilitator of resistance

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**Introduction**

This paper presents a reflexive insider’s tales\(^1\) of critical reflection at work in the workplace. Although not the first (see e.g. Nicolini et al., 2004, Rigg and Trehan, 2008), such examples are still relatively rare (Rigg and Trehan, 2008, Welsh and Dehler, 2004). Presumably this is because not many have had the opportunity to investigate this phenomenon in practice. It may also be because critical reflection is typically difficult for all concerned, particularly when the context involved is the participant’s workplace rather than an academic classroom (Trehan and Rigg, 2011)\(^2\). Opportunities may also be hard to come by: not every organisation has embraced reflection, let alone a critical variety. Vince and Reynolds (2009) suggest that “…organisations are often environments where reflection is ignored or unwanted…” (p.100). According to Raelin (2002) managers typically believe they do not have time to reflect and are “…socialised to be [persons] of action, not reflection” (p.66) \(^3\).

Whatever the reason, to date more work has been completed on conceptualizing critical reflection prescriptively (Van Woerkom and Croon, 2008) rather than researching how attempts to operate it fare in real life scenarios (Gray, 2007, Van Woerkom, 2010).

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\(^1\) With a nod to Van Maanen (1988). Given the nature of the paper, and because research itself is a critically reflective practice (Czarniawska et al., 2005), I write reflexively with liberal use of the ‘I’.

\(^2\) This does not mean it isn’t difficult in the business school classroom either though. Sinclair (2007) had a ‘hellish’ experience in just such a location. Critical reflection is difficult all round.

\(^3\) Weick (2004) also discusses the managerial bias for action. However, this is too simplistic I think and not necessarily helpful. Managers reflect all the time. It is the quality of this reflection and its lack of any strong social aspect that needs to be better understood.
This empirical deficit is viewed problematically (Nesbit, 2012, Van Woerkom, 2010, Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009) as much has been made of the potential normative power of critical reflection (Cotter and Cullen, 2012). It often seems to be positioned, even if implicitly, as a sort of pedagogical cure (though not panacea) for all manner of organisational ills; from the ethical (Cunliffe, 2009) and emancipatory (Raelin, 2008) through to the productive (Boud et al., 2006). However, normative potential is one thing actualisation another and some have wondered if critical reflection is “…‘just too difficult” to operate in organisations (Rigg and Trehan, 2008, p.374). Therefore, responding to calls for more empirical research on the workplace dynamics of critical reflection (Antonacopoulou, 2004, Reynolds and Vince, 2004, Swan and Bailey, 2004, Vince and Reynolds, 2009), particularly in terms of its ‘organising’ aspect (Vince and Reynolds, 2009, p.101) in this paper I will unpack how critical reflection actually proceeded in one empirical case.

As I do so, I will link up with the relevant literature and try to contribute to this conference stream’s stated aim of receiving work which reflects the ‘current conceptual preoccupations of critical HRD scholars’ in particular, accounts of ‘critical reflection and reflexivity in learning’ (Conference website). Much of the focus is placed on what is still something of a missing link in theories of critical reflection to date; namely, the missing voice of the critically reflecting manager⁵.

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⁴ It has to be said however that this particular illness is perhaps overprescribed by scholars and under-demanded by mangers themselves. To quote Hannah Arendt, “The intention of liberating is not identical with the desire for freedom” (Arendt, 1990, pp19-20). For something similar see also Clegg et al. (2006). For a refreshingly honest take on the idea of emancipation in organisations see Alvesson and Clegg (2012, pp 177-210).

⁵ According to Guess (1981) “A critical theory is not acceptable unless it is empirically adequate and unless it enjoys the free assent of the agents to whom it is addressed” (p.78). In the case of Critical HRD theory then, and theories of critical reflection specifically, this makes capturing the voices of managers an important step.
The logic for this focus is straightforward: as a pedagogical approach, critical reflection is aimed at managers; what do they say in reply? The paper proceeds in three stages. First, the general contours of contemporary HRD research are outlined. I am mainly interested in critical HRD and in particular the goals of this orientation; what does it advocate and seek to achieve? At this point I attempt a friendly deconstruction of some of the more idealistic strands of thinking in this area. As I do so I try to draw pedagogical inferences from my survey. For example, when Fenwick (2004) comments that “…as a practice, critical HRD is difficult to envision without dissolving into utopian prescriptions” (p.202) I want to take this and explore, using new empirical data, what can be envisioned regarding critically reflective learning in the workplace which would ultimately avoid the label of utopian but which may still constitute some measure of critical progression however small (see Alvesson and Willmott, 2012, p.119). I say ‘ultimately avoid’ because with Parker (2002) I believe that utopia is a relevant organizational concept and imaginatively conceiving of seemingly impossible “…statements of alternative organisation” (p.2) should be a crucial part of critical managerial reflection. This is so even if utopianism serves more as a start-point from which to begin, rather than an actual destination in itself (Olin Wright, 2010).

Second, I explore critical reflection in the workplace by presenting an empirical account of how it operated during ‘the Anchor study’. This study is based on my own doctoral research which was a two year ethnographic research engagement within my own organisation.

6 Which is admittedly all too brief and selective.
After introducing the research design, focusing mainly on the reflexive insider elements of this, I then move to the main body of the paper. Here, via a series of empirical vignettes taken from my study I outline how critical reflection proceeded in one ‘practice-based’ research example (Gherardi, 2012). To frame this discussion I lean theoretically on some of the main ideas of Hannah Arendt, particularly her political theory of action (Arendt, 1999). I try to demonstrate how some of Arendt’s concepts may be used to construct an enhanced conceptualisation of critical reflection: one which is more fitted to the special demands and complexities of operating this challenging process in a complex and pluralistic workplace environment (Brooks, 1999, Rigg and Trehan, 2008).

To use a term from Arendt, I describe how critical reflection operated as a ‘… public space of appearance’ (d’Entreves, 2008). A space where critique - even harsh critique - was welcomed rather than censored, where critical reflection produced the motivation to experiment with ‘practical reflexivity’ (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004), where honesty was made possible as a form of resistance in itself, and finally, where safety and trust was learned between peers, encouraged by pedagogical leadership. Lastly, I pull all the threads of the paper together closing with some conclusions about what I have written and how it might contribute to the critical HRD literature.

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7 Political philosopher, 1906-1975. In this paper I use two primary sources; Arendt (1972, 1999) and two secondary sources; Fry (2009) and d’Entreves (2008). The latter in particular is an excellent and free online resource written by a leading Arendtian scholar.
What is Critical HRD and what does it want?

The field of HRD can seem uncommonly reflexive. Worried about its insular character and marginal impact on practice, Short et al. (2003) once wondered if it would even ‘survive’? It has gone through critical times (Sambrook, 2004), sought hard to define itself (Lee, 1998, McLean, 1998, Swanson, 1999) then to resist definition (Lee, 2001), attempted to ally with other concepts such as, for example, organisational learning (Callahan, 2003, Stewart, 2005), been defended from attack by ‘antagonistic’ positions adopted against it (Fenwick, 2004), promoted a more ‘socially conscious’ stance (Bierema and D’Abundo, 2003) and more recently, in light of the recent global financial crisis (Trehan and Rigg, 2010, p.280), been asked once more to consider what it now takes itself to be and to know (Callahan, 2012).

This is just deliberately scratching the surface of course and there is substantively much more to HRD than just soul-searching. Yet, perhaps too much reflexivity makes HRD seem less secure than other fields and it shouldn’t say O’Donnell et al. (2006), having “…now moved well beyond the identity forming stage of its own development” (p.6). Although still full of “…diversity and dispute…” (Stewart, 2005, p.91) HRD need no longer need ‘defer’ to other disciplines (Swanson, 1999).

Reflexivity is a call sign of critical orientations (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009, Cunliffe, 2003, Fournier and Grey, 2000) so perhaps this tendency was inaugurated at HRD’s ‘critical turn’ (Elliott and Turnbull, 2005, Sambrook, 2004, Stewart et al., 2007)? This turn mirrors it’s earlier counterpart in management and organisation studies (Stewart, 2005).
It seeks to disturb and go beyond HRD orthodoxy (Stewart et al., 2007), outlining and enacting a research stance against a number of the traditional targets for critique such as performativity, naïve humanism and positivist research epistemologies (Elliott and Turnbull, 2005, Sambrook, 2004). One thing critical HRD is certainly for is critical pedagogy (Armitage, 2010, Fenwick, 2004, Sambrook, 2007, Trehan and Rigg, 2010) and it would mobilise this in the name of a raft of admirable though often generic and abstractly stated causes. Critical HRD adopts an advocacy research stance with a meliorist, reconstructive character consistent with “research as praxis” positions (Lather, 1986). Thus, it does not shy away from talking theory in the same breath as values (Hesse, 1978).

Examples of this abound. For instance, although far from blind to the difficulties involved, Callahan (2007) nonetheless wants critical HRD for a “…more free and democratic workplace...” (p.79) and reckons on changing the “…habits of mind…” (p.79) of practitioners and scholars alike to realise this goal. Vince (2005) also wants to promote the benefits of workplace “democracy” (p.35) yet he doesn’t say enough about what this would actually involve. Democracy is a complex and highly contested idea which comes in many forms (Held, 2006) so perhaps this lack of description is understandable. Still, is it likely to help if the idea is to support “critical practitioners”?
On the face of it perhaps not, as another potential problem here is that Vince expressly does not wish not to speak about “individual HRD practitioners” but about HRD as a “collective endeavour” (p.26). Whilst this is conceptually interesting, speaking as such about a *category* (collective HRD) is bound to end up more in abstract rather than concrete prescriptions for action, and this, - especially given the way HRD is typically structured and understood within actually existing organisations - is likely to have the unfortunate and surely unintended, practical outcome of really speaking to nobody at all: except perhaps to the already converted within the critical HRD fold (Short et al., 2003, p.241).

Trehan and Rigg (2010) wish for a critical HRD which will enable practitioners to act in full understanding rather than ignorance of how their organisational actions may be contributing, however indirectly, to the “…exclusion of structurally marginalised social groups” (p.287). They are also concerned with how “…forms of social inequality [may be being] perpetuated…within the organisation” itself (ibid.). What this means however, is never really fleshed out so it remains difficult to get a firm grip on what this could potentially mean for those working within organisations. Rigg et al. (2007) list one of the characteristics of critical HRD as “…developing a workplace and social milieu characterised more by justice than by inequality and exploitation” (p.9).

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8 Vince’s research is altogether interesting and important I believe and like all the references cited in this paper, has been a source of learning and inspiration for me. As I have already stated, what I write here is meant more as friendly – but perhaps challenging – deconstruction, rather than straight criticism as such.

9 This does seem suggestive of the classic ‘false consciousness’ accusation often made by critical theorists. There are major conceptual (let alone practical) issues with this as has been recognised for example by O’Doherty and Willmott (2009). See also the comprehensive discussion in Rosen (1996).
They go on to state assertively that:

“…HRD practitioners ought not only to be conscious but also to be concerned that their interventions within organizations…impact on the way organizational members make choices and take actions which ultimately have political consequences on the environment, on exploitation of people or on extremes of wealth and poverty”

(ibid. p.10, emphasis added)

All of these are heartfelt statements and certainly serious and worthy goals. My point is not to criticise or deny them in any way, only to try to extend them helpfully: this means recognising their status as ideal, normative and a priori. As such, devoid of context they risk emptiness and stating them in abstracto means they are almost certain to lack motivational force for the organisational actors they are intended to reach. This is surely not the intention\textsuperscript{10}: yet, ideal prescriptions are not always in harmony with their more shaded \textsuperscript{11} empirical counterparts. I join Mills (2005) in believing that “…the best way of realizing the ideal is through the recognition of the importance of theorizing the nonideal” (p.166, author’s own emphasis). This is a symbiotic approach which recognises a mutual reliability between the normative and empirical domains (Weaver and Trevino, 2009) and avoids the ‘false antimonies’ that can be created when one divides these realms too strictly and deterministically (Bourdieu, 1988).

\textsuperscript{10} And Tourish (2013) is surely right when he says that “…critical researchers [mustn’t] imagine that their work stops with critique, rather than starts” (p.14). Fleming (2004, p.44), strikes a similar chord.

\textsuperscript{11} Or sometimes shady; Enron had an industry-lauded code of ethics and Fassin (2007) says that with it they went all the way “…from idealism to hypocrisy” (p.132).
It is also a broadly pragmatic position which makes no appeal to neutral criteria but instead seeks to make clear-eyed but imaginative advances from “…the actual present to a possible, if inchoate, future” (Rorty, 1998, p.217). Making such advances means (among other things of course) conducting real world research (Robson, 2011) which will tell us more about what happens to ideal, normative notions when they are experimented with in practice (Weber, 2012). It means conducting critical research which will help to get at the possible, and inevitably plural meaning/s of some of the ideal terms and precepts used by critical HRD scholars (Elliott and Turnbull, 2005, p.6).

Many critical HRD concerns seem to be targeted on ‘justice’. It might be useful here to consider Sen’s (2009) point that tracking justice in the real world takes the form of a pragmatic comparing of one policy, or way of proceeding, against another in the search for a relatively better alternative at a specific time and place. Ideal theory here is less than useful because it simply doesn’t necessarily apply in, or somehow cater globally to, each unique set of contextual coordinates in which everyday life unfolds amongst plural actors (Brown, 2010). Ideals then, as Coady (2006) says, “…only form part of morality” (p.33), the rest we fill in as best we can, as we go along. Gigerenzer (2010) calls this ‘moral satisficing’.

As well as being idealistic however, critical HRD scholarship is also sophisticated, nuanced, pragmatic and reflexive and those working in the field do recognise and acknowledge the paradoxes and dilemmas I am highlighting here (see e.g., Trehan and Rigg, 2010, Vince, 2005).
Fenwick (2005) is also a good example of this: whilst advocating a reformist critical HRD mandate which would include such topics as “…equity, justice and organisational democracy” (p.236), she goes on to qualify this by reminding critical HRD theorists and practitioners that when promoting such causes in the workplace, it is necessary to “…navigate a difficult meld between these precepts and commitments to individual career, and organisational development…” (ibid, emphasis added). Here is an honest admission that the precepts animating critical HRD approaches will inevitably be subject to critique themselves by those who would be their agential audience. Critical HRD scholars are advised to be reflexive and make room for this; if they don’t then not only are practical problems possible (as with Sinclair, 2007), but conceptually, a vicious and ironic circularity is invited whereby the normative ideals of critical HRD theorists are imposed on managers via critical reflection without these having been critically reflected on by the group as potential learning content, but instead assumed as valid subjects for reflection in the first place.

This includes the activity of critical reflection itself which, owing to the potential risks and ethical issues involved in its operation (Ellsworth, 1989, Perriton, 2004) must also be negotiated and agreed upon as a way of learning with those who are asked to enact it. This is the kind of demanding empirical reflexivity imposed necessarily on ideal theories by the complex, plural and political contexts in which these are supposed to be enacted (see Geuss, 2008).
Put crudely, managers may not care about what critical HRD theorists care about, even if a good normative case can be constructed as to why they should. Normative propositions may be rational without being reasonable (Thornton et al., 2012, p.30). ‘Oughtness’ is an interpretive concept and like beauty, it exists in the eye of the beholder\textsuperscript{12}. As one manager said to me during a critical reflection workshop - “Why should I be reflexive?”(Author fieldnote) \textsuperscript{13}. This is not to say that managers are in charge of critical agendas, or that critical research approaches must kowtow to practical demands or exigencies (Bolden et al., 2011, pp 8-10), far from it: it is merely to begin by recognising that “Managers have their own normative worlds and so their own normative concerns and questions” (Cotter, 2012, p.26). These may compete with the aims of critical HRD as when for example managers do not row in with the sort of ‘imperative curricula’ (Fenwick, 2011b) one often finds contained within critical pedagogy (see e.g., Sinclair, 2007).

It follows then that critical HRD might be best served by an engaged approach to scholarship (Van De Ven, 2007), a critically pragmatic research stance (O'Donnell et al., 2006) which would not eschew but instead appreciate “Practical gains, however small…” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2012, p.119).

\textsuperscript{12} Although, realist approaches to normativity do exist; see e.g. Wedgewood (2009).

\textsuperscript{13} It was very early into a two day workshop. This is a good and welcome question. In fact, a constructively subversive one which demonstrates the critical reflexivity of the person asking. I replied “Well, let’s see shall we? Are you willing to talk about it? I promise to listen too”. This worked. I think it disarmed him. Antionacopoulou (2004) is right, the motivation to critically reflect cannot be assumed ‘a priori’. But, in my experience, motivation need not be present at the start of a critical reflection workshop; it can also be found too during such sessions. In fact, I believe it has to be this way; if you were to wait for managers to be motivated to critically reflect before you ran a session you would be waiting for some time to even get your intervention off the ground, if at all.
I want to turn now to an example of how such an approach was adopted and implemented in practice: an example which details how a learning intervention premised on public critical reflection (Raelin, 2001, Reynolds and Vince, 2004, Vince, 2002) was instigated in a workplace environment.

Such examples are rare (Fenwick, 2008) and when they are conducted they hardly take account of “…power relations…including those created by researchers” (p.232). The account presented here shows that this need not always be the case. It also responds to Rigg and Trehan’s (2008) question as to how critical reflection can be ‘expedited’ even amongst the complex plurality of a commercial context? Given the theme of this conference track, choosing to focus here on a learning approach\(^\text{14}\) like critical reflection is appropriate. Not only is it a key strand to critical HRD thinking and practice (Rigg and Trehan, 2008, Trehan and Rigg, 2010, Van Woerkom, 2004) but according to Clegg et al. (2011) it is probably the most likely way in which critical ideas may potentially gain some purchase amongst practitioners.

*Critical reflection at work in the workplace: the Anchor study*

*The research design: main features*

What follows is based on a two-year reflexive insider ethnography (Aull Davies, 2008) conducted within my organisation as part of my doctoral research.

\(^{14}\) By ‘learning approach’ I mean a catch all terms that includes methods (how critical reflection operates – see Gray, 2007), principles (its normative standards, e.g. many forms of critical reflection espouse that it must be collective) and values (teleological aspect; what the proponent of critical reflection wants to achieve or the ends they wish to deploy the approach in service of).
The design represents a form of insider research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, Coghlan, 2003, Coghlan and Brannick, 2010); an example of what Alvesson (2009) calls an ‘at home’ ethnography. It is not action research because unlike that approach I am not concerned primarily with a productive issue and my focus is not pinned exclusively towards the resolution of an organisational problem (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010, p.50).

Instead, in line with doctoral level aims my interest is fixed first and foremost on making a theoretical contribution (Dunleavy, 2003) so efforts are geared towards ‘Mode 1’ knowledge production (Huff and Huff, 2001). My ontological lens is *idealist*, specifically a middle-ground ‘agnostic’ idealism. This means I am taking social reality to consist of: “…what human beings make or construct [together]…the shared interpretations that social actors produce as they go about their everyday lives” (Blaikie, 2007, pp 16-17). Epistemologically I am taking a social constructionist stance which fits with my chosen ontology. This means I am committed to a view of knowledge as “…the product of the intersubjective, meaning-giving activity of human beings in their everyday lives” (Blaikie, 2007, p.23). Although offering unique advantages which tend to outweigh the liabilities involved (Alvesson, 2009), insider stances are complex and not without challenges (van Heugten, 2004) and as a result they demand a highly reflexive orientation (Edwards, 2002). Working on the basis that social reality is a shared, constructed accomplishment (Berger and Luckmann, 1991, Gergen, 2009) and that knowledge of this is achieved between people as a matter of intersubjective discourse (Schutz, 1972), behoves me to regard my whole research identity as reflexive (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009).
This does not mean I have to privilege and foreground my own personal position within the design (see Alvesson, 2009, p.157). I don’t do this because my question intends to focus more on eliciting the response of manager’s to RML and this is more important to my overall theoretical project. Thus mine is not a strictly auto-ethnographic approach but a reflexive one where I can record and report on my own experiences without “…turning inward to a complete self-absorption” that would potentially undermine rather than support my research goal (Aull Davies, 2008, p.26). My research question is ‘How do managers respond to reflexive management learning in the workplace?’ With some flexibility granted, reflexive management learning could be cast as synonymous with critical reflection; which itself is a term open to many interpretations (Rigg and Trehan, 2008). To keep things terminologically simple this is what I want to do here; conflate the two and use them interchangeably. However, it must be said that there is considerable definitional debate and at times confusion about the link, or division, between the component words involved ‘reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’ (Keevers and Treleaven, 2011). With good reason, some might resist such a move even with the disclaimer provided (perhaps Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004, Zundel, 2013). I have covered this in some detail elsewhere though (Cotter and Cullen, 2012) and there is no space to do so here again.

An ethnographic approach was adopted for two main reasons: first, it answers the call for more ethnographies of organizations generally (Watson, 2011) and in particular it responds to calls for such approaches to shed light on how critical reflection proceeds in practice (Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009).
The research site and participants

The research was conducted over two years at Anchor Ireland Plc., a services company based in Ireland with a multi-national global parent, Anchor International. The company employs approx. 600 employees of which 80 are managers. Like many companies, since the global financial crisis (see Hassard et al., 2009, especially Chapter 1) Anchor has experienced an extreme turbulent trading period. The accompanying expense line challenges have reaped a significant human cost with over 100 voluntary redundancies, significant erosion of staff and management’s pension entitlement and until recently, a pay freeze which had lasted three consecutive years.

It was against this backdrop that in May 2011 data collection began. I took extensive fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 1995) and in all I conducted two interviews each with 32 managers from three different hierarchical levels. I have been working in Anchor Ireland since 2008. I joined the company as a business manager in the HRD team responsible for learning and organisation development. In 2012 (during my data collection period) I was promoted to executive manager level.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\) I have no room here to go into the complexities, tensions, difficulties but also the huge advantages and opportunities my own hierarchical status afforded me in terms of carrying out this research. The ethical issues are intricate but not unmanageable.
Being a critical insider

I labelled my overall research identity as ‘critical-from-within’ (Cotter, 2012). I know from experience that it may be difficult for some to believe that an insider, especially perhaps a HRD insider, could be critical, what would that look like? What kind of criticality are we talking about? Meyerson (2001) talks about the ‘tempered radical’ who may be frequently pulled in different ethical directions, finding themselves caught between the need to act on their personal values and the risks associated with resisting corporate conformity. Rhodes and Harvey (2012) refer to the HRD insider who may be a “…deviant innovator [in]…highly localized settings” (p.55). I can relate to some, but not all of this. All I can say is that it is more tacit, complex, and emergent than can be written down. It is best, I think, to simply say that above all an approach such as critical-from-within is compelled to be reflexive (Case, 2007).

However, reflexivity must be shown not merely said (Ashmore, 1989) so an example is in order. Below I offer an excerpt from my reflexive work diary (Bolton, 2010, Dalton, 1964) which will demonstrate what critical reflexivity feels like for an insider. It will also give an insight into something which Trehan (2007, pp 76-77) has directly asked about, namely; what ‘idea’ of development do managers and HRD professional run in the workplace and what happens when they critically question the premises under which they conduct and coordinate such development?

16 By the lights of some critical theorists the stance might seem to be untenable by default. This is due to the intrinsic practice element of the insider. For example, Adorno (1998) has said “Whoever puts proposals forward easily makes himself into an accomplice” (p.4). As it is impossible for critical insiders not to put proposals forward, and if you read Adorno to mean that this should not be done, then everyone – not only the insider – should resolve themselves to negativity and hopelessness. I choose to read Adorno as saying instead that care is required when suggesting practical remedies, and so, argue that he is advocating reflexivity rather than practical inertia. This, I think, is how many critical scholars today view the critical theory corpus, as a guide rather than a bible (see Alvesson and Willmott, 2012, especially chapter 2).
The entry below was made directly after a meeting conducted with an Anchor manager called Pierce and his colleague Andy. Pierce had previously dropped by my desk to talk informally about “training for the team”. The team was an experienced set of over twenty technical experts whose “mindsets” Pierce now said needed to change. They needed, he said, “to have a more commercial attitude” because “the role is changing”. I listened to what he had to say and then met him and Andy more formally later that week to talk it over in more depth. Afterwards I noted the following (the underlining is in the original note):

In the meeting today with Pierce and Andy and I couldn’t help feeling that we were talking more about control than learning. How to control the learning in the team and harness it, put it to use performatively. And that is what we were trying to do. Is there any escape from performative learning in organisations?

(Author’s Reflexive Journal, May, 2011)

In another entry titled ‘Lazarus learning’ I note a conversation which took place not long after the one above, this time with a management consultant. He had been in talking with me about a piece of training work he had just completed for Anchor. I asked him the customary “how is business?” question. He answered, and here is a fragment from the fieldnote I took down later (again, the underlining is in the original):

Frank tells me about a training job he did recently for a financial services company. The Finance Director hired him personally and asked him to provide “four dead bodies” (Frank winks at me here and smiles. I know what this means.
These people are already fired, they will just be trained now to, as he says, “tick the legal box”). The problem was however, Frank went on to say, these would-be corpses responded to the training and started to improve, making them as he said “untouchable”. The Finance Director was “not impressed” he said, but Frank still got paid.

(Author Reflexive Journal, May, 2011)

If critical HRD theorists like Trehan (2007) are worried about the ways in which development might be positioned, and enacted within organisations, then based on data like this such concerns are well justified. If Sambrook (2004) is right and HRD is what we say it is in practice then what are the ontological results arising from the examples displayed above? One wants to modify, and control the minds of a team via development, the other to ‘kill’ people with it. What is really going on here? Is this what development is? Mind control and career murder?

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17 I was sent a book once, written by two McKinsey consultants, called ‘Mobilizing minds: creating wealth from talent in the 21st century organisation’. This sort of thinking is prevalent unfortunately. Taking a cultural perspective, Wilmott (1993) has famously excoriated it. Critical pedagogues too however need to be mindful that they are not, even if more implicitly, trying too to control the minds of managers. It is disingenuous I believe for critical pedagogues to say they merely wish to ‘wake managers up’, they want to do so for a reason. See Perriton (2004).
Only critical questions can provide answers worth having here; criticality then, isn’t an ideological or lifestyle choice for HRD professionals\textsuperscript{18} it is a necessary orientation if they are to try to seek genuinely mutually beneficial improvements in their organisations which stretch beyond narrow searches for increased efficiency or productivity alone (see Boud et al., 2006, Cunliffe, 2004, Vince, 2005). Of course in practice, development interventions may be instigated for a host of reasons and not all the stakeholders involved may even be aware of what is going on and why.

In terms of revealing the motives and goals behind development initiatives, honesty is often hierarchically stratified on a kind of need-to-know basis which runs contradictory to the rhetoric of growth and development on which such interventions putatively proceed. Fenwick (2011a) is right then to ask “Just who is developing whom? For what? Why?”\textsuperscript{19} (p.84). However, not all practitioners are unreflexive and not all development works in such ways. Sometimes practitioners try to do something more critical. This was the intention behind the ‘Anchor Reflexive Manager in Practice’ intervention.

\textsuperscript{18}A way of making the job more fun, more intellectually challenging perhaps. Or, a way of congratulating oneself on being a bit of a ‘maverick’, reading Marx or Landauer at the desk at lunchtime. In the past I think maybe I used to think this; not anymore. In recent times things have gotten too economically serious and since my doctoral research began, my belief in the need for and the value of critical reflexivity has been genuinely strengthened. Like Sambrook (2004, p.13) perhaps I too am becoming ‘criticalised’ (not radicalised) by my doctorate?

\textsuperscript{19}Although Fenwick doesn’t make this connection, her questions are inherently Leninist ones and they place power relations squarely at the heart of why development initiatives are instigated (on Lenin’s famous ‘who/whom?’ query, see Geuss, 2008).
This section will recount how practicing managers respond to and talk about critical reflection in their workplace. In Sambrook’s (2004) social constructionist sense, HRD is literally whatever we say it is. In the same vein, critical reflection is whatever managers say it is too. This is the crucial paradigm in terms of operating critical reflection in the workplace because it means managers can’t be told its meaning, its meaning has to be negotiated with them in context (Mishler, 1979). In this way critical reflection is not teaching at all but negotiating, or maybe a form of shared sense making in action (Weick et al., 2005). I begin by explaining a little about the ‘Reflexive manager in practice’ (hereafter RMP) ‘intervention itself: then I use fieldnote and interview data to portray how Anchor managers made sense of it, its ideals and its practices, and what it meant to them to experience critical reflection in their workplace.

The RMP was designed and delivered in 2011 to acknowledge and recognise with Anchor managers the very difficult circumstances in which they and their teams were now operating in. The main aim was to provide a space of support for managers, where they could reflect collectively under ambiguity (Bjerlov and Docherty, 2006). The RMP was a two-day programme facilitated by myself and a senior member of the HRD team.

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20 Especially in terms of how to make it pedagogically successful. Arguably this is where Sinclair (2007) fell down: she admits as much, “…I wanted [the executives in my class] to have the freedom to learn, to see the bigger picture of what was going on in society, in organizations and in their own lives. I wanted them to discover critical thinking, to have a transformative experience, to see the world and their part in it in new ways. I now see there was a lot of projection in this dream, a lot of naivety too, but back at this stage I thought I could single-handedly and genially persuade these managers to relinquish every competitive, individualistic instinct they had honed in their lives and embrace a new way of being” (p.465).
The RMP relied heavily on the use of collective reflection (Raelin, 2001, Vince, 2002, Vince and Reynolds, 2009) and also incorporated reflexive concepts of management learning such as those found in Antonacopoulou (2004) Cunliffe (2002), Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004), Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) Eriksen (2009) and Zundel (2013). The programme was structured around related themes such as reflexivity, culture, power, agency, and the public and private realms of leadership and management. The way the programme operated was intensively dialogic (Cunliffe, 2002), although some time was given over to reflexive writing (Bolton, 2010) and to exercises based on introspection to allow for reflexive ‘inner talk’ (Archer, 2003, Archer, 2007) to occur.

There was no fixed or predefined business objective driving the delivery of the RMP. Given the difficult and uncertain climate at Anchor, its main goals were instead simply supportive in nature. The idea was to carve out formative spaces where Anchor leaders could be helped to think critically (Bierema, 1996) in a time of great turbulence. Spaces which would have a creative and even therapeutic function (Fischer, 2012), helping to foster managerial reflexivity (Quinn, 2013).

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21 No set text or model was prescribed to handle these topics but instead a host of varying readings were backgrounded and introduced and worked through as relevant, i.e. to kick-start debate or to help theorise a particular reflective discussion. Examples of the works discussed ranged from the orthodox (Stephen R. Covey’s ‘7 Habits’, Mintzberg’s ‘Managing’, Kegan and Lahey’s ‘How the way we talk can change the way we work’) to the critical (Erich Fromm’s ‘To have or to be’, Marcuse’s ‘One Dimensional Man’, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘Self Reliance’, Berger and Luckmann’s ‘The Social Construction of Reality’). The structure was loose and fluid but also kept focused by the skeletal frame of the themes mentioned which naturally overlapped throughout.

22 Of course, an instrumental research goal was also in play, i.e. I wished to use the intervention as a vehicle for studying reflexive learning amongst managers in the workplace. However, this was opportunism on my part rather than pure instrumentalism. Plans were already afoot to do something to support managers and I was fortunate enough to be the one who decided what that something would be. Eschewing traditional management development options, I chose the critical reflection route, seeing the benefits on all sides to doing so and genuinely believing it was the right way to support managers at that time. The generally positive reception which the RMP received, despite the deep and sometimes uncomfortable challenges it posed for all concerned, seemed to validate this decision.
Specifically the aim was to:

- Show care for managers, and allow them to care for themselves (Foucault, 1990a), in a time of change and uncertainty by bringing them together to share experiences and to learn through dialogue with each other.


Perhaps confirming the felt need amongst the HRD team that creating an intervention was important and necessary, the response rate to the programme was very high and almost every manager invited participated. In line with the relational quality we wanted the RMP to have (Gergen, 2009), managers were invited to share the RMP rather than being obliged to go, which is more usually the case in these situations.

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23 Throughout the paper I use these terms interchangeably. For a rationale see Leavitt (2004) or Mintzberg (2004, 2009).
Gergen (2009) is good on this. He puts it as follows:

“I do not believe that organisational engagement can be “produced”. Those in charge cannot cause others to be vitally engaged. If work is to inspire, collaborative effort is required. When training is viewed as a top-down effort – with the trainer educating the fledgling – the possibilities for collaboration are diminished. When training is dominated by a single voice, carrying the organisational viewpoint, …[people] may register information but there is no invitation into the co-active process of creating meaning”

(p.314)

The spirit in which the RMP was offered was atypical when compared with accounts of how collective workplace critical reflection proceeded in other cases. These seemed to have a far more explicitly performative intent (see e.g., Rigg and Trehan, 2008, Vince, 2004). In her study of critical reflection in three retail banks, Antonacopoulou (2004) describes the motives behind development as ranging from cost reduction to the attempt by the powers-that-be to inculcate a learning organisation. HRD efforts in these cases set out deliberately “…to determine to a large extent, how individuals should develop and what knowledge and skills [would be] relevant to their development” (p.52). The RMP made no such demands and determinations: the emphasis was placed firmly on “…development instead of prescription” (Trehan and Rigg, 2010, p.353)
In this way, the RMP met with Callahan’s (2007, p.78) three criteria for what constitutes a critical intervention;

\[a\) \textit{The RMP had no explicit ‘performative’ intent, i.e. it was not aimed at ‘making’ managers better or helping them to perform harder or be more productive}\]

\[b) \textit{Through its use of the concepts of social constructionism and practical reflexivity, the RMP promoted the idea of ‘denaturalization’}\]

\[c) \textit{The RMP, and the research which accompanied it, both had strong ‘reflexive’ elements}\]

In the next section, borrowing a term from Arendt (1999), I explain the RMP as an ethical / political \textit{‘public space of appearance’}. Using empirical data, I unpack this under four dimensions: 1) RMP as a public space of appearance where critique is encouraged, 2) RMP as a public space of appearance where critical reflection sews the seeds for reflective ‘natality’ in the workplace, 3) RMP as a public space of appearance where honesty itself might represent a form of resistance and is expressed in the saying of ‘dangerous things’ and lastly, 4) RMP as a public space of appearance where trust is kindled via pedagogical leadership and the safety necessary for genuine critical reflection is learned by example from one’s peers.

\[24\] Which she takes from Fournier and Gray (2000).
The RMP invited Anchor managers into a very lightly structured\(^\text{25}\) public ‘space of appearance’ (Arendt, 1999); a space “…in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where [we] appear to others as others appear to [us]” (p. 173). Beyond a decision to try critical reflection, and even this would be negotiated\(^\text{26}\), there was no attempt to determine how and what managers would learn, even that they would learn. Consider the following field note / analytic memo (Emerson et al., 1995, Saldana, 2009) taken from inside one RMP session and added to shortly afterwards in order to reflexively analyse the event. It tells the story of how one manager chose to engage in critical reflection on their own terms, the effects this had on the facilitator and the group, and the possible theoretical lessons that can be drawn from this experience:

“During a critically reflective group discussion on the topic of the psychological contract at work and how it is changing [we have been linking this notion to the idea of practical reflexivity] Mark suddenly intervenes, his voice raised aggressively; ‘So in Richard’s new culture we’ll be mollycoddling staff. Staff are paid to get results! That’s it…producing results isn’t that the focus of the manager?\(^\text{25}\) And even then the structure was open, flexible. For better or worse, we would be led by reflection and dialogue not by content which in any case was reduced to dialogic markers or signposts such as ‘Power’, ‘Ethics’, ‘Reflexivity’ etc.\(^\text{26}\) Managers were invited to a pre-RMP briefing where the intervention and specifically critical reflection was explained to them. The idea here was to let them know what they were going to be getting into so to speak. Managers could then make a fully informed decision as to whether to join or not. I promised managers that I would not report on who/who did not attend the RMP and no data would be provided to senior management or to anyone else on this. To truly be an invitation, it had to be clear that it could be refused without fear of reprisal. To be honest, after the briefing I think many managers came out of curiosity. Yet, afterwards there was also a majority consensus that “we needed it…we don’t get together and do ‘this’ often enough” as one manager put it. ‘This’ refers to talk, reflect, debate, argue, discuss, reveal, listen, feel, think, express, watch, read etc. - it refers to relational activity (Gergen, 2009). I don’t believe that managers fully relate with each other enough in the workplace, I mean in the strong sense of this word as I have unpacked it here: critical reflection enables this.
This is theory, this is just…you should go down and manage my team for two weeks, see how you get on, you should hit them over the head with this theory and see how that works…this sounds good but it’s not reality.” I tell him calmly (though I don’t feel calm, I feel my heart beating faster) “Okay, that’s your experience and I think we’ve got to take that into account, but I think as well that theories do influence practice and sometimes we mightn’t always be aware of this – what do you reckon? “I think you’re up in the sky with this” he replies. “Do you want to go into it more” I ask him. He doesn’t reply. I ask the group “Does anyone want to talk about this?” I notice that heads are still down. Nobody is exactly riding to the rescue here. After a few more (long) seconds, I make a call here not to press it any more than I already have… I move the discussion on by switching to our next topic which is ‘Communication silos’…

(This was a very difficult moment. It really felt like a chasm had opened up in the group. The tension was very palpable. As I responded to Mark’s critique I could see heads go down in the group and people exchange nervous glances. It was an awkward interaction. In the moment, as I look back now, I was fighting off emotions myself; anger, frustration mostly at this guy for interrupting a good discussion. Plus, Mark personalised the critique too – ‘Richard’s culture’ – maybe I was pressing it too much? I don’t think I was, it certainly wasn’t my intention if I was. Nobody else seemed to think so.

I’m glad I kept it together but it was hard. My attempt to delve deeper was shut down by him not by me. Some invitations then are obviously not accepted and so, reflexive dialogue is a space which can ultimately not be occupied alone but which requires reciprocity. To have a democratic, participatory classroom (Brookfield and Preskill, 2012) you need people to participate democratically. It would have been ideal if he did want to discuss it but he wouldn’t allow it. I remember thinking at the time ‘should I talk to him at the break? Try to get behind what’s on his mind?’ I left it though.
At the end of the day what has he done? He’s done nothing wrong. He’s critiqued a concept is all, but I think the way he did it was wrong; too aggressive. Plus, is it fair to open up something then not finish it? He was prepared to make a critique but not to work it through with me or anyone else on the session. That doesn’t seem to be sincere critical reflection. But, nonetheless he wasn’t censored or chastised and he remained.

Interestingly enough, although at the time the group did not get involved, throughout the rest of the morning I note a hint of antagonism towards Mark by others in the group, e.g. at one stage he makes a comment and Declan, visibly irritated says ‘…you’re digging a hole for all of us here…’ (I wonder what that means?) later again when he contributes to another discussion, this time on coaching as way to enact practical reflexivity, Annette says to him, quite sharply. ‘…that’s not how I see it, it’s not ‘mollycoddling’ the team to coach them’ - I note her use of the word he used earlier which suggests that she perhaps had something to say at the time but did not say it. Could I have done more to bring the group in to the discussion, maybe I moved on too quickly? I was calm but I was uncomfortable too, maybe I was rushing out of that ‘chasm’ that opened up instead of staying in it a bit longer In fairness though I did leave time and I did try to bring others in. they just didn’t seem to want to go there).

(Author Fieldnote / Analytic Memo)

Here we see that the invitation to participate in the RMP obviously extended to the invitation to critique it too, and even to shoot the messenger (“Richard’s new culture”). Mark’s critique was an example of the “integral dissonance” that can be created by critical reflection (Rigg and Trehan, 2008).
Theoretically, this moment can be construed as an irreducible Derridean aporia\(^{27}\) (Derrida, 1994) which calls for reflexive endurance when the way forward seems lost or unclear. Reflexive endurance in this specific case meant that the dissonance introduced by Mark was acknowledged, embraced, even welcomed rather than censored, despite being aggressively presented. In Arendtian terms the RMP demonstrated that it really was a space for critical reflection which both “relates and separates” individuals (Fry, 2009, p.43). This is a reflexive way of going about critical reflection and it also demonstrates how power relations can be genuinely levelled during critical pedagogical efforts (Dehler et al., 2001). Hierarchically I ‘outranked’ Mark in a culture in which this sort of thing is taken very seriously. Mark saw that this did not have to apply within the parameters of the RMP, which in a way speaks to the authenticity of the space, and also the seriousness with which he took it. In a way Mark was the ideal RMP candidate: the meta-critical reflector. I mean, he was \textit{told} not to apply such rankings within the RMP space. He was playing by the reflexive rules if you like and in a paradoxical way the apparent failure of critical reflection here is actually success\(^{28}\).

Critical reflection is a process: if the process is enacted, even partially (by choosing not to go further with his critique when prompted, Mark did not complete the process; he would not do so), then it is successful. It is a means to \textit{some} end but the reality of difference and plurality in the typical group make-up means potentially to no \textit{particular} end.

\(^{27}\) A seemingly insoluble impasse, or point of “non-passage” (Derrida, 1994, p.12.)

\(^{28}\) Although, on another interpretation it could probably equally be argued that because Mark did not fully engage, critical reflection failed and he was more critic than reflector, refusing to challenge his own taken-for-granted assumptions (Reynolds, 1998). This seems right. However, I think I am saying more that the RMP, as a space or a ground where critical reflection could survive was strengthened by his interjection and in this sense the space itself succeeded on its own reflexive terms.
There are no teleological guarantees to be found: such ends have to be navigated and negotiated and we all possess different, unique compasses. As Arendt (1999) would say, we are all the same by virtue of our difference, our uniqueness and this separates us as it brings us together. However, perhaps in one regard can we critique Mark from the same position as the one in which he is allowed himself to exercise critique, i.e. we might critique him in the way in which he exercised this right to criticality on the RMP. Reflexivity then, and doing critical reflection ‘well’, I suggest is more an ethical way of being than a cognitive mode of sheer criticality (Cunliffe, 2002, Cunliffe, 2004, Cunliffe, 2009, Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011, Gergen, 2009, McPherson, 2005, Zundel, 2013).

Lastly, this particular example also speaks to how managers may reject out of hand new concepts presented to them without even providing, but only hinting at, the reasons why (in this case ‘it won’t work’). Cunliffe (2009) mentions the importance of encouraging and persuading managers of the value of practical reflexivity (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004), here is one manager who said no to this prima facie; who said no to even critically reflecting on it. At the very least this suggests that, at least in one manager’s case, far more time is needed with such ideas than could be provided on a programme like the RMP if they are to take hold theoretically, let alone at the level of practical acceptance. This in turn points to the need for cultural work, suggesting that ‘structures that reflect’ are required (Nicolini et al., 2004) not just oases of temporary critical reflection however valuable these may be.
Yet, as Arendt (1999) says these are what spaces of appearance are, ephemeral and short-lived. We have to re-create and re-enact them over and over again and therein lies the challenge for HRD professionals. Yet such spaces still remain critically valuable and the concepts presented and discussed in them can take hold; they can sometimes even translate into a manager’s practice as the next example shows.

During critical reflection on the RMP, Ciara (a participant in the same group as Mark’s mentioned above) seemed to latch very firmly on to the idea of critically reflective practice (Brookfield, 1998, Brookfield, 2009, Corley and Eades, 2004, Mezirow, 1998). It resonated with her; “struck” her as Cunliffe (2004) would say. Deciding to try out the idea of practical reflexivity within a particularly challenging work relationship with a member of staff on her team, when I interviewed her shortly after the programme, Ciara related to me at length about how her ‘live’ critical reflection “experiment” (her word) went:

“I took the ‘softly softly’ approach and this didn’t work. Then I tried a ‘hard’ approach and that didn’t work, I just saw them go back into themselves completely. Then I tried a change of tact. I stopped to think ‘how am I coming across here?’ This, now, was at the highest point of intensity in our relationship. I stood back and said ‘this isn’t working’. Getting no acceptance from her made me think ‘how would I feel in her shoes?’ We’re all human at the end of the day…I had to go through this, I had to see it for myself…”

(Ciara, Interview 1)
At my second interview with her I wanted to return to this story and this time I asked Ciara specifically what it was that she actually did when she was being critically reflective in practice within this situation, and how she experienced it as it played out. Here is what she said:

C: “With [names individual here] I tried to deal with it by leaving power aside. Trying to talk to her on a one-to-one basis, saying “What’s going on? Can we sort it out?”

R: “You left your power ‘aside’ you say? How do you mean?”

C: “Yeah, I did. When I was doing this I wasn’t telling her, I was asking her ‘What was going on?’ I told her I was really interested in that.

R: “Do you mean you stepped out of the authority role?”

C: “I did a little bit, no, in fact I totally did. I was trying to get to the bottom of things. I just did it, I thought it was the best way of doing things. It worked, it worked for a while…but then it reverted.”

(Ciara, Interview 2)

A major theme in the literature on critical HRD and critical reflection in particular, is how power relations operate and perhaps interfere with critically reflective behaviour in work, or how critical reflection can surface and illuminate these in the reflexive classroom (Trehan, 2007, Vince, 2002, Vince and Reynolds, 2009).
Here is an example of a practicing manager, having learned to critically reflect on the RMP trying to operate with this new paradigm in a very specific and localised case in her work life. It goes to show, I suggest, that just as collective critical reflection itself cannot be understood outside of its local, historical context (Brooks, 1999) neither can critically reflective practice be understood outside of the specific and highly contextualised circumstances in which it is enacted by a manager who is willing, as Ciara was, to give it a ‘try’; and what is critical reflective practice except a ‘trying’?

An effort, an attempt to start something new when something “isn’t working”. Brooks (1999) says this is what critical reflection is for “… for improving work practices [and] addressing moral and ethical dilemmas” (p.69). This is what Ciara seemed to be doing. She was also doing what van Woerkom et al. (2002) say critical reflection is - “…challenging [her own] norms and examining the assumptions behind [her] reasoning and action” (p.375). Ciara is also doing something intrinsically Arendtian here: she is dropping authority in favour of power in order to seek a new beginning (Arendt, 1999). Call it an active attempt at reflexive natality.

Even though Ciara says she left her “power aside” to step into a relational space (Eriksen, 2009, Gergen, 2009) with this team member, on an Arendtian reading she really left her authority behind to find power together with this other person because on Arendt’s relational view of power, it is never the property of one individual which it is their prerogative to drop or leave aside (authority is): instead, power is something we must do or enact together 29: “Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.

29 Note how close this is to Foucault - see the discussion in Townley (1993).
Power is never the property of an individual.” (p.143). Even though the result was not what Ciara planned (“it reverted”), this cannot be the primary way in which critically reflective practice is judged. It must instead be judged in terms of the effort expended and the level of sincerity involved. This is because as Freire (1996) has said critically reflective action is a form of “authentic praxis” (p.66) whereby “People will be truly critical if they live the plenitude of the praxis, that is, if their action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking…” (p.131).

Ciara was acting having critically reflected (“I stopped to think, ‘how am I coming across here?’”) and so was operating in Freire’s state of “authentic praxis”. She was also practicing Arendtian power, having relinquished the force, strength and authority of her formal managerial role to relate to another in a new way, operating an Arendtian reflexive natality. And further, she was doing so experimentally, because working with critical reflection on the RMP had made her think differently and ultimately allowed her to put critical reflection to work in her own practice environment.

For Ciara, although clearly challenging, critical reflection in her workplace wasn’t “too difficult” (Rigg and Trehan, 2008), at least not for her to try: it just didn’t ultimately ‘work’, but, as I have tried to argue, that is not the point and the criteria for success should be measured by the sincerity of the effort not necessarily the end result. Another way to evaluate critical reflection is through the honesty it engenders. The next example discusses how this operated inside the RMP classroom.
The RMP as Space of Honesty

The RMP took place in one of the conference rooms in the Anchor offices. A large oval table was used, with chairs seated around so that everyone could see each other. To maintain intimacy we set a limit of 12 participants. The design of the space was very deliberate and very new for managers who were more used to traditional set-ups such as u-shape. The design tried to match Vince’s (2011) ‘circle of chairs’ design which seems to try and ‘remove power relations’ in the group, be they between the facilitator and participants or between participants themselves. Vince is right however, to say that:

“In fact, social and strategic power relations and differences are not ‘removed’. Rather, they are replaced with a shared fantasy of equality that sustains the idea that there are few significant differences in the group. This design encourages the notion that ‘we are all the same here’—that we are all learning together in the same way and with the same opportunities.”

(p.340)

He is right, but with one addendum: the space alone, however important it is as a ‘safe container’ (Vince, 2004), only enables, it cannot and does not do any relational shaping. Only people can do this. My experience has been that power relations can be partially parked in a space such as RMP, even if only temporarily.
This is really helped along by the way the facilitator leads the group, disclosing honestly ‘who’ they are by their speech and actions within the session (Arendt, 1999) signalling the freedom for others to engage honestly and speak riskily by themselves engaging honestly and speaking riskily. How can we ask others to have critical courage if no critical courage is evident on our part? Is this where insider critical pedagogues have an edge over outsiders? With the RMP groups I always had something at stake with them in the session. I too had some “skin in the game” as one manager said to me afterwards. With these social actors I shared a work life, under “…real and hence fateful conditions” (Goffman, 1971, p.293).

But, power is hard to see (Clegg et al., 2006a) and how can we know power relations have been parked or mitigated? How can we know that we are not just deluding ourselves in a …”shared fantasy of equality” (Vince, 2011, p.340). I would say when you hear people saying ‘dangerous’ things, or when after a session a manager comes up to you with a worried expression and says (as happened after one of our RMP sessions); “Won’t you take down those flipcharts, yeah? Jesus if anyone saw those, you know?” (Author fieldnote). What was this manager worried about? The critical evidence perhaps? This highlights the importance of trust and safety during critical reflection (Vince, 2004).

30 In Foucaudian terms this is a form of ‘moral parresia’, free and courageous speaking amongst peers which has a confessional aspect (Foucault, 2010). For more on confessional forms of reflexive management learning see Cotter and Cullen (2012).

31 “It is not costly to prescribe the impossible if you excuse yourself from performing it” Rousseau (1973).

32 The flipcharts in question were filled with group responses to the question ‘How is power and authority used for good and for bad in Anchor?’
Pedagogical leadership is paramount here, but trust and safety can also be learned between peers during critical reflection which, after all is “…a social learning process involving a great deal of peer learning” (Brookfield, 2009, p.133). The next and final example demonstrates this.

Dermot, an Anchor manager with over twenty-year’s experience whom I interviewed after the RMP referred to pedagogical leadership on the programme as “handling”. He stressed the importance of this and spoke of how it made him feel “comfortable” in being open and honest in his group. At first however, this was very difficult he admitted. The reason he gave was as follows:

“My relationship with those around the table is based on a relationship of formality, a business relationship built up over years and years of dealing with people at a certain level which isn’t necessarily personal…”

(Dermot, Interview 1)

I then asked him if critical reflecting with the group had changed this:

“…well, everybody participated. It was good because everyone participated to the fullest…I saw others doing this and I saw it was okay. This showed we were being pretty open. After the first morning of the first day I got the feeling that it was safe, it was a safe environment to be open in…”

(ibid.)
Critical pedagogy seeks to de-naturalise (Fournier and Grey, 2000) what appears to be natural, set in ontological stone but is really socially constructed (Gergen, 2009). Via public critical reflection (Raelin, 2001), in a space where power was de-centred and hitherto opaque and unspoken, organisational issues like power, authority and ethics, were surfaced and problematized (Dehler et al., 2001), Dermot’s experience on the RMP was to understand that his relations with other participants were malleable and could be changed. They could become more reflexive and drawn along something other than formal hierarchical lines, even if these might never be rubbed out completely (Leavitt, 2004).

In Arendt’s language, Dermot realised the ‘natality’ inherent in speech and action in the public realm where new beginnings were possible with others (Arendt, 1999). In this case, new relational ones (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Critical reflection can do this. Notice that Dermot was watching others to see how they would react? He told of how this helped to legitimise for him, certain ways of being on the programme. Picking up on social cues from his peers (Bandura and McClelland, 1977), he learned to trust from watching them as they engaged sincerely with the process. He learned that he could “trust the room” as he said.
In conclusion

In terms of representing a contribution; using three different types of empirical data, I have tried in this paper to provide an example of what Callahan (2007) calls “critical constructionist HRD”. This is critically oriented work which she calls vital to the future of HRD, aimed at enabling critical thinking amongst practitioners, and taking place “…through interplay of research and practice” (p.79). Amidst the “…very contexts of practice [with all its attendant] dynamic tensions and contradictions” (p.81). By providing a rare, insider’s glimpse into how critical reflection operates and is received by managers within a workplace setting, I have sought to demonstrate that not all is lost when it comes to introducing a critical pedagogy in a commercial context. Although difficult, critical reflection is not necessarily “too difficult” (Rigg and Trehan, 2008).

As a critical HRD mechanism that managed to create some ‘space’ (Sambrook, 2004) in a practitioner world, the RMP might be seen as testament to the paucity of binary critical versus conventional approaches and the potential power of critical yet pragmatic stances (O’Donnell et al., 2006, Spicer et al., 2009) towards the introduction of critical concepts and learning processes into a workplace environment. To better understand complex ecologies like organisations (Tsoukas and Dooley, 2011) more intricate, innovative, even risky research designs are being called for which will demand researcher mindfulness (Nind et al., 2012).

33 Ethnographic fieldnote, reflexive journal and interview data.
I hope that the critical-from-within (Cotter, 2012) design I have presented here answers this call persuasively and also responds to requests for more HRD research crafted from inside practice (Sambrook, 2004). HRD research which takes the form of “critical action” (Fenwick, 2011a, p.88) undertaken by a reflexive HRD professional (Fenwick, 2005) which “align[s] itself with people’s needs and experiences working within organisations” (Fenwick, 2004, p.200).

Using ideas taken from Hannah Arendt I have theorised one particular critical reflection intervention (the Anchor RMP) as a ‘public space of appearance’. A space where critique, even harsh critique is welcomed, where critical reflection can work to motivate managers to experiment with enacting this in their practice, where authentic honesty is made possible through the saying of ‘dangerous’ things and lastly, where safety was enabled by pedagogical leadership and trust is learned from interacting with and watching one’s peers in a reflexive learning space.
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