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Introduction

If we consider the findings from recent surveys (CIPD 2012; CIPD 2013), there is evidence of a retreat for HRD professionals. There has been a falling median annual training budget per employee (with as slight rise in 2013) but with particular and continuing pessimism in the public sector. There are concerns about the effectiveness of key activities such as talent management and development. Further, it was found that new insights on learning and development from areas such as neuroscience, social psychology, economics, computing and the natural sciences are currently rarely incorporated into learning and development practice in organisations. It would seem therefore that there has been a failure by those in the HRD profession (hereafter referred to as the Profession) to critically challenge key assumptions (Rigg et al, 2006). In this paper we propose to explore the professional standing of HRD in the post-financial crisis period and argue for the necessity to expose HRD students and professionals to the “sociological imagination” – the ability to connect local and personal problems to larger macro and global forces (Watson 2009) – and the concept of reflexive critique, to explain the beneficial learning to be gained from teaching and learning about HRD that is sensitive to context, power and inequality. We will call such a move Critical Human Resource Development Education or CHRDE. This interpretation focuses on the development of a teaching and learning culture that focuses less on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of HRD, but shifts the emphasis towards the ‘why’ of HRD; with the everyday processes and human actions that occur in the workplace and their impact on employees.
and the local community in which any work organization is situated. We begin with a brief consideration of the status of the Profession, the education process for its practice and the tools of delivery. We will explore the key ideas that underpin our thinking for CHRDE before providing evidence of its use in professional practice. We will conclude with some key implications for the future of learning and development for HRD students and professionals.

**The Profession in the Post Crisis World**

Over the last two decades there has been much consideration of the pace and magnitude of change in the world, marked by such contingencies as privatization, deregulation, free markets, free trade, and withdrawal of state intervention in many areas of social provision, the essence of the hegemonic neo-liberal political-economic agenda (Harvey, 2007). Further, from 2007, a banking crisis that triggered the greatest economic recession to hit the global economy since 1931 have, arguably, impacted negatively on the credibility of western business models (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005), including management models (Simpson, 2011) utilized by HRD professionals. This is the neo-liberal context within which management education in general, and HRD in particular, has been taught since the late 1970s.

HRD as a profession, like all other professions, is based on claims of expert knowledge that is needed to persuade others of its legitimacy (Gold et al, 2003). In addition, in support of such claims is an identifiable body of knowledge considered as foundational for a profession, allowing it to differentiate itself from others (Abbott 1988; Friedson 2001). New entrants to the Profession are required to prove their understanding of such knowledge and its application in a variety of settings that they will face as practitioners. In HRD, in the UK, professional status is achieved principally by following the professional development scheme (PDS) offered by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). It is a path, which seems to emphasize an explicit ‘what’ knowledge, with less attention to the ‘how’ of practice, mostly valued by those in professional practice and even less attention to the ‘why’ of HRD both in theory
and in practice.

A repeated problem for HRD is the failure to build unity in theory development (Swanson 2001; McLean, 1998) and define the meaning of HRD (Lee 2001) which has added to the confusion about the profession’s status, identity and territory (Mankin 2001). One consequence is the frequent re-positioning by practitioners in order to show their value to organizations, and in recent years, to ensure survival. Paradoxically, there has also been a significant increase in the outputs from academe through HRD journals and conferences. This also includes interest during the last decade in the idea of Critical HRD (CHRD). This seeks to highlight the working of such issues of power, politics and emotion in HRD is theorized and practiced (Trehan and Rigg 2011) in the interest of moving towards greater justice, fairness, and equity in how HRD is theorized and practiced (Fenwick 2004).

These add to the body of theoretical or abstract knowledge which is available publicly, providing the propositions that can be generally considered for practice (Eraut 2000). However, there is little evidence that this happens and the status of such outputs for may have provided little benefit for practitioners through a failure to see the relevance of such work for practice. An added danger of the CHRD moves is that the gap between theory and practice widens as the balance between rigour and relevance becomes more uneven.

Within practice, professionals have to localize their expertise by developing a personal knowledge (Eraut 2000), ‘grounded’ in the various situations of professional work (Cheetham and Chivers 2001, p.381). Such knowledge, accumulated through informal learning and experience, allows a professional to satisfy clients. However, this ‘how’ knowledge can also become accepted as the way to do things which can also result in an inverse privileging for HRD professionals; it is knowledge which positions them as a ‘weakened profession’ (Short et al, 2009, p. 421) where they play a subservient role to others in organization. The Profession needs to give more attention both to ‘why’ knowledge involving a reflexive critique of the purpose of HRD, and a ‘for whom’
knowledge, concerning its outcomes and the interests it serves. The HR profession generally can easily suffer overload and ambiguity in the face of more dominant line managers (Harrison 2011), with little questioning of the connection of such domination to the wider issue of the privileged position of managerial ideology and how privileged interests benefit certain groups in our society.

One of the symptoms of the weakness of the Profession is the failure to shift assumptions about the status of HRD in organizations, where rather than sustaining a shift in understanding towards seeing learning and development as an investment in human capital, there is a return to the dark days of a low status budget item as a cost to be cut. This seems to have occurred in spite of recent evidence to support the centrality of learning, development and skills in the mediation of the impact of high performance working and successful organisation outcomes (Camps and Luna-Arocas 2012: Jiang et al, 2012). Secondly, assumptions about the tools of HRD practice still seem centred on ideas from another age. For example, the classic systematic training model, which emerged in the 1960s, has the advantage of simplicity and therefore becomes normative sequence for planning and action (Buckley and Caple 2007). However it engenders a linear view of training, remaining blind to key contextual features that impact on training and learning at work such as the vagaries of culture and history (Chiaburu and Tekleab 2005). Similar staged models with the normative connotation of systematic can be found in change management and learning models, even if the stages are re-presented as cycles. Similar concerns could be expressed about the normative nature of competency frameworks, described by Bolden and Gosling (2006, p.160) as ‘a simple representation of a highly complex and changing landscape’ and models of evaluation that imply linear causality from training to application, where research suggests that the act of learning alone, is not sufficient for training to be considered efficient (Grossman and Salas 2011). The Profession seems to prefer to keep the models simple making it prone to ‘new’ products, services and fads as they become available from an HRD provider industry (Short et al, 2003).
One of the most fraught issues is the difficulty in showing value-added from HRD activities such as training. Grossman and Salas (2011) completed a review of 63 studies of the transfer of training and found little evidence to support efficient transfer from learning at an HRD event and changed behaviour in the workplace. Transfer seems particularly troublesome in areas such as leadership and interpersonal skills, where learnt skills need to adapted to a variety of situations when practiced. Blume et al. (2010), in meta-analytic review of evidence, suggest such open skills or far transfer tasks are less likely to be transferred. Once again, the assumptions of a linear path from HRD event to change at work and even measurement of that change in terms of a Return on Investment (ROI) is undermined. The reasons are varied but context and history have a role to play. In response, HRD practitioners need to problematise such difficulties and in doing so, to modify Weick's (1979) famous dictum, ‘complicate’ themselves.

Before complication perhaps, comes critique. In recent years, and following the 2008 crisis, there has been some interest in the role that the Profession might have played in the crisis. Were they blameworthy through the focus on performance at work which included questionable practices, underpinned by doubtful models? Or were they mere bystanders unable because of their lack of influence to make the challenges to thought and practice that were necessary? (MacKenzie et al, 2012). Whatever the answers, it is suggested that the Profession needs to bring critical thinking to leaders and others. However to do this, we suggest that the Profession and those seeking to join it, need to understand how critique can become part of their own repertoire of skills and behaviours.

**Towards CHRDE**

There is and has been for some time an interest in critical management studies (Alvesson et al, 2009) and even CHRD (Rigg et al, 2006) which together would support the need for business schools and the curricula they delivered to engender leaders, manager and professionals who can make organizations effective in a variety of different ways: more efficient, more ecologically sustainable, more satisfying, more equitable and more democratic. However
conceived, the evidence suggests it is not always easy to bring a critical pedagogy to students. For example, Sambrook (2010) reports the problems of emotions and ethical considerations in introducing critical thinking to leadership students. One approach is to utilize action learning where a concern for organisation issues allows students as learners to consider how power, politics and emotions are crucial elements of the dynamics of life at work (Trehan and Rigg 2007).

Our view of CHRDE seeks to make a critical pedagogy more pervasive by first of all aiming to influence the CIPD’s professional scheme, where many HRD practitioners attempt to obtain their qualification to practice, although not with a controlled boundary for such practice (Freidson 2001). We are seeking to show how, both in terms of content and process, a contribution towards transformative learning can be made for both students themselves as professionals in HRD and others. We seek to do this by showing how the idea that socio-economic ‘context’ and human agency mutually shape and curtail can be applied to everyday issues that occur in the HRD field of practice. To do this, we draw on the work of one of most significant Sociologists of the 20th Century, Charles Wright Mills and his key contribution of *The Sociological Imagination* (1970). As argued by Watson (2010), the idea of the sociological imagination allows the possibility of becoming critical by focusing the attention of individuals on the connections and relations between their own problems and the wider problems within society. Mills’ approach calls for a consideration of what he calls *personal troubles* and their connection to *public issues*. This allows a person to initially consider those aspects of life within awareness, including the immediate context that is most obvious and potentially amenable to influence and action. However, using sociological imagination, a person can become more aware of the economic, social and political factors and changes in such factors that can enable or restrict the choices made. The possibility is for individuals to become aware of the links between ‘the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, the intersection biography and history within society’ (1970: 14). For example, an HRD professional might by troubled by the persistent failure of line managers to provide time, space and support for staff learning and development, preferring instead to focus sole efforts on task completion within cost
constrains. Using sociological imagination, the personal problem which is closely linked to the values of the Profession, but also provides a threatening contradiction to such values. Moving beyond the personal aspects, a connection can be made to public issues which are concerned with political, social and economic forces that transcend the particular context of the HRD professional but point to the way that pressures on line managers are created by a performance culture that meets the requirements of institution that require a short term financial return. In the UK, all too often, the power of finance in organizations has persistently focused attention on short term costs and targets. Such thinking also affects policy-making and changes in policy with respect to skill formation but also attitudes towards skills, especially vocational skills and apprenticeships. It is still often the case that cost-based competition is the strategic driver in the UK involving routinized working, low discretion and low skill utilization, particularly in low wage sectors (Keep 2009; Wright and Sissons 2012).

The argument can be extended to the implications for poverty and widening income inequalities within society, with implications for quality of life. There are many other aspects of HRD from daily life that could also be treated through the sociological imagination and we argue that its inclusion in CHRDE would allow a more holistic approach through the consideration of personal problems which are linked to wider macro historical and organizational changes and contradictions. What Mills (1970) argued in the last century has continued into the 21st; that an understanding of personal troubles requires a person to look beyond and consider the wider social structure and changes as the world becomes more complex through the intricate connections created. To do so can increase the possibilities for action.

CHRDE in Action

In this section, we show how CHRDE can be introduced to HRD professionals with a report on the impact. Based on the work of Mills (1970), we developed a 4 stage process for HRD professionals to employ their sociological imagination. The stages are briefly described:
1. Identifying a personal trouble related to work in HRD. To highlight awareness, the identification is extended to consider who else is involved. To allow the privacy of the trouble to become clearer, we asked each person to state why it was considered important to them and why they wanted to solve the problem?

2. The immediate context feeds awareness but such contexts are connected more broadly to trends, continuities and changes within the organization, of which a person has less awareness but a sense of connection.

3. This stage allows the sociological imagination to come into play. The link to changes in society as a whole, where such changes transcend many contexts and organisations. In turn, public values come into view, with the possibility of tensions and contradictions emerging in the public realm.

4. The final stage provides for a conclusion and new possibility for action and change to be considered.

Completion of these stages is a progression in the direction of the sociological imagination but also a move towards critical thinking. Here we can refer to what Reynolds (1999) saw as the principles of a critical management pedagogy: questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions in the theory and practice of management; making explicit power relations in organizational practices; challenging claims of rationality and objectivity; and movement towards an emancipatory or democratic ideal. These principles are never easy to implement, and there has, of course, been a significant amount of soul-search into how a critical pedagogy can be introduced (Ford et al, 2010). Our approach is to provide a relevant process of reflection that opens the possibility for both the use of sociological imagination and critique.

We approached three HRD (or Learning and Development) professionals, all well known to us, and therefore quite used to working with ‘academics’ seeking to develop ideas and approaches to learning. The four stages above were followed and in two cases, the professionals provided a written text and one of the authors recorded the responses for the third.
Case 1- Learning and development manager – Private Healthcare Organisation

The personal trouble identified concerned an ongoing issue of influencing and gaining access to a senior manager, but found his path blocked by the PA. The outcomes, which was causing great concern, was a delay in programme procurement and the feeling of threat, that the senior manager might not understand what the manager was doing or worse, was doing nothing to progress a key programme. One consequence was a near-loss of a supplier.

Considering how this personal trouble related to trends, continuities and changes within the organization, the manager could see how systems and structures had been in flux for nearly five years. Indeed, the business had suffered significantly since 2008. What was emerging was an attempt to align behaviours to ensure sustainability, but ‘bureaucracy’ still exerted its power.

At the next step, the manager was asked to use his imagination to link his analysis to changes and trends in society. He could quickly see the links, most prominent of which were the tensions created by an aging population combined with chronic health conditions and the rising cost of drugs and treatment. As a private healthcare provider, he could see how such issues affected the NHS and the global healthcare agenda. His own organization could play a key role in how such tensions were accommodated but internal difficulties could stymy such efforts.

From this consideration, it was obvious that the flux would not ‘go away’ nor would the healthcare issues both in the UK but also beyond. His organization could shape the future, but this would require a more integrated understanding throughout the business; paradoxically, a key feature of the programme that was being delayed.
Case 2 – Learning and Development Consultant and a partner in the business. The personal trouble centred on the reliance of the business on her where decisions and activities required an active involvement. Others who should be involved included her business partner, associates and staff. However, she feared that personal burnout was threatening the survival of the business.

Considering the systems and structures, the consultant considered how her own personal history was one of taking responsibility, and this included creating a tendency for dependency by her business partner. Loss of confidence by her partner had made the situation worse.

Moving to the connection of personal troubles to the public realm, she could see that the economic troubles had pushed people like her to become ‘burdened with the load’. Time was squeezed in an effort to get things done, meaning less time for pleasure, withdrawal from the social worlds, isolation and an impact on health and well-being.

The analysis produced a critique of her own assumptions of responsibility and dependency, and a need to plan time off to reconnect to a social life, as well as rebuilding the confidence of her partner to ‘take back ownership’.

Case 3 – Learning and Development Manager in a large retail chain. The personal trouble connected quickly to current resourcing for ‘the doing’ of business as usual (BAU), preventing her from completing work on time and in full, as well as stifling her own growth. Others also affected were the head of talent and group HRD/M. The trouble prevented what she saw was a combined aspiration to ‘really add value’ and ‘stretch me and my thinking’.

Such troubles were connected to the pressure from the board, responding to ‘City’ expectations on profits. Therefore HRD faced a squeeze on budgets. This
contrasted with a historical trend of support for HRD and ‘lots of resource’, which was now ‘under constant watch’.

HRD was bring forced into contraction by the judgment on costs of short-term considerations based on share prices and the performance of the CEO. Profits were still very positive but not in line with expectations. Society’s poor appreciation of the value of learning and development were a constraint.

Action focused on the question; can I grow and save costs? As a learning and development manager, crucially, her future lay in the connections and interdependencies already developed, ‘woven through my world’.

**Discussion and Summary**

Though hardly representative of the HRD profession, the cases show some of the aspects of what Short et al (2009) called a ‘weakened profession’ (p. 421). In two of the cases, managers found themselves playing a subservient role to others in organization which prevented them from pursuing their activities and personal aspirations. In all cases, the organisation systems and structures were reinforcing the problems, with HRD being forced, especially in case 3, to succumb to pressures to cut costs and therefore, the HRD budget. The managers, in using their sociological imagination, could also understand how the wider social structure and changes were both contributing to their own troubles but also providing some potential to re-energise their approaches. Revealing assumptions about their own lives and positions but also the power relations working within and working on their organisations, to some degree, allowed a reassessment of what could be done.

Of course, the critique could have been taken further and the employment of the sociological imagination deepened. We would advocate that preparation for professional life incorporates a more developed process to allow this to work. While managers and professionals seem to have little problem in revealing the personal troubles that are a feature of the ‘patterns of their own lives’, the connection to ‘the course of world history’ (Mills, 1970, p.9) is a challenging step
that our participants only partially completed. This is not surprising and was a new experience which we recognised needed careful presentation. There is always a risk that such interactions could become an academic exercise.

Mills sought to use the sociological imagination to allow the concern for personal troubles to become ‘transformed into involvement with public issues’ (p. 11). We want to argue that this direction of travel can both enable HRD professionals find new ways of responding to their problems, but that such problems provide much of the everyday realities of working in the Profession. They need to become a part of the curriculum for those entering the Profession, assuming they have had sufficient exposure to such problems.

We suggest that the curriculum for the Profession, principally those modules that feature in the CIPD scheme need to be designed around learning outcomes that encourage student to use their sociological imagination and appraise HRD work critically. As such, the syllabus should be more balanced and not soley focused on ‘performance’ and ‘business value’ priorities, but should also consider questions such as ‘who benefits from HRD practices?’, ‘what are the purposes to which HRD is put?’ and ‘what impact does ‘better’ or ‘effective’ HRD on employees, social justice and society at large. Our interpretation of CHRDE is based on a view that the workplace needs to show a social connection through balancing profit, people and planet (3Ps). This requires a context-sensitive understanding of contemporary HRD where learners develop sensibilities that allow them and others to question and be critical of what is done in the workplace and beyond. For a ‘weakened’ profession, we argue that there is an opportunity to find strength by breaking out of the narrow confines of the current professional cul-de-sac.

**References**


