The HRD Cube: A Heuristic for Understanding, Locating and Investigating HRD Theory, Research and Practice

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Over the past decade and a half there has been much debated and written on what makes for Human Resource Development (HRD), and in turn its informing theoretical foundations, dominant research perspectives, and necessary domains of outcome. For example, the range of definitional perspectives run the gambit (Hurt, unpublished) from a tightly bounded definition of HRD (Swanson, 1995), to a more open and ambiguity accommodating one (McLean & McLean, 2001), and a refusal to define HRD (Lee, 2001) on the basis it being in a perpetual state of becoming. Similarly, HRD has been debated on the bases of intended domains of outcome. For example, McLagan (1989) proposed a tri-part model of HRD as the practice as organization development, training and development, and career development. Later Swanson (1999) proposed the Three Legged Stool effectively conceptualizing HRD in terms of two dimensions: the theoretical foundations of psychology, systems, and economics; and the performance domains of individual, process, and organization. A broader analogy was offered by McLean (1998, 2009)—of HRD as an octopus or centipede—positing HRD’s theoretical foundations as necessarily broader and including philosophy, sports, evaluation, literature, anthropology, sociology, and speech communications. This advocacy was underscored by Kuchinke (2001).
who added political science to the necessary repertoire.

The outcome domains of HRD—whether performance (Swanson, 1999), learning (Watkins & Marsick, 1995), or both (Swanson & Holton, 2007, 2009)—have been repeatedly contested (e.g. Lynham & Cunningham, 2004, 2006; McLean, 2005). Also argued is the bounding of HRD in different contexts, from organizations to nations and the globe! A further debate has ensued over the research philosophies dominant in HRD, with a growing recognition that HRD research tends to be post-positivistically ‘heavy’ (Bierma, 2002; Lincoln, 2005; Passmore, 1995; Reio, 2009).

Intended merely as an illustrative dip into informing literatures, the above illustrates the developmental nature of engaged scholarship in the HRD community. In particular, these dialectics have informed the importance of theory, research and practice to HRD, and their necessary interdependence for the continued evolution and maturation of the field. They also illustrate the need for emergent models that conceptualize HRD from multiple and expanded perspectives. Such advocacy is mounting from those engaged in HRD inquiry and practice outside the traditional setting of the organization—for example, in the catalytic work edited by McLean, Osman-Gani and Cho (2004) in which the concept and construct of national level HRD (NHRD) was first explored. Subsequent works—e.g. by Byrd and Stanley (2009), Hansen and Lee (2009), Rocco, Gedron and Kormanik, 2009; Lynham, Paprock and Cunningham (2006), and McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2001)—have suggested that the dominant frames of HRD are inadequate for dealing with national-level and diversity-rich HRD issues and problems. These works suggest the need to extend the frames of HRD, provoking, among others, the following questions: How might HRD be (re)conceptualized to accommodate existing and expanded frames of HRD theory, research and practice? And, What might the utility of such a
(re)conceptualization of the field be to HRD scholars and practitioners? Each question is briefly considered in the ensuing discussion.

**How might HRD be (Re)conceptualized to Accommodate Existing and Expanded Frames of HRD Theory, Research and Practice?**

In response to this first question we developed the HRD Cube, presented in Figure 1 below. This Cube conceptualizes HRD as a multi-level, multi-dimensional and interdependent system of theory, research and practice. A developing model, the Cube is comprised of three integrated components: theory, in the form of informing theoretical foundations (X-axis); research, in the form of modes of knowledge and inquiry (Z-axis); and practice, in the form of domains of outcome and performance (Y-axis). Furthermore, the Cube operates in a context of social problems and conditions, the context in which the applied field of HRD occurs (Lynham, 2000). The three interacting axes are ‘open’ in nature, indicating their necessary interdependence for addressing and solving HRD problems, and describing and coming to know HRD-related phenomena.

The X-axis consists of two dimensions. The first, typological in nature, acknowledges Swanson’s (1999) call for an integrated foundation of HRD theory, and opens up this three-legged approach to include theories about people, processes, and performance. The second proposes that multiple theories ought to be used to this end, including but not limited to those in figure 1.

The Z-axis identifies the metaphysical positions embedded in inquiry/discovery in HRD and responds to the advocacy for a spectrum of paradigms for coming to know and inquire in HRD. Building off the work of Lincoln and Guba (2005), and Habermas (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989), this axis frames inquiry from an integrated system of ontology, epistemology,
methodology, axiology, and teleology that informs necessary research considerations and methods choices. It therefore advocates for HRD research within and across (where commensurable), but not limited to, the paradigms named in figure 1.

![HRD Cube: A Heuristic Framework for Identifying, Locating and Selecting HRD Theory, Research and Practice](image)

*Figure 1. The HRD Cube: A Heuristic Framework for Identifying, Locating and Selecting HRD Theory, Research and Practice*
The Y-axis identifies the possible outcome domains of HRD as those indicated (although not limited to) in figure 1. Extending these domains of outcome/performance facilitates HRD inquiry and practice in contexts and systems larger, and indeed smaller, than the traditional organization.

Of further import are: that the integration of these three axes operationalizes the cycle of HRD praxis, conceptualizing HRD as a virtuous (hopefully) cycle of HRD theory (knowing), research (discovery) and practice (action/application); the synergistic relationship among the three axes and necessary intersectionality of knowing (theory), inquiry/discovery (research), and action/application (practice) in an applied field (which one might visualize as a Venn diagram). This developing model accommodates existing, expanding and emerging frames of HRD inquiry and practice, thereby addressing the first research question.

**What Might the Utility of the HRD Cube be to HRD Scholars and Practitioners?**

Besides a flexible and integrative model of HRD, the Cube offers utility to HRD professionals across the scholar-practitioner spectrum (Short, Kormanik & Ruona, 2009). One to HRD scholarship lies in its heuristic nature—as a sense-making and problem solving frame and guide, and as a learning tool to this end—to locate and position HRD research artifacts in their metaphysical and theoretical landscapes. Further: to identify the degree to which HRD literature integrates theory, research and practice; to determine the metaphysical position/perspective/assumptions of the same; and the degree to which the metaphysics, design, procedures, strategies and methods used align, speaking to issues of trustworthiness and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). The Cube can also be used to determine the adequacy of informing theory in research and practice—whether they span the necessary foundations of people, process and performance, or have a tendency to favor one or the other.
In addition to utility to HRD scholars, the Cube holds the same for HRD practitioners. Some examples include: to determine the degree to which HRD tools and techniques are informed by sound theory and evidence (to avoid use of those that are atheoretical and ascientific); as a tool to gather informing theories and research for improved practice that best meets the context of the organization and nature of the problem being addressed; as a mechanism for locating and positioning HRD tools and techniques; as a means for doing the same with outside consultants; and as a way of understanding ones own preferences in practice, and accompanying blindspots. Initial testing of the Cube in this capacity is currently underway (Hurt, unpublished).

References


