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HRD Forum

The Future of HRD: Scenarios of Possibility

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Across Europe and beyond, there is a sense that we are in the midst of a fundamental shift or change unlike anything we have experienced before and we did not see enough of it coming. As a consequence, HRD and learning and development professionals risk joining the growing ranks of those who have been left behind. Schwab (2016) refers to what he sees as a "profound shift" (p. 1) as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where a confluence of technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics and the internet of things provide a capability for transformation for generations to come but much disruption, unpredictability and future surprises.

For many, and the HRD community and profession might be included, the track of globalization and neo-liberal capitalism, with all its faults, has not yet run its full course. As it does, combined with the advances in technology, it will continue to engender divisions and inequality. As a recent World Economic Forum gathering at Davos found, there was a growing distrust of government, companies and the media, based on a belief of a failing economic and political system. Next in line for an algorithmic/robotized attack might well be skilled and intelligent service staff and professionals, including those in HRD. Left to global forces, the expansion of low paid and low skilled work is likely to become more pronounced leading to uncomfortable political and social disruption (Brexit and Trumpism may be just the start).

There are difficult possibilities for the professions in general (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) and HRD professionals in particular. With its status as a 'weakened profession' (Short et al., 2009, p. 421) whose members play a subservient role, the status was hardly enhanced during the Global Financial Crisis when HRD professional were accused by some of becoming bystanders because they lacked the necessary influence to change the practices they could see happening (MacKenzie et al., 2012). Has anything changed in HRD?

With the advance of technologies, others have provided a pessimistic scenario where HRD professionals are needed less in creative endeavours. Their work is deskilled and reduced in value because machines can do their work better and more cost efficiently; for example, by reducing complexity to uniform and standardized packages that can be rolled out as People Development courses across large numbers of supine learners (Calver et al., 2012). Those in academe are likely to fare little better, caught in their own limited life-world of producing outcomes that meet their organization's targets, for example the UK's Research Excellence Framework which some have called a 'fetish' and a 'perversion' (Wilmott, 2011).

The current state of HRD academe falls nicely into what Nicholas Maxwell (2011) suggests as knowledge-inquiry where the means become the ends as knowledge is produced but seldom put into practice. Achievement is celebrated by publications and winning best paper awards at

conferences. Maxwell points the finger at academic research caught in this trap that succeeds in developing knowledge and even technological know-how but only in ways that disconnect it from problems of living and from what is needed to 'resolve' these challenges.

As we consider the future, how best might we respond to these challenges? How can we move in the direction of what Maxwell terms wisdom-inquiry, when the 'problems of living rationally' should form the basis of research so that actions to tackle the problems are considered and imagined before the acquisition of knowledge? Thus, knowledge would not be pursued or acquired for its own sake, nor become trapped in the academic cul de sac of papers and conferences.

In his broad based economic analysis of the last 50 years, Mason (2015) points to a more positive future based on collaborative working and networking during a period of transition from neo-liberalism and polarized capitalism towards a post-capitalism, the shape of which is still not determined. It becomes important, at a time when what is 'popular' becomes accepted as a fact or an alternative fact. The future is still to be made.

In pursuit of this aspiration, at a recent HRD conference in Lisbon (June 2017) we held a symposium to actively consider the future of HRD. This involved bringing together participants from academe and professional life to jointly work a future view of HRD. We employed the process of developing mini-scenarios, taking the year 2027 as a target point.

Method

Scenarios as a futures method have been available for centuries, however during the difficulties of the 1960s and 1970s, when scenarios became more widely known in the management literature, a new approach was taken by futurists to move away from scenarios as prediction toward as 'pictures' of possibility (Micic, 2010). In our symposium, there were 12 attendees, consisting of nine academics, one from a private organization and 2 from professional associations. A simple process was followed with a focus on the future of HRD in 2027. This enabled the formation of three groups of four, each with their own question from which they could develop projections for September 2027. Once declared, the projection could form the destination of mini scenario and then, working retrospectively, consideration could be given to antecedent events and causes that would be evident five years before in 2022 and then what might be discernible in the near present 2017/2018. Each of the mini-scenarios are reproduced below followed by a brief comment. A final concluding comment draws the piece to a close.

Scenario 1
Will formal knowledge still be prioritized over practice knowledge?

Aileen Lawless, *Liverpool John Moores University*
Patricia Harrison, *Liverpool John Moores University*
Russell Warhurst, *Northumbria University*
Wilson Wong, *Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development*

2027

We project that Mode 2 (practice) has eclipsed Mode 1 (formal academic knowledge). Many workplaces continue to use familiar e-learning tools like webinars and MOOCs, with many also using face-to-face classroom instruction. At a time where algorithms are embedded in systems and large corporations using artificial intelligence to trawl through big data to gain valuable insight, the realization that more and more it is sharp, skilled, creative people (human capital) that provides the competitive edge. Workers are now generating data that provide a clearer picture of the intangible value they generate and their employers are now more and more keen to invest in Learning Management Systems, knowledge management systems and better communications tools to encourage the sharing of knowledge in their workforce.

While formal classroom knowledge is still valued and often still the best mode for particular kinds of learning (e.g. executive programmes; university accreditation and the status attached), organizations are concerned about faster returns, demonstrably effective learning and scalable. The preference is now for smaller units of learning repeated for mastery. National blockchain systems maintain lifelong records of learning bits by each learner in their learning passports. Much of this information is created and curated by masters in the subject at the workplace who share their knowledge with their colleagues. This user-generated content via digital platforms (maybe using virtual reality technologies) is distributed widely and oftentimes openly. These learning systems have learned from Google search, Youtube, LinkedIn, Wiki, Amazon, etc. to create a much better, more democratic, user experience unlike the dreaded online compulsory compliance course of the 2010s.

The focus is now on peer-to-peer learning, user generated content. This is far more trusted that the more removed and remote formal instruction in classrooms — which have become extremely expensive. Learners are now used to sifting through free or cheap content and now less and less prepared to sign up to formal fixed time courses instead of learning in small blocks which can be certified over time. With dispersed workforces and tenuous employment relationships, learning must be driven by immediacy, speed, utility and trustworthiness by the learners themselves. As a consequence, the HE sector is fast consolidating with 10 percent fewer places than in 2000.

The role of experts has also changed. The growth is in expert QA on the mass of the content so key content sites have experts checking the veracity and value of the content before commending these to the workforce. They are less in the driving seat as the nation's educators than fact-checkers/ endorsers augmented by AIs that over time there is a concentration of trusted content sites for particular knowledges.

And driving the agenda is the Chief Learning Technologist who now helms what in the old days was called L&D.

2022

Within the UK, internal (skill shortages), external (restricted labour pools owing to Brexit) and government policy (apprenticeships, TEF, shackling of labour) result in greater pressure on employers to educate the workforce. As a consequence, there is greater demand for technical-level skills — 'Mode 2' knowledge.

The uptake of higher level apprenticeships has pushed Mode 2 knowledge into the HE agenda. Post 1992 universities have responded rapidly to this change and have captured the local markets as they position themselves as civic universities serving the needs of the local labour markets and local employers. Oxford and Cambridge ignore the trends and create their own markets with blue-sky research and rich alumni, creating campuses abroad.

Other red bricks collaborate with their post 1992 colleagues and create strategic partnerships, designing programmes, which integrate 'Mode 1' (academic knowledge) and 'Mode 2'. Programmes such as the MBA and DBA, which prioritize Mode 2 knowledge, continue to mature and provide evidence of impact. This evidence of impact influences the REF and TEF agendas and impact is recognized as the development of social capital, the relationships which sustain organizations and societies.

Social media and access to virtual learning materials continues to expand and is integrated within formal programmes of learning. Individuals continue to access their own material on line and the role of the expert is challenged.

2017/2018

The tension between HRD theory and practice has been explored from both the academic (Kuchinke, 2004; Moats & McLean, 2009) and macro practice based (Leitch, 2006) perspective. In the context of the UK priority has been on expanding higher education (CIPD, 2017a) and de-valuation of technical-level education (Wolf, 2016). The consequences are that those in professional jobs enjoy greater market value than those in vocational positions with the UK suffering significant skill shortages (Chapman, 2017). This has been fuelled by globalization with resource pools for talent and multi national companies that operate across the world.

Changes in the UK with greater investment in technical-level education (The National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2015; Wolf, 2016) as well as the impact of Brexit on skills shortages (CIPD, 2017b; Wallace, 2017) are influencing the future of HRD practice. Furthermore, employers are being incentivized to support on the job learning initiatives, such as through the Apprenticeship levy (National Audit Office, 2016).

The organization of work has changed significantly with a growth in flexible working patterns and fewer people with steady jobs and fixed salaries. Instead, growing numbers are contingent (Stickney, 2008) or portfolio workers, offering their skills to a host of clients and leading flexible lives between home and the workplace. Zero-hour contracts, the gig economy and crowdworking have become part of the narrative (Field & Forsey, 2016). The term precariat (Standing, 2016) denotes individuals who experience insecurity in the workplace. One of the strategies encouraged for those trapped in a precarious lifestyle is self-indebtedness (Stewart & Pine, 2014), something that is particularly evident in the UK (Fazackerley, 2017). Some view this as a model of social control (Guerin, 2013) as employers can have the advantage of a cheap and docile labour force. The resulting shackling of labour to organizations in the UK may result in a greater emphasis on practical skill development.

Comment

This scenario starts from a position of despair but sees some light emerging from the move towards apprenticeships. While this says nothing yet about the quality of apprenticeship learning nor how this can remove low skilled work along with low paid employment, it does see the potential for a move in the direction of valuing technical education. Skills shortages which Brexit makes more obvious, provide the rationale for employers to demand technical level skills, assuming they can also provide work of sufficient challenge to require such skills.

The term 'Mode 2 knowledge' is invoked to make a contrast with 'Mode 1' or academic knowledge. The distinction was first suggested by Gibbons et al. (1994) as a way of highlighting knowledge in the context of its application. Such knowledge is transdisciplinary and requires interaction with participants or actor in situ. This scenario sees the route to Mode 2 established by the push for apprenticeships, with knock-on effects on postgraduate programmes. What is interesting here is how some universities can ignore this shift but those that make the changes, do so in collaboration with others.

By 2022, Mode 1 has been eclipsed by Mode 2, and, it is assumed, a variety of action modes of research, has actually happened. Remembering that the future has not yet happened but this positive result is evident in the skills of people, over and above the advance of algorithms. It does seem that people are keeping ahead in the race with the digital world through the acquisition of social intelligence and creative skills which are needed in tasks which technology cannot do (Frey & Osborne, 2013).

Scenario 2
How will HRD research be making a positive difference to people's lives across the world?

Clare Rigg, *Liverpool University*
John Watkins, *Coventry University, London*
Valerie Anderson, *Portsmouth University*
Kate Black, *Northumbria University*

2027

In September 2027 HRD research is valued and recognized for its impact on people's lives. It collaborates with other disciplines to improve 'the whole.' And, it does so through a hybrid, un-siloized view of what is HRD research. People within and outside organizations describe their involvement in HRD research, feel their voice has been heard during the process of research and feel they have had a stake in research that has been carried out. They are able to identify ways in which HRD research has made a difference to their life. Research in general is held in high esteem but not unquestionably. People have developed the ability to critique and question what they see or read. They know there is value in good quality knowledge and to question the provenance of knowledge made public. Since 2017, there has been a fundamental shift from assuming expertise only (or even ever) comes from experts to an orientation that recognizes that, in the face of problems that are inter-linked, knowledge and solutions need to be holistic without silos.

HRD research is recognized as having impact as an integral part of other discipline research (for example training and knowledge sharing as an outcome of medical or engineering research). When impact metrics are undertaken there is a radioactive marker within any research that shows the contribution of HRD alongside other disciplines. As such, HRD research is confident in its identity in the midst of complex and novel collaborations with other research domains.

2022

- BBC One's Big Knowledge' celebrates its third Grammy for best reality show, and twentieth franchise country, where members of the public work with HRD researchers and technical experts to investigate and solve company problems.
- World Leader Summit 2022 agrees to adopt the United Nations Human Rights Council and CIPD joint policy recommendation that all school leavers must hold a qualification in the Nature of Knowledge.
- Wikipedia relaunches its site to include the names of their editors. Each editor is rated for their trustworthiness using the 'F-rating' scale.
- The Grenfell Foundation becomes the world's largest sponsor of practitioner PhD research projects with a requirement to combine technical and HRD outcomes. Impact studies start to suggest these are more valuable than pure research PhD in the fields of social science.
- UK and Irish universities with strong HRD component continue to graduate students from around the world with training in HRD and research degrees.
- Partnerships between universities internationally extend the exposure of HRD in international curricula.

- Such curricula continue to internationalize and to become more relevant and valuable to the issues of the day. They also have shaken off western hegemonic assumptions in the content of teaching.
- GoogleBook (the Facebook and Google merger) sponsors training for the world's academics to use social media to communicate their ideas and research.
- HRD researchers are valued for their contributions to all kinds of disciplinary research, for example to facilitate learning conversations across business and scientific researchers; to inform the creation of training materials that are a product of technological research.
- The voluntary and mandatory standards that govern business transactions have HRD standards at their centre (for example, investment in development …).
- The first Nobel Prize for HRD research is awarded.

2017/2018

- In the December 2017 Christmas episode of Eastenders some piece of HRD research is profiled as pivotal for changing the lives of a key character.
- The Grenfell Fire inquiry identifies how a piece of HRD research could have prevented the tragedy if it had been heeded in 2016.
- Facebook and Google co-launch the 5 point 'Faked-It' or 'F' rating scale that cross references news stories for trustworthiness.
- Trump's parroting of 'fake news' turns the tide of public opinion in favour of greater critical questioning of 'truth'.
- HRD standards are written into the revised CIPD charter in 2018 and the equivalent internationally.
- A new ISO for HRD is written.
- A major scientific breakthrough in the preventative treatment of dementia and Alzheimer's declares it would not have been possible without the input of HRD research.

Comment

Scenario 2 is also optimistic with the value of HRD research based on how it impacts on people's lives. This is achieved because of how research involved others and is cross disciplinary, interestingly proven with an embedded identifier of HRD contribution.

Back in 2017, during difficult and doubtful times, the start of a shift is discernible through a questioning of the words of politicians and social media's attempts to rescue their reputations. Disastrous events, scientific breakthroughs and key moments on TV point to the contribution of HRD research. Thus by 2022 HRD researchers have broken out of their silos and enter partnerships with influence spreading and having an impact. Similar to Scenario 1, there is Mode 2 ethos with its orientation to consider problems. Technology seems to be working in synch with this new ethos; quite an assumption but if the big players can make it happen, it becomes a possibility.

Scenario 3
Is our HRD wisdom making a difference?

Leslie Kirsch, *WithumSmith+Brown*
Chandana Sanyal, *Middlesex University*
Lynn Nichol, *Worcester University*
Rick Holden, *International Federation of Training and Development Organisations*

2027

For the first time in anyone's recollection an HRD Conference enjoys an equal participation from academics specializing in HR/HRD and HRD practitioners. Emerging from the 'loose' scholarly-practice network established in 2017, and which has flourished over the last 10 years the conference utilizes advances in IT. These help facilitate academic-practice collaboration and the generation of 'collective intelligence' (Bostrom, 2014). The essential elements of continuous professional development are activities of a scholarly practice nature. Academics and practitioners want to attend and participate; HRD scholarly practice is valued by them and is meaningful to them.

In embracing King and Brownell's maxim that "the school is not a building to go to but rather a society to be in", the combined attendees share the insight gained through their respective centres of learning. It is recognized that a 'university' need not exist within its walls; that it is a place of wisdom within any organization. Employees rather than their managers 'own' learning and development and access to learning is determined by the engagement and commitment of individuals. HRD is everyone's business.

It is premature to claim the 'academic-practice' divide has been bridged but what is clear is that the level of disconnect between HRD research and practice is no longer a constraint on the development of the profession. The HRD academic and practitioner now co-create HRD 'wisdom' which will provide purpose and meaning to those working in organizations. The range of learning interventions will widen considerably, with an emphasis on non-cognitive learning methods focusing on building awareness in the moment and extending to developing resilience and improving health and well-being at work. Qualitatively and quantitatively, HRD scholar practitioners (wherever they work) can provide a powerful and credible claim to be making a difference. A virtuous cycle is evident.

2022

Uncertainty and instability characterize both research and practice in HRD … and elsewhere in the social sciences. There are membership crises in many professional bodies. Looser networks are developing — technology enhanced and interest based. The message is clear: such bodies can no longer survive unless they can provide evidence of impact for both practitioners and academics and one way to doing this is through practitioner-academic research. The developing network of HRD scholar–practitioners are seeking to exploit this disruption to advance their vision of wisdom through HRD.

Within the higher education world, narrow and exclusive views of research are increasingly being questioned. The tide is definitely turning against high ranking academic journals destined to influence no-one outside of a narrowly bounded community. Forces within universities and government have combined to re-assess how best to measure (and reward) research output. The widespread weakening of specific 'professional' ties (e.g. CIPD vis the UKs HR/HRD curriculum), almost paradoxically, enables HRD scholarly practice to become the life blood of professional, and postgraduate provision. Professional development (and crucially promotion) policies/practice linked to (academic) research excellence are increasingly discredited.

In the world of practice, HRD professionals are increasingly despondent with traditional formulas and supposed 'best practice'. The 'voice' of the critically reflective practitioner is increasingly being heard, questioning their own practice as the challenges of the 2020s (artificial intelligence; growing income inequalities) begin to bite. In response, HRD researchers actively engage with HRD practitioners in organizations to co-inquire into current HRD practices and through their research co-create new HRD knowledge which informs and improves practice. The trend toward seeing HRD as a central, integrative force, in all aspects of organizational development is growing, gaining recognition and being embedded into organizational practice.

With the influx of new scholars comes new insights. This transition helps to refocus scholars away from the notion that it is the role of research to imperialistically grant its superior knowledge to practice. Instead we seek to learn together, to allow the lessons of practice to flow to theory as we also hope to see theory flow to practice. As a new generation of scholars completes academic programmes, they take their HRD wisdom back to their disparate organizations as scholarly practitioners.

2017/2018

Emboldened by UFHRD 2017, attendees review effective methods of distilling HRD's collective wisdom into more accessible forms. In the spirit of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) they celebrate the achievements of the last two decades, i.e.:

- The shift from 'training' to 'learning and development'.
- HRD interventions can and do build capabilities and improve skills.
- The utilization of HRD to promote employee engagement.
- Principle based standards where HRD works to safeguard and promote well-being in every facet of working life.
- Raised awareness of diversity, inclusion and well-being into the discourse of HRD.

and use these to help envision an exciting future for HRD.

The achievements are viewed as key building blocks to enable a fresh HRD 'USP' to be championed where HRD is central to work and life in the latter part of the 2010s. Suitably utilized they also provide the keys to opening doors to HRD curriculum change, new perspectives on collaborative research, translation of theory to practice, and to the gate to bridge the academic-practice divide.

There are 'troubled times' in higher education (Adams, 2017). Projected falls in student numbers and the perceived need for universities to restore their community 'anchor' see a number of mergers proposed. One such proposal captures the headlines; that between a Russell group institution and a 1992 'new' university. Whilst it will take time to realize in practice terms they adopt a set of new principles vis social sciences and humanities research and teaching; challenging conventional wisdoms about the role of the university as we enter the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The institution seeks a radical shift away from Nicholas Maxwell's (2011) notion of knowledge-inquiry where the means become the ends as knowledge is produced but seldom put into practice.

In business and management, the move emboldens a cross section of professionals to question current practices surrounding 'best practice,' evidence based practice, the professional curriculum, research endeavours, and academic–practice collaboration. Importantly, challenges are directed at shibboleths within both the worlds of practice ("what need have we of the ivory tower?") and academia ("promotion is not dependent upon publication in 3* journals or better").

The foundations are in place and the keys to opening some new doors are being forged. The emergent HRD scholarly practice interest group/network is empowered.

Comment

Scenario 3 projects a bright and reconciled future for HRD based on the collaboration between academics and practitioners and the co-creation of 'wisdom'. The importance of what has become a virtuous progression is how collaboration has made a difference, whatever the advances in technology. While some projections for the future point to the role of non-human consciousness (Harari, 2016), i.e. robots that supersede human consciousness and judgement, through collaboration, and continuous learning by humans, the negative path can be prevented. Further such learning is inclusive and beneficial individually and collectively. In 2017/2018, those in HRD are searching for how value can be added and recognized. There is optimism here. Even though some HEIs are beginning to face problems, it is the scholarly practice community that can work with such challenges and indeed feels empowered to do so. In 2022, technological advances are seen as a factor in perceived threats to professional expertise (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) but rather than accepting the inevitable, the impact agenda of research is recognized and valued and scholarly practice is embraced. The seeds of co-creation of knowledge are sewn, so this also represents a move to Mode 2 research.

Concluding Comments

These scenarios seek to portray a future in 10 years, clearly one which has not yet happened. It is important to remember that they are not predictions but rather stories of possibility, even probability in some cases. Like all stories, they need to be plausible in their narrative construction to hold the reader's attention (Fisher, 1984). Further, as constructions which have emerged from a talk process between people, they also reflect the prejudices of those who participated. A question for readers of this article, from whatever professional perspective which influences your work, is the extent to which you can align with the scenarios.

What is interesting but not necessarily surprising is that all the scenarios for 2027 are positive and optimistic. HRD research and practice have advanced together and with a creative response to political, regulatory, and technological dynamics. Different factors instigate the advance in 2018 and 2022 but there is convergence by 2027. It is churlish at this stage to provide too much criticism; the purpose of the 'scenario' is to help us consider desirable possibilities. The scenarios capture what many in HRD academe and HRD professional activity, see as desirable and, importantly, suggest that HRD scholarly practice is a promising pathway to follow. For example, apprenticeships provide the opportunity for technical skills to be fully recognized and for learners to be valued, supported by what is best in technological advances and benevolent structures and roles. In all the scenarios, explicitly or implied, Mode 2 researching has come to the fore, maybe at the expense of traditional curricula in HRD and other social sciences. This also implies the adoption of action modes of research where academics work on what is relevant to others but can also maintain rigour to generate knowledge which is actionable within HRD practice.

This process is also multi-disciplinary and HRD is perhaps just beginning to find out how it can work in a variety of contexts with a heterogeneity of standard and voices. As facilitators of learning and generative activity, HRD could create the narrative for others to follow. It remains to be seen how we might work over the next few years to create what we desire.

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