

## **CPE and HRD: Research and Practice Within Systems and Across Boundaries**

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**The problem and the solution.** Establishing relationships between concepts is an important component of systematic inquiry. However, determining those relationships can be extremely difficult when definitions of concepts are murky and the proximity of their boundaries is nebulous. Uncertainties reside in the literature regarding the alignment, overlap, and/or distancing of human resource development, continuing professional education, and workforce development. This article serves as a discussion point for the journal by stressing a need for coalescence among these areas of inquiry for mutual gains within theory and practice.

**Keywords:** *systems theory; continuing professional education; human resource development; workforce development*

The research and practice of human resource development (HRD) and continuing professional education (CPE) have evolved at arm's length from one another. Historically, scholars from both camps have been content to fertilize within fenced-in yards rather than explore and nurture common ground. But things are beginning to change. Emerging trends in the professions, the workplace, and society have crisscrossed HRD and CPE, and, in the process, scholars who are familiar with both areas are beginning to seek out logical links between them. Core elements such as the interplay of context and learning that are shared by both CPE and HRD are causing scholars to ponder the overlay of boundaries (Daley & Carlsson, 2000).

Points of convergence and divergence between CPE and HRD have yet to be fully examined and, thus, serve as the impetus for crafting the articles of this issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources (ADHR)*. What are the characteristics of practice and theory that are unique to each area, and where do the domains of these areas crossover? The overlay seems to be increasing. For example, formal educational systems such as community colleges and universities work collaboratively with stakeholders of both

CPE and HRD as service providers. Emerging information technology systems are taking on greater stature in the research and practice of both CPE and HRD. CPE providers have wrestled with the complexities of regulation through certification and mandatory continuing education for several years. These issues are drawing an increasing amount of attention in the HRD community regarding the role, processes, ethics, and scope of certification. Social forces have influenced both fields including factors related to race, ethnicity, gender, power, and other matters of difference. Although both fields feel the tension of these contextual forces, scholars from CPE and HRD have not systematically explored the pursuit of mutually beneficial goals.

So in the grand scheme of things, what is the fit between CPE and HRD? The purpose of this issue of *ADHR* is to take a closer look at the possibilities. This opening article reviews discussions regarding the definition of HRD. This review will bring to light dilemmas faced by HRD scholars as they try to ascertain researchable questions that should reside inside the boundaries of HRD. Further delineation of definitions and differentiation of CPE and HRD is provided in articles by Sleezer, Conti, and Nolan (2004 [this issue]) and Bierema and Eraut (2004 [this issue]). The opening article offers a cursory glance at systems theory and the notion of boundaries. The article concludes by highlighting relationships between systems and subsystems as a way of thinking about CPE, HRD, and workforce development. For the sake of this discussion, workforce development is viewed as a broad concept that portrays systemic coordination between public and private work programs, policies, and contexts. Closing comments of this article focus on the importance of viewing HRD, CPE, and workforce development as components of an integrated system.

### **HRD—A Concept in Search of a Definition**

The Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) is my professional home. Although I have affiliations and memberships with other professional associations, I have selected AHRD as my primary place to roost. I am not alone, as several hundred other scholars from around the globe have selected AHRD to be the primary connecting point to their research agendas, their professional networking, and their scholarly identities.

As president of AHRD, I am sensitive to expectations that are connected to this role. For example, sometimes I am expected to explain the nature of HRD. What is it and what is it not? What are the parameters of HRD? What topics should be included in HRD literature and what topics fall outside of its domain? When pressed to answer these questions, I often seek to deflect them or make a quick exit by telling a joke. As noted by McGoldrick, Stewart, and Watson (2001), "Although there is no agreement on what HRD

means, it is nonetheless researched, practiced and taught” (p. 353). My common response is that I am not absolute with a definition of HRD, but I know that it is bigger than a breadbox. Some of my colleagues would prefer more precision than a breadbox metaphor.

Stating that a universal definition of HRD has not been embraced by practitioners and theorists is old news. The term has been bandied about since its inception. Ruona (2000) noted, “A major barrier for HRD professionals is that our work and what we stand for are not yet well understood by others. Some would also argue that we do not yet well understand ourselves either” (p. 2). The lack of a shared understanding can be traced to the myriad lenses we use to view the world. In a classic essay, Watkins (1991) acknowledged that different disciplines emphasize different roles for the HRD practitioner and different foci for the various discipline-based definitions of HRD. In other words, fundamental value differences exist between HRD stakeholders:

Some disciplines emphasize the ways in which workers must learn, change, or improve their efficiency. Others acknowledge that there may be a performance problem, but that it may have more to do with the way in which the system functions or with the context in which the worker must function. From a discipline-based perspective, this is akin to the difference in perspective of the psychologist who sees the problem as one which is within the person (and therefore under the individual’s control) and the sociologist who sees the social system as the problem. (Watkins, 1991, p. 254)

Watkins (1991) conceptualized HRD as a field of practice with theoretical underpinnings influenced by economics, industrial psychology, adult learning, organizational behavior and management models, and other disciplines. Weinberger (1998) reviewed several U.S. definitions of HRD and examined their underlying theories. Acknowledging HRD as interdisciplinary in nature and that many fields of study inform HRD theory and practice, she identified the primary influencing forces as psychology with a learning emphasis, systems, economics, and performance.

Kuchinke (2001) argued against calling HRD a discipline within academia: “HRD does not count as a discipline but rather as a field with multiple disciplines as its roots or foundations” (p. 292). He urged scholars to “rise above the various disciplinary perspectives of an organizational situation and form multi-faceted explanations and predictions” (p. 293). Swanson (2001) recognized the tension in academia regarding whether HRD should be viewed as a field of study or as a discipline. Selecting the latter, he noted, “The discipline of HRD relies on three core theories in order to understand, explain and carry out its process and roles. They include psychological theory, economic theory, and systems theory” (Kuchinke, 2001, p. 304).

Russ-Eft (2000) acknowledged the different views of HRD between individuals and organizations. She adeptly recognized that varying viewpoints of HRD could be traced to the word on which the author placed his or her emphasis: *human*, *resource*, or *development*. For example, Elliott (2000) encouraged us to look at the human part of the equation:

If we replace the term *human beings* with *human becomings*, then we immediately dislocate our day-to-day, taken-for-granted, perception of ourselves and others, creating a much more powerful image of the shaping of individual identity. A human who is constantly *becoming* is also one who is subject to many influential processes, whether these be—to name a few—social, political, historical, or economic. Consequently, a human *becoming* is a fragile entity, which when grounded in the organizational world alone becomes infinitely complex, displaying multiple identities. By taking a view of HRD from the perspective of human *becomings*, we gain insights into HRD as strategic process concerned with the sustainability of all types of organizations. (p. 188)

Those who emphasize the word *resource* draw ample ire from critical theorists. Many scholars bristle at the notion of merely viewing humans as resources. Baptiste (2001) cautioned scholars to distance themselves from initiatives linked to human capital theory. He noted that a more accurate worldview could be attained by considering the broad domain labeled *political economy*: “It brings together such disciplines as social and political philosophy, history, sociology, social psychology, economics, and anthropology” (p. 198). And finally, Pace (2000) urged HRD professionals to pay close attention to the thoughts that underlie HRD. He contended that development was the key driving force of HRD.

The debate over the definition of HRD and its parameters has meandered about without the prospect of closure in clear sight. McLean (2000) has been an active participant in this evolving discussion. Recently, he expressed a greater interest in the myriad ways that we can imagine HRD rather than zeroing in on a specific definition of it. He noted, “It should not be surprising that HRD differs from country to country, that different organizations view it differently, different universities define it differently, and different individuals see it differently. Such diversity should be applauded rather than decried” (p. 41). Likewise, a plurality of theoretical orientations fuels the efforts of scholars engaged in HRD research. This too is healthy, because considering competing research perspectives and paradigms can help us to better understand important research questions within HRD through alternative approaches to inquiry. This plurality of theoretical orientations represents what Merton referred to as a *disciplined eclecticism* (as cited in Burden, 1994). McGoldrick et al. (2001) shared a similar perspective noting that a dominant paradigm of HRD research does not exist. They considered multiple viewpoints of HRD to be a worthy proposition. “There is no *single lens* for viewing HRD research and there are *many voices* expressing opinions. It may be that, as HRD academics become more sophisticated in theorizing, then greater clarity and paradigm commensurability will occur” (p. 346).

Lee (2001) took a delightfully obstinate position with the definition issue. She simply refused to do it on the basis of philosophical, theoretical, and practical grounds. She explained her resistance to providing a clean and tidy definition to her HRD graduate students. “It was an attempt to ensure that each person developed their own, emergent view of HRD, rather than adopting the one propounded by the teacher, which they would end up wear-

ing like an old, ill-fitting raincoat” (p. 337). She encouraged learners to rely on their own experiences to make sense of the concept of HRD.

Scholars will continue to debate the definition of HRD. Some authors will seek out precision and clarity with their definitions. If preferences be known, they would probably like to apply a global positioning system to HRD rhetoric to pinpoint its exact location within a galaxy of scholarship. Others will find comfort in the ambiguity of the term *HRD* and merely enjoy the thrill of the chase and the pursuit of its becoming. But for both sets of scholars, how does one determine what falls within or outside of the boundaries of HRD?

### **The Amorphous and Permeable Boundaries of HRD**

Perhaps it is a sign of the times that everything seems to be connected to everything else. The brief history of HRD is replete with discussions of its fuzzy parameters. Jacobs (2000), reflecting on his role as editor of *Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ)*, detected an increasingly broader array of topics that were viewed by authors as appropriately linked to HRD. He explained that, during the inception of *HRDQ*, the field was defined predominantly by practice and devoid of a theoretical framework. The emergence of *HRDQ* and other research journals provided opportunities to examine the field from vantage points of both theory and practice. Jacobs noted that recognizing the field’s approximate boundaries helped to guide the process of deciding which manuscripts were or were not consistent with the *HRDQ* editorial mission. His contention was that as *HRDQ* matured, the boundaries of HRD began to blur.

According to Jacobs (2000), an increasing number of manuscripts were submitted to *HRDQ* that would have previously been construed as being outside the traditional boundaries of HRD. What was causing this dilution of traditional HRD scholarship? Jacobs believed that for one reason or another, the authors truly believed that their work had a valid connection to the field of HRD. He further acknowledged that “much of the boundary pressures seem to stem from the changing nature of the authors who submit manuscripts to *HRDQ*” (p. 2). One might surmise from his observation that authors from a wide range of disciplines were seeing connections to HRD and to the outlets of mainstream HRD research—journals such as *HRDQ*, *Human Resource Development International*, *ADHR*, and *Human Research Development Review*. Over time, scholars from disparate fields of study began to recognize HRD as a relevant context for their research agendas.

Political, economic, and social contexts have altered what were previously perceived to be traditional boundaries of HRD. For example, the array of topics that are addressed in the annual international conference of the AHRD has increased drastically. The 2003 conference proceedings included

more than 140 papers clustered among 50 research symposia that represented considerable breadth in HRD research. The research agendas of scholars who are affiliated with AHRD have pushed out the boundaries on which Jacobs (2000) mused when he reminisced about the birthing period of *HRDQ*. This annual conference and its proceedings are open to all scholars who can make some type of connection between their research and HRD. Scholars on the margins are welcomed. With this venue, the boundaries of HRD research are permeable, elastic, and open.

But even with the seemingly open boundaries of the AHRD conferences, there are scholars who poignantly rattle the status quo of HRD literature. A good example is the recent article by Bierema and Cseh (2003) that critiqued AHRD research using a feminist research framework. They examined more than 600 AHRD Proceedings papers from 1996 to 2000 and found that only 6% of the articles dealt with women's issues and a small percentage dealt with diversity. Their research points out the glaring discrepancy between the research of AHRD members and the glaring disconnect to an espoused goal of the AHRD strategic plan—the goal of embracing diversity. This disconnect is not unique to the AHRD. On a parallel note, Willis and Kenway (1996) examined the restructuring of the world of work in Australia. Within their concluding comments, they noted that the characteristics of “a place of work” and a “competent worker” and of what is needed for “effective participation” in work remain deeply gender inflected (p. 256). These two examples of feminist critique are stunning portrayals of how the boundaries of HRD research must be continually challenged and questioned. The AHRD cannot fulfill its vision of leading HRD through research if its scholars do not have the peripheral vision to see who or what is on the margins.

### **Situating CPE Within the Systems of HRD and Workforce Development**

What might be the best approach for understanding HRD, its boundaries, and those things that seem to have the strongest connections to it? Systems theory has been suggested as a logical starting point for examining HRD. However, like the realm of HRD, competing contentions reside in the literature on the parameters of systems theory. As it turns out, there are many types of systems and theories about them. Miller (1955), in his classic article on general behavior systems theory, described systems as

bounded regions in space-time, involving energy interchange among their parts, which are associated in functional relationships, and with their environments. General systems theory is a series of related definitions, assumptions, and postulates about all levels of systems from atomic particles through atoms, molecules, crystals, viruses, cells, organs, individuals, small groups, societies, planets, solar systems, and galaxies. (p. 514)

Bahg (1990) included general systems theory among many types of systems including living systems theory, fuzzy systems theory, grey systems theory, large-scale systems theory, and others. He stated that, although there are several types of systems theories, an exact definition of systems theory did not exist, and “a unified systems theory approach to systems has not been developed” (p. 79). Evidently, HRD is not the only concept that is challenging to define—the same can be said about systems theory.

This lack of consensus regarding systems theory might also influence scholars as they wrestle with the notion of boundaries among systems. Miller (1955) noted, “Boundaries of systems are not always clear-cut and round like the rind of a watermelon” (p. 515). It is safe to say that the boundaries of HRD are not well represented by watermelon rinds. I would be more apt to visualize HRD as a giant amoeba—an amorphous, amoeboid mass of theory and practice that is constantly reacting to contextual forces.

Scholars associated with HRD seem to have gut feelings about what is central to HRD and what might be viewed as tangential. As Watkins (1991) pointed out, these centralized notions are often linked to one’s predispositions that have roots connected to distinct academic disciplines. In other words, we view the essence of HRD according to our philosophical groundings, and our views regarding what is central and how far we should extend the margins vary accordingly. So, generally speaking, how might HRD approximate its boundaries? Miller (1955) suggested that proximity to the center or periphery of a system can be traced through energy transmission:

How does one locate a boundary, i.e., a region where energy or information exchange is significantly less than inside or outside the system? One decides upon the order of magnitude of difference in rate of change of information or energy which one will accept as indication of a boundary. (p. 516)

Miller (1955) contended that boundaries can be approximated by locating that region where there is a marked variance of energy interchange from either inside or outside of the system. The contention of authors in this issue of *ADHR* is that the energy transmission between CPE and HRD is garnering momentum. They have noted convergence between HRD and CPE and the energy that is being interchanged between these areas. Furthermore, authors have noted the convergence or overlay between these two areas and the broader concept of workforce development.

### **Workforce Development: A Broader System**

For some scholars, CPE can be perceived as a subsystem of HRD, and HRD can be viewed as a subsystem of the broader concept of workforce development. Naquin (2002) described workforce development systems as “integrated collections of public and private education, training, and employment support services designed to meet the human resource development needs of organizations, com-

munities, and nations” (p. 133). Jacobs and Hawley (2003), acknowledging that no definition of workforce development can offer a fully integrated perspective of working and learning, offered the following description:

Workforce development is the coordination of school, organizational, and governmental policies and programs such that as a collective they enable individuals the opportunity to realize a sustainable livelihood and organizations to achieve exemplary goals, consistent with the history, culture, and goals of the social context. (p. 1017)

Jacobs and Hawley (2003) noted that the concept of workforce development has three major implications for HRD theory and research: (a) the possibility of enriching HRD theory, (b) opportunities to reframe problems and settings, and (c) the potential to determine broader sets of dependent variables. Within the realm of workforce development, scholars are able to explore broader issues associated with work and society. Examples include the centralized vocational qualifications effort in Great Britain (O’Brien, 1994), the dual system of vocational education in Germany (Kutscha, 1996), or the subemployment difficulties within the United States (Sheak, 1995).

From this broader perspective of workforce development, Hawley and Taylor (2003) established a claim for considering business associations and other contexts related to CPE. They noted, “Until recently, research on business associations might not have been considered within the boundaries of HRD research. However, recent societal trends make this topic increasingly pertinent for study” (p. 440). They went on to say,

Specifically, research on business associations has the following implications for human resource development practice and research: greater understanding among practitioners of society-organization connections, recognition among researchers of the need to expand research boundaries, and an increased attention to workforce development services for adults as well as youth. (p. 440)

Rusaw (1995) explained the important role that professional associations can play in the formal and informal learning of adults:

In summary, professional associations play three primary learning roles: (1) as providers of formal and informal learning opportunities, (2) as constructors of frames of reference in which professional and bureaucratic norms can be blended, and (3) as catalysts for changing conditions and relationships in external environments. (p. 223)

### **Concluding Thoughts: CPE—Providing a Professional Home For a Narrower Subsystem**

Whereas workforce development provides a broader sphere of support for HRD, CPE provides a tighter niche for exploring HRD-related topics. A cursory glance of CPE beholds issues of theory and practice that are situated in the literature of HRD. Roscoe (2002) delineated the reach of the stakeholders of CPE—extending beyond the obvious professional bodies and

their memberships. Employers of professional staff are included, because they desire to increase the competence of their professional employees. Clients and customers of professionals are stakeholders who expect professionals to be competent and current in their craft. Professional associations and organized labor are stakeholders who may be concerned about credentialing processes. From a global perspective, governments and societies share interests in ensuring that professionals stay abreast of contemporary trends in their work. A similar discussion could take place regarding the stakeholders of HRD. Yet Roscoe noted confusion related to where responsibility rests for accountability of CPE systems: "Is it for individual professionals to maintain their performance, the professional body to maintain credibility, the employer or the customer and client?" (p. 4). Once again, this question cuts across the boundaries of CPE and HRD. When professionals, professional bodies, employers, customers, and clients interact with both CPE and HRD systems, the energy interchange increases and boundaries are penetrable.

The interactions between these systems are complex and ambiguous. Certain aspects of CPE may be perceived to be HRD, and other aspects of HRD may be perceived to be CPE. The constant element for both CPE and HRD is that the bulk of the action resides in the workplace. It is this constant that has brought CPE scholars to the halls of HRD seeking a professional home that will allow them to connect to a larger system. Jeris and Armacost (2002) noted that CPE scholars/practitioners tend to affiliate with organizations within their individual professions. Because of these strong allegiances, the products of CPE research dissipate across diverse fields of practice and collective knowledge fails to gel. Jeris and Armacost expressed the desire for an international affiliation that would allow CPE providers and researchers opportunities to express their ideas of research and practice. They surmised, "To the extent that this space can be extended to the research and practice of CPE, the potential exists for a richer consideration of HRD through the narrower lens of CPE" (p. 568). The dialogues provided in this issue of *AHRD* are situated in this quest—the need for scholars to extend their ideas across the boundaries of HRD and CPE with the intent of gaining new insights.

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