Towards a Critical Practice of HRD

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Abstract

This paper contributes to an organizational understanding of HRD. Current HRD practice promotes an over-emphasis on the development of individuals (for example through individual performance appraisal linked to programmes of skill and knowledge development) and not enough on understanding and engaging with the organizational dynamics that limit and shape individuals’ or collective opportunities and abilities to learn and to organize. These dynamics are created as a result of the interaction between emotion and politics in organizations. My specific interest is in the way that emotions and politics combine:

- To create organizational structures or processes that then limit, for example, knowing, feeling, sensemaking
- To reinforce existing organizational designs or power relations
- To inhibit the organization of learning and change

Another way to express this would be to say that I am interested in the ways in which emotional responses become political – how they help to maintain or challenge existing assumptions, values and/or power relations that characterise ‘the way we do things here’. In this paper, the interplay between emotions and politics provides a basis for developing a revised approach to HRD, an approach that attempts to be more critically reflective, collectively focussed and more politically and emotionally astute than many of the current ideas that inform HRD and the resultant practices.

Consider the following example. Most people in organizations have at some point experienced the weight of ‘expectations from above’. Where these are powerfully felt they can produce cautious and self-protective behaviour. Caution and self-protection stimulate a tendency to blame others for problems that arise. As blame becomes a
habitual individual response it starts to have an impact on organizational processes, for example, how reflection is both undertaken and avoided. Reflection is undertaken in isolation from others (if at all) and becomes focussed on ‘looking back’ at actions. Ambivalence about engaging in collective, public and strategic reflection reinforces difficulties of communication across organizational sub-systems. From a relatively simple emotional reaction (caution in the face of expectations) has emerged an organizational process or ‘structure’ that limits learning and change. Therefore, in addition to looking at, for example, the meaning of reflection or leadership in the minds of organizational members, I explore the organizational dynamics that impact on concepts like reflection and leadership, and that construct them in practice.

The above is just one example from a very large set of possibilities mobilised by ‘expectations’, since caution is not the only possible response in this situation. Expectations from above might produce anxiety; they might encourage and support action, create confusion or indeed produce a mixture of all of these. This suggests the importance of studying the relationship between emotions and politics (power relations) in organizations, and through such study, to identify the dynamics that give rise to implicit organizational designs and structures. I provide examples from private and public organizations that illustrate the relationship between emotion and politics. These examples demonstrate how emotional responses create political responses, which then shape the ways in which feelings are experienced and enacted both by individuals and collectives. Such underlying emotions and politics contribute to the establishment of characteristic or habitual ways of organizing, which then have an impact on key organizing processes, particularly reflection and leadership.

My focus here is on reframing reflection and leadership as collective rather than individual concepts. I argue that it is important to understand reflection as an organizing process rather than as the responsibility of the individual, ‘reflective practitioner’. I suggest that specific practices that can contribute to reflection as an organizing process will be informed by three characteristics. First, such practices should contribute to the collective questioning of assumptions that underpin organizing in order to make power relations visible. Second, reflective practices necessarily provide a ‘container’ for the management of the anxieties raised by making power relations visible. Third, reflective practices should contribute towards participation and democracy in the organization. I present a view of leadership as the collective capacity to create something of value, and suggest that a revised and critical practice of HRD can support a shift away from emphasising leadership as the authority or legitimacy of the individual. The leaders’ role therefore will be less about having responsibility for making decisions, and more about creating shared responsibility for decision-making. Such a shift in the practice of leadership is part of the process for creating an organizational environment for more strategically orientated approaches to HRD.

From a perspective on collective reflection and leadership, the paper proposes a number of focal issues for the implementation of a critical practice of HRD. These are related to the three main themes of HRD, McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2002: 396) have described what these are. First, “HRD has a central focus on and concern with learning”. Second, HRD is likely to have a wider constituency and purpose than organizational success, which suggests that HRD practice has a broader accountability
than performance. Third, “HRD is clearly a political activity”, it is central to power and control processes.

Reference