

THE SECOND ACADEMY-PRACTICE GAP: COMPARING AREAS OF FOCUS OF HRD PRACTITIONER PUBLICATIONS AND ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

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Abstract

In this study we compared contents of more than 900 articles from practitioner-oriented human resource development (HRD) publications (the *Chief Learning Officer Magazine* and the *Training Magazine*) and of more than 200 graduate courses taught in 10 leading HRD academic programs in the U.S. Our goal was to determine whether academic programs focus on content areas that are considered important by HRD practitioners. While the gap between HRD practice and research has been discussed in numerous academic articles, the gap between practice and teaching of HRD in academic programs remains largely unexplored. We identified three areas that are of high interest to HRD practitioners, but don't seem to be adequately covered in academic programs: Leadership and leadership development; Organizational culture and ethics; and Social learning, social networking, and social media. We discuss each of the three areas, review related literature, and reflect on the reasons for the observed discrepancy between importance of these topics in today's workplace and attention, paid to them in academic programs. Furthermore, we discuss how design of HRD programs could be changed to address identified gaps, and outline future research directions.

Keywords: Practitioner-oriented HRD publications, HRD academic programs, gap between theory and practice

1. The Second Academy-Practice Gap: Comparing Areas of Focus of HRD Practitioner Publications and Academic Programs

The gap between HRD theory and practice has been a focus of numerous academic articles (e.g., Keefer & Stone, 2009; Keefer & Yap, 2007; Kuchinke, 2004; Moats & McLean, 2009; Myers, 2008; Short, 2006; Short, Sherlock, & Sugrue, 2004; Tyler, 2009; Yorks, 2005) and conference presentations (e.g., McLean, 2008, February; Short, Keefer, & Stone, 2006). The tensions between theory and practice are not unique to HRD and are discussed in literature from related fields including higher education (Boyer, 1991), management (Marcus, Goodman, & Grazman, 1993; Tranfield & Denyer, 2004), organization science (Beyer, 1992; Van de Van, 2007), and organizational behavior (Rynes, Trank, Lawson, & Ilies, 2003).

Short, Keefer, and Stone (2009) proposed that two questions can be asked to determine whether the link between HRD theory and practice is sufficiently strong: (a) does HRD theory provide answers to problems, found in HRD practice? And (b) is HRD theory integral to the education of HRD practitioners? However, there is a third, equally important question: Do HRD academic programs cover topic areas that are considered important by HRD practitioners? Studies show that U.S. universities tend to be slow in responding to practical demands of the field and adjusting their curricula to practical needs of industry (Baylen, Bailey, & Samardzija, 1996; Dare & Leach, 1999; Kuchinke, 2001, 2002, 2004). However, to our knowledge, none of the extant studies attempted to compare the content of HRD academic programs with some indicators of whether this content is relevant to practitioners in industry.

2. Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to compare topics, covered in practitioner-oriented HRD publications and in HRD courses in graduate academic programs, and to determine whether

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there is a gap between teaching of HRD in academic programs and the needs of practitioners in industry. The research questions of this study are: *Is there a gap between topics, covered in the HRD academic programs, and topics covered in practitioner-oriented magazines? In what topic areas is the identified gap the most significant?* In addition to answering the above two questions, we discuss possible reasons for identified gaps and strategies for closing the gaps.

There are several reasons why we used the content of practitioner-oriented magazines as a proxy measure of practical importance of various topics and themes. First, unlike academic publications, these magazines are widely read by practitioners. Various authors have pointed out that HRD practitioners tend not to find the answers to their problems in the academic journals (Berger, Kehrhahn, & Summerville, 2004; Dilworth & Redding, 1999; Graham & Kormanik, 2004). Rather than reading academic journals, HRD professionals turn to practitioner journals that provide advice based on authors' first-hand experience, case studies, benchmarking, and best practice information (Bassi, 1998; Keefer & Stone, 2009).

Second, the majority of articles in practitioner-oriented publications are authored by industry practitioners (either full time HRD specialists in business organizations, or independent HRD consultants), who are writing about topics that are practically important to them and their customers.

In addition, our approach was informed by a study by Rynes, Giluk, and Brown (2007) who compared contents of practitioner-oriented management magazines and academic publications. The main research question of that study was whether topics identified as important in academic publications get similar coverage in practitioner magazines. There are precedents for content analysis and comparison of contents of academic publications in HRD. For example, Wasti, Poell, and Çakar (2008) compared contents of U.S.-based and European HRD and Organization studies journals.

3. Method

We have analyzed and compared the contents of two major practitioner-oriented magazines, published in the U.S., and of the curriculum content of 10 leading HRD graduate programs. The following sections will explain our procedures for data collection and analysis.

4. Data Collection Procedures

For *practitioner-oriented HRD magazines*, we created the dataset of HRD topics, addressed in articles published in 2009-2012 (data for 2012 were collected from journal issues, published in January through April) in two practitioner-oriented HRD magazines: *Chief Learning Officer* and *Training*. A total of 999 articles were identified for inclusion into the dataset. We included all articles except for editorials and book reviews. For the data analysis, (1) magazine name, (2) year of publication, (3) volume, (4) issue, and (5) topics (content areas) of the articles were entered into an Excel worksheet.

Kuchinke (2007) estimated that there are about 250 *HRD academic programs* in the U.S. A recent report on HRD academic programs in the U.S., published by scholars at the University of Texas at Tyler, lists more than 270 programs, offering HRD and HRD-related degrees (Roberts, 2011). Our study focuses on 10 major HRD graduate programs (see Table 1), considered to be the leading programs in the U.S. Our list includes all seven HRD programs, included in the 2011 U.S. News and World Report online on ratings of top graduate programs in the U.S. Note that according to the U.S. News and World Report annual ratings HRD

programs are listed under the technical/vocational education category. This introduces a certain bias in ratings, and some programs, that are recognized as influential programs by the members of the HRD academic community may not be listed as top programs if they are not part of vocational or workforce development departments or program areas. Therefore, we added to our list three programs that are widely regarded by peers as leading graduate HRD programs in the country (of these programs, University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and George Washington University (GWU) were listed on the U.S. News and World Report top program list a number of times in the past).

Table 1: Major HRD Graduate Programs in the U.S. (2011)

Rank	School	Program Website
1	Ohio State University, Columbus, OH	http://ehe.osu.edu/paes/wde/
2	University of Georgia, Athens, GA	http://www.coe.uga.edu/leap/
3	Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA	http://www.ed.psu.edu/educ/workforce-ed
4	Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA	http://www.nvc.vt.edu/alhrd/
5	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, Minneapolis, MN	http://www.cehd.umn.edu/olpd/
6	Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL	http://www.wed.siu.edu/
7	Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK	http://education.okstate.edu/academic-units/stcl/occupational-education
-	University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL	http://education.illinois.edu/epol/
-	Texas A&M University, College Station, TX	http://eahr.tamu.edu/
-	George Washington University, Washington, DC	http://gsehd.gwu.edu/HOL

After reviewing websites of the 10 programs, we have identified and included in our database a total of 234 HRD-related graduate courses. We opted against including undergraduate courses, since the majority of the top 10 programs offer only graduate degrees in HRD.

We first conducted a complete document review of internet-based program information and syllabi, and recorded the related information in an Excel worksheet, using the following categories: (1) institution name, (2) program name, (3) course titles, and (4) topics (content areas) of the courses.

We have excluded courses on general foundations of HRD and workforce education. For example, a course on foundations of Work and Human Resource Education (covering the history of vocational education and training and philosophical debates around this topic), that is required in one of the reviewed doctoral programs, was not included. Another important selection decision we had to make was related to adult education courses. In some of the reviewed programs students can specialize in adult education, HRD, and other related fields. In other cases, adult education courses are required as part of the HRD curriculum. We have included in our database adult education courses that are an integral part of the HRD

curriculum, but did not include courses that are part of separate adult education programs. Finally, courses on research methodology and research design were not included because these courses do not directly represent HRD content areas.

5. Content Analysis

We started by conducting two separate analyses on two subsets of our data: HRD topics in practitioner-oriented magazines and HRD topics, covered in graduate courses of the academic programs. Content analysis enabled us to identify the key themes of articles or courses and to categorize them into groups (content areas). While there are numerous approaches to content analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in this study we used an approach that is combining qualitative and quantitative analysis (Berelson, 1952; Weber, 1990). Berelson (1952) described content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (p. 18). The goal of content analysis under this approach is not to understand deeper, hidden meaning of communication, or to uncover tacit dimensions of the knowledge base or practice, represented by the communication. Instead, we focused on objective categorization of explicitly communicated information about course or article content, as intended by the communicants (in this case, authors of articles and course syllabi).

To classify the content of the HRD articles and courses, we first analyzed separately each of these two groups of data, and created two lists of topics (content areas). After several iterations of discussions on appropriate categorization, we created final lists of categories for each of the two areas, and then put all articles and courses into these categories. Next we compared the two lists and, after several iterations, agreed on the final list of topics, common to both groups. This process required us to make a number of changes that resulted in the creation of some new category names and consolidation of some categories. For example, we decided to combine categories “Organizational Learning” and “Knowledge Management”, although initially we had two separate categories in the HRD journals dataset.

In some cases categorization of topics proved to be rather difficult. For example, a number of articles in magazines addressed issues of instructional design for e-learning. How to classify these articles – under the Instructional Issues, or under Learning Technology and E-Learning? We decided to use a “dominant-less dominant” approach, borrowing this concept from the mixed method research literature (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). This approach calls for determining which of the two themes is dominant and central to the article’s argument, and which is subordinate (less dominant). For example, one of the articles was focused mostly on instructional design, but was also discussing the issues of instructional design using examples from e-learning. At the same time, another article was mostly focused on issues of developing e-learning courses (and issues of instructional design were discussed as a subordinated theme). The first of the articles was classified under the Instructional Issues category, while the second was classified as a Learning Technology and E-Learning article.

6. Results

In this section, we first present top 10 topic areas, discussed in HRD journals, and top 10 topic areas, found in HRD courses (see Tables 2 and 3). Next, we compare the frequencies and ranks of topics in these two groups (see Tables 4 and 5).

6.1 Topics Covered in Articles in Practitioner-Oriented HRD Magazines

Top 10 topics covered in the articles in practitioner-oriented HRD magazines are presented in Table 2. We used simple frequency distributions to compile the top 10 list. One topic – Learning Technology and E-Learning – accounted for more than 16% of all articles. The second largest category was Leadership and leadership development. The third largest category – Instructional Issues – includes roughly 50% less articles than the second.

Table 2: Top 10 Topics Covered in Articles in Practitioner-Oriented HRD Magazines

Topics	Rank	Numbers of Articles
Learning Technology and E-Learning	1	165
Leadership and Leadership Development	2	138
Instructional Issues	3	66
Evaluation and Measurement	4	57
Intercultural, International, and Global HRD	5	49
Organizational Culture, Work Environment, and Ethics	6	48
Strategic HRD	7	44
Social Learning, Social Networking, and Social Media	8	43
Organizational Learning, Learning Organization, and Knowledge Management	9	42
Specialized Topic Areas (e.g., Sales training)	10	34
Total		686

Note: Based on the analysis of two magazines: Chief Learning Officer and Training (January 2009 – April 2012, a total of 999 articles).

6.2 Topics Covered in Courses in HRD Academic Programs

Top 10 topics covered in courses in HRD academic programs are presented in Table 3. Unlike the journal article dataset, where two topics (Learning Technology and E-Learning and Leadership and Leadership Development) were significantly ahead of other topics judging by the number of related articles, the distribution of topics in the course dataset was much more even. However, the gap between the highest category (Instructional Issues) and the lowest category (International, Intercultural, and Global Issues) was still rather wide (24 vs. 12 courses, respectively).

Table 3: Topics Covered in Courses in HRD Academic Programs (Top 10 List)

Topics	Rank	Number of Courses
Instructional Issues	1	24
Learning Technology and E-Learning	2	21
Management of the HRD Function	3	15
Program and Curriculum Development	3	15
Specific HRD Skills	3	15
Diversity and Generational Differences	3	15
Literacy	3	15
Adult Learning and Adult Education	8	14
Evaluation and Measurement	9	13
Intercultural, International, and Global Issues	10	12
Total		159

Note: Based on the analysis of 10 HRD graduate programs in the U.S., 2011 (a total of 234 courses).

6.3 Comparison of Topics in HRD Magazines and HRD Programs

Table 4 and 5 show side-by-side comparisons of top 10 topics for two sets. Only four topics appear on the top 10 lists of *both* HRD magazines and HRD programs: Learning Technology and E-Learning; Instructional Issues; Evaluation and Measurement; and Intercultural, International, and Global Issues. The remaining topics are unique to either the HRD magazine or HRD program top 10 lists.

Table 4: Comparison of Ranks of Top 10 Topics in Articles in HRD Magazines and in HRD Courses

Topics	Rank in HRD Magazines	Rank in HRD Programs
Learning Technology and E-Learning	1	2
Leadership and Leadership Development	2	13
Instructional Issues	3	1
Evaluation and Measurement	4	9
Intercultural, International, and Global Issues	5	10
Organizational Culture, Work Environment, and Ethics	6	21
Strategic HRD	7	12
Social Learning, Social networking, and Social Media	8	21
Organizational Learning, Learning Organization, and Knowledge Management	9	13
Specialized Topic Areas (e.g., Sales training)	10	19

Table 5: Comparison of Topics in HRD Magazines and HRD Programs (Top 10 Lists)

Rank	Topics in HRD Magazines	Topics in HRD Programs
1	Learning Technology and E-Learning	Instructional Issues
2	Leadership and Leadership Development	Learning Technology and E-Learning
3	Instructional Issues	Administration and Management of the HRD Function
4	Evaluation and Measurement	Program and Curriculum Development
5	Intercultural, International, and Global Issues	Specific HRD Skills
6	Organizational Culture, Work Environment, and Ethics	Diversity and Generational Differences
7	Strategic HRD	Literacy
8	Social Learning, Social networking, and Social Media	Adult Learning and Adult Education
9	Organizational Learning, Learning Organization, and Knowledge Management	Evaluation and Measurement
10	Specialized Topic Areas (e.g., Sales training)	Intercultural, International, and Global Issues

7. Discussion: Gaps in Rankings of Topics in HRD Magazines and HRD Programs

Table 6 shows the gaps in rankings of HRD topics when comparing practitioner-oriented magazines and academic programs. The presented data suggest that some critical topics in practitioner-oriented HRD magazines have not yet found their way into core curriculum content of graduate HRD programs. The gap is especially pronounced in three cases. Thus, Leadership and Leadership Development is ranked as the second most important topic in HRD magazines, and only as the 13th most important topic in academic programs. The topic of Organizational Culture, Work Environment, and Ethics is ranked as sixth in magazines and only 21st – in programs. And Social Learning, Social Networking, and Social Media is ranked as eighth in magazines and 23th – in programs.

Our results seem to support Kuchinke's (2002) findings that there is a critical gap between graduate HRD programs and emerging professional issues. Our analysis shows that the majority of HRD graduate courses focus on traditional content areas (e.g., Instructional Issues; Program and Curriculum Development; and Specific HRD Skills) and pay less attention to current trends, discussed in the practitioner literature. It is interesting to note that of the three top topic areas that are inadequately represented in the curriculum, only one can be classified as truly new. Therefore, an argument that academic programs are just slow in adopting innovations may not be sufficient in explaining this gap. There must be other reasons for underrepresentation of such topics as leadership and organizational culture and ethics. Perhaps one of the explanations could be that these topics are covered in other colleges, departments, or program areas of the universities in question (e.g., business administration or I/O Psychology). But this raises additional questions: What should be the extent of the topical coverage in HRD? What should be the division of labor between related programs? Which topics need to be considered core topics and covered in HRD programs regardless of their coverage in other programs?

Another potential reason for the identified gaps could be that HRD academic programs are focused on the required core curriculum in foundational areas (like overview of OD or T&D, or foundations of instructional design), and there is not enough space left in the programs for more specialized topics, like leadership development or social media and social learning. While the logic behind such focus can be explained by a number of considerations, the long-term impact of such a choice has to be seriously considered. What is the goal of graduate education in HRD? Is it development of generalists, who know theoretical foundations of their profession and are also exposed to information about general trends in HRD practice? Or is it development of specialists who, in addition to the general knowledge, acquire advanced competence in specialized areas of expertise, like design of leadership development programs or application of technology and/or social media in HRD?

Table 6: Gaps in Ranks of Topics: HRD Magazines and HRD Programs

Topics	Rank in HRD Magazines	Rank in HRD Programs	Gap in Ranks
Learning Technology and E-Learning	1	2	1
Leadership and Leadership Development	2	13	11
Instructional Issues	3	1	2
Evaluation and Measurement	4	9	5
Intercultural, International, and Global Issues	5	10	5
Organizational Culture, Work Environment, and Ethics	6	21	15
Strategic HRD	7	12	5
Social Learning, Social Networking, and Social Media	8	21	13
Organizational Learning, Learning Organization, and Knowledge Management	9	13	4
Specialized Topic Areas (e.g., Sales training)	10	19	9
Average			7.0

8. Implications

Our study has identified critical gaps between topics of interest to HRD practitioners and areas of focus of academic HRD programs. The results of the study lead us to suggest several recommendations for future improvements in HRD academic programs.

First, HRD curricula need to be evaluated to determine the extent to which they reflect the needs of HRD practice (Baldwin, 2000; Yorks, 2005). HRD academic programs need to be reviewed with a goal of identifying what is the appropriate balance between coverage of foundational disciplines and theory and discussions of practice-focused, aligned with practitioner priorities, content that reflects the realities of the workplace (Short, Bing, & Kehrhahn, 2003).

In this context, we need to address an additional question, raised by our findings: Is it wise to focus academic curricula in HRD on currently popular in industry trends, since these “trends” may be simply fads, bound to be displaced by some other “flavors of the month” in the near future? A distinction needs to be made between fads and trends that are reflective of deeper change in the direction of organizational practices. Thus, some observers explain the current interest in social media among HRD practitioners by evoking the image of deep paradigm shifts in economic structures and practices of the society. For example, Emelo (2011, December) argued that shift from industrial training to knowledge transfer through social media is dictated by a more fundamental shift in the economy (from industrial-era structures to the knowledge economy structures and processes), and by the fact that organizational workforce is increasingly comprised of “digital natives”, for whom social media are the way of life. Therefore, it is argued that the shift to social media is not just a fad, but a necessity dictated by changes in the society and the economy.

Second, we need to strengthen collaboration and partnerships between practitioners and HRD academic programs. There is a significant steam of literature on the gap between academia and HRD/HRM practice and the need for collaboration; however, most of these publications discuss research collaboration and engaged scholarship (Bartunek, 2007; Jacobs, 1997; Van de Ven, 2007). Some scholars pointed out the need for promoting collaboration in delivering HRD curriculum between universities and external HRD organizations (Hamlin, Reidy, & Stewart, 1998; Kormanik & Shindell, 2009), including professional associations (Dewey & Carter, 2003; Dooley, 2004).

Ruona (1999) argued that to be able to close the theory-practice gap, HRD faculty members need to keep up to date their knowledge about industry’s needs by participating in hands-on HRD consulting in organizations. We would like to add that consulting is not the only avenue for developing and maintaining a faculty member’s practical skills and knowledge. Engaging in hands-on, action research – based research projects that are aimed at *both* the development of solutions for clients and generation of new knowledge may be even more beneficial than engaging in traditional consulting that does not focus on new knowledge generation as the priority goal. A recent example of such fruitful combination of research with practical consulting and development work, based on the action research approach, was reported by Yamnill and McLean (2010).

9. Limitations and Future Research

The study limitations also suggest future research directions. First, this research focused on the 10 major graduate HRD programs, all of which are located in research extensive or research intensive universities. Therefore, any generalization of findings to a larger group of HRD programs should be made with caution. Our study does not allow us to state with confidence that programs located in teaching-oriented universities do not have a stronger focus on currently important for practice topics. Therefore, expanding the study to include a sample of HRD programs from a variety of universities would be advisable.

Second, our study focused on two HRD practitioner-oriented magazines only. Arguably, it is important to add other influential HRD practitioner publications (e.g., magazines, published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) or the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI)).

Third, the study focused on U.S. academic programs, and U.S.-based practitioner journals. It would be important to conduct studies, comparing contents of academic programs and practitioner publications in other countries or regions where numerous HRD programs can be found (e.g., the U.K. or the Asia-Pacific region), and also conduct an international comparative study (e.g., comparing the U.S. and U.K. programs and publications).

In addition, it would be beneficial to expand the comparison to include not only practitioner publications, but also major HRD academic publications. In this case, bibliometric analysis and comparison methods, used by Wasti et al. (2008) could be used.

Finally, the research agenda for the studies on the relationship between academic curriculum and practical issues needs to be expanded to include research into how other disciplines have framed and addressed the theory-to-practice transfer issue and into how theory-to-practice dialogue is experienced within the HRD profession (Berger et al., 2004).

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