

Making Connections: The Link Between HRD Education, Practice, and Research

Lyndsay M. Taylor
 Jamie L. Callahan
 Texas A&M University

This study addresses the question of whether or not there is a linkage between HRD education, practice and research. By reviewing HRD graduate curriculum, AHRD member research interests, and analyzing the contents of the primary HRD empirical journal, we analyzed three years worth of data. Results indicated that there are many overlaps in the foci of HRD university curriculum to current research interests and publications

When discussing Human Resource Development (HRD), a variety of debatable issues typically surface. What does HRD mean? (e.g., Lee, 2001; McLean & McLean, 2001; Walton, 2002). Does HRD have different meanings in different countries? (McLean & McLean, 2001). From which theoretical frameworks are HRD derived? (e.g., Swanson, 2001; McGoldrick, Stewart & Watson, 2001). Can we classify HRD as a discipline? (e.g., Kuchinke, 2001). Are there other, better ways to understand the nature of our field? (e.g., Ruona, 2002; Callahan & Dunne de Davila, 2003) Many of these questions are visible in HRD literature, university graduate courses and in the professional association for the field, the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD).

As HRD professionals in the United States, we have come to recognize and respect these debates that occur within the field of HRD. However, it is clear that these debates filter through not only the research and publications that inform our field, but also through the graduate programs that prepare researchers and practitioners to enter the field. Responding to calls from senior scholars in the field of HRD, Kuchinke (2002) conducted a study of the curriculum associated with HRD graduate programs in the United States. He noted a lack of alignment between publications in the field of HRD and curriculum in the graduate programs he studied:

When looking at the HRD curriculum, one sees that although much of the writing in the field stresses such topics as organizational learning, strategic HRD, international issues, workforce diversity, change management, distance learning, and the economic impact of HRD, these have not yet been translated universally into core curriculum content of HRD graduate programs (Kuchinke, 2002, p.140).

A lack of alignment between our research and practice could have serious consequences for our search for identity, as Kuchinke points out. Our research can include not only the publications in the core journal of our field, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, but also the espoused research interests of members of AHRD. Our practice can be equated with the knowledge, skills, and abilities we impart through the educational programs that produce HRD professionals. Knowing more about linkage issues between HRD curriculum, HRD publications, and the research interests of HRD scholars could benefit novices in the field because they would be better informed about the nature of our community of practice. This information would also be beneficial to professionals in the field so that they might recognize if and where gaps exist that are contributing to the identity crises we are currently experiencing in HRD (Ruona, 2002). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to begin to identify both potential overlaps and gaps that currently exist between fundamental information taught to HRD graduate students (novices) and what today's HRD professionals are researching and writing about.

Research Method

This study consisted of collecting, categorizing and analyzing existing descriptive data from three primary sources. The first source of data was from Kuchinke's (2002) study of graduate level HRD curricula. From 1999-2001, Kuchinke studied the curriculum of United States – based HRD graduate programs (Kuchinke, 2002). One component of his study compares the HRD graduate course offerings to current HRD publications.

The second source of data was derived from the AHRD membership listings, which are found on CD-ROMs provided to AHRD members at the annual professional conference. In past years, these membership lists included research interests that individuals had provided as part of their professional membership applications. In order to appropriately compare data to Kuchinke's study, the present research utilizes data from 1999-2001, the same years

Copyright © 2004 Lyndsay M. Taylor & Jamie L. Callahan

Kuchinke gathered his university curriculum data. However, the AHRD membership interests only appeared on the 2000 CD-ROM; the 1999 and 2001 membership listing did not contain the research interests of AHRD members. Therefore, the results of this study will only show what members were interested in researching during the year of 2000, and will not be representative of the three-year time span.

The third source of data came from a review and analysis of publications in the journal *Human Resource Development Quarterly (HRDQ)*. *HRDQ* is the primary research publication in the field of HRD. The data used for the present study was derived from the table of contents (TOC) for all issues of *HRDQ* during 1999, 2000, and 2001; there were four publications each year. This analysis would show the current topics pursued by researchers, as well as what the topics that the editors found to be important for sharing with the HRD community. This review of publication topics may also shed light on current interests within the field of HRD.

To maintain consistency with the first source of data, the assessment of graduate HRD curricula, we attempted to use the same themes when analyzing AHRD member research interests and *HRDQ* publications. The first author conducted an initial analysis using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss); the second author also conducted an analysis and the results were compared. Using a dialogue approach to clarify assumptions and decisions, the two authors came to agreement upon the themes presented for AHRD member interests and publications.

HRD in Universities

“In the absence of a central accrediting body at the program level and institution-level professional organizations, little is known about the total number of [HRD] program[s] in this country” (Kuchinke, 2002, p.129). However, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) periodically publishes a list of HRD related graduate programs; this list is composed as a result of information volunteered by U.S. universities (Kuchinke, 2002). Therefore, the list is not fully representative of all U.S. HRD graduate programs.

The names of these HRD related programs are not all always called ‘HRD’. Each program location, title and the required curriculum within the program are representative of the perceptions of *what* HRD means to that particular university, department and staff. Preparing students to go out into the world as HRD practitioners or leaders is ultimately in the hands of the university a student chooses to attend. Kuchinke’s study, based on the ASTD list of HRD graduate programs, focused on the location, title of, and the core curriculum of U.S. graduate programs:

The fifty-five programs were located in departments or units that were strongly heterogeneous in name, ranging from department of public administration and urban studies to psychology, leadership and organization, management, human services, counseling, curriculum instruction, and many others. In fact, there were no two departments with the same name and only a small number with similar names (those indicating emphasis on counseling, educational leadership, and adult education) (Kuchinke, 2002, p.135-136).

The most frequently mentioned department name with an HRD related graduate program was that of the college of education; “this [location within the university] represented seventy-six percent of HRD programs” (Kuchinke, 2002, p.136).

Does the difference in program names and location within the university necessarily change the curriculum that students are exposed to? Will graduates of these varied programs come out with relatively similar or varied educational experiences? Each university program uses their own process for developing the curriculum they provide to their graduate students. However, ideas advocated by scholars such as McLagan (training competencies) and Swanson (the three legged stool), are generally utilized in HRD graduate curriculum. Therefore, although varied, the core curriculum for HRD related graduate programs are somewhat homogeneous.

Kuchinke found that, “the fifty-five programs addressed a total of 981 content areas, with the average program covering about one-half of all areas identified.” (2002, p.138). The content areas were summarized into thirty-one topical content areas. Seventy-three percent or more of the programs required students to take courses in instructional design, instructional delivery, evaluation, and adult learning theories (Kuchinke, 2002, p.139). While just over fifty percent required courses relating to computer applications in HRD, organizational learning/learning organization, organization theory/behavior, and management of HRD. Forty to forty-five percent of programs required students to learn about communication, facilitation, psychological dimensions, strategic HRD, career development, distance learning, instructional media, diversity/multicultural HRD, and change management. Some less frequent, yet noteworthy, content areas that surfaced were leadership management (36%), international HRD (35%), action learning/research (31%), economic dimensions of HRD (27%), HRD/educational policy studies (22%) and quality management (20%).

We see that these graduate programs generally offer the same types of courses, although each individual program is slightly varied. We know this since there is not one content area that is covered in 100% of the HRD graduate programs. However, this shows us that even though our programs may be found in the management, education or psychology departments – and have different names such as HRD, OD, T&D or industrial psychology, each program offers similar HRD curriculum. For comparison purposes, Table 1 (below) contains an abbreviation of Kuchinke’s table showing the top fifteen university curricula content areas.

Table 1. *Top 15 Content Areas Covered in Curricula Of Graduate HRD Programs*

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Content Areas</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Instructional design	43	78
2	Instructional delivery	41	75
3	Evaluation	41	75
4	Adult learning theories	36	73
5	Needs/performance analysis	35	65
6	History and philosophy of HRD	35	64
7	Instructional technology	33	60
8	Organization development	33	60
9	HRD consulting	32	58
10	Management of HRD	30	55
11	Organization theory/behavior	30	55
12	Organizational learning/learning organization	29	53
13	Computer applications in HRD	28	51
14	Principles of business/industry/management	27	49
15	Teams/group dynamics	26	47

n = 55

(Kuchinke, 2002, p. 139)

Again, Kuchinke offers that his study had the limitation that he has only included fifty-five HRD programs in the US, when there are potentially hundreds more that were not identified in this study. Now that we have learned about the content areas that universities use to prepare their students for a career in HRD, it is time to analyze and compare the research interests of AHRD members. This information on research interests might inform universities of changes or improvements being made in the real world of HRD.

Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) Member Interests

AHRD members typically consist of university researchers/professors and HRD university students. While there are certainly other professional associations to which HRD professionals belong (e.g., Academy of Management, Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Institute for Behavioral and Applied Management), AHRD is the only professional association dedicated to the advancement of HRD scholarship. Further, there are members of AHRD who consider themselves to be ‘HRD practitioners’ and are not affiliated with a university. Practitioners tend to participate less often than do university affiliates; this is because AHRD is a research-focused organization, while other professional associations, such as ASTD, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), and the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) are more practitioner-focused. Thus, we felt that using the membership of AHRD was a sufficient proxy for capturing the research interests of those who identify themselves as HRD researchers.

On the 2000 AHRD CD-ROM there were a total of 650 members. Five hundred and fifty members were from North America; ninety-five members were from Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Switzerland, Korea, or the Netherlands; and five members noted their origin as being either ‘HRD’ or ‘ISPI’ (International Society for Performance Improvement). We did not have access to the specific nationalities of each member, just the country in which they claim residency, for AHRD membership and correspondence records. For analyzing purposes, ‘HRD’ and ‘ISPI’ members will be analyzed as being residents of North America. Each member had the option of reporting his or her top three research interests. Seventy percent of members volunteered to report their primary research interest to be shared with other members. 398 North American members and 65 International members are who made up the research interest population for the year 2000. Therefore, 62.27% of North American members and 65% of International members participated by sharing their research interests.

Because few members reported a secondary research interest and even fewer reported a third, only primary research interests were included in the present study. There were 323 different ‘primary’ research interests given by the 458 total respondents. Since one purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a link between Kuchinke’s curriculum study and the research interests of the HRD community, we began analyzing the primary research list by matching them to the content areas listed in HRD university core curriculum. This matching process enabled us to narrow the 323 different research interests into ninety-three research themes. Many interests were specific and did not fall under the general content areas listed in Table 1, nor did they match the interest of other AHRD members; this prevented further ‘grouping’ of themes. The top fifteen of the ninety-three research interests are reported, according to their frequency, in Table 2.

Table 2. *Top 15 Research Interest Themes As Reported by AHRD Members in 2000*

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Leadership/management development	24	5.2
2	Transfer of training/learning	23	5.0
3	Organization development	21	4.6
4	Adult learning theories	20	4.4
5	Learning organization/organizational learning	20	4.4
6	International HRD	20	4.4
7	Evaluation	19	4.1
8	Training and development	18	3.9
9	Diversity/multicultural HRD	16	3.5
10	Needs/performance analysis	16	3.5
11	Action learning/research	14	3.1
12	Instructional technology	14	3.1
13	Workplace learning/group learning	14	3.1
14	Career development	12	2.6
15	Distance learning	11	2.4

n = 458

Because there were 458 individuals with 93 different topical research interests, most research interests accounted for only 0.2 to 1.0 percent of the total population of respondents. The top fifteen interests represent eleven percent or more of the total respondents. Although each member’s interests are important, the purpose of this study was to analyze what AHRD members were *most* interested in researching, most of these are represented on Table 2. When the research interests were assessed by geographical location, members from North America were most interested in leadership/management development and transfer of training/learning, respectively. International members showed most interest in workplace learning/group learning, followed by training and development.

One interesting finding was that three research interest themes found in the top fifteen of AHRD member interests were not found on Kuchinke’s curriculum content listing as separate, specific courses. Transfer of training/learning, training and development, and workplace learning/group learning are broader interest areas that are likely components of other courses in HRD graduate curriculum. On the other hand, twelve of the top fifteen research interests are being addressed in HRD graduate programs already. Some of the most frequently mentioned research themes are in fact being taught in the university, but are being taught less frequently than other content areas. For example, leadership/management development and international HRD are in the top six research interest of members, but in the university they are only listed as number 26 and 27 (out of 31) as their frequency of being present in university curriculum. Kuchinke’s observation that HRD literature focuses on organizational learning, workforce diversity and international issues would seem to be valid, based on the top fifteen research interests listed in Table 2. These three issues are weighing on the minds of HRD professionals, but are not being taught specifically as core curriculum in our universities. It remains to be seen if the field is actually publishing manuscripts that address espoused research interests of AHRD members and core content of HRD graduate curricula.

HRDQ Publications

Human Resource Development Quarterly is the flagship empirical research journal within the field of HRD. The editors of this journal are responsible for making the final decision as to what is and what is not going to be

published in the journal. Therefore, what we read in *HRDQ* is not only representative of what is being submitted to the journal for publication (researcher interests), but also what the editors find worthy of publishing.

Since this study was meant to determine whether there was a linkage between university curricula, to professional interests, and finally to what we are actually publishing to inform the HRD community, *HRDQ* was the publication of choice. The authors obtained the TOC for the years of 1999-2001. Several components were analyzed during this process:

1. Were there themes in the titles of the articles that matched those of Kuchinke and the AHRD membership interests? If so, how many? And what were they?
2. Since there are both peer-reviewed and non peer-reviewed entries in the HRDQ journal, which themes were peer-reviewed, and which were not (which ideas are being published based on more than one HRD person's perspectives)?

The table of contents in *HRDQ* has five sections: editorial, feature, article, forum, and discussion. The only section in the journal that is peer-reviewed is the articles section. All other sections are included on the judgments of the editors; scholars do not conduct a blind review of the ideas, validity, and quality of articles/papers in the editorial, feature, forum and discussion sections. This component of analysis may or may not show that peer-reviewed articles are more likely to match themes found in the other two areas of this study.

During the three-year time span, there were twelve journals published. There were a total of sixty-seven items published in *HRDQ*. Of these sixty-seven items, thirty-five were peer-reviewed articles, and the remaining thirty-two were not peer-reviewed. The number of peer reviewed versus non-reviewed were nearly equal. Table 3 highlights the top themes found in *HRDQ* manuscripts. Only those themes that appeared more than twice were included in the present study, resulting in only nine reported themes.

Table 3. *Top Themes Present in 67 HRDQ Articles From 1999 – 2001*

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Organizational analysis	9	13.5
2	Diversity/multicultural HRD	7	10
3	Leadership/management development	6	9
4	Facilitation	6	9
5	Transfer of training/Learning	5	7.5
6	Adult learning theories	4	6
7	History and philosophy of HRD	3	4.5
8	Needs/performance analysis	3	4.5
9	International HRD	3	4.5

n=67

Organizational analysis, diversity/multicultural HRD, leadership/management development, facilitation and adult learning theories, were by far the most apparent themes which were published in *HRDQ* between 1999 and 2001; these themes show us that we are in fact teaching current, real world HRD issues in the university setting. However, there is one content area that is very evident in the *HRDQ* publications and is reported as being the number two research interest of AHRD members, but is not specifically identified in university curriculum—transfer of training/learning.

Limitations

Limitations to this study are present in both our current study, as well as in the Kuchinke study, which is where 1/3 of the data was derived. Kuchinke's study "does not represent the universe of HRD programs, but a purposefully selected volunteer sample, thus the findings do not generalize beyond the fifty-five programs [studies]" (Kuchinke, 2002, p.141). Also, "even though coding curriculum content areas instead of course names gives a more detailed picture of what is being taught...the information in [his] article is likely to hide additional detail that would be uncovered in a fine-grained study" (Kuchinke, 2002, p.141).

Another limitation in the present study, regarding the AHRD membership interests is that we only had access to research interests reported in the year 2000. The other data analyzed in this study was representative of data reported during the three-year period of 1999 –2001. Therefore, different or additional key research interests could have been available from other sources with which to compare to curriculum and publications. Also, within the 2000 research interests, we focused on the primary research interests rather than all three-research interests reported. There were, by far, more primary research interests available than there were secondary or third research interests

In researching only AHRD member interests, we may get an accurate picture of what university students and academicians are interested in knowing more about concerning HRD issues; but we would not be representing HRD field practitioners, who are members of professional organizations like ASTD, SHRM, OD Network and other such associations. Had we collected and analyzed research interests of members belonging to these HRD-related organizations, we may have shown different or additional areas of interest. In addition, during this process of analyzing research interests was our goal was to remain neutral, but our perceptions as to what may or may not 'fit into' a certain 'content area' or category may be different than someone else's, thus possibly skewing the data.

By reviewing only *HRDQ*, we have limited ourselves to one journal's perspective on what is important to publish for the HRD community. Another approach might have been to identify each member of AHRD and to conduct literature review searches for their publications. Interestingly, such an approach would have given us access to what those who claim to be HRD scholars are writing, but, since our identity standard bearer is *HRDQ*, we would not have been exploring the link we sought. Namely, we wanted to know if what we taught was consistent with our declared interests as HRD scholars and with the portrait of HRD presented by our flagship journal. Again, we used personal judgments in which titles belonged to each 'theme'; and, although we conducted checks of our respective judgments by independently reviewing each others' analyses, our mental process in organizing the data may be different than someone else would have done it.

Implications for HRD Research and Practice

While the present study has limitations, the exploratory nature of the study reveals several areas for consideration in strategically positioning HRD as a viable professional and educational field. By reviewing the research (publications and interests) and practice (education) within the field of HRD, we see both overlaps and inconsistencies.

Kuchinke (2002) suggests that our graduate curricula should be updated to meet current research publication topics. While we do agree that the more popular themes in research publications and interests are not well represented in the graduate curriculum of most programs, the present study does suggest that we are on the right track with our HRD graduate education. For the most part, AHRD members express a high level of interest in issues associated with training and learning. This interest in training and learning concepts can also be seen in the major research publication of the field, *HRDQ*.

This interest is quite consistent with the history of the field. Training and learning have been foundations of the field since Nadler initiated the first HRD graduate program at George Washington University in the 1960s (Ruona, 2000; Callahan, 2003; Swanson & Torraco, 1996). However, the three-way comparison conducted in the present study reveals a potential disconnect between our research and practice. Our graduate programs tend to teach small components of the training process, with in-depth courses on assessment, design, delivery, and evaluation. Themes identified in both the publications and in member research interests suggest that at least two changes in our curriculum could (and should) be made.

First, the issue of transfer is clearly of substantial importance to current researchers. However, there are no specialization courses on this particular aspect of the training process as part of the core curriculum of graduate HRD programs. The curriculum suggests a focus on simply preparing and providing training, without substantive consideration of the impact of that training. This reflects a growing strategic orientation in current research, while current education lags behind. While this is largely due to the bureaucratic nature of large educational institutions, this strategic orientation to training should be reviewed for inclusion in graduate curricula.

However, by focusing only on parts of the training process, we potentially miss the opportunity to strategically identify our real strength as a field. Our strength is our ability to use those constructs of learning and development as a foundation for multiple types of interventions that go well beyond training. Thus, the first change we would advocate is a more mindful consideration of an overview of training and development as a broad approach to applying learning theories to improving people and the organizations in which they work. At the same time, however, we advocate having more detailed coursework on the impact of training transfer. We suggest having both the overview courses that illuminate how all the parts fit together and also the specialization courses that give HRD novices the necessary skills to practice at all levels of the HRD profession (i.e., not just as training designers, but as training directors or HRD directors)

The second major change we would suggest is based on the heavy organizational level focus of both interests and publications. Organizational analysis is one of the most popular interests among HRD scholars. However, HRD coursework does not include required courses from disciplines that focus on the collective. The shifts in research interests and publications toward a better understanding of how learning and training inform the collective suggest that we should require courses from sociology or anthropology. These disciplines are specifically focused on developing knowledge about and understandings of the collective. If we are to take a truly systemic view of HRD

and the way HRD interacts with the systems in which it is embedded, we must better educate ourselves and novices about theories of the collective.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to identify both potential overlaps and gaps that exist between fundamental information taught to HRD graduate students and what today's HRD professionals are researching and writing about. Identifying key content areas in HRD university graduate curriculum, AHRD research interests and HRDQ publications allowed us to find 'key' issues in HRD from three different angles. There were many three-way overlaps with foci such as: evaluation, leadership, management/development, OD, diversity/multicultural HRD and needs/performance analysis. So, we would suggest that several aspects of HRD research and practice are in fact linked.

In fact, there appear to be many more overlaps than there are gaps. There are several small gaps, but only two of great concern. The two notable gaps between what we teach novices to what we are facing in the 'real world' deal with training: T&D and transfer of training/learning. The desire of HRD professionals to be seen as something beyond 'trainers' is understandable. However, training is core to the nature of HRD and can be leveraged to a strategic level if incorporated with principles of learning and performance at the organizational level. Our answer for survival as a distinct field of practice and research is not to abdicate our roles as purveyors of learning in the organization. Instead, our answer is to demonstrate the full range of learning and development constructs that can be used to lead to equifinality of improved individual and organizational performance.

These topics being addressed by HRD professionals and HRD publications are an avenue for us to see where the field of HRD is 'headed'. With the research presented in this paper, it is evident that our HRD interests have heightened in the areas of T&D, transfer of training, and management development/effectiveness. However, our field appears to be rather stagnant overall. Most frequently reported interests and publications are closely in alignment with our current HRD curriculum. Something to consider, prior to deciding whether we truly have a linkage between HRD education and the real world, would be to analyze HRD practitioners (possibly members of ASTD) in addition to looking solely at the opinions and articles developed by researchers, or academics.

References

- Callahan, J.L. (2003). Organizational learning as a critical issue in human resource development. In A.M. Gilley, J.L. Callahan, & L. Bierma (Eds.), *Critical issues in human resource development*. (pp. 161-178). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Kuchinke, K.P. (2001). Why HRD is not an academic discipline. *Human Resource Development International*, 4(3), 291-294.
- Kuchinke, K.P. (2002, Summer). Institutional and curricular characteristics of leading graduate HRD programs in the United States. *Human Resource Development Quarterly* 13(2), 127-143.
- Lee, M. (2001). A refusal to define HRD. *Human Resource Development International*, 4(3), 327-341.
- McGoldrick, J., Stewart, J., & Watson, S. (2001). Theorizing human resource development. *Human Resource Development International*, 4(3), 343-356.
- McLean, G.N. and McLean, L. (2001). If we can't define HRD in one country, how can we define it in an international context? *Human Resource Development International*, 4(3), 313-326.
- Ruona, W.E.A. (2002). *What's in a name? Human resource development and its core*. Paper presented at the town forum meeting of the Academy of Human Resource Development, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Swanson, R.A. (2001). Human resource development and its underlying theory. *Human Resource Development International*, 4(3), 299-312.
- Swanson, R.A., & Holton, E.F. (2001). *Foundations of human resource development*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Walton, J.S. (2002, February). *How shall a thing be called? A debate on the efficacy of the term HRD*. Paper presented at the town forum meeting of the Academy of Human Resource Development, Minneapolis, Minnesota.