HRD beyond what HRD practitioners do

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HRD beyond what HRD practitioners do: A framework for furthering multiple learning processes in work organizations[1]

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This chapter aims to challenge the idea that HRD is (solely) about what HRD people do. HRD practitioners are far less influential than most literature in the field (and some practitioners) assume. The chapter argues that HRD is about understanding the ways in which workers learn and organizations work. Learners and managers rather than HRD practitioners are the core actors in HRD processes. The chapter proposes a literature-based alternative framework to understand HRD processes (in the broadest sense), based on everyday learning and development activities undertaken largely incidentally and informally by workers, managers and HRD practitioners to varying degrees of systematization. Implications for HRD research and practice are discussed as well.

Among all the misconceptions about human resource development, one of the most persistent and obfuscating ones is the idea that HRD practitioners are the core actors on the learning and performance stage (van der Krogt 2002). Although it is common nowadays to assert that employees are self-responsible for their own learning and careers, with their managers in a coaching role, in practice HRD professionals still spend most of their time co-ordinating, designing, and delivering training to employees (Hytönen, Poell & Chivers 2002; Nijhof 2004; Tjepkema et al. 2002). There is little evidence to suggest that managers are enthusiastically taking on new roles supporting employee learning or that employees are engaging in completely new ways of self-directed learning.

It is often forgotten that employees and managers have always been involved in learning at the workplace, much more so than HRD practitioners ever have. Only in the past ten years has attention in HRD literature been targeted (anew) to implicit and self-directed learning processes occurring within work environments. Before that, until the mid-1990s, HRD was really about training, about trainers, and about what trainers could do to improve the transfer of training (Broad & Newstrom 1992). At first, the workplace was regarded as the site where employees applied what they had learned in a training setting (Robinson & Robinson 1989). Later, the focus shifted and the workplace came to be seen as an important learning environment in its own right (Simons & Streumer 2004).

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This chapter proposes a model of learning in the workplace in relation to the activities of HRD practitioners. The model makes clear that there is a lot of HRD beyond what these HRD practitioners do. Firstly, the basic components of the model will be outlined. Next, the model will be built up gradually. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of the model in terms of advancing our understanding of HRD will be discussed and a research agenda presented.

THREE TYPES OF LEARNING ACTIVITY COMBINED

If HRD is defined as outside intervention in employee learning and development processes, how are these learning processes influenced and in which directions exactly? Eraut, Alderton, Cole & Senker (1998) asserted that besides formal training and education arrangements, the most important sources of learning are the challenges in the work itself and interactions with other people in the workplace (van Woerkom 2003). Therefore, it is important for HRD to investigate such implicit and self-directed learning practices, in order to realize its full potential for competence development. Several HRD actors are relevant in their possible impact on such learning processes, including supervisors, managers, work preparation staff, trainers, consultants, trade unions, works councils, professional associations, and so forth. Important independent variables in this connection are characteristics of the work setting, the existing organizational structure and culture, various learner characteristics, various characteristics of the intervention, and the dynamic interplay between individual learning and outside intervention (Poell 1998; van der Krogt 1998; van der Sanden 2001).

Learning in the context of work and organization is strongly contingent upon individual employees' daily experiences in the workplace. Much of this learning remains implicit (van Woerkom 2003). For instance, becoming a better salesperson or learning to communicate with multiple constituencies are competencies often acquired through unconscious experience. In some cases, however, employees deal with their experiences more consciously, for example, when they conclude they have been unsuccessful, think about how they might improve, and try out a better way the next time. In still other cases, dedicated experts or HRD practitioners design a learning situation or an activity for employees to learn from: for instance, a training course, an educational CD-ROM, or a performance evaluation meeting. Employees may ask for guided learning themselves or be exposed to it by their manager or an HRD practitioner.

The three types of employee learning activity can be modelled as shown in Figure 1 (Poell 2001): implicit, self-directed, and guided learning. All three types of employee learning can occur in both an individual and a collective setting. Taking into account the fact that self-directed learners can also ask for support from experts, coaches, counsellors, and so forth, Figure 1 represents the way in which six employees (1-6) learn, both on their own terms and as a result of outside intervention:

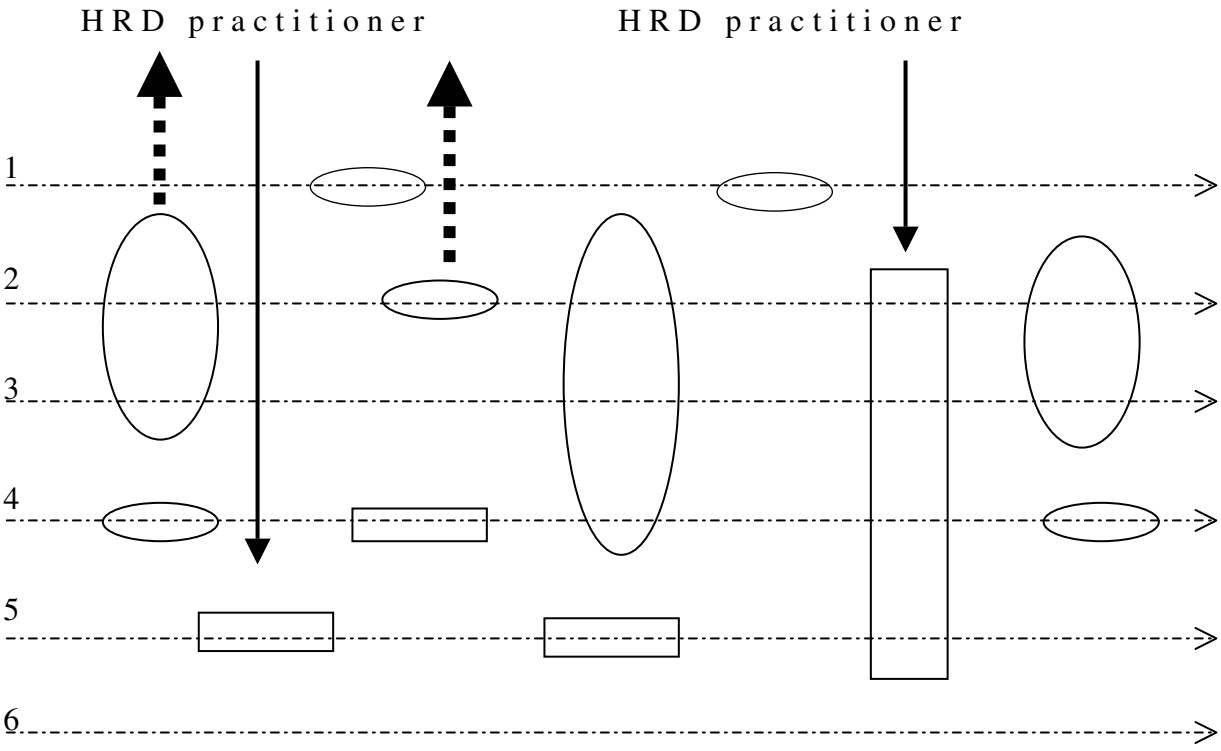

Figure 1. Six Employees Engaging in Different Combinations of Implicit, Self-Directed, and Guided Learning Activities.

In Figure 1, the six horizontal arrows represent implicit learning, the small ovals represent individual self-directed learning, the large ovals represent collective self-directed learning, the small rectangles represent individual guided learning, the large rectangles represent collective guided learning, the top-to-bottom arrows represent outside intervention, and the bottom-to-top arrows represent asking for support. These elements will be introduced and explicated in more detail below.

Implicit Learning Activities

Figure 2 shows the basic learning process in any organization: implicit learning (Tomlinson 1999). The six arrows indicate that these six workers learn on a continuous basis over time. The notion that employees learn a lot from doing their every-day job, without being aware of it necessarily, has been around for a long time. Some examples of implicit learning activities include solving every-day work problems, finding out by coincidence what approach works out best, unintentionally copying what an experienced colleague tends to do, and bringing someone else's job to a good finish in an emergency. This type of learning has been referred to as learning-by-doing and as experiential learning (Kolb 1984). Marsick & Watkins (1990) called it incidental learning, whereas the term every-day learning was coined by Van Biesen (1989). The main similarity among these

concepts is that they do not require any pedagogical structuring or intention to learn, or even an awareness of learning on the part of the learning employee.

Figure 2. Implicit Learning at Work in Six Employees.

Self-Directed Learning Activities: Individual and Collective

The second type of learning activity does require an awareness and an intention to learn as well as some form of pedagogical structuring on the part of the learners themselves. Managing one's own learning process is a good way to describe this type, which is often referred to as self-directed learning (Candy 1991) or informal learning (Marsick & Watkins 1990). Donald Schön's book *'The Reflective Practitioner'* (Schön 1983) describes professionals who engage in self-study and who learn consciously and explicitly through reflection within and upon their work experiences, a prime example of self-directed learning. In relationship to implicit learning, self-directed learning refers to shorter periods of time when employees learn more consciously, explicitly, and intentionally than is normally the case. During these periods, however, the implicit learning processes still go on, often independent of the self-directed learning that takes place, although the two activities can also mutually reinforce one another.

A distinction can be made between individual and collective self-directed learning. Some examples of individual self-directed learning (the small ovals in Figure 3) include paying more attention to a recurring problem, looking up something one wants to know more about, asking an experienced colleague for advice, and actively seeking new learning experiences. A few examples of collective self-directed learning (the large ovals in Figure 3) are tackling a mutually experienced work problem together, asking (and giving) structured

feedback from (and to) direct colleagues, collectively inviting an expert for concrete advice, and collaborating on a proposal for work improvement. The notion of learning from and with one another in the workplace was made popular by Nancy Dixon (1994), building on insights around *c*ooperative and collaborative learning (Johnson & Johnson 1999). Another related concept is inter-colleague consultation (Driehuis 1997), also popular among professionals.

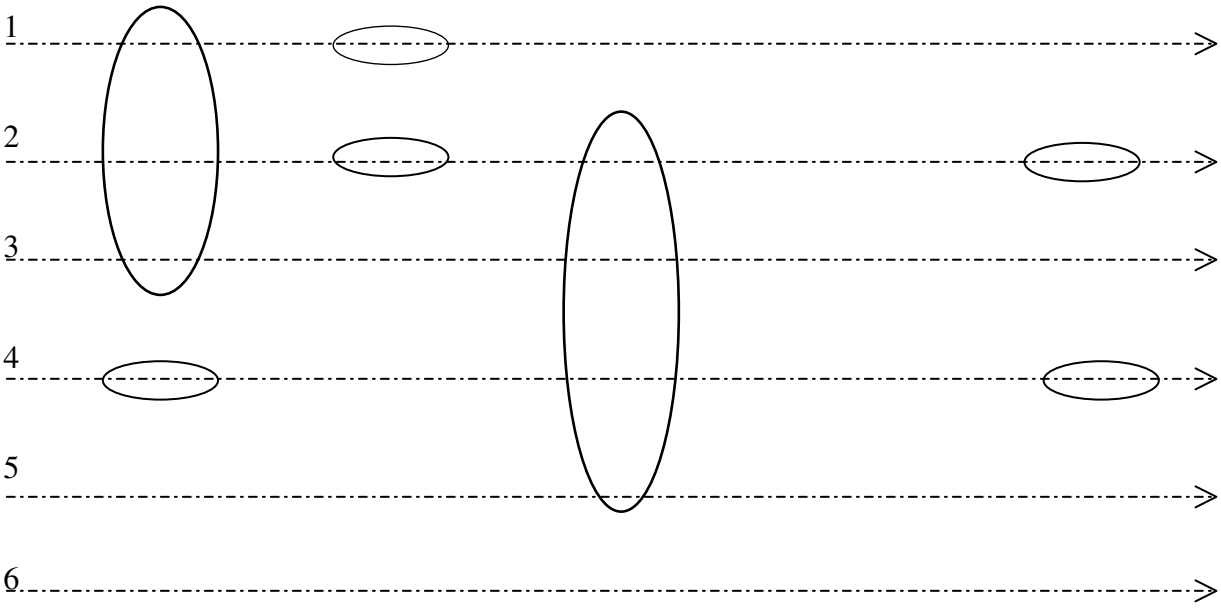

Figure 3. Self-Directed Learning, both Individually and Collectively, in Six Employees.

Guided Learning Activities: Collective and Individual

The third type of learning activity, presented in Figure 4, is structured by an outside agent for the learning employee, therefore it is referred to as guided learning (Billett 2000). These activities are commonly known as training courses or educational programs (Romiszowski 1982), for which transfer enhancing measures have to be designed to make the learning effective in the workplace (Robinson & Robinson 1989). Other related terms are instruction learning, formal learning, and structured learning (Jacobs & Jones 1995). Two common characteristics among these concepts are the large degree of preparation and design by an expert and the considerable amount of organization and intervention by an educator, trainer, or adviser.

Again, a distinction can be made between individual and collective guided learning activities. Quite often, such efforts are collective (the large rectangles in Figure 4), as in the examples of attending refreshment training, receiving workplace instruction, participating in course activities, and being sent to a seminar by one's supervisor with a view to informing the whole team of latest

developments. However, individual guided learning activities (the small rectangles in Figure 4) are also quite prominent where there is a one-on-one relation of the learning employee with the educator, trainer, or adviser. One may think of individual instruction or forms of supervision. Two well-known concepts in this connection are coaching (Locke & Latham 1990) and mentoring (Galbraith & Cohen 1995). Examples of individual guided learning activities include having a job review with one's supervisor, receiving individual instruction at the workplace, carrying out a difficult assignment under the supervision of an expert, and being inducted into a job by a mentor or coach.

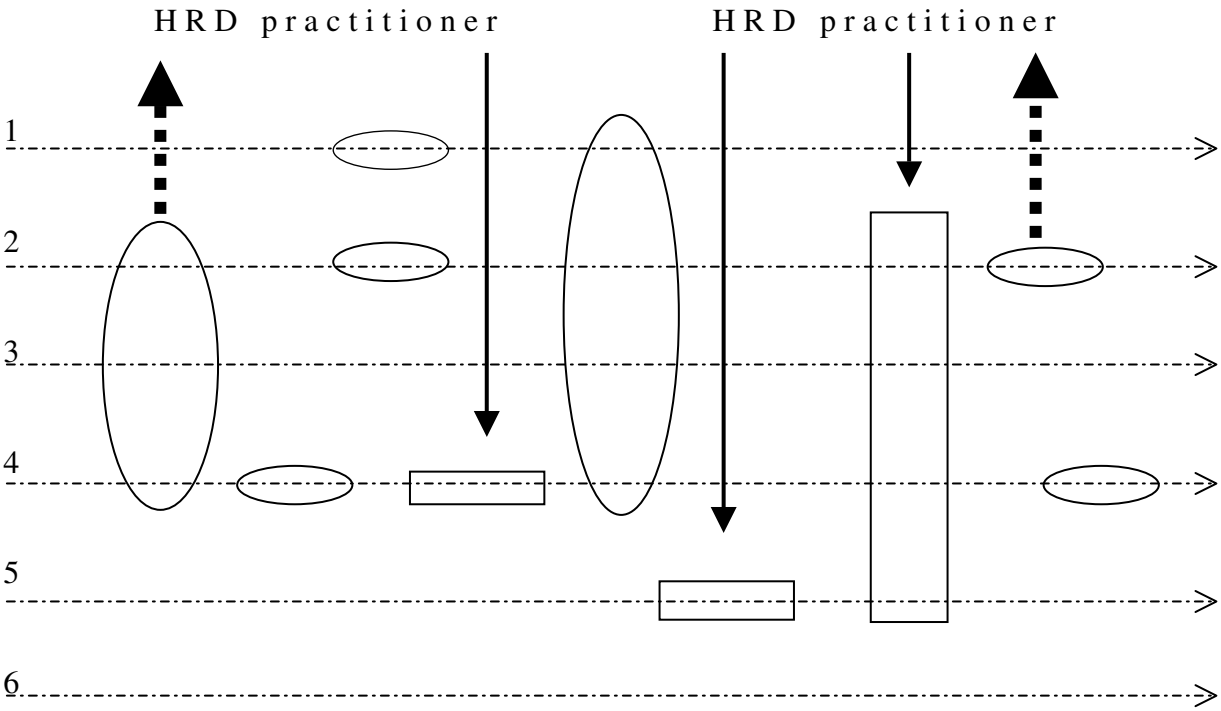

Figure 4. Guided Learning, both Individually and Collectively, in Six Employees.

It has to be mentioned here that employees can also ask for support in self-directed learning themselves (the vertical arrows in Figure 4), for instance through taking the initiative to call in advice for complex problem solving, through having a counsellor's input to draw up a personal development plan, through mobilising the resources and expertise one has available in the social environment, and through consciously putting part of one's learning process in the hands of an expert. This is guided learning at the initiative of the learner.

THE INTEGRATED MODEL: MULTIPLE LEARNING PROCESSES

It is worthwhile to note, going back to Figure 1, that workers can have very different patterns in combining learning activities. Worker no. 6 is learning

mainly by doing, by experience, with little or no conscious reflection or explicit planning (but even no. 6 does learn !). Worker no. 1 conducts individual self-directed learning activities as well (an 'active learner'). Worker no. 5 is learning mainly in settings pre-organized by others (besides every-day implicit learning). Worker no. 3 is looking mainly for collective learning activities, with an emphasis on self-directed group situations. Workers nos. 2 en 4 have quite multi-faceted learning patterns: they are learning in all kinds of situations and settings.

However, in all six cases the every-day implicit learning always continues. This can be problematic in the case of self-directed learning, as mentioned above, but is usually far more troublesome in the case of guided learning. It is relatively easy for self-directed learners to take into account their own implicit learning activities, but it is far more difficult for outside experts to do so when designing training programs, especially collective ones. This is where the problem of training transfer surfaces, in that, the distance between the training program and the implicit learning activities of a participant is often hard to bridge, especially for the learners themselves.

Reasoning from the model presented above, transfer is really the challenge of combining multiple (implicit, self-directed, and guided) learning activities into a coherent learning pattern by the learning employee. This is the very thing that HRD practitioners (and managers) cannot do for employees and, therefore, the reason why employees are much more powerful than HRD practitioners when it comes to organising learning processes. While managers usually have some opportunities to change the work of employees (and therefore, their every-day learning opportunities), the influence of HRD practitioners is restricted largely to guided learning (i.e., training) situations (van der Krogt 2002). The bottom line here is that no one can force employees to learn anything or, as Kessels (1999) put it, to “be smart against their will”.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Model

What can this model offer that HRD literature has not produced yet? In the first place, it draws on various well-established traditions within the HRD field to interlink the activities of employees, managers, and HRD practitioners in various constellations distinctively within a single framework.

Secondly, it places employees at the forefront of HRD theorising. By doing so it can explain why in HRD practice employees are often accused of being resistant to change, of showing a lack of motivation, of failing to take on self-responsibility for their work, learning and careers. Self-directed learning means that employees actually self direct what they need to learn and how they like to go about doing that. As long as their notions in this respect fit with the ideas of the people trying to intervene from the outside (i.e., managers and HRD practitioners offering guided learning), all is well. When, however, actual conflicts of interest or

opposing viewpoints have to be played out, which is often the case, the idea that individual and organization needs can always be aligned turns out to be an illusion and terms like resistant, unmotivated, and irresponsible enter the discussion.

A third strength of the model is that it brings the issue of power into the field of HRD, which has been conspicuously absent to date, except for the work of Ron Cervero and Arthur Wilson (1996); see also Wilson & Cervero (1997). Underlying the three different types of learning are different conceptions of who decides about what is learned, why, and how. The model also provides insight into which actors are powerful in which domains of learning, thereby accounting for many of the problems experienced by HRD practitioners concerning their less than strategic position, their low status and recognition within organizations, and their lack of support from management - even if they adhere to management's problem definitions (Hytönen, Poell & Chivers 2002; Poell & Chivers 2003; Poell, Pluijmen & van der Krogt 2003).

Finally, the model can also be used as a pragmatic tool to think through various ways in which coherent sets consisting of various learning activities can be organized. In all its simplicity, the model is emancipatory in the sense that not only HRD practitioners can easily use it but employees and managers as well. It can even act as a (language and planning) tool for discussion among these parties in clarifying priorities and preferences.

A potential weakness of the model, on the other hand, is that it may be used as a technical tool *only*, by HRD practitioners *only*, thereby not realising its emancipatory potential. On a more conceptual level, dividing all possible learning activities into only three main categories is of course oversimplifying organizational reality. More work should be done to elaborate upon each of the three categories and refine them into meaningful sets of conceptually valid subcategories of learning activity. A final weakness of the model proposed here that should be mentioned is its relative inability to shed light on the content of learning, especially when it comes to implicit learning. The model rather focuses on the way in which learning takes place in a work context. It should (and can) be elaborated for various types of work context (i.e., work content and work relations) tied to different learning contents. Such an effort, however, is beyond the scope of the current chapter.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HRD RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Key questions informing a research agenda that arises from the perspective described above are the following:

1. How do various types of learning activity take place and what are their outcomes?
2. Which constellations of various types of learning activity can be distinguished and what are their outcomes?

3. What is the impact of outside intervention on employee learning activities and outcomes?
4. What is the impact of employee learning activities and outcomes on outside intervention?
5. Which mechanisms have the largest impact on the interaction between HRD practices and learning activities / outcomes?
6. To what extent do learning activities and outcomes, as moderated by HRD practices, depend on the work setting, on the existing organizational structure and culture, on various learner characteristics, on various characteristics of the intervention, and on the dynamic interplay between individual learning and outside intervention?

Especially the fifth question, about the mechanisms that moderate the effect of HRD on learning, seems relevant for a critical HRD research agenda. In part because this is the least elaborated question conceptually, let alone empirically, and in (larger) part because providing a better insight into these mechanisms enables employees, managers, and HRD practitioners to play the organizational game called organising learning with a fuller understanding of the determinants and consequences of possible actions that they have at their disposal. Interesting mechanisms to include in further studies along these lines encompass the negotiation of (shared) meaning (Billett 1996), power distribution (Wilson & Cervero 1997), organizational conflict (Rahim 2002), identity formation (Winch 2003), and participation (Lave & Wenger 1991; van Woerkom 2003).

The proposed model can contribute to the debate on critical HRD by providing a means to discuss learning in organizational contexts as a contested domain heavy with oft-ignored power issues and conflicts of interest. Besides this, as Fenwick (2003) asserts, critical HRD operates from the principle that the inherent logic of human development prevails over an economic rationale for learning. In putting employees and both their implicit and self-directed learning first, the model presented in this chapter reflects this very principle. In other words, performance follows learning (Bierema 1996).

HRD practice can benefit, as illustrated above, from applying the model to better understand the interplay of implicit and self-directed employee learning with outside intervention by HRD practitioners and managers. If not necessarily to bridge the gap between employee interests and corporate concern with learning and development, the model can at least provide an insight into the social-organizational dynamics and problems associated with such contested processes.

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