

Developing who, for what? Notes of caution in rethinking a global H(R)D: A response to Kuchinke

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First, my thanks are due to the *HRDI* Editors for this invitation to respond to Dr. Kuchinke's essay (Kuchinke 2010). It is an honour to engage in dialogue with a scholar whose contributions to theory and research in human resource development, including his guidance in strengthening and focusing the *HRDI* journal as its Editor-in-Chief, have been considerable. Throughout his writing career Peter has worked to theorize a genuinely ethical and international dimension in HRD.

At his 2010 keynote presentation in Pécs, Hungary, where Dr. Kuchinke first presented the ideas comprising this paper, I was struck by his emphasis on global 'human flourishing' as a core guiding value for HRD: even going so far as to characterize this as a professional responsibility. For Dr. Kuchinke this is a primary challenge, and he calls HRD to 'formulate and refine its own understanding of what it means to develop individuals in the context of work in global organizations and institutions'. Human flourishing is a most worthy aim for professionals of any disciplinary practice, ideology, or moral commitment. While particularly daunting when expanded to the complexities of a global context, this is a vision that in spirit, I would hope few would contest.

It is within these complexities that I situate my response to Dr. Kuchinke's vision. My remarks are not meant as critique, but as addendum. Undoubtedly he would have important comments to offer in return. My reflections simply intend to open out the dialogue somewhat, to 'trouble' certain issues and name some ambivalences in ways that hopefully will invite other questions and responses.

In his argument for human flourishing as 'the guiding value of human resource development', Dr. Kuchinke suggests that HRD be situated within a broader notion of 'human development'. He draws upon Amartya Sen's concepts of capabilities to explain development, in particular upon Sabine Alkire's explanation of Sen's position: 'The objective of development, then, is to expand and equalize the capability of each individual to enjoy those activities, ways of living, and general 'functionings' that he or she chooses as a mature and self-directing human being in the context of his or her social, political, economic, and psychological context'. If we are not very careful, this sort of statement can easily be appropriated to pervade a not unfamiliar individualist liberal view of rational choice and self-direction. That is, Sen's theories can be misinterpreted to suggest that each human, if sufficiently 'developed', can choose a life. Sen's 'capabilities' are sometimes mistaken for competencies, e.g. that can be valued in order to measure human capital. Contexts can easily be mistaken for neutral containers within which the individual 'chooses', as though different contexts share similar structures and interchangeable contents: a conceptualization that homogenizes and defuses the complex entanglements of relations constituting human life in its flows with knowledge and work. But in fact, Sen (1999, 2009) has spent much of his career in academic economics pleading for difference, and devising alternatives to conventional economic notions of

rational choice, competency, measurement and 'added value'. He fought inequity, particularly in poverty and hunger. In his capabilities approach, Sen (1999) was actually talking about expanding human freedom. 'Functionings' are what people most value as their 'beings and doings', not what doings are most valued for their exchange. 'Capabilities' for Sen include, for instance, the capability to be 'nourished' or to escape morbidity. Democracy built on public reasoning, and people's freedom to affect core processes in life and work, are central to Sen's (2009) view of justice. These sorts of ideas, when truly understood in Sen's terms, may indeed hold radical and exciting potential for HRD, and I will return to them further on.

But the mission of human development per se, like all well-intentioned projects, carries a history of contestation. We have learned, through these debates, to always ask: Just *who* is developing whom? For *what?* *Why?* (And according to whose vision of what 'developed' looks like?) Obviously human development projects are manifest in very different forms, although these tend to be treated homogeneously in the widely varying illustrations of 'human development' presented in the Kuchinke essay. In all of his examples, ranging from global initiatives announced by supra-national agencies to youth volunteer training, he stresses the altruism of intention. Serving the public good is presented unproblematically, and whatever construction of good underlies such service is apparently self-evident. While few wish to deter genuine efforts to contribute to more healthy, sustainable societies, there are sufficient examples of negative consequences of such efforts as to demand critical scrutiny about any calls for development. Simple pedagogic projects for adults have been critiqued for presuming to 'develop' people according to some educators' normative construction of a desired future, or at least of particularly desirable 'developed' subjects, through the lever of education (e.g. see Edwards 2003). Even emancipatory development initiatives, such as those evidenced in the first waves of critical management studies/critical HRD and critical pedagogy movements, have long been problematized for their presumptions that a more enlightened someone ought to develop someone else. As Alvesson and Deetz (1996) pointed out, 'the irony of an advocate of greater equality pronouncing what others should want or how they should perceive the world 'better' is not lost on either dominant or dominated groups' (p. 195).

Beneath the unreflexive dreams of grand liberation, the more immediate problem is the fallibility of such development efforts. Complex socio-political dynamics of any adult learning situation mitigate against naïve notions of dialogue, mutuality and voice, as Ellsworth (1989) showed. In terms of liberatory or human (resource) development efforts promoting 'developmental' learning in work situations, such as 'action learning' projects and 'learning communities', studies have shown how these efforts can be precarious at best and repressive at worst in their elisions of contested interests and forces characterizing any work environment in a capitalist environment. Learning becomes accepted as never-ending unpaid labour serving organizational shifts, work communities idealize consensus, difference is rehabilitated through learning to discipline particular subjectivities, inequities such as gendered conditions are rendered invisible, working people in general are configured to be active, enterprising, flexible learner-workers, and critique has no legitimate space, at least in the workplace (Fenwick 2001, 2003, 2005,

2007; Jason, Jewson and Unwin 2007; Mojab and Gorman 2003; Perriton and Reynolds 2004, and many others).

In global workspaces, where Dr. Kuchinke situates his remarks, the question of who is developing whom for what becomes particularly interesting. Global mobility of workers, he suggests, has accelerated; for HRD this brings both an ‘opportunity to shape global organisations’ and ‘a responsibility for broader political, social and economic goals’. But as noted by John Walton (2010), another keynote speaker addressing mobility issues at the Pécs IHRD conference, important questions must be asked about precisely who is mobile, for what reasons, and for whose benefit. It is certainly true that a small group of elite knowledge workers - innovators and designers - can choose to trade their skills on a global market, while a slightly larger group are compelled to relocate to find any work at all; however, the rest of us tend to live and work in the same location in relatively routinized activities that have more to do with local concerns and relationships than with global linkages (Farrell and Fenwick 2008). Far more workers are affected by the mobility of work itself. In short, companies outsource work. As capital seeks the cheapest and least regulated production zones, and the most lucrative markets, certain kinds of work activity move rapidly around the globe. From this mobility and distribution of work springs demand for greater standardization of knowledge, greater coordination and control of supply chains, and tighter connections threading together far-flung communities and individuals. The outsourcing of production and functions like accounting, technology support, customer ‘call centre’ service – and HRD services - is now a ubiquitous organizational practice. In these arrangements the work practices and even conditions are subject to such highly prescriptive internationally standardized protocols, procedures and documentation that local policies and practices matter less. HRD is usually pressed into service to ensure that workers, whether they are located in Boston, in Bangalore or in Baoding, fill out the same forms, observe the same quality assurance practices and sometimes adopt the same problem solving practices – even the same accents - as the clients they will serve.

International development is another area referred to positively by Dr. Kuchinke. This area historically has been characterized by development projects imported from the wealthy West in everything from education and health reform to economic and community development. Many of these projects have attracted excoriating attack for their assumptions in applying Western knowledge and Western solutions to ‘develop’ people and societies that function according to radically different epistemologies. This naïvete in misunderstanding or dismissing deep-rooted cultural, material and social webs of relations has led to disciplinary approaches, colonizing effects, conflict, or just plain meddlesome and short-sighted activities that have often left behind frustration and cynicism (e.g. see Easterly 2006; Hobart 1993; Van Ufford and Giri 2003). Development ideology is suffused with power relations of helping. And as Lilla Watson, an Australian Aboriginal woman leader, is reported to have said: ‘If you come here to help me, then you are wasting your time. But if you come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us begin’.

My point is simply to recall to this dialogue the complexities of conceptualizing a project of development, particularly in a global economy. With all of these examples, the problem begins from assumptions that development is inherently ‘good’, that what constitutes ‘good’ is self-evident and perhaps even universal, and that an altruistic intention is sufficient to justify action to promote development. Of course another, related, problem is to define development. Whatever is understood to constitute development is rooted in some particular purpose. Here is where we need to return to the contexts of human resource development practice, which are always tied to the purposes of particular work organizations. While the HRD profession can and does constitute itself as a self-regulating body with distinct expertise and code of ethics, many would agree that HRD practice is still very much subject to managers’ expectations of promoting individual and organizational performance, in terms of organizational goals. In the private sector, particularly in the larger organizations where HRD practitioners are most likely to be employed, these goals inevitably are defined by profit and productivity.

Of course, HRD locations are heterogeneous. As Dr. Kuchinke points out, HRD can be manifested in public sector agencies, non-governmental organizations, churches, and even youth training. (He also describes continuing professional education, a field whose relations with HRD are suspicious at best). Obviously each of these sites must be carefully distinguished in their different structures and purposes, their divisions of labour, the forms of whatever is understood to be HRD practice that become enacted there, and the meanings of development that are possible. I am uncertain that these diverse examples can be so easily conflated to demonstrate ‘HRD practice’ per se – I would be inclined to suggest that in each, a very different and distinct world of HRD might be unfolding.

But let us accept Dr. Kuchinke’s premise that these are all simply examples of HRD as a commons, a practice that can be oriented to ‘human development’. What is more centrally common among all work organizations in today’s economy, regardless of sector, position or purpose, is that they are constituted by relations of global capitalism. Work arrangements are characterized by fundamental contradictions of labour and capital, regardless of whether they are organized as institutions, networks, charities or churches. Any discussion of work, or HRD, must have at its centre the clear-eyed acknowledgment that the space of practice under discussion, the work space, is contested terrain. Multiple interests and deep divisions are held within the central contradictions, and usually fundamental inequities.

This is where I am a bit confounded about how to regard the principles for human development advanced in Dr. Kuchinke’s essay. He does not allude to capital, nor for that matter, to a theory of work, in his discussions of learning and development. It is as though the *resource* part of human resource development can simply be erased, or perhaps overlooked, in a view of HRD promoting human learning and development. But when we ask the simple questions, development of whom? for what? by whom?, we confront other conundrums. These are the old questions about how to reconcile aims of human flourishing when they so often conflict with other aims in work spaces, such as organizational goals of increased performance, professional goals of disciplining

particular subjects (the ‘good teacher’ or ‘good leader’), or societal goals of preserving particular institutions and behaviours (such as Baptist churches or youth citizens) to serve cultural or economic social needs of the day. I wonder, for example, how a public corporation responsible to shareholders is going to be persuaded to devote expensive training dollars, particularly in today’s fiscally strained organizations, to ‘flourishing’ that is not about improving performance? If it is about performance after all, then the argument here is simply for euphemistic rhetoric, and I don’t believe that is Dr. Kuchinke’s intention.

What would be useful is some critical explanation about just what particular purposes of human development can be advanced by workplace educators-cum-HRD practitioners within capitalist work relations. Such an analysis would want to avoid the traps of development as colonization, as repression, or as naïve under-estimation of people’s complex lives and enacted knowledge. It must avoid simplistic conflation of individual with organizational flourishing, in the way that old unitarist approaches used to fabricate an illusory seamlessness between management and worker goals. And given the exhortations of recent HRD writings about its own scholarship (e.g. Elliott and Turnbull 2005), such analysis should be thoroughly reflexive about its own intentions as a project. We have already witnessed decades of examples of soft management, exercised through HRD activity focused on harnessing the hearts, minds, identities, private lives, and even spirits of working people, to advance organizational productivity and competitive advantage.

If this project is genuinely serious about human flourishing, it needs also avoid the long-critiqued individualist focus of performance enhancement, competency acquisition, and human development as a psychological pursuit. Sen’s capabilities approach suggests that such a project embrace understandings of human knowing and being as unfolding in webs of action and relations – webs that extend beyond the purely personal and social to material circulations of nature, technology, bodies and objects – and to influence these webs to effect greater justice through social choice. Such a project presumably would work bottom up, involving the people themselves collectively, as good educative efforts always do. It would be solidly critical, to enable a robust analysis of how ‘flourishing’ might be promoted within a system of capital relations in ways that trace both these complexities and the ways they mobilize particular desires and identities – including desires for particular forms of flourishing and their consequences. Arjun Appadurai’s invitation (2001) to those interested in developmental work in a global economy is to focus on globalisation from below: the problems of ordinary people in the global everyday. This focus is upon the potential that global networks offer for the circulation of ideas – human imaginations – and resources that seek to generate collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life. These alternative imaginings and possibilities can feed directly into immediate and specific needs of local communities. Local workforces can operate more powerfully in local economies when connected with, not just used by or sold to, the flow of capital, ideas, technologies and strategies circulating in global knowledge economies. If we think about HRD from this perspective we may view its challenges somewhat differently. Attention could be directed much more to amplify the skills and knowledge that people and communities can enact to leverage global

networks at local sites, and less to calls that ‘develop’ people to fit standardized processes, migration routes, consumption patterns and knowledge protocols.

I am not arguing for more critique of capitalism, which we have in abundance, but for critical action. I am suggesting that perhaps, with some creative expansion and rigorous development, Dr. Kuchinke’s project of ‘human flourishing’ for HRD may have the potential to mobilize critical action for change, from within the system, from within the markets, to promote sustainable, healthy communities. Amartya Sen promotes human freedom through people’s capability to affect the processes at work in their own lives, and through people’s opportunity for ways of being, and doing, that they value as living well. These ways may not be what is valued in particular work organizations, and the knowledges they constitute may not be valued – or even recognized – in many dynamics of the global knowledge economy. But here is the choice for ‘H(R)D’, to take up Dr. Kuchinke’s reframing of this profession: to develop individuals for purposes that are fundamentally not their own, let alone valued by them as their life’s ‘beings and doings’, or to work alongside them to open opportunities and abilities whereby they may affect these purposes and find ways for living well within them. Of course there are all sorts of pragmatic dilemmas and ideological contradictions with such a mandate, as many of those writing about critical HRD have pointed out. I don’t pretend to understand the HRD profession or its dance with capital. However, Dr. Kuchinke and many of you reading these words do. There is much imaginative power among the HRD community to challenge the more simplistic assumptions, analyses and authorities prescribing what counts as knowledge and skill in the global economy. There is also, I suggest, a time upon us now where conventional assumptions about the economy have never been so widely distrusted, and their advocates so generally suspect. This may sound like a call to action. Consider it simply an amplification – perhaps with some critical edge – to the challenge put to the field by Peter Kuchinke.

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