

Chapter 3

The Interplay between Theory and Practice in HRD: A Philosophical Examination

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ABSTRACT

While few would argue that a tension exists between HRD theoreticians and practitioners, few models explain why such tension exists. Leveraging Gosney's Model of Modern Era Theory & Practice Generation in HRD (Gosney, 2014; Gosney & Hughes, 2015), a careful evaluation of current HRD context and informing philosophy reveals compelling reason for the theory-practice gap. In reviewing both the current historical context, capitalism, and the predominant informing philosophy, pragmatism, both theoreticians and practitioners are better equipped to understand and ameliorate the divide. The chapter concludes with specific recommendations to the discipline, including a more robust exploration by theoreticians of pragmatism as an informing philosophy in HRD and the adoption of critical thinking as a core competency in practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Writing for The New York Times in November of 1991, Edward Rothstein (1991) had this to say in review of a recently-premiered classical composition at Carnegie Hall: "... the dominant style is of a euphonically tonal pop ballad: the musical texture is very thin, the counterpoint elementary and many settings awkward. This music ... is incapable of handling contradictory tensions or expressing intricacy of character." One needn't be a seasoned composer of music to recognize

that this is, unequivocally, a poor review. And to whom was this indictment of musical composition directed? None other than Sir Paul McCartney – joined by Bob Dylan and his writing partner John Lennon as arguably one of the most influential writers of popular music in the latter-half of the 20th century (Galenson, 2009).

While few will feel a great amount of sympathy for Mr. McCartney's poor review, given his undeniable success as a popular music artist, one can't help but wonder why his abilities in one arena translated so poorly to another. After all, music is

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music! Should there not be some transferability of skill set? McCartney's long-time producer while with The Beatles, Sir George Martin (himself a classically-trained musician), suggested that in fact the skill-sets were not only uncomplimentary but in fact may indeed be mutually exclusive.

I think that if Paul, for instance, had learned music 'properly' – not just the piano, but correct notation for writing and reading music, all the harmony and counterpoint that I had to go through, and techniques and orchestration – it might well have inhibited him... Once you start being taught things, your mind is channeled in a particular way. Paul didn't have that channeling, so he had freedom, and could think of things I would've considered outrageous. I could admire them, but my musical training would have prevented me from thinking of them myself. (Martin, 1979, p. 139)

Mr. McCartney's experience in music is evidence of what could best be described as a discord between theory (classical training and composition) and practice (does it have a good beat and can I dance to it?). Such a discord between theory and practice, while not unique to Human Resource Development (HRD) (McClintock, 2004), certainly generates significant discussion in the discipline – particularly in its calls for clearer linkage between theory and practice as well as development of scholar-practitioners (Ardichvili, 2012; Graham & Kormanik, 2004; Holton, 1999; Keefer & Yap, 2007; Kormanik, Lehner, & Winnick, 2009; Suss, 2015).

The aim of this chapter is to more fully explore the interplay between theory and practice. While others in the discipline are exploring how to bridge the research-practice gap (Gold, Spackman, Marks, Beech, Calver, Ogun, & Whitrod-Brown, 2015; Gubbins & Rousseau, 2015; Hughes, Wang, Zheng, & McLean, 2010), this chapter will primarily focus upon why dissonance between theory and practice may exist. Exploration of this idea will occur through a consideration of the current

historical context by which HRD is practiced, as well as the philosophies which predominate both the theory and practice of HRD. The chapter begins with the proposal of a theory/practice continuum, HRD's place on that continuum, and the reasons for that placement. The chapter continues with the introduction of Gosney's Model of Modern Era Theory & Practice Generation in HRD (Gosney, 2014; Gosney & Hughes, 2015). The model accounts for the historical context in which HRD is practiced, the influence of other disciplines such as psychology upon the theory and practice of HRD, as well as the influence of informing philosophies. Support for the proposal of capitalism as a current historical context in HRD will be evaluated. The chapter ends with a consideration of the philosophical influence of pragmatism in both the theory and practice of modern HRD.

THE THEORY/PRACTICE CONTINUUM

One consistent element in the theory/practice conversation is the theorists' desire for practitioners to become more grounded in the theories they espouse. Indeed, HRD is a field historically dominated by the practitioner (Chalofsky, 2004). The angst of the discipline surrounding the theory/practice conversation is in part due to HRD's status as practitioner-dominated. Imagine a line, upon which one might plot various disciplines. On one end of the continuum are disciplines rooted nearly completely in the arena of academia and where theory almost wholly guides practice. Anthropology is a discipline (Thompson, 1972) that one would imagine on this extreme end. In the middle are disciplines that strike a balance between theory and practice. A tenuous (sometimes contentious) but explicit relationship between theory and practice are clearly evident – one informs the other. This middle-ground is the arena of the scholar-practitioner. As McClintock (2004) notes:

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