

# Chapter 84

## Human Resource Development as a Knowledge Management System: The Importance of Bridging the Scholar–Practitioner Gap

**Claretha Hughes**  
*University of Arkansas, USA*

**Matthew W. Gosney**  
*Hillcrest HealthCare System, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*The crux of the challenge in bridging the scholar-practitioner gap in Human Resource Development is in creating effective mechanisms for the transfer of knowledge between scholars and practitioners. Emerging literature on the topic of knowledge management, and of knowledge management systems, provide a compelling point of view in which to consider the scholar-practitioner gap in HRD. In the chapter, knowledge management systems, as a functional outcropping of systems theory, are considered along with the use of logic models to develop and evaluate organization and program effectiveness. Preliminary research results conducted by Hughes and Wang (2015) gives further support to the notion that considering HRD as a knowledge management system may provide a framework for bridging the scholar-practitioner gap.*

### INTRODUCTION

The process of learning – obtaining knowledge – is a well-studied topic (Mazur, 1994; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). While there is much debate on the topic of how to tap into the motivation to learn, it appears that most human beings possess the capacity for such motivation given the appropriate context (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2001). Unfortunately for the field of Human Resource Development (HRD),

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creating the appropriate context to inspire motivation in learning amongst scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners has been challenging; most notably internal to the field itself. This gap in knowledge, and the motivation to obtain knowledge, is embodied in two groups: those who study the discipline and those who practice within it. This gap between scholars and practitioners is widely recognized within HRD (Bing, 2009, Moats & McLean, 2008; Moats & McLean, 2009). Numerous attempts have been made to address this gap, as evidenced recently by the theme of the 16<sup>th</sup> International Conference on HRD Research and Practice across Europe. Nevertheless, the gap remains.

Per Kormanik, Lehner, and Winnick (2009) the key to improving the transference of knowledge between scholars and practitioners is in the leveraging of a third group: the scholar-practitioner. A pure practitioner focuses mainly on researching the bottom-line, regardless of quality of work produced. A pure scholar focuses primarily on theories, and lacks the context on which to employ them (Kormanik et al., 2009). A scholar-practitioner integrates a practice-theory approach in their work (Ruona & Gilley, 2009). Thus the call within the discipline has been made to leverage the scholar-practitioner as a channel between empirically-based HRD research and pragmatic HRD practice (Short, 2006). The challenge, of course, is that creating space and framework for scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners is not a simple task. There is emerging research that suggests, however, that creating such space and framework is critical for bridging the scholar-practitioner gap (Anderson, Herriot, & Hodgkinson, 2001; Aram & Salipante, 2003; Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Bartunek, 2007). Creating such opportunities makes of the scholar-practitioner a boundary-spanner, as termed by Wasserman and Kram (2009); their role is to function as *both* a scholar and a practitioner as opposed to simply becoming familiar with the opposed perspective.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Systems Theory**

As a core theory within the HRD discipline, the examination of systems theory aids in understanding the discipline of seeing the wholes (Senge, 1994) and how the HRD professional's purpose of performance improvement is linked to working within performance and organizational systems to improve the capabilities of individuals and the organization. System theory's primary goal is to discover information about systems within which it operates, to understand how the parts of the system are arranged, how the parts are interrelated to other parts and the whole system, and the rationale and reasons of the system design (Ruona, 2001).

Additionally, systems theory integrates the study of behavior within the system, how change impacts systems, the future of systems as they evolve, and "provides HRD with *capabilities* – the potential to act" (emphasis in original, Ruona, 2001, p. 119). Senge (1994) defined the attributes of systems thinking as "a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static "snapshots." it is a set of general principles" (Senge, 1994, p. 68). The discipline of systems thinking as seen by Senge (1994) is a way of seeing the underlying structures within complex situations and as a way of identifying high and low level change.

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