

An Important New Book: Human Resource Development: Critical Perspectives and Practices

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Introduction

I begin by declaring two interests. Firstly, two of the authors have been and/or are current research collaborators and close academic colleagues. The second enables me to make a significant descriptive point about the book. Some of my research and publications include a focus on critical HRD (CHRD) and so I have established perspectives and opinions. But is this book about CHRD? According to the authors, it is not. However, the authors claim in their preface, the book “is the first HRD book written from a critical perspective to interrogate the contested nature of organizations and workplaces and challenge metanarratives and dominant discourses in HRD”. Given this statement and even a cursory glance at the content, there is a clear intent to use research, concepts and theories from CHRD to question and challenge the orthodoxy of HRD. So, I think it is fair to describe the book as a contribution to advancing CHRD as the basis for educating HRD professionals and for the practice of HRD.

The content

The structure of the substantive content is organised around a framework of CHRD designed by two of the authors, Bierema and Callahan (an additional indicator that the book is a CHRD book?). This framework has four components which are argued to be four areas of engagement for HRD practice. The components are *Relating, Learning, Changing* and *Organising*.

Following an introductory chapter, the *Relating* part has three substantive chapters titled Stakeholders and Power; Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Decolonization (EDID); and The Role of HRD in Work Relationships. These chapters apply a framework explained in the introductory chapter. The framework consists of relating through context, relating through stakeholders, relating through process and relating through content. Each chapter has four or five sections covering topics such as power, hegemony, social justice and an explanation of the authors preferred acronym of EDID. The final chapter examines relating at organisation, interpersonal and individual levels with a focus in the latter of work and non-work relationships.

The *Learning* part has two substantive chapters as well as an introductory chapter. The introductory chapter applies the framework of context, stakeholders, process and content to explain the component. The two substantive chapters are titled Learning



Theory and Practice and Adult Learning Discourses and Practices in HRD. The first of these has three sections which examine adult learning; aims and process of learning; and learning, knowledge and organisation. Topics covered include philosophies and techniques of learning, organisation learning and the learning organisation. The second chapter has seven sections with a focus on competing discourses of learning and training, including the learning versus performance dichotomy. The final section makes a case for the role of discourse in shaping practice and for adopting alternative discourses to change practice.

The *Changing* part has the usual introductory chapter and two substantive chapters. The introduction again applies the framework of context, stakeholders, process and content to explain the changing component in the organising model. The two substantive chapters are titled Theory and Practice of Change, and Designing and Implementing HRD Interventions. The first chapter has seven sections dealing with definitions; theoretical underpinnings; critical perspectives on change; the prevalence, and reasons for failure of change initiatives; and strategies for surviving change. The second chapter examines using data in planned change; designing and implementing HRD interventions at individual, team and organisation levels; and finally, the role of HRD leadership in change initiatives.

The final substantive part, *Organising* has two main chapters. An opening introductory chapter follows the pattern in the book of using the context, stakeholders, process and content framework to introduce and explain the component. Titles of the main chapters are Constructing Organisations and Accountability in HRD. Constructing Organisations has five sections. Topics covered include the meaning and definitions of organisation; types of organisations; methods of analysing organisations; organisation development; and finally, inequalities in organisations. The second chapter has ten sections which suggests a longer chapter. However, some sections are very short and, unlike other chapters, there are few sub-sections. Many if not all aspects of accountability in HRD are covered, including ethics and how to act in an accountable fashion. The final section looks at talent development and makes a case for inclusive rather than exclusive approaches.

In addition to these four main parts, there are an introductory and a concluding part. These also have brief introductory chapters. The introduction part has two main chapters aimed at introducing and setting the context of the framework of CHRD. These chapters address the history of HRD and metanarratives of HRD. The concluding part has three main chapters. The first of these explores how to design and use CHRD interventions, the second addresses evaluation and the third examines recent trends in HRD research as well as trends affecting organising and managing more widely.

The book has many of the standard features intended to support learning and teaching and these are included in all the main chapters. They are a chapter overview which includes learning objectives, a concluding summary and three types of what are labelled “Boxes.” The first type is labelled Points to Ponder and provides both opportunities to reflect on a specific idea or theory and guidance to support that reflection in the form of questions to consider. The second type is labelled Case in Point and these are illustrative examples, mostly brief, which also sometimes but not always provide questions to be addressed related to the case. The third type is labelled Tips and Tools and these provide applications and exercises that can be used by the reader for themselves but also, in some cases, as an intervention within HRD practice. Many boxes also provide useful links to external resources such as websites and podcasts.

Reviewer’s comments

My first point is that the book is an important addition to HRD literature and specifically CHRD. I am confident that the book will be welcomed by both teachers and learners involved in HRD educational programmes. I believe that will also be true of current

HRD practitioners. This is because of the many strengths of this book. Firstly, the standing in HRD research and teaching enjoyed by the author team. Secondly, and while I do not know the writing process, the book is written seamlessly with a consistent focus and message integrated into the analysis of HRD theory and practice. The quality of writing is consistently high with a direct and communicative style which enables understanding of the many complex concepts tackled in the content. In addition, there is a consistency of “message” across the whole book and in individual chapters, as well as very useful forwards and backwards signposting in chapters to where ideas and arguments can be either refreshed or followed up in other chapters. The pedagogical features mentioned earlier are all excellent aids to learning and teaching. Finally, the focus and content are sadly lacking in many HRD and CHRD books currently available. I read much content in this book which, like me, many readers will find new and stimulating.

I have some minor criticisms. Firstly, despite the authors claiming it is not a CHRD book, the book’s content is mainly about CHRD. Also, the authors have chosen to title the main parts of the book using the abbreviation CHRD, e.g. *Relating in CHRD*, *Learning in CHRD* etc. and so it is in my judgement a CHRD book, a view that I also think should be celebrated rather than disputed. Secondly, the book covers very many complex topics and concepts. This inevitably means that not all receive comprehensive attention. Thirdly, I question the statement in the preface mentioned earlier that this “is the first HRD book written from a critical perspective to interrogate the contested nature of organizations and workplaces and challenge metanarratives and dominant discourses in HRD”. For example, my 1999 HRD book included material drawn from critical management studies and included content on organisation politics and power relationships as well as on the ethics of HRD. The 2011 book I co-authored with Clare Rigg includes similar content and had a declared objective to “support a critically informed examination of the theory and practice of HRD/learning and talent development”. I note that those two books were written for an audience learning and teaching on programmes approved as meeting the qualification standards of the CIPD and so were constrained by the content of those qualifications, as were the titles of the books. It is fair and accurate to say that this reviewed book goes a lot further in supporting CHRD than those two earlier books. However, it does lead me to also note that academics currently involved in teaching CIPD approved HRD programmes might prefer alternative texts as essential reading to ensure meeting CIPD qualification requirements. I am confident that they will though want their students to also read this book, and to use its content in their teaching. There is in any case a vast market outside of CIPD approved programmes and so the book will be deservedly highly successful in that market. In any case, I firmly believe and recommend that this book needs to be on the reading list of every HRD programme at all educational levels.

In summary, I highly recommend this book to all readers of EJTD and everyone with an interest in HRD. It is informative of content that will be new to most readers, stimulating of new thinking about the subject and a pleasure to read such high-quality writing.

Jim Stewart

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Further reading

Stewart, J. (1999), *Employee Development Practice*, FT Prentice Hall, London

Stewart, J. and Rigg, C. (2011), *Learning and Talent Development*, CIPD-Kogan Page, London