

# HRD Research in a Diversified Field

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The expanding diversity in research topics and approaches should not be regarded as a weakness of HRD but as a rich landscape for sense making and meaning. For the advancement of HRD expertise, research should reflect the diversified field of HRD practice. This paper offers such reflection on the diversity of HRD research from a European perspective, focusing particularly on work from the Netherlands and Belgium.

More than ten years ago, in their study on the characteristics of HRD research in Europe, Lowyck and Elen (1994) came to the conclusion that this research landscape offered a scattered view. The majority of research projects followed an explorative and descriptive approach. The orientation showed a strong inclination towards instructional psychology and course design. The authors pointed out that themes referring to learning to learn, self-regulation, meta-cognition and collaborative learning were almost absent. In addition, questions referring to the coherence between characteristics of the organising of work and learning in the workplace received relatively low attention, as did the various roles of HRD professionals.

## **Progress Made?**

It is interesting to see the development of HRD research in the Netherlands and Belgium that has taken place over the last ten years. It shows a growing interest in learning to learn and self-direction (Van der Waals, 2001), critical reflection (Van Woerkom, 2003) and collaborative learning (Mulder, 2004). Learning in informal settings, especially, has received more attention (Van Lakerveld, 2005). In particular, the number of research projects in the domain of competencies is growing at a steady pace (Kuijpers, 2003; Kouwenhoven, 2003; Toolsema, 2003). The increased attention for learning in the workplace is remarkable. Initially, HRD research, similar to research in school systems, focused primarily on the design, implementation and evaluation of courses and training events. A didactic approach was strikingly dominant (Lowyck, 2005). Research projects of Onstenk (1997), Glaudé (1997), Poell (1998), Van der Klink (1999) and the studies of Baars-Van Moorsel (2003) in

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the field of cultural dimensions of learning in organisations, showed explicitly interest in the day-to-day work environment as an important learning environment. Initially, the role of managers received little attention. Van der Vegt (1974) probably was one of the first researchers who examined the influence of line managers on the transfer and effects of training in the workplace. A later study of Van den Ouden (1992) built on the work of Van der Vegt, followed by the work of Simons (1993), and recently by Bianco (2006), Doornbos (2006) and Margaryan (2006). The role of managers in the design process of learning environments and HRD policy building was a key question in the studies of Kessels (1993). The interest in the responsibility of managers in HRD processes found further expansion in the studies by Gielen (1995), Wognum (1999), Van der Waals (2001) and Nijman (2005). The Flemish study by Sterck (2004) investigates the organisational context and its influence on learning policies and learning patterns in knowledge intensive firms. Despite the increased attention for HRD policy and plans for learning, Sels *et al.* (2000) nevertheless conclude that in Belgium the integration of HRD activities in company strategies is still very weak. Most HRD activities still focus on resolving entrance problems after recruiting new employees and hardly contribute to forms of lifelong learning (Forrier and Sels, 2003).

A question that still remains unanswered, but deserves abundant attention in the coming period, refers to the kind of learning processes and reflection that are evoked by new kinds of learning environments, like informal learning and learning in a workplace. There is a need for experimental settings where authentic learning environments go beyond offering direct practical experiences and stimulate theoretical deepening in the envisaged learning processes and reflection. When we hope for trainers and facilitators to enhance this kind of learning, new capabilities are needed, such as organising strategies for reflection and advanced information search in the day-to-day work practice.

### **Coherence and Proliferation**

Lowyck (1995) stated that HRD research in Europe suffered from two major weaknesses. The first point of critique concerns the lack of rigour in carefully building a coherent cycle of empirical research. In Lowyck's view, the systematic succession of description, correlation, experimentation and theory building is conditional for knowledge development, but is lacking in HRD research (Lowyck, 1995). Often, HRD research projects are isolated from neighbouring disciplines, and fragmented in their cycle of sound knowledge development, so that the process of building a consistent theoretical basis for HRD does not make impressive progress. The second point of critique in HRD research refers to the often-clumsy jump from descriptive studies to prescription. Lowyck (1995) therefore stresses the need for further development of intervention studies that aim at validating the step from description to prescription, which forms the basis for HRD as an academic discipline focussing on the development and design of fruitful learning environments. This step is crucial for European HRD research as there is a strong interest in designing learning environments, in comparison with other HRD research, e.g. from North America or Asia, where analysis and explanation of observed phenomena receive widespread attention.

Overlooking the myriad of topics that is covered by current HRD research, it is obvious that the early and one sided instructional design approach in training research is gradually fanning out in a broad domain of learning and development. This is reflected in expanding research themes and research approaches that – in view of the critiques above – might hamper a consistent construction of a solid HRD knowledge base.

Interestingly, the many HRD studies, of which a number are mentioned in this text, show a great variety of designs, methods and techniques. We often observe a focused theory search with additional case studies, leading to a conceptual framework that forms the basis of a survey, extended with small-scale experiments or design studies, and sometimes even replication in diverse contexts. Obviously, this is not considered as taking the royal road when it comes to longitudinal and coherent cooperation of researchers in related research topics. In view of a consistent knowledge building on the basis of carefully exploring, observing, explaining, understanding and theorizing, a different approach should be recommended. However, within the scope of single research projects often a similar line of reasoning and development can be distinguished.

### **Grand Strategy or Disciplined Eclecticism**

The interesting question could be raised whether the pursuit of an unambiguous body of knowledge for HRD is still worth aiming for, in particular now themes and methodologies are expanding in the wide domain of learning and development, in a great variety of circumstances and contexts. Is it still feasible to frame truth finding and generalisation leading to a deep academic structure of coherent concepts and principles in the domain of HRD? Does this mean that hope is lost that HRD will ever reach the position of recognized academic discipline, and should we give up the search for the 'Grand Strategy' as advocated by Schwab (1978)?

Instead of drawing a mournful conclusion on the deficit of academic development in HRD in Europe, there is also evidence for broadening the initial narrow road of classroom training for more attention to a variety of learning environments in diverse contexts. This opening up has led to a new range of research themes, designs, methodologies and methods. This development does not take the classical road of scientific theory development, following description, correlation and experiment (Gage, 1978). Instead of an impoverishment of the academic HRD field, one could also argue that such development is an enrichment of the landscape, where researchers feel inspired by the spirit of 'Disciplined Eclecticism' as proposed by Shulman (1986). It offers a colourful spectrum of themes and approaches, without anybody granting the right to pronounce judgement on what is necessary and what is permitted. A positive interpretation of the proliferating development in HRD research will recognize and value the complexity of a research domain that focuses on learning and development of professionals in the context of their work. Therefore, it might be more fruitful to encourage researchers to follow their personal interests and curiosity in a responsible way, and accept a research attitude that reflects the diversified field of HRD practice. Consequently, the pretension of reaching universal and everlasting truth must be abandoned. Such an expanding

diversity in research topics and approaches should not be regarded as a weakness of HRD, but as a rich landscape for sense making and meaning.

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