

## **Book Review: Critical Human Resource Development – Beyond Orthodoxy**

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### **Book Information**

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

The book “Critical Human Resource Development – Beyond Orthodoxy” is truly critical to the subject of Human Resource Development (HRD) in a progressive and constructive way. Therein its convincing strength lies. It is written by authors who have a profound background in HRD, either in academics or as professionals. The term critique is regarded throughout the book as the driver for advancement of the HRD subject. The core issues of this book deal with four areas that are to be investigated.

First, HRD has been so far focussing to improve performance defined in economic terms predominantly. Second, it targets namely the reliance on humanist assumptions about identity and personhood of traditional HRD. That is certainly good but it has led to the exclusion of alternative discourses. For instance to which extend are they culturally or temporally specific? The third criticism targets the view on HRD just as a kind of training activities. Therewith its scope for research and practice, named here the ‘representationalist perspective’ is being limited. Using a different frame would have an implication on research hence it would contribute to a better understanding of HRD. The fourth major point of critique centres on the traditional domination of pedagogical methods that influence the HRD curriculum. In a broader sense the critic wants to be more critical to what is taught by the traditional HRD and goes beyond being critical instead of just taking for granted the ideas and follow the theory of critical thinking.

The book is composed of four main parts and it is divided into twelve chapters which were written by fifteen authors. In the following I will summarise the main four parts of it with regard to selected chapters.

The first part takes a critical view on HRD in general. It discusses what it means to be critical in this field and how this is defined. Moreover, it analyses why it is worth being critical. In addition to this, it outlines the challenges implied. Very interesting are the contributions by Hatcher and Steward on the ethical aspects of HRD. While Hatcher discusses the paradoxon about the HRD as a discipline which deals with the human behaviour in its core but which nonetheless has not been influenced by ethics at all, as it should have been, Steward argues that HRD per se was an ethical subject. His approach derived from a socio-biological angle and it is an interesting way of explaining human behaviour which HRD also aims at establishing.

The second part is dedicated to HRD in the workplace. Here, the role of gender is investigated by Metcalfe/ Rees, who make a valuable contribution because this subject has just been little investigated so far although it should be considered as fundamental, actually. Unfortunately, it often finds fewer acknowledgements in the workplace, especially in the area of management and HRD, which is today still dominated by masculine conceptual schemes. In the following chapter, Francis analyses the discursive and social nature of HRD using the example of a manufacturing company that changed its organisation to a less hierarchic form. In this case, the relationship of line managers and HRD practitioners is investigated. The article written by Kellie features two case studies. Her analysis focuses on the intersection of the offer tools-and-techniques-based form of management education and management development. In this context she scrutinises the role of HRD.

The third part of the book focuses on constraints in the classroom. The first essay discusses the usefulness of thinking-tools, such as critical social theory in an action learning situation, stressing several benefits of critical reflection for managers. The next two essays include the research on a critical curriculum for postgraduate teaching of HRD, including a recommendation in respect of a less hierarchical teacher-student relationship (by Valentin) and finally, there is an explorative discourse by Harvery on the dilemmas when working in creative ways with students, especially focussing on different forms of creative writing.

The fourth part accentuates a critique of critical orthodoxy. The chapters imply not only a critical view on subjects as presented in the previous chapter but critically spotlight on existing learning techniques by reinterpreting them, or a final reflection on various perspectives in critical HRD.

It has to be noted that the book is excellently structured. Each of the four parts of the book presents an introduction that outlines the following essay and each part features an outro named “activities”, asking the reader to rethink and apply the key items learned from the previous chapter – a truly professional and effective structure.

It would do the book well if further editions would include a fifth part on the important impact of culture on HRD. That section could contain an analysis on how HRD is approached by other than western cultures, e.g. in collective cultures such as Japan. The result could open new horizons, especially in the frame of an ethical or moral discourse. So far, the book appears to be quite Western if not just U.K. centred.

As the book does not solely look at HRD and on how it can contribute the most to managerial goals in profitability terms but takes a look far beyond this scope, it contributes to bringing HRD back to where it actually belongs to – into the centre of interest for advancement of society. It should be a standard book for those who are seriously engaged in HRD. It suits well for postgraduates, organisational HR developers or HR consultants.