

## **Abstract**

### **Problem**

There is a continued, well documented disconnect between HRD scholars and practitioners. Specifically, the “Implications for HRD Practice” section in academic articles is often lacking in relevance and meaning. This is harmful for both academia and practice, but especially for the well-being of learners.

### **Solution**

This essay focusses on how to write a meaningful “Implications for HRD Practice” section and suggests five areas to consider: why writing for practice is important; understand who practice is; relate to practitioners’ knowledge; provide evidence-based suggestions and finally, connect with practice.

### **Stakeholders**

HRD scholars who are committed to write for, and connect with, practice.

### **Keywords**

Scholars and practitioners, writing for practice, Human Resource Development

## **Implications for Practice: How to Write a Meaningful Contribution**

During the 2023 Academy of Human Resource Development conference in Minneapolis, there was a renewed call for Human Resource Development (HRD) scholars to connect with HRD practitioners, a goal that I, as scholar-practitioner, strongly embrace. This is not a new ambition and many articles and special issues have been written on this topic, including a dedicated eBook: *Bridging the Scholar-Practitioner Gap in Human Resources Development* (Hughes & Gosney, 2016). This essay specifically focusses on writing the “Implications for HRD practice” section in academic journals. The “Implications for HRD Practice” section is at the end of most articles and seems to be the one that is given the least thought. Authors seem to rush through this section and offer superficial suggestions on how practitioners can benefit from their article. This essay is about how to write a meaningful “Implications for HRD practice” section and suggests five areas to consider: why writing for practice is important; understand who practice is; relate to practitioners’ knowledge; provide evidence-based suggestions and finally, connect with practice.

### **Reflect on Why Writing the Implications for Practice is Important**

A good start for writing meaningfully for practice is ask why, as a scholarly author and researcher, this is important to you and your research? Scholarly culture seems to push scholars towards writing more for peers than for practitioners (Moats & McLean, 2009; Clayton, 2015). The question is whether this is a problem, and whether scholarly knowledge, concepts, and theories without a meaningful connection to practice are valuable in themselves. Moats and McLean (2009) argue that there can be no relevant HRD theory and research without practice. I would suggest, also reflecting on the philosophy of Kant (Stanford, 2023), that theories and concepts are not without power, however that they are limited. Any knowledge is dependent on context and purpose and should be “recognized as partial, incomplete, and involving inherent bias with respect to any complex problem” (van de

Ven & Johnson, 2006 p. 808). Instead of academics transferring their theories into practice, and practitioners putting their practices into theory, this approach may be misguided:

because they assume that the relationship between knowledge of theory and knowledge of practice entails a literal transfer or translation of one into the other.

Instead, we take a pluralistic view of science and practice as representing distinct kinds of knowledge that can provide complementary insights for understanding reality (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006 p. 808).

Equally, Moats and McLean (2009) suggest that theory becomes “more mature” (p. 512) with input from practice. I can strongly relate to this suggestion and have found that my sex/gender-sensitive model of training (Kroese, 2022) is maturing and becoming more insightful by connecting with the knowledge from practitioners in my train-the-trainer sessions. So, for me the key “why” of writing for practice is not just to help practitioners do a better job, but to advance HRD knowledge, both scholarly and practical, in order to improve the realities and well-being of our learners, in all its complexities.

### **Understand Who Practice Is**

There are many employees in organisations that do HRD but are not HRD practitioners: “we constantly refer to HRD practitioners and professionals, yet I doubt you will find either of those titles on the payroll” (Byrd, 2023 p. 3). In addition, the role of HRD is changing and needs to change (Torraco & Lundgren, 2020). So, the second question to ask is who this HRD practitioner is who would benefit from scholarly knowledge and research. Is it the learner, or individual employee, as key stakeholder, deciding how and what to learn (Poell, 2022). Is it the line manager, who organises and supports the everyday learning-on-the-job for team members? Is it the instructional designer or trainer, who develops and facilitates the learning? Is it the Chief Learning Officer as change agent, who approaches individual and organisation development as a strategic role within the company, focusing on and supporting the company’s business goals and strategies (Grieves & Redman, 2006; Torraco & Lundgren,

2020). HRD as change agent is extremely relevant and important in our current VUCA World: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Maybe all these practitioners can benefit from a scholar's knowledge and research, but in different ways, and the "Implications for practice" section needs to define who practice is, acknowledge different implications for different practitioners, and suggest relevant implications accordingly.

### **Relate to Practitioners' Knowledge**

Instead of writing implications "for" practice, Kondrat (1992) argues that the starting point should be an understanding of "what does the competent practitioner know, and how does he or she know it?" (p. 238). Instead, scholarly articles are often published without considering relevant practical knowledge (Moats and McLean, 2009). Authors even suggest that "practitioners are not evidence-based as their knowledge level of the [academic] research evidence on effective HRM practices can only be described as "fair"" (Tenhiälä et al., 2016 p. 193). This is concerning because practical knowledge is not secondary to scientific knowledge, it is a way of knowing in its own right (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Practitioners' knowledge is, not surprisingly, based on doing, not only on formal study:

practice connects 'knowing with doing'...knowledge consequently does not arise from scientific 'discoveries'; rather it is fabricated by situated practices of knowledge production (Gherardi, 2000 p.218).

Two inspiring examples of how to relate to practitioners' knowledge and connecting scholarly knowledge with practitioners' knowledge can be found in two recent articles in *Advances*, both with practitioners as first authors. The first article (Simmons & Yawson, 2022) connects scholarly research with a practitioner's conceptual framework and inclusive leadership model, concluding with six practical points to avoid in order to cultivate inclusivity. The second article (Booker & Williams, 2022) takes a different but equally important approach by pointing out that while practitioner models of inclusion have made significant contributions, they can be expanded by addressing exclusion and human relations

outcomes. The authors propose a newly developed model, building on both scholarly and practitioner knowledge. I believe the strength of these articles is that scholars often limit their focus on how to transfer knowledge from academia to practice. However, “ dissemination is too late if the wrong questions have been asked” (Pettigrew, 2001 p.S67).

### **Suggest Evidence – based Recommendations, Not Just Training**

The “Implications for Practice” section in many academic papers often reads like an afterthought, with recommended actions for practitioners that are not nearly as well supported with data as the research/theoretical arguments that take up 95% of the paper. A few real-life examples (references are not stated, as the intent is to demonstrate and not shame).

- Introduce pretraining intervention to facilitate self-discovery.
- Introduce post training coaching and mentoring support.
- Provide training to address gendered culture.
- Use suggested screening instrument and tailor programs to learner profiles.

These are merely ideas, without the data to support why these specific recommendations are credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable. The practical real-life situations and barriers are not discussed, nor by what method these recommendations are to be implemented. For example, how can programs be tailored to learner profiles when there are over 100.000 employees?

Another observation is the reliance on training as “go to” solution. However, HRD is so much more than training, and should be an “integrated and holistic approach...using a range of learning techniques and strategies” (Grieves & Redman, 1999 p. 97). As outlined above, HRD scholars and practitioners are also change agents, approaching individual and organisation development as a strategic role within the company, focusing on and supporting the company’s business goals and strategies, in a VUCA world. In this light, the dominant focus on training as recommended implication for practice is downgrading HRD as a scholarly field and profession. In addition, training as a stand-alone or add on approach is

often not the right solution for developing individuals and organizations, as highlighted in the extensively documented failure of many training programs to ensure that newly learned knowledge and skills are transferred to the workplace (Cheng and Henson, 2008). To offer relevant suggestions for practice, it will be important to start with reflecting on who practice is, and practitioners' knowledge, as outlined above, and subsequently to consider a range of learning and development approaches that are evidence based, meaningful, relevant, and specifically consider the importance of learning in the flow of work, the agency of learners, and the fast development of new technology and artificial intelligence to support learning and learners (Torraco & Lundgren, 2020; Poell, 2022).

### **Connect with Practice**

To write "Implications for Practice", and consider the areas mentioned above, it is key to connect with practice in meaningful ways. There are several elements to be considered in this area. First, academic language can be difficult to understand for practitioners: "the language of scholars is too foreign to be used in practice" (Moats & Mc Lean, 2009 p. 514). Non-academics question the need for the complexity of academic writing and more or less cynical reasons have been suggested for the "opaque writing style" (Clayton, 2015 n.p.) of academics: it is an elitist game to exclude interlopers; it is a requisite to be taken seriously by academic journals; academics write for peers, not the average person; academics do not write to express themselves, they write to impress. One can read a sense of frustration in these reasons, and this may reflect a social space in which power relations are at stake, as argued by Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2011). Similarly, Foucault argued that power relations can come into being through the effects of words: "this form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life, which categorizes the individual" (Foucault, 1982 p.781). Any attempt to connect meaningfully with practice must start with language that is respectful and accessible, which is not easy: "It's easy to be complex, it's harder to be simple" (Clayton, 2015 n.p.).

Secondly, ensure that the knowledge produced benefits the work of practitioners and is not challenging for practitioners to apply in their work. Often “the knowledge that is produced is not in a form that can be readily applied in contexts of practice” (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006 p. 803). For context, the foremost request before my train-the-trainer sessions is ‘tell us what you want us to start doing, stop doing and do more of, and why’.

A third consideration is that most practitioners do not have access to academic journals. As a result, practitioners need to rely on publications and research from global consultancies, such as McKinsey and Company, Boston Consulting Group, and Bain and Company. Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) call this: “a “trickle down” view of the knowledge supply chain: knowledge is created and tested by academic researchers, taught to students by instructors, adopted and diffused by consultants, and practiced by practitioners” (p. 805). This is clearly a very lucrative model for global consultants, with a combined 2021 global revenue of \$38.4 billion, and a \$111.4 billion projection by 2031 (Allied Market Research, 2022). I firmly believe that the academic knowledge available to HRD practitioners should not be limited to consultants’ commercial agendas and hence the importance for academia to connect with practice in more direct ways, for example via practitioner journals, conferences, and social media.

Finally, consider the model of communication when connecting with practice. Building on Metcalfe (2019), three models of communication can be distinguished: the ‘deficit model’, the ‘dialogue model’, and the ‘participation’ model. In the deficit model academics view practitioners as “having a ‘deficit’ of scientific knowledge until this is received in some form through dissemination or education” (Metcalfe, 2019 p. 384), usually via publications, lectures, and conferences. In the dialogue model, academics are willing to listen to and consult with practitioners about their perceptions, needs and concerns. In the participatory model, practitioners are equals in reflecting, sharing, and creating new knowledge. The last model is particularly relevant as the gap between theory and practice is

argued to be more of a knowledge production problem than a knowledge transfer problem (van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Metcalfe (2019) finds that the deficit model is the dominant mode of communication and concludes that a combination of the three models is recommended, dependent on the focus and style of the audience. Which brings me back to the importance of understanding who the practitioner is with whom an author wishes to engage. An important observation is that using the deficit model is preaching to the converted, so if an author intends to engage a wider audience of practitioners, a combination of communication modes may be more applicable, than only the deficit model, publications, and conferences. I strongly relate to this finding by Metcalfe and am in the process of finding meaningful ways to extend my academic and professional publications and presentations to engage with my peers and other HRD practitioners via dialogues and co-creation of knowledge. Whereas I am limited in the co-creation of knowledge from a time and resource perspective, I am finding that dialogues with practitioners are crucial to develop my theories and research, including online dialogues. This requires reading practitioners' papers and determining the key voices and influencers in my field of study, connecting with them (on LinkedIn for example) to share and learn from each other.

### **Conclusion**

To bridge the gap between scholars and practitioners may require deep system changes (Moats & McLean, 2009). However, system changes may seem unattainable and its magnitude paralyzing, and change is also about personal behaviors and motivation: "People are influenced by ideas, goals, opportunities, or assertions. They in turn influence through their responses, their behaviors, and their commitment" (Pasmore & Woodman, 2017 p. 17). This essay intended to personalize the required change by sharing five areas that scholars can consider when writing "Implications for Practice" in a meaningful way.

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