



HUMAN  
RESOURCE  
DEVELOPMENT  
REVIEW

VOLUME 2 NUMBER 2 JUNE 2003

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## **A Disservice to the Ideas of Theory, Research, and Expertise**

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*A student casually states that he is going to the library to do some research when he is simply going there to read and retrieve a few documents. Finding and reading written materials by themselves are not research.*

*A businessperson claims to be doing action research when in fact she is simply solving a difficult workplace problem. Solving a problem by itself is not research.*

*A professor directs a brainstorming session and then helps the group to classify its ideas as well as choose the best option. Generating new ideas or hypotheses is not by itself research.*

*The successful executive or sports coach writes a book on leadership to expound on his personal theory of leadership. Personal theories by themselves do not qualify as sound theory.*

*A mortgage banker who can efficiently and accurately complete mortgage transactions is deemed by his colleagues as an expert. Because a person can do a job well does not constitute expertise.*

This article is primarily about the disservice caused by the misuse of the ideas of theory and research. I have equal concern about misuse of the idea of expertise and the essential roles that knowledge and experience play in developing and maintaining expertise.

Human expertise is defined as “displayed behavior within a specialized domain or a related in the form of consistently demonstrated actions of an individual that are both optimally efficient and in their execution and effective in their results” (Herling, 2000, p. 20). Bereiter and Scardmalia (1993) informed us that a distinguishing component of expertise is the propensity of individuals to solve problems. Even so, a person can be a true expert in the greatest sense of the word and still not be a researcher and not have anything more than personal theory to explain his or her expertise. I have no qualms

about this. John W. Gardner's (1967) famous quote sums up my personal value system about excellence in all realms: "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy: neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water" (p. 68). Quite frankly, I have more respect for an excellent plumber than a mediocre researcher, and I have no need to portray my plumber as a theorist or a researcher.

As an applied discipline, human resource development (HRD) requires sound theory to be backed by systematic theory building as well as confirmation in practice (Dubin, 1978; Lynham, 2002). In an applied discipline, theory, research, and expertise are ultimately obligated to attend the same dance. Yet stereotypes of research that conjure up scenes of research laboratories with experimental researchers in white laboratory coats are sophomoric and a fundamental disservice to the profession. One example of such a disservice is the book by Peter Jarvis (1998) titled *The Practitioner-Researcher: Developing Theory from Practice*. In Chapter 12, Jarvis equates personal theory with practical knowledge. The author's conception of developing a personal theory looks remarkably like the model for experiential learning developed by David Kolb almost 20 years ago. Despite the title of Jarvis's book, there is nothing in the book that even remotely resembles the rigorous process of developing theory. Even the most thoughtful and competent practitioners are not necessarily willing or able to articulate theory and should not be confused with competent researchers who produce relevant, robust theory. A pragmatic heuristic developed from reflecting on practice is just that—a heuristic, a rule of thumb for a particular practice setting. It is not theory.

In addition, the inclination to create inflated professional terms such as *library research* instead of *literature search* or *action research* instead of *problem solving* are in themselves a huge disservice to the profession.

### **The Scholarly Idea of Expertise**

Life presents us with tasks to perform. Applied disciplines are fundamentally interested in practitioner tasks. Doing tasks well can be hard work and a worthy activity. But doing work well, in itself, does not meet the scholarly criteria for expertise (or research and theory). To the layman, an expert is often someone who can do something better than he or she can or better than anybody else in the group. This limited contextual perspective of expertise is quite immature and has little value in the realm of scholarly pursuit or discourse about the idea of expertise.

Herling (2000) noted that competence is minimally efficient and effective demonstrated behaviors in contrast to the optimally efficient and effective

tive behaviors demonstrated by experts. Beyond this, Bereiter and Scardalia (1993) saw the expert as a problem solver geared for performance.

As an applied discipline, the idea of expertise is fundamental to HRD. In that HRD is focused on people functioning in organizations, HRD cannot be satisfied with the idea of knowledge alone. The gap between knowing and doing can be great (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) and is one distinguishing characteristic of HRD. Participant exhibition of some degree of expertise (doing) is a core objective of HRD. Developing knowledge is the easy part of learning, whereas the development of expertise is the challenging part. Thus, innovations like e-learning that only focus on knowledge can actually work to disconnect HRD from the essential challenge of ensuring expertise. The idea of expertise is central to HRD because it pursues the goal of work-related learning.

### **The Scholarly Idea of Research**

Life is a series of problems. Solving problems is hard work and worthy work. But solving problems in most instances does not meet the scholarly criteria for research (or theory and expertise). The layperson often misuses the idea of research by equating it with gathering information and thinking. This immature perspective has research being something just a bit more than the routine of life. This misuse of the idea of research has little value in the realm of scholarly pursuit or discourse about research. Clearly, gathering information and thinking are involved in research, but they in themselves are not research. "Research is a process having a specific type of outcome. The outcome of research is new knowledge, obtained through an orderly, investigative process" (Swanson, 1997, p. 10).

As an applied discipline, the idea of research is fundamental to advancing HRD. In that HRD is focused on people functioning in organizations, HRD scholars cannot be satisfied with the common idea of research that exists apart from practice. Ideally, HRD practitioners should be partners in research endeavors, or at least cheerleaders. For sure, the scholarly idea of research in HRD must be judged within the HRD research community itself and have credence among scholars and researchers in related disciplines. All the time, good practice should not be confused as research in name or intent. Practitioners choosing to engage in the research process need to learn and honor rigorous research methods. The idea of research is central to HRD scholarship and is not central to routine HRD practice.

### **The Scholarly Idea of Theory**

Life demands that we play our hunches based on personal theories or hypotheses. But in most cases, personal theories do not meet the scholarly criteria for theory (or research and expertise). To the layperson, theory is

often thought of as abstract hunches that have not been proven in practice. This contextual and immature perspective of theory has little value in the realm of scholarly pursuit or discourse about the idea of theory. Theory is defined as “a coherent description, explanation, and representation of observed or experienced phenomena” (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, p. 587), whereas “theory building research is the ongoing process of producing, confirming, applying, and adapting theory” (Lynham, 2002, p. 222)

As an applied discipline, the idea of theory that is verified in practice is fundamental to advancing HRD. In that HRD is focused on complex phenomena surrounding people and organizations, HRD scholars cannot be satisfied with the erroneous idea of theory being disconnected from practice. Yet this connection to practice should not be confused with the popular ideas of theory-in-practice or theory-in-action (Argyris, 1994; Schon, 1987). These ideas from practitioner practice are likely important elements of theory building within applied disciplines but should not be confused with competent researchers who produce relevant, robust theory. The scholarly idea of theory in HRD must be judged within the HRD research community and have credence among scholars and researchers in related disciplines. Ideas or speculative hypotheses that simply look and sound good should not be confused as theory in name or intent. Extolling the notions of theories-in-practice and personal theories as anything beyond early steps in the theory-building process is a disservice to sound theory. The idea of theory is central to HRD scholarship and is harmonious with sound principles and tools of practice.

### **From Disservice to Service**

Out of necessity, HRD scholars have historically been masters of three domains—theory, research, and practice. One could speculate that wearing these multiple hats sets the stage for watering down the ideas of theory, research, and practice—if only in an undisciplined use of the terms. Although HRD scholars have worn these multiple hats, they have made few, if any, demands on practitioners to learn and honor the tools of scholarship. Worse yet, HRD scholars have not even held practitioners accountable for not following defined HRD processes, let alone best practices or a sense of responsibility on their part to support rigorous efforts in advancing the realms of theory, research, and expertise.

This condition must change for both HRD scholarship and practice to advance. I suggest that a critical starting point in this challenging journey within the HRD profession is to advance the ideas of theory, research, and expertise through the following:

1. Begin with our own clear definition and use of the terms *theory*, *research*, and *expertise*.

2. When the ideas of theory, research, and expertise are misused, we should first gently call this to the attention of the person or organization.
3. When the person or organization misuses the ideas of theory, research, and expertise again, we should publicly challenge their thinking.

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