The demise of inquiry-based HRD programmes in the UK: implications for the field

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

We have written this article both to honour a form of educational practice and to invite debate in the field of Human Resource Development (HRD). We begin with the observation that a number of postgraduate programmes in the UK whose pedagogies were characterized by inquiry-based, action-oriented experiential learning, which were thriving when Human Resource Development International (HRDI) was first developed, have now closed. These programmes enacted HRD as an approach to adult learning and teaching through educational practices mirroring the topics explored. As authors with some 40 or more years’ combined experience as staff on such programmes, we aim first to set on record the nature and significance of the pedagogical approaches involved, which participants often experienced as transformational. We then consider how the changing climate of UK higher education, reflected in mechanisms like the Research Excellence Framework, may have influenced the demise of such programmes. The paper reflects on the significance of the pedagogies, outlines potential implications of their demise for the practice and scholarship of HRD as a field internationally, and considers the role that HRDI, as a leading journal in the field, might play in addressing the paper’s concerns.

\textbf{Background and purpose}

In October 2014, Judi, a relative latecomer to the staff team, and Paul, the external examiner, are meeting at Lancaster University Management School for the final Exam Board of the MA in Management Learning and Leadership (MAMLL). The passing of MAMLL feels important – the degree was long-lived (initiated in 1982) and strongly field-shaping. Reflecting on its ending, we observe that a number of once thriving postgraduate programmes have all closed in the last decade. Besides MAMLL, we were directly involved in the MSc Change Agent Skills and Strategies (MSc CASS, 1992–2008) at the University of Surrey, and the doctoral programme (1994–2010) and MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice (MSc in RBP, 1997–2010) at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) at the University of Bath School of Management. (A successor to the MSc in RBP was developed at Ashridge Business School in 2009, its final intake being in 2016).
Although none of these programmes specified Human Resource Development (HRD) in its title (few UK programmes do, Tosey et al. 2015), we associate them with that field due to the way their pedagogies enacted HRD as an approach to adult learning and teaching through practices such as experiential learning, action learning, and more, and due to their substantive focus on themes of learning, development, and contributing to change in organizational and social settings.

We experience the passing of these programmes, and others we consider ‘kin’, as a loss, even though alumni networks persist and alumni continue to be influential in their fields. We wonder whether this has wider significance, especially in view of our interests in such pedagogies internationally (Boden et al. 2015; Tosey, Dhillon, and Hassinen 2015). We acknowledge that there have been other related, important programmes, some of which continue to exist, for example, at Metanoia Institute, Middlesex University, Roffey Park Institute, the Tavistock Institute, and the University of Sussex. But few new programmes of this type have emerged in the UK, to our knowledge.

Our first purpose is to place on record the significance of these programmes and their pedagogies. If we do not voice our sense of the value of this work, we feel complicit in it becoming invisible. Yet this paper is not primarily an epitaph for programmes past. As our colleague Peter Reason puts it, those were, and probably should be, falling stars rather than permanent suns. The conditions under which they exist may be propitious; institutions arise, their time passes, and they wane (Boden et al. 2015). Of greater concern is that the skills and understanding those pedagogies promote are, we believe, vitally important in today’s world. Furthermore, their demise seems to reflect a major epistemological shift in UK universities that is becoming consolidated. Our second main purpose, therefore, is inquiring – to raise awareness of the demise, consider what might be learnt, and invite debate with colleagues in the field of HRD.

We emphasize that this paper reflects our own perspectives and experiences; it neither seeks to represent the programmes mentioned nor attempts any comprehensive survey of inquiry-based programmes. Incidentally, our concern is not unprecedented. Reynolds (1979) issued a ‘cri de coeur’ about the declining influence of experiential learning, predating any of the programmes cited above.

Next, we explore what connects these programmes’ pedagogies and review what may have been lost. We then ask how this demise has come about. Finally, we discuss potential implications for HRD and HRDI.

**Inquiry-based pedagogies**

In writing, we have in mind a range of programmes arising mainly in the 1980s and 1990s amongst which ours sat. Each was distinctive, originating in its specific institutional setting and time, through the informing heritages, ideas, and practices of initiating staff. Yet we considered them as ‘kin’ in intentions to enact radical educational pedagogies, to enable course groups to become communities of inquiry, to challenge participants, and to help develop skills in the practices of change as well as personal development.

We cannot do justice to the richness and uniqueness of each programme in the short space of this article; nor is it straightforward to say what characterized them, since they were also diverse. Nevertheless, significantly, each was informed by an underpinning philosophy that was integral, determining form and process, distinguishing these
programmes from others which employed educational approaches like experiential learning more tactically and intermittently within mainstream pedagogical formats. In design and enactment, educational process was as important as subject matter. This was political work epistemologically, with the challenges and need for reflexivity that implies.

The informing philosophies and practices included: learning communities, T-groups, organization development (OD), experiential learning, action learning, action research, and critical management education. For example, the MSc CASS was infused with the experiential learning pioneered by John Heron, founder of the Human Potential Research Project at Surrey and author of numerous books on facilitation. This included the principle of developing a learning community (Tosey and Gregory 1998). Another take on that concept (Pedler 1994) was also foundational to the initiation of the MA in Management Learning (later MAMLL). Both programmes practised forms of self and peer assessment. CARPP was known especially for its developments of participative and first-person action research (Marshall 2014). The MSc in RBP was founded in multiple enactments of action research. All the programmes were keenly concerned with enhancing participants’ capacities for effective action.

The three Masters’ were part-time and operated as ‘closed’ programmes, that is, whilst the degrees were formally modularised, workshops were not available to students registered on other programmes. They had maximum cohort sizes associated with the number of people that could function effectively as a single, face-to-face group (nominally 22 on the MSc CASS). Participants were often pursuing ‘mid-career’ development and few were under 30 years of age.

In practice, the educational approach typically featured face-to-face group learning, both large group and small, such as learning sets. The principal medium for learning was inquiry through dialogue and interaction. While sometimes supported by virtual/networked learning (e.g. MAMLL), the programmes were generally ‘low tech’. The intention was for the community to learn from its own process, face-to-face, and in the moment, on the basis that this experience mirrored the ‘topics’ the community was ‘studying’ (Marshall 2004). In our view, this embodied, experiential learning was central to these pedagogies, as no amount of conceptual language about action research (for example) is sufficient to give students the generative space to appreciate its rich dimensionality and potential, and to create their own lived practice (Fenwick 2003).

‘Teaching’ primarily took the form of facilitation – sitting with and guiding a group, attending to and intervening in the group dynamics, coaching individual development and group learning capacity, and maintaining regard for the processes of inquiry. Instruction and ‘content’ input featured (especially on the MSc in RBP) but were offered to be worked with as inquiry, in contrast to the dominant instructional style of mainstream higher education (HE).

The development of the self, emotional and psychological as well as intellectual and practical, was often embraced with the express purpose of promoting effective and ethical action. In some instances that personal dimension was an explicit feature of the learning contract and became a reason for participants seeking out these programmes rather than other Masters such as MBAs. Often, staff and participants were experienced already in exploring their interior worlds through processes such as co-counselling, psychotherapy and experiential courses, on the assumption that this would inform and enhance their professional practice.
The aim was for staff and course participants to work together as co-inquirers. Often this invoked tension between stated aims of participation and peerhood and the power staff were seen to hold, for example in relation to assessment. In principle, attending overtly to such tensions was fundamental to this educational approach, yet was by no means easy or comfortable in practice. Participants (staff and students alike) often needed time to adapt to this way of learning. As tutors worked to create safe-enough spaces, being themselves vulnerable and at risk was inherent to this form of educational work; enacting and modelling the approach well enough was a continual, dominating attention. Operating in teams was therefore common and helpful, with regular reviews.

We acknowledge that it may be difficult to appreciate the rigours of such facilitative pedagogies for those who have not experienced them. They are easily discounted as ‘just’ sitting with a group, in what could appear to an observer to be a laissez-faire manner. Yet the quality of attention, sustained engagement, and skilled, sensitive intervention needed to facilitate effectively can be far more demanding, in our experience, than conventional teaching. And there is no perfection, it is always work on the edge.

The two-year, part-time Masters’ format allowed sufficient space for participants to let their lives loosen, shift, and reconfigure. This, coupled with the inquiry-led approach, encouraged experimentation and supported participants’ ‘learning about learning’ in a way that other postgraduate programmes seldom enabled. Participants have testified that the outputs could be a potent blend of practitioner skills, intellectual knowledge, and self-understanding that many regarded as transformational and which continue to underpin their professional practice.

Developing this article, we discussed the different ways we had each found into this work. Our own educational experiences included freedom to experiment, through which we had grown. We followed self-directed development, seeking worthwhile work and a sense of engagement, not initially following formal career paths. That development had included life-relevant processes such as co-counselling, group relations training, and Neuro-linguistic Programming, tuning us to pedagogies based on multidimensional knowing. When we moved into education, we wanted to offer these to others. Why would we offer less? We had thus developed our ‘crafts’ in what would now be quite unconventional ways for those in academic posts, being enticed into HE for certain aspects of the role and needing to grow into others. We both saw ourselves as choicefully on the boundary between HE and ‘practice’. We had had strong and interesting colleagues, alongside whom we had developed inquiry-based educational approaches. We had also learnt the complexities of development; for example that well-intentioned ‘educators’ might not always be experienced as helpful; that any educational format is an offering, and people will do what they feel and think ‘best’ with it; and that power issues are involved in any attempt to be ‘facilitative’. We suspect that many people entering HE nowadays have had more conventional backgrounds and have limited scope to expand ‘sideways’ as we were able to do.

**Shifts and trends influencing the demise**

Next, we consider influences on the demise of these programmes, drawing on our experiences as tutors and programme directors and on our links with similar programmes through roles as ‘critical friends’, invited guests, and external examiners.
We focus here on our sense of systemic shifts that have unfolded through many agents, changing the landscape of HE over the last 20 years, leaving aside the more local, intra-institutional dynamics that they appeared to precipitate. Our purpose is to highlight challenges for the future and to explore what can be learnt rather than dwell on the past. Inevitably there are multiple experiences, perceptions, and memories of how things happened, and any account is necessarily particular and contestable.

The overall story feels like one of increasing mismatch between inquiry-based programmes and the national (and international) climate of HE, rendering it more difficult for them to survive and thrive. To what extent the direction taken by HE in the past two decades is seen as regrettable, and to what extent the programmes concerned may have failed to adapt to change, or had their weaknesses exposed by the shifting context, is open to interpretation. We certainly wish to avoid romanticizing these pedagogies and acknowledge that the programmes have probably played a role in this demise. They were always radical and contentious. Their closed cohorts and ‘select’ staff could appear elitist. Action research, for example, which is inherently concerned with taking effective action in the outer world with other people, could appear self-absorbed for also advocating critical self-reflection. More prosaically, the structure of these programmes tended to clash with institutional moves towards larger cohorts, shared module timetable slots, and room allocations based on recurrent, short teaching sessions. Inquiry-based learning could then invite and fall prey to criticisms of being too demanding, too costly, too risky, too different, and perhaps not willing to fit in.

There are also important tensions in, and criticisms of, this work. Perriton (2007), for example, challenges an overemphasis on process and facilitation in management development if this favours subjective experiences over organizational settings as reference points for judgement. Reynolds (2000) examines ideals of solidarity and harmony that may be associated with the notion of a learning community. Such idealization can obscure issues of power and be oppressive if, for example, learning communities ‘reinforce values of consensus that potentially diminish the importance of difference’ (Reynolds and Trehan 2003, 163).

It is perhaps no surprise that these four programmes flourished in particular locations, specifically at intersections of academia and practice, the latter being both integrated and respected. For example, the MSc CASS was originally one activity of the Human Potential Research Group (HPRG), which included a large programme of non-award bearing courses, and was itself located in an Educational Studies department which focused on postgraduate programmes for students who were, largely, educators of adults. A recurring feature in the demise of these programmes appears to be a loosening, or loss, of that context, resulting in isolation of the programme from both its host and related activities; thus, over time the MSc CASS became the HPRG’s sole activity. Programmes then became more vulnerable, both financially and through loss of critical mass in terms of staff and student numbers. Across HE, economic and financial pressures meant that employer funding for programme fees decreased; prospective participants in mid-career faced employment uncertainties which deterred them from committing to part-time study, especially if courses needed ‘the life space’ within which to develop the capacities for inquiry. Pressure on university departments to maintain financially viable course numbers also increased.
When staff teams shrivelled, the internal diversity and creative tensions which supported the programme experience were reduced and the boundaries of the programme spaces became harder to hold. Writing and talking about this paper certainly stirred up emotions for us and some of our critical readers about the demands of operating in the (apparently widening) schism between inquiry-based educational practices and institutional norms and systems.

This has the feel in retrospect of almost a generational shift. It became increasingly difficult to replace departing staff with others who possessed not only comparable skill sets (e.g. the ability and motivation to facilitate inquiry-based, experiential learning) but also the research and publication profile demanded by institutions in the light of the Research Assessment Exercise, now the Research Excellence Framework (REF), in the UK. The influence of the REF has extended beyond judgements about the ‘quality’ of outputs per se to the direction of careers – the prospect of not being ‘REFable’ has serious consequences in many institutions – and affects who can be recruited. One consequence is that while universities may espouse the value of providing ‘real-world’ experience for their students, space for academics with substantial practical HRD experience in areas such as consultancy and management development seems to have been reducing.

This has been coupled with work intensification and monitoring through which institutions have placed academic staff under increasing pressure, with significant implications for how they spend time. This pressure has, perhaps, been felt acutely in HRD, whose journals have yet to be rated in the 3*/4* categories of lists (such as that of the Association of Business Schools) that are used to assess academics’ performance, notwithstanding significant concerns about the validity of such lists (Walker, Salter, and Salandra 2015). Thus, highly respectable journals that were previously regarded as appropriate places to publish could become disparaged when judgements are made about individuals’ performance. While the REF can elicit creative responses, such as continuing to write about things we consider important and socially useful targeted at 3*/4* journals, we think it has played a part in reducing the scope for institutional contexts to be supportive of inquiry-based pedagogies.

Work intensification and monitoring has also affected all academics through (for example) the way time committed to teaching ‘counts’. On inquiry-based programmes, activities such as team teaching, working with small learning groups, and spending time with participants helping build learning communities are seldom credited adequately in workload models focused on formal, standardised contact hours. Escalating teaching loads and higher numbers in other programmes also mean that the differences between part-time Masters for experienced people and full-time undergraduate or postgraduate programmes are more likely to appear disproportionate. Teaching large courses might then be depicted as the ‘real work’, whereas facilitating a group of mature Masters’ students can be perceived as an easy option if the skill set involved, the demands of these clients, and the intensity of the educational dynamics are not evident. The time involved can then be squeezed, politically and in terms of hours allocated.

Finally, the current climate seems less encouraging of experimentation that aids teaching skill development appropriate to these programmes. Inquiry-based, experiential learning is probably inherently riskier than more orthodox, instructional styles, hence staff can feel more vulnerable in case students react against feeling
uncomfortable. Trying to introduce inquiry-based approaches into programmes with a conventional pedagogy is especially fraught (see, for example, Tomkins and Ulus 2015). UK HE institutions have become hypersensitive about teaching ratings and their implications for widely publicized National Student Survey rankings; if course feedback scores are not high enough, tutors can face the threat of reprimand.

**Significance for HRD**

We have highlighted the UK context, and we acknowledge that Masters’ programmes in the field of HRD differ in other regions of the world (for example, McLean and Akaraborworn 2015; Zachmeier, Cho, and Kim 2014). Yet the trends represented by mechanisms such as the REF appear to reflect wider shifts in universities (Mills, Trehan, and Stewart 2014) affecting HE globally. What might be the implications for the practice and scholarship of HRD as a field?

It seems to us that HRD practitioners with the self-awareness, understanding of individual, group and organizational dynamics, and inquiry skills described above are needed more than ever in an increasingly complex, unpredictable, and fractious world characterized by ‘wicked’ problems. For example, the frequent emphasis on the importance to businesses and national economies of developing effective leadership, contemporary themes of authentic leadership (Avolio and Gardner 2005), and a personalization agenda (Petriglieri, Wood, and Petriglieri 2011) imply a significant need for HRD practitioners who can facilitate commensurate development. Senior managers need support to face significant complex challenges and constant scrutiny by multiple stakeholder groups. Creativity, innovation, and the need to reinvent organizational forms are recurring rhetorics. How can all of this be supported and facilitated without HRD practitioners who are comfortable with uncertainty and inquiry, familiar with exploring diverse perspectives and experiences, and skilled in enabling spaces in which to experiment?

In OD, process awareness and skills have been foundational (T-groups, Schein’s process consultation, the Tavistock School, and so on). Yet, from being more prominent as the core pedagogy of programmes in the field 20 years ago, the practices and skills associated with inquiry-based work seem at risk of becoming invisible. The latest Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) ‘profession map’ (CIPD n. d.), for example, includes ‘learning and development’ and ‘OD’, yet drilling down into these areas reveals a substantial emphasis on cognitive skills such as analysis, strategy development, and designing solutions. Inquiry-based skills seem largely subsumed into areas such as ‘facilitation of learning events’ and ‘managing change’, rendering them less explicit, less nuanced and potentially less valued.

Inquiry-based pedagogies seem acutely needed for practice, yet paradoxically are disappearing from HE. This also reduces diversity and weakens criticality in HE. Teaching HRD conventionally can mean that experiential learning becomes reduced to safely packaged activities decoupled from their educational philosophy. Power dynamics between academic staff and students – particularly relevant to HRD programmes with their mature participants – become neglected as learning opportunities. If taken to extremes, the turn against facilitation and experiential learning results in HE becoming less and less a site of HRD practice (Stewart and Sambrook 2012). We worry in particular that opportunities to
learn process skills and knowledge in a fully embodied way, through engaging substantially in sustained inquiry, may be decreasing. Students’ understanding seems likely to be constrained because the embodied, experiential dimension is crucial for developing a post-conventional way of holding ideas and generating an ongoing living practice. We find it harder to trust the way HRD ideas and processes are applied if people have not experienced them personally. Equally, we are concerned that practitioners develop the capacity to resist the reduction of HRD in scope, vision, and impact engendered through processes of compliance. Can HRD claim to be a field that is preparing professionals fully for practice if it lacks the means to develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, crafts, artistry, and learning capacities associated with inquiry-based work?

Finally, yet perhaps most troubling of all, the epistemological politics of an increasing conformity to mainstream research and knowledge can result in a discounting of the legitimacy of certain types of research (e.g. action research) as well as types of knowledge (e.g. emergent, practical knowledge), agenda (e.g. contentious issues such as sustainability and social justice), and activity (e.g. academic–practitioner collaboration). All of these are central features of inquiry-based pedagogies and, we contend, highly important within HRD. Sadler-Smith (2014), for example, has argued that HRD can be thought of as a ‘design science’, which emphasizes practical knowledge and bridges the research–practice ‘gap’ yet may fit poorly with global research trends such as that represented by the REF. HRD as a field then finds itself at a disadvantage because its values and identity are undermined, leaving it at risk of becoming a subject matter increasingly divorced from its wealth of practices.

**Closing comments**

We wanted to speak of a loss that has occurred during the first 20 years of Human Resource Development International (HRDI) that we feel personally and which may have wider implications for HRD theorizing, practice, and professional integrity. Simply recreating previous inquiry-based pedagogies and programmes seems unlikely to be realistic in the context of contemporary HE, for all the reasons given above. Innovation may be required, for example, in virtual, networked forms of learning and interacting and technological developments such as social media, and in inquiry-based developmental opportunities located outside HE.

Even so, the challenges remain of how HRD is providing for practitioners’ development in the light of the complexities noted here, and how we all, as academic colleagues, are addressing the epistemological politics outlined above. Given the concerns expressed in this paper about the shifting landscape, what role could HRDI, as a leading journal in the field, play? How might HRDI address the widening schism between inquiry-based educational practices reflecting the nature and processes in HRD and the mainstream institutional norms in HE?

It seems vital that any leading international HRD journal should uphold the legitimacy of diverse forms of research, types of knowledge, and agendas. The type of article that HRDI invites, encourages, and actually publishes is significant both directly and symbolically. HRDI has the opportunity to address concerns about epistemological politics through being a beacon for multiple forms of knowing and inquiry, and through challenging the ‘compliance culture’ that seems increasingly prevalent in HE and other organizations. This seems broadly
congruent with HRDI’s stated aim (from its website, 23 March 2017) of being ‘committed to questioning the divide between practice and theory; between the practitioner and the academic; and between traditional and experimental methodological approaches’. At the same time, we acknowledge the tensions involved in this since HRDI, like any other academic journal, has to navigate the influence of journal rankings and wants to maintain or enhance its status in ranking systems, themselves shaped by mainstream institutional norms.

First, in our view, HRD scholarship would be served well by encouraging extended debate about the nature of knowledge in HRD (see, for example, Sadler-Smith 2014) and about the implications for research, practice, and education in the context of a changing world.

Second, aligned to HRD’s particular focus on practice and in tune with the notion of the ‘scholar practitioner’, HRDI can also encourage critical accounts (e.g. case studies) of diverse HRD practices around the world and explorations of theory/practice intersections.

Finally, there is scope for HRDI to host debate about pedagogies and educational practices. The journal could invite critically reflexive accounts of pedagogical practices, featuring and debating a stream of programme case studies. The perspective of HRD practitioners who have participated in programmes would be valuable to hear. HRDI might also consider sponsoring academic/practitioner collaborations and partnerships, doctorates, and awards.

Being mindful of diverse understandings of HRD around the world and international variations in approaches to HRD and its education, we are curious to hear the thoughts and experiences of colleagues.

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