Human Resource Development Scholar-practitioners: Connecting the Broken Divide of Research and Practice

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> *The challenge of combining research and practice in HRD led to continuing debate concerning who are scholar-practitioners and how they combine research and practice in the workplace. A study of seven scholar-practitioners provides some answers for HRD scholar-practitioners on connecting research and practice. The findings show scholar-practitioners' perception of their roles, the perceived gap, and actions they take to overcome barriers and challenges related to research and practice.*

Key words: Scholar-Practitioner, Research-to-Practice, Qualitative Case Study

Within Human Resource Development (HRD) and other fields of studies, scholars have been trying to understand practitioners and researchers who engage in both research and workplace domains to better disseminate research results. As stated by Short (2006a) there have been many terms chosen including research practitioner (Lynham, 2002); scientist-practitioners (Brewerton & Millward, as cited in Hamlin 2002); scholar-practitioners (Graham and Kormanik, 2004; practitioner-theorists (Lynham, 2002); Scholarly practitioners (Ruona, 1999); reflective practitioners (Jacobs, 1999). Short (2006a) defined an HRD scholar practitioner as follows:

> HRD scholar-practitioners operate as a bridge between HRD research and HRD practice to improve the understanding and practice of HRD. They ground their practice in research and theory, they are champions of research and theory in the workplace and in professional associations, they conduct research, and they disseminate findings from their own research and practice. They are partners with academics and with other practitioners (p.261).

We used Short's (2006a) definition as a basic assumption for this study to identify research participants. HRD is not alone in its quest to understand the 'gap' which is suggested to exist between research and practice (Short, 2006b, 2006c, & Short, Keefer & Stone, 2006). The scholar-practitioner divide has been reviewed across many different fields including psychology, nursing, education and business.

Ruona (1999) provided detailed descriptions of scholar-practitioners in offering definitions of four types of HRD practitioner including atheoretical, practitioners, reflective practitioners and scholarly practitioners. They are defined as follows:

- Atheoretical practitioners were defined as having very little grounding in theory, perhaps no relevant educational qualifications or affiliation with professional associations, lacking the knowledge of sound and credible resources, and lacking the skills to consult and interpret scholarly resources.
- Practitioners were defined as meeting the minimum standards of the profession, having a mastery of the common body of knowledge, continually updating of that knowledge, having a willingness to engage in dialogue, having the ability to strategically and effectively analyze/use scholarly resources and theory in practice, and the ability to "sell" theory to gain support of key stakeholders.
- Reflective practitioners were defined as meeting the standards of the *Practitioner* but also critically reflecting on their practice and consulting scholarly resources as a basis for the improvement of their practice.
- Scholarly practitioners were defined as meeting the standards of both *Practitioner* and *Reflective Practitioner*, and also contributing to theory through research, publication in both refereed and non-

refereed journals, involvement in scholarly conferences, and having a goal of further development of the field of HRD. (p. 895)

Problem Statement

This study attempts to add to the research base by validating the definition and description through research on scholar-practitioners within HRD. In the absence of empirical evidence validating the role of scholar-practitioners in HRD, the issue will remain unresolved, hence, the need for this paper. According to Muchinsky (2004) implementation is a major reason for the gap between practice and science. He notes that "scientists are relatively unconcerned with how their theories, principles and methods are put into practice in arenas outside of academy study" whereas practitioners are "deeply concerned with matters of implementation because what they do occurs in arenas not created primarily for scientific study." (p.208). Furthermore, he suggests that there is a linkage between organizational change and implementation and that the scientist and practitioner both could benefit from a better understanding of the linkage. Specifically, he suggests that Human Resource professionals would benefit from this understanding from an organizational acceptability perspective which is encountered more in practice than in academics (Muchinsky, 2004).

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to explore how participants define a scholar-practitioner, the extent to which they view themselves as one, and the forces facilitating and hindering their carrying out the scholar-practitioner role.

The following research questions will guide the study:
1. How do scholar-practitioners perceive and define "scholar-practitioner?"
2. How do scholar-practitioners perceive the relationship of research and practice?
3. What forces drive or hinder scholar-practitioners' efforts to combine research and practice?

Theoretical Framework

This paper is guided by several theories that exist regarding the research and practice debate. Across disciplines within academia scholars are searching to find a link to close the gap between research and practice (Banks & Murphy, 1985; Hulin, 2001; Latham, 2001; Muchinsky, 2004; Short, 2006a, b, & c; Short, Keefer & Stone, 2006). Research-to-practice is a valid concept for this study. According to Carr and Kemmis (1986) research and practice should "be understood as mutually constitutive, as in a process of interaction which is a continual reconstruction of thought and action" (p.34). Active HRD scholar-practitioners are being asked to describe how they are connecting the link between research and practice through continuous evaluation of their action in the workplace.

Short, Keefer & Stone (2006) found that "many of the same factors are used by different disciplines to describe reasons for the gap between research and practice" (p. 269). The similarities they found included:

researchers are disconnected from the world of practice; research questions do not address issues of importance to practitioners; research methodologies do not provide answers to practitioner questions; research is not being disseminated in ways that are likely to influence practice; there is a lack of education and training for practitioners in the understanding and use of research; there are limited opportunities to bring together practitioners and researchers. (Short, Keefer & Stone, 2006, p.269)

According to Latham (2001) "the workforce consistently provides thought-provoking questions; the journals consistently provide answers for practice; and the implementation of the answers provides a basis for publication and subsequent research" (p. 202). These thoughts point to a continuous cycle view of research and practice as opposed to the choice of one or the other. Within Latham's (2001) assessment of his experiences in the field, he has stated that practitioners note the following reasons for not reading academic journals that may be of use to them in the workplace: (1) Lack of time; (2) "transfer of leaning from the journals to practice is difficult and even clumsy when trying to go from one finding or one insight to a specific application"(p.207); (3) "the organization and the participant sample are different from the ones with whom I am working" (p.207); (4) Practitioners reject journals that reject them; and (5) The journal topics are too narrow.

In contrast to Latham's (2001) viewpoint, Hulin (2001) argued that:

journals are the repository of the research we do; if they are not read, our research has no utility. If they are read by other academics, but not by practitioners, the research has no utility for the practitioners …; [therefore], its utility is not diminished by being unread by practitioners (p.226).

Hulin (2001) also noted that "research done by scientists often does not address immediate problems of organizational managers"(p.227).

> Practitioners want to solve this problem in this organization at this time [and] their issues of generality are not important because (a) this problem may never come up again, (b) it may come up again but only in my expected (short) tenure in this organization, and (c) if it does come up again, we can try the same intervention that solved it this time. (Hulin, 2001, p. 228)

Resolving their issues in this manner allows practitioners to focus on their singular, organizational goals and not invest in long-term research that may not result in a payoff for the organization. It also points out the difference in the time frame that practitioners focus upon as opposed to researchers.

Short (2006a) identifies the following list from the HRD journals (1995-2005) of specific activities that allow HRD scholar-practitioners to differentiate themselves from HRD practitioners:

- Adopting an evidence-based orientation to their practice through making conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making HRD decisions.
- Consulting research and theory on HRD issues they face, using it to inform decisions, and to give direction to new projects, to influence other stakeholders, to justify actions taken, and to make sense of what happens.
- Accessing research-based solutions in a timely manner.
- Identifying the significance of new research and theory, and updating their HRD practices accordingly.
- Reviewing new and existing practices by questioning the underlying theory and research, and by demanding some level of scientific testing of interventions before they adopt practices.
- Committing resources to ensure effective application of research and theory in HRD practices.
- Encouraging other practitioners to apply research and theory in their HRD work, and identifying ways of recognizing and rewarding those HRD practitioners who apply research in their practice.
- Influencing others in their organizations to value research and theory.
- Contributing to the HRD literature base by testing research and theory in practice.
- Conducting research to enhance practice and further the literature base of the field.
- Providing researchers with access to organizations in which they can conduct applied research.
- Partnering with external researchers on research that meets the objectives of the organization and the research community.
- Disseminating their experiences to practitioners and academics, including personal research and findings on the practical application of research and theory.
- Influencing the researcher community to conduct research on topics that have a high relevance to the practitioner community, both currently and in the future.
- Influencing the practitioner community to value research and theory and adopt evidence-based practices.
- Participating in conferences and other forums for researchers and practitioners, and airing issues connected with scholarly practice.
- Participating in the activities of HRD professional associations to further development of the field. (pp. 261-262)

However, there has been very few if any specific empirical data studies to support these findings (Short, 2006c).

Banks and Murphy (1985) proposed that there is a divergence in focus indicating that researcher's solutions may not speak to practitioners' problems (p.336) and that only through "joint effort of researchers and practitioners can useful products be generated and adopted in organizations" (p.337). The suggestion of a collaborative effort is essential for success. This study attempts to find out through empirical data if there is a divergent focus (Banks, C.G. & Murphy, K.R., 1985) on the part of scholar practitioners with regards to scholar-practitioners in HRD. Limited literature is available that address the HRD scholar-practitioner perspective and how they view organizational goals, time and other benefits associated with a blend of practice and research. We argue that scholar-practitioners are bridging the gap by addressing both the research and practice needs within their organizations.

Research Design

This study was conducted by a research team of four members. Among them, three are graduate faculty members and one is a HRD practitioner/consultant who is also in pursuit of a PhD degree.

A Case Study

This study adopted a collective case study approach that is qualitative and exploratory in nature (Stake, 1995). A case study, by definition, is a detailed investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its realistic context,

"especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). It is an essential research strategy in applied disciplines such as HRD (Dooley, 2002). This approach is most useful when "little is known about a phenomenon, current perspectives seem to be inadequate because they have little empirical substantiation" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 548), or when the researcher "seeks an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon because of its uniqueness" (Ellenger, Watkins, & Marsick, 2005, p. 330). In collective case study, the researchers examine closely multiple cases to gain a solid understanding of a phenomenon of interest (Stake, 1995). In other words, each case becomes a means to an end. In the context of this study, the phenomenon of dynamics between research and practice was investigated from the perspective of a number of practitioners.

Sampling Strategies

The multiple cases for the study, or individuals, were selected using criterion-based sampling strategies (Patton, 2002). First, the participant must be a practitioner in the field of HRD. (Second, the participants must have published scholarly works in HRD. In other words, s/he must have been either actively engaged in scholarly activities or using research findings to guide daily practice. Using these criteria, each member of the research team identified two individuals through personal contact. The final sample consisted of five male and two female HRD practitioners who currently assume responsibilities in areas such as training, strategic planning, project management, leadership development, performance improvement, and research. Among the seven participants, six have earned a PhD degree.

Methods for Data Collection

Data for the study were collected primarily through individual interviews. To ensure the consistency of information obtained from different participants (Patton, 2002), we developed an interview guide with 13 semi-structured and open-ended questions. Each member of the research team conducted two interviews with the two participants s/he identified. Three interviews were conducted face to face, and five via telephone. Prior to the actual interviewing, participants were sent a cover letter explaining the purpose and procedures of the study, and their consent to participate was obtained using the Informed Consent letter. Each interview lasted between 60 – 90 minutes in length. All the interviews were tape recorded. For confidentiality, participants were identified as P1 – P7.

Methods for Data Analysis

The main unit of analysis was the participants interviewed. All the interviews were thoroughly transcribed by the researchers, respectively. Transcripts were analyzed within and across the units using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2001) at two stages. First, all the transcripts were reviewed and coded for themes by two researchers independently. A table was developed to represent emerging themes coded based on the interview questions. At this stage, thirteen coding categories were used; key phrases and illustrative examples were identified to support themes under each category. Then the two researchers exchanged results of their independent analysis. Both similarities and differences were noted, compared, and discussed until consensus was reached. Through constant comparison and further analysis guided by the researcher questions this time, the emerging themes were re-defined, merged, refined, and organized under a reduced five coding categories.

Findings

A number of findings were elicited from the thematic analysis of seven interview transcripts. Only selective themes were reported in this section as they are most relevant to the phenomenon under study. For better data representation, long direct quotes are separated and italicized.

Meaning of "Scholar Practitioner"

Participants shared their understanding of a scholarly practitioner from different perspectives. For example, P2, Vice President of Leadership and Development in a publicly traded company, perceived a scholarly practitioner as "someone who can create or develop program content grounded in theory and supported by research, but applicable or useful in whatever area they work in." P6, a training consultant, described a research-oriented practitioner as "being pragmatic, uses tools such as action research or evaluation research, and may even do ethnographic research. P7, a research director in a large Fortune 500 corporation, defined scholarly practitioners in comparison to non-scholarly practitioners.

> *A practitioner is somebody who does things according to common practice. They are following the rules of the profession and they don't question the rules. In other words, I would describe a practitioner as a single-loop learner. A research oriented practitioner or scholarly practitioner would be a double-loop learner who is always questioning common practice based on research.*

P7 went on to share more insights into the differences,

> *A research oriented practitioner would probably be somebody who would read broadly and read outside of his particular practice, and therefore, look for general principles to guide practice. A practitioner would just be looking for better practice within the same paradigm…would not be seeing ways to improve or question what*

they are doing…is looking for things that basically reinforce the way that they do things and perhaps help them do the same old things better. A scholarly practitioner would be more likely to challenge the things that are being done.

Despite the variation, what appeared to be commonly agreed were the following characteristics of a scholarly practitioner: (a) likely to have a higher degree of education and read broadly outside of his/her field of practice, (b) consciously applies research findings to practical problems, (c) proficient in conducting research, (d) tends to challenge the status quo, and (e) is grounded in practice.

Relationship between Research and Practice

All the participants articulated the dynamics between research and practice. Speaking of the role of research in practice, HRD practitioners listed values such as providing measurement, reliability and validity of practice, informing them of doing things differently, and helping making better decisions, and much more. More specifically, P2 said, "Research supports the practice. I think anything done should be grounded with some reliability and validity. Therefore, you know what you're doing makes sense, can be replicated and applied to others, and is not some pie in the sky presence." As an executive overseeing training and HR issues, P1 pointed out that "the only value of research is if it can substantiate that various approaches work." In P6's experience, research has made her to be "a conscious researcher," that is, "be conscious of what the opportunities are around me." P5, serving as the head of a research group in a research-based organization, sees research as an ongoing practice and a requirement for the company to deliver quality products that are evidence and research-based:

It's a little bit easier at XXX than it might be at some other places because we are a research-based organization. XXX takes great pride in that fact,, that even though it isn't as lucrative for us, that our products and service are not fad based. We don't come out with the flavor of the month. So anything we deliver has to be delivered with the proper amount of reliability and validity evidence…we maintain several proactive research projects that involve collecting data from our clients on an ongoing basis, doing analyses that offer insights into our clients.

Echoing other participants' points, P7 felt very strongly about the influence of research in his practice:

I am always looking for new ways to transform the things that I am doing. My eye is more on research than practice, because I look at practices being something we need to change. And I see my role as being a change agent... My interest in practice has always been to change it and to improve it. In my consulting activities, my interest is always going in and shaking things up by bringing in new ideas from research, never trying to create a more stable practice, always to change things. That's why I say I am a research oriented practitioner rather than practitioner oriented researcher.

In terms of the overall relationship between research and practice, P1 stressed that "they have to be together. One is not exclusive of the other." He went on with the following explanation:

As a practitioner, you have to stay current and reading and trying to stay abreast of what's going on and doing ongoing research, and trying to figure out what are the best practices that exist out there. As a researcher, you have to also want to understand what's going on out in the workplace and the workforce. They go hand in hand. They are not mutually exclusive. It is extremely beneficial to have a combination of both.

Unlike other participants, P7 provided a different perspective by describing the relationship as "very difficult" and "uneasy" and referring to the field of HRD in particular.

People in HRD tend to be very practice oriented…they tend to embrace things that are very humanistic, whether they are research based or not. So I find there is a tendency to accept certain types of research that tend to fit the mental model of the HRD practitioner and ignore the other things. That's one thing.

Another thing is that because HRD people are not very well grounded in research, because they are not very scholarly, they have difficulty explaining and defending the things that they do. One of the things I have observed is the way we embraced ROI as a panacea. We came up with all kinds of weird ways to justify what we are currently doing, rather than going out and find new ways to do things and being experimental. So I think that practitioners, by their very nature, tend to be status oriented, and in HRD, that's definitely the case.

Driving Forces

A number of forces were identified by the participants, such as legal issues, change orientation, seeking sound practice, passion about research, credibility, fairness, ethics, efficacy, and return on investment. Among these drivers, it appeared that the organizational demand to justify their practices and provide evidence for return on investment made fundamental impact on the practitioners, as well as the internal drive of the scholar-practitioners for sound practice and the desire for new ideas and change

Under the organizational pressure for demonstrating benefits to the bottom line, P4 commented that:

I always have to justify what I'm doing and prove return on investments. The research is the metrics and measurement of what I'm doing that tells whoever's paying for it; it's reasonable and valid to pay for it because they're going to get some return, meaning some desired thing will change or desired efficiencies.

From a learning-oriented perspective, P7 concluded that:

My whole orientation is to be driven by research, new ideas, and changes, as opposed to be driven by practice. (P7).

Challenges and Barriers

As presented below, challenges and barriers for combining research and practice are different in nature. This is perhaps largely due to the diversity of background and experience the seven participants have. Some of the major themes were selected with support of representative quotes for each.

Theme 1: Lacking knowledge of/disconnection between practice and research

There is a huge disconnect because they are totally different agendas. There are totally different goals, motives, systems. I don't think they necessarily are designed to co-exist…they are just not necessarily compatible. It's like Sushi and Steak. (P3)

The biggest challenge for me as a scholar-practitioner is being a broad enough thinker, because I have one foot in HR and HRD practice, and the other foot in the scholarly pursuits. I think scholar-practitioners have particular difficulty thinking beyond the area of practice. (P7).

Most of the barriers are organization oriented. It's not a lack of knowledge. I become a barrier when being too knowledgeable coming to a training role, because people do not look at training as a science. So when you approach it as a scientific process, they get real squirrelly. They don't want to look at it that way, because you start to complicate their world. (P3)

Theme 2: Resistance to change

The research keeps me focused on an experimental orientation. I am not just a researcher; I am an innovator. So I have problems with practice both of the perspective. Changing practice is very difficult because practitioners seem very comfortable with what they are doing. (P7).

Theme 3: Lack of time

You get involved with so many other things that you don't have the luxury of perusing through tons of journals…many times you are not drilling down as deep as you could probably go. (P1)

Recommended Strategies

In addition to sharing their perceptions about the relationship between practice and research, the participants also provided specific recommendations on how to bridge the gap in between. The most important issue that was emphasized by all the participants was to make sure that research does have practical application. Like P3 said, "You have to work on something that has practical applications, even if it's theoretical. It has to inform you to do something differently or better; can't do it in a vacuum. It's a waste of time." Other recommendations that were suggested by the participants include building communities of scholars and practitioners through constant dialogues, constantly educating organizations and members about the value of research, being the proponents of the practitioner, and becoming more of an empathetic practitioner.

Conclusions and Discussions

Scholar-practitioner participants referred to the role of the scholar-practitioner using similar terms and characteristics as found in the literature. This study added a layer of depth to those definitions by explicating components of the role of the scholar-practitioner, encompassing operational definitions, driving forces, alienating forces, and strategies. These components could be the starting point for constructing competency models or performance measures for scholar-practitioners.

It is encouraging to see that there are both internal and external motivations for integrating research and practice. Internal motivations include scholar-practitioners' drive for informed decisions, best practices, and new ideas. External motivations involve the organization's demand for practitioners to show evidence, to justify their practices, and to demonstrate return on investment (ROI). These forces could be combined and reinforced by professional organizations such as AHR; through disseminating HRD findings to the practitioner world, as well as supporting skill development in evidence-based research. Further research is needed to examine the effectiveness of the efforts of professional organizations in addressing and utilizing the motivations for professional development purposes.

The findings indicate that in general there are opportunities for connecting the link between research and practice within the workplace. The challenges and barriers identified by study participants included: (a) lacking knowledge of/disconnection between practice and research; (b) resistance to change; and (c) lack of time, which are similar to what was found by (Muchinsky, 2004). He concluded that there was a link between implementation and

organizational change that strongly related to the gap between research and practice (Muchinsky, 2004, p.208). HRD scholar-practitioner participants recognized a perceived gap between research and practice; however, they viewed themselves as capable, within the constraints of their particular organization, to bridge the gap. More research is needed on the role of organizational culture and change and methods scholar-practitioners are employing to effectively bridge the divide between research and practice as opposed to identifying that a gap exists.

Scholar-practitioners, as evidenced within this study, work in various roles within various types of organizations. The impact of the organization may determine the effectiveness of the HRD scholar-practitioner. As noted by P5, since the organization valued research, there was not a problem to implement research into operational practice. However, that may not be the case within other organizations. The literature on change needs to be reviewed to add depth to how scholar-practitioners may be able to implement change initiatives that may impact the divide between research and practice within their organization. According to Moran and Brightman (2000), to manage change within organizations, leaders must understand the three most powerful drivers of work behavior: purpose, identity, and mastery in individuals. Leaders of change efforts must inspire individuals to align work behavior components and the environment effectively with the necessary organizational change effort. More research is needed to assess scholar-practitioners' perception or organizational change and how they may act to lead research and practice change efforts within their organizations.

The participants recommended ways to improve the relationships of scholars and practitioners that support the literature, specifically, that research has practical application. Hulin (2001) argued that research does not have to have immediately apparent practical application to be sound for practice. Latham (2001) argued that time was the issue of concern. All of these issues and perspectives are important and are supported by the findings of this study. More empirical data is needed to support the theories and assess why these barriers and challenges continue to exist despite attempts to bridge the gap by organizations such as American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) and the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) within the field of HRD (Short, 2006c).

Implications for HRD

This study provides empirical results as evidence of how scholar-practitioners identify themselves and are working to close the gap between research and practice. The specific case examples are instances where scholar-practitioners are actively involved in trying to include valid and reliable research within their practice. The findings of this study combined with other research findings may provide a foundation for HRD researchers to conduct a broader survey study to see if other scholar-practitioners agree with the definition, relationship between research and practice, driving forces, and challenges and barriers that are faced within the field. The descriptions provided within this study could be used to further develop and test theories regarding HRD scholar-practitioners

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