

Program Excellence Network of the Academy of Human Resource Development: Its Purpose and Activities

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The perceptive reader will notice that the subtitle of this article (the third in the set in this issue of *New Horizons*) deviates a bit from the other two. I did not feel justified using the word “history” quite yet because the Program Excellence Network is just nearly 2 years old and we are still by all accounts in our infancy or entrepreneurial stage (Quinn & Cameron, 1983).

The Founding of the PEN

The Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) established the Program Excellence Network (PEN) in September 2006 in response to a proposal brought forward by this author, Wendy Ruona. I led the proposal and founding of this group; however, the seeds of it were planted along with Jerry Gilley, President of the AHRD 2006-2008, and Larry Dooley, President of the AHRD from 2004-2006, who both made fostering program and teaching excellence important priorities in their presidential agendas. In addition, I am also grateful for the support and input of Susan Madsen, Utah Valley State College, who energetically supported this initiative and brainstormed with me at important points along the path, as well as for a group of board members and program leaders from across the country who spent time with me during the 2006 AHRD meeting dreaming about what we could create.

The mission of PEN is to strengthen HRD academic programs and promote excellence in teaching HRD. PEN provides a forum for its members to explore, learn, and work together to shape the future direction of HRD education. This includes professional development as well as fostering the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990).

The AHRD was well positioned to sponsor the PEN given its history and mission. The AHRD was founded in 1993 by a group from the Professors’ Network of the American Society of Training and Development and the University Council for Research on HRD. The mission of AHRD (n.d.) was and still is:

to encourage the systematic study of Human Resource Development (HRD) theories, processes, and practices; to disseminate information about HRD; to encourage the application of HRD research findings; and to provide opportunities for social interaction among individuals with scholarly and professional interests in HRD from multiple disciplines and from across the globe. (para 1)

In the early 2000s, that social interaction paired with AHRD’s vision to advance the profession began to foster conversations that AHRD should seek ways to stimulate and develop academic programs and faculty members.

PEN was developed with these aims in focus. Upon benchmarking organizations such as the Organization Behavior Teaching Society and special interest groups and/or committees of the

Academy of Management, the American Educational Research Association, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, and more, it was clear that many similar professional associations had structures and systems to encourage and support the strengthening of academic programs, the professional development of program and teaching skills, and scholarship related to teaching. These organizations were studied, and informal surveys of AHRD members were completed to identify key activities that would add value to AHRD members in this area. At its inception, PEN committed to providing the following:

1. Annual meeting of PEN delegates to foster networking, share best practices, engage in professional development, etc;
2. Membership to a list-serv that links PEN members together throughout the year;
3. Listing of the PEN member institution's website on the AHRD website;
4. Sponsorship of professional development related to academic program leadership and teaching excellence for both PEN members and AHRD members;
5. Opportunity to participate in and receive the results of benchmarking surveys; and
6. Access to a members-only webpage where PEN members (and their faculties) can dialogue and share academic resources with each other.

It is hoped that PEN will develop in the spirit of a cooperative of academic programs—and that its members will work together to sponsor and coordinate many more activities that support PEN's mission. It is only through the energy and commitment of PEN members that the mission of PEN will be realized.

Membership in the Program Excellence Network

PEN membership is institutional, meaning that HRD academic programs join. PEN is open to all academic programs worldwide that provide instruction, research, service, and leadership in HRD. Each program designates a PEN delegate. This delegate is typically the chair/coordinator of the HRD academic program at the institution *or* the designated representative. Delegates must be full-time faculty members actively engaged in HRD at their home institution *and* must be current AHRD members. Delegates represent their HRD academic program at the annual meeting as well as serve by being the primary contacts for all PEN-related communications and business. It is also expected that delegates facilitate the sharing of PEN-related activities amongst the faculty at their institution.

A Retrospective on the First Two Years of PEN

Year one for the PEN was all about getting started and building a foundation on which the PEN can grow. The inaugural meeting of the PEN was in February 2007. Twenty-four institutions were represented. In the spirit of fostering benchmarking among academic programs, the meeting focused on exploring conceptual frameworks and curriculum of the PEN member institutions. That is, each PEN member shared the conceptual framework that underlies the HRD curriculum in one's programs. For some institutions, this was well designed, explicit, and vented. For others, it was less explicit and might have been simply a story of how the politics and realities of the specific program have shaped the curriculum. The sharing among the programs

greatly informed PEN members about the diversity of models and ideas underlying our curriculums and gave us all insight into what constitutes and affects an HRD program.

In Spring 2007, a Steering Committee was established. Its members include: Wendy Ruona, Chair (University of Georgia), Brenda Levya-Gardner (Xavier University), Cyndi Gaudet (The University of Southern Mississippi), Sharon Gibson (University of St. Thomas), Judith Kolb (Pennsylvania State University), and Paul Roberts (The University of Texas at Tyler). PEN has already benefited greatly from the contributions and commitment of these individuals. And, as with any volunteer organization, we are eagerly seeking talented individuals committed to PEN's mission.

There was a list-serv created to facilitate communications among PEN members throughout the year. And a website is being worked on that will allow the PEN to host other forms of communication (discussion areas, blogs, wikis) as well as provide an area where PEN members can share syllabi and course resources. Finally, website links to each PEN member institution have been included on the AHRD website. This is considered to be an important member benefit as this publicizes HRD academic programs that have made a commitment to strengthening their academic programs and teaching at their institutions.

The PEN has also sponsored professional development activities at both the 2007 and 2008 AHRD conferences. In 2007, thanks in large part to the leadership of Dr. Robin Grenier (University of Connecticut), PEN sponsored an Idea Exchange designed to encourage the sharing of successful teaching and training practices. This was an opportunity for AHRD members to exchange copies of teaching or facilitation ideas with other participants. Then, at both the 2007 and 2008 AHRD conferences, Dr. Susan Madsen facilitated PEN sponsorship of an Innovative Session called *Teaching Ideas for HRD Educators*, which was designed to promote excellence in teaching HRD by providing participants with benchmarks for effective and creative teaching in higher educational settings.

Finally, a sub-team of the Steering Committee (Drs. Gaudet, Gibson, Kolb, and Ruona) designed the 2008 PEN meeting, which was held on February 20 and 21 in Panama City. The meeting focused on exploring trends in graduate education. There is a distinctive movement afoot in the United States and in Europe to explore and interrogate the state of preparation for both academics and practitioners pursuing graduate study. At the 2008 PEN meeting, we learned more about the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, n.d.). We were also able to learn more about the trends affecting graduate education and the experiences of academic programs that are responding to some of the trends through a tremendous panel of presenters: Dr. Robin Grenier (University of Connecticut), Dr. John Walton (London Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom), and Dr. K. Peter Kuchinke (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). Together we explored questions of: What is the purpose of a doctorate? Whom does the doctorate serve? How does/should the doctorate develop researchers and advanced practitioners similarly or differently? What are the implications of these trends for academic preparation (doctoral and masters levels)—especially as related to skills in research and theory-building? How does all of this affect the link between theory and practice? How does all of this affect a field's aim to build a solid theoretical base? We were also provided a dinner that was graciously sponsored by the Jack and Patti Phillips

Workplace Learning and Performance Institute at the University of Southern Mississippi. It was a very simulating meeting!

The Future of PEN

The PEN will continue to work towards delivering value to its members in 2009 and beyond. The Steering Committee is busily planning the next PEN meeting, which will be prior to the 2009 AHRD conference in Washington, DC. We'll also be exploring additional professional development opportunities for PEN members and potentially for AHRD members, too. And, we'll be actively working to stimulate virtual interactions amongst PEN members throughout the year.

In addition, PEN members at the 2008 meeting decided to undertake four important initiatives. First, a committee was established to develop ways to foster dialogue about and utilization of the newly adopted *AHRD Standards for Graduate Program Excellence* (AHRD, 2008). For the past several years, the AHRD engaged in a concentrated effort to identify characteristics of academic program excellence and develop standards that could be used to assess and enhance the quality of graduate programs in HRD. The Academic Standards Committee finished their work, and these standards were formally adopted by the AHRD in February 2008. Now, the PEN is working to identify ways that these standards can be used to foster dialogue about academic programs, help us learn from academic programs, and so forth.

Second, the PEN has established another sub-committee that will be working to develop a system to recognize academic program excellence. The AHRD has asked the PEN to develop a new system that will recognize academic programs in different and more innovative ways that are also aligned with the newly developed *AHRD Standards for Graduate Program Excellence*.

Third, PEN's Steering Committee will be leading an initiative to develop and administer a benchmarking survey amongst PEN members. This will provide PEN members the opportunity to learn about what other PEN member institutions are doing as well as provide them benchmarking data across institutions. Finally, a sub-committee has been established to explore ways to promote the sharing of teaching-related resources, best practices, and research through publication opportunities and initiatives.

Conclusion

Many people have asked me how the three organizations featured in this *New Horizons* are similar or different. Hopefully after reading these three articles, the reader will be able to see that all of these organizations are deeply committed to improving the state of the profession of HRD in important ways. In some aims we are quite similar, and in others we are quite different. It is certainly conceivable to me that an academic program would join all three organizations to address the unique needs of their program and become involved in any or all of the three organizations in varied ways.

The PEN is distinctive in that it is a sub-group of the AHRD and has quite a tight focus on strengthening academic programs and promoting the scholarship of teaching in HRD. In this

way, we are likely more similar to the special interest group (SIG) that has recently been established in the University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD), which will support teaching, learning, and assessment in HRD programs (see Stewart, Lee, and Poell in this issue). In fact, the PEN and that SIG have begun a dialogue about potential ways to collaborate and support each other and the members of both AHRD and the UFHRD with the aim of supporting and enhancing the teaching and program leadership part of what those in academia do, which as the authors of that article note, are inextricably connected to what we do as researchers.

The one thing I know is that it is good that we see organizations like these emerging to address the aims discussed in these three articles. I have read things throughout the years that have characterized teaching as an extremely private and solitary act in academia—done behind closed doors, largely alone, and with little in the way of a feedback system to stimulate development. After over 10 years in this role of teacher, I believe that is right. Parker Palmer (1998) states that:

If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft. (p. 141)

The PEN, the UFHRD, and the University Council for Workforce and Human Resource Education are all important and valuable communities that facilitate the kind of dialogue, learning, development, and scholarship needed to help HRD faculty members to improve their craft. While this is surely vital for faculty members (indeed, Parker Palmer (1998) says it's our "*professional obligation*" (p 144)), I also celebrate that participating in and contributing to these communities also stands to benefit the students who engage in our academic programs *and* can be a powerful way to develop and lead the profession of HRD.

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