

Dialogue Review: Invited Response

Skills, Training and Human Resource Development: A Response

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Editor's Preface

This article is an invited response to a review by Ian Hampson that appeared in ELRR 18 (2), pp. 129–144. From time to time, when a significant book is published, the ELRR editors ask a reviewer to write an extended refereed review article, setting the book under review in the context of current debates. The author is then invited to respond to the review. The purpose of this 'dialogue' is to foster the exploration of new ideas. This is a new process and is still evolving. The following refereed response by Professor Grugulis appears some time after the original review, but in future, the review and the response will appear in the same issue of ELRR.

— David Morgan, Book Review Editor

Introduction

It is always nice to be reviewed, and I both read Ian Hampson's comments on *Skills, Training and Human Resource Development: A Critical Text* with interest, and welcomed the editor's invitation to respond. In the interests of brevity, I shall confine my response to two areas: the aims of the textbook, and its account of soft skills.

One of Ian Hampson's main concerns is that the book does not engage with the conventional, mainstream, prescriptive literature on training. It does not tell readers how to complete training needs analysis forms, nor evaluate courses, nor design workshops. Yet this, as the introduction explains, is a deliberate omission. The way most texts deal with skills and training has long surprised (and, as a teacher, frustrated) me. No attempt is made to set issues in organisational, sectoral or national perspective. No mention is made of gender or race, save in the obligatory genuflection to the value of Managing Diversity or brief allusions to workshops encouraging women and BMEs to Achieve their Potential. Much of the training literature, in short, is prescriptive and managerialist, it offers rhetorical flourishes rather than evidence and ignores structures in favour of individual responses. This approach is all the more baffling when we contrast it with university-level HRM texts which might be expected to be similar in style, approach and level. Yet HRM is far more rigorous an academic subject than HRD, in Britain and Australia at least (the USA is rather different).

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HRM's descent from industrial relations, industrial sociology and psychology can be clearly traced. It is often research-led, critical and exciting. The field is positively crowded with textbooks which challenge and interest university students including, for example, edited books by Bach (2005), Storey (2007) and Redman and Wilkinson (2008), and a best-selling monograph by Karen Legge (1995). These works help the student understand the workplace and hold a mirror up to the firms they observe. A process which is not only intellectually more invigorating than the 'how-to's of training needs analysis, but which is also far better preparation for work. Most employers are, after all, more than capable of teaching their new hires to conduct training needs analyses, and given the speed at which forms, expectations and ideas of good practice change, the workplace is where that training should occur. Few employers will help graduates to realise that skills are not the same as training or encourage them to take a sectoral, national or international overview.

The book's focus, then, is making academic research accessible to students. It seeks to make a new field for skills and training that complements (rather than supplants) workplace practice. And it seeks to make studying this area — at a minimum — comparable with studying the best of HRM, rather than leaving it in its current state. It is a book that, as a teacher accustomed to collegial gibes on the poverty of training textbooks, I have long wanted to be written. After all, if there is a role for studying management at universities, it is not to offer employers subsidised and low-level training facilities, but because we are able to focus on areas and highlight issues that firms cannot. Our role should be that of critical friend, not managerial apologist or hagiographer. We can provide an independent viewpoint, stimulating research and a realisation that the voice of the employer is not the only one that should be heard.

The HRD literature may be weak, but many of the themes that concern it are dealt with in some excellent student texts, which this book draws on — in particular, the deservedly popular *The Realities of Work* by Mike Noon and Paul Blyton (2007), and Paul Thompson and David McHugh's *Work Organisations* (2002). It also makes use of a great deal of existing research. Indeed, writing this text would have been impossible without the work done by SKOPE, an ES-RC-funded research centre on Skills Knowledge and Organisational Performance based at the Universities of Oxford and Cardiff, of which I am an associate fellow. For every researcher looking into any aspect of education, skills and training, or any tutor frustrated by the fact that students surfing the net come back only with material from enthusiastic corporate websites which stress that Training is a Good Thing, I can strongly recommend the many freely downloadable articles on the SKOPE website at <http://www.skope.ox.ac.uk/>. There you can discover cutting-edge research long before it reaches the journals, and tap into work conducted by economists, social scientists, educationalists and management researchers.

The other area Ian Hampson addresses is the book's discussion of soft and social skills. Over the last thirty years there has been a change in the way we describe skills from the purely technical to the predominantly social, with communication and customer service now dominating the lists of skills most de-

sired by employers. This is an important development and the book devotes a considerable amount of space to it, setting it in historical perspective and using some excellent research to draw out the impact that these developments have. It also raises some of the problems with these new skills: their fluid nature, the lack of control workers enjoy over them (like beauty, they exist largely in the eye of the beholder), and the way factors such as gender, race, social status and appearance are used as proxies for assessment. It is the work on call centres that Ian Hampson is particularly interested in, and it is here that he bundles this work with Labour Process Theory in — sometimes — defining the skill levels of work ‘without empirical enquiry’ (p. 137). In this, he is both unfair and inaccurate. Taking his first point first, there are thirty four references which focus largely or primarily on call centres, all of which report on empirical studies and many many more in which call centres are discussed. The book itself has forty-one pages of references, which might be expected given its aim of popularising some of the best research in the area. If this is ‘without empirical enquiry’, then the standards are being set extremely high. Through the studies reported, a variety of different types of call centre work are considered from Frenkel and colleagues’ (1999) knowledge-intensive vanguard of the new economy, through the gendered work processes observed by Taylor and Tyler (2000), the conflicting expectations described by Korczynski (2001), and various contrasting views of knowledge (Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan 2001) to Taylor and Bain’s (1999) infamous assembly line in the head.

There has been considerable debate on the extent to which soft skills are ‘real’ skills. This is a genuinely difficult issue, not least because of the diversity of levels and practice that a common language conceals. Not all forms of, for example, problem solving, are the same. Fixing a nuclear power station, dealing with the oversupply of a particular ingredient to a restaurant, and finding out what time it is are all types of problem solving, yet the skill levels each involves varies, and it is extremely unlikely that a facility in one of these three areas would prepare a worker to deal with the other two. In other words, the skill of problem-solving is neither homogeneous nor necessarily transferable (as anyone who has seen *The Apprentice* will confirm). Close observations also reveal that even in low-level customer service work, soft skills can be highly complex and this is presented in the book through some excellent empirical studies by (among others) Sharon Bolton, Hardimos Tsoukas and Edward Wray-Bliss. But close observations of jobs with low levels of technical skill also reveal complexity, and it is here that we need to do what Ian Hampson does not, and realise the difference between observing work through a microscope and observing work from a helicopter. Both are legitimate and both are necessary. We need to appreciate the complexities involved in scripted call centre work or factory line tasks, but we must set this in context and consider factors such as levels of discretion, the extent and range of problem solving required and the predictability of the work. None of these elements will provide an answer on their own, but they will present a more complete picture. Equity does not, as Ian Hampson seems to assume, demand we call everything equal and everything skillful. All workers deserve respect, decent working conditions, good pay and job security.

But the route to achieving this is not to pretend, Alice in Wonderland-style, that all work is equal, then wonder why it is not treated so. Workers doing jobs that require few skills are more than capable of realising the fact themselves (Lloyd and Payne 2008). As Ewart Keep (2001) has argued, the increasing lexicon of skills has effectively created a 'skills escalator'. The number of things we can label 'skill' has increased exponentially but the people on the bottom step are still on the bottom step. In the book, the discussion on soft skills is conducted fully and fairly with evidence from both sides presented (indeed, both knowledge work and management and leadership each enjoy a complete chapter to themselves) and a wide range of jobs, skill levels, contexts and levels of control is described. Ian Hampson is free to disagree with the conclusions drawn, that is what academic debate is about, but he should not pretend that the evidence is not there.

I am sure the book has omissions. Had I been writing the chapters today, I would have included much more explicit material on theory, on the role of trade unions and on the links between skill and performance (the direction some of my work has taken since). But the book does have strengths. The work is research-led. All of the topics have been tested on students, who responded enthusiastically. More significantly, gender is mainstreamed and the way women's skills are evaluated, observed, defined and valued is specifically dealt with for almost every topic. Race is also brought in and here I am particularly indebted to some excellent American research. Workplace structures, sectors and career paths are considered. I am sure many people (including myself) will challenge the various topics included and excluded, but I am not sure that the most legitimate objection is the fact that training needs analysis is missing. This is an opportunity for a new direction rather than a repetition of the old.

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