

Realising Critical HRD

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*Stories of Reflecting, Voicing,
and Enacting Critical Practice*

Edited by

Jamie L. Callahan, Jim Stewart,
Clare Rigg, Sally Sambrook,
and Kiran Trehan

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8020-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8020-6

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The creation of this book was a team effort of so many individuals beyond the editors and chapter authors. In this brief acknowledgement, we would like to extend our thanks to some of those individuals. Collectively, the editors would like to thank the authors of this book, each of whom who wrote interesting and insightful works to contribute. We also appreciate the Critical Management Studies Conference organisers and the participants of the Critical Human Resource Development Stream who laid the groundwork that made this book a possibility. We thank Stephanie Cavanagh and Sam Baker, our commissioning editors at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, for working with us to make this book a reality. And to those family, friends and colleagues who supported us in this endeavour—you know who you are—we thank you.

PART 1:
INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

JAMIE L. CALLAHAN, JIM STEWART, CLARE RIGG, SALLY SAMBROOK AND KIRAN TREHAN

“Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”
Martin Niemöller (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website,
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>:
paragraph 2)

As a field, human resource development (HRD) is often accused of colluding with managerialist organisations (Bierema 2009, Callahan 2007, Hill 2014). By promising to enhance performance in the workplace, HRD (perhaps unwittingly) “subsidizes the wealth of corporate elites” (Hill 2014: 409) at the expense of human interests. Indeed, Rigg, Stewart, Trehan (2007) argued that HRD has typically been seen as “technocratic development of effective practitioners” (3) whereby the economic desires of the organisation take precedence over the needs of the people who work in the organisations. They highlight the underlying assumption that workers are resources “from whom more value can be extracted” (4) if they are developed and, as an added benefit, those workers become more adept at exploiting other resources (to include people).

Many in the field of HRD have begun to acknowledge their complicity in this project against workers, against themselves. Instead of silently standing by, they are advocating for a critical theory perspective of HRD to explore alternative ways of realising the field. This perspective, called critical HRD (CHRD), is beginning to occupy a significant place in theory, practice and research associated with the field. Critical HRD emerged from other fields applying a critical theory perspective, such as critical management studies (CMS) and critical pedagogy (CP). Sambrook (2004) notes that the critical component within HRD calls for “challenging contemporary practices, exposing assumptions, revealing illusions and questioning” tradition (614).

And, yet, Trehan and Rigg (2011) note that traditional HRD “has often failed to supply the performative promises” (277). Critical HRD scholars have begun to challenge the perspective that the value of the field lies in its ability to deliver increased performance for organisational gain. Others

(e.g., Perriton 2009) have suggested that the desire to appeal to dominant organisational interests through the use of “business cases” results in reproduction of inequalities instead of the sought-after social changes. Rigg, Stewart, and Trehan (2007) contend that a critical HRD orientation is necessary to challenge assumptions of power in organisations and learning contexts, and to enact social change.

To do this, critical HRD professionals must begin by questioning whose interests are being served by their interventions. Stewart (1998) raised this question many years ago while Callahan (2007) argues that the question is the essence of critical HRD, recognising that HRD professionals serve two masters—both the organisation and the employee. A critical HRD uncovers biases and assumptions associated with sexism, racism, ableism, heteronormativity, and other ‘isms’ that privilege some and oppress others (Bierema and Callahan 2014).

The chapters here challenge the one-dimensionality (Marcuse 1964) of working to improve the existing system and, instead, offer ideas for working to create new systems. The project of CHR D is to effect change/transformation. To that end, critical scholars must expose the injustices and inequities associated with the neoliberal narrative which forms the dominant rationality of current mainstream HRD practice. In other words, those that would change must first recognise that there is a problem worthy of being transformed. It is here that much of the CHR D project has plateaued; there is much theorising on dominant ideology, hegemony, power structures, and other artefacts of a critical agenda, yet there are comparatively few empirical explorations of the CHR D project that would facilitate practical engagement with CHR D. This book offers a means to help progress CHR D from its current concern with problem recognition to (meaningful) change champion.

The Practice of CHR D

“There are few actual examples of engagement by critical scholars directly into management practice” (King 2015, 255). This book addresses the limited empirical or engaged scholarship (King and Learmonth 2015), and offers actual examples of engagement by critical HRD scholars. A key critique of critical approaches is that they lack praxis (St Clair and Sandlin 2004), and this is one attempt to remedy that.

With this book, we provide a series of chapters that present examples of different approaches to engaging in interventions that allow CHR D professionals to challenge such power structures and, in turn, begin to effect change for organisations and employees alike. The concepts of

thinking, voicing and doing are powerful ways of framing critical engagement in organisations that have received significant attention. Cunliffe (2014) highlights the foundational impact of reflexive, dialogic, and relational management. She argues that ethical organisations are dependent upon managers who engage in the interconnected application of these three processes. In addition, Ramsey (2014) advocates for a scholarship of practice to guide organising processes. She suggests that a scholarship of practice necessarily includes three domains of attention: engagement with ideas, practice of inquiry, and navigation of relations. These three conceptual areas suggested by Cunliffe (2014) and Ramsey (2014) are roughly equivalent to the way in which this book is organised; however, we have chosen to use action verbs to represent these areas because of our focus on *practising* CHR. The chapters here are clustered in three distinct approaches to thinking about, talking about and doing critical *practice*: Reflecting, Voicing, and Enacting.

Reflecting

Ramsey (2014) stresses the importance of engaging with ideas to facilitate a scholarship of practice. While her approach is not exclusively an *internal* interaction with an idea, as is suggested by the concept of “reflection”, or the essence of becoming aware and using ideas for enhancing practice, chapters in this section address different mechanisms of engaging individuals to reflect on, and be reflexive about, their practice. The section begins with a challenge to ensure that the underlying philosophy of criticality continues to be infused in reflective practices, else reflection be reduced to mere technique instead of meaningful action. The next chapter sheds light on how critical reflection can be accomplished in practice. The third introduces the sociological imagination as a means of reflexive critique to CHR education and the final chapter examines how academics themselves might embrace radical reflexivity.

Perriton considers the implications of the commodification of reflection and, like Cunliffe (2014) notes, the concern that reflection is too often reduced to merely “standing back and looking at a situation in a logical way” (73). In many ways, Perriton’s work raises the issue of dichotomy so frequently found in the HR literature. On the one hand, reflection is an issue of technique as a means to accomplish something; on the other hand, reflection is a philosophy or commitment—an outcome, so to speak. She challenges the way in which organisations slip into using reflective activities as measurable performative means to accomplish tasks. She questions how to address that difficulty, if even possible,

suggesting that reflection is currently torn by this dichotomy, occupying fully neither space of technique or outcome. Her work sets the stage for readers to consider the role of reflection in their lives and in organisational spaces; she moves toward a more reflexive approach to engaging with ideas.

The next chapter begins an exploration into critical reflection at work, raising the question of whether the dichotomy posed by Perriton could potentially be seen more as a dialectic that intertwines both performative means and philosophical outcomes. Cotter and Cullen provide a rare insider's glimpse into how critical reflection operates and is received by managers in a workplace setting. They demonstrate that critical reflection can be attempted with relative success in a corporate context, creating and experimenting in critical "spaces" (Sambrook 2004) within a practice environment. Data from their WorldLife study shows how critical reflection can speak to HRD in practice.

Moving from practice to pedagogy, Gold and Bratton argue it is necessary to expose the HRD profession and students in training for the profession to the "sociological imagination"—the ability to connect local and personal problems to change and macro and global social structures (Mills 1959/2000) and the concept of reflexive critique. They explain the beneficial learning to be gained from teaching and learning about HRD that is sensitive to context, power and inequality, an approach they call Critical Human Resource Development Education or CHRDE.

Considering context, power and inequality, Mills and Lee explore the role of "radical reflexivity" in the way academics make meaning of their career development choices and prospects within the contested power relationships of higher education (HE). Their chapter draws on both their own experiences as experienced teachers but early career researchers, and the results of their complementary empirical studies of academics. They show the ways in which radical reflexivity results in reported repressive tolerance and prompted academics within the new university environment to reconsider the very nature of their careers and thus their futures within academia.

This section consistently emphasises the challenge to ensure that the underlying philosophy of criticality continues to be infused in reflective practices; otherwise reflection is reduced to mere technique instead of meaningful action. Consistent with Ramsey (2014), the reflective engagement of ideas is connected to both the practice of inquiry and the navigation of relations. Thus, the emphasis on critical reflection found here forms the foundation from which other CHRDE practices can grow.

The next section illuminates how issues of inquiry as a manifestation of voice within CHRD can make a difference in organisations.

Voicing

The voice is a powerful tool. It can “talk” a field into being (Sambrook 2000); it can construct identities (Cunliffe 2014); it can “shape a more equitable world” (Chapman 2004: 97). Our voices shape meaning through stories of and by “power”, or lack thereof (Cunliffe 2014). In this section, we are concerned with the project of voice. These chapters address mechanisms of using voice in different ways—to resist, to create cultures of privilege, to silence ideas. In “voicing”, CHRD professionals engage in the practice of inquiry (Ramsey 2014) or dialogic communication (Cunliffe 2014); the chapters here demonstrate how voices can be used in relation to others within a given context in order to effect and affect CHRD practice. The first chapter broaches how we might dismantle discursive hegemony. The next explores storytelling as a vehicle for expressing and repressing particular narratives. The section ends with a practical example of using critical action learning to help surface, rather than suppress, what we can say.

Connor’s approach engages both resisting and dealing with inequity by creating a new way to break a discursive hegemony (written essay examinations) with a dialogic technique (oral examinations) (Cunliffe 2014). Connor recognised the heteroglossic nature of his students’ voices and attempted to create a different mechanism for marginalised students to demonstrate their earned expertise through dialogue with the instructor. And, yet, Connor’s chapter is a double-edged sword. To what extent are we complicit in reinforcing the commodification “quotient” when we change assessment methods to more authentically “measure” student learning so that greater equity in graduate placement is possible? Are we still privileging the system that created the inequity in the first place?

Caesar explores voice as contested narrative spaces of storytelling. Her case study of corporate storytelling suggests the implications of repressive tolerance (Brookfield 2014) in the way that the official corporate story implicitly shaped and controlled unofficial stories of change in the organisation. As members created what Caesar called a “collaborative thinktank” to process their stories and to find ways to trust one another, the dominant management narrative had already been formalised to privilege some and marginalise others. Her work highlights the implications of fragmented stories and who has the power to control those stories.

Donovan's chapter also addresses the issue of control of language. Stories are transmitted through acts of language and, in turn, language is a powerful tool for change. The way in which language is delivered can make a difference in changing power structures in a given context. Donovan's work lies at the intersection of voicing and enacting. Using Critical Action Learning (CAL) sets as a context, he explores the ways in which the voice of those in power creates undiscussables in the group. Donovan suggests that a vital role for CHR D professionals is to stand in the gap and help facilitate the power inequities that occur when the privileged powerful (perhaps unintentionally) silence others, misplace their anger, or detach from issues.

This section illustrates diverse ways in which voice can create—and sometimes stifle—opportunities to share otherwise untold stories, whether of experiences of power, inequity or resistance. These stories illuminate just what can—and cannot—be said, drawing our attention to various problems. But we should not halt here, because “language doesn't imprison us and determine everything we do or say” (Cunliffe 2014: 52). These problems deserve our attention and intervention; once voices have been expressed and (hopefully) heard, there is a need to act to invoke meaningful change. Our final section is devoted to exploring attempts of enacting CHR D.

Enacting

This last section, *enacting*, has conceptual similarity to Ramsey's (2014) navigation of relations in that CHR D is understood and advanced through actions and activities in context. It also is the epitome of Cunliffe's (2014) relational manager who creates “meaning, action and [tries] to shape our identities *with others in relationally-responsive and dialogic interaction*” (71-72, emphasis in original). Enacting is distinct from, yet grounded in, the reflecting and voicing engagement that formed the basis of the previous sections. This is why enacting is the last section—it pulls together the essence of all three approaches to enable professionals to realise CHR D.

There are growing calls for a “performative turn” in critical approaches to organisations (Spicer et al 2009). All of the chapters in this book could be said to meet the essence of the type of performative turn advocated by critical management scholars (Spicer et al 2009) in that they are all about actually realising CHR D in organisations. Yet, the chapters of this section are specifically about performative engagement. They address *doing* CHR D in ways that combine voice and mind into bodily action. The

section begins with a chapter that explores how critical educators conceive of their work. The next chapter addresses identity exploration in leadership development. And, finally, the concluding chapter discusses creating development programs for low-skilled-employee sustainability and progression.

Breen acknowledges the general lack of awareness of critical perspectives within business schools and practice, and sets out to explore the practice of CHRD in higher education. Her work highlights enacting CHRD in two ways—on one hand, she addresses the practice of teaching critical perspectives; on the other hand, she deepens that enactment by articulating a “critical experientialist” approach to teaching which emphasises the active process of learning to be critical. Her findings of the professional teaching practice of CHRD-related academics further revealed gender and status implications associated with the academicians’ enactment of their CHRD beliefs.

The next chapter, by Morgan and Thomas, reveals the social character of capital as it is manifested in a leadership development programme. These programmes are grounded in the context of organisations’ discourses of power, performance, and profit. Within the enacting of these programmes, they emphasise identity issues of not only *being* a leader but also of *doing* leadership (Cunliffe 2014). The authors caution CHRD professionals against turning leadership development programmes into collusive endeavours with organisations to colonise employee identities.

Finally, Armitage bases proposals for critical pedagogic practice on the importance of dialogue and the associated possibilities for multi-voiced creation of knowledge, rather than transmission of knowledge models of management learning. Building on ideas of both aesthetics and the sociological imagination to advocate what is termed the dialogical imagination, the chapter presents suggestions of how critical management education and development can be achieved in practice.

This section considers various ways of enacting CHRD. The chapters offer insights into how reflection and voice can be transformed into meaningful action, to achieve performative praxis (Spicer et al. 2009), whether in HRD education or practice. Not only do we—as educators, researchers and practitioners—have to think about what *it is* to be critical, but consider *how* we can articulate and share this, how we can actually *be* critical ourselves and help inspire and facilitate students and colleagues to *become* critical.

Enacting this Book—How to Use It to Maximise CHRDR in Your Practice

The chapters in this book have been written by practitioners and scholars intellectually interested, and practically involved, in CHRDR. The book is also intended for practitioners, scholars, and also students of HRD—those aspiring to engage in a critical consideration and execution of their professional practice. Each chapter offers a story that represents the domains of reflecting, voicing and enacting and, as a whole, the book offers its own narrative of a scholarship of practice (Ramsey 2014). It explores ways of teaching, thinking about, talking about and enacting a more critical HRD, offering a means of helping HRD professionals to progress from (simply) being intellectually aware of organisational problems to being able to practically champion, support and sustain meaningful change. As reflexive (reflecting) and dialogic (voicing) approaches are melded into relational enactment (enacting) of a CHRDR, we want to encourage readers to continue to question inconsistencies between what is said and done in organisations.

We appreciate that different readers will have different interests in and motivations for engaging in this book, albeit it all within the broad sphere of critical HRD. Hence, the book offers an eclectic mix of expositions on HRD research, pedagogy and practice to satisfy the curiosities of those occupied in a variety of HRD activities.

We also recognise that different readers will engage the book in different ways. Some readers may wish to digest the chapters sequentially, progressing through each section in turn. To facilitate this, the book has an internal logic and flow, collecting together chapters that address similar topics. However, other readers may wish to dip in and out of chapters that particularly interest them. The book is designed to accommodate this, in that readers are not required to have read previous chapters.

To conclude, we hope that this book, offering actual examples of engagement in critical HRD, stimulates students, practitioners and scholars to reflect on, experiment in and foster more meaningful HRD practice. Earlier versions of the chapters were presented at the Critical Management Studies conference in 2013 and have been developed in response to reviewers' constructive feedback. Given the paucity of praxis, we hope these chapters encourage readers to reflect on their own practices, voice their own experiences and enact meaningful changes - to provide more evidence of critical HRD in practice, which we hope could be disseminated in future conference presentations and publications.

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PART 2:
REFLECTING

CHAPTER ONE

REFLECTING ON THE CONCEPTUAL (AND PRACTICAL) DIFFICULTIES OF REFLECTION

LINDA PERRITON

Introduction

Critical reflection has been a topic that I have returned to at several points in my career in order to worry over. When I worked in industry as a management development practitioner, I developed what I later came to think of as a critically questioning facilitative approach. In my doctoral research I explored how behaviour within and by corporations could be challenged through critical management approaches and theory, including critical reflection. In the years since this research was published, I have turned my attention to other projects, but recently I have returned to the problem of criticality and reflection. That is not to say that questions regarding reflection's conceptual and practical difficulties did not continue to present themselves in the intervening years. For example, I was interviewed as a potential witness in a criminal case that was investigated many years after the alleged offence had taken place. Being confronted with photographs of my younger self's attendance at events that I no longer had any memory of, or had transplanted to different years, or had assigned different meanings to, disrupted my confidence in the truthfulness of my own memories and construction of my experiences. Whilst we don't expect reflective exercises in Human Resource Development (HRD) to conform to the standard of legal testimony, we do engage students in "remembering projects" (Winter 2013, 8) that require them to recall instances when they were acting in particular ways or in particular contexts. These projects have now become—for me—problematic if they do not include some element of challenge about what is being remembered. A more recent challenge to my sense of what reflection is and does resulted from facilitating an online conversation

about HRD practice. The event closed with each contributor “reflecting” on the week-long event and what they felt that they had learned from it. Ahead of posting my own reflective statement of learning I realised I was feeling slightly panicky and unsure as to what to write; I felt that there had sometimes been some unhelpful gender dynamics within the group but did not wish to say so given that the event was voluntary. My reflective statement, when I eventually posted it, erred on the side of social expectations of positivity. I was aware that I crafted my public response in line with an implicit notion that the event should close with a wholly complimentary message around contribution. Concerns around reflection as method, professional expectation, and as something that carries social significance as a practice have followed me throughout my years of practice. These concerns continue to prompt questions about how reflection is understood and used in HRD contexts both in the workplace and the classroom.

Boud et al. (1996, 37) have stressed that, in order to be useful, reflection is something that is applied to the constructions that the *learner* brings to the experience, and not those of the facilitator. But, given that it is the facilitator who brings to the learning event the idea that reflection is going to be useful, it seems to me that a reflexive understanding of what role reflection has in the individual facilitator’s construction of learning and their design decisions is essential. To aid that process in my own practice, I returned to the literature on reflection and initiated a number of conversations with other educators and practitioners on the topic of reflection. My aim was to use these critical conversations to re-orientate my understanding of reflection in HRD teaching in the workplace and higher education. The prompt questions I developed in the critical conversations have been arranged in a (hopefully) logical order in respect of debates around reflection, canonical theorists of reflection, hierarchies of reflection, the effect of the public and criticality as a goal and outcome. Needless to say, any logic that can be discerned in the order and presentation of the prompt questions is a feature of later organisation in the writing and editing process rather than ones I started out with. The questions themselves also position me within the literature; these are *not* the only questions that can be asked of reflection, nor is there only one possible set of answers.

What is the proper aim of reflection?

In a recent article, Helene Ratner (2013, 201) suggested that reflection (and learning) could be thought of as actants in a network of relations,

rather than denoting a cognitive endeavour. In her research, she traced the meanings that became attached to reflection through discursive and socio-material practices in the Danish education sector. Far from being a neutral idea, learning through reflection had become part of the measure of being a “good teacher”, and led to the labelling of those who do not reflect on their practice and performance as “obstacles” in organisational life. Ratner’s identification of the “social life”, or perhaps more accurately the *political* life, of reflection beyond the textbook is an invitation to explore the unintended consequences of turning reflection and learning into a management, professional or student ideal (2013, 201). It is clear from the literature—covering the spectrum from technical rational arguments for reflection to the critical—that reflection is often implicitly or explicitly considered the means by which an educational ideal is achieved.

Many of the reasons that are cited for reflecting, or including reflection in educational practice, are implicitly concerned with being “good”. For those commentators that have a concern with organisational or managerial effectiveness, i.e., making a better decision the next time round, reflection is a necessary developmental supplement to the other behaviours that a manager is expected to master. In keeping with the organisational focus, Daudelin (1997, 39) presents reflection as a set of “core processes” and tools for promoting reflection by managers on their work experiences. Daudelin (1997, 37) believes that reflection is something that managers avoid because they normally have a bias towards action but HRD professionals can help managers by prompting analyses of causes, developing and testing hypotheses and producing new knowledge that improves the effectiveness of the individual manager. Her four-stage model is consistent with a problem-solving orientation; the formation of the problem, thinking about the issue, hypotheses formulation and planning. In a later article with Douglas Hall, Daudelin suggests that reflection helps to “leverage learning” (1997, 13) and is a phrase that has found purchase in the HRD literature when discussing organisational learning (for example, Cavaleri 2004; Fazey et al 2007; Mintzberg and Gosling 2002; Quinton and Smallbone 2010; Smith 2001). In the type of reflective practice that Daudelin and Hall (1997) use as the basis of their HRD practice, managers work on examples of difficult management issues—often with other managers—in order to link learning directly to improved work performance through collaborative problem solving and feedback about their own actions or approaches.

Boud et al. (1996, 32) also place experience at the centre of their HRD interventions but they see the notion of experience as encompassing the *total* response to an event; i.e., what is felt, thought, done and concluded at

the time of the event or situation and immediately after it. Reflection is the processing of the experience and involves stages of recapture, thinking about it, mulling it over and evaluation. For Boud et al., reflection is an experience in itself, but it is not an end in itself. The objective of reflection is to make individuals ready for new experiences, where we will be able to make conscious choices about our behaviour or responses because of having processed previous experiences. The outcome of reflection may be that we are better managers but equally the outcome may be the resolution of a personal problem, a different emotional state, the clarification of an issue, or a new (or at least altered) cognitive map (Boud et al. 1996, 50). Reflection in both Daudelin's (1997; Daudelin and Hall 1997) and Boud et al.'s (1996) use of the concept is as the process that leads to better learning. Where reflection is associated with performance improvement, better learning also leads to better management.

It can be difficult to tease apart the concepts of reflection (the process) and learning (the outcome) in the literature given the investment that advocates of reflection have in particular outcomes that are associated with the process. For example, Peltier et al. use the phrase "reflective thinking skills" (2005, 250) and suggest that students who develop this capacity are "well on their way" to becoming effective leaders in the workplace. Reflective thinking skills appear to endow graduates with: the understanding that learning is a process of self-discovery, the ability to challenge their own assumptions and beliefs, the confidence to challenge the actions that are taken by their managerial peer group and have a "comprehensive view" of managerial practices (Peltier et al. 2005, 250). However, it is far from clear what a "comprehensive" view of managerial practice might mean. Does it equate to broad technical knowledge, a challenging stance as to whether managerial practices are effective, or a more fundamental questioning of the belief structures around management? Leadership is positioned as the natural outcome of a process of continuous self-challenge and refusal to assume a position of absolute certainty. Petriglieri et al. (2011, 430) point to numerous examples where self-awareness has been identified as a key leadership factor, which has also led to some leadership researchers declaring that leadership development and personal development are largely the same thing and where reflection is the means by which individuals become more aware of their own thought processes, preferences and biases.

Conceptually it is a small step between questioning your own personal assumptions and perspectives and focusing outside the self to question social assumptions and power relations (Gray 2007; Hanson 2013). In the critical education tradition, the idea of deeper learning is inextricably

caught up in the notion of being a better person, and not a better manager. Critical reflection hopes to deliver more than Boud et al.'s (1996) modest ambitions for some resolution of a personal problem, a different cognitive map or some other small alteration in understanding or outlook. Critical reflection speaks to “transformative” learning (Gray 2007; Hanson 2013) and emancipation (Ellsworth 1989; Cotter 2014; Perriton 2004; Reynolds 1998; Perriton and Reynolds 2004). The shift is marked by a change of terminology, in that reflection becomes reflexivity, the ability to position your own assumptions and perspectives within social discourses and institutionalised power relations. The addition of the word “critical” suggests a commitment to use the awareness of how we are constituted by these wider social scripts to resist them, and the unthinking ways in which we might profit by them at the expense of less powerful groups and individuals.

However, as Hanson's research illustrates, even activist-facilitators who organise on the basis of critical reflection show a wide range of understandings of reflection, and a similarly divergent understanding of practice. More often than not, she notes, activists focus on technique rather than paying attention to ethical or political questions. Participants describe reflection at a technical rational level by talking about it as a process that enables them to examine “what went well” or “what had to change”. Many link critical reflection to the post-workshop evaluation of the value of their own work and contribution, although some use it to question their assumptions about the ethical and political contribution of the programme (Hanson 2013, 79–80).

The ubiquity of the term “reflection” in common speech, and in statements of the goals of education, or of managerial performance, or of what it is to lead a socially and politically aware life clearly works against a single explanation of why we pursue reflection as pedagogy. Perhaps the lesson here is that in the absence of consensus on the desired outcome of reflection we should, as practitioners, be aware of the socio-material practices of reflection that we are working with *and* against simultaneously and declare our own positions on reflection openly and repeatedly with students and colleagues.

We all have the innate capacity to reflect. Or do we?

On the management development programmes I used to run in industry, a common activity would be to ask participants to write personal statements as to what they felt their strengths and development needs were as prospective senior managers. During one such programme, a participant

asked to see me, placed a blank piece of paper down in front of me and said something along the lines of “I don’t know what my strengths and weaknesses are. I don’t have that ability. I rely on what other people tell me about myself.” The participant’s distress was real and I did not doubt that they believed that they somehow lacked the wherewithal to “look inside” and to come to some valid and useful conclusions about their own behaviour and abilities. Here was learning accompanied by a dilemma. I was aware that I was being confronted with evidence of a blind spot in my own assumptions about reflection and self-awareness; it made sense to me—now that I had been forced to think about it—that reflection might be something that some people were better at than others. But this was a development programme for managers who had been identified as having leadership potential and the participant was admitting to not having the capacity to reflect on their own qualities, assumptions and behaviours. Given the growing belief that leadership development was personal development (Petriglieri et al. 2011, 430), this was troubling in terms of the participant’s future career prospects. Yet, their lack of capacity to reflect did not equate to a lack of knowledge about the self, otherwise the participant would not have been sitting in my room telling me that they knew that they were not able to reflect with the apparent ease that other participants did. Was this something that I should write in my report on the participant, or not? Was it really a significant developmental flaw to rely more on feedback from others than feedback from your own reflections? I decided not to refer to the activity in my assessment of the individual.

The observation that not all individuals are good at reflection is not one that is explored very often in the HRD literature. Where it is covered, the extent to which it is considered a problem varies. For example, Daudelin and Hall (1997, 14) talk of the “unwillingness” of some participants to reflect, and link this directly to the idea of learning styles rather than to ability. Boud et al. (1996, 33) see the issue as developmental; i.e., some individuals have been able to develop a greater capacity to reflect than others, and this might also explain the observed difference between individuals who appear to learn from experience from those who do not. The implication is, however, that there is a developmental *hierarchy* of reflective ability. Where the issue of differential capacities to reflection is considered in more detail is in fields that are based on psychological test data, or concepts from psychology. For example, Wong and Wiener’s (1981, 650–63) research explored the issue as one of “attribution seeking” and ran a number of experiments to isolate the circumstances that lead individuals to seek explanations for why something went right or wrong.

Their findings suggested that there were a number of appropriate societal scripts or rhetorical resources that people turned to, depending on whether they were asked to reflect on causes of success or failure, and depending on if they were reflecting on their own successes and failures or those of other people. Differences were also recorded in responses between settings where individuals were expected to give public explanations for failure versus those where individuals were expected to show adaptive strategies to prevent problems recurring in the future. Anseel et al. (2009) explore the same problem using need for cognition (NFC) and goal orientation, suggesting that both are directly implicated in the likelihood that an individual is “good” at reflection. Need for cognition is the label given to the tendency for individuals to seek out and enjoy effortful cognitive activity. Therefore, individuals who score highly for NFC are assumed proactive in seeking and acquiring information and reflecting on it in order to make sense of events (Anseel et al. 2009, 30). Additionally, if individuals also score highly on learning goal orientation, i.e., the reporting of deeper processing strategies for information, and in creating connections that aid knowledge acquisition, then the authors posit that these individuals will be “naturally inclined” to engage in reflection *and* to be able to record and communicate the reflections (Anseel et al. 2009, 30).

It is not the case that the HRD literature ignores brain science and psychology altogether—it is quite capable of using insights from neuroscience to argue for the advantages of reflection. In an editorial for the *Journal of Management Education*, Schmidt-Wilk (2009) is brave enough to try and answer the question that was left hanging by Boud et al. (1996): when and how do the differences in reflective abilities emerge in individuals? Using a basic knowledge of brain architecture, Schmidt-Wilk notes that the recording and mental elaboration of an event is handled by a *different* part of the brain to the part that deals with abstract reflection; i.e., making connections, challenging assumptions, envisaging different behaviours and their probable outcomes, assessing the context of the event. The prefrontal cortex (not only characterised as the “CEO of the brain” in the article, but also as the location of the managerial skill set) develops later than the part of the brain that handles simple recording, processing and recall. Development starts in adolescence and continues up until the age of 25. Schmidt-Wilk wants her readership to grasp the significance of the developmental range: “Note that these ages include the traditional years of higher education, including management education” (2009, 5). Here then, perhaps, is an example of the sort of science of reflection that HRD practitioners are more comfortable considering. Pre-existing differences in “natural” ability leave us without a role (and