Conference Reflection Paper (30 pts.)

I attended the Annual Academy of Human Resource Development North American conference in Schaumberg, IL as both a paper presenter and as a graduate student at Texas A&M University (TAMU). This was my first such conference in human resources as well as my first non-medical conference. I have attended several medical conferences as a physician assistant over the past twenty years but rarely have I felt that I truly had much to offer that was not already well covered by other attendants. The AHRD conference was a delightful change in substance and direction. I felt that I had something to contribute from a medical education standpoint being the only one of my profession at the meeting.

In review of the meeting, I came across several highlights and points of learning. The first was the overall theme experienced at just about every presentation and that was the diversity of definition of HRD. I came from a basic impression that human resource development departments existed in the basement of any business, providing information on benefits and that was about it. I had no idea the width and breadth of the actual profession. I also had no knowledge or experience of the strength of the research involved.

The process of learning the meaning of HRD and its application to what my goals are has been enlightening. I initially entered the TAMU program to learn how to be a developer of postgraduate medical training programs and educator. What I have learned so far is that there is so much more to it than my original intentions. I found that I could specialize across vast landscapes of learning and development. For example, the keynote address by Dr. Brinkerhoff showed me the area of evaluation that I had not even
considered prior to that presentation. I now have the knowledge of one approach to evaluating organizational learning and performance outcomes such that companies can use a particular model of adoption and directional training to maximize ROI. For me this was a profound idea and very applicable to my present postgraduate training endeavor.

**Additional conference highlights**

**Emerging research.** As part of the EHRD 628 course, Research in HRD, I took part in the Emerging Research pre-program course given on Wednesday and Thursday, February 23 & 24. My take away for this two-day learning was inspiration to delve more into research and scholarly work. Initially impressed with the faculty members’ anecdotal scholarly journey, I easily saw myself on a similar path.

I have a strong desire to explore my own questions regarding education and seeing if what I am doing as a new educator is beneficial to more specific areas of medical learning. As each faculty member disclosed their areas of interest, I discovered new areas and branches of known areas of my own interest. For example, certain faculty members in the first group discussion came from the practice in an area unrelated to HRD but were able to locate HRD issues within their field and build on them. I see this as the impetus for my journey and although I still have many questions and options for the direction in which I would like to research, I was primarily inspired to keep asking questions and writing.

Another part of the two-day course that left an impression was the discussion on the different types of papers. I really enjoyed having the faculty from various approaches to research share their experience. It put a human element to what I have always thought was somewhat of a cold, or unemotional, part of research.
I found that critical models, as opposed to positivistic or interpretive, hold more appeal for me. I like questioning what we (I) are (am) doing in the field of medicine and believe that it is important to ask if what is happening is benefiting or hurting society. This was the main reason for the paper that I presented at the conference, which questioned the increase trend of physician assistant specialization. I wanted to know if there was something insidious driving, or influencing, the growth of this trend. I found that by listening to the professor whose main research style is critical I was asking the right question(s) for the right reason(s).

It was also very helpful for me to see the differences in research styles in a structured, separated way so that I could understand my approach with future pieces. All three of presenters did a great job of guiding me through the process as well as offering pearls to overcome potential roadblocks.

One additional learning event that I found helpful during the course was the selected paper review and group presentations. Although I have given presentations in the past as an individual and group, I had never reviewed, critiqued, and presented it as a group. This exercise opened my eyes to small group dynamics during the review and critiquing stage as well as during the creation of the presentation. I believe that we all worked quite well to present a non-biased review of the paper to the other groups and I recognized ways that I could strengthen my future works as a result.

**Diversity in HRD.** What probably stood out the most for me, as a novice member of this academy as well as a student of HRD and education, was the diversity in the definition of HRD. In fact, I was constantly reminded that no one, from student to senior faculty, was able to define HRD for everyone. Everyone had their own impression
and definition based on areas of study, areas of thought, directions of research, and even the department location of HRD at their university. For example, one faculty member that presented a paper on economic impacts of HRD, which was interesting and informative, but I could tell that there was a bias (he admitted to) due to the fact that his HRD department was part of the overall business section of the university. Obviously his departmental funding was filtered through the business school so any research coming out of HRD for that university was tainted by the funding agenda.

I also attended a symposium that reviewed all of the different names for graduate HRD programs in 2009 and 2010. There was an incredible variation of names across the United States. For example, one program would be an MS and one an M.Ed. in either HRD, HRM, or Organizational Learning; that is to just name a small difference in the number of programs listed. Unfortunately, variations in curriculums and course topics were not reviewed. I believe this would have been informative if for any other reason, to place an even brighter light on the diversity of HRD programs.

I did not attend any of the international symposiums on diversity in HRD but I am sure that some existed on the program schedule. I assume, though, that other countries are suffering from the same problem when defining HRD in definitive terms. I also did not attend any of the cultural diversity symposiums including race, religion, and sexual orientation issues. For the most part, this was due to other conflicting symposiums that held more interest for me. I will admit, though, that I probably lost out on some very intriguing topics and discussions.

Overall, I found that there were positive and negative effects from not having a solid definition for HRD. On the positive side, there are no restrictions for students and
faculty to conform to. In contrast, HRD programs could gain credibility with a solid definition and not having one may be hurting research and practice. As an example of leaving HRD undefined, a prominent faculty member of TAMU gave a presentation to the students regarding the topic of defining HRD. He made it quite clear that any attempt to corner, or box, HRD would be met with resistance. My impression was that he was adverse to any definition no matter how open. I took slight issue with this stand since I believe that relevance is important to gaining credibility and I don’t see how having a “floating” definition of HRD helps solidify our worth. Perhaps this is a paper for a later time.

**Inspired to Write.** I was honored to have a paper that I wrote with my chairman last summer accepted at the AHRD conference. Composing the paper that I envisioned with the goals that I wanted to get across was a labor of love. I spent several hours framing and re-framing, writing and re-writing, and going back to adjust and correct again. I became somewhat disgruntled with the process and, even though I have several research ideas and topics down on paper as well as in my head, I struggle to think of how I will get another piece going.

The conference, especially the student course, got me excited about research that I did not even think of but would be pertinent to my area of study. Since motivation is a prime ingredient to getting started on any daunting project and I was, and still am, very motivated to learn more about researching. I am now very driven to learn as much as I can about topics that interest me, and researching those questions, as taught during the course, is a great way to get answers. It can also be a great way to get thoughts and guidance from others by way of networking.
I kept several notes on topics that I would like to explore and with the tools obtained during the student learning sessions, coupled with observances of symposiums and food-for-thought groups, I feel armed to go forward with any topic that peaks my interest. For me this was the largest benefit of the conference and I plan to submit a paper for the 2012 AHRD conference in Denver.

**Conclusion.** The annual conference was the first of many that I plan to not only attend but also participate in. The take-a-ways for me were numerous and I could only hit on the few that stood out in my mind as the most influential in my learning and growing HRD. My plan is to go forward with the tools obtained at this conference to build my knowledge and experience in HRD by way of researching and teaching. Overall, this was an exceptional and memorable experience for me.