

# Teachable Moments in Human Resource Management: National Culture, Organizational Culture, and Intersectionality

David Starr-Glass

**Abstract** The most important outcome of any academic course is to increase understanding for both learners and their instructors. However, in many business courses this is made problematic because of the ways in which business schools have constructed the bodies of knowledge that they consider relevant. This chapter considers the ways in which the Human Resource Management (HRM) course has evolved and argues that in its trajectory it has become artificially separated from many other critical understandings and bodies of knowledge, particularly those of national and organizational cultures. However, within the teaching and learning of HRM there are many opportunities for considering overarching perspectives, integrating what have become separated aspects, and providing the richer and more expansive understanding of subject matter that is increasingly demanded from business graduates in the complex and globalized world of work. The chapter explores the nature, significance, and potential of these opportunities—opportunities that are generally understood as teachable moments.

## 1 Introduction

In an attempt to adhere to the aims and philosophy of this edited volume, the present chapter considers not only the *teaching* of Human Resource Management (HRM) but also the *learning* of HRM. The chapter explores some of the problems encountered by those who teach and those who learn HRM, and provides some recommendation that might be useful. As such, this chapter does not constitute a ‘unit’ in a HRM course, but rather a holistic and overarching approach to the teaching and learning of the subject that might well be useful for both teachers and learners. It is probably most advantageous to read this chapter *before* beginning either the teaching or learning of HRM; although, some readers may use this chapter to reflect on a course in which they have already participated.

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D. Starr-Glass (✉)

SUNY Empire State College, International Programs, Prague, Czech Republic  
e-mail: David.Starr-Glass@esc.edu

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Ideally, *teaching* and *learning* should interlock into a single dynamic process that provides learners with the opportunity to develop a deep and considered understanding of the topic. The mutuality and inter-relationality of the teacher-learning dynamic is captured by Paul Ramsden's [1] well-known aphorism that 'the aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible' (p. 5).

Of course, while this teaching objective might be simply stated, in practice it is always challenging for instructors to bring about genuine learning possibilities for their students. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties and challenges, many instructors have come to appreciate the inter-connectedness and mutuality of the teaching-learning dynamic and try to ensure that effective learning opportunities are created in their courses. Indeed, it is hard to disagree with Case [2], who argues that a critical element for those *teaching* HRM, and for students *learning* the subject, is that 'good teaching is directed towards fostering desirable approaches to learning, and, in making these expectations clear, teachers are able to influence learning behaviours' (p. 626).

However, the teaching and learning of HRM is not only a process that involves instructors and students. Like all other business-orientated courses, most HRM courses are taught within the framework of the business school and its objectives, philosophies, and pedagogies have an impact on how the HRM learning experience is shaped and on how it is delivered. In recent years, the business school has had more than its share of criticism and that criticism has not abated. Even before the financial crash of late 2007 and the subsequent Great Recession of 2008—which, among other things, focused acute scrutiny on financial institutions, their managerial philosophies and practices, and the competency of their graduate employees—some had been highly critical of the curriculum content, pedagogic approaches, and perceived mission of the business school [3–5].

More recently, others—including academic scholars, business educators, and practitioners—have seriously questioned whether, as presently conceived and operated, it is realistic or indeed possible for business schools to produce graduates who possess the competencies required in the complex, globalized, and disruptive world of the 21st century [4, 5]. These critics are also skeptical about the quality of social and cultural awareness of business graduates [6], about their ability to fill the role of global managers [7], and about how they have been taught to engage with real-world problems and trained to provide realistic or sustainable solutions for those problems [8–10]. Most criticism has been leveled at U.S. business schools, which have a very long history and a pre-eminent global reputation, but their relatively modern British counterparts—which only came into existence after 1965—have not been completely spared [11, 12]. Although this criticism has been directed generally towards the business school and its graduate products, it is also fair to say that many of the failings identified also apply at a micro-level to the specific courses that the business school teaches—including HRM—and to the learning expectations and outcomes associated with those courses.

At the macro-level, there is a consensus that the failings of business schools are institutional, that significant changes are needed in both their mission and pedagogy, and that these changes must be institutionally-centered and

institutionally-driven [13–15]. However, at the micro-level—within the learning experiences that come about through the teacher-learning dynamic in the classroom—there are multiple opportunities for instructors and students to address the repercussions of these systemic problems, and to develop richer and more critically attuned learning outcomes. Faculty and students can co-create more expansive and holistic understandings of the disciplinary area in which they are engaged. *Faculty* can re-envision and re-formulate the HRM course in ways that allow learners to confront, explore, and appreciate issues that might not normally be part of the institutionally formulated course. *Learners* can be more critically sensitive to what at they are being taught, what they are expected to learn, and why that learning is considered relevant or important. Part of this mutually beneficial process of teacher re-envisioning and student re-considering can be dynamically enacted in the classroom through the use of what have come to be known as *teachable moments*, which Hansen [16] describes as ‘instances in which the learner’s natural defenses against destabilizing insights are low so that he or she is willing to consider the need for change’ (p. 8).

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section considers the ways in which knowledge, in the business school and the courses that it offers, has been fragmented and reduced to linear presentations. The implications of this for those teaching and for those studying HRM are then reviewed. Section 3 emphasizes the point that HRM deals directly with people and groups and, as such, is embedded in a matrix of political, social, and national culture forces. Section 4 explains the construct of teachable moments and argues that these opportunities, spontaneous or planned, provide an opportunity to re-consider HRM in ways that are broader and more relevant to the HRM practice that graduates will encounter in the real world.

Section 5 provides a framework for exploring the complexities of HRM within society and organizations by briefly underscoring some key issues in the understanding of national culture, organizational culture and climate, and the intersectionality of these cultural domains. Section 6 suggests possible teachable moments that might arise in the teaching and learning of HRM, and provides guidance on how they might be used. Section 7 summarizes the main issues developed in the chapter. This concluding section is followed by a number of short questions that the reader might find helpful in reviewing the chapter—answers to these questions are provided after the reference section.

## 2 The Fragmentation and Linearization of Business Knowledge

The central themes of this chapter are the teaching and learning opportunities that emerge through *teachable moments*, and the creative perspectives provided by the *intersectionality of culture* in the HRM course. At first glance, both of these themes might seem peripheral or tangential issues. After all, teachable moments are often

considered to be rather trivial and ‘destabilizing insights’ [16] and intersectionality is rarely present in HRM, being more commonly associated with the studies of race, gender, and inequality. In order to appreciate how teachable moments and intersectionality *can and do* play critical roles in HRM teaching and learning, it is first necessary to explore how business schools have created their curriculums and the philosophies, epistemologies, and pedagogies that shape the courses that they offer. In other words, it is necessary to first assess the problem.

## 2.1 *The Origins of the Business School*

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an extensive review of the origin of U.S. business schools. However, several features of their evolution undoubtedly have a direct bearing on the present-day HRM course. In their development, certainly from after 1945, U.S. business schools had tried to move away from the narrow vocationalism that had dominated business education and which had centered on meeting the anticipated needs of the workplace. Business schools wanted to reposition themselves through the expansive professionalization of management, the provision of a highly-trained managerial class, and the generation and dissemination of managerial knowledge derived from their own research programs. It was contended that all of these outputs would advance the status of the business school, create new career trajectories for faculty and graduates, and add wealth of the nation and local community.

In an attempt to define themselves, business schools began to build academic ‘walls’ that separated them from the liberal arts faculties—which were centered on broader, more inclusive, and critically-centered education—and, perhaps more surprisingly, from the social science faculties that might have been regarded as their natural allies [3, 17–19]. In an attempt to legitimize and differential their knowledge production and curriculum, business schools also adopted a rigorous and systematic *scientification* of their disciplinary areas and of the ways in which these areas were considered, researched, and taught.

Borrowed from the natural sciences, the scientification of management knowledge entailed ‘the promotion of research-based teaching and scientifically valid procedures, which usually required the use of quantification and statistics to certify findings as objective knowledge rather than as the subjective products of ideologies or individuals’ [20, p. 280]. This move took place despite the inherent contradiction that the positivist paradigms and validation methodologies of the natural sciences did not match the epistemological outlooks and social constructivist approaches of the social sciences, to which management and management disciplines naturally belong. All of these decisions taken by the emerging business schools—taken for existentialist, pragmatic, and arguably theoretical reasons—helped to define their research and teaching agendas but, in the future, these same decisions would come back to haunt business schools in terms of the perceived legitimacy, authenticity, and practicality of their knowledge-production and graduate output [3, 10, 20, 21].

The *professionalization* of the discipline and the *scientification* of its subject matter had a number of direct consequences on the ways in which business subjects were taught. These can be summarized as follows: (a) the artificial fragmentation of business practice into well-defined and independent functional areas and often functional subdivisions within these areas; (b) the exposure of students to overly theoretical and restrictively-focused understandings of these functional areas; and (c) the creation of a linearly-conceived set of courses (presented as the ‘curriculum’) that incrementally advance and reinforce understandings learned in prior coursework. Those wishing to graduate in a particular disciplinary area—such as finance, marketing, or HRM—had to progress through a sequence of separate and specifically focused courses, each designed to add to the student’s knowledge of that predefined discipline.

## 2.2 *Teaching and Learning Consequences of the Business School Curriculum*

The study of a particular disciplinary area within the business school is mapped out in a series of separate units, with students expected to move through this sequence in their pathway to graduation. The linear assumptions and sequential progressions of the business school curriculum possess a certain degree of epistemological and pedagogical logic. However—perhaps more importantly for both instructors and students—these assumptions of linearity and self-reinforcing progressions can lead to a number of significant problems in both the teaching and learning associated with, for example, a HRM course. These problems beg the more fundamental question posed by Guest [22]: ‘Is HRM a list of practices, a measure of strategic fit or some sort of configuration of practices?’ (p. 1096).

- **Isolating Discrete Bodies of Knowledge** In a linear presentation of the curriculum, knowledge and the ways in which knowledge is constructed are artificially fractured into distinct *bodies of knowledge*. In this fracturing process, both the integrity and connectedness of knowledge are lost. The emerging bodies of knowledge becoming artificially isolated, differentially privileged, and effectively reified as distinct entities. These separate bodies of knowledge tend to be located and then taught in the distinct, separated, and silo-like departments of the business school. The fragmentation of knowledge, and the preferential access to that fractured knowledge—which is an inevitable outcome of competing inter-departmental cultures, power, and politics—significantly limits, and indeed may effectively preclude, the opportunity for any meaningful inter-departmental cooperation, inter-disciplinary boundary crossing, or indeed college-wide collaboration [3, 17].
- **Privileging Analysis and Reductionism** The dominant logic within the structure, curriculum, and delivery of course content in business education is analytical—it seeks to decompose, split, and fragment the whole into separate and discernable

parts. A predisposition towards analysis and the reduction of complexity to simple elements is pervasive in business school approaches and in their teaching method. This is clearly reflected in their ubiquitous reliance on case studies and case study methodologies, which attempt to present the complex experienced world in partial, selective, and fragmentary ways [23, 24]. This epistemological and pedagogical preference is guided by an assumption of *reductionism*, which seeks to reduce complex systems to single issues—or at least to readily isolatable factors—rather than to recognize the complexities and synergies of these systems, and to consider integrated and holistic solutions. Whereas reductionist and positivist paradigms are normal in the physical sciences, they are always problematic in the social sciences (including business) in which complexity and social construction are more insistent and relevant [5, 25, 26].

- **Devaluing Synthesis and Creativity** Analytical and reductionist ontologies in the business school have pedagogical consequences that impact the ways in which instructors design and deliver their courses and the ways in which students try to create knowledge within these courses. As Bloom's [27] hierarchy of cognitive levels suggests, *analysis* does indeed constitute a significant and required component in the learning sequence—remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating [27, 28]. However, focusing on analysis tends to devalue and divert attention from the higher-order functions of evaluation and creativity, both of which center on a process of synthesis. Rather than believe that their goal is to decompose complex problems into what seem to be their constituent parts, students might be more profitably encouraged to go beyond this and focus on putting the fragments together—synthesizing, formulating solutions, and generating novel and creative possibilities. These are the skills that are increasingly required and demanded in the complex realm of 21st century business practice, but they are not the skills that are accentuated in most business schools and the courses that they offer [29].
- **Encouraging Self-reference and Narcissism** Although reflection and reflective practice are regarded by as critical and distinguishing elements of professional practice, business schools tend to accentuate a linear educational agenda that leaves little room for a more considered, integrated, and reflective understanding of the disciple [30]. Despite academic and practitioner arguments, reflective practice is rarely something that business undergraduates are encouraged to undertake, whether they are HRM or Organizational Behavior majors [31–33]. Even when encouraged to adopt reflective practice, students run into a problem generated by the business school's approach to disciplinary knowledge and knowledge-production, which tend to be inward looking, narcissistic, and self-referent—an emphasis on *our* theories and *our* solutions, rather than *their* problems and *their* needs. As Tomkins and Ulus [34] insightfully note, many of the difficulties that students encounter in their reflective practice subconsciously mirror the structural issue that 'when we [in the business school] review the work of others, do we see it so much through the filters of our own perception that we morph into a mode of appropriation, effectively judging the work as if it were ours?' (p. 603). These authors then add, playing on the double meaning of

*reflections*, that these ‘reflections dovetail with the burgeoning literature criticizing the business of academic review [in the business school]’ (p. 603).

- **Forgetting Myopia and Reduced Peripheral Vision** The linear flow logic of the business school curriculum tends to produce graduates who are encouraged to be self-referent, analytically focused, and professionally orientated. However, in order to be operationally effective, business graduates need to be outward-looking, focused on the creative synthesis of solutions, and orientated towards practice. There has been a growing concern that these graduates—who may well possess an institutionally validated sense of confidence—prove to be unsuccessful and frustrated in their subsequent employment and careers [3, 11]. For example, Pfeffer and Fong [4] concede that although ‘business schools and business education have been a commercial success, there are substantial questions about the relevance of their educational products and doubts about their effects on both the careers of their graduates and on management practice’ (pp. 78–79).

Given the substantial questions about relevancy, and the significant problems about the structure of learning, many have urged for reform of the business school curriculum, teaching approach, and implied learning assumptions. For example, Glen, Suci, and Baughn [35] suggest that the predominant analytical logic of business education and course structure should be replaced by a logic of synthesis that focuses on solution-driven philosophies, holistically-conceived integrations, creative design thinking, and practitioner-centered perspectives—arguing that ‘at the heart of effective business education lies the need to synthesize knowledge of the functional business disciplines with the day-to-day challenges faced in practice’ (p. 655).

Perhaps more fundamentally, scholars such as Szkudlarek, McNett, and Romani [36] urge business schools to revisit their existing pedagogies and to actively ‘engage with the topic of developmental and transformational learning... [stressing] a process of self-reflexivity and increasing pedagogical sophistication along themes such as awareness of increasingly complex realities in which we and our students operate’ (p. 491). These same authors also argue that this changed teaching and learning approach would encourage and support business students to ‘develop a new pair of eyes through which they can perceive the world, and a new set of cognitive frameworks through which they can interpret what they see and make conscious behavioral choices’ (p. 489).

### 3 The Political, Social, and Cultural Embeddedness of HRM

Both the teaching and learning of HRM are complex, because HRM is itself complex. This is perhaps something that is obvious but all too frequently—when instructors are busily engaged in presenting the course and when students are

eagerly trying to learn the new subject—there is a tendency to lose sight of the complexity and to also lose sight of the political, social, and cultural matrix within which HRM is inevitable and inextricably embedded.

The complexity of the subject is readily seen when we consider the name of the subject, which co-joins three significant elements:

- **Human Aspect of HRM** It seems obvious, but unfortunately it is sometimes overlooked or neglected, that HRM is about real people, real organizational settings, and real experiences. Any study of the subject must involve a consideration of human behavior and responses, including the social and cultural contexts (national and organization) within which these individuals are situated.
- **Resource Aspect of HRM** People are considered to be one of the most significant and critical elements of organizational success. HRM is about the extent to which organizational participants know what their organization requires from them, are able to meet these requirements, and are prepared to meet what their organization might want in the future. HRM is also about the extent to which people can or *should* be regarded as ‘resources’ of the firm [37, 38]
- **Management Aspect of HRM** At its core, management is about how people and other organizational resources can be woven together in a process that is effectively planned, communicated, monitored, regulated (or controlled), and evaluated. The outcome of the managed process is ultimately to provide a competitive and strategic advantage for the organization and all of its participants, including those that it employs.

These multiple elements, processes, and perspectives associated with HRM are picked up in many of its definitions. Because of its different focuses and concerns, it is remarkably difficult to produce a succinct yet comprehensive definition—some inevitably stress one aspect, while ignoring or minimizing others. However, the following definition by Bratton and Gold [39] manages to bring out the complexities of the subject in a balanced way. They see HRM as:

A strategic approach to managing employment relationships which emphasize that leveraging people’s capabilities and commitment is critical to achieving sustainable competitive advantage or superior public services. This is accomplished through a distinctive set of integrated employment policies, programmes and practices, embodied in an organizational and societal context. (p. 7).

Yet even in such a definition many will see a European—as opposed to a U.S.—perspective of HRM, which places more value on the importance of organizational participants and their inclusion in a mutually beneficial process of cooperation rather than as being simply the object of management’s strategy. It is important to remember that HRM, as a business school subject area and as an industrial practice, originated and underwent significant development in America. There, it was shaped by prevailing social and politic factors such as the relative weakness of unions, lack of state or federal intervention, and a predominant sense of the individual rather than of the collective. With these social and national cultural perspectives in mind, Guest [40] remarked that in its original and evolved nature ‘HRM is yet another



manifestation of the American Dream, and its popularity and attractiveness must be understood in this context' (p. 377).

Further, U.S. manifestations of HRM were strongly influenced by a 'scientific preoccupation' derived from Taylorism, an assumption that HRM was intended to improve the firm's performance and to focus on its strategic relevance, and a belief that there was likely to be 'one-best-way' of managing within the organization [41–43]. The impact of U.S. orientated HRM was very significant, as was the diffusion of the model through the dominance of U.S. research in the literature and the use of U.S. textbooks in classrooms well beyond America.

The social, political, and cultural forces at work in Europe were quite different. In most European contexts labor rights and protection were strong and often state endorsed, collective bargaining and more socially engaged industrial relations were the norm, and there was general skepticism about the extent to which business problems were either 'scientific' in nature, or that they could be reduced to 'one-fits-all' solutions. European models of HRM incorporated a distinctive 'human orientation' that tended to balance the rights of the individual with those of the firm, and which looks towards a more robust psychological contract—that is, the implicit socially-constructed employment relationship that provided mutual benefits, guarantees, and protection for employer and employee [44–47].

The key point is that, in its formation and evolution, HRM has been embedded in social and cultural systems that determine its perspectives and approaches and, although it is still a highly contentious area, there seems to be equal degrees of convergence and divergence in the various national and regional HRM manifestations [48, 49].

Of course, *all* business subjects taught in the business school are embedded in politics, society, and culture as are decisions and behaviors in the business world. Lane [50] makes the point that 'although organizational goals... may not differ significantly across organizations, courses of action towards reaching these goals do, because action is socially constructed and hence shaped by culture as manifested in societal institutions' (p. 34). The degree to which cultural and social considerations shape the agendas and outlooks of HRM systems is something that has to be kept in mind when teaching or learning the subject. Most would agree with the paradoxical situation noted by Schein [51], that although 'culture is an abstraction, yet the forces that are created in social and organizational situations that derive from culture are powerful' (p. 3).

## 4 Teachable Moments: Spontaneous and Deliberate

When engaging in a HRM course, there is a natural division of roles: Instructors are preoccupied with their *teaching*; whereas, students are concerned with *learning* the subject matter. With their different roles, instructors can all too easily forget the learning aspect of the learning experience, and students can focus on the subject matter in ways that might, in retrospect, be considered myopic or uncritical. How

can instructors be refocused on the learning and learning possibilities of their students? How can students be encouraged, as it were, to raise their heads and look beyond the well-intentioned but restrictive boundaries that are created by the logic of the course presentation?

Sometimes, in the teaching and learning associated with the HRM, it becomes apparent that a cultural consideration is, or has become, a *central and critical* aspect of the issues being studied, not a tangential and categorical separated one. Sometimes, this culture linkage is clearly recognized by the instructor. Sometimes, it is considered—perhaps only briefly, tentatively, and hesitantly—by the inquisitive and thoughtful learner who is prepared to think outside the logical box of the course. If recognized, these occurrences signal *teachable moments*.

*Teachable moments* constitute a reality of pedagogy, although oftentimes they seem to be part of teaching folklore. Teachable moments are normally considered to be *spontaneous* instructor-centered realizations that an opportunity exists to further student learning. These moments of realization often emerged from the learning that is currently being undertaken. Initially, they do not seem related to that material; however, when introduced and discussed, the new topic begins to assume particular relevance and appropriateness. Teachable moments present an opportunity to deviate from the predetermined script and to introduce new themes, or to move in unexpected directions. Hyun [52] argues that these teachable moments ‘represent new, emerging ways for us to learn from each other by temporarily ignoring our institutional identities (teacher, learner) in order to become participating members of a teaching and learning community’ (p. 14).

Teachable moments can be viewed from a number of different perspectives, each with its own implication for teaching and learning:

- **Disruptions of Linear Knowledge Assumptions** Usually, disciplinary knowledge is arranged and communicated in sequential units according to a linear logic. It is assumed that there is a progression of concepts, a sequence of ideas, and a flow of relationship that points forward towards understanding. Teaching follows that trajectory, providing—like any good story—an extended narrative that has a convincing beginning, middle, and end. There is an implied assumption that learning also follows this linear logic that has been established. Teachable moments suggest that this linearity is questionable and that discontinuities exist in it. These discontinuities in the scripted narrative often become evident during the teaching-learning interaction process and provide an opportunity for introducing new ideas, for considering relevant but presently unconsidered knowledge, and perhaps for restating the *meta-principles* of the discipline—its underpinning, inferred but not explicitly referenced, philosophical principles.
- **Signals of Critical Concerns** When recognized and appreciated by learners, teachable moments can be signal *critical moments* because the questions and concerns raised by students about the current subject matter may well have significance, importance, and a degree of unresolved urgency. When recognized by the instructor, teachable moments might seem to be fortuitous—spontaneous

opportunities that suddenly become apparent, unsolicited invitations to reconsider the topic that is currently being explored. However, teachable moments are not necessarily spontaneous or fortuitous. Teachable moments can be created *deliberately* and exploited as part of a considered pedagogic approach that seeks to advance the learner's understanding by deliberately breaching the normal sequencing of disciplinary knowledge and exposing the learner to other and perhaps more overarching perspectives [16].

- **Demonstrations of Emerging Possibilities** As has been suggested, one of the central aspects of approaching, creating, and disseminating knowledge in the business school has been reductionism, a belief that a system of many components can be continuously reduced to simpler elements. From a reductionist perspective, complex real-world systems—such as those that confront all businesses—can always be broken up into smaller functional elements such as marketing, management, or HRM. These smaller functional areas can in turn be decomposed into more and more specific elements, such as selecting new employees, training them, determining their remuneration, and assessing their performances. In any ways, reductionism seems a perfectly logical way of pin-pointing relevant ‘parts’ of the system, but in the process of identifying these parts the complexity, interconnectedness, and synergism of the whole system is ignored. Teachable moments occur—often in a sudden and striking way—because it becomes evident in studying these fragmented elements that the existence of the larger, more complex, and more interconnected system has been neglected. Teachable moments suggest new possible structures, behaviors, and functions that may indeed *emerge* from this reconsidered complexity. Goldstein [53] defines *emergence* as the ‘arising of novel and coherent structures, patterns, and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems. Emergent phenomena are conceptualized as occurring on the macro level, in contrast to the micro-level components and processes out of which they arise’ (p. 49). Emergence and emergent thinking have long histories in psychology, philosophy of the mind, and organizational studies and there is some evidence that these are the mode through which systems designers, subject matter experts, and practitioners approach complexity [54–56].

A teaching strategy of deliberately creating and exploiting teaching moments, suggests that new and relevant knowledge can and should be introduced into the course when it provides learners with greater insight, novel perspectives, and more resilient ways of constructing knowledge of the topic. From such a perspective, the present chapter argues that truly valuable and empowering teachable moments are often not those that arise spontaneously, but those that are deliberately introduced and which challenge the existing linearity of the disciplinary knowledge script and the traditional curriculum [52, 57].

Although they might not solve the structural problems of business education or the HRM course, teachable moments can provide a valuable way—for both instructors and learners—of promoting ‘a process of self-reflexivity and increasing pedagogical sophistication along themes such as awareness of increasingly complex

realities in which we and our students operate; methods that have positive impact in the classroom...and commitment toward developing responsible global leaders' (35, p. 491)

## 5 National Cultures, Organizational Cultures, and Their Intersectionality

Although *cultural considerations* are pervasive in the teaching, learning, and practicing of all the designated functional aspects of business—such as HRM, Management, Marketing, Consumer Behavior etc.—culture is rarely taught as a separate and independent study in the business school. Instead, suitably defined and limited, culture makes its appearance as a limited and specific focus in some selected courses—as *organizational* culture in Organizational Behavior, and as *national culture* in International Business and Cross-culture Management courses.

Despite the significance and vitality of culture, a sharp and convincing definition of it has failed to materialize in the social sciences over the last hundred years [58, 59]. In the present chapter, the working definition is provided by Spencer-Oatey [60], who—having extensively reviewed the history of culture's definition—concludes that it comprises a fuzzy set of basic 'assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the "meaning" of other people's behaviour' (p. 3).

This broad, but useful, definition underpins other expressions of culture at the national or organizational level. However, it might be useful to briefly consider these other cultural manifestations separately.

### 5.1 National Culture and Its Consequences

National culture suggests that at the macro-level—that is at the level of geographical areas, which might or might not constitute recognized nations and nation states—identifiable cultures seem to have emerged and have been subsequently transmitted to the inhabitants of those regions.

Reviewing the evolution of the national culture construct and its importation in Cross-culture Management education, Bird and Mendenhall [61] confirm the critical part played by Gert Hofstede's [62] seminal work, *Culture's Consequences*, which focused on *comparative managerial* assumptions and behaviors that had been shaped by individual national cultures. Hofstede [62] attempted to identify, define, and measure quantifiable dimensions of national culture, defining national

culture simply and tersely ‘the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another’ (p. 9).

Hofstede [62, 63] privileged a statistical approach to national culture, seeing it as *static manifestation* rather than as dynamically evolving system. Despite the many problems associated with Hofstede’s assumptions, methodology, and analysis his work has had an enduring influence on the ways in which national culture is recognized and taught in the business school. However, many contend that this reification of culture as a static and shared reality tends to obscure the complexities of cultural shifts and the extent of its national expression, replacing them with what often turn out to be unproductive misconceptions, fundamental misunderstandings, and plausible but self-limiting *sophisticated stereotypes* [64–66].

Hofstede identified a number of national culture dimensions that might be of value in considering HRM issues:

- **Power Distance** This dimension measures ‘the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally’ (67, p. 89). In high power distance cultures status, hierarchy, and deference are anticipated and accepted and individuals are aware of what they understand to be their ‘rightful place’.
- **Individualism/Collectivism** The difference between ‘people looking after themselves and their immediate family only, versus people belonging to in-groups that look after them in exchange for loyalty’ (67, p. 89). Individualistic cultures focus on the individual, the uniqueness of the ‘I’ and on expressions of self. Collectivistic cultures focus on the collective—the ‘We’ and on maintaining societal structures and customs.
- **Masculinity/Femininity** This dimension focuses on ‘the dominant values in a masculine society are achievement and success; the dominant values in a feminine society are caring for others and quality of life’ (67, p. 89). Masculine cultures tend to have more significant gender-based role and activity differentiation than feminine cultures.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance** This is ‘the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and try to avoid these situations’ (67, p. 90). In high avoidance cultures there is a significant degree of reluctance and discomfort associated with engaging in situations involving change, innovation, and risk-taking.
- **Long-term versus Short-term Orientation** This dimension measures ‘the extent to which a society exhibits a pragmatic future-orientated perspective rather than a conventional historic or short-term point of view’ (67, p. 90). Long-term orientation places value on persistence, perseverance, and an investment in the future; whereas, short-term orientated cultures favor the immediate, the present, the transient, a pursuit of happiness, and immediate gratification.

## 5.2 *Organizational Culture and Its Impacts*

Schneider, Ehrhart, and Macey [68] define organizational culture as a set of ‘shared basic assumptions, values, and beliefs that characterize a setting and are taught to newcomers as the proper way to think and feel’ (p. 362). These *proper ways of thinking and feeling* are continuously reviewed, reinforced, and communicated through ‘the myths and stories people tell about how the organization came to be the way it is as it solved problems associated with external adaptation and internal integration’ (p. 362).

Part of the process of creating and preserving an organizational community comes about through sharing, communicating, negotiating, and redefining the existing social and cultural norms of those who enter the organization. The culture provides cohesion for the organization and a sense of identity for its members. Often, but not inevitably, the cultural values that will become the accepted norms of the new collective are seeded by their leaders and founders. Subsequently, that defining and cohesive value-set becomes the accepted values of all organizational members through a process of inculcation and socialization [69].

The *experienced* culture—the one recognized and acted upon by members, rather than the one that is proclaimed or rhetorically espoused one—constitutes a pervasive *organizational climate* [70, 71]. Viewed together, organizational culture and organizational climate provide an insight into how organizational participants are most likely to interpret and respond to their shared experience. As Edgar Schein [72] observes, ‘to understand what goes on in organizations and *why it happens in the way it does*, one needs *several* concepts. Climate and culture, if each is carefully defined, then become two crucial building blocks for organizational description and analysis’ (pp. xxiv–xxv, emphasis in original).

## 5.3 *The Intersectionality of Cultural Classifications*

Intersectionality is a construct borrowed from sociology [73, 74]. It is the intersection of two or more categorical sets—diagrammatically, the zone in a Venn diagram where two or more circles overlap. Within that zone of intersection, included members possess two or more categorical identities that simultaneously exist, are important determinants of identity, but which can be independently salient depending on context. Sometimes, intersectionality produces an unexpected additive or compounding effect. By way of analogy, consider what happens when blue and yellow filters overlap to form something that is recognized as a new and unanticipated color (green).

Pager [75] explored how two separate social identifications—‘Black males’ and ‘White males’—interacted differently so far as a felony conviction record and employment opportunities were concerned. For the set that had felony convictions, it was possible to calculate the likelihood of securing employment compared with

non-convicted applicants. However, those within the set of felons those who were categorized as ‘Black’ experienced significantly lower hiring success than ‘White’ or ‘Black non-felons’. Pager’s [75] analysis suggested that categorizations based on a simple dichotomous attribute—felon/non-felon and Black/White—did not accurately predict future employment success. Rather, there was an intersectionality effect when ‘Black’ and ‘felon’ overlapped—a compounding of lower hiring chances for those simultaneously belonging to both classes. Indeed, ‘White felons’ were more likely to be hired than ‘Black non-felons’, demonstrating that ‘*race* continues to play a dominant role in shaping employment opportunities, equal to or greater than the impact of a criminal record’ (p. 958, emphasis added).

Although there is no consensus, many sociologists suggest that the complexities of intersectional experiences dramatically underscores the inherent problems of defining social categories—especially categories regarded as binary, dichotomous, or treated in isolation [76–78]. Indeed, in advocating an *anti-categorical* approach, Leslie McCall [79] argues that social categorization is a process that is inherently artificial and effectively exclusionary, suggesting that the ‘vexing questions about *how* to constitute the social groups of a given social category, which have often arisen in the context of empirical research, have inevitably resulted in questions about *whether* to categorize and separate at all’ (p. 1778, emphasis in original).

Intersectionality may play a significant—albeit under-recognized and presently under-researched—role in many areas of HRM work in which individuals possess two categorical identities related to gender, race, ethnicity, or culture (national and organizational) [80–82]. Culture categorization in most business school courses are usually simple, dichotomous (national/organizational), and treated singularly. This precluded, or at least significantly limits, any exploration of intersectionality by researchers, faculty, or students. However, in the real world, it is apparent that national and organizational cultures *do* result in intersectional complexities for organizational participants, management, and HR professionals—not only in multinational corporations, but also in all businesses that operate across national borders, or which have a diversity of workforce national cultures [83–85].

## 6 Using Teachable Moments When They Materialize

By their nature, most teachable moments are spontaneous and can arise at any point in the HRM course. They are inevitably initiated by a question—a question that materializes from a critical, reflective, or emergent appreciation of what is being studied and of what it might mean. Often, the question comes from the *learner* who is trying to make sense of what is being presented, but who senses that something is missing, or incomplete, even although it is unclear what it is. Learners, depending on the educational culture or the dynamics of the teaching-learning environments, might feel inhibited in raising the issue, or be concerned that such a question might only break the ‘flow’ of what is being taught. And, of course, teachable moments

and the questions that come before them *do constitute* breaks in the conventional or planned flow of many instructors' presentations.

Appreciating this, *instructors* might want to create a suitable teachable moment [16] by shaping the structure of what is being presented, or by providing scaffolds that might lead students to glimpse the possibility of some overarching issue connected with national or organizational culture. It is easy to see how culture considerations might easily flow into many of the functional considerations of the HRM course. For example:

- To what extent is the rationale for HRM in organizations compatible the assumptions, beliefs, and values of the (local) national culture? To what degree does HRM—as presented in the textbook or in the present course—project itself as a ‘universal’ (best practices) or a ‘contextual’ (best fit) discipline? What considerations might this suggest? In what ways might HRM achieve ‘best fit’ in firms located in different countries and geographic regions? [43–45, 86, 87].
- Do the ways in which job applicants are recruited and selected conflict with or espouse the values of an organization’s culture, and if so to what extent? How might firms ensure that they hire applicants who will be successful within their organizational cultural contexts? Might such biases and preferences be discriminatory? If they are, what might be done? [83, 88–90].
- If organizations do hire candidates who best fit their cultures, what happens when these employees are transferred to other organizational units that have different organizational or national cultures? What does HRM mean in a world of multinational corporations, globalization, migration, and international careers? What is talent management and in what ways might its goals and practices differ from HRM? [87, 91–93].
- Performance evaluation is always complex, but in what ways might national culture assumptions shape the evaluation criteria or be problematic in interpreting the results? Do the evaluation criteria match, or clash, with espoused organizational culture? How might employees respond to the process of evaluation and how might national culture assumptions be involved? What challenges might arise in evaluating the performance of a workforce that has high race and ethnic diversity? [94–96].

By their very nature, teaching moments abound throughout the teaching-learning experience. In utilizing them, several considerations should be kept in mind. First, teaching moments should never be forced, artificial, or contrived. They should occasionally punctuate the learning experience, never come to dominate it. Their value lies in providing glimpses of overarching considerations and connection, not in simply adding to content of the course. Their impact lies in promoting interest, further consideration, and novel ways of reflecting on learning, not in distracting or confusing.

Second, teaching moments allow learners to move beyond the restricted scope and delineation of the standard HRM course, and to provide insightful and valuable contributions to that study. They should be connected in ways that complement and



perhaps challenge the HRM study, not in ways that turn it into a cramped and ill-formed Organizational Behavior, International Business, International HRM, or Comparative HRM hybrid.

Third, teachable moments are valuable in furthering the understanding of learners by moving them beyond what they have already learned, by allowing them to reflect on other narratives and other knowledge, and by cultivating a spirit of critical appreciation, awareness, and discernment. They are not meant to distract or obscure. Fourth, teachable moments are best understood as valuable but relatively scarce. They should be used effectively and skillfully when they present themselves, but should not become the central thrust of the classroom pedagogy.

## 7 Conclusion

A bye-product of the ways in which the business school has been created and promoted is a fractured appreciation of the real business world. The courses that the business school offers often reflect this in their fragmentation, reductionism, and emphasis on functionality. Especially in the U.S. business school, Zander and other [97] consider that the legacy of Taylorism is evident among faculty, students, and graduates with students ‘more interested in mechanical checklists than they are in each other, and therefore rarely learn to apply their social learning to the workplace... [with managers] task and result-focused, and anything that distracts them from these regarded as a problem’ (p. 463).

Further, although HRM has grown in importance in the business school, its importance has not necessarily been accomplished by providing real-world solutions to real-world problems. Instead, as Kaufman [98] suggests ‘HRM’s upward trajectory may be over-stated because researchers have been unduly influenced by desire to provide the field the influence, status, and respect it has so long struggled to attain in companies and business schools’ (p. 214). Part of that desire for influence is reflected in a narrower and ‘scientific’ orientation in their research, scholarly publishing, and teaching [25, 99].

The problems of the business school undoubtedly require institutionally-led reform; however, this does not preclude individual instructors and students from recognizing these problems and from trying to reduce the damage that these institutional problems have produced. In this chapter, it is argued that there is a need to bring more breadth and authenticity into the HRM course. This might be done by connecting it more securely to the needs and realities of an increasingly complex, globalized, and diverse world. In particular, it is argued that HRM has to be better socialized and humanized for those who teach it and for those who study it.

A central theme in this chapter is that *teaching* and *learning* are mutually connected in a dynamic process that allows *instructors* to explore their disciplinary specialties and their teaching impact, and *students* to develop deeper and more considered understandings of what they are studying. The introductory section underscored this teacher-learning inter-connectedness by quoting Paul Ramsden’s

[1] aphorism: ‘the aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible’ (p. 5). It might then be appropriate to conclude with another observation by Ramsden.

Ramsden [1] suggests that *understanding* constitutes the most vital competence in academic disciplines and in the application of knowledge. Understanding—its promotion, development, and refinement—is the link between instructor and student in their teacher-learning engagement, in the business school and in the HRM course. Understanding is not simply being able to recall information presented in the course, or even being able to acquire or to construct new knowledge. Rather, for Ramsden [1] and for many other business educators, understanding is ‘the way in which students apprehend and discern phenomena related to the subject, rather than what they know about them or how they can manipulate them’ (p. 6). It is suggested that teachable moments can bring about just such understanding.

## Testing Your Knowledge

### *Answer the Following Questions as True (T) or False (F)*

The following questions might be helpful for both HRM instructors and students in reviewing this chapter. To provide optimal benefit, the reader might like to briefly re-read the section that seems to be connected with the question. Each statement requires a true or false answer. Answers, together with explanations, are provided in the section that follows these questions.

1. There is a growing consensus that the most significant problem with business schools is that they do not produce graduates who have a rigorous understanding of the theory of their discipline.
2. All disciplinary knowledge, including HRM, needs to be broken down into a logical sequence so that it can be taught effectively and understood by students.
3. The focus of most business courses is on analysis—that is, on reducing a complex situation into simpler and discrete issues that can be better understood, taught, and subsequently recognized in management situations.
4. Teachable moments only appear naturally and spontaneously during the teaching-learning encounter and cannot be anticipated, predicted, or forced.
5. Teachable moments, especially when structured by the instructor, provide a very good way of expanding the HRM course and of bringing it in line with other courses such as Comparative HRM and International HRM.
6. HRM is best described as a socially constructed discipline.
7. Organizational cultures always mirror the national culture of the country within which the organization is situated.
8. Intersectionality means the overlapping of two separately defined categories in ways that question the initial categorizations by producing unanticipated, additional and compounded outcomes.

9. Teachable moments might work in the HRM course because of its history and development, but they would not be useful in other business courses.
10. The desired outcome of any academic course—for instructors and students alike—is that the students involved should know the details of the subject matter and be able to apply and manipulate those details effectively.

### *Answers to Review Questions*

1. **False.** Business school graduates usually have a good understanding of disciplinary theory. However, often they have not been taught to critically assess theory, explore the extent to which that theory applies in complex real-world situations, and develop global perspectives or understandings.
2. **True.** It is inevitable that knowledge should be broken into units in order to teach it. However, this raises a problem because knowledge—including that associated with HRM—is by nature interrelated and interconnected. Trying to present knowledge as a linear sequence or progression (linearization) inevitably breaks its continuity, fractures real and potential connections with other bodies of knowledge, and creates a logically defensible but artificial and unauthentic representation of real-world experience.
3. **True.** The dominant logic in devising the curriculum and in teaching subjects in the business school is analytical. Analysis is a crucial part of approaching many managerial contexts but, as indicated in this chapter, a preoccupation with analysis inhibits the more important functions of synthesis and of developing creative perspectives and solutions.
4. **False.** It is true that many teachable moments (when learner-generated) arise naturally and spontaneously in teaching. If they do, then they should certainly be utilized effectively. However, students can be encouraged/prompted to think in ways that make them question what is being taught and to recognize that there may be other possibilities, alternatives, and presently unconnected knowledge that could enrich their learning experience.
5. **False.** Teachable moments provide the opportunity to bring new knowledge into the HRM course, but that knowledge should advance the knowledge content of the course by providing new perspectives, critical re-assessments, and novel ways of connecting with other disciplinary knowledge (such as culture).
6. **True.** Unlike physics, HRM does not deal with realities that can be universally experienced, objectively measured, and independently validated. Instead, it deals with issues such as aptitude, talent, productivity, motivation, commitment, etc., the existence and nature of which are all socially determined.
7. **False.** It is certainly true that many aspects of national culture are reflected in organization. However, national culture is broad, statistically-based, and recognizes that not every individual in a 'nation' will possess the same values.

That variation is reflected organizational founders and the cultures they create in their firms. Organizational cultures usually reflect the values of their founders.

8. **True.** Intersectionality suggests that the experiences of individuals represent a combination of social classifications (gender, race, social class, etc.). The experience of 'Black women' is qualitatively different from those of 'all women' or of 'all Black people'. It is suggested that the experiences of those with two cultural identities (national and organizational) will be impacted differently by the same HRM practices.
9. **False.** Teachable moments are valuable in all business courses. Contemporary business courses recognize the need to make connections with other bodies of knowledge and often include them (globalization, ethical consideration, corporate social responsibility, etc.). However, where there is no structural provision for introducing these issues, teachable moments can be valuable.
10. **False.** Knowledge of details and an ability to manipulate that knowledge is a beginning, but the desired outcome of the teaching-learning experience is increased *understanding*. Understanding is grounded in recognitions, appreciations, and connections that go beyond the prescribed or curricular limits of the subject matter being taught or learned.

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