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Learning And Development Practitioners in Organisations: Organising, Belonging, Learning And Performing Tensions

Research Article

Thomas Garavan[1]

1 Cork University Business School, University College Cork, Ireland and National College of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract: This paper provides a review of the literature on the learning and development (L&D) role in organisations using the lens of paradox theory. I evaluate prior literature and organise it around four paradoxes: organising, belonging, learning and performing. The L&D organisational role is fraught with paradox due to tensions around organising, belonging, learning and performance. I evaluate the different ways in which L&D practitioners respond to these tensions, I highlight future research avenues and suggest practice implications for L&D practitioners.

Keywords: *L&D Practitioners, Paradox Theory, Organising, Belonging, Learning, Performing, Research and Practice Implications*

INTRODUCTION

Learning and development functions and professional L&D practitioners (Garavan et al., 2020) are now a key feature of many organisations either operating standalone or as part of the HR function. The L&D practitioner is considered an important component of the HR architecture and plays a key role in enhancing organisational human capital and business performance. The literature on the role of learning and development is expansive (Dignen & Burmeister, 2020; Ford, 2020; Kraiger & Ford, 2021) and increasingly there is spotlight on the L&D practitioner role. To date, scholars have investigated multiple practice strands including the design, delivery and transfer of learning, the positioning of L&D in organisations, the expectations of L&D actors and effectiveness in delivering on employee and organisational expectations (Gubbins et al., 2018; Torocco & Lundgren, 2020; Garavan et al., 2020). In addition, scholars have suggested different models of practice including the systematic training model (Garavan et al., 2018), cognitive science models (Kraiger et al., 1993), systems perspectives (Colquitt et al., 2000) and open systems theory (Garavan et al., 2022).

The L&D role is a relatively new area of organisational activity compared to the HR role (Bartlett, 2003; Little, 2016). Specialist L&D roles started to emerge in a significant way in the early 2000s and they are now a key feature of organisations worldwide (Garavan et al., 2022; Barratt-Pugh et al., 2020), including public sector organisations, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (Nolan & Garavan, 2016) and most particularly multinational companies (MNCs). The increased significance of the L&D role is attributed to a conflux of factors including the elevated importance of training and skills development, the increased emphasis on personal development planning, the importance of career, employability and organisational development and the imperatives that employee human capital be aligned with business strategy (Noe, 2010; Storberg-Walker & Gubbins, 2007). The L&D role in practice is complex and variegated because practitioners operate in many different contexts and they address multiple

* E-mail: tgaravan@ucc.ie

learning needs and priorities. In addition, L&D practitioners are required to respond to different business models and to be more strategic in how they get things done. The L&D role can therefore be conceptualised as a paradox in itself because it is about the development of the identity of others. Barratt-Pugh et al. (2017) for example proposed that L&D professionals must build their own capability as they build the capability of their clients, be they employees, line managers or senior management.

Paradox theory has emerged as an important theoretical lens to understand HRM and L&D roles in organisations. Paradoxes are defined as “persistent contradictions between interdependent elements” (Schad et al., 2016, 6) and these tensions are persistent over time, impacting perceptions of organisational outcomes (Waldman et al., 2019). Paradox theorists therefore stress “both/and” in terms of how tensions should be managed to optimise outcomes (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). A key idea underpinning this approach is an understanding of oppositions and “a dynamic equilibrium model of organizing [that] depicts how cyclical responses to paradoxical tensions enable sustainability and [potentially produces] … peak performance in the present that enables success in the future” (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 381). Paradox theory has gained traction in the management literature including in areas such as top management teams (Carmeli and Halevi, 2009), CEO strategies (Fredberg, 2014), and strategy work (Dameron and Torset, 2014). In the HRM and L&D fields, recent papers have applied it to talent management (McCarthy et al., 2023; Tahmasebi & Nijs 2023; Jooss et al., 2023) and talent development (Garavan et al., 2020). It is therefore a useful approach to understand the L&D role, in that it emphasises both-and-approaches (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2017) and it is a good fit with the day-to-day L&D role, where the emphasis is on implementation, collaboration and joint-action.

While paradox theory has limitations, it helps to make sense of the tensions inherent in L&D role performance (Berti et al., 2023). The L&D role is subject to a number of important tensions. First, the L&D role is frequently located within the HR function and the latter increasingly gives priority to organisational requirements and the strategic agenda (Gerpott et al., 2015).As a consequence, L&D practitioners experience professional uncertainty, significant resource limitations and insufficient credit for the contributions that they make (Garavan et al., 2020). Second, conflicts between the learning and development needs of the organisation and those of the individual (Kuchinke, 1995; Short et al., 2002) are inevitable with the former increasingly taking a significantly higher-level priority over the latter. This leads to tensions around how these different sets of learning needs can be addressed and L&D practitioners, as a result frequently experience conflicting identities (Byrd, 2023). Third, L&D role holders do not have sole responsibility for the task of developing people and thus have to work and co-create with line managers, employees and senior management (Yorks et al., 2023). Finally, significant tension exist around the measurement of success, including the conflicting expectations of HR actors, the measures of performance that should be used and the time scale to measure the impact of learning and development (Garavan et al., 2021). Therefore, paradox theory is a very good theory to “borrow” to understand the complexities of the L&D role in organisations. Theory borrowing is common in HRM and L&D research, and paradox theory is well established and empirically supported.

My overall aims are threefold: (1) to analyse research on the L&D role using a paradox theory lens, (2) to surface future research avenues using paradox theory and (3) point to a number of practice implications for L&D practitioners.

I structure the paper as follows. I first explain paradox theory and its applicability to the L&D role. I then analyse four tensions/paradoxes in the context of the L&D role: organising, learning, identity and performing. I conclude with suggestions for future research and propose a number of L&D practice implications.

PARADOXICAL TENSIONS: ORGANISING, BELONGING, LEARNING AND PERFORMING

Smith & Lewis (2011) in their seminal publication identified four tensions which organisations and individual role holders encounter. These are organising, belonging, learning and performing. *Organising tensions* arise from efforts to balance forces focused on the efficient and orderly running of the L&D function and the delivery of a consistent and uniform set of L&D solutions versus flexibility, customisation, responsiveness and individualisation in L&D solution design (Anikieva, 2021; Kapros & Peirce, 2014). B*elonging or identity* tensions arise according to Smith & Lewis (2011) from the complexity and plurality manifest between the demands of the individual and the collective and between competing values, roles and memberships (Erthal et al., 2021). *Learning tensions* go to the core of L&D and highlight issues around stability versus change processes (Garavan et al., 2020), organisationally aligned knowledge and behaviours versus continuous transformation. *Performing tensions* arise from the conflicting demands of internal and external stakeholders and different approaches to the evaluation of L&D performance and success. Table 1 summarises these different tensions in the context of the L&D role and highlights research and practice implications of each one.

Tensions around the Organising Paradox

I first address the organising tension or what Smith & Lewis (2011) call the "organising paradox" that is embedded in the way in which L&D practitioners perform their roles. In the context of the L&D role, this paradox highlights tensions around the structuring of L&D, including devolution to the line versus centralised control, collaboration and co-creation versus control and mandated L&D approaches (Lewis, 2000). These organising paradoxes bring to the fore key debates about whether the L&D role should be operational or strategic in focus or achieve some blend of both. A major area of controversy concerns whether L&D role holders should transition to be strategic, as envisaged in the HRD and strategic L&D (Crawshaw et al., 2020; Garavan 2007) literatures or continue to be operational. The call to become more strategic is fraught with problems for L&D practitioners including questions around what it means to be "strategic." Garavan (2007) for example, suggested that to be strategic requires that the L&D role contribute to both the formulation and implementation of business strategy in organisations. From a practice perspective, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2022) defines a learning and development strategy as one that sets out the workforce capabilities, skills and competencies required to realise the effective execution or implementation of strategy. This definition is largely silent on the role of L&D practitioners in formulating strategy. The research suggests that the L&D role because of its structural position within organisations, is less likely to be involved in strategy formulation, with this role usually performed by the HR director or Vice President.

There are also debates as to whether the L&D role has the bandwidth and scope to be involved in both strategy formulation and implementation, and that its more natural home may be in the area of implementation. Normative models such as those proposed by Ulrich (1997) and Ulrich et al. (2008) envisaged that components of the HR role, including learning and development, should include operational and strategic dimensions. In this context, Garavan et al. (2020) found that L&D practitioners were much more successful in executing the operational dimensions of L&D work and less successful with the strategic L&D. For example, L&D professions are frequently pulled into operational type activities and many are therefore very comfortable in this mode of operation. In addition, L&D has long had problems with its professional status in organisations and this issue was acknowledged in the seminal textbooks on training and development (e.g., Kenney et al., 1979; Harrison, 2005). It is argued that because of the positioning of L&D practitioners in organisations, they are not well placed to send signals to senior management about the importance of L&D and the need to upgrade the function.

L&D practitioners have taken actions to enhance their legitimacy and show progress towards evolving to a strategic role. One such step has involved positioning L&D as a centre of expertise (Ulrich, 1989). This is a common approach in MNCs where L&D is organised around a number of areas of expertise including competency development, technical training, leadership development and talent development (Caligiuri et al., 2005; Cox & Warner, 2013; Jaiswal et al., 2022). These centres of expertise are tasked with designing best-in-class learning and development solutions that can be leveraged throughout the MNC to enhance capability. Second, a significant amount of operational learning and development is now devolved to line managers. Managers are expected to engage in developing their team, including coaching and learning on the job. In this context, L&D practitioners are expected to facilitate the upskilling of line managers so that they can perform these tasks effectively (Blayney et al., 2020; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022). This approach is not without its challenges because managers often have significant skill deficits when it comes to performing a development role, coupled with, in some cases, a lack of commitment to do so. While organisations have taken steps to address these line manager skill and motivation issues, a more persistent and intractable problem exists where line mangers experience difficulties in taking on a HR or learning and development role identity (Kou et al., 2022). Overall, the evidence on the effectiveness of the devolution of the operational aspects of L&D is inconclusive.

L&D practitioners increasingly engage with issues around collaboration and co-creation (CIPD, 2023). There is increasing evidence that L&D practitioners are now expected to work in collaboration with other functions to ensure delivery on business-critical issues. These include working with line managers, collaborating with employees and engaging with senior leaders to develop customised learning and development solutions. L&D is also to the forefront when it comes to the outsourcing of learning and development with different forms of outsourcing used including

Table 1: Utilising Paradox Theory to Study the L&D Role in Organisations: Implications for Theory and Practice

Area of Paradox	Sub-Dimensions of Paradox	Future Research Questions	Implications for Practitioners
PARADOX OF ORGANISING	**Devolving to the line versus providing central direction and control** **Definition:** Tension manifest in whether L&D should be devolved to line managers?, or should it be centrally directed and implemented?	• What are the key conflicts and tension that L&D professionals experience in the context of devolution to line managers: • What are the most salient or significant areas of tension and what explains these tensions? • How are tensions with line managers addressed from "both/and" thinking?	• Develop the skills of L&D professionals to cope with the ambiguity of both/and" thinking. • Enhance using training interventions the development of L&D professionals' paradoxical mindset or a to shift from an either-or mentality to a both-and mentality.
	Fostering collaboration and flexibility versus control and standardisation **Definition:** Tension manifest in whether L&D role should be focused on collaboration with organisational actors versus focused on centralised control and coordination	• What tensions arise in the context of collaboration between L&D professionals and other HR actors including senior and line managers? • What unique tensions arise in terms of collaborating with employees around development?	• Develop L&D and line manager skill sets to work as equals in context of L&D. • Promote collaboration as part of the mission statement and guiding principles of L&D role.
	Implementing co-created L&D solutions versus L&D professional deigned solutions **Definition:** Tension focused on whether L&D role should encourage co-created learning solutions or develop solutions within the L&D function?	• How does co-creation of L&D solutions work in practice? • What are the key cultural, trust and climate factors that make co-creation work or not work? • How do L&D professionals navigate paradox or tensions in the context of co-creation and how does it differ for different HR actors in organisations?	• Develop the skills of L&D professionals to take a non-dogmatic stance in co-creation processes. • Encourage L&D professionals and these that they engage with in co-creation to remove the needs for clearcut answers and allow things to emerge. • Develop the skills to ask questions such as What is really going on here?' 'What is the dynamic at play?,' or 'How can we unite two seeming opposites?'
	Focusing on operational versus strategic components of the L&D role **Definition:** Significant tensions around whether L&D should focus on operational delivers of make a strategic contribution to the organisation	• How can L&D professionals utilize work behaviours that enable the performance and strategic roles? • What challenge arise in transitioning from an operational to more strategic L&D role? • To what extent are L&D professionals trapped in an operational mode due to the expectations of line managers and employees?	• Develop financial acumen skills to enhance strategic contribution of L&D. • Network with senior echelon managers to better understand the organisations strategic agenda? • Develop the capabilities of line managers and employees to implement L&D objectives.

Area of Paradox	Sub-Dimensions of Paradox	Future Research Questions	Implications for Practitioners
PARADOX OF BELONGING	**Is L&D about performance or learning?** **Definition:** Tension around whether L&D role is focused on enhancing the performance of employees or ensuring that they learn?	• How do L&D professionals work within the learning and performance tension to achieve synergies? • What demographic and human capital characteristics of L&D professionals shape their cognitions about learning and performance?	• Include training in L&D professional development programmes and qualifications that help them to embrace and live with paradox through accepting that these fundamental identity tensions and become comfortable with the discomfort of these tensions. • L&D professionals need to develop the mindset that established L&D practices are not a one -size -fits all but need to be customised and adjusted to the practice context. • L&D practitioners should become comfortable to operate within liminal spaces.
	Does L&D prioritise the 'human' or the 'resource'. **Definition:** Tension focused on whether the L&D role is about developing the 'human' or the 'resource?	• What are the specific conflicts that arise within the 'human' and 'resource' tension? • How do L&D professional cope with this tension in their interactions with HR actors such as line managers and senior management?	
	Tensions arising from L&D professional and manager identity **Definition:** The tensions that arise for L&D professionals in context of professional identity versus the management of resources within the L&D function?	• How do L&D professionals cope with the paradox that arises from their professional and manager of L&D resources identities? • How do L&D professionals transition to a manager of L&D role and leave behind the professional role? • To what extent do L&D professionals relinquish their professional identity when they become L&D managers versus L&D practitioners?	
	Classroom L&D delivery versus self-directed approaches through technology **Definition:** The classic tension central L&D identity that the classroom is best versus using technology to facilitate the self -directed learning of employees?	• What are the tensions involved in shifting from the classroom where the 'trainer' has control to where the employee has control through self-directed L&D? • What tensions arise for the L&D professional in utilizing technology to deliver training?	
PARADOX OF LEARNING	**Is training about stability of change?** **Definition** A fundamental tension around whether training promote doing things the right way or doing things differently?	• Ho do L&D professionals who deliver training, which is about change and new ways of doing things work with the requirement to do things in one specific way as mandated by the organisation?	• Respect the perspectives of both line managers and employees and avoid being dogmatic based on professional knowledge. • Acknowledge in working with line managers that mutual understanding does not mean agreement, rather it allows for the respectful exploration of different ideas.
	Does training focus on the present of the future role? **Definition:** Another fundamental tension for L&D professionals concerns the role of training and whether it is focused on performing the current role or preparing employees for a future role?	• How do L&D professionals work within the tensions of training for the current role versus developing employee for the future where both are important?	
	Does training focus on the needs of the organisation or the labour market? **Definition:** A major tension which is focused on developing the employee to meet the needs of the knowledge, skills, abilities and other attributes (KSAOs) for the organsation versus developing those that are important in the labor market?	• How do L&D professionals navigate the tensions of developing employees in organisation-specific KSAOs versus those that are valuable in the wider labour market? • What tensions arise in securing organisational resources for the development of employability skills? • How do learning paradox tensions in general manifest themselves in day-to -work?	

Area of Paradox	Sub-Dimensions of Paradox	Future Research Questions	Implications for Practitioners
PARADOX OF PERFORMIMG	**Short-term versus long- term performance** **Definition:** This tension is focused on whether training should emphasise immediate or long-term impacts?	• How do L&D professionals resolve or work within the economic value requirements of organisations versus the social and moral value contribution of L&D?	• Make use of polarity mapping especially in case of large L&D investments which seeks to balance costs and benefits so that measurement tensions can be resolved and lived with. • Develop and practice 'integrative thinking' when it comes to measurement issues and consider alternative perspectives simultaneously.
	Learning driven measures versus business/ financial measures **Definition:** This tension is concerned with whether the L&D role should be concerned with learning or business and financial measures when assessing the contribution of training?	• To what extent are L&D professionals "victims of ambiguity" in how they justify their contribution? • What are the negative consequences of performing tensions for the status of the L&D professional in organisations?	
	Efficiency measures versus effectiveness **Definition:** This tension is concerned with whether the L&D role should focus on the efficiency of training processes and activities or impacts on individuals and organisations?	• What are the negative consequences of performing tensions for L&D professionals and their jobs including job dissatisfaction, stress and work relate health problems? • To what extent can performing tensions become a source of change in L&D practices in organisations?	

business process outsourcing, contracting and licensing (Patel et al., 2019). Business process outsourcing can be comprehensive or selective, with the former focused on the full set of learning and development processes and the latter involving a small number of processes. Contracting is the most common method used and focuses on specific L&D tasks such as programme design and delivery. Licencing is increasingly common and involves the purchasing of access to learning materials. There are however questions as to its impact on the in-house L&D function and the strategic focus of the L&D role. For example, Glasiter (2014) argued that outsourcing may limit the ability of the L&D function to benefit from skill development and this diminishes the strategic impact of the function. In a similar vein, Sim et al. (2012) concluded that outsourcing of the HR function in general has not added value strategically and resulted in a better positioned function to deliver value to the organisation.

L&D practitioners have undertaken automation of operational L&D tasks as a way of addressing the operational-strategic tension. These include the automation of course registration and the nomination process, course evaluations and course participation tracking. MNCs and large public sector organisations have automated components of L&D and make the argument that by automating administrative tasks, L&D practitioners therefore have more scope to a strategic role and contribute to the implementation of business strategies (Garavan et al., 2020). L&D practitioners have also taken steps to enhance their occupational and professional status. A common refrain in the early years of the evolution of learning and development as a profession focused on criticism that those who occupied L&D roles were very administratively focused. It was argued that they were not sufficiently skilled to work on more complex HR areas including employee relations and reward management. This has changed significantly with the introduction of professional masters programmes in learning and development and important work by the CIPD in the UK, ATD and AHRD in the USA and the Learning and Development Institute (formally IITD) in Ireland. These educational and professionalisation efforts have elevated the importance of L&D expertise, business acumen, consultancy skills, financial acumen, change management and strategic awareness (Garavan et al., 2020) and enhanced the legitimacy of the L&D role. They have allowed L&D practitioners to be perform strategic partner roles and contribute to organisational performance (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023).

Tensions around Belonging

The tensions that I have discussed so far arise from the contradictory demands placed on the L&D role by organisations and employees (Van Fenema & Loebbecke, 2014), however tensions also arise around identity and belonging that are cognitively constructed (Lewis, 2011). The identities of L&D practitioners are continually challenged and changing due to new technologies and the development of new relationships within and outside the organisation. A major identity issue which goes to the heart of what the L&D role is about concerns performance or learning (Holton, 2000; Chalofsky, 2007). This tension is articulated in many of the early writings on training and HRD. For example, Weinberger (1998) argued that from the perspective of learning theory, L&D is a continuous process of learning with the focus on the learning itself. However, the performance dimension is also given emphasis with arguments that L&D is about performance improvement for both individuals and organisations. Swanson and Holton (2002) likewise side with the emphasis on performance and that L&D is essentially concerned with the identification and solving of performance. Bierema (2002) and Dirkx (1997) stressed that the process of individual learning and growth are beneficial to organisational performance, however they place learning as the central focus of L&D. Arguably this dimension of identity has shifted significantly given new developments in technology and the changing workplace.

Another version of this identity tension is expressed in debates around whether L&D focuses on the “human” or the “resource.” McInnes et al. (2017) made an important distinction between individual and organisational level L&D and proposed that at the individual level a focus on the “resource” include themes related to individual development, self-awareness, personal change and human capital. This conceptualisation also incorporates the notion of employability, which focuses on the development of self as an identity project. At the organisational level, L&D is concerned with the crafting of an identity in service of the organisation, or as proposed by McGuire, Garavan and Lee (2013) the development of a similar worldview and shared identity to ensure organisational alignment. McInnes et al. (2017) proposed that this harder version of L&D is essentially about the development of a coerced identity where employees are expected and required to attach themselves to a shared organisational identity. Many L&D scholars place the emphasis on the “human” (Garavan, 2007; Fenwick, 2004,) and propose that the essence of the “human” is to be individual and unique, therefore organisations should value diverse and complex identities. At the organisational level, a focus on the “human” is manifest in issues including social justice in the workplace, caring and what are called organisational undiscussables (McGuire, 2014). In contrast, the emphasis on “resource” prioritises usable human resources but gives significantly less attention to the needs of the individual and the diversity of human needs (Collins et al., 2015).

An interesting belonging or identity tension for L&D practitioners concerns their professional versus manager identities (Chen et al 2021). Professional identity for L&D practitioners is manifest in their L&D skills, expertise, and knowledge of learning and development processes; however, they experience significant challenges in establishing their value based on this organisational and professional knowledge (Heizmann & Fox, 2019). In the context of HR, O’Brien and Linehan (2014) criticised frameworks such as those proposed by Ulrich as both prescriptive and simplistic in that they do not capture the nuances in the professional work of HR practitioners. Garavan (2023) found that many L&D professionals felt inadequate in their professional role due to a perceived inability to work on strategic projects. While they have made some progress in that their professional identity enables them to perform multiple competing roles, the reality is somewhat different from that proposed in normative models and versions of the L&D role (Garavan et al., 2018). These identity dimensions contrast with what might be described as manager identity which is manifest in the case of a L&D practitioner who takes on a manager of L&D role. This role requires that they have to engage with financial budgets and resources, manage teams of trainers and L&D professionals and make complex resourcing decisions. Garavan (2023), for example, found that where L&D professionals took on a manager of the L&D function role, they encountered difficulties in shifting away from the professional role and in some cases retained their professional identities as they performed a manager role and sought to mould the manager role with their professional identity.

Barratt-Pugh et al. (2017) highlight that the need to respond to technology and develop new L&D practices represents a self-development project for many L&D professionals and that there is a continuing requirement to work on the self. This is vividly illustrated in the context of how L&D practitioners responded to COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, L&D practitioners had not sufficiently engaged with new technologies as a way of delivering training (Mikołajczyk, 2022; Dirani et al., 2020). The centrality of the classroom as the locus of learning and development presented significant identity challenges for L&D professionals. For example, a CIPD (2022) reported issues related to a reluctance and lack of confidence to upskill to facilitate online learning, concerns about reduced natural interactivity and rapport-building during training sessions. They additionally expressed major self-doubt due the different sensory cues emanating during an online training session compared to the familiar and ideal type face -to-face environment, and fear of technology generally (Nanjappa et al., 2021). Gubbins et al. (2023) explored similar challenges and the ability of L&D practitioners to embrace digital learning. Peng et al. (2022) found that during the shift from working in the office to working from home (WFH), L&D practitioner learning agility was central to their own learning and to supporting the learning agility of others within the organisation.

Overall, L&D practitioners experience significant tensions related to belonging or identity. These tensions cut to the core of what the L&D role in organisations is about. In many respects these tensions reflect a fundamental paradox found in the wider HRM literature related to whether they focus on the needs of the employee or employer. This becomes particularly evident in Ulrich's (1997) notions of employee champion and strategic business partner models and Garavan et al. (2023) for example found that L&D practitioners are more comfortable with the employee champion components. Indeed, in different elements of L&D practice found in organisations, this tension is acknowledged in initiatives such as personal development plans (Beauseart et al., 2011; Greenan, 2016), personal development accounts and financial support (Hamouche 2021), and support for personal development and employability.

Tensions around Learning

Learning paradoxes are, according to Schad et al. (2016), often framed in terms of the "old versus the new", "stability versus change", and "the present versus the future". Organisational training processes emphasise stability in that they focus on the demonstration of skills and behaviours that align with how things are done in the organisation. Many aspects of technical, compliance, regulatory and induction training are underpinned by notions of stability (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Blume et al., 2010). The very definition of training emphasises a change in the behaviour of employees (Baldwin et al., 2009), yet a significant amount of organisational training is designed to reinforce existing behaviours and routines rather than implement new routines,

On the other hand, L&D practices frequently emphasise experimentation, risk taking and double loop learning which provide energy and resources to be more dynamic and competitive. These different learning tensions co-exist and employees oscillate between stability and change. In the implementation of many training practices these opposing forces are highly interdependent and they create present a persistent tug of war for individual leaners and the organisation Where training is explicitly focused on the requirement to develop new behaviours, it challenges existing norms and requires that people individually and collectively do things differently (Kreiner et al., 2006). Some employees will interpret the change advocated through L&D activities as welcome and positive whereas others will interpret them as negative, leading to resistance. These tensions will exist during and post the training process (Doz, 2020).

Another dimension of the stability-change learning tension is manifest in the internal consultancy roles that L&D practitioners perform. Garavan (2023) in his study of L&D roles found that practitioners interpreted the stability and change dimensions differently. For some practitioners in their interactions with line managers, the approach is focused on compliance and providing what is requested. They are less likely to disagree with what the line manager requests and are focused on ensuring that rules and procedures are followed rather than challenge and question issues. In contrast, other L&D practitioners are more likely to question, critique and oppose what managers request. They are more likely to articulate the need for L&D to stand up for their competence and professionalism and to emphasise different ways in which things can be achieved. Increasingly, learning paradox have become more pronounced for L&D practitioners due to technological change which creates a gap between existing capabilities and those required by external environmental changes (Tursunbayeva, 2019; Li et al., 2020).

Tensions around Performing

Given the plurality of stakeholders that L&D practitioners are accountable to, this inevitably gives rise to competing strategies, goals and outcomes (Stahl et al., 2020; Prikshat et al., 2022). Harney and Collings (2021) pointed to the important role that multiple stakeholders play in HRM and Poell (2022) highlighted that L&D is too important to be left to professionals alone but must involve managers and employees. Wognum and Fond-Lam (2000) highlighted the importance of stakeholder involvement and the strategic alignment of L&D, however in practice it results in tensions about means and ends. The number of stakeholders relevant to L&D has expanded to include regulators, external business partners, external consultants and the wider society (Bierema and Callaghan 2014).

At the most basic and day-to-day level, L&D practitioners and line managers frequently have different priorities and time horizons (Hutchinson & Purcell, 2007; Gibb 2003). Kravariti et al. (2023) investigated the importance of line manager support for development as an element of effective implementation. The reality is that line managers give less priority to L&D practices and they have a short term-time horizon, focused on performance. In addition, line managers focus on the team or work unit rather than the total organisation, which contrasts with L&D practitioners who take a more total organisation perspective. Frances and Keegan (2006) pointed out that HR and L&D practitioner were likely to experience tensions when choosing which stakeholders to serve, be it the organisation or employees, their profession or external stakeholders. O'Brien and Linehan (2014) for example emphasised that this lead to strain, emotional exhaustion, a sense of failure and professional incompetence. Garavan (2023) found that L&D practitioners have increased engagement with individual employees around development planning and career issues. This can sometimes lead to conflicts with line managers concerning development opportunities, career progress and supports. Senior leadership are a somewhat opaque group for L&D practitioners, and many have limited engagement with this level and have to learn about their priorities from HR managers who sometimes function as gatekeepers. Tensions also arise between the L&D role and HR role when it comes to prioritising development and resources for learning and development.

L&D practitioners increasingly respond to these tensions around means and ends through an increased use of learning analytics and metrics (Poquet et al., 2022; Lundgren & Poell, 2023). They use metrics to make justifications for financial resources to support training and to provide data to external training agencies that fund training. However, Garavan et al. (2020) found a relatively low level of sophistication in the use of learning metrics and these metrics are not widely distributed outside of the L&D function. The research from the wider HRM field suggests that the use of analytics may have value in enhancing the strategic role of the function and its overall contribution to organisational effectiveness (Boudreau & Lawler, 2014). There is however no doubt that the L&D function is behind the curve when it comes to measurement of its effectiveness (Garavan et al., 2019; Phillips & Phillips, 2016).

When it comes to deciding on which metrics to use to demonstrate the impact of L&D, additional tensions emerge between stakeholders. The essential dilemma here concerns efficiency and effectiveness measures and proximal and distal measures (Kodwani, 2017; Ritzmann et al., 2017). Garavan et al. (2020) found that many L&D practitioners utilised efficiency rather than effectiveness measures of training, including programme attendance, utility, relevance and satisfaction and they also measured the effectiveness of the trainer. While these metrics are important to L&D practitioners, managers give them significantly less priority. In contrast, managers prioritise proximal measure such as impacts on productivity, reduction in errors and safety issues, and enhanced customer service. However, the reality is that few L&D practitioners systematically measure these dimensions. Senior managers prioritise distal measures such as impacts on sales performance and the bottom line, yet these measures take time to collect and there is the persistent and intractable problem of how do L&D practitioners link training to these outcomes (Garavan et al., 2021; Govender & Adegbite, 2022). In addition, HR specialists prioritise HR-type outcomes including increased engagement, job satisfaction, retentions and promotions. However, these outcomes also present a causation problem in that the direct links between learning and development practices and these outcomes are difficult to capture. Wider stakeholders are interested in external outcomes including enhanced strategic relationships, community involvement, contributions to CSR and the sustainability of the environment. These different and potentially competing stakeholder priorities present significant challenges when it comes to generating solutions that enable paradox to be navigated (Dadd & Hinton, 2022; Cotter et al., 2018).

DISCUSSION

In this paper I use the lens of paradox theory to synthesise the literature on the L&D practitioner role in organisations. Over a period of some 30 years. the literature on learning and development has grown significantly and it is now an important HRM practice in SMEs, public sector organisations and MNCs (Garavan et al., 2022). My motivation for this paper is to bring a sense of coherence to literature and, in doing so, I argue that paradox theory is a good fit and an appropriate theory to conceptualise the L&D role in organisations (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The L&D role is complex, characterised by significant tensions concerning organising identity, learning and performance (Garavan et al., 2021; Lundgren & Poell, 2023). Paradox theory emphasises a conflict between opposites that are interrelated, persist over time will likely coexist and should therefore be managed in conjunction (Lewis, 2000).

To date research using a paradox lens to investigate the L&D role is nascent with the Garavan et al (2020) study the one of the few to apply paradox theory to development. I suggest that the use of paradox theory can move the field forward and shift away research away for the current instrumental approach and instead emphasise synergies and win-win solutions (Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2015). Paradox theory emphasises that the long-term viability of the L&D function requires - on the part of the role holder - continuous efforts to meet multiple and divergent demands and priorities. In terms of the leadership of the L&D function, the theory suggests that the role holder should at all times seek to counterbalance defensive behaviours by stakeholders or L&D actors and manage tensions and conflicts by simultaneously meeting the requirements of the opposing forces (Erthal et al., 2021). I accept this this is not an easy task for L&D practitioners something that I will address later under the practice implications. I will first consider future research implications.

Recommendations for Future Research

The use of paradox theory points to several important areas of future research on the L&D role which I outline in Table 1. First, there is a need to develop more insights around the operation of the four paradoxes that I discuss in this paper. To date, research has tended to focus on "which" and "when" questions. "Which" questions look at how a problem can be solved and suggest a trade-off, whereas "when" questions set up research to investigate an ideal solution based on "if/then" logic. The application of paradox theory suggests that research should shift to investigating "both/and" questions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This type of approach could be used to understand for example the dynamics of interdependence between the operational and strategic dimensions of the L&D role. It could also shed light on the interdependence of stability versus change in L&D practices and the emphasis on the "human" versus "resource" in the way L&D practices are implemented.

Second, there is a need to develop insights into how L&D practitioners respond to the different types of paradox. Paradox theory suggests potential responses. So, for example, what is the utility of synthesis where L&D practitioners make simultaneous use of both operational and strategic role dimensions within the context of the paradox of organising? How can L&D professionals use both temporal and spatial separation to address paradoxes related to stability versus change and the "human" and "resource" tensions in L&D practices? What role does acceptance for example play where L&D actors are willing to accept the paradoxical impacts of using specific L&D practices rather than focusing on positives or negatives?

Third, there is major scope to investigate the outcomes and dynamics of paradox in the context of L&D over time. What for example are the benefits to L&D of the L&D practitioners working through paradoxes and the costs of failing to do so? How does the navigation of paradoxes impact the performance of L&D in organisations and how it is perceived by stakeholders. In terms of the dynamics of paradox, there is scope to explore the emergence of virtuous and vicious cycles that are key component of how actors respond to tensions. What do these dynamics do to the standing of the L&D role in an organisation? Can virtuous cycles of learning advance the impact of L&D in the long term? These are just some of the questions that can be investigated.

Paradox Resolution Strategies for L&D Practitioners

My analysis suggests several practice implications. First, central to L&D and other actors, effectiveness within the paradox approach is focused on the development of a paradox mindset. Proponents of a paradox mindset (Miron-Spektor & Palatz, 2020) suggest it helps managers and L&D practitioners to embrace tensions and develop a frame to enable them to understand conflicting and interconnected demands and priorities. It also helps managers to both identify and then accept that tensions are inevitable (Smith & Tushman, 2005). Organisations should endeavour to design development interventions that help managers and L&D practitioners to engage with inconsistencies and tensions and develop the mental templates required to embrace seemingly contradictory dimensions to a task. Second, there may be value in L&D practitioners and for that matter other HR actors to question the strategic – operational focus tension. In particular, Gerpott (2015) proposed that the paradoxical perspective is useful in questioning the either/or thinking that often accompanies calls for L&D to be strategic. I would go far as to suggest that L&D practitioners should begin to question whether the commonplace appeal to be strategic in many ways neglects what is distinctive about L&D practices in organisations, which is to enhance the individual develop their KSAOs and promote (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

Learning and development practices and the L&D practitioner role are now well established in organisational practice and academic research. Researchers have generated important insights on how the L&D role has evolved and the tensions experienced in the world of practice. In this article, I "borrow" the theoretical lens of paradox theory to understand tensions that occur within L&D day-to-day' practice. Given that paradox theory is a firm-level theory, it is appropriate to use to understand the L&D role at an organisational level. It provides a framework to categorise the tensions that L&D practitioners experience and it helps to make sense of their responses to these tensions. My wish is that this paper will help to shift the focus of research to concentrate on "both/and" type questions and to develop the skills of L&D practitioners to cope effectively with paradox.

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