Engaged in teaching HRM: The quest for critical and reflective practice

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abstract

Research on teaching experiences related to converting the theoretical critique of HRM into practical action is scarce. In this article, we scrutinize our own development as HRM teachers in our quest for critical and reflective teaching praxis. We address teaching HRM as a practical activity and use our own teaching materials from the years 2011–2015 to identify three phases in the development of our teaching: telling, challenging, and engaging. All three phases rely on somewhat different tactics and teaching methods when incorporating critical HRM traditions and reflection into course design. We argue that in order to encourage critical thinking towards HRM we as teachers need to, firstly, reflect on our own practice. Reflection demands time and commitment– both rarities in today's academia, characterized as it is by pressures to publish in top-tier journals. Secondly, we need to use students' experiences and expectations of HRM as a starting point when planning our teaching. However, incorporating critical content is a balancing act in today's university context, which increasingly underlines the employability of students.

Introduction

It is March 2016 and we are having lunch in the university cafeteria with a couple of doctoral students. One of them has been asked to participate in teaching a "capstone course" for bachelor-level students. He has a background in sociology and he seems quite puzzled over the expectations. The course aims to provide students with "hands on" business experience and "practical analytical skills" that students could use in their future as management consultants. He doubts whether he understands what this means: "I would be happy to give a lecture on Weber's thinking, but I don't know if I'm the right person to do this. Maybe it's relevant for my career development as teaching experience", he says. "However, I still think that these students would benefit more from a wider and critical education", he adds.

> "Isn't understanding the bigger picture and questioning the taken-for-granted what most leaders and managers seem to be crying out for in their employees?"

The conversation above took place in our workplace, Aalto University School of Business in Finland. It exemplifies tensions characterizing contemporary university-level business education. University studies are increasingly expected to contribute to the 'employability' of students, to be 'useful', and to offer a 'toolbox' for future employment. These expectations, however, conflict with the more critical view of higher education, which underlines the importance of educating reflective professionals or citizens capable of analyzing power dynamics and the truth effects of management and research paradigms. These are not only local tensions, but pressures stemming from students, industry and commerce across different national contexts (Cranmer, 2006; Bratton and Gold, 2015).

In the contemporary societal context, characterized by financial crisis, growing economic inequality, the exploitation of natural resources and the workforce in countries with insufficient regulation, not only economics departments but also business schools and disciplines in general are accused of contributing to, rather than trying to counter-balance, these trends (Bratton and Gold, 2015; Fotaki and Prasad, 2015). Similarly, the field of Human Resource Management (HRM), which has since its emergence been criticized for being an ideological force contributing to the neoliberal political agenda, is now increasingly required to become more reflective and critical (Janssens and Steyaert, 2009). These same requirements apply to teaching, and in recent years a number of studies have addressed teaching critical, responsible and reflective HRM (Bratton and Gold, 2015; Holden and Griggs, 2011; Ruggunan and Spiller, 2014).

As indicated in this special issue, there is no lack of critical approaches to HRM to draw on when aiming for more critical HRM scholarship and practice. However, the mainstream approach to HRM seems to offer knowledge with practical managerial relevance, and is thus easier to put into practice in organizations, which has led to its dominance among HR practitioners and business school training in general (King and Learmonth, 2015; Valentin, 2007). Advice about converting theoretical critique into practical applications in teaching HRM is scarce compared to the number of mainstream HRM textbooks. Some scholars, however, advocate critical and reflective HRM education (Bratton and Gold 2015; Holden and Griggs, 2011; Lawless and McQue, 2008). Our study builds on this and takes practice into account by studying how our own teaching practice evolved while teaching a bachelor-level course in HRM during the years 2011–2015.

Our aim is to describe how we as university teachers and junior scholars have developed our teaching practice in our quest for critical and reflective teaching. We

approach our professional learning process from a practice theory perspective which underlines knowing, teaching and learning as cultural and social phenomena (Lave, 1996), as 'knowledge in action situated in the historical, social and cultural context in which it arises' (Nicolini et al., 2003; Nicolini, 2012). Practices can be understood as knowledgeable collective action created from resources and constraints at hand. Practices are, hence, negotiated and emergent in nature (Gherardi, 2009). Practice theory views work organizations as dependent on knowledge created through participation in community and shared meaning-making processes in relation to the action at hand (Gherardi et al., 1998). Organizational learning is social by nature and acquired by socialization to organizational work (Brandi and Elkjaer, 2011). Consequently, knowing and learning are tacit processes which take place in communities of practice, which share joint enterprise and engagement (Nicolini et al., 2003). Many practice scholars also use the notion of praxis, which has a long history as a philosophical term, to denote reflected or informed practice (Bernstain, 2011). Praxis is often understood as engaging with ideas in action; as practice which combines reflection on the social reality (critical awareness) and action (Arendt, 2013; Freire, 1970). We use the term praxis in a similar vein to indicate activity which 'combines a moral purpose with political commitment and tactical skillfulness' (Räsänen, 2008).

We narrate our trajectory from novice business school recruits and teachers towards an engaging teaching praxis which reconciles our critical view of HRM as social scientists with students' expectations for relevant business skills needed in contemporary working life. In so doing, we pay special attention to the different ways in which we have encouraged critical reflection. By following our learning process as teachers, we identify shifts in our teaching practice, developing from informing (telling) to challenging, and finally to engaging, with a view to incorporating critical content into the mainstream course setting. In the spirit of this special issue, we explore what can be considered a good way to teach 'how to manage the human' in the contemporary business and societal context.

First, we proceed by describing in more detail the problems related to teaching HRM in business schools and higher education in general. Then we move on to describe some methodological considerations, as well as the way in which our teaching has evolved, paying attention to the interplay between the changing context, our increased understanding of the subject matter and our pedagogical skills. The article ends with a discussion of the results and our conclusions.

Difficulties in teaching critical HRM

HRM – Key to business success or ideological force?

In most mainstream HRM textbooks designed for higher education, teaching HRM covers management activities related to people in organizations (recruitment, competence development, performance management, change management, and administration), as well as an overview of HRM as 'a distinctive approach to the management of people' that is different from personnel management (Torrington et al., 2008: 10). They also briefly describe the historical development and theoretical underpinnings of HRM as a subject and scholarly field. An overview of mainstream HRM textbooks shows that HRM research and education aims to offer theories that solidify human resources as a source of competitive advantage, and guidance on how to achieve this through showcasing a variety of evidence-based practices from recruitment to talent management (Dessler, 2011). This suggests that most HRM teaching is largely aligned with the interests of business, offering practical advice on how to succeed, adopting a functionalist and managerialist perspective (Stewart et al., 2007), and training students *for* management and business (Perriton, 2007).

Since its emergence, HRM as a managerial paradigm and research field has been questioned by a number of related academic disciplines, which adopt either a critical or a wider social and historical perspective. From early on, HRM scholarship has been linked to advancing the neoliberal agenda, and contributing to the trend of weakening unions and collective bargaining (Jacoby, 2004; Weiskopf and Munro, 2011). These critical remarks have originated from diverse traditions: Marxism (industrial relations, labour process theory and industrial sociology) (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995), business ethics (Greenwood, 2002; 2013), adult education (Baptiste, 2001), and history (Kaufman, 2002; Jacoby, 2004), to mention a few.

HRM practice and scholarship have also been criticized from within, with HRM scholars like Karen Legge (2005), Tony J. Watson (2004) and Tara Fenwick (2005) calling for more critical research on the subject. The aim of critical HRM studies has traditionally been to demonstrate the challenges inherent in transforming HR policy from rhetoric into reality, and to investigate how the strategic objectives of HRM are formed in organizations and society   (Guest and King, 2004; Legge, 2005; Truss, 2001). Scholars addressing HRM from the Critical Management Studies (CMS) perspective have raised concern over attempts by HRM theorists and professionals, traditionally often described as having a low status, to gain a strategic role in organizations. They argue that this has led to 'short-sightedness' and an over-emphasis on economic performance (Bratton and Gold, 2015). Various social consequences are also associated with the spread of HRM. New flexible employment patterns are eroding full-time employment and leading to contingent or precarious work, contributing to a rise in insecurity and income inequality (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010; Bolton et al., 2012; Fotaki and Prasad,

2015). Additionally, a vibrant school of thought within CMS has engaged in Foucauldian analysis to address new forms of people management as neo-normative forms of control, used to gain commitment and to construct an enterprising and flexible subject, institutionalizing neoliberal logic in the process (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; 2011; Fleming, 2013).

Some of these critical works, such as that by Karen Legge (2005), are established as core readings in many HRM curricula, and also cited in mainstream textbooks. Still, it is argued that critical HRM approaches don't truly challenge mainstream approaches by offering an alternative perspective on how to practice and/or teach the agenda (Ruggunan and Spiller, 2014; see also Fournier and Grey, 2000). Scholars from various backgrounds have also argued that the critical (Foucauldian) tradition marginalizes worker resistance and establishes the trends it aims to critique (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). Lately, there have been calls for 'critical performativity' (Spicer et al., 2009), in other words calls for critical scholarship to adopt a more 'practice-oriented position that explores new practices and possibilities for action' (King and Learmonth, 2015: 356).

Some attempts towards critically-oriented but practical HRM have been made. These attempts scrutinize HRM, and management in general, as phenomena anchored in different social, political and economic contexts, and underline that due to the ideological elements of HRM theory and related practices, management education ought to be *about* management, not *for* it (see Perriton, 2007.) Such critical but practical HRM efforts emphasize the need to move from teaching 'neutral' instrumental knowledge and management skills towards so-called critical education. In critical education, questioning taken-for-granted assumptions underlying HRM theory is stressed (Bratton and Gold, 2015; Holden and Griggs, 2011; Lawless and McQue, 2008; Valentin, 2007). The point is to reflect upon HRM instead of just learning 'how to do it' (Valentin, 2007). Furthermore, this reflection is expected to engage students and teachers in social change (Ruggunan and Spiller, 2014), echoing the project of CMS, the spirit of critical pedagogy and emancipatory education (Freire, 1970; Valentin, 2007) aiming for democracy and empowerment in society (Perriton, 2007). These programmes also underline community or community of practice, *the social* instead of the individual, as sites of learning and change (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004; Valentin, 2007).

Most studies on critical HRM and management education stress critical reflection as a key pedagogical tool for such education (Holden and Griggs, 2011; Lawless and McQue, 2008; Perriton, 2007; Valentin, 2007). In the fostering of such critical reflection, many scholars have turned towards practice theories, as they seem to offer paths to engage students and practitioners in such activities. For example, Lawless and McQue (2008) have drawn on critical pedagogy and action

research to form a critical agenda for HRM, one that would be based on reflection and enable a 'community of critical practitioners'. Similar attempts have been made when educating practitioners (Lawless and McQue, 2008) working as managers (King and Learmonth, 2015), as well as when designing HRM or HRD programs for university (Armitage, 2010; Valentin, 2007; Holden and Griggs, 2011). In our academic home base, Aalto University (previously Helsinki School of Economics), a research group called Management Education Research Initiative (MERI) maintains a long tradition of inquiry within the discipline into academic practice, including both research and teaching. It also offers a range of courses on management and HRD from candidate to doctoral level, drawing on similar insights from adult education and practice theory (see Korpiaho et al., 2007; Päiviö, 2008; Räsänen, 2009; Räsänen and Korpiaho, 2011).

Despite all of these intentions, adopting a critical teaching practice entails similar difficulties in relation to enhancing critical reflections in the classroom and transferring critical HRM practice from the classroom to workplaces. Such difficulties arise from the disparity between the nature of critical knowledge and the expectations of 'useful skills and knowledge' imposed on higher education (Valentin, 2007). These studies, as well as abundant research on higher education reforms worldwide, suggest that although there seems to be a clear need for critical education, it is also becoming harder to realize due to the generalized expectations for education to serve economic or managerial interests and disciplinary mechanisms institutionalized in higher education.

Instrumentalization of higher education

While there is more demand than ever for critical approaches to management, it seems that educational institutions themselves are running based on the same managerial logic that they ought to question, making this quest increasingly difficult. Along with other educational and public institutions, universities are increasingly led by market logic and are expected to serve economic interests (Ball, 2009; Lorenz, 2012). Universities are also increasingly treated like competitive actors, 'a global market of their own' competing over students, talent, resources, status and reputation (Aula, 2015; Aula and Tienari, 2011). Institutions offering higher education are expected to serve the national interests of 'competition states', competing over investments and talent, and contributing to nations' innovativeness on the international market (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Ball, 2009). In the knowledge economy, universities do not encourage students to seek the truth. Instead, they are expected to contribute to lifelong learning by producing 'product-like knowledge' that can be delivered, transferred and marketed (Furedi, 2006). They are also expected to produce a competent workforce; to enhance the employability of students by developing skills and attitudes that businesses and

societies require (Ball, 1998). In order to outshine other universities, they are also required to produce cutting-edge research. To ensure this, universities are themselves led by continuous auditing processes, competition over resources and career opportunities, and the need to develop a celebrity culture (Berglund, 2008).

All of the above-mentioned changes underline the instrumental logic, usefulness, innovativeness and effectiveness of knowledge and skills production. Extensive scholarship on the neoliberalization of universities has demonstrated how universities themselves have been harnessed in the production of individualized and responsibilized entrepreneurial subjects, willing and able to transform their own conduct to become 'ideal neoliberal selves' (Brunila and Siivonen, 2016; Davies and Bansel, 2007). In such environments, activities previously regarded as legitimate core functions of universities – pursuing truth and engaging in contemplative activity – are increasingly treated as non-relevant or elitist (Furedi, 2006). This hinders endeavours geared towards reflection and criticality. In the contemporary context, they seem to be turning into instrumental and superficial 'tools' to be used to gain a degree or enhance business rather than to pursue real engagement with questioning and innovative practices (Holden and Griggs, 2011). Instead of nurturing reflection arising from understanding a subject thoroughly, criticality turns into asking a certain set of questions or engaging in superficial reflection to please the teacher.

Based on Lawless and McQue's (2008) and Valentin's (2007) experiences, such an environment also hinders critical reflection in other ways. In the competitive educational and labour market, and in circumstances of growing unemployment of university graduates, students are increasingly urged to act like consumers and to expect educational services that enhance their employability. Continuous attempts to improve personal skills, qualities and experiences in order to compete in the graduate labour market burden students with individual responsibility in situations where their opportunities might still be more dependent on their social background (Boden and Nedeva, 2010). Additionally, teachers involved in critical education have expressed concerns about rendering their students more vulnerable to being unemployed if they encourage reflective professionalism in a context where competition is encouraged (Lawless and McQue, 2008; Valentin, 2007). Hence, these authors recommend that critical and reflective teaching should be offered as part of a wider curriculum.

Methodological considerations

Our analysis is based on our experiences of teaching a bachelor-level course in HRM during the years 2011–2015. During this time, while we principally worked

as project researchers and on our own PhDs, we were in charge of teaching this course ten times in total, and twice a year on average. The course is arranged by Aalto University School of Business where we have taught both Open University students and degree students in the Department of Management Studies. Aalto University, like almost all Finnish universities, offers Open University education. As the name implies, the courses are open to everyone regardless of age, aims or previous education, in return for a modest fee.

From the outset until our final implementation of the course, the key learning targets were to familiarize students with the scope of the HRM field, as well as to help them understand the significance of HRM in organizations, and to recognize how HRM contributes to achieving organizational goals and performance. An additional aim was to find links between HRM theory and organizational practices in Finnish work organizations. To achieve this, a critical approach has always been part of the course. The original lecture content covered the history of HRM and addressed differences between personnel administration, HRM and SHRM. Further, gender inequality in labour markets and industrial relations were incorporated into the lectures.

The context for our teaching experiences was the substantive merger Aalto University had undergone by 2010. In this context, our workplace, Helsinki School of Economics, was merged with Helsinki University of Technology and the School of Arts, Design and Architecture. In the period during which we started teaching, the effects of the merger had started to become apparent. As Aula (2015), who studied this merger, indicates, it was part of a wider development in Europe where university mergers have become an integral part of public sector reforms, in which the role of universities has been redefined to serve the interests of national economies.

To analyze how our trajectory towards critical and reflective teaching praxis developed, we used our own teaching materials as data. To this end, we traced how our course content and teaching methods evolved during the ten HRM courses that we taught together during a four-year period between autumn 2011 and autumn 2015. This material includes a rich collection of PowerPoint slides, notes from lectures and classroom exercises, online discussions, course readings, as well as pre- and final exam questions. To be able to track changes in our teaching, we also used notes based on our reflections, as well as assignments we had used on pedagogical courses, coupled with course feedback.

We conducted the analysis in two interrelated phases. First, we skimmed through all of the materials, categorizing them chronologically. Then we scrutinized them further, looking for the ways in which we had formulated lectures, classroom

exercises and exam questions. We were particularly interested in changes in practice, in this case how we had modified both the course content and the teaching methods and how we endeavored to engage students in critical reflection. This way of analyzing the data was fruitful since it allowed us to scrutinize our notes and materials in connection to the contextual changes that occurred during the time of our teaching.

Development of our teaching practice

In this section, we show how we as teachers developed our teaching practice in our quest for praxis that would encourage reflection and critical understanding of HRM. When scrutinizing the teaching methods we had applied during the years in question and taking into account the changing context of our teaching, we noted that we have gradually modified our teaching practice on our journey from novice teachers to where we are now. Consequently, we identified three phases of development in relation to how we presented critical content and strove for reflection. We have categorized these phases as *telling, challenging,* and *engaging.* Each phase was motivated by a different tactical stance, indicating change in our didactic aims and vision, as well as in our skilfulness in realizing these visions. Next we discuss these phases in detail and show how we combined mainstream and critical HRM approaches during each of them. As practice theory indicates, practices are socio-cultural and situated (Nicolini et al., 2003), and hence we also pay attention to how context is reflected in the development of our practices. These insights are summarized in Figure 1.

Phases	1. Telling →		2. Challenging →		3. Engaging →
Years	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Teaching methods	Lecturing				Participatory inquiry in small groups about linkages between HRM and corporate social and environmental responsibility (both during and outside course meetings).
	Written group assignment on role and organization of HRM in a work organization (outside the lecture room).				
	Brief classroom discussions.		Classroom exercises and discussions linked to pre-readings.		Long discussions and exercises linked to participatory inquiry and pre-readings.
	Preliminary exam.			Preliminary assignment.	
	Final exam.				Reflective exam.
Teaching of critical HRM	Critical view to HRM as a minor perspective compared to mainstream HRM. Lecturing about history and industrial relations.		Critical view to HRM discussed and lectured alongside mainstream content. Challenging students' points of view with critical readings and exercises.		Framing of critical HRM and critical thinking in general as a part of professionalism in working life. Instead of lecturing on critical HRM, the critical perspective stems from the students themselves.
Teaching context	Strong influence of professor in charge of HRM teaching, inexperience of business school context, newly accepted doctoral student status.		Increased university-level pressures to become 'world-class', pedagogical training.		
	Imposter syndrome.				Freedom to revise the course.
Tactical stance	Novice: Trying to cope in a new field and portray expertise.		Towards situated knowledge: political awareness linked to increased understanding of HRM.		Reflective and engaging: political understanding combined with pedagogical understanding and skills.

Figure 1: Development of teaching practice from 2011 to 2015

Phase 1: Telling

We have named the first phase of our teaching development as 'telling' because our teaching relied mainly on giving lectures, formulating and grading exams and assessing written assignments. Simply put, we expected students to absorb the knowledge that we had chosen and presented to them. This phase lasted for approximately eighteen months between autumn 2011 and summer 2013.

We got involved in teaching the HRM course soon after being recruited to Aalto University as project researchers. As the project was investigating HRM performance links, we were asked to assist the professor in charge of HRM courses. We were subsequently offered the possibility to teach the same bachelor-level course ourselves for Open University students. However, we were novices not only in relation to teaching, but also in relation to business school education and the HRM curriculum as our educational background is in social sciences (social history and sociology). This led to a situation whereby we adopted practices that we observed around us, while relying on our previous experiences and knowledge as students in social sciences. Although we lacked teaching experience, we had tacit knowledge (Nicolini et al., 2003) of higher education from our own history as students, and we were thus aware of context-independent teaching rules (Gherardi et al., 1998).

We also applied to and were accepted into the doctoral programme at Aalto University, which led us to a situation where we were simultaneously teaching and taking courses at the same university. The fact that we were students ourselves on a number of different courses made us aware of the students' perspective. Thus, we aimed for 'fair' teaching from the beginning: teaching that would support students' learning, avoid addressing them as 'others', and recognizing our own power in the classroom. In retrospect, our background in social sciences made us aware of the importance of understanding power asymmetries in teaching. Interestingly, this also resonates with practice theoretical perspectives on higher education, which support respecting students as capable agents and practitioners (Korpiaho et al., 2007).

During our initial teaching years, we were mainly preoccupied with how to 'make it' as teachers, and to showcase our own knowledge of HRM, with which we were familiarizing ourselves at the same time. When we started teaching the course, we followed the course content and used almost the same lecture slides that were produced by the responsible professor.

From the outset, we were bewildered with some of the aspects of HRM. The division of literature into critical and mainstream seemed particularly odd, as this

division is missing from social sciences, as they don't aim to produce information directly for business or managerial purposes. Hence, we incorporated some new content into the lectures, which reflected our own thinking, including a more thorough lecture on the history of people management to situate HRM within a continuum of different managerial paradigms. When assessing students' written assignments, we drew attention to the links between people management paradigms and changes in working and employment patterns. We also tentatively incorporated the themes of responsibility and sustainability with regard to HRM (Ehnert and Harry, 2012; Jackson and Seo, 2010), as we regarded these as emerging trends, challenging the 'hard' versions of HRM to some extent. We also made moderate efforts to engage the students in discussion, following the example of the responsible professor. We asked for their opinions and experiences on performance assessments, for example, and asked them to come up with examples of different forms of competence development. These discussions were brief for the most part and took place at the end of the lectures.

The second time we taught the course, we continued almost in the same vein. However, modest progress from novices to advanced beginners who could recognize situational elements (Gherardi et al., 1998) were visible in the way we aimed for a more reflective direction. These changes were made largely due to discussing student feedback and facing situated expectations: some students lamented the lack of concrete tools for management, and complained about irrelevant content and boring lectures. Hence this time, during the first lecture, we asked the students to contemplate and discuss with a partner 'why they are attending the course, what they wish to learn and how they would like to be taught'. Then we linked their thoughts to multiple expectations of studying HRM in universities: We explained that not only managerial tools, but also analytical competence and wider understanding were to be acquired from university studies. This illustrates how we believed we could foster students' capability of critically evaluating HRM by telling them how the subject could (or should) be addressed from our perspective. Moreover, to make the content more vibrant for participants, we resolved to incorporate at least one class discussion into every (45-minute) lecture in order to 'involve' the students.

While lecturing, we presented mainstream and to a lesser extent also critical research to the students. However, our knowledge of these fields was still limited to the most well-known HRM critical approaches (such as Legge, 2005), as was our repertoire as teachers in engaging the students in critical thinking.

Phase 2: Challenging

The second phase in our teaching development lasted approximately two and a half years between summer 2013 and autumn 2015. We term this phase 'challenging' due to our own intensified experience of the political nature of HRM and our related attempt to challenge the students to switch between different perspectives on the subject. This change in our practice was due to our wider and deeper knowledge of both mainstream HRM and CMS, gained by practical experience of both studying and teaching these matters. Additionally, due to our strengthened pedagogical understanding, we tried to make the course elements more aligned (Biggs, 1996) and the grading more transparent since we believed this would be fair and would boost student engagement.

During this phase, the teaching environment underwent various transformations. New frameworks for career management and teaching were adopted (see Aula, 2012; Lund, 2012 for documentation). First, the new Aalto University established a pedagogical centre that offered a range of pedagogical courses. We attended these to the extent that it was possible as doctoral students (as when applying for pedagogical training those having tenure were prioritized). Second, the changing environment brought new pressures for university staff to become 'world-class': to internationalize and publish in specific top journals (Lund, 2012; Tienari, 2012). Shortly after the introduction of a new tenure track system, staff who had been employed in the discipline for years were no longer offered renewed contracts. Similarly, some courses were cut. In particular, courses taught by scholars from the Management Education Research Initiative (MERI), who had developed the teaching of enhanced reflection and participatory methods within our management school and discipline, were cut. In light of these changes, some critical-minded scholars also left the university, as they no longer regarded their work there as meaningful. Furthermore, recruitments outside of the tenure tracks, when famous corporate leaders with limited academic experience were hired, made us feel inadequate as teachers at times – a sign of the 'imposter syndrome' (Knights and Clarke, 2013). As female PhD students and part-time teachers, we were neither world-class researchers, nor could we lean on merits from the business world. The new rhetoric also suggested that we might have problems reaching world-class aims, as this would (based on the rhetoric) require being able to dedicate oneself completely to advancing one's international academic career. In our life situations with various family commitments, this kind of dedication seemed impossible and led us to doubt our chances of fulfilling the requirements of the new academic ideal (Lund, 2012).

These contextual changes affected our teaching practice in various ways. First, the pedagogical courses we attended had an impact on our teaching, as they encouraged self-reflection and provided means of evaluating learning goals, learning load and alignment of different elements of teaching. Second, the

implemented policies aimed at producing a world-class university recast us as targets of HRM rhetoric, practices and policies (Lund, 2012). In our work context, the Department of Management Studies, these changes were discussed, criticized and written about, and hence the political nature of HRM became tangible. Taken together, these changes led to a situation whereby we started to pay more attention to the political and moral underpinnings (Korpiaho et al., 2007; Räsänen, 2009) of teaching HRM. Our tactical stance changed from 'how to do it' towards 'how to incorporate these reflections into our teaching'.

As a result, we gradually transformed the nature of some of the course elements towards what we call 'challenging'. By 'challenging', we mean elements that challenge students to take a critical stance vis-à-vis studied HRM practices. We designed new assignments, and incorporated critical readings and lecture content into the course to address relations between HRM rhetoric and changing employment practices, with the aim of guiding students' interest towards intensified expectations of employee performance and commitment in relation to flexible work arrangements and contingent work. We aimed to challenge students to reflect on the talent discourse and its consequences by raising questions about social differences and how these contribute to an individual's capability of constructing him- or herself as a 'talent'.

One of the new exercises we used in this phase was the so-called 'Privilege walk' or 'One step forward', which we modified to match the HRM theme. In this exercise students are given an imaginary role – in our case related to profession and background. Different examples are 'child of diplomats studying medicine' or '42-year-old part-time worker at McDonald's'. In this activity, participants are asked to stand in a straight line while the facilitator starts to read statements revealing different privileges. Such statements were, for example: 'If your parents have encouraged you in your studies, take one step forward', or 'If you had the opportunity to take language courses abroad during your studies, take one step forward'. Those who imagined that these statements might hold true in their role would take a step forward and eventually people would end up in different parts of the room. Our aim was to make students aware of the social inequalities and the social embeddedness lacking in business education (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015), as well as to help students understand that life experiences are shaped by class, gender and race (Bratton and Gold, 2015).

Gradually, inspired by pedagogical courses offering insights into how to engage students in reflection as a means of professional development, we included similar elements. We replaced the pre-exam with a pre-assignment whereby students were asked to reflect on their own understanding of HRM and their learning expectations based on assigned readings. In addition, instead of assigning people

to groups, we took account of students' interests and let them form groups around them.

Eventually, we made a decision to seek better alignment between the different lectures and the exercises we provided. We aimed to teach the entire course by always offering the students three specific perspectives on every lecture and, thus, on each HRM subfield. Firstly, we showed how HRM has developed both historically and institutionally as a managerial paradigm intertwined with working life and management trends. Secondly, we approached HRM from the mainstream perspective with a normative interest in supporting and developing business and, thirdly (inspired by the same idea of practical activity we are using here), as a practical activity carried out by people in work organizations. We integrated these perspectives into each session through lecturing and exercises to make the multifaceted nature of HRM evident. While making these changes, we still relied to a great extent on lecturing as a teaching practice, but increasingly incorporated different exercises into the lecture content, where students were asked to discuss and form opinions together.

However, while this tripartite perspective to HRM was fruitful for us as teachers and researchers, students mostly considered the mainstream HRM approach as the most relevant. Although we had modified some teaching methods and found new ones, we mostly relied on lecturing. Moreover, we still struggled with feelings of a lack of credibility and pondered how to present critical HRM content as important and not 'more political' than mainstream content where ideological elements seem to be normalized and taken for granted. To some extent, the imposter syndrome feelings increased the more challenging content we included, as we started to feel that we were imposing our own concerns upon our students. While we believed that students ought to become increasingly reflective on social structures and their position in them, we also viewed the idea of liberating or emancipating students from oppressions as problematic, as they might not perceive them as oppressive in the first place (see Korpiaho, 2014). Instead, we were seeking a way to teach that would allow students to find ways to build their own capabilities for action and agency. Added to this, the final exam and evaluation of the course changed little. Thus, while we aimed to promote reflection, we were still mainly measuring students' ability to absorb content.

Phase 3: Engaging

As a third step in the development of our teaching practice, we identified a phase built on 'engaging'. This phase occurred in autumn 2015 when we had the chance to plan the entire course anew when the professor in charge retired. This opportunity was quite random, as it took longer than expected for the department

to recruit a post-doc that would take the lead in HRM teaching. As this opportunity presented itself, we were interested in finding a way of teaching that would make the critical content of the course as interesting for the students as the mainstream content had been thus far. We embedded the reflectivity aim into the course design, and changed our teaching so that the critical perspective was not spoon-fed by us as lecturers, but would stem instead from the students themselves. To achieve this, we had to give the course architecture an extreme makeover.

In this phase, our tactical stance changed to how to foster reflection and master new kinds of teaching methods, and let go of lecturing as the core method of the course. As we were aiming for a course structure that would place critical reflection at the core, we chose to build the course on participatory (collaborative) inquiry learning. Participatory or collaborative inquiry builds on the same theoretical underpinnings as practice theories (especially action research), underlining the practical and shared nature of knowing (see Heron and Reason, 1997; Bray, 2000), and can be used as a research method or way to structure a learning experience (Bray, 2000). It also emphasizes participation and democracy, placing the practitioner and the interaction between practitioners at the centre of the learning process, thereby avoiding an elitist or a manipulative setting. Learning is regarded as a process, aimed at leading to personal, organizational or societal change, through engagement in inquiry both alone and with others (Bray, 2000).

In this phase, we designed the course content to support the realization of participatory inquiry. We chose 'linkages between HRM and corporate social and environmental responsibility' as a theme for the entire course, since we saw it as an emerging area of interest for both HRM research (Dubois and Dubois, 2012; Harris and Trigger, 2012) and for work organizations seeking to brand themselves as 'green' or otherwise 'responsible' (Preuss et al., 2009; Leonard, 2013). We structured participatory inquiry, realized in smaller student groups, as the central element to which other elements were aligned. The key element we used for alignment and engagement comprised structuring the inquiry around the question of 'good HRM'. To this end, for every core component, we sought to engage the students in reflecting on their own experiences and understandings of good people management by offering them perspectives drawn either from HR practitioners or research on the matter. To create the circumstances for common inquiry with HR practitioners, we facilitated the setting in advance by contacting two companies emphasizing sustainability, and were able to convince them to co-operate as case organizations on the course.

Before the course started, students were asked to complete a pre-assignment. For this assignment, we selected a few readings around HRM and sustainable HRM, and asked them to reflect on their own understanding of good HRM, as well as to

articulate their expectations of the course. The students were then divided into groups based on their interests stemming from these assignments. We organized eight weekly meetings, where the main purpose was to support and facilitate the participatory inquiry process of the groups and guide them through some basic HRM themes. Furthermore, we categorically called these sessions 'meetings' instead of the commonly used term 'lectures' in order to underline their nature. During the meetings, students were allowed and expected to actively participate. We assigned pre-readings for each meeting and asked the students to talk them over beforehand in a forum situated on the course's home page, in order to ensure that the students would be able to discuss and advance the inquiry during the meetings. These texts replaced the textbooks that were previously used as course literature. They were chosen according to the principle that for every meeting the students had to read and reflect upon two texts: one from the mainstream and the other from a more critical HRM perspective. We commented on each group's discussions on a regular basis, either by giving them tips on further reading, ideas to develop their group inquiry or encouragement to continue their reflections.

During the weekly meetings, we applied different participatory group-work methods (such as active listening, free writing exercises, fishbowl discussions, and snowball discussions) to aid critical reflection on the texts in relation to the inquiry at hand. We also established links between our inquiry-based learning and the application of these methods and skills in contemporary workplaces, in which abilities such as complex problem-solving, reflection and collaboration are increasingly demanded (Reynolds et al., 2006). As a consequence, we framed methods and assignments supporting reflection as 'tools' that students themselves could use in the workplace. At the end of every meeting, we encouraged students to pay attention to their personal feelings as well as to the group dynamics and atmosphere, in order to draw their attention to the (power) dynamics of team-based working.

During the first two meetings, a preliminary research question was formed by each group in such a way that these questions would complement each other, as well as the common participatory inquiry theme. The research questions were then explored in two companies, where students interviewed various HRM and CSR professionals, resulting in written reports.

In order to complete the course, students were expected to do the pre-assignment, participate in discussions, fulfil their part of the inquiry, and take an exam in the form of a reflective essay. In the exam students described their own learning experience during the course. To achieve this, we asked students to reflect on their pre-assignment and to describe how their understanding of 'good HRM' had changed during the course. Students were expected to refer to the studied

literature, which they were allowed to take with them into the exam room. Through this change in the final exam, we were also able to align our evaluations with the aim of enhancing reflection instead of the memorization of HRM theories. We also asked students to reflect upon the process of participatory inquiry that they had carried out in small groups.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article we have traced our own professional development as HRM teachers, and our efforts to carry out critical and engaged teaching. We have recognized three phases in introducing critical content to our course design: through telling (contextualizing HRM by lecturing and pointing out), through challenging (exposing the political nature of HRM through exercises and readings), and through engaging (assigning tasks that include students' reflections on their experiences, and their standpoint as a starting point). Our experiences underline, as Korpiaho (2014) suggests, that reflective work needs to be underpinned by approaches that also challenge teachers to reflect on their own practice.

Looking back and writing about our teaching experiences has served as an opportunity to continue reflecting on the development of our own practice. At the beginning of our journey as HRM teachers, we were novices with limited pedagogical understanding and without a clear teaching philosophy. Still, from the beginning, we have aimed at a teaching practice with a moral purpose and political commitment (Räsänen, 2008), incorporating perspectives from mainstream HRM, employment relations, labour studies, political economy, sustainability studies and critical traditions (Bratton and Gold, 2015; Fotaki and Prasad, 2015). But as we progressed, we realized that we needed to understand how to introduce these viewpoints in a way that speaks to students. After trying to challenge students with critical views and content, we realized that instead of simply cynically pointing out the ideological mechanisms at play in mainstream HRM, we preferred to follow Spicer et al.'s (2009) suggestions of critical performativity, especially when it came to engaging with students' and practitioners' views. Now, looking back on our teaching experiences, we noticed that we had tried different ways of tactically resolving 'the dilemma of caring for actors' views at the same time as we seek to challenge them' (Spicer et al., 2009: 548).

By looking back on our own teaching, we argue that a supportive way of challenging standpoints and worldviews lies in taking students' own understandings and experiences as a starting point. We were able to do this when we aligned the whole course content to support critical reflection through participatory inquiry. Based on student course work, we were content with the

changes we had made to the course design. Students' pre-assignments and reflection exams from the last phase indicate that most participants had not only achieved a mainstream understanding, but were able to reflect on HRM critically from various perspectives, much in the spirit that Bratton and Gold (2015) have demanded from critical HRM education. These include being able to recognize one's own viewpoints, but also to better understand one's position vis-à-vis HRM practices. Students also developed an understanding of HRM as situated and complex, and stated that they had understood that instead of 'tools' they would need to understand the situation and organization at hand. Compared to how the students presented their learning outcomes during previous phases, their understanding had considerably developed towards critical reflection.

Our quest for engaged and engaging HRM teaching echoes Joan Lave's (1996) view of learning as identity-making life projects of participants in communities of practice. She emphasizes that instead of mechanisms of learning, there are different ways of 'becoming a participant, participating and ways in which participants and practices change' (Lave, 1996: 157). This opens insights into why our tactical stance towards teaching changed. First, in a business school context, where students expect to acquire practical knowledge to enhance their business skills and to become successfully employed, designing a course which lectures *about* HRM (history, development and consequences) was problematic. The situation would probably have been different if lecturing on other subjects, such as social sciences. In the second phase of our teaching, we transitioned from lecturing towards giving practical examples. At the same time, we tried to push the critical view through challenging students with different approaches introduced through lectures and linked assignments. This reflects our own personal academic experiences of new kinds of HRM rhetoric and practices. In sum, we aimed for teaching practice, which would reflect our growing awareness of the political aspects of HRM and thus also our political commitments (Räsänen, 2008) to critically view HRM in the changing context. Although these new ways of teaching were well received by some students, we lacked the skills and possibilities to arrange the different elements of teaching and evaluation to support reflection. This showed in the feedback, which indicated that students deemed the content irrelevant or too theoretical. This way of teaching was problematic as we took our own experiences as a starting point, instead of engaging with the experiences, expectations and identities of the students (Lave, 1996) in relation to the social practice, HRM, we were studying. In the third phase, when we gained the possibility to alter the course design as responsible teachers, we switched to asking how to place critical reflection and students' own agency at the heart of the learning process. In this way, engaging with students' expectations and standpoints proved to be the starting point of learning and reflection. This time, challenging the mainstream approach to HRM did not emerge from us as teachers. Instead,

students themselves engaged in critical evaluation of HRM in their reflections on the readings: challenging stems from them becoming more knowledgeably skilled (*Ibid.*) of how people management practices craft their own working conditions and identities.

The developments in our teaching practice can also be viewed in relation to our own learning and becoming practitioners in a community of practice (*Ibid.*). Our tactical skilfulness developed during these years in relation to how to use literature from different HRM and social sciences approaches to provide students with different perspectives, and how to use participatory methods to aid critical reflection on these perspectives. This happened through gaining practical experience: experimenting with different teaching methods and acquiring more knowledge of HRM through research. In addition, the courses offered by the pedagogical centre supported the development of our practice. However, regretfully, even though we were in the same department as established critical management scholars as well as scholars specialized in advancing education based on participatory inquiry and reflection, we did not really encounter or gain access to a community of practice to support our teaching through collective reflection and the development of shared teaching praxis. The 'opportunities' to teach were acquired rather randomly either via the Open University or through our professor to substitute her. Hence, until the last course realization we had no possibility to design the course structure or the learning goals, nor were we involved in general curriculum planning or events where teaching was discussed. It felt that we were always treated as doctoral candidates in need of teaching experience, and never recognized as teachers. To some extent this affected our self-understanding and actions as well: Our reflections on what constitutes 'good teaching' occurred to a large extent between us. Although there was an abundance of knowledge around us, first we were not aware of it, and when we gained more understanding of it, we did not feel entitled to it. We felt like we were not 'real teachers' in relation to those with recognized teaching responsibilities. To some extent, our experience as teachers suggests that the merger and the strengthened emphasis on publishing in top journals weakened the search for a shared teaching praxis within the discipline, as we heard stories about times when everybody was involved in developing teaching. Instead of being involved in shared reflection, we ended up reading about these reflections in journals.

Our experience also underlines other developments characterizing the new academic capitalism; the construction of the 'ideal academic' emphasizing publishing in certain top journals disadvantages individuals who have caring responsibilities or who are involved in teaching. These effects are found to be gendered, as females are often burdened with both (Lund, 2012). It is also our experience that disbelief in our ability to succeed in the publishing game led us to

take on a teaching responsibility whenever offered to us in order to both legitimize ourselves vis-à-vis the discipline and to nurture an ideal of meaningful academic work (Tienari, 2012). This led to a situation whereby we were even more burdened and even worse off in being able to publish and advance our doctoral studies and academic careers. Still, we believe that being able to engage with developing our teaching was possible because we taught the same course multiple times and were therefore able to experiment with different elements. This underlines that learning and development happen when engaging in a practice (Gherardi, 2009; Lave, 1996), and that reflecting on that practice takes time and commitment. Paradoxically, even though doctoral students are to some extent encouraged to take part in teaching as assistants to gain experience (and to ease the workload of tenured staff), engaging in teaching is not rewarded with future career prospects in the same way as engaging in publishing.

We have drawn on various HRM and social science research traditions in the furtherance of engaged teaching and learning. In so doing, we discovered that the most fruitful way to introduce different viewpoints was to design the course structure to support reflection and discussion about 'good HRM'. On our last course, we encouraged students to look into the 'goodness of HRM' in relation to different readings and discussions with HR practitioners and with other students (also as HR practitioners or involved with HR practice as students or employees). This way of addressing the subject leads to taking into account not only the socio-political embeddedness of HRM (different groups having different ideals of goodness) but also leads students to evaluate their own perspective and ethical engagement (Greenwood, 2013). We combined mainstream readings (chapters of textbooks or overview articles) with articles addressing the same phenomena from a critical perspective, and also discussed a rather new trend: the sustainability of HRM. Through comparing different readings, we were able to lead students to pinpoint paradoxes within HRM, to understand the social nature of the employment relationship, to reflect on HRM outcomes from different perspectives, and to see the connections between workplace phenomena and societal, even global-scale problems, all of which Bratton and Gold (2015) describe as principles of Critical Human Resource Management Education. By stating this, we share the view of many scholars that the path to critical management education can be found through engaging with different views of HRM, which contextualize and reveal it (Grey, 2007). Based on our experiences, we also suggest that lecturing combined with challenging exercises could support critical reflection (instead of using readings), if the course design and course elements are aligned to serve that purpose through first engaging with students' perspectives.

No matter how critically we approach HRM, most of us would probably be happier to work for organizations where just and enabling people management practices

are observed. On this course, we aimed to educate students as (future) professionals and practitioners able to reflect on HRM and related practices either as HRM professionals, employees, employers or supervisors. However, not everyone recognized that they would be happier working for organizations that did their best to promote social justice and to operate ecologically. This became evident in the way in which only a few students found sustainability or greenness to be a relevant topic at the beginning of the last HRM course we taught. However, a critical human resource agenda could also engage students in critical reflection between workplace employment relations and societal and global issues (see Bratton and Gold, 2015; Ruggunan and Spiller, 2014). To some extent, we also felt we were able to achieve this, as our course setting seemed to provide room for students to 'find' sustainability through their own interests while discussing the 'goodness of HRM' with practitioners in the case organizations. This is a point where students could be challenged to think even further about relationships between businesses and society, as well as humans and nature.

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