

Training Networks: A new and hybrid organizational form in the system of vocational education and training (VET)

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Introduction

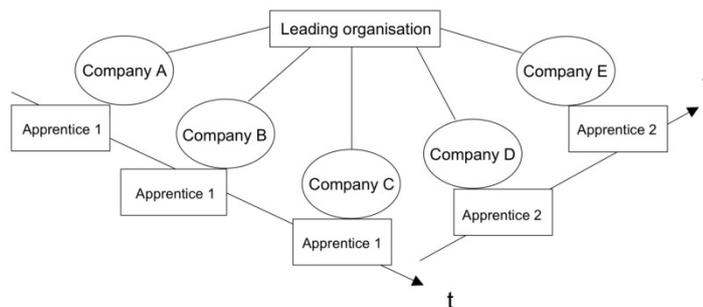
During the past decade national vocational education policy in several European countries has been promoting so-called *training networks* as an alternative location for the placement of vocational training opportunities.¹ Enterprises which are too small or too specialised to offer an apprentice a comprehensive training programme on their own participate in a training network with other enterprises to cover all the elements in the vocational training plan. The collaboration of training companies on the one hand serves the public good of creating additional apprenticeship opportunities and supporting the integration of youth into the employment market. On the other hand, this new educational form aims at improving the quality of VET. Last but not least, it facilitates the adjustment of training organisations to structural changes on the labour market.

The aim of this paper is to analyse theoretically and empirically the functioning of the complex organisational form of training networks to better understand the problems in funding and running such training organisations for VET.²

Main characteristics of training networks

The responsibility for recruitment, selection, employment, placement, supervision and formal qualification lies with a professionalised so-called *leading organisation*. During their apprenticeship, the apprentices switch their *training company* on a (half-)yearly basis (cf. Figure 1).

Figure 1 Structure of a Swiss training network and the rotation of apprentices



Training networks as a social hybrid of the modes of 'organisation' and 'network'

From the perspective of system theory training networks are a hybrid form of two modes of social coordination, i.e. 'organisation' and 'network'. The combining of these two social forms of coordination leads to tense relations (Kraft 2012; Tacke 2009) that can be described shortly as follows:

¹ For Germany: Schlottau, Walter (2003). Verbundausbildung sichert hochwertige Ausbildungsplätze. In: Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung (Hrsg): Verbundausbildung – Organisationsformen, Förderung, Praxisbeispiele, Rechtsfragen. Bonn: BIBB: S. 7-20. For Austria: Lachmayr, Norbert und Helmut Dornmayr (2008). Ausbildungsverbünde in Österreich: Potenzial zusätzlicher Lehrstellen. Wien: Österreichisches Institut für Berufsbildungsforschung. For Switzerland: BBT, Bundesamt für Berufsbildung und Technologie (2008). Resultate Evaluation Lehrbetriebsverbünde. Bern: BBT. For Norway: <http://www.vilbli.no/?Artikel=014632&Side=Artikel&Lan=3>.

² In Switzerland there is no robust statistical data available on the dissemination of training networks. Nevertheless the results of a study of the Federal Office of Professional Education and Technology (BBT 2008) show that only a minority of apprenticeships are delivered by training networks.

Training companies which offer apprenticeships resort to the network, its resources and the common produced good in order to solve own organisational problems and requirements (e.g. better recruitment of apprentices due to more interesting apprenticeship, production of complex competencies and professional profiles, guarantee of higher economic efficiency of VET). The network on the other hand needs an organisational context to regulate different problems resulting from the network formation (like membership of the training network, influence and co-determination of training companies, organisation of recruitment and rotation of the apprentices or distribution of the common produced good. i.e. work force). These organisational structures are implemented through the leading organisation.

Tensions between the involved actors (leading organisation, training companies) that can be observed in this hybrid form of VET are to be understood by the fact that the two modes of coordination do not collapse into a new and discrete type of coordination ('organisation-network'). The maintenance of the differentiation of the two modes is a prerequisite for profiting of the respective other mode for solving relevant problems (Kraft 2012). At the same time the differentiation between the two modes generates new problems of coordination and legitimation which we call follow-up problems.

State of research

Empirically these tense relations between the two modes of social coordination have so far barely been investigated and the existing studies are theoretically not based on a sociological framework. Moreover system theory itself does not provide the epistemological concepts for observing and understanding the organisational tensions and how the actors involved try to solve them.

Research questions

The aim of this paper is to conceptualise these tensions theoretically and analyse them with empirical data. We are going to answer the following questions: What are the fundamental reasons for founding a training network? Which problems are to be solved by the joint training? Which new problems result from the training model and the rotation of apprentices? In what way does the leading organisation try to resolve these problems? And which new tensions arise?

Theoretical framework - Training networks as systematically solving problems (compromises) and provoking conflicts

In our contribution we are going to present and discuss the above mentioned tensions – problems, solutions and follow-up problems – by referring to the French sociology of conventions (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, Diaz-Bone 2011).

Conventions are collectively established principles of orientation and action on the basis of which actors – especially in situations of uncertainty and ambiguity – evaluate, make decisions, coordinate and legitimate their actions. The social world comprises a plurality but finite number of competing and conflicting conventions (market, domestic, civic, industrial, fame, inspiration, project).

This approach conceptualises the occurrence of conflicts inside the network as a dispute between different conventions that actors rely on: From the perspective of one convention they criticise the values and rationalities of another convention.

To keep the training network running, compromises (i.e. more or less durable agreements, constructed on the basis of different conventions) are to be made. At the same time compromises as 'solutions of disputes and conflicts' are not definitive but create new critique.

Design of the study

The empirical data stems from a case study (cf. Yin, 2009) of one training network that has been funded around 15 years ago to form the work force of a specific industry (public transport).

Our analyses are mainly concerned with the production of the profession of 'commercial apprenticeship in public transport'.

The paper is based on a qualitative approach of semi-structured expert interviews with representatives of the leading organisation as well as of the training companies.

Results

The funding of the training network is a compromise of different motives and objectives for forming qualified work-force. First, two large companies intended to professionalise VET by outsourcing it to a specialised organisation – the present-day leading organisation (industrial convention). Second, the state – responsible for the VET diplomas – demanded that the apprentices gain a diploma which allows them to be employed in the whole industry (civic convention). This has been reached by the creation of the profession 'commercial apprenticeship in public transport'. Third, the labour market requires that apprentices acquire key competencies like flexibility or autonomy (project convention) what is fostered by the rotation system and additional educational features.

In the subsequent years several training companies have been voicing critique. One severe critique concerned the rotation system: because the apprentices spend only a short time in the respective firm culture (domestic convention), the chance to hire them after the completed formation is being threatened. As a compromise the leading organisation has introduced a new system for the last year of the apprenticeship to stabilise the relation between firms and apprentices.

To solve recruitment problems, in the last years the leading organisation has been seeking to attract motivated and achievement-oriented apprentices by offering a new professional field in the VET programme (aviation) as well as interesting future job opportunities within the respective industry (convention of inspiration). For this reason it has acquired new members (training companies) with a somewhat different professional profile. As a consequence, the organisation of the rotation and the fit between apprentice, training company and professional profile have been getting more complicated and costly, which has evoked new critique in relation to the market convention... (and so on).

Our results show that running such a network is based on an endless sequence of critiques and compromises. By consequence this new organisational form of VET is a rather fragile and brittle formation, which explains the difficulties to establish training networks in great numbers.

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