

ECER Roundtable on HRD and VET, Friday 15 September 2006

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In order to make accessible what I am going to say I have to provide some information on the type of research sfs is conducting and how we do this. The Social Research Centre, as of 2007 a central institute of the University of Dortmund, is one of the oldest and largest social research institutions in Germany. Founded in 1946, it presently has about 80 employees, 45 researchers, and a turnover of approx. EUR 5 million. Three quarters and more of these € 5 million come from the mostly public research market. Sfs is a Mode 2 institute. We pursue an empirical research concept which we call "Social Science Production": production of social science and social production of science. The output of our production is social because the production process of science is social, at the same time, scientific because we consider ourselves to be in a double-bind situation, on the one hand with a link to the scientific community obliged to follow scientific quality criteria; on the other hand, with a link to practical fields of action who provide their own quality criteria of usefulness of science.

We work exclusively in projects. Nearly all these projects are conceived in close contact with social actors in their specific action fields. These partners actively participate in the definition of the problem giving rise to the project and consequently the research questions to be answered by the project; the projects are carried out together with them; and the projects' products must comply with scientific and practical requirements. All project consortia include several partners depending on the problem and its possible solutions. The research process is organised as a shared re-search and learning process of which usually we are the network managers. Thus, most projects are a mix of research, development and consulting.

As to my own fields of activity, along with being the institute's financial manager, I am a researcher and consultant with a focus on the development of organisation and human resources (I cannot separate them), organisational learning, VET and quality management (mostly EFQM and ISO 9001 in educational and training organisations), but also regional, network and cluster development.

What I want to say: I tend to have an integrated view on HRD and VET issues as my practice is highly integrated. And: I tend to have a greatly non-academic view as our research is very untypical for the bulk of what academic research in HRD and VET represents.

Statement 1

Barry Nyhan's summary of HRD and VET research coincides greatly with mine concerning HRD. It heavily collides with the reality of VET-related research in the German speaking countries (for once, including The Netherlands).

HRD is a management-oriented construction which has come from the Anglo-saxon countries, mainly US, merging in Germany with what we used to call "personnel development". I share Nyhan's ascriptions throughout the three transparencies he presented in Tilburg.

Concerning VET, the "German speaking world" and much of the Scandinavian world, too, cannot share many of his descriptors.

Statement 2

VET, vocational education and training, in the German speaking countries is not focused on "public goods". Companies are the employers and trainers of trainees, they pay for them, and they mostly train them to employ them afterwards. "Berufsschule" is a one-day-a-week element in this training career which is greatly spreading far beyond industrial workers into white collar work and services. The links with the educational system are by no means close, they are loose. The origins are also, but not at all exclusively linked to trade union demands; the Chambers of Crafts as well as of Industry and Commerce are the most important pillars of the system. There is no longer an over-identification with technical education nor is there a focus on individual learning. On the contrary, the most highly valued asset of VET is "organisational socialisation". This still is the state of affairs, although under the impact of globalisation there is a cultural shift going on in these issues.

Statement 3

For the German speaking countries, it is necessary to distinguish initial VET which is highly formalised, and continuing VET (CVET) which is mainly structured as a free and open market system; so there are two separate systems with separate systemic logics. It is impossible to speak about VET in general.

Statement 4

In the German speaking countries, since the seventies of last century, research related to VET has achieved a high reputation, at least within the social sciences. It is the most advanced research on learning and learning methods and its findings are widely institutionalised within the vocational standards. The VET system is miles ahead of the academic system which still is a teaching system throughout Europe. At least in Germany, vocational school teachers are trained at universities.

Statement 5

HRD and VET in organisations tend to be separate systems in large organisations; HRD looks at the upper people, VET at the lower ranks. But even so, organisational traditions in Europe are very different. In France, an engineer with a university degree in many cases will do the same job as a Meister in the German production organisation. The difference is that the Meister comes from the lower ranks, has a much more practical training and experience and a full organisational socialisation, while the French engineers considers himself an academic, has a lack of practical experience and no organisational socialisation which makes him an alien in the eyes of the workers. In Germany, HRD normally includes the Meister level thus reaching farther down than in France, although modern concepts of HRD practised in most German large enterprises do not distinguish any more as they include the whole workforce in their systems.

Statement 6

I agree with those colleagues who assumed that individual scientists and programmatic representations of institutes need not coincide. At least in our case, we have two basic types of practice concerning papers and presentations at conferences which mirror the double-bind situation of our work: one is to present innovative approaches, methods or results of specific projects; the other one is to present theoretical or methodical reflexions across projects and individual work areas in order to reflect on a higher theoretical level what individual projects frequently do not allow me to reflect.