

Classification and framing in vocational education in Germany.

Gabriela Hohns

Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training
Germany

Bernstein claims that the model of description for pedagogic practice he developed is valid for a wide range of, if not all situations of knowledge transmission.¹ He applies the categories „classification“ and „framing“, which are at the core of this model, also to describe the relationship between education and production.² So it should be possible to use these categories also to describe knowledge transmission within and research about the German system of vocational education.

Since this system did not develop in line with the history of academic thinking, i.e. trivium and quadrivium, but from the tradition of artisans' training, the presentation shall start with a short historic overview, leading to an introduction of the different agencies, agents and social relations involved in the field of power in vocational education in Germany today. Based on documentary analysis, the existing balance of powers shall be explained, which is regulated by social partnership, and it shall be made clear that the centre of gravity is not learning in a VET school, but workplace learning in a training company. We shall suggest that, in Bernsteinian terms, the German VET system is characterised by strong horizontal classification between the „professions“³ and weak vertical classification towards the world of work.

The ideology of vocational education generally accepted in Germany is to make young people experts in their professions and thus prepare them for employment. For the different professions, there are different professional labour markets in Germany⁴, so there, again, is strong horizontal classification.

According to segmentation theory, graduates from the dual system should find employment on the corresponding professional labour markets. In view of generally rising labour market flexibility and weakening classifications on the labour market, the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training⁵ started a research project in order to find out whether this tendency applied to young professionals as well and, what this might mean for the dual system, which used to have a reputation for smooth labour market entry trajectories. Following a major quantitative analysis, a small number of qualitative interviews was carried out among graduates from the dual system, who

¹ “My concept of pedagogic practice is somewhat wider than the relationships that go on in schools... In other words, the notion of pedagogic practice which I shall be using will regard pedagogic practice as a fundamental social context through which cultural reproduction-production takes place. Operating with this rather wide definition of pedagogic practice, the models of description that I shall try to create necessarily have a certain generality in order that they can cope with the differentiation of the agencies of cultural reproduction.” Bernstein 2000, Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity, p. 3

² Bernstein 1977, Class, Codes and Control 3, revised edition, Chapter 8

³ According to a dictionary (Collins Dictionary of the English Language. Collins, London&Glasgow, 1979), a profession is: “an occupation requiring special training in the liberal arts or sciences, esp. one of the three learned professions, law, theology, or medicine”. There seem to be certain parallels between the three learned professions and the professions transmitted in the dual system in Germany. (Compare e.g. “The traditional professions – law, medicine, engineering, accounting, architecture, for example – have over the centuries developed stable ways of determining and updating the knowledge base of the profession, in concert with a strong social base in the organisation of the profession.” In: Muller, Johan (2009) 'Forms of knowledge and curriculum coherence', Journal of Education and Work, 22:3,205 — 226, p; here: p. 213/214.) It should be kept in mind, however, that the word “profession” in this presentation refers exclusively to non-academic, vocational professions.

⁴ Kreckel, R. (1983): Strategien sozialer Schließung und Klassenbildung. Göttingen: Schwartz. & Co. describes the strong horizontal labour market segmentation according to professions.

⁵ www.bibb.de

had changed their profession at least once in ten years after graduation, in order to find out, whether and how workplace-learning in the dual system of VET, independently of individual trades, had helped them for further learning and working in other jobs.

Bernstein's category framing, with its values selection, sequencing, pacing, evaluation and hierarchical rules, and the relative control transmitters and acquirers have over these values, the 'how' of pedagogy, was used to structure problem-centred interviews⁶ about how learning took place both at the workplace in the dual system and later on the job. Respondents came from different vocational professions; different organizational training structures were taken into account. The interviews gave indications to similarities and dissimilarities between the pathways of learning and to effects of workplace learning in VET that made young people feel safe and confident in the world of work. The latter is of importance especially for disadvantaged groups among the population.⁷ While in the knowledge society it is the elaborate code that counts, "Elaborate orientations are potentially dangerous, and those acquiring them have to be made safe."⁸ The analysis also gives rise to a number of further research questions.

⁶ "The problem-centered interview (PZI) is a theory-generating method that tries to neutralize the alleged contradiction between being directed by theory or being open-minded so that the interplay of inductive and deductive thinking contributes to increasing the user's knowledge. The appropriate communication strategies aim firstly at the representation of the subjective approach to the problem, secondly the stimulated narratives are enriched by dialogues employing imaginative and semi-structured prompts. Theoretical knowledge develops by using elastic concepts that are further developed during the analysis by employing empirical analysis and which will be refined by "testing" empirically grounded "hypotheses" with the data." Source: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1132>

⁷ As Bernstein had shown in three different experimental contexts, "the modal orientation of the middle-class children across the three contexts was elaborated, whereas the modal orientation of the lower working-class children was restricted." (Bernstein 1990, p. 57). This referred to seven-year-old children. However, not all children learn to adapt to the elaborated modality which is called for in schools and academy, as e.g. PISA tests of 15-year-olds show. For these, workplace learning with its restricted code orientation should be a pathway to a successful labour market entry and social inclusion.

⁸ Bernstein 1990, p. 62