

International Transfer of Professional Ethic: Pattern of interpretation on German vocational education in Mexico

Martina Fuchs

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I. Introduction

The transfer of vocational education from Germany, Austria and Switzerland to regions of the Global South comes with high expectations for high-road quality production and the reduction of youth unemployment in these regions. While studies consider various restrictions in such transfer activities (Li/Pilz 2021), there is a research gap on the transfer of professional ethic inherent in vocational education. This chapter therefore analyses patterns of interpretation to be encountered in vocational education and presents German professional ethic transferred to Mexico.

The following specifies the research gap, explains the methodology and shows patterns of interpretation on professional ethics. The discussion embeds the findings in the broader context of the research project. The conclusion illustrates the relevance of the outcomes for academia and practitioners.

II. Transfer of vocational education and its inherent professional ethic

In Germany, vocational education is a way of skilling young employees 'dually', i. e. in vocational schools and companies. It is embedded in institutional settings, which makes it tricky to transfer to other countries (Li/Pilz 2021). For example, the generally lower social status of blue-collar workers in many countries of the South reduces the attractiveness of dual apprenticeship, compared to academic education (Fortwengel/Jackson 2016). In contrast, in Germany vocational education has a high reputation, based on a professional ethic of mastery (Fuchs/Schalljo 2016). Mastery relates

to glorified imaginations of former medieval craftsmanship and the idea of competencies being passed from master to novice. Historically, a key element was the wandering years of young journeymen in regions that today make up Europe. The way in which apprenticeship is exercised has changed significantly since the medieval period, caused not least by the fall of the guilds and the transformation of former crafts into industries (Glückler/Lenz 2018). Nevertheless, collective imaginings still refer to a pretty durable, slightly fuzzy romantic ideal of craftsmanship. Today, these imaginings still contribute to professional self-awareness based on the humanist idea of the master as a responsible mentor who accompanies the learning process of the apprentices (Ajithkumar/Pilz 2019). In Germany today, mastery is not only a notion and part of the professional ethics; a master (“Meister”) is a certified teacher and apprentice trainer within the company.

Given that mastery implies supervision of apprentices, mastery is related to power practices (Fuchs 2022a). In the context of German metalworking apprenticeship, a well-known practice is filing a metal cube. Wolf (2009, p. 232) illustrates such cube filing by explaining that the apprentices stand in the same working posture for an entire day and perform ‘dull’ activities – filing ‘until their arm drops off’. Exercising this is based on patterns of interpretation about how apprentices are ‘formed’.

III. Methodology

This study is part of a research project on the transfer of vocational education and training from Germany to Mexico, India and China¹. This chapter attuned the methodology of structural hermeneutics to the research design. The objective was to analyse critical socio-cultural patterns of interpretation within a selected interview protocol. Such patterns can be characterised as commonly held, broadly distributed, normative and stable socio-cultural interpretative rules that direct how people interpret the world and act. The basic idea is that socio-cultural patterns of interpretation not only exist in an individual mind-set but generally are present in society, as, for instance, patriarchal structures (Oevermann 2001a; Oevermann 2001b).

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A particular focus of this study is on patterns of interpretation related to the professional ethic. Habitualisation in a particular profession generally forms the social personality structure and social character (Schulz-Nieswandt 1998). The following is based on the key interview, conducted with a German expat training manager involved in metalworking apprenticeship in Mexico. The quotations are translated from German to English. Then, the insights are integrated in findings of carefully selected further interview protocols of the project.

IV. Pattern of interpretation on the transfer of German professional ethic

“We always try to teach this knowledge transfer through practice”. This phrase picked from the key interview summarises the essence of vocational education understood as hands-on training. While this is what German vocational education internationally is renowned for (Wolf 2009), the interviewee explained the difficulties to implement such principles:

“We explain things to them [the apprentices], we teach the topic and then we repeat it x times. No matter how long it takes, so that they’ve really got it.”

Hence, the interviewee illustrated training as frequent and exhausting repetition (“x times”). He practiced power by exercising, and habitualisation of the apprentices was highly relevant to him:

“That’s the subtle struggle we have here every day, with details, punctuality, neatness, cleanliness. Mucho tráfico is no argument for us. If I start at 8 o’clock, then I start at 8 o’clock. Then I have to be here at least ten minutes before and not 5 minutes too late.”

The interviewee started with an understatement, the ‘subtle struggle’, emphasising his efforts to introduce a certain work discipline including punctuality. The use of “I” (instead of ‘the apprentice’) in the last sentence again points to punctuality as a general rule which applies to him, the apprentice and everyone else. Such exercises contrast with other training objectives. The interviewee also tried to teach competencies how to participate in team-work. These competencies imply the ability to recognise a problem, to reflect on it and contribute the insights gained to colleagues and superiors. Such principles, however, conflict with the notion of practicing in the sense of subordination under the production process:

“That is, you cannot assume that if he [the apprentice] always says ‘sí señor’, he’s understood everything. He did not understand anything. It took me a while to realise that I have to question a lot more – I really must question every time. It takes a lot of time time – to really know ‘which parts of what you were trying to explain to him did he understand?’. And this is absolutely not comparable to Germany, absolutely not.”

Interestingly, the interviewee did not see a contradiction between the principles of exercise and participation. Rather, he related problems to the fact that he experienced a difference to what he was used in Germany. He explained that his patience and engagement not only applied to the apprentices, but also to the local trainers:

“So that’s actually my main part, I try to recruit the teachers. First, I try to introduce some sort of structure.”

There is an interesting choice of words in that he called the local trainers, for whose recruitment and education he is responsible, “teachers”. This term is usually reserved for persons with pedagogic intentions, in other words persons who provide more than the functional capacity of training apprentices in particular technical tasks. In order to habitualise the local teachers, he also exerted power by trying to “to introduce some sort of structure”; however, he sees this as legitimate in order to generate teachers who feel responsible for the apprentices. In another part of the interview he emphasised the “pride and respect for this profession” (instead of ‘jobs’). The following quote also illustrates his efforts:

“And now I go through this with each individual teacher (...) and I say that’s important, you have to put a focus on this. Then the exams, the tests (...) are built up accordingly. This entire system is first placed on the German foundation, let me say.”

To “place the entire system” on the German “foundation” illustrates his systemic approach. The wording demonstrates that he not only acted as an individual; the reference base was the institutional setting of the German skill formation system. The final phrase “let me say” puts the previous statement into some perspective and tones down the (generally unpopular) ‘German power’ inherent in such efforts. Nevertheless, his sensitivity did not reduce his factual engagement in changing social relations. To the contrary, his efforts extended to other actors beyond the firm, in this case

the customers (i. e. the companies that sent their apprentices to him for training). He explained:

“I have to be careful that my customers do not trample these tender little plants. I have trained specialists who earn twice as much afterwards, and who can work at a completely different level [than their colleagues] because they have completely different technical expertise – and they have proven that they have it. But if I’m unlucky, they’re bulldozed in the factories where (...) a lot of people were trained on the job (...) who consider themselves competitors.”

The interviewee compared his role as master to that of a nurseryman (‘young plants’). He considered himself a mentor and guardian of the apprentices, whom he saw exposed to danger and suppression (“trample”, “bulldozed”). Moreover, the quote expressed that his apprentices had absorbed the heart of vocational education, and that such competencies contributed to their outstanding position. He emphasised that the apprentices not only had the knowledge but were also able to apply it in practice (“they have proven that they have it”).

At this point of the interview it became clear that the interviewee was engaged in a comprehensive effort as a competence-based master to implement vocational education locally. He saw that he could not restrict his activities on the training centre per se but also had to address the actors surrounding his company (local apprentices, trainers, customers). Generating such local impacts requires reputation building. The interviewee illustrated his successful reputation building by describing his contacts to responsables of a Mexican technical university.

“I was at a university, it was really a great highlight; they had a CNC milling machine in their workshop. So I walk up to the machine and say, oh great! Great! And then I take a closer look, and then the director asked me why I am looking so closely. – Well, you know, I’m looking for scrap metal chips. Where are they? – And he says, oh, the machine is not running. – I say, excuse me? You are not using it? (...) – No, no, no, they don’t have any money for that. (...)

Then, they came to visit us, a delegation. We were in the workshop and my instructors were just teaching how to use the lathe (...). He came to me and said, what? They [the trainers] show (...) [the students how to use the machine in practice]? – Of course! (...)

The interviewee described a situation where he presented how the principle of practicing was implemented on the shop floor. The intention is clearly that his visitors should adopt this as a role model. Hence, the interviewee, a ‘translocal’ from Germany, perceived himself as representative of German professional ethics. As a master, in a concrete and figurative sense, the tried to disseminate his practices not only to apprentices and local trainers in his plant, but also locally.

V. Discussion

Beyond the key interview, the project allowed to integrate the findings in further contexts (Fuchs 2022b). In Mexico, as well as in India and China, we identified expats who emphasised that for them, the implementation of professional ethics and related power were more legitimate than existing patterns of authoritarian supervision of the apprentices in the factories. They emphasized that the social character of a teacher must be that of a mentor who follows modern pedagogic and didactic principles rather than a punitive power. The interviewees saw this professional ethic as a condition for modern industrial production and opportunity to improve labour relations.

However, the research project also showed various cases of short-termed functional technical trainings. In fact, such engagement as ‘master’ requires time and costs, and resonates with the local formal and informal institutional settings (Fuchs 2022a; Fuchs 2022b; Gessler/Fuchs/Pilz 2019). However, in sum the results show that a predominant characteristic of the professional ethic can be termed ‘mastery’, as far as comprehensive vocational education is considered. Mastery relates to the (usually implicit) normative assumptions, principles and rules about how to work and how to train. Mastery is based on notions surrounding a master craftsman who guides young apprentices on their own path to mastery. A master has high competence in the subject matter and, moreover, represents the habitus of a mentor and teacher for apprentices. The study showed that practical exercise and participatory teaching-learning objectives principally conflict, but are combined in the daily practice when vocational education is implemented. Expats often act as boundary spanners between different worlds of imagination (Wiemann/Fuchs 2018; Fuchs/Röhrer/Vogelsang 2021).

VI. Conclusion

Removed from their institutional and historical context in Germany, translocals engage in the transfer of patterns of interpretation on mastery. Thereby, reputation is a relevant source of power (Glückler 2005). While the social character of a master is embedded in a meritocratic, socially relatively permeable society in Germany, in many countries of the South the situation is different (Wolf 2009).

Thus, there is no transfer of a complete skill formation system, and rather we find that the local actors get inspiration by the translocals for new teaching-learning practices (Wiemann/Fuchs 2018). Considering the emancipatory potentials inherent in this dynamics, this is a vibrant research field and a relevant issue for practitioners.

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Author

Prof. Dr. Martina Fuchs, Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeographisches Institut, Universität zu Köln, Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Albertus Magnus Platz, 50923 Köln, fuchs@wiso.uni-koeln.de