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European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults 7 (2016) 2, S. 207-221



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Röbel, Tina: The interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the context of workplace learning in Germany: a framework for empirical research – inspired by business ethics - In: European journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults 7 (2016) 2, S. 207-221 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-125394 - DOI: 10.25656/01:12539

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-125394>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:12539>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<http://www.ep.liu.se>

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The interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the context of workplace learning in Germany: a framework for empirical research - inspired by business ethics

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Abstract

As an effect of marketisation, the importance of workplace learning in Germany has increased. The article follows up on the long-standing discourse around the question of how economic and pedagogical ideals interact in this context. In order to develop a theoretical framework for empirical research, three major positions of the discipline of business ethics are introduced. Business ethics in more abstract ways deals with the very same question, namely how do ideas such as profit orientation interact with other norms and values? The new perspectives show that the discourse has been hitherto based on a specific understanding of economy. In order to derive an empirical answer to the research question, the question is re-formulated as follows: Which values are inherent in the decisions taken? Consequently, it suggests using the concept of 'rationalities of justification' for empirical research. The article shows how this concept can be applied by conducting a test run.

Keywords: workplace learning; ethics, program planning; rationalities of justification; Germany

Introduction

Marketisation refers to the phenomenon of the state withdrawing from social functions and 'corporate power' becoming more important (Finnegan, 2008, p. 56-57). The results of the Adult Education Survey (hereafter AES) for Germany show that 70% of the reported learning activities belong to the segment of workplace learning (BMBF, 2014, p. 21). Public funding has shifted from general Adult Education (hereafter AE) to workplace learning in small and medium-sized enterprises (Käpplinger, 2013). As defined in the AES, workplace learning comprises all organised learning activities that take place during paid working hours and/or are (partially) paid for by the employer (BMBF, 2014, p. 19).¹

Workplace learning by definition takes place in institutions with other primary goals than the provision of AE (Gieseke & Heuer, 2011). For those of us who wish for pedagogical ideals to be considered outside of theoretical discussion, the question of how economic and pedagogical ideals interact in this context holds particular interest. As an example, looking at the levels of participation in workplace learning for different social groups leads to the impression that ideals that might be considered as pedagogical – such as social equality and redistribution of power – are not the main concern. German-born employees are more likely to participate than migrants (39% vs. 20%), while employees with A-levels participate more than those holding a certificate of secondary education (43% vs. 27%). Further differences regarding participation can also be found depending on income, full- or part-time employment and position (BMBF, 2014; Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2014).

At the same time, the interaction of economic and other ideals not only holds interest for AE research. The scandals around VW and the manipulated emission tests or Barclays, the Royal Bank of Scotland, UBS and Deutsche Bank and the manipulation of the labor rate prompt the question of what kind of economy we want to live with.

In this article, an ethical perspective will be adopted (regarding the need for research on ethical aspects of AE see Schrader, 2014, p. 25 and Sork 2009, p. 28). The intention of the author is to be critical without being biased. This means that ‘economic’ will not be seen as *evil* per se.

In fact, workplace learning is a rather complex field of research. There are a number of different stakeholders within the corporations, including the employees, the department in charge of workplace learning, general management as well as line managers and the workers’ council. Usually several stakeholders are involved in the decisions regarding program planning and participation. Each of these stakeholders ascribes different functions to workplace learning. These functions include more obvious aspects such as qualification or motivation function as well as less obvious ones such as an image and acquisition function for the company, a profiling function for the human resources department or even potentially critical ones such as selection function and function of reproducing social disparity (von Hippel & Röbel, 2016).

It is important to understand that despite acting in an environment characterised by a focus on costs and benefits, program planners of workplace learning have leeway in their decisions (Bäumer, 1999, pp. 67; 138). The Anglo-American debate has recognised this leeway (e.g. Cervero & Wilson, 1994) and encourages practitioners to take different objectives (educational, management and political) into account in the process of program planning (Cervero & Wilson, 2006, p. 160).

Practitioners themselves are asking for a pragmatic approach. An article in a common journal among practitioners in the context of workplace learning titled ‘Organisational Development’ suggests: ‘The idea is, to become an agent of and within those discrepancies. Human resources development becomes – as the entire human resources management – the “conscience” of the organisation regarding the fact, that what is needed is workforce and what is there are human beings’ (Looss, 2012, p. 45).

In conclusion, the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals holds both theoretical and practical interest. Moreover, it is also the research interest of the author’s dissertation. In this article, a theoretical framework for empirical research will be developed. For that three major positions of business ethics will be introduced. Business ethics in more abstract ways deals with the very same question, namely how do ideas such as profit orientation interact with other norms and values? The aim is to derive an empirical understanding of the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the

context of workplace learning. The suggested framework will be applied in a test run, whereby first results and theoretical implications can be discussed.

State of research

The review of the state of research covers two aspects: previous works on the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the context of workplace learning as well as a brief exploration of ethics in AE. For the first part, mainly German scholars will be cited in an exemplary way, whereas the second part covers both English and German literature. The aim is to show the need for empirical research.

The question of how pedagogical and economic ideals interact in the context of workplace learning has been dealt with in a number of publications in recent decades. The discourse evolves around the terms education (*Bildung*), qualification and competence, which are used to represent different understandings. Faulstich and Zeuner (2015) point out: 'It seems that the discourse around 'Bildung' cannot be completed. It is always raised – at least in Germany – when the focus is turned towards more humane perspectives' (p. 27). In the English discourse, there seems to have been a comparable development regarding the terms used to speak about AE: 'A shift has occurred from speaking about education to speaking about learning' (Fejes, 2010, p. 90, in an article on the division of responsibility for employability between citizens on the one hand and state and employers on the other).

The German discourse focused on the context of workplace learning has been very comprehensively summarised in three theorems by Gonon and Stolz (2004). They will be briefly described as they still serve as a good orientation to understand the different theoretical assumptions regarding the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals.

The first theorem suggests a convergence of both kinds of ideals. The assumption is that changes in the organisation of work that require more autonomy and reflexivity from the workforce are reflected in the topics, goals and approaches of workplace learning. These are seen as signs for a reduced potential for conflicts of interests (e.g. Arnold 1995, 2002; Arnold & Steinbach, 1998; Dehnbostel, 2010; K apflinger, 2016). While some of the authors assume that technical, social and economic changes will automatically lead to the convergence, others see the changes as an opportunity for 'active pedagogisation' (Gonon & Stolz, 2004, p. 15).

The second theorem advocates the idea of divergency, its proponents claim that a fundamental difference exists between pedagogical and economic ideals (see K apflinger, 2016). The convergence theorem is criticised for being 'illusionary', including the warning that AE research might be turning itself into a 'provider of terms for any kind of modernisation within the neoliberal mainstream' (Faulstich & Zeuner, 2015, p. 29). Changes regarding new competences addressed in workplace learning are described as a 'strategy for rationalisation, that by putting learning into service through pedagogy, makes the subjectivity of the employees accessible as a new dimension for rationalisation' (Dobischat & D usseldorf, 2010, p. 924, see also Hartz & Stachowski, 2002, pp. 160-161).

The third theorem – the transformation theorem – is least commonly discussed. Similar to the first, it concludes that convergence is possible, although the argumentation is different. The primary concern relates to the revaluation of informal learning. As informal learning becomes more important, workplace learning is constantly changing (Behringer, Kampmann & K apflinger, 2009, p. 47; Gonon & Stolz,

2004, p. 16). The focus is on self-organisation and the individualisation of learning processes that are ‘not necessarily bonded to the company or educational establishment’ (Gonon and Stolz, 2004, p. 17).

All three theorems have been criticised for their lack of empirical foundation:

Unfortunately many scholarly works in the field of pedagogy often only have a normative-teleological focus, e.g. they end with the formulation of theses, while there is a serious deficit regarding the empirical examination and validation of those theses. To a varying extent, it is true for all three of the theses presented that they ‘oscillate between description and normativity’ (Gonon & Stolz, 2004, p. 17) and that is where they end at or at best there is some minor empirical research (Behringer et al., 2009, pp. 48-49).

At the same time, empirical research is challenging: given that ‘the question of economic and pedagogical perspective is an analytical distinction, there are no two physical or material units that can be separated’ (Harteis, 2004, p. 284). Furthermore, answers cannot be universal but rather only context-specific (Dollhausen, 2008, pp. 118-119).

Before exploring the discipline of business ethics for help, one might wonder what the discourse on ethics in AE has to offer. While ethics certainly has not been one of the core themes of AE research, there still are a number of contributions, a few in the German and some more in the Anglo-American debate.

The body of work available in German is described by Schrader (2014) in three areas: ethically justified goals of AE that take political contexts into account, the interaction of AE practitioners and adult learners as well as the interaction of research and practice (Schrader, 2014, pp. 18-24). Schrader concludes that further research is needed in all three areas. Moreover, in AE practice, only the first steps towards developing ethical standards have been taken. Some institutions and professional organisations have formulated ethical standards (Bernhardsson & Fuhr, 2014, p. 55). There remains a lack of coordinated action and a need for research on those professional ethics that supports practitioners in the reflecting process and allows for orientation (Bernhardsson & Fuhr, 2014, p. 56).

The international discourse – especially the Anglo-American discourse – seems to be some steps ahead in addressing ethical issues, although empirical approaches remain rare. The two main areas of research are codes of ethics and models of ethical decision-making, with the later often comprising sets of questions to ‘help practitioners reason their way to sound ethical choices’ (Sork, 2009, p. 26, see also Lee, 2005). More specifically, there are some publications that deal with ethical aspects of program planning, as well as those focusing on human resource development and training (an overview can be found in Sork, 2009, p. 19). However, Sork underlines the need for further research taking the different contexts of AE into account.

In addition to the broader discourse around ethics in AE, there is a body of work on “Critical Human Resources Development”. For example, Elliott and Turnbull suggest adopting a critical perspective, for which ‘HRD theory [...] subsequently needs to open itself up to, and equip itself with, a broader range of methodological perspectives and theoretical interpretations’ (Elliott & Turnbull, 2005, p. 2). Although emancipatory and critical AE can be seen as general ethical positions in AE (see Brookfield & Holst, 2011 as an example), they have neither been developed to a sound theory (see Wilson & Kiely, 2002) nor do they cover the specific question of the article, namely the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the context of workplace learning. Nonetheless, they provide useful insights into what pedagogical ideals might specifically mean.

The review of the state of research leads to three conclusions: first, the research question at stake has been previously discussed, which is seen as a sign for theoretical relevance; second, there is a need for empirical research; and third, existing works on ethical aspects of AE do not cover the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the context of workplace learning.

Business Ethics: A broader perspective on values vs. profit

In order to reach an empirical understanding of the research question, this chapter offers a step back by introducing three major positions of the discipline of business ethics. Business ethics is an applied ethics that – as the name suggests – is focused on the business context. It deals in more abstract ways with the very same kind of question as this article, namely how do ideas such as profit orientation interact with other norms and values?

Within business studies, the discipline of business ethics has only slowly gained some recognition since the first chairs at universities have been granted, starting in the 1970s in the United States (Herold, 2012, p. 26) and Germany following in the 1990s (Göbel, 2013, pp. 5-7). There is a body of literature offering both normative suggestions, theoretical reflections and some empirical findings. The three positions that will be subsequently presented are less formulated around specific ethical dilemmas, but rather seek to answer in different ways whether and how business can be done in an ethical way. They coincide in the belief that the ethically problematic consequences of current economic actions are linked to the generalisation of an instrumental economic rationality. Each proposition will be discussed regarding its helpfulness for the development of a theoretical framework for this paper.

Homann: applying economic theory to ethics

Karl Homann is considered the most prominent representative of the idea of ‘economy as the continuation of ethics with different means’ (Homann, 2002).¹ At the core of his argumentation is the idea of the homo oeconomicus, who always seeks for the best choice to maximise his or her benefit. To understand interactions with several stakeholders, he uses the prisoners’ dilemma to show that it is only rational for the stakeholders involved to cooperate if they can be certain that everybody will cooperate/act in an ethical way (Herold, 2012, pp. 128-131). Ethical business – or ethical behaviour in general – will only happen if the right set of regulations is put in place. This means that only market rules that make ethical behaviour the rational choice can ensure ethical business.

Ethical principles [such as human dignity, solidarity, freedom, justice; *TR*] are open concepts, that cannot guide action on their own – there is always a need for a translation to specific societal conditions and an institutional design of incentives. Ethics becomes the heuristic for economics (Homann, 2002, p. 21).

Changes in the outcome of interactions are explained by the changing actions of those involved, which in turn can be explained by a change in the relevant conditions or restrictions (Kettner, n.d.). In conclusion, the economy will always work with the logic of maximising the individual profit, the arena for ethics is legislation and there is no need for moral appeals towards individuals or companies (Göbel, 2013, p. 76).

Comparing Homann to the state of research presented in chapter two, it seems that the methodological assumption of the homo oeconomicus seems to be mirrored in the three theorems presented. Applying Homann to AE research might lead to questions such as: What kind of legislative change is necessary so that it becomes rational

(meaning: beneficial in terms of profit) to – for example – grant opportunities for workplace learning to all employees?

Ulrich: integrative business ethics

By contrast, Ulrich rejects the idea of two different logics (ethical logic that needs to be translated to the logic of rational choice) as every kind of decision is based on an understanding of what is legitimate and what is not.

In his book on “Integrative business ethics” first published in 1997, Ulrich strongly criticises the argumentation put forward by Homann. The differences start with the basic assumptions: while Homann suggests that ‘rational choice’ in the sense of profit maximisation is free from ethical considerations, Ulrich points out that every choice and every idea of rationality comprises a certain understanding of what should be done and thus is ethical (Ulrich, 2008, p. 101). The distinction between economy and ethics in practice leads to the implicitness of economic ideals, whereas ethics is reduced to a compensatory or corrective role (Herold, 2012, p. 135). By contrast, integrative business ethics aims at an understanding of rationality that equally serves all human beings by sustainably providing goods for all, allowing the individual to live a fulfilled life and find purpose (Ulrich, 2008, pp. 221-250).

As Thielemann (2003, p. 110) – a scholar of Ulrich – states, the role of business ethics research is ‘to show which norms and values are involved in specific contexts of discussion, which normally are overlooked or ignored’ to allow for an informed discourse among the stakeholders. Taking the perspective offered by Ulrich, relevant questions for AE research might be: What are the values inherent in the decisions that are being taken? What are the values that fit into the concept of a social-economic rationality?

Küpper: analytical business ethics

In contrast to Homann and Ulrich, Küpper (2006, p. 140) does not suggest another viewpoint, but rather calls for a less normative and more empirical discourse. His critique regarding Ulrich is centred around the claim that the idea of a social-economic rationality is as normative as the suggestions regarding regulations put forward by Homann. Furthermore, he argues that Ulrich’s proposition is constructed upon the enemy image of a strictly liberal economic system, while the reality is much more pluralistic (Küpper, 2006, p. 155). In conclusion, he advocates reconsidering the role of business ethics research.

Research is unable to free him [the practitioner in charge; *TR*] from the choice between norms, values and/ or rules. The purpose of research is, to provide the knowledge that helps him to understand the ethical or value-based dimension of his decision and to act responsibly (Küpper, 2006, pp. 164-165).

The empirical analysis of conflicts of values as Küpper envisions it forms the basis for a discourse that takes the ethical dimension into account, allows for the implementation of certain values and makes visible where further legislation is needed. In this sense, the approach of analytical business ethics can be seen as the integration of Ulrich and Homann:

- Which values are being referred to?
- Which conflicts of values can be described?
- Is there a need for a change in legislation?

Küpper himself describes a four-step approach for analytical business ethics: first, relevant ethical questions and the norms and values referred to need to be described; second, the effects of management decisions on those values and vice versa the effects of personal and moral values as well as regulations on management decisions should be analysed; third, relations and conflicts between economic goals and ethic norms should be uncovered; and fourth, the values referred to should be analysed regarding how they are being justified (Küpper 2006, pp. 172-176).

Summary and conclusion for the next steps of the research

The three viewpoints of business ethics allow for different perspectives on the research question of this article.

The idea of economy as the continuation of ethics formulated by Homann seems to be closest to the current state of AE research as it assumes two different logics, namely economic and pedagogical. Questions for further research could be: What kind of legislative change is necessary so that it becomes rational (meaning: beneficial in terms of profit) to – for example – grant opportunities for workplace learning to all employees? Alternatively: What kind of societal changes make the “good” choice the rational choice (see “convergence theorem” presented in chapter two)?

More promising – in the sense of being less similar to existing work – is the perspective of an integrated business ethics offered by Ulrich. He underlines the implicit ethical dimension of all kind of decisions, which he subsequently measures against his conception of a social-economic rationality. Regarding the question of how economic and pedagogical ideals interact in the context of workplace learning, a re-formulation of the research question is necessary: What are the values inherent in the decisions that are being taken?

The analytical business ethics proposed by Küpper suggests a four-step approach for empirical research. Using his approach could be a starting point to integrate both Ulrich and Homann, possible questions for further research could be: In the context of workplace learning, which values are inherent in the decisions taken? Which conflicts of values can be described? Is there a need for a change in legislation?

For this paper, the perspective of Ulrich seems most fruitful as it represents a new perspective. An empirical description of the values inherent in workplace learning brings about an innovative role for AE research. If we seek to truly understand the interaction of different values in the context of workplace learning and if we aim at providing useful knowledge for practitioners so that they can take ethically informed decisions, we need to open our understanding of “economic”, stop limiting ourselves to a normative discourse and start to take a closer look. Accordingly, the following chapter suggests a way towards doing so.

Applying business ethics to adult education research on workplace learning

Inspired by business ethics, the initial research question of this article has been re-formulated to: Which values are inherent in the decisions taken in the context of workplace learning?

This question tells us what to look for, but not where to find it. One might analyse participation levels, the different steps of the planning process or the learning situation itself. Here, the object of research is a different one: based on the assumption that the

question raised in this article is not only a theoretical one but also a practical one and that ‘the answer or rather the solution is being discussed critically in all stakeholder groups’ (Lisop, 1998, p. 46), the object of research will be the ‘communicative framing’, the way in which the stakeholders talk about workplace learning (Harney, 1998, p. 140). The research question can be specified as follows:

- What kind of decisions are being taken regarding workplace learning?
- What is being justified? What is not?
- Which values are being referred to? Which values are not mentioned?
- If decisions are justified by practical constraints, what are the inherent values?
- What is ‘a happy by-product’ and what is ‘an end by itself’? (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012, p. 166).
- Are there examples of decisions that can be justified by both practical constraints and pedagogical values? (see “conditions for convergence”, Harteis, 2004, p. 285).

Design of test run

The sample used in the test run for this article comprises two expert interviews with the heads of the workplace learning departments of two different German companies. They were conducted during a research project on program planning in workplace learning, financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The project ran three case studies with nine to twelve interviews each and an additional analysis of the training programs (von Hippel & Röbel 2016, von Hippel forthcoming). The two interviews analysed again for this article were the first within the respective case study. They have been chosen owing to the differences between the two companies’ approaches to workplace learning.

The data were analysed following the qualitative content analysis as described by Mayring & Brunner (2013) and Kuckartz (2012).

Operationalisation: Rationalities of justification

In order to answer the research question, a set of categories is needed that reflects the theoretical framework. It should make values visible as well as practical constraints or any other kind of justification of decision. For this test run, “rationalities of justification” are suggested as three main categories. They have been developed deductively based on work by Wittwer (1981), Pohlmann (2015), Cervero and Wilson (2006) and Sork (1990):

- value-based justification (pedagogical / societal)
- “rational” choice justification (cost / benefit / profit / growth / demand)
- (micro-)political justification (interest of stakeholders)

Value-based justification: This category is intended to grasp any referral to values such as ‘democracy, social justice, sustainability, freedom, responsibility, equality and solidarity’ (Wildemeersch & Salling-Olesen on the role of AE, 2012, p. 101). It includes values that one might understand as pedagogical as well as societal. Wittwer (1981, p. 231) describes this category with the terms ‘idealistic-anthropological orientation’ and ‘political orientation’ in his dissertation on the legitimatisation of goals in workplace learning. Both orientations are understood as a reference to normative values and orientations for actions (Wittwer, 1980, p. 231). ‘Political orientation’ refers to ideal conceptions of society. Similar terms are used by Pohlmann, who – in the context of a study on educational leave in Bremen (a federal state in Germany) – interviewed

program planners with the aim of describing the logics of decision-making (Pohlmann, 2015, p. 82): ‘pedagogical principals’ and ‘societal demands’ (Pohlmann, 2015, p. 100). She refers to them as ‘contexts of justification’ or ‘strategies of legitimatization’ (Pohlmann, 2015, p. 100).

‘Rational’ choice justification: In contrast to the first category, this one aims at justifications described as “rational” choice. Put very simply, this category reflects what commonly has been understood as “economic”. The focus is on justifications that refer to costs and benefits, profit, growth and demand: in other words, justifications that refer to alleged ‘empirically-verifiable consequences’ (Sork, 1990, p. 3). Nonetheless, this does not imply that whenever there is a rational choice justification, there is no room for values. This category is the necessary first step to ask for the values inherent in decisions that are justified as “rational” choice by the stakeholders. That second step of the analysis differs from Wittwer (1981) and Pohlmann (2015), who refer to this category as ‘economic-technical orientation’ (Wittwer) and ‘economic criteria’ (Pohlmann) without analysing the inherent values.

(Micro-)Political justification: The third category reflects the fact that workplace learning takes place in a social context. Different stakeholders are involved and negotiate their interests and power relations (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; von Hippel & Röbel, 2016). Cervero and Wilson claim that in terms of program planning, ‘planners need to recognize that people’s political objectives are as much a part of the planning process as their educational and management objectives’ (Cervero & Wilson 2006, p. 140). Here, ‘political’ refers to micro-politics and the interests of the stakeholders. Again, the assumption is not that values are excluded whenever a decision is justified by micro-political interests, but rather that it is necessary to ask which values are implied.

Initial results of test run

The full transcripts of both interviews were coded according to the three categories by the author. In a next step, summaries were written for both interviews in each category.

Case description: Interview 1 was selected from a company that operates in the utility sector, interview 2 from a retail company. Both companies have more than 15,000 employees. Company 1 has been facing organisational restructurings and cost-cutting measures, whereas company 2 is expanding. Expert 1 – Ms One – and her team are responsible for the organisation of workplace learning and receive conceptual input from other stakeholders. Expert 2 – Ms Two – and her team are in charge of conceptual tasks, while the organisation of the learning activities is executed by regional learning and development staff.

Value-based justifications: In five of seventeen coded statements, Ms One refers to the position of the workers’ council, which campaigns for the protection of privacy, equality and the right to learn. Her own statements are mainly ambiguous; for example, she highlights the importance of personal development of the employees, to ensure the continuous success of the company. Two aspects that might truly be seen as values are gender equality and physical safety.

By contrast, in the thirty-eight statements that have been coded, Ms Two describes the following as important: enabling employees for self-directed learning, providing support for daily business tasks, strengthening the awareness for informal learning and individual learning competencies and needs, respecting individuality as well as fostering a corporate culture of cooperation, transparency and understanding.

But there is a precondition: I need to have an idea, how self-directed learning works, or self-caring learning. (.) And that is our task, to put emphasis on those topics, how does

reflection work, what is it good for, why is it a good starting point to move forward. [Mhm] And also to tell them: You are already learning anyway. I mean, we can't stop anyone from learning in his everyday life. [Mhm] But we want to show you how you can get more of that when you do it consciously.

For a more detailed analysis, a number of sub-categories are conceivable: among others, equality, cooperation and respect can be found in the data.

'Rational choice' justification: In the forty-eight coded statements in the first interview, Ms One speaks a lot about rational choices and practical constraints. Training that is compulsory is conducted. Leadership trainings are strongly discussed, because a lot of money is spent there. Different groups of workers (blue- and white-collar) receive different training (mainly compulsory vs. other). She seems to mainly focus on two aims: reducing direct costs as a department and company, as well as reducing indirect costs, in the sense of reduced time investments. Therefore, learning activities are split into parts, with the idea that people gain exactly the knowledge that they need. One problem regarding the goal of reduced costs is that trainings should be booked via the training department, although often the external market is used, which means higher costs. They try to prevent this by customising trainings more to the specific demand of the internal customers. Interestingly, even relationships are described as being dependent on practical restraints:

It's important to know for how long we should offer it [a training/ workshop; TR] or hold it available, will I still need it in a year. Do I need to nourish my suppliers or can I cross them off the portfolio and say, ok this will end in two years?

Again, interview 2 is very different, in which fifteen statements were coded. Ms Two makes very few comments in the sense of rational choice or practical constraints. One comment is made regarding change that happens anyway owing to changing products. In another statement, she highlights that very long trainings are difficult for part-time workers and in a third comment she speaks about a small number of compulsory trainings. The other coded statements in the category 'rational choice' refer to the managers (store head, area head, regional head), who – as Ms Two describes them – are very heterogeneous in their focus on economic criteria and their understanding of or appreciation for learning.

Again, a detailed analysis would allow for sub-categories to be developed inductively, such as cost reduction, internal demand and time saving.

(Micro-)Political justification: In both interviews, four statements were coded. Whereas Ms One mainly speaks about how her involvement in the planning processes depends on the hierarchical level of the internal customers, Ms Two is interested in making visible that what her teams offers is high value (little internal promotion, exclusive paper used for printed program).

Possible sub-categories are gaining influence, sharpening profile and increasing the budget of the department.

Discussion and reflection on methodology

This chapter had two aims: first, a suggestion for the operationalisation of the theoretical framework developed in chapter 3 was made; and second, it was applied by way of trial in a test run. On the way towards answering the research question of the values inherent in decisions regarding workplace learning, the rationalities of justification can be seen as a vehicle, which allow for a necessary detour.

As stated in the design of the test run, case 1 and 2 were chosen due to the differences between the two companies' approaches to workplace learning. These differences were also reflected in the primary rationalities of justification: Ms One used more "rational choice" justifications, whereas Ms Two mainly brought-up value-based justifications. Nonetheless, both of them referred to other stakeholders within their companies as ambassadors for the respective other kind of justification. Apparently, all three kinds of justifications can be found in the context of workplace learning. What might be interesting to observe in further analysis is the importance that they are assigned.

Regarding the methodology of future analysis, several recommendations seem promising.

First, given that both interviewees refer to other stakeholders, it will be important to let those stakeholders have their say. Second, the categories need to be refined, one option is to develop sub-categories inductively (which values do interviewees refer to, to what extent can they be found in other interviews) and another is to use the state of research as a start; for example, regarding values that might be referred to (see thoughts on limitations below). Third, the central question of the values inherent in rational choices remains largely unanswered. It is conceivable to analyse the coded statements under the aspect of what is "seen as acceptable". Fourth, given that the range of decisions justified by the interviewees is very broad, to make the attempt at adding complexity by including other stakeholders more achievable, it might be fruitful to focus further analyses on specific decisions such as needs or needs assessment in the context of workplace learning.

Regarding the limitations of this approach, it seems important to highlight that the analysis cannot stop with what is found in the data; rather, a link back to the normative discourse in AE on how workplace learning should be is necessary. As stated above, this can even be undertaken in the process of the analysis by developing sub-categories to the value-based justifications, such as democracy, freedom and equality.

Conclusion

One effect of marketisation in Germany is the (relatively) increased importance of workplace learning. For several decades, discourse has emerged around the question of how economic and pedagogical ideals interact in this context. While some authors claim that both kind of ideals converge due to changes in the organisation of work, others describe a fundamental divergence of economic and pedagogical ideals, whereas a third group focuses on the increasing importance of informal learning. What all three theorems have in common is that an empirical foundation is missing. Furthermore, the body of work on ethics in Adult Education does not provide help in terms of how to reach an empirical understanding of the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the context of workplace learning.

In order to better understand the existing discourse and offer a new perspective, three positions of the discipline of business ethics have been introduced. In conclusion, this has led to a re-formulation of the research question. Accordingly, rather than asking for the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals – which implies perceiving business and ethics as being separate – the question now is: Which values are inherent in the decisions taken in the context of workplace learning?

The assumption is that even though a decision is justified as a "rational" choice or beneficial for the micro-political interests of the stakeholders, it still shows what is

considered as “ok” or “not ok” in terms of values. For the test run presented in chapter 4, three deductively developed categories have been used for the analysis: value-based justification, “rational” choice justification and (micro-)political justification. These three contexts of justifications are not mutually exclusive, but analytical perspectives. The results of the test run indicate that this approach allows for differences between companies to become visible. Suggestions for further research have been elaborated, such as including more stakeholders, refining the categories, developing sub-categories, focusing on one kind of decision – for example, needs assessment – and above all a methodological solution concerning how to make values inherent in rational choices visible.

The intended contribution of this article is a first step towards an empirical answer concerning how pedagogical and economic ideals interact. The author believes that if AE is to adopt a critical position that is heard and considered as helpful by practitioners of workplace learning, the empirical approach is needed as an addition to the normative discourse. Accordingly, a detailed description and critical discussion of the values reflected in workplace learning can form the basis for ethically informed decisions.

The adaptation of business ethic research seems fruitful, although some methodological challenges remain open (see Randall & Gibson, 1990, for a review of methodology in business ethics research). For example, additional research will need to explain the connections between individual, social and company values (see O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005, for a review of the empirical ethical decision-making literature that covers both individual and organisational factors). Furthermore, ethical dimensions of workplace learning cannot only be analysed on the level of singular corporations as conducted here, but rather on multiple levels, including the role of the state and the public. Longitudinal studies that – for example – analyse both changes in participation and justifications will be especially interesting.

Finally, it seems important to underline again that this article does not mean to argue in favour of marketisation; rather, the aim was to contribute to the understanding of one of its effects, namely the interaction of economic and pedagogical ideals in the context of workplace learning. The suggested framework will be used by the author for further empirical research, which will hopefully lead to an empirical understanding of the research question at stake, eventually supporting practitioners of workplace learning in taking ethically informed choices or leading to changes in legislation.

Acknowledgements

The empirical data used for this article were gathered by the author when working for a research project on program planning in workplace learning (StePrA: Steuerung der Programm- und Angebotsplanung in der betrieblichen Weiterbildung. Eine Analyse der Handlungskoordination verschiedener Akteursgruppen). The project was financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and carried out from June 2013 to June 2015 under the lead of Aiga von Hippel, head of the Department of Adult Education/Lifelong Learning at the Humboldt University of Berlin. Special thanks go to her and her team, as well as Bernd Käßlinger, Professor for Continuing Education at the University of Giessen., for helpful advice on the journey of writing this article. All German publications cited in this article have been translated by the author.

Notes

¹ Workplace learning as a term is also used to describe the part of initial vocational education and training that is taking place at the workplace. In this article the term refers to education and training taking place after the first vocational training, as part of human resources development.

² The citations refer to the publication in German. English publications by Homann and Ulrich are included in the references (Homann, Koslowski & Lütge, 2007; Ulrich, 2008).

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