Challenges Of The Recognition Of Competences Acquired Informally And Non-Formally By Vocational Education And Training Teachers: Reflections Based On The EU's Experience

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Abstract

*V*ocational Education and Training (VET) Teachers have usually had a characterized by complex and diversified learning process. A large number of VET teachers have mixed professional pathways – both teaching and working outside the educational system. This mixed experience is considered in the VET centres as a guarantee of better teaching, because the teachers are more familiar with working life. The socioeconomic networking activities of VET centres highlight the as social networking capacity. For this reason the recognition of competences acquired non-formally or informally by VET teachers takes a central place in the careers of VET teachers. Would it be useful to incorporate this mechanism of recognition in the "trans-national standards of teachers' education for VET?" For several decades now there has been in the EU context a debate on the mechanisms for recognition of competences acquired non-formally or informally. The speaker intends to discuss the recognition of the competences acquired by VET teachers in non-formal and informal ways based on the experience of recognition of prior learning in the EU.

Keywords: Model, Non-formal and Informal learning, Notion of Competences, Methodology challenges

Introduction

VET teachers like all of us are affected by globalisation which this Congress is just one example. among the effects of this globalisation are far reaching changes on the contents and the methods of learning, also for teachers. But for the VET teachers the changes are, if possible, more complex due to two reasons: the place of VET systems as interface between education and productive systems, as well as the complexity and less structured ways in which VET teachers acquire their competences.

This text is divided in four parts: the first one focuses on the peculiarities of the curricula of VET teachers and the place of tacit competences in therein; the second part concentrates on the historical summary of the relationship between the models of production of competences and their recognition; the third focused on the on the axes of the debate, in the European Union, about the mechanisms to recognise competences acquired non formally and informally as a point of reference for the recognition of this kind of competences of VET teachers; the fourth one tries to define the methodological challenges for the recognition of informal learning by the VET teacher.

The Peculiarities of the Curricula of VET Teachers and the Tacit Competences.

VET systems, by their own nature, are placed between the formal educational systems and the productive systems. The formal education systems provide to the VET students the basic knowledge their need to learn the specific knowledge and capacities to work in a determinate production field; but the main goal of students on VET courses is to find a job where the students use their capacities in a productive context, as soon as possible.

Due to this specific placement of the VET systems, the VET teachers, as individuals and as collective teams, need to have competences giving the capacity to construct bridges between the training world and the productive world.

For VET teachers, the mixed experiences in their training pathways don't mean erratic pathways but very valuable ones, reflecting the complexities of the VET functions, as well other social experiences and capacities could be a good ingredient of the competences required for VET teachers.

The kind of competences VET teachers need as a collective body are, at least, competences coming from both sides of the vocational apprenticeship, the educational and the productive one. The kind of competences VET teachers' needs are also tacit ones, acquired by experience and difficult to communicate outside of the work practices.

Having the tacit competences acquired by experience could be very important for VET teachers and centres, because, as Jones and Wood said (Jones 1989; Jones and Wood, 1984; Wood 1989), by the tacit competences we might acquire: a) the routine tasks practices, related to a determinate job, and, by this routine practice, an stock of knowledge difficult to define objectively, b) the capacity to solve unexpected problems or non habitual situations on the job, and c) the competences related to the collective nature of the work process, the capacity to cooperate end to work in teams.

The tacit competences introduce us also to the social and spatial-temporal dimension of the actual work. Last but not least, other social competences such as social networking

capacities are crucial for the activities of a VET centre. To establish links with the social and economic surroundings is a part of the VET's centres activities and this capacity is not evenly distributed between all VET teachers and based on tacit knowledge acquired by experience. These kinds of competences, as most other competences, are more developed in some teachers than in others and for this reason constitutes individual competences that we might recognise.

These kinds of competences are acquired mainly outside of the formal education by non-formal or informal learning processes, even through experience as a VET teacher. Even if we can and wish to reinforce the presence of these competences in the initial and formal educational period of the teachers training, the background of the individual teachers in this field will be different due to their different professional and life pathways. Then, we are faced with a double level of competence: the individual one and the collective one. A VET centre doesn't need all the teachers to have a similar level of competences in this field but to have these competences could be crucial for the quality of the VET centre as a whole. If we wish to have these kinds of competences in the VET centres, and for teachers, we must be able to identify and to recognise people who have these competences.

In the following parts of this text we will try to tackle the issue of the recognition of the competences acquired informally and non- formally by VET teachers based on the experience of recognition of prior learning in general. We will look at the recognition of VET teachers' competences in a more general framework for the debate about the characteristics of the methodologies. This more general framework in the EU's experience must be placed in the framework of the research on the topic of the processes of recognition of competences, acquired while working or living.

In this context VET teachers' competences are just a peculiar case for the analysis of the problems related with the recognition of competencies acquired informally. The above mentioned topic constitutes one of the key elements in the debate focus on the creation of the National or European Qualifications Systems in the European Union. This debate is based on the discussion of different issues such as the transparency of the qualifications and students and workers mobility within the National and the European Space of Education, Training and Employment.

During the last decades several projects and European guidelines have been developed in order to make concrete this project (CEC 2005), despite the fact that limited results have been reached, raising significant questions that could be relevant when we discuss the case of VET teachers.

The Models of Production of Competences and their Recognition: a History in Three Stages

The basis for proposing a methodology for the recognition of the competences acquired while working, or simply in the social life, must answer two questions: firstly, why is it necessary to recognise the competences acquired in a informal or non-formal way? Secondly, which is the appropriate method to do this? To find a correct answer to these two questions, we must place them in a more general framework of debate on why and how the competences acquired outside formal education must be recognised.

If we approach this issue from a historical perspective, schematically, we might say that, with regard to the modalities of production and recognition of competences, during the twentieth century and the period we have gone through of the twenty-first one, we have had three stages in this history. During the first half of the twentieth century, for the most part, the competences that were required for a job were acquired while carrying it out, their recognition being produced –very differently from one sector to another and from one country to another– by means of the internal markets of the company and/or by means of having access to a "trade" certified by several modalities of access to a guild ("professional markets"). From the Second World War on, and mostly from the 1960s onwards, supported by the Theory of Human Capital, there appeared in all countries the phenomenon of "educational expansion". It was characterised by the consensus among states, families and companies in order to increase the level of the population's formal initial education, so that, during the second half of the twentieth century, although with different rhythms and modalities according to the countries, each generation was better educated than the previous one (Béduwé, Planas, 2003). Without completely supplanting experience, during this period, formal education became increasingly important in the production of competences, and certificates became increasingly important to certify the latter, too.

Over the last decades of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, a slowing down in the growth of formal initial education took place. At the same time, on the one hand, there was an increase in the spaces and mechanisms of competence acquisition, among them, the virtual ones; on the other hand, the training processes, both the initial and life-long learning ones, became more complex. Simultaneously, the productive processes quickly changed due to technological changes, changes in work organisation and market globalisation. All this has implied new competence requirements, which are sometimes hard to acquire through formal education, and, more than anything else, great instability and uncertainty in those competences acquired in the medium and long run. One of the effects of these changes is that the certificates of formal education, although still important, have become information that is increasingly limited and incomplete on people's competences; new information and competence-recognition tools are becoming predominant and are needed both for human resources management and the regulation of the labour market, as well as the organisation of life-long learning pathways.

In analytical terms, today, the research that is under way on the productive abilities of the employment offer is based on the need and the difficulty to measure people's competences (Borghans, Green, Mayhew, 2001); therefore, they have in common the following premises:

- Competences and their recognition cannot be limited to formal education and its certificates.
- One of the priorities of research with regard to the labour market is searching for new methods of recognising the competences of the employment offer.
- The progress made in research on competence assessment is still very limited.

The Mechanisms for the Recognition of non Formal and Informal Learning: Axes of the Debate in the European Union.

In operational terms, or rather, methodological ones, the debate, in the European Union, on mechanisms for the validation and recognition of competences are centred on the following axes:

•   The subject of formalisation and transparency: generally speaking, the recognition of competences in the labour market takes place *de facto*, although the introduction of formal tools to carry it out is very scarcely developed. This massive recognition of competences takes place, more or less spontaneously, through informal and mostly opaque mechanisms. In this debate, one of the main points refers to the will of transparency of the different agents' involved (Leney *et al*., 2007); this is one of the premises of the formal systems of competence recognition. To increase the interest and the efficiency by means of response mechanisms that are suitable for "specific needs and users", Bjornavold (2001: 215) proposes the following: *"This may be looked upon as a reflection of the need to tailor methodological and institutional solutions to specific needs and users"*.

•   Over the last few decades, some sectorial, regional, national and European mechanisms have been developed that have been called "Qualification Frameworks". These reference frameworks for the recognition of competences have in common the holistic vocation of recognising them regardless of how they have been acquired (formally, non-formally or informally). Generally speaking, they have universal aims within their field, that is to say, they intend to become reference frameworks for all the competences and jobs in their territorial and/or sectorial field (Young, 2005). The development of the European Qualification Framework follows the same direction. The question that the poor results of this type of mechanisms raises, some of which have already had a long history, is the following: Why are some tools that are apparently so necessary so scarcely accepted? (Leney *et al*., 2007).

•   Another axis of the debate focuses on the holistic intention of most Qualifications Frameworks. And not to the question: Is it possible to make use of methodologies and systems of recognition common for the competences formally or non-formally acquired? Some authors, with a long experience in the analysis of the mechanisms for the recognition of non-formal competences, answer: "No". Following the experts' suggestions (Collardin & Bjornavold, 2005, Bjornavold, 2002, Miller, 2002), the introduction of standards for describing learning have as a "necessary and important" condition the coexistence of very different validation systems. As Collardin and Bjornavold say: *"The integration of validation into mainstream policies is, to a certain extent, paradoxical. The majority of countries use validation as a means to increase the flexibility of formal education and training systems and to accommodate alternative learning pathways. But promoting validation simultaneously challenges the role of formal education and training insofar as validation of non-formal and informal learning may fulfil goals different from those served by formal education and training. This challenge to the formal systems is accentuated by the increasingly important role*

played by enterprises and sectors in developing assessment and validation instruments for internal management proposals... In most Member States, the validation approaches developed by enterprises and sectors remain isolated from the validation developed in formal education and training" (Collardin & Bjornavold, 2005: 131-133).

- The notion of competence and its effects on recognition methodologies. One of the indirect effects of establishing Qualifications Frameworks built and legitimated with regard to formal education cycles is that the notion of competence tends to "adjust" to reference "trades" and to the cycles of formal education that prepare for the "qualifications" or "trades"; the method for the recognition of non-formally acquired competences basically means the total or partial validation of pre-established formal training cycles with regard to the access to pre-defined trades. Does this make sense?

- The recognition of informally acquired competences poses a previous knowledge problem, even for the person who is in possession of them. As Bjornavold (2001: 217) points out: *"in the attempt to capture non-formal learning we need to consider that this kind of competences are partly* tacit *in their character. This means that it is difficult to verbalise and delimit the single steps or rules intrinsic to a certain competence. In some cases, people are not even aware of being in possession of a competence. This is an element of high relevance to the task of assessing non-formal learning, and has to be reflected by the methodologies."*

- Last but not least, the debate on the conditions that the mechanisms of competence recognition must meet in terms of feasibility, validity, legality and legitimacy. These aspects are dealt with next directly related to the specificity of work of VET teachers. Special attention must be paid to the subject of legitimacy, as Bjornavold (2001: 218) points out: *"The acceptance of assessments of non-formal learning is not only a matter of their legal status but also of their legitimate status".*

Methodological Challenges for the Recognition of the Informal Learning Carried out by VET Teachers

1. The Specificity and Diversity of the Agents Involved in the Informal Experiences of VET Teachers and their Consequences for the Recognition of Informal Learning.

The agents involved in informal experiences of VET teachers, as defined above come from the educational sector, as well from the firms or the social institutions. The VET is as diverse as the productive (goods & services) sector and each field have their own characteristics. There is not a previously defined set of agents involved in all the informal experiences of VET teachers   and in the possible use of validated competences. Standing in the interface between training and other production sectors and institutions, the interest for the recognition and the capacity to recognise of the experience might come from all the agents involved in each particular case. Some problems of legitimacy could be emerging, see below, if the method of recognition doesn't capture the diversity of the agents involved in the experiences, but it's not possible to organise a tailored system for feasibility reasons. To find a good balance between the involvement of the agents involved and the feasibility is one of the challenges we have to meet.

2. To Incorporate the Interest of the Different "Users", Agents and the VET Teachers, in the Process.

There are also the interests of the teachers, which can be very diverse by field of activity, due to the external labour market references or even for personal reasons. But other agents, like firms or institutions, can have specific interests in the contents and the forms of validation and recognition of VET teachers. VET teachers more than other teachers can move from teaching activities to other activities and vice versa.

3. Validity and Feasibility of the Proposal.

According to what some authors point out (Bjornavold, 2001), among the conditions that the methodologies for competence recognition have to meet we find those of validity and feasibility. The validity condition regards the quality and reliability of the information contained in the tools used. In fact, the feasibility condition is a condition that counterbalances that of validity, referring to the fact that the means devoted to guarantee the validity of information are limited by the fact that validation tools are not so awkward and expensive that they really hinder their application in a generalised way. Therefore, some methods and tools will have to be looked for, which, in addition to providing good quality, appropriateness and reliability, may also be assumed within a type of practices that we want to become generalised.

4. Making tacit competences explicit.

As we pointed out above, regarding formally acquired competences, the recognition of non-formally learned competences implies the added difficulty of their tacit nature and that of the lack of awareness of the people who have acquired them. Due to the "spontaneous" manner of acquiring tacit competences the recognition of the competences acquired informally could demands a great deal of effort, often from professionals outside the VET sector, to make those competences that they will have to recognise later on appear, even if this increases the means required for their development; otherwise, their validity would be seriously diminished.

5. Legitimacy of the result: for whom and by whom.

As we previously pointed out, one of the challenges that any mechanism must guarantee is legitimacy. That is to say, the mechanism employed must be supported by the uses and the institutions involved; this will make it reliable. Therefore, in our case, the recognition of legitimacy must be guaranteed, firstly, by those people whose competences it aims to recognise, and, secondly, it must also guarantee the recognition of those future employers and of the educational and training institutions that it is expected will recognise the competences. The main sources of legitimacy are the institutions (public or private, formal or informal) involved in the labour market and in educational and training institutions.

6. Relationship with legal/institutional frameworks: an international dimension?.

Although legality is no guarantee of legitimacy, legal certificates may be issued that are not recognised in the labour market; legality is usually an ingredient of legitimacy. In particular, in the recognition of informally acquired competences and despite the problems

that have appeared when establishing correspondences between those competences acquired formally and non-formally, some links should be established between the mechanisms set up and the legal frameworks of competence recognition of each country and on an international level. The international networks could become a source of legitimacy for an agreed methodology.

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