Learning by Leaving — Towards a Pedagogy for Transnational Mobility in the Context of Vocational Education and Training (VET)

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‘Transnational mobility’ has over the last decade become a household byword in VET policy discussions, not only in a European Commission-context, but also at national and regional policy level in Europe. The debate is not merely an academic one — the second phase of the main VET programme of the European Commission (Leonardo da Vinci) aims to involve at least 250,000 participants in mobility activities over a five-year period, and various national and regional programmes and initiatives can at least match this number. Despite the numbers of people and the finances involved, however, the area has so far failed to attract the attention of the VET research community. Practices ‘out there’ are based on assumptions and have seldom been underpinned by research, and no adequate theories have been developed to give a general sense of direction and coherence to the field.

This article presents the main conclusions of research undertaken to ‘capture’ this new and largely uncharted area. For this purpose, a three-pronged approach has been adopted. The first consists in delineating its contours through the collection and analysis of empirical data. The second is a conceptual exercise, trying to construct an adequate theoretical framework, mainly by combining and adapting theories from neighbouring fields. The final line of the work has as its aim, by combining the outcomes from the first and second phases, to try and trace pathways towards a proper pedagogy for the activity of ‘transnational mobility’ in a VET context. Due to the complexity of the field and the paucity of prior research and development activities, much of the exercise has been a heuristic one, with empirical and theoretical work undertaken concurrently. The overriding aim has been to identify and capture strategic points, leaving behind many pockets of resistance for a later stage. The research started in 1999 and is ongoing.

The term ‘transnational mobility’ has been used throughout the article to describe a phenomenon which is, basically, a period of work experience (or work-based learning) undertaken in another country. The term ‘transnational’ is not wholly satisfactory, since it may be said to represent a piece of political wishful thinking rather than being a neutral descriptor of the activity. The term indicates the creation of a space that lies over and beyond the confines of individual nations or Member States and is truly ‘European’ in a sense that is yet to be achieved. Likewise with the term ‘mobility’ which denotes an ability (namely the ability to be mobile, which carries positive connotations) rather than the actual movement itself. Through its use in European Commission contexts, the term has gained

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widespread currency, however, and has therefore been retained here to avoid confusion.

The Empirical Basis

To have an overview of the scope of the activity, Cedefop commissioned a series of studies in the years 1999–2001 for each of the Member States of the European Union as well as Iceland and Norway. These studies were carried out by selected experts at national level, who were asked to pay particular attention to activities that were undertaken outside the framework of the European programmes. These results form the backbone of the empirical data collection used for the analysis. Another important source of information was the annual reports of the National Agencies for the Leonardo da Vinci programme concerning the mobility strands of the programme in the years 1997–98. Leonardo da Vinci is the Commission’s action programme on vocational education and training, and is now in its second phase with a total budget of 1.2 billion Euro for the period 2000–2005, of which some 40% is earmarked for transnational mobility activities. Also included in the material were various Commission texts related to mobility and VET. The data was analysed using the ‘grounded theory’ methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Basically, this implies approaching the material as an ‘innocent anthropologist’ without any preconceived ideas (in so far as this is possible), using the phenomena encountered to produce the conceptual ideas for structuring the data. On the way, however, preliminary conclusions have been used as an input to European and national discussions on mobility, and many findings have been incorporated into several Commission documents, effectively transforming the very object of study as it was being studied. In this way, the exercise in its totality is perhaps better described as action research that impacts the object of study while it is being studied.

The main outcomes of the empirical study can be summarised under the following points:

The use of transnational mobility in a VET context is widespread in Europe. The main source of funding remains the European programmes and initiatives, but many Member States have set up their own programmes at regional, national, or even bi-national level. In Germany, several very large companies have set up their own mobility programmes for their apprentices. In Denmark, mobility has been incorporated into VET laws, giving apprentices the right to take all or part of their placement periods abroad with financing from a national fund set up by the social partners. The use of mobility in a VET context is fairly recent, however, with all major initiatives having been introduced in the last decade.

Transnational mobility in the context of VET has certain characteristics at activity level. The activities assume the form of work-experience (or placements) that are carried out in a public or a private company outside the home country. They involve staying in the same company for a minimum period (usually 3 weeks), and mainly concern young people in the 18–28 age bracket who are either enrolled in a formal training course, or in the labour market (employed or unemployed). Whilst significantly longer than study tours, most projects are of a duration close to the prescribed minimum of the programmes (3–4 weeks) — in particular for those who are engaged in a formal training course.
There is no clear consensus as to why these activities are undertaken. The overall framework of VET makes it clear that the focus is on ‘learning’. But what kind of learning, and learning for what? It is possible here to identify four different discourses on mobility in the texts studied. One sees transnational mobility in the context of VET as a means to promote European labour market mobility — i.e. as a means to condition participants to become mobile across borders in Europe in their later career. Another sees mobility as a means to transfer technology across borders, in line with the tradition of the ‘travelling journeymen’ in Medieval Europe. In a third, mobility is a way of achieving acceptance and understanding between nationalities, or even of creating some kind of transnational consciousness (‘European citizenship’). A fourth posits placements abroad as a didactic tool for fostering skills in the participants, notably international (foreign language proficiency, intercultural competence) and personal (broad, generic) skills. These discourses are analytical tools and are not mutually exclusive. They can — and do — often co-exist happily within the framework of the same programme or project. There is a very strong tendency among practitioners (project organisers), however, to see the last (mobility as a didactic tool) as the most worthwhile. This feeling is echoed in the external evaluation of the first phase of the Leonardo da Vinci programme (1995–2000) carried out by Deloitte and Touche, which sees the main achievement of the mobility strand as one of improving the ‘employability’ of the participants.

The field is very poor in terms of research and development activities. Despite looming large as a concrete activity in a VET context, it has not in the same way been able to attract the attention of the research and development communities. The few accompanying measures of this nature have often been directed at logistical issues — legal and administrative barriers to mobility (transfer of social security rights, recognition of qualifications obtained in another European country, etc.) — rather than content. Even inside the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci programme, this aspect is insignificant. Besides the mobility strand, the programme also contains a budget line for pilot projects, providing funding up to 300,000 Euros for development activities in a transnational context. Of the many thousand pilot projects in the first phase of the programme, only 57 dealt with matters related to mobility.

Theoretical Implications

There are, at present, no theories or plausible frameworks of understanding that cover the learning process in the phenomenon of ‘transnational mobility in the context of VET’. Such a theory will therefore have to be constructed. Given the nature of the activity — work experience in another country —, a useful procedure in this respect could be to break it up into its two constituent elements (namely ‘work experience’ and what we may call the ‘interculturality’ of the activity) and look at the theoretical complexes surrounding each of these. A further exercise would then be to see to what extent the combination can give rise to synergies and/or complications.

The term ‘work experience’ is used to cover work-based learning through immersion in practices, and not the related activities of ‘work shadowing’ and ‘work visits’.
Work-based Learning and Work Experience

In the past 10–15 years (i.e. roughly the same period as transnational mobility became an issue in VET), theories on learning have become increasingly concerned with the learning that takes place non-formally at the work place, and in particular how this learning occurs through participation in a social context rather than as an individual cognitive process. The main proponents were Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave, who coined the terms ‘community of practice’ (denoting the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place) and ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (denoting the process whereby a novice is initiated in a field by experienced practitioners and is gradually brought to a level of knowledge where he can fully participate in the activities of the community). Lave and Wenger’s work has been criticised, however, for presupposing ‘communities of practice’ as stable and well-defined entities, and therefore less useful as an analytic tool in a situation of change. Yrjo Engeström, using the model of human interaction developed by the Russian psychologist L. Vygotsky in the 1920s and 1930s (activity theory) sees learning as a result of participation in what he calls an ‘activity system’, which may be compared to a community of practice. In his recent work, however, he proposes a model of analysis which sees any learning situation as consisting of a minimum of two interacting activity systems. This makes it possible to incorporate the concept of change: how new knowledge is created through the interaction between different activity systems, and how this knowledge, in turn, reflects and changes the original activity systems and creates new contexts (‘reflexive learning’). Engeström used the term ‘boundary-crossing’ to describe the important skill of being able to navigate between and with different activity systems.

The emergence of ‘practice’ as an important epistemological breakthrough is, of course, not just the accidental discovery of a mode of learning that has always been there, even in an institutionalised form (namely the apprenticeship model). Rather, it has a historicity of its own and hangs together with technological and socio-economic change, which has led to a focus on other forms of knowledge and modes of delivery. The need for constant adaptation has put a premium on broad, generic skills (as opposed to narrow, technological ones) and the concept of ‘lifelong learning’ was introduced to denote the need for constant learning to keep abreast of developments. The move away from hierarchical and complex organisations with simple, tayloristic jobs towards decentralised network-oriented enterprises with more complex jobs necessitates a good grasp of production and labour processes; a competence that has been described as ‘work process knowledge’, and which, at least partly, overlaps with Engeström’s concept of ‘boundary-crossing’. Theoretical instruction or simulation exercises in school-settings is seen as incapable of capturing this elusive and ‘fuzzy’ knowledge, which is often embedded in practice. Donald A. Schön speaks about the ‘high ground of research-based theory and technique’ and the ‘swampy lowland of messy, confusing problems that deny technical solution’ when, in ‘Educating the reflective practitioner’ (1987), he argues for a practicum (i.e. work experience) as an important part of all education and training to give trainees the skills they need to solve real life problems. The same distinction is made by Duguid and Brown (1991) when they talk about ‘canonical’ and ‘non-canonical’ practice. Through these developments, ‘work experience’ as a learning tool has been given
a new lease of life at a time when traditional apprenticeship systems have come increasingly under pressure.

The Concept of ‘Interculturality’

Under this heading we may group two theoretical complexes that deal with the question of what — and how — we can learn in a different cultural (national) setting. One group of theories has developed around the process of globalisation and its effects on companies. In order to cope with a situation where import and export relations multiply, where production processes are often split up spatially (geographically) and temporally, where the ‘home market’ opened up for foreign competitors, and where acquisitions, mergers and ‘joint ventures’ across borders are everyday occurrences, employees need to acquire what has been termed ‘international skills’ (Wordelmann, 1995) to be able to cope in this environment. In connection with a survey of 4,000 German companies and how they see globalisation as affecting their skills needs, Werner and Lenske (2000) have created a grid whereby they classify these new skills in two groups: International basic qualifications and International key qualifications. Under the first heading, they subsume international professional knowledge (knowledge of work practices, markets, international law, etc.) and foreign language proficiency. Under the second, they place what they call intercultural factual knowledge, by which they understand concrete culture-specific knowledge about the history, politics, education, mentality, customs, etc. of a given country; and intercultural aptitude (German: interkulturelle Dispositionen). The last term covers skills of an affective character: openness, tolerance, flexibility, empathy, etc., i.e. generic skills that are not linked to a knowledge of any one culture in particular, but which can be applied to any foreign culture. These are competences that have been developed and described more particularly in a management context (Trompenaars, 1993). However, Werner and Lenske’s survey clearly demonstrates that companies now see these skills as essential also on the shop floor.

Werner and Lenske’s concept of intercultural aptitude resembles the notion of ‘interculturality’ as it has been developed in another context, namely that of youth exchange and youth work. In this context, transnational mobility has a long tradition as a vehicle intended for promoting peaceful coexistence and understanding. The idea is, briefly, one of bringing about understanding and acceptance across borders by giving young people the possibility to discover other countries and explore both conflictual and consensual elements of culture and mentality. Such use of transnational mobility has been prompted by the experience of the two World Wars that devastated Europe last century, and which gave the impetus for the creation of several large-scale youth exchange NGOs as well as state-sponsored exchange programmes (e.g. the Franco-German Youth Office). For the European Union, with its roughly similar genesis, the concept of ‘European citizenship’ also inscribes itself in this context, even though it also carries other connotations. The dividing line between this notion of ‘intercultural understanding’ and Werner and Lenske’s notion of ‘Interkulturelle Dispositionen’ may be thin, but is nevertheless firm: for one, this understanding becomes an end in itself; for the other, it is an instrumental skill that is ultimately used for other purposes — in this case, for enhancing employability and competitiveness in a globalised market. Within the organisations dealing with
youth exchange, some very distinct ideas and practices have developed on how this intercultural understanding and acceptance can be fostered in the context of a transnational experience. A specific term has even been coined to denote this process — ‘intercultural learning’. This process is particularly well documented for the activities of the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO), where projects have been closely followed by researchers and educationalists. The experiences of the FGYO are particularly interesting for a VET context, in that they often deal with projects of a similar duration. There are very few signs, however, that the important lessons learned in one context have been taken on board in the other, despite the fact that many organisers highlight the deconstruction of stereotypes as an important aim of the activity.

Combining ‘Interculturality’ and ‘Practice’

One way of explaining the popularity of transnational mobility in VET contexts is to see it as product development: taking the revitalised didactic tool of work experience and tacking on to it a dimension that will enable it to meet the new skills needs arising from globalisation, as well as (for the European programmes) fostering a certain political vision (European citizenship). It is tempting to see evidence for this in the phraseology used in European contexts, where it is common to talk about work experience with ‘European added value’. The idea has a distinct attraction, but it is evident that any attempt to load more content into a concept that is already straining to contain other developments (Koch & Lundsgaard, 2000) — like capturing work process knowledge, or Engeström’s notion of ‘boundary-crossing’ — will also entail new risks and complications. Using Lave and Wenger’s term of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, it is easy to imagine scenarios in transnational work placements where this legitimacy is challenged at the work place, and the trainee left to his own devices or, at best, reduced to ‘work shadowing’ busy colleagues without ever engaging in a practice. It is often a problem to find a company that is willing to host a trainee on a transnational placement — and an even bigger one to make them open their communities of practice or ‘activity-systems’ to incorporate a young foreigner for a limited period. So many complications may arise from the displacement to another country that the net outcome for the average participant may very well be a loss — i.e. the value of the new skills acquired may not be able to compensate for what they would otherwise have learned in their home countries. Hence a reluctance in the VET systems of many countries to recognise long-term placements abroad in formal VET curricula (e.g. in Germany), even though it is very clear that duration has a direct influence on the acquisition of international skills.

Seen from the ‘add-on’ perspective, transnational mobility in VET easily becomes a risky adventure for only a selected few, or, at best, a sort of exotic school outing that can help raise the attraction level in VET, but which must deliberately be kept so short that it does not interfere with what is seen as the core curriculum. However, there is evidence that the added element of interculturality does not only function as an extra complication, but can also help to foster and underpin certain types of skills in a way that work experience in the home country can only partially — and perhaps sometimes not at all — bring out. Below, an indication of two such areas, which cover what we may call the integrative
perspective on transnational mobility and VET. For lack of any dedicated research to this end, they must for the time being stand as conjectures.

**Interculturality as a means to foster personal skills.** The different setting presents the participants with new types of problems, which they cannot solve by using normal problem-solving techniques or by soliciting advice from their usual reference groups in the home country. They will have to devise new innovative solutions and rely on themselves for their implementation, and will have to develop an ability to live with uncertainty and change. This mechanism is very strongly represented in many reports and evaluations, and it is especially interesting to note how this particular type of learning is exploited in projects dealing with socially disadvantaged target groups.

**Interculturality as providing a contrast background to work practices.** This approach aims to foster an ability to identify (and question) work practices and learning processes by offering a ‘contrast medium’ (interculturality) — a background against which known practices and their relativity become visible. The whole exercise can, in fact, be seen as an example of ‘boundary-crossing’ from one activity system to another, where the participant uses his experience from one to criticise and possibly enrich the other. This can also be explained by Piaget’s terms of ‘assimilative’ and ‘accommodative’ learning. Similarly, the differences between home and host company can make the participant aware of the process of knowledge generation and foster an ability to reflect on his own learning and for self-directed learning (taking responsibility for his own learning process).

**Towards a Pedagogy of Transnational Placements**

A search for material on pedagogical theory and practice for transnational placements yields very meagre results, even when conducted Europe-wide. What is available to the project organiser at local or regional level, then, is, in many cases, limited to some general remarks about the importance of linguistic and cultural preparation. Similarly, in the Commission’s EUROPASS-certification material, that aims to provide a uniform certification of transnational work placements undertaken in a VET context, a reference is made to the ‘mentor’ role, but without any further explanation of what this important function implies in terms of tasks and resources. As for the legal and administrative framework for transnational mobility, however, considerable work has been taken on board, notably at the European level (see, e.g. the Commission’s Green paper on obstacles to mobility from 1996, and the European Parliament’s Recommendation on mobility from 2001). The implications of this, put somewhat polemically, seem to be that mobility is mainly a logistic exercise and that pedagogic considerations are unnecessary: once the trainees have been sent out and have returned home safely, the learning processes will have occurred more or less by themselves. This is undoubtedly true, to a certain extent, in many individual cases, and some longitudinal studies that have been carried out on the impact of mobility in VET on individuals (Busse & Fahle, 1998) would seem to indicate that those who have participated in mobility activities generally fare quite well in their later careers. These studies are all problematic, however, in that they lack comparable control groups to validate the findings. They do not take into account that those who
participate (through selection and/or volunteering) in mobility activities are often the most motivated, best qualified and internationally orientated of a given youth cohort, and that many of them probably would have performed well later in life under any circumstances. They also fail to register what Vygotsky has called the ‘zone of proximal development’ — i.e. the difference between what the participant has attained more or less by himself and the level he could have reached if given adequate pedagogical support. Impact studies on mobility are, in general, very few and far between, and have, with a few exceptions, been carried out on a limited budget, retroactively, and over a short period of time. This is somewhat surprising, given the sums that are allocated to the practical activities.

There is, however, a certain element of truth in the kind of ‘pedagogy’ of many transnational placement projects, which is defined as an absence (or at least only the rudiments of) any pedagogical method. I have elsewhere suggested (Kristensen, 2001) that the main learning outcomes of mobility projects occur through two processes, which may be called immersion and responsibilisation respectively. The first is defined as the degree of proximity to and interaction with another culture and mentality. Put somewhat differently: the more the participants are exposed to the foreign environment, the more are they likely to acquire foreign language skills and intercultural competence. If, conversely, they remain mostly with their fellow countrymen (as is quite often the case in mobility projects involving groups staying in the same area) and are not properly integrated in the work processes at the company in which they are doing their placement, the learning outcome will be limited. The second process — responsibilisation — denotes the space that is available to the participant for autonomous decision-making in their living and working environment. For many participants, this will be the first time they ‘stand on their own feet’. They will not have their usual network of family, friends and teachers to receive instruction from and examples on how to solve the numerous problems they face in their everyday life in and outside of placement. They will have to devise ways and means of doing this themselves. At the same time, many of the challenges have cultural causes and will be of a nature where they cannot draw on past models for their solution. On the other hand, the fact that they are alone in this new environment also means that they can act in an atmosphere where they are free from the expectations of others and can experiment with unknown aspects of their personality.

Immersion and responsibilisation as processes can function unaided, if the participants are strong enough, the placement period is long enough, and the host willing to incorporate them in the practices of the workplace. But this is simply not the reality ‘out there’. In most cases, the project is of a duration of 3–4 weeks, and with the numbers already involved, it is clear that mobility is going beyond the ‘self-catering’ elite of VET students and trainees. Host companies are left with their own guesses as the only guide as to how to ensure the meaningful integration of a foreign trainee at the workplace. It is therefore imperative to develop methods for preparation, supervision (mentoring) and de-briefing of participants in mobility activities — i.e. rules for the construction of a didactic space where they can develop international, personal and boundary-crossing skills, as well as a capacity for self-directed learning. In ‘minimalist’ projects, the preparation measures limit themselves to linguistic and cultural preparation, and can in their most primitive form consist merely of a glossary of professional terms and a list of ‘do’s and don’ts’ when dealing with the natives of the host country. Supervision is
done reactively, and debriefing consists in a short participant report to satisfy the demands of the programme administration. It is clear that in such cases the activity seldom has the desired impact on participants in terms of learning and personal development — indeed, it is relatively easy to imagine a scenario where they return worse off than when they left. A closer study of individual projects would seem to indicate that, even in projects where the organisers have made an effort to support the participants in the best way possible, the measures are often somewhat mechanistic and seem to lack an overall sense of direction and cohesion. In transnational placement projects in the context of VET, good preparation should sensitise to learning, good mentoring should facilitate learning, and good debriefing should visualise the learning process for the participants afterwards, and help them act upon the outcomes.

‘Learning by leaving’ (as it has been called) is a potentially very powerful — if complex — pedagogical tool for an age when old behaviourist methods of teaching are gradually being taken over by new constructivist methods of learning. To reap the full benefits, however, the pedagogical aspects must be tackled in a concerted way, involving researchers in education and training as well as the practitioners.

REFERENCES


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