

**In search for common ground: Starting points for analysing the professional situation of
trainers in six European countries**

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Abstract

This paper gives an account on the working hypotheses of the European cooperation project TTplus (“A framework for continuing professional development of trainers”) concerning the diversity of training cultures and on the distribution of training functions. Then, the paper examines some methodological starting points for analysing the European training cultures with the help of sociological concepts like ‘contextual images’ (Ritsert, Bracher) or e-portfolio -related concepts like ‘use cases’ (Rhees-Jones). Based on these grounding reflections the paper provides justification for the ‘controlled but explorative’ research strategy (Bracher) that was applied in the empirical studies. In this context the paper discusses the role of concepts like ‘instances of good practice’, ‘instances of change’ and ‘instances of innovation’ for the research approach of the project. In the concluding reflections the paper discusses the relevance of such research approach for European knowledge development on the professional situation of trainers.

Keywords: Training cultures, Contextual images, Use cases, Scenarios of practice, Framework for developing training competences

1. Background and context of the TTplus project

This paper discusses the conceptual starting points and the methodological challenges of the European cooperation project “*A Framework for the Continuing Professional development of Trainers*” (TTplus). The project is funded as a ‘reference material’ project of the European Union action programme Leonardo da Vinci. The TTplus project has studied training cultures and the professional situation of trainers in six European countries: Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom (with a particular focus on Wales). The main tasks of the project are to

- 1) carry out case studies on the professional situation of trainers in selected organisations,
- 2) carry out complementary expert interviews,
- 3) undertake policy analyses with a focus on continuing professional development of trainers and
- 4) develop a common framework for promoting the professional development of trainers.

The policy-related background of the TTplus project can be characterised in the following way:

- a) After the Lisbon Summit 2000 the European education and training policies have been shaped by parallel framework processes that cover different levels of education. In this respect the
- b) Bologna process provides the basis for developing the European Qualification Framework (EQF) for Higher Education. In a similar way the Copenhagen process provides the basis for the European Qualification Framework (EQF) for Lifelong learning. Both processes are contributing to the Lisbon follow-up and the qualification frameworks are linked to each other.
- c) In the context of the Lisbon follow-up there has been a special emphasis on promoting the professional development of teachers and trainers. For this reason there has been a specific working group for developing common European principles for teachers’ competences and qualifications. These principles have latterly been adopted as key elements of the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament “*Improving the quality of teacher education*” (COM (2007)392).

Concerning the given policy background, there are several conceptual challenges as regards the incorporation of the schemes for ‘*training of trainers*’ or measures for ‘*continuing professional development of trainers*’ into common European policies. In this respect there are two main questions to be studied:

1. Can ‘*trainers*’ be considered as a homogeneous target group for joint European policies in a similar way as ‘*teachers*’?
2. Can the given European frameworks (for promoting qualifications and competences) be used in a similar way to promote the professional development of ‘*trainers*’ in different contexts?

2. Starting points, critical issues and working hypotheses of the TTplus project

Until recently, many European cooperation projects in education and training have considered that their basic task is to provide a group picture of national education and training systems and that their focal task is analyse the prospects for common European policies. Accordingly, the recent development of European studies can be characterised in the following way:

- a) The earlier Cedefop studies on ‘*Teachers and trainers in Vocational Education and Training in Europe*’ (1995-1998) provided a general picture of vocational teacher education and/or training of trainers in EU Member States and EFTA countries. At that time there was a general interest to include both teachers and trainers to common overviews.
- b) The more recent studies commissioned by European Commission have been based on a more differentiated need for analyses that focus on *trainers in enterprises* (e.g. the *Eurotrainer* project) or on trainers in training centres outside the public educational systems (e.g. the *LOT 2* project).
- c) The most recent Cedefop studies have explored the possibilities to introduce common European competence profiles for diverse education and training professionals within *initial*

vocational education and training (IVET) and continuing vocational education and training (CVET).

Without going into details it is possible to conclude that these studies have some common starting points in examining the professional situation of trainers and related European measures:

- 1) The situation of trainers is discussed with a view on *national* education and training policies.
- 2) The results arise from expertise studies or from expert interviews that reflect the approach of vocational teacher education institutes or public bodies responsible for VET.
- 3) The expectation on European policies is that common instruments (such as qualification frameworks and competence profiles) would reduce complexity and diversity.

In the light of the above it is necessary to mention the following critical issues that need to be considered when the validity of such studies is discussed:

- i) Training activities are not merely a sub-set of education and training policies. Instead training measures are being organised under different policies and organisational initiatives. Therefore, training needs to be considered as an interface area.
- ii) Training activities are also influenced by sectoral factors and international market processes that cannot be controlled by public bodies or educational establishments.
- iii) The future development of training competences is dependent on changes in the learning culture. The changes may lead to new combinations of formal and non-formal learning.

Regarding the above mentioned starting points and critical issues the TTplus project agreed on a set of *working hypotheses* that are presented below as polarities:

1. Polarity: The TTplus project needs to consider as 'trainers' *both* in-company trainers *and* external service providers. In addition, the project has to consider further distribution of training functions.

2. Polarity: The TTplus project needs to consider *both* formal training programmes *and* non-formal learning opportunities as means to support professional development of trainers. In this respect the project has to explore the possibility to support professional development with new learning resources.

3. Polarity: The TTplus project needs to consider *both* pedagogic support for organised learning *and* validation of experience-based learning as focal areas for training-related competences. In this respect the project needs to explore the role of web-based support for trainers and learners.

4. Polarity: The TTplus project needs to consider *both* training-related prospects for professionalisation and support for training as secondary professional activity (semi-professionalisation). In this respect there is a need to consider different interests and commitments of 'trainers' and related stakeholders.

3. Common methodological orientations

This section presents some preliminary methodological agreements and the efforts to develop a common research strategy on the basis of two parallel approaches. A reflective commentary presents the interim conclusion that paved the way for joint empirical research activities.

3.1. Preliminary methodological agreements

Taking into consideration the above discussed starting points the TTplus project agreed on the following methodological orientations:

- 1) The TTplus project will not introduce a common definition of 'trainer' or a tentative (trans-national) professional profile for trainers. Instead, the project analyse the work and professional development of trainers (either as in-company trainers or as external service providers) within country-specific or context-specific training arrangements.
- 2) The TTplus project will not standardise the samples of case studies according to institutional, sectoral or organisational criteria. Instead, the project partners will focus on cases that have

particular importance for European scenario setting. This leaves room for presenting country-specific 'mainstream models' as well as cases that exemplify trans-cultural developments.

- 3) The TTplus project will not aim at a unified European framework that would introduce similar career patterns, competence profiles and qualification formats. Instead, the project seeks to clarify, what role different commitments, initiatives and support measures. This leaves room for common principles, pattern variance and parallel developmental approaches.

3.2. Working towards a common methodological approach

Based on these preliminary agreements the TTplus project developed its own methodological approach on the basis of a dialogue between German-based research approaches that draw upon the influence of the Critical theory of the Frankfurt school and UK-based research approaches that draw upon cultural studies, semiotics and programming for e-portfolio concepts. Below, the main points of the parallel approaches are summarised in a nutshell.

3.2.1. The methodological contribution of the critical theory

As regards the methodological heritage of the Critical theory of the Frankfurt school, the TTplus project studied in particular the lessons from an earlier German study on the societal consciousness of teachers and on the role of social-scientific study contents in teacher education (see Ritsert & Brunkhorst 1978, Bracher 1978 and the project-internal communication of Kämäräinen 2007). For the research design of the TTplus project the key message of the earlier study can be interpreted as the following set of arguments:

- i) In order to provide a common ground for analysing the functioning of training in different societies it is essential to produce **contextual images** (*Kontextvorstellungen*) on the training cultures. Contextual images have the task to present the *basic assumptions*, the *cultural conventions* and the *strategic orientations* (or the lack of such factors) at the level of situation assessment, orientation to target groups and goal-setting for learning activities. Thus, researchers are expected to be open for identifying the role of core ideas, core structures and conventions (when there is a ground for tracing a real impact on training) **or** to analyse the dynamics of relatively open, particularised and less regulated training cultures (when there is a ground for presenting a more heterogeneous training landscape).
- ii) In certain societies (e.g. in Germany) it is necessary to note the impact of traditional **socio-cultural conventions** (the dual system of apprenticeship) that commit public education system and training in enterprises into system-embedded cooperation with each other. Such socio-cultural conventions provide fundamental **core principles** (*Kernvorstellungen*) and the established **core structures** (*Kernstrukturen*) for organising training provide a basis for integrative concept development regarding training. However, in other societies it is not evident that similar core structures, socio-cultural conventions and core principles can be traced. Nevertheless, the existence or non-existence of such conventions, core structures and core principles has a role in the renewal and change of training cultures.
- iii) **Trans-cultural studies** (on the professional situation of trainers in different training cultures) need to be grounded by constructing **empirical and practical contexts for constructive conceptualisation** (*'empirisch-praktische Verweisungszusammenhang'*). For this approach it is essential to keep a balance between advance knowledge (assumptions and anticipations) and emergent knowledge (empirical results and interpretative insights). Thus, researchers are expected to make selective use of their prior assumptions (and eventual hypotheses) if they want to trace the *scope of interests*, the *authentic meaning-structures* and the *context-specific strategic reasoning* of training-related social actors.

3.2.2. The methodological contributions from cultural studies and e-portfolio development

The UK-based methodological contributions were drawn from different discourses of cultural studies, semiotics and e-portfolio development (see Attwell & Hughes 1998, Lübcke 2008 and

Rees Jones 2005). For the research design of the TTplus project the key message of these contributions can be interpreted as the following set of arguments:

- i) Trans-national projects are not obliged to put their main emphasis on national policies and institutions or European priorities. Instead, the projects can draw attention to **generative themes, boundary-crossing innovations and communities of practice** as driving forces for renewal and change in training cultures. From a methodological point of view such a transition can be characterised as shift from *'paradigmatic'* (context-embedded) to *'syntagmatic'* (context-transcending) mode of conceptualisation. Regarding the development of training cultures in Europe this approach draws attention to transfer of knowledge and innovations across different fields of training practice.
- ii) Regarding empirical studies, such projects do not need to commit themselves to production of empirical materials as evidence for pre-given theories and research hypotheses. Instead, the empirical research strategy has to be open for capturing the situation assessment, meaning structures and the range interests of the interviewees. For the research dialogue this requires the use of controlled-explorative interview strategies and the use of story-telling as a methodological tool.
- iii) Regarding the use of the empirical material, the case studies are not merely material for research. Instead, after the basic analyses, the material needs to re-examined as potential 'use cases' for developmental purposes. In this context the actor-positions, the related stakeholder positions and the mutual expectations/requirements have to be specified. When aggregating such materials, the analysis can lead to a limited number of scenarios of practice with a wider European relevance.

3.3. Reflective commentary

Above, two sets of arguments have been presented for a relatively open methodological research design. In spite of the different sources the arguments support each other as regards the capturing of contextuality, authentic meaning structures and the interests of the interviewees. In a similar way the arguments guide the researchers in the research situation to stick to controlled-explorative management of the interview dialogue and to follow the story-telling (and the conceptual threads that are brought into discussion by the interviewees). The key difference between the above presented arguments is related to the possible role of specific societal core structures or core conventions (like the German *'Beruf'* principle) and related core images (like the German career models based on the idea of *'Beruflichkeit'*). Yet, the development-oriented re-processing of the material as 'use cases' and the construction of 'scenarios of practice' makes it possible to see, what relative importance can be given for such core images (or for the absence of such constructs) across the European training landscape.

4. Collection and utilisation of the empirical material

Below, the first sub-section presents the key features of the country-specific samples of case studies. Then, the second sub-section moves on to the construction of policy scenarios and scenarios on the basis of the material. More detailed insights into processing of the material (and into related problems) are provided by the two other papers prepared for this symposium (see Grollmann 2008 and Kämäräinen & Patiniotis 2008).

4.1. Collection of the empirical material: Insights into the samples of case studies

Concerning the targeting of the case studies and the selection of the organisations to be studied the following arguments were presented:

- The TTplus project needs information on diverse training contexts and different preconditions for trainers' professional development.
- The TTplus project needs insights into different career paths and learning histories of trainers and training specialists.

- The TTplus project needs to learn from different modes of promoting '*training for trainers*' and from tendencies to outsource training functions.
- The TTplus project needs to learn from different uses of informal learning resources, knowledge sharing forums and on cross-organisational support for training and professional development.

It is worthwhile to note that the TTplus project was reluctant on making any advance groupings of countries or cases before the material was analysed. However, after the first results it was possible to note some similarities and differences that made it possible to make tentative groupings of the country-specific samples. Below, a preliminary European group picture is presented on the basis of the target organisations and on the pattern variance within the country-specific samples.

4.1.1. The samples that focus on in-company training in industries (and related services)

In Germany and in Greece the aim of the TTplus partners was to analyse the current situation of in-company training in industries or in service companies that support major industries. In these cases one of the key questions was related to the commitment of the companies to provide training or the readiness to outsource the training functions.

a. Features of the German sample

The German sample consists of enterprises that provide training in the dual system of apprenticeship. The enterprises represent different industrial traditions (family enterprise, SME merged to a nation-wide consortium, large enterprise that is part of multi-national concern). All companies provide training in electric occupations (used as an exemplary field). All companies expressed their commitment to continue with the dual system of apprenticeship and their interest to support the professional development of trainers.

b. Features of the Greek sample

The Greek sample focuses on in-house training that is provided by the companies themselves or by their immediate cooperation partners. The branches that are included are IT services and shipping industry. The Greek sample does not focus on public VET frameworks or on the use of external (public or private) training provisions. In the Greek sample the training-related interests of the companies were very different. One of the companies was clearly committed to develop its own training culture. The second company had opted for the outsourcing of training functions. The third company had positioned itself as a specialised service provider for companies like the second one. Therefore, there was no common view on the commitment of the companies regarding trainers' professional development.

4.1.2. The samples that focus on a wide range of (public and commercial) services

In the Netherlands and in Romani the TTplus partners brought together a sample that covered a diverse set of public and private services. In these cases one of the key questions was related to the positioning of the companies as providers of their own training and/or as users of external services in the emerging training markets.

a. Features of the Dutch sample

The Dutch sample is composed of diverse organisations that can take a different role in the training markets. The case of a central public authority provides an example of manifold possibilities to use internal trainers and external services. The case of ICT-service provider provided an example of training as minor part of the services. The case of ICT-related training company provided an example of specialisation on training as the service to be marketed. Consequently, there was no unified position on the commitment of the companies to provide their own training and to take responsibility on the professional development of trainers.

b. Features of the Romanian sample

The Romanian sample is composed of diverse organisations that have gone through different organisational transitions during the transformation to market economy. The case of the privatised cement factory brings into picture informal organisational changes regarding the in-company training culture. The case of the public training institute (service provider for public bodies) brings

into picture the changing training culture in the public sector. The case of the insurance company brings into picture the impact of international companies and their training policies. In a similar way as in the Dutch sample, it was not possible to get a unified view on the commitment of Romanian companies regarding the future role of their own training activities and regarding the professional development of trainers. Everything was dependent on the development in the training markets.

4.1.3. The samples that focus on external training providers

In the United Kingdom (Wales) and in Portugal the TTplus partners brought into picture training contexts that were based on outsourcing of training functions and/or on privatisation of formerly public training services. In these contexts one of the key questions is, how to ensure the continuing professional development of trainers by the training-related service companies.

a. Features of the UK (Welsh) sample

The UK (Welsh) sample focuses on the consequences of outsourcing of training and on the professional situation of independent training providers. The training contexts that are highlighted vary from community development initiatives to ICT-related training and to organisational training schemes within the health care sector. One of the interviews reflected the cooperation with an independent service provider from the perspective of the client organisation. Therefore, the UK (Welsh) sample was primarily bringing into picture the concerns of independent training providers.

b. Features of the Portuguese sample

The Portuguese sample focuses on training centres that have originally been launched to support training in a regional contexts (and/or have their background in the public sector) but have latterly become private training companies. One of the cases is a company that provides training services for German companies' production units in Portugal. In general, the Portuguese sample was overshadowed by the regional development context and possibilities of training-related companies to position themselves as commercial service providers and as contributors to regional policies.

4.2. Policy scenarios and scenarios of practice emerging from the analyses

The work of the TTplus project has not been completed and some of the interim results need to be analysed and linked to each other. In particular, the results of the validating expert interviews have to be integrated to the emerging framework for professional development (and to related roadmaps for context-specific implementation strategies). Yet, already at this stage it is possible indicate what kind of scenarios are emerging from the analysis. Below, two sets of scenarios are presented:

- 1) The policy-oriented macro-scenarios are related to the power structures and organisational autonomy regarding the responsibility on training and on trainers' professional development.
- 2) The pedagogy-oriented micro-scenarios are related to the learning cultures and to the professional status of trainers.

4.2.1. Macro-scenarios on policy developments and on the responsibilities on training

The findings of the policy analyses of the TTplus project can be summarised as **three policy scenarios** regarding the responsibilities on training and on the professional development of trainers:

- **System-oriented policy scenario:** Professional development of trainers needs to be promoted by public policies. Thus, the key instruments to be developed are *new certificates* and *qualifications* and related *training provisions* or *accreditation processes*.
- **Market-oriented policy scenario:** Professional development of trainers is strongly dependent of organisational choices concerning *in-company training* vs. *outsourcing*. Therefore, the key instruments to be developed are *organisational benchmarks* for analysing the *quality of internal training* vs. *quality of external services*.
- **Community-oriented policy scenario:** Professional development of trainers is primarily dependent on the trainers' own commitment. Therefore, the instruments to be developed are

guidelines for *community-based peer reviews* and *mutual certification* (e.g. under the auspices of trainers' professional associations).

The scenarios have been presented as ideal types and as starting points for policy learning at European level. In this context it is worthwhile to note that the scenarios are not excluding each other. Yet, some scenarios have more relative weight in certain countries than in others.

4.2.2. Micro-scenarios on the development of pedagogic practice

The above presented scenarios are closely related to the general group picture and to the results of specific policy mapping. The micro-scenarios are based on more specific findings on the *needs for pedagogic support* and on the preconditions to promote *trainers' pedagogic competences*. On the basis of these findings it is possible to summarise **four scenarios of pedagogic practice**:

- **Scenario on the use of learning arrangements:** Pedagogic planning of *vocational and organisational learning arrangements* has to be linked to pedagogic support for *decentralised (=work-based) and individualised learning processes*. Training of trainers needs to be based on similar pedagogic concepts.
- **Scenario on the use of e-resources:** Pedagogic capability to use *integrative web platforms* has to be linked to the capability to use *learner-adjusted web applications* and to enhance web-supported learning with *wider networked learning resources*.
- **Scenario on the assessment of learning:** Pedagogic use of *outcome-oriented assessment* has to be linked to *self-organised documentation of learning* and to possibilities to *reflect upon one's own learning progress*. Training of trainers needs to be based on similar pedagogic concepts.
- **Scenario on trainers' position:** *Professional upgrading* of trainers has to be linked to the *distribution of training functions* and to similar (semi-professional) *support for the counterparts* of professional trainers.

4.3. Reflective commentary

It has pointed out that the transition from the empirical analyses to the development-oriented re-processing has not been a linear process. Instead, the mapping of 'instances of innovation' or 'instances of change' or 'instances of good practice' has not directly led to 'use cases' that could immediately be included as exemplary cases to support the continuing professional development of trainers. Obviously, such case-based material is needed. However, the above presented policy scenarios give a preliminary view on different options to promote the continuing professional development of trainers:

- a) Support for professionalisation via **public interventions** and with the help of formal qualification frameworks (relying on public standards and general support for related learning);
- b) Support for professionalisation via **organisational quality assurance** and related benchmarks (relying on market-based quality processes and market-oriented monitoring services);
- c) Support for professionalisation via **voluntary initiatives** of trainers' associations or networks (relying on community-based self-certification and on related peer reviewing support).

It is worthwhile to note – as already mentioned with reference to the 'use cases' – that each of these options requires interaction between the key actors (trainers) and other societal stakeholders. Therefore, before outlining the differentiated roadmaps for the professional development of trainers within different scenarios, the TTplus project has prepared a common consultation document for stimulating discussion on the commitments of trainers, teams of trainers, employers and trade unions, intermediate bodies and public authorities. In this context, some of the empirical findings of the TTplus partners are used as illustrations of current practice and as points of orientation for further developmental steps.

5. Conclusions and discussion

The paper started with a recapitulation on the policy-related background of the TTplus project in the light of recent EU policies and related European studies. Based on this background two key questions were raised concerning 'trainers' as target group for European policies and concerning the role of joint European frameworks in promoting the professional development of trainers (in different cultural contexts). In the light of these questions the paper presented the methodological orientation of the project (with insights into the different sources). Then, some insights were given into the country-specific samples of case studies and into the pattern variance between the samples and within the samples. These analyses paved the way for the setting of policy-oriented and pedagogy-oriented scenarios on the basis of the empirical findings.

Regarding the starting points of the TTplus project it is appropriate to note that the methodological orientation of the project has made it possible to

- a) **study the professional situation of trainers** (in different training cultures) without *confusing teachers and trainers* with each other (in the hope of creating a common European framework);
- b) **analyse the cultural diversity** regarding *trainers' development prospects* in different training cultures (based on cultural differences between the countries and within the countries);
- c) **develop new modes of European cooperation** that provide *support for professional development of trainers* (by taking up the scenarios, the consultation document and related roadmaps for promoting professional development);
- d) **to develop a coherent research approach** that contributes to further *European knowledge development on trainers* (by exploring different training contexts, 'instances of innovation' and by constructing related use cases with the help of the consultation document).

Without going into details the research approach of the TTplus project can be justified on the basis of the following arguments:

- a) The project has approached **training-related actors in** culturally specific (if not **always** paradigmatic) **action contexts**.
- b) The project has provided **room for presenting different preconditions** for training and **multiple challenges** for trainers.
- c) The project has outlined common **core principles** and **boundary conditions** for **three strands of implementation**.
- d) The **research approach** can be made transparent as an **encounter** between earlier **sociological approaches** ('contextual images') and educational **scenario studies** (that transform 'case studies' into 'use cases' for the developmental work).