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CULTURE AS A TOOLKIT TO INVESTIGATE EDUCATIONAL PROCESSES IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

This contribution offers a new approach to the investigation of educational processes in development projects. The discussion in the *International Knowledge Network for Sustainable Development* (IKN-network) has shown that one key factor helping to avoid a failure of technical innovation for projects in developing countries is an integrated qualification of the beneficiaries. To both generate and improve this qualification measure, satisfactory toolkits are needed that can deal with the varied influences impacting qualification projects. The findings were generated by an analysis of a significant number of studies on development policy. The interpretative basis of this analysis was the theoretically grounded concept of culture as a dynamic result of interactions between social actors. In presenting this dynamic concept of culture and applying it as a heuristic toolkit, the author will show how we can arrange the clutter of factors that influence the educational processes in development projects. After a short overview of this new approach, the paper will outline the four main categories that emerge from the application of this approach to the factors influencing educational processes. The purpose of this paper is to first demonstrate how the new theoretical approach of a dynamic concept of culture functions works, and moreover its advantage in organizing existing and additional factors that influence qualification projects. To do so, provisional examples from the application of this heuristic toolkit in a field study on a rural Cuban development project will be discussed. The heuristic toolkit showed great potential to improve integrated qualification measures in technical innovation projects. However, in order to fully establish the new theoretical approach for the improvement of development projects, further research is necessary.

Keywords: Qualification Measures, Culture, Educational Processes, Development Projects, Training.

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1 Introduction

How culture is understood in development policy is often shaped by the dichotomous relationship between tradition and modernity. Here culture is frequently identified with tradition. Therefore, the concept of culture is often seen as a constraint or limitation on the success of global development projects.

In discourses on development policy regarding the importance of culture and progress that emerged in the early 1980s, it became clear that cultural dispositions would be abused as a means to realise the modernisation projects and the progress following the modernisation theories (Kidd et al., 1980; Gilman, 2003).

Similarly, in the field of international politics, culture is seen as static and part of the strict basis of political organisation of the homogenised social order. Popularised as a "clash of civilization," this static understanding of culture has been used as a means to serve political interests (Abu Lughod, 1991).

Both understandings of culture are essentialist, an expression of the anthropologic substance to organise the view of world. This hegemonic view of a concept of culture that is static leaves us with fewer possibilities to understand learning and knowledge transfer processes. To improve the understanding of knowledge transfer and learning in different societal and cultural contexts, we need a different view led by a reflective observation of cultural things. We need a dynamic concept of culture, which provides a deeper understanding of the different forms and means of knowledge acquisition and knowledge internalisation. These learning processes are clearly influenced by a large set of different factors. With a dynamic concept of culture we can classify the multitude of influencing factors of learning processes in different social and cultural contexts and arrive at a better understanding. This new comprehension will and can facilitate and improve qualification measures and learning processes in a more appropriate design.

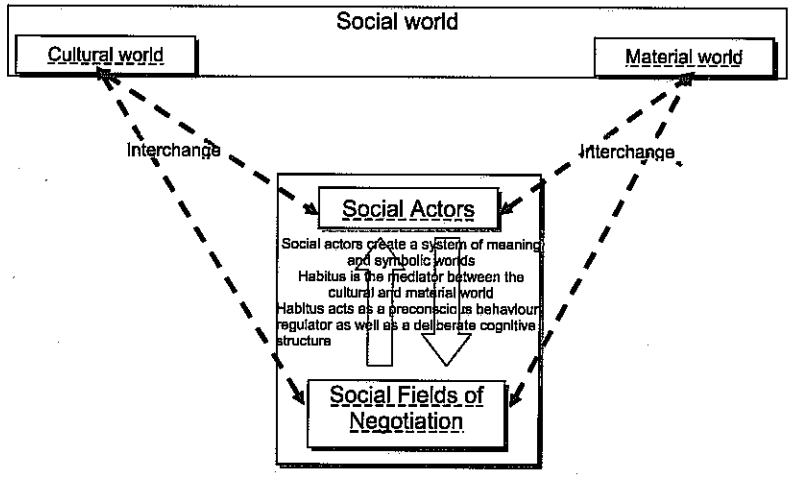
Through an analysis of a number of studies on Germany's development policy from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, the author will draw attention to the different factors that influence development projects. With a focus on the specific role of Germany's development cooperation in the area of vocational education and training (VET), his study analyses the factors influencing development processes in the VET-field. To gain the above-mentioned results, it was first necessary to formulate a theoretical approach of culture as a dynamic concept that can be used as toolkit to investigate empirically the factors of influence of qualification projects. This theoretical approach was grounded empirically in the reality evident in the second analysis of a number of studies of German development policy (Wolf, 2009b).

2 Culture: A dynamic concept

To use the concept of culture in the context of education, it is helpful to place the social subjects at the centre of the analysis, yet this should be done without

assigning the subject too much autonomy. The subject and the social world are interdependent and mutually influence each other (Elias, 1976). Culture is a result of this interdependent social process. Humans – social subjects – interpret the social influences around them; thus, they construct new or altered symbolic worlds and structures of order (Geertz, 2003) and with these new symbolic forms interact again with the social world. This interaction between social actors and the social world takes place in highly contested social fields, in which the constructed cultural system of meaning and the symbolic world show their effectiveness on different levels as demonstrated in the graph below.

Figure 1: A dynamic concept of culture



Source: Author.

Following Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu, 2000), the social world can be analytically divided into a world of goods and groups; in other words, the material world and the cultural world. Social actors are subject to the influences acted upon them by both of these "worlds." In order to secure the subject's place in a social field, as well as to improve the subject's circumstances, the subject reinterprets the external influences acted upon him/her from both of these "worlds." Culture here is understood as a dynamic outcome of a social process of interaction that is internalized as pre-conscious regulator of behaviour as well as a deliberate cognitive structure. From this level of interpretation on the part of the social actor arise new, different and possibly unfamiliar and unknown cultural elements that can be called alter-cultural factors of influence. Similarly, the cultural and material influences interplay with the subject's social field of negotiation – the contested social fields (Wolf, 2009b). This model is still complex and does not lend itself to any easy further reduction. However, this model makes it possible to classify the multiplicity of influence factors in the social world that have been identified through the analysis of a number of studies in the realm of development policy and vocational education

and training cooperation. Employed as a heuristic tool, this cursory overview of culture as a dynamic concept made an analysis of this multitude of factors possible.

Firstly, this cultural perspective is useful in understanding the dynamics of cultural disposition of social actors and rejects the essentialist approach to culture. Secondly, this cultural perspective is useful in empirically examining the factors that influence qualification measurement and learning processes.

3 FACTORS OF INFLUENCE OF QUALIFICATION PROJECTS

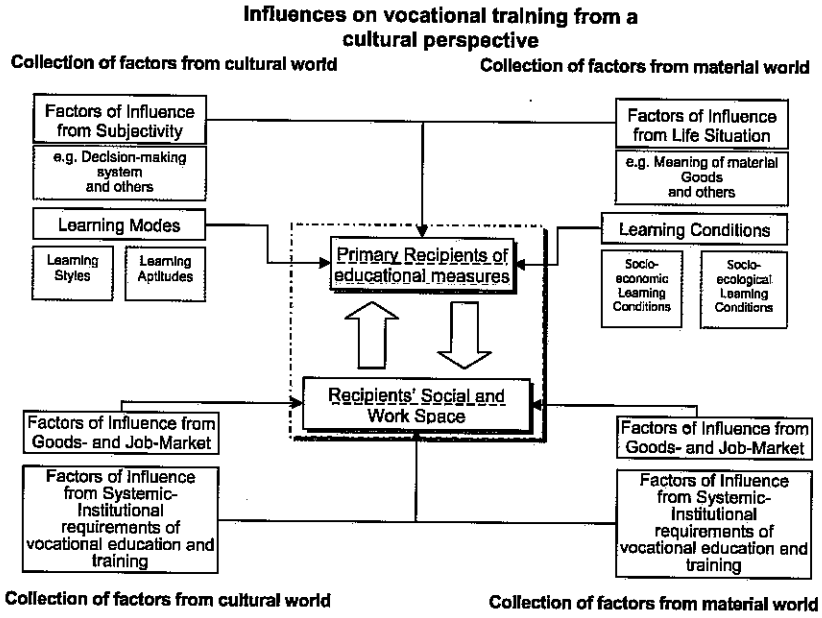
In order to make use of the above-mentioned dynamic concept of culture as a heuristic toolkit to investigate qualification projects, we need to clarify its general concept.

First, the assumed general social actor now stands for the primary recipients of educational measures. The social field of negotiation now refers to the social and workspace of the recipients. We can identify a large number of factors, but now – as a heuristic purpose – they can be categorised in two different ways. The first category denotes the influence on either the primary recipients or on the social and workspace. The second category is the origin either in the cultural part of the social world or in the material part of the social world. To create a qualification project design for rural areas, it is useful then to consider the oft- different cultural dispositions of rural peoples (HANN, 2000; BLUM, 1998; ADOMßENT, 2004) in transition countries and elsewhere. More importantly, it is crucial not to fall into a trap of assuming predominant understandings of western knowledge as universal general knowledge. To design an appropriate qualification measure, it is important to investigate the circumstances and contexts of the specific areas in a pre-study and to accurately research the influences to these measures.

3.1 Factors of influences impact on the primary recipients

In reference to the cultural world, these factors are factors of subjectivity that are linked to the qualification measures to be researched, e.g., the decision-making systems, belief systems, traditional world views or the disposition to innovation and others of the target groups. The learning modes that have a strong and direct influence on qualification measures can be divided into the learning styles and the learning aptitudes of the primary recipients. Learning styles convey internal dispositions as an outward expression of the social subject's mental, physical and societal conditions. This could include e.g., such phenomena as low self-esteem, uncommon social behaviour, a lack of or little motivation and a lack of autonomy and self-responsibility (WOLF, 2009a). Learning aptitudes, that is, externally perceived aptitudes, skills and knowledge refer to the community knowledge concerning the rural agricultural conditions or the different meaning of nature (ADOMßENT, 2000). The factors of the material world are factors of influences from life situations e.g., the meaning of material goods, the behaviour of upward social mobility, the economic sentiment (BLISS, 1999) or the social activity and others.

Figure 2: Cultural factors of influence on vocational training



Source: Author.

Learning conditions here are grouped into socio-economic and socio-ecological learning conditions. Family income is considered a *socio-economic factor* that directly influences access to knowledge and information. Similarly, the need to contribute to the family income can also hinder a student's school attendance or the possibility to pursue further training. Financial stress, and the inability to cope with it, also invariably has a negative impact e.g., the lack of sufficient credit to finance the next sowing. The family situation and living environment are also included under *socio-ecological learning condition*, which impact the learning process. One could also include the difficulty in negotiating encounters with government offices and authorities such as the police or justice system. Health, nutrition and hygiene issues can be counted here as well. Also the technical equipment that is available in the rural environment to train and deepen new knowledge is counted in this cluster of factors (WOLF, 2009a). With this short sketch of factors of influence that direct the primary recipient, I will move on to a discussion of a specific example. A precise analysis of these factors is only possible if a specific rural area and its target groups of the qualification measures are known. Only then can the inventory based on qualitative research begin.

3.2 Factors of influence impact on the social and work space of the primary recipients

Now I will shift to a discussion of the factors that are directly related to the social and workspace of the primary recipients. I will discuss two main categories: the first, factors of influence from the job market and the market for goods and second, factors of systemic-institutional requirements of qualification measures. The meaning of time and the ethics of work, the gendered division of labour, the modes of mobility and others are included as factors relating to the job and goods market and the social group's cultural world. Factors from the systemic-institutional requirements to mention here are traditional leading structures, networks of loyalties and supplements. The economic exchange relations, similar to the technical capabilities of the target groups, are located in the material world as factors related to the job and goods market. The transportation capabilities, the infrastructure, the laws and rules of vocational and further training, the structure in the field of training companies are examples of factors from the systemic-institutional requirements but are also located in the material world.

3.3 First experiences with the toolkit in field research

In the field of development cooperation, the main purpose of the dynamic concept of culture is its application as a planning support for qualification projects. Technical innovation projects in developing countries are often planned only as far as technical transfer projects without considering the societal and the cultural circumstances in the receiving country. This disregard to the cultural context in which the technical innovation is applied often results in a failure in the overall application of the technical innovation. One key issue in avoiding such an error is to consider an integrated qualification of those people who are meant to benefit (WOLF, 2007). For example, to improve the implementation of decentralised renewable energy supplies in rural areas in the Cuban province of Sancti Spiritus, a multidisciplinary research team applied the toolkit for a short pre-study for further project planning. Due to the short amount of time allotted for this pre-study, the team focused only on one set of factors that were based mainly on observations. The factors from the material world that influence the recipients' social and workspace (see Figure 2) are the infrastructure, the existence of material goods in the households, the houses and the goods for productive activities. The investigation of these other factors requires more time, for example to use a questionnaire in order to interview rural people in the area. Similarly, one should also interview key persons in the community and the responsible persons from the local energy sector or from the state administration. The team was only able to conduct short interviews with inhabitants of the community in their own houses. The provisional questionnaire was developed on the basis of the theoretical grounded dynamic concept of culture and referred to factors of life situations and for factors from the cultural world that influence the recipients' social and work space (see Figure 2). To investigate the factors that are more important to the world of the social actors, as mentioned here, we need a different design for the research field. To develop this design on the basis of the dynamic concept of culture is one of the aims of the multidisciplinary research team. This comes with the expectation of improving integrated qualification measures in the implementation of decentralised renewable energy supplies.

4 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

This cursory overview of the analysis of development policy literature shows that it is possible to classify the cluster of factors that influence educational processes (WOLF, 2009b). But this new approach to the concept of culture cannot provide the complete answer as to how an appropriate qualification project for rural areas in developing countries can be designed. Rather, it leads us to an understanding of the complex phenomena of cultural dispositions and to an understanding of the interdependence between influences from the cultural world and material world. To shape our own world through a re-interpretation of the cluttered influences from the social world make it difficult to operationalise culture for empirical research and to use it as heuristic toolkit to shape educational processes.

However, as I demonstrate, it is possible to identify and to classify factors that influence educational processes. But the partial collection of factors I have mentioned here reveals that with this dynamic concept of culture, we have a tool to research factors of influence that impact educational projects in particular cultural contexts. But we do not yet have an answer on how we can apply this concrete teaching and training in rural areas. Therefore, we need to expand our research to investigate the links between the cultural factors of influence and the training measurements. With the new understanding gained through the application of the dynamic concept of culture, we are now able to improve our training and teaching in a reflective manner and to improve step by step our didactics and teaching methods. Yet we also require a type of research behaviour for the social scientist working in this field that falls under the paradigm of interpretative research (SCHRÖER, 1994; SCHNETTLER and STRÜBING, 2004; GIDDENS, 1984) to identify and to classify the existing factors in the given areas. A combination of methods to research and to accurately identify the needed factors is recommended as well as a cross-disciplinary approach. There is a need for further empirical research to establish the theoretical approach developed thus far and to expand the potential of this dynamic concept of culture (WOLF, 2009a).

The approach is relatively new in the field of educational sciences and also in the field of VET-cooperation, but it would be fruitful to consider working in a cross-disciplinary way with those in the agricultural sciences. The approach to culture discussed in this paper would help improve projects in the agricultural sciences that deal with areas of progress.

If the approach discussed here proves to be useful for research and development projects in the agricultural sciences, it should be proved by an empirical investigation in the field, e.g., in development projects that aim to introduce decentralised

renewable energies to rural areas in Cuba with an undeveloped infrastructure, such as Sancti Spiritus province.

5 Conclusion

The dynamic concept of culture used to investigate education and training in qualification projects introduced here has potential to shed light on educational processes from a cultural perspective. We are able to identify, order and understand the large scale of tangled factors that influence educational processes in development projects. As I have mentioned above, some examples of factors of influence from different categories are given. Further research is necessary in order to elucidate what the additional factors of influence from the cultural and material world would look like and which of these factors would play a role in the educational process. A first clue is the insight gained from the results drawn from studies on development policies. The related factors should help explain from the concrete field of intervention where the educational processes are located. Scientific research following the paradigm of interpretative sociology is used to deploy various methods of qualitative research. However, it still has to be proven whether these results are suitable for educational processes. And how – as a new research stream – we can improve our didactics and teaching methods regarding the results gained from the research of educational processes with the dynamic concept of culture as a heuristic toolkit. Additionally, it is important to explain the ways in which trainings can have a positive impact on the factors of influence that students bring with them, and to identify the position the trainings might be in to change the habitual disposition for students' educational success.

Yet another, more theoretical conclusion is needed. Until now, there is no concept of culture that serves as an appropriate tool to illuminate teaching and learning processes from a cultural perspective in schools or in trainings. It does not help that the concept of culture is a controversial one in the German field of education research. Moreover, when the concept is applied, it often serves to reveal the behaviour and views of pupils. (Yildiz, 2008; Abu Lughod, 1991; Stanat, 2009) In Germany, educational studies that employ culture as a category of analysis almost always end up focusing on the experiences of migrant children, even though the deficiencies briefly outlined in this paper are found across the German social spectrum. The cultural model outlined in this paper should be further developed and empirically examined in order to help expand the research focus in the field of education.

As the first but still provisional results from the field studies showed, the concept of culture employed as an analytic toolkit will fit. We need now to try and to develop the toolkit in field research, not only in the Cuban project of decentralised renewable energy supplies in rural areas, but also in other integrated qualification projects to improve the social and economic situation of rural peoples.

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