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Between external prescription and local practice

The uses of official knowledge by adult education professionals in Portugal

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Abstract

This article presents the results of research where the main objective was to achieve a better understanding of the uses made by professionals in the adult education sphere of the official knowledge that provides the framework and guidelines for their work. The study was undertaken using Bernstein's theoretical model of the structure of official pedagogical discourse, and employed an essentially ethnographic fieldwork methodology to analyse the work of a team of adult education specialists working in a local development association in the north of Portugal. The results of the study show that the team was able to make both reproductive and recontextualising use of official knowledge, thereby demonstrating that, even in workplaces where external prescription is extremely influential, it is possible to put official knowledge to alternative i.e. more effective, locally-adapted use.

Keywords: official knowledge; knowledge use; adult education professionals; sociology of education; Portugal

Introduction

In the field of adult education, the study about professional educators and trainers has a long standing tradition (Scheffknecht, 1980; Jarvis, 1997; Merriam & Brockett, 1997), and we can say that in the last years this research has gained more visibility. Several studies funded by the European Commission provide concrete evidence in this respect

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(Research voor Beleid & PLATO, 2008a, 2008b; Buiskool, Broek, van Lakerveld, Zarifis & Osborne, 2010), namely analyzing the adult learning professions in Europe and the key competences for adult learning professionals. A series of thematic issues dedicated to the adult education professionals, organized by the *European Journal of Education* (Osborne, 2009), and by the *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* (Jütte, Nicoll, & Salling Olesen, 2011a), are also symptomatic of the growing importance of this particular area of research.

Some of this research has described and reflected about the diversity of adult education professionals (teachers, trainers, animators, training managers, etc.), their work contexts (schools, associations, training or community centers, etc.), their working conditions, (volunteers, part-time or full-time paid professionals) (Jarvis, 1997; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Osborne & Sankey, 2009; Jütte, Nicoll & Salling Olesen, 2011b). Most studies about adult education workers, however, have been made around such issues as the profession, professionalization procedures and professional development. The debate about the existence (or not) of adult education professionals and the necessary requirements to be a professional (academic degree, basic theoretical competencies, codes of ethics, regulations to define and access the profession, among other issues) has been enriched by different authors in the last two or three decades (Jarvis, 1989; Jarvis & Chadwick, 1991; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Osborne & Sankey, 2009; Ackland, 2011).

The issue of professionalization, professional development and professional knowledge of these actors has gaining increasing interest and has been mainly based on the critical analysis of: the most influential educational policies in different countries (Guimarães, 2009; Osborne & Sankey, 2009; Lassnigg, 2011); the differences between professionalization and other approaches, such as quality management (Egetenmeyer & Käpplinger, 2011); and the required competences of these professionals, including the pedagogical knowledge (Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011).

In our view all these analytical and research perspectives contribute to improve the knowledge basis of those working in the vast and complex field of adult education. However, there is one area of research which has been underestimated and that we consider quite relevant, namely the study of the uses that adult education professionals make of the official knowledge in their institutions (Loureiro & Cristóvão, 2010). In fact, professionalization is not simply a question of acquiring knowledge, but one of putting that knowledge into uses within the work context.

Sociology of education approaches (or, at least, part of it) can be helpful in considering the use of knowledge in educational work contexts. In fact, it is important to note that sociology of education has long focussed its attention primarily on school education and, when it analyses the knowledge used therein, concentrates above all on the content and transmission of that knowledge, and the corresponding effects (Young, 1971; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1978). Bernstein (1990) argues, however, that those working with sociology of education approaches have not paid appropriate attention to the intrinsic characteristics of communication in the pedagogical sphere, nor indeed has any theory of communication been developed for this sector. While researchers have concentrated on communication as being something that transmits external relations of domination, their analysis has treated the means of communication, i.e. the specialist discourse of education, as if they were unimportant in concretising these relations.

Educational sociologists have dealt with school-based knowledge in the following ways: (a) knowledge assumed to be neutral, and therefore requires no analysis; (b) being non-neutral, school-based knowledge causes some to succeed and others to fail but, while the use of knowledge may count among the possible causes of this situation, it

remains largely unanalysed, and the school remains a "black box"; (c) school-based knowledge is a social construction that involves struggles and conflicts and the analysis of its content and organisation is therefore crucial (Loureiro, 2009).

The research reported in this article treads different ground in two senses. Firstly, its concern is not so much the curricular content and organisation of knowledge, but the uses to which educational agents put knowledge in their daily practice. Secondly, it focuses on practitioners in non-formal adult education. More specifically, it seeks to understand the uses to which these professionals put the official knowledge or official pedagogical discourse in Bernstein terms (1990, 1996), that guides their activity. In other words, the main objective of this article is to contribute to a better understanding of the uses made by professionals in the non-formal adult education sphere of the official knowledge that provides the framework and guidelines for their work.

In spite of what has been suggested above regarding the conventional approaches adopted in the sociology of education, it is possible to find authors who have, to some extent, studied what educational agents do with the knowledge that is central to their profession (Apple, 1986, 1993; Bernstein, 1990, 1996, 1999; Perrenoud, 1999). Such studies constitute a tangible shift in how this area of sociology analyses knowledge. Before summarising the methodology used in our study and discussing the results obtained, in the section that follows we review the work of some of these analysts, which can be used to do research on how professionals in the field of adult education make use of official knowledge.

The sociology of education and its analysis of the use of knowledge

Knowledge and official pedagogical discourse: from Apple to Bernstein

Apple (1979, 1982, 1986, 1993) has produced a vast body of work on school-based knowledge; of particular interest to the present study is his analysis of the how the official bodies that control official knowledge influence the work of teachers, since this has direct bearing on the relation the latter have with knowledge. His research on the production, distribution and organisation of official curricula in the USA indicated that large educational publishing houses, in partnership with the state, exert a determining influence (Apple, 1982, 1986, 1993), and are able to control both the content and the form of school-based knowledge, as well as the tools used to put it into practice. As a result, teachers' work falls under outside control, since the content transmitted, the way the teachers' work is planned, and the pedagogical techniques used, are all externally predefined and prescribed. A sharper separation emerges between those who conceive and plan the content of education and those who transmit it: teachers become mere executers and, as such, their work is deskilled, they lose competences and knowledge, and their reflexive capacity is diminished.

Apple (1982, 1993) believes that teachers nevertheless make creative use of both curriculum and textbooks whenever they deconstruct and reconstruct officially-sanctioned knowledge, and whenever they make alternative use of official procedures, i.e. whenever they subvert what has previously been formatted by external agents. Regardless of the degree of real autonomy available to teachers, Apple's findings encourage analysts to carefully examine how actors respond to the official documentation with which they are required to work. In the specific case of education, much remains to be done if we are to understand how teachers, students and other actors in this field come to accept, interpret, reinterpret or reject (totally or in part) the texts with which they work (Apple, 1993).

Another important contribution to our analysis has been Bernstein's (1990, 1996, 1999, 2001) theory of the structure of official pedagogical discourse, i.e. his theory of how educational institutions construct, regulate and distribute this discourse. In his model, educational discourse, practice and organisation is constructed in three interdependent fields: production, recontextualisation and reproduction. Here, a pedagogical device provides the internal grammar of official pedagogical discourse through the rules of distribution, recontextualisation and evaluation that it imposes. These hierarchically inter-related rules underpin all three of these fields, thereby structuring pedagogical discourse (Bernstein, 1990). The field of production is responsible for creating the intellectual dimension of the educational system: it is where educational discourse and practices are generated (along with the processes of creation, modification and exchange of new ideas and specialist discourses), and where new knowledge is legitimately produced. The distribution rules aim at controlling access to the field where legitimated knowledge is produced, as well as who may transmit it, to whom, and under what conditions (Bernstein, 1990, 1996).

Those active in the field of recontextualisation selectively undertake transfers from the field of discourse production to that of reproduction i.e. the original discourse is detached and relocated. The function of this field is to act as a bridge between the fields of production and reproduction, thereby regulating the circulation of texts between these fields. This field's main activity is the appropriation of discourse from the field of production and its transformation into official pedagogical discourse. When recontextualising agents first appropriate a text, it is subjected to an initial transformation before it is inserted into the field of reproduction.

Thus the principal activity in the field of recontextualisation is the construction of the "what" and the "how" of official pedagogical discourse, i.e. the establishment of the categories and relations to be transmitted and the manner of their transmission. The rules of recontextualisation fix both the external and internal limits of official pedagogical discourse and provide the basis for constructing the "what" and "how" involved. It is around these rules that real official pedagogical discourse is built and it is these rules that regulate the work of specialists in this field (Bernstein, 1996).

The field of reproduction is where practical pedagogy is undertaken, and where the selective reproduction of official pedagogical discourse occurs (Bernstein, 1990). Evaluation rules regulate pedagogical practice, for they guarantee that teachers transmit material with a specific content in a given locale, and that a predetermined cohort or age group of students absorbs it, in accordance with clearly defined levels of achievement to be attained (Bernstein, 1996).

The model envisages a structural and functional hierarchy that extends from the field of production through to that of reproduction, each field having its own organs and agents. But, as Bernstein (1990, 1996) notes, the model has its own internal dynamic and, as it develops, generates spaces and opportunities for divergences from the model to occur. As Bernstein (1996) stressed and the present article also demonstrates, the model is applicable outside the formal school context, though certain adaptations are required.

Both hierarchy and internal dynamic are essential if we are to understand if and how actors discover and take advantage of the spaces left by the state, or create such spaces themselves, while they are reproducing the official discourse. In our view, recontextualisation can also occur in the sphere of practice, opening up the possibility for actors to establish an active type of relationship with knowledge and with the official pedagogical discourse.

As contemporary society becomes increasingly "pedagogised", "new pedagogical cadres" emerge, with new professional discourses based on updated research and policy reforms, as well as the corresponding 'new positions, planners and transmitters of knowledge' (Bernstein 2001, pp. 15-16). Thus, applying Bernstein's model outside the conventional school context provides a test of its wider relevance, and allows us to map these recent shifts and to analyse both 'new content and the recontextualisation process that the new content presupposes' (Bernstein, 2001, p. 15).

The importance that new non-formal education contexts and actors have progressively gained over the years confers even greater explanatory potential to Bernstein's model. However, before looking at non-formal adult education and training, we will assess the contribution of two models that focus on the uses of knowledge in schools, and that recognise the important role official pedagogical discourse plays in communicating a particular "officialised" version of theoretical knowledge at the local level.

Towards an active relation between actors and knowledge

The work of Perrenoud (1999) and Caria (2000, 2002) provides a basis for identifying the potential that exists for teachers, while undertaking their professional activities, to establish and maintain an active relationship with the knowledge they use. This perspective permitted these authors to examine knowledge recontextualisation in a new context – that of reflection-in-action among professionals.

Caria (2000, 2002) studied the contextual use of abstract knowledge among primary and junior school teachers. His broad aim was to understand how they 'use the abstract knowledge that is transmitted to them either in initial higher education and/or in their subsequent in-service training' (Caria, 2002, p. 805). This knowledge consists of 'written discourse of a scientific-ideological, scientific-technical and philosophical-ideological nature, the formal organisation of which may relate to general questions, thematic specialisation or problematisation, internal coherence, systematising and/or validation of the development of the arguments advanced' (Caria, 2002, p. 806). The author produced a typology of knowledge-uses, ranging from the articulated use of abstract and local knowledge, to the non-use of abstract knowledge when undertaking specific actions.

Perrenoud (1999) analysed the professional practice of teachers with a view to understanding what resources they used when acting, in particular, in complex circumstances and situations. He began with the notion of competence, understood as the correct mobilisation of diverse resources (including, though not necessarily, abstract knowledge) in a given action. The relevance of this approach to our own study is that it allowed for the possibility of actors' making competent use of theoretical knowledge, which would only be possible if they were capable of reflexive intermediation between this knowledge and the practical situation confronting them, i.e. between theoretical knowledge and their experiential knowledge. Perrenoud's approach helps us to assess the actors' relations with knowledge in terms of its social and creative use, rather than merely its applicative mobilisation. Moreover, his specific concept of competence also helps us to understand if, how, when and in which particular practices educational agents establish a more active relationship with knowledge.

Research methodology

The research reported on here was undertaken on the basis of an ethnographic study of a team of adult education professionals in an Education and Training Centre (ETC) attached to a local development association (LDA) in the north of Portugal. Ethnography provides the means of understanding and translating "the other" (Geertz, 1983) and offers an appropriate strategy for confronting what is said with what is done (Silva, 2001). For these reasons, it was felt that this method was the most appropriate for studying how, in reality, official pedagogical knowledge is used. Furthermore, it did not require us to have recourse merely to the actors' own views and representations regarding their use of discourse.

The choice of the LDA, and the corresponding ETC and adult education team was the result of a three-phase process: (1) a survey of all the associations of this type active in the north of Portugal was conducted; (2) an assessment was made of the extent of each association's involvement in adult education; and (3) a representative case was chosen for further in-depth study.

The unit of analysis consisted of a six-member team of adult education specialists (of which 5 were female) between 25 and 45 years old. All had first degrees in either education or sociology, and varying periods of professional experience. The team's activities and the uses its members made of official knowledge as they carried out their duties were systematically observed.

The ETC was visited three times a week over six months. The physical facilities comprised a reception area, and offices and rooms used for technical, administrative, training, relaxation and other activities, though observations were primarily made in the main office. Information was collected by systematic observation over extended periods, and through informal conversations with team members i.e. the data consisted of what they said and did. All questions were posed in context i.e. based exclusively on what had been directly heard and observed. Written documents were only examined if team members had produced used or explicitly referred to them.

This strategy permitted – indeed demanded – the use of other techniques, such as informal conversations and interviews, and documentary analysis. Thus, a combination of distinct observation- and observer-based techniques lay at the heart of the ethnographic strategy adopted (Merriam & Simpson, 1989; Burgess, 1997).

All the information was recorded in the form of field notes in various locales, and each day it was organised in a fieldwork diary under the following headings: (1) descriptive notes, presenting what had been observed, where and concerning whom; (2) methodological notes, relating to the tools used, the type and amount of information gathered, with reflections on the relevance the observations; (3) empirico-theoretical notes, reflecting an initial theoretical interpretation of the data.

The processing of the information was done in two stages: (1) the first interpretations of the data were made while we still had the ETC "under observation", allowing us to provide team members with the initial, provisional results of the research; (2) later, with the fieldwork concluded, more detailed and in-depth analysis was undertaken. The basic technique used to process the data was triangulation, i.e. the cross-referencing of (a) our own interpretations with the views expressed by team members; and (b) of team member's written and oral discourse, content analysis being applied to discourses of both varieties.

In the content analysis it was of fundamental importance the confrontation between what we can consider the guiding hypotheses that resulted, in essence, from the literature review and the explanatory emerging hypotheses that resulted from field

observations. These last hypotheses made us look for new theoretical insights in order to better interpret the collected data. As such, the confrontation between theory and field data was a dynamic process and permanent process, inspired by both the literature and the fieldwork.

Official knowledge and pedagogical-professional recontextualisation

This section presents the results of the study; it begins by conceptualising the activities the adult education team undertook, and ends by analysing precisely how team members employ official knowledge.

A typology of team activities

We identified 5 types of activities: (1) technical activities connected with the diagnosis, planning, conception, organisation, execution and evaluation of adult educational initiatives; (2) coordination of the team, and organisation and evaluation of its work; (3) management activities related either to the physical, material, human and financial resources deployed in the ETC; (4) directive (or decision-making) activities, associated with actions/initiatives requiring a formal commitment by the ETC; and (5) "other" activities not directly related to adult education. Team members' involvement is quite distinct in each of the above types of activity.

The adult education team's activities can also be categorised according to three distinct time-scales: (1) the cycle of day-to-day activities involving the organisation, implementation and evaluation of adult education initiatives, along with the associated managerial, team-coordination and directive functions; (2) the annual cycle of activities focussing on the evaluation of past initiatives and the diagnosis, planning and conception of future adult education initiatives; and (3) a highly variable cycle of work that corresponds to the "other" above-mentioned activities.

The field of official recontextualisation

The work context observed in this study has two striking characteristics that both connect and regulate the types of activities undertaken by the team: (1) the extent of the normative dimension of education in general; and (2) the specific institutional framework in which adult education functions. These characteristics constitute an essential basis for addressing the question of how official knowledge is used.

In reality, apart from the normativity of what team members do, there exist informational structures that mark out the type of adult education provided. In other words, from the very beginning, the philosophy underpinning the activities to be undertaken is defined by the structure that Bernstein (1990, 1996) refers to as the field of recontextualisation of official pedagogical discourse. The field of recontextualisation is delineated by the sphere of influence of officials from the government departments directly responsible for adult education, namely the Directorate General for Vocational Training (DGFV), the Institute for Training Innovation (INOFOR), the Portuguese Institute for Employment and Professional Training (IEFP), and staff from the nation-wide Operational Programme for Employment, Training and Social Development (POEFDS). Recontextualisation takes place in these organisations i.e. knowledge that has been generated in the field of production (i.e. by researchers, experts, etc.) is transformed into official pedagogical knowledge and communicated down to the local level, using official pedagogical discourse.

Concrete examples of Bernstein's field of recontextualisation of official discourse include: (a) the way in which certain aspects of adult education and training courses (e.g. teaching loads, module content) are previously defined and predetermined; (b) the philosophy and methodologies underpinning the framework documentation adult education professionals receive from the official bodies responsible for their activities, and (c) in the forms that team members habitually are required to use. The RVC (Skill Validation & Certification) documentation used to monitor and validate the competences trainees acquire over the course of their careers provides a good example of the latter manifestation of the recontextualisation process. It is this type of documentation (forms, records, etc.) that Apple (1986, 1993) calls texts.

The main activities of the team are situated within Bernstein's sphere of reproduction of official pedagogical discourse, and are bounded by the corresponding recontextualisation field, which in turn prescribes the "what" and the "how" of the knowledge that is generated in the field of production. From a Bernsteinian viewpoint, the adult education staff reproduces the discourse that has already been recontextualised in the intermediary field that separates the production of official knowledge from its reproduction.

Though the recontextualisation field presupposes a rather rigid and hierarchical relationship between adult education practice and official pedagogical discourse, with team members merely reproducing official discourse, might there be more to their role in determining the relationship they establish with the official knowledge on which this discourse is based? Despite the government control of the activities of adult education professionals, do they have any space for autonomy in which to make alternative use of official knowledge, as in Bernstein's (1990, 1996) concept of room for manoeuvre?

Forms and uses of official knowledge

The official pedagogical knowledge employed by adult education staff takes three forms – conceptual, philosophical and procedural (Loureiro, 2009):

1. Conceptual knowledge refers to "what is", providing a framework of concepts (e.g. evaluation, partnership, trainer, diagnosis), typologies (e.g. of adult education), and phenomena/categories whose conceptual pertinence is typically communicated in statistical form (e.g. data on illiteracy rates). Thus the purpose of this type of knowledge is to define and classify.
2. Philosophical knowledge refers to the general principles that underpin a theoretical model, on the basis of which particular actions may be justified and/or legitimised. In adult education, the philosophical knowledge in question is that deployed through the EFA (the national Adult Education & Training model) which, in certifying both vocational training and equivalence between informally- and formally-acquired competences, invests adult education with a quite specific meaning. Thus the purpose of this type of knowledge is to legitimise actions.
3. Procedural knowledge is used to define an action that is to be taken, indicating how, when and through which instruments given objectives are to be achieved. It is therefore used to prescribe and regulate specific actions, and often is to be found in documentation providing guidelines for particular actions or initiatives.

Members of the adult education team were found to use all three types of official knowledge in practically all their activities, ranging from the most routine to the most

complex of tasks, though the procedural form is used far more than others. This contradicts the notion that professional practitioners only use implicit knowledge when dealing with difficult situations. Moreover, team members use official knowledge with different aims in mind: (a) planning a given set of actions (using the procedural and conceptual forms); (b) undertaking planned actions (drawing on the same two forms); (c) legitimising past or planned actions, and/or justifying changes to them (deploying all three forms); and (d) describing/explaining actions taken (applying the procedural and conceptual forms).

While the above analysis provided some clues to the uses team members make of the knowledge emanating from the field where official knowledge is recontextualised, we needed further clarification of whether official knowledge is, in fact, transformed in some way when it is put into practice i.e. do alterations occur in the purposes of official knowledge and/or its specific content (understood as the features that distinguish each of its three forms) as it passes from the recontextualisation field to that of adult education practice?

At first sight, it seems that there is only one reproductive use of official knowledge, i.e. where it is drawn on by practitioners in precisely the form in which it manifests itself in the recontextualisation field, i.e. where it is merely applied, without there being any change in its purposes or content. However, team members made reproductive use of all three forms of official knowledge: conceptual knowledge was applied in this way when, for example, they used educational and training typologies (supplied from above) to classify the type of initiatives and actions they were undertaking, or when they were preparing documents that responded to external institutional imperatives (e.g. when the ETC was applying for accreditation as a provider of a particular type of training). In these cases, neither the purpose nor content of official knowledge were transformed as they were being applied, team members accepting the necessity of the classificatory and definitional aims contained in the documents originating in the recontextualisation field.

The reproductive use of procedural knowledge was visible in many procedures team members followed in which there was no transformation of the purposes or content of official guidelines. For example, when they (a) prepared documents relating to the planning of a specific course, based on the procedural guidelines of the specific government training programmes involved; (b) created dossiers containing all the technical and pedagogical details of a particular course (based on the guidelines provided by the same entity); (c) wrote the minutes of meetings of Adult Education & Training (EFA) teaching teams; or (d) filled in forms relating to the work and performance of EFA trainees. Thus, neither are the purposes of official procedural knowledge altered as team members undertake their duties, nor is the corresponding content transformed, because they dictate the order in which things are to be done, how actions are to be executed, as well as providing the instruments that provide a framework for ensuring that what was intended is carried out.

The following reflection, proffered by a female member of the team with regard to the technical-pedagogical dossiers of specific training courses, illustrates the procedural form taken by official knowledge:

> … I'm organising the technical-pedagogical dossier for one of our courses … We are obliged to do this; there are POEFDS guidelines [on the internet] for how to compile these dossiers, and it's those that we follow …

Reproductive use of the philosophical form of official knowledge was also readily identifiable. For example, when one member of the team was explaining to a trainer what the RVC was and how EFA course curricula were organised, she picked up an

official document, and read out to him the principles underlying the key competences the training was intended to impart, in order to justify the type of actions he was to undertake.

While the existence of widespread reproductive use of official knowledge cannot be denied, a more detailed analysis of the data collected indicates that team members also make recontextualising use of such knowledge, altering at least one of the two dimensions (either purpose and/or content) of the official knowledge coming from the recontextualisation field. This type of use was more visible where the knowledge involved was most subject to official guidelines, namely procedural knowledge. We were able to identify three distinct types of recontextualising use of official procedural knowledge, essentially related to the outcome-structuring tools (or "texts", to use Apple's terminology) provided for the guidance of adult education teams. These tools/texts were subject to: (a) partial use; and/or (b) re-sequenced use; and/or (c) transformative use.

A good example of both partial and re-sequenced uses of these texts can be found in the planning of the "Life Themes" component of EFA courses, in which at least one broad theme (such as Culture) is integrated into all course modules. For planning purposes, the DGFV provides four tools/texts to be used in a predetermined order: "Overall Design", "Key Competences Management", "Life Themes", and "Integrating Activity" (Loureiro, 2009). The conversation below occurred during the fieldwork (all names are fictitious): while team members retain the original purpose of the official knowledge they are deploying, they transform its content by dropping one of the four tools/texts provided ("Key Competences Management") and changing the sequence in which they are applied (leaving "Overall Design" until last).

Episode 1. Partial and re-sequenced use of tools/texts

On her desk, Margarida has a pile of material provided by the DGFV for the preparation of "Life Themes", one of which must be incorporated into each training course. After leafing through the documents, she turns to Jaime and asks for help.

Margarida: Jaime, do you understand all of this?

Jaime: Yes.

Margarida: So tell me… the trainers have to indicate here the "sub-themes" they're going to use, don't they?

Jaime: Yes, there on the "Life Themes" form you've got in your hand. Then put the details of the corresponding activities on the "Integrating Activity" form.

Margarida: And what about the "Overall Design" form?

Jaime: Well, Joana, Sílvia and I discussed this and decided not to fill in the form for the whole course right at the beginning, as the DGFV expects us to do, but to do it bit by bit instead.

Margarida: Joana, I'm sorry to interrupt you. Are you applying the "Overall Design" form?

Joana: Well yes, we are using it. But we don't apply it to the whole course right at the very beginning, as we were told to do in our training sessions. We're developing the design as the course proceeds.

Cristina: But when the local DGFV officer was here, he told us to use all the forms, filling in the "Overall Design" form first. So that's what I did.

Joana: Yes, I know that's what we were told, but we're not doing it in that order. And we're not using all the forms either. When they introduce these new systems, it's only by using the forms that you're able to figure out whether they work or not. And it turns out that what we were told just isn't viable.

Margarida: Right, I see. So which forms are we using and in what order?

Joana: Firstly, we never fill in all these tables because some of them duplicate the same information. The "Overall Design" and the "Key Competences" forms are very similar, as you can see. So we don't use the "Key Competences" form at all.

Margarida: Yes, I see what you mean.

Joana: That's why we don't use this one. In our day to day work, we use the "Life Themes" form, where we include the sub-themes into which the life theme is to be divided; and we use the "Integrating Activities" form, too. The work is done sub-theme by sub-theme: for each sub-theme we devise an "Integrating Activity". So we fill in the tables bit by bit. We only fill in the "Overall Design" form at the end, once we've completed all the sub-themes.

Margarida: I'm starting to understand now. It really makes more sense this way.

Joana: In our initial training, we did an exercise on how to fill in these forms. But here we don't follow that procedure exactly, because we soon realised that the forms weren't adapted to the type of situation we're working in. Our instructions were to fill in the "Overall Design" form first. But this makes the whole process really inflexible, and if we want the trainees to participate, and to contribute to defining the themes, and to work well on them, we thought it was better to work theme by theme, rather than planning all the "Life Themes" at the beginning.

Margarida: I think you were right.

Since one of the team members came to make reproductive use of official procedural knowledge, while others did not, this episode shows that the recontextualisation process is neither even nor instantaneous, i.e. it does not necessarily incorporate everyone at the same time. It is important to recognise that the recontextualisation that led to changes being made at the local level involved team members' (a) capacity to be selective in the use of the tools/texts supplied by the government bodies; (b) capability to adapt tools/texts to the real-world circumstances in which they have to apply them; and (c) capacity to apply critical and evaluative faculties (drawing on their individual and collective know-how) as well as being able to legitimise the use of such tools/texts in a partial, re-sequenced or transformative manner. It is the combination of these skills makes it possible that changes in how the training courses will be made. Also, since the way in which the team arrived at this change involved recontextualisation, the subsequent description and explanation (by one member to another) of the new procedure to be adopted should be seen as an integral part of the recontextualisation process at the local level.

The documentation provided by state bodies in support of the RVC (Skill Validation & Certification) process provides an example of a use of official knowledge that transforms rather than merely reproduces the knowledge inherent in the tools/texts involved. The following excerpts from a further episode observed during the fieldwork

illustrates how oral and/or written changes were made to questions contained in these tools/texts, and how questions that were not originally contemplated in them were included.

Episode 2. Transformative uses of tools/texts

When consulting the dossier of a particular EFA course, a researcher noticed that some of the forms that were being used for the RVC process were different from the official forms he had analysed earlier. As Joana was responsible for the training course in question, he checked with her why these differences existed.

Researcher: Joana, this RVC dossier on the Geriatrics course contains forms that differ from those used by the DGFV.

Joana: Yes, we made some changes to them because, as we started to use them, we realised this was necessary. Sometimes we add a few questions, and sometimes we change the language to make it easier for trainees to understand.

Researcher: Exactly how are these changes made?

Joana: Changes to the Portuguese are made orally when we have meetings with the trainees. When we add questions aimed at collecting more data than the original document contemplated, we ask trainees to make additions on the various forms they fill in. For example, here on this "Participant Details" sheet, where they're asked to provide data on their participation in social activities, we've added a question asking them to specify what form that participation takes.

Researcher: Yes, I noticed that.

Joana: The way the original form was organised, trainees only put a cross in a box to indicate if they had participated in any type of association. But that doesn't tell us very much, so we put more specific oral questions to trainees, and they write their answers here in the space we've created. It's important for us to have more data on issues like this: it'll help us to do a better evaluation of citizenship, which is one of the key competences we have to examine.

Researcher: So, basically, you've added this question with a view to obtaining more information?

Joana: Yes. In other situations, we write down additional questions in our notebooks and get the answers in meetings with the trainee. This is also to complement the information we collect using the official forms. We do this because we've already seen that the forms have certain shortcomings. On other occasions, additional questions can be put during the RVC process itself. Since we've concluded that it was necessary to get more detailed data, we also take advantage of informal conversations with the trainees to collect information on certain issues. Basically, these are the alterations we've made to the tools we're provided with.

Researcher: Tell me something else. Do you ever put into written form, i.e. include in the official RVC documents you prepare, the questions that you have only posed orally?

Joana: Sometimes we do. Not the corrections we make to the Portuguese; but we have written down the questions relating to the type of participation trainees have had in associations. In fact, the question arose in a session with the trainees: we hadn't prepared it in advance. That's how it normally happens: whenever we find that a question is pertinent to the work we're doing, and that the answers will help us achieve our aims, we subsequently include it in the materials we use.

Researcher: So there are questions that you have prepared in advance, and that are put to trainees in your meetings with them, and there are others that just arise in your conversations with them?

Joana: Yes. Also, there are issues that emerge out of conversations here, amongst ourselves, concerning the documentation we're using. We sometimes conclude that what's on the forms doesn't go far enough, and so we develop complementary questions. We always analyse the documentation in advance, and if we feel that something's missing, we make the alterations we consider appropriate. In the beginning, because we lacked experience, we jotted down any doubts in a notebook; later, if we found that they were well-founded, we would alter the original materials. But now we don't do it like that. Now we analyse all the documentation first, check whether any alterations are necessary, if anything needs to be added, or if the format of the document needs to be altered and, if so, we make the changes immediately, before the RVC process begins, so that right from the start we're using the materials in their adapted form. The aim is always to obtain more and better information.

Researcher: What are these adaptations based upon?

Joana: That varies. Sometimes they're based on our own training and sometimes we refer to books. But mostly we work as a team, so as the work of applying the documentation progresses, we are all learning how to identify materials that either aren't sufficiently well-adapted to the situation in which we have to use them, or that have gaps. But you have to realise that we draw on our experience when we make these alterations; when I began here, I did everything exactly how I had been shown in my DGFV training. Once I'd gained experience, I started to make alterations and to introduce new things.

As in the case of Episode 1, this episode allows us to see how, in concrete activities, official knowledge and contextual knowledge articulate: it is this very articulation that generates the recontextualised use of official knowledge; and it is the contextual knowledge that enables professionals to apply their critical faculties to the official knowledge contained in the tools/texts provided by the state bodies involved. The critical analysis of RVC documentation was either performed in advance i.e. was based upon a reflexive assessment of the activities to be taken, or it was the result of improvisation in which the alterations judged to be appropriate were made in the very act of applying the tools/texts in question. In both cases, team members made use of what Schön (1983) has referred to as "reflection-in-action".

Episode 2 also demonstrates the crucial importance of experience in the whole process. Experience permitted team members to go beyond being mere appliers, and become recontextualisers of official knowledge, allowing them to fulfil tasks in a different way, more in line with local conditions. Their experience also gave them the capacity to identify in advance the relevance of making adjustments to the tools/texts involved in their work.

Thus contextual knowledge provided the basis for a reflexive exercise through which team members were able to detect any deficiencies in key documentation, and assess the contribution that the respective alterations would make. Their recontextualising use of official knowledge took place in two distinct phases: (a) experimentation i.e. the "trying out" of various modifications to official knowledge; where this yielded positive results, there was (b) a "mainstreaming" of a specific recontextualising use of official knowledge. Proceeding in this way is crucial to the construction of contextual or local knowledge, in which official knowledge is incorporated.

In all the cases referred to above, the recontextualisation process is applied to the content of official knowledge; as the adult education professionals undertake their activities, the purpose of official knowledge remains unaltered.

Conclusion

The results of this research demonstrate that it is possible, even where little structural flexibility exists, for official knowledge (i.e. resources and rules) to be used in alternative ways. The adult education professionals that constituted the focus of the study not only made reproductive but also recontextualising use of official knowledge, and this was possible because of their ability to articulate official knowledge and their own contextual knowledge. This capacity provided clear evidence of the existence of what Bernstein (1990, 1996) called the "margin for manoeuvre" – a limited space for autonomy that the system either concedes to practitioners, or that the latter creates and secures in the course of their professional activities, and in which they may make alternative use of texts (Apple, 1993). Put another way, our conclusions support Schön's (1983) idea that when official knowledge is applied in a specific and concrete context, it is frequently subjected to a practical epistemology that works in the opposite direction to that of technical rationality.

Based on the observations made and reported on in this article, we can conclude that, in practice, contextual knowledge and official knowledge regularly interpenetrate one another, and that if the latter is subjected to a recontextualisation process, it comes to form part of the former. This is how official knowledge contributes to the construction and reconstruction of a contextual knowledge that has relevance not only for the locale in which adult education professionals work, but also for the territory their activities serve.

The fact that the professionals analysed in this study are not mere appliers but also recontextualisers of official knowledge, as well as being producers of local knowledge, suggests that they have an active relation with both official knowledge and contextual knowledge, and that in their daily practice they play a reflexively mediating role between structure (i.e. knowledge originating in the official field of recontextualisation) and the specificities of their own practice and contextual knowledge. In this manner, actors can be considered reproducers of structure (Giddens, 1984), though not necessarily only reproducers, since they have sufficient room for manoeuvre to put to alternative use the resources that are placed at their disposal and the rules that are intended to govern their activities.

In spite of the limitations of our results, derived from the ethnographic nature of the study and, particularly, of its validity to a specific context, the research done provides a contribution to a better understanding of the uses adult education professional make of the official knowledge they deal with. Sociological approaches in general, as Giddens' one (1984), or the sociology of education perspective used in this research (for example Bernstein, 1990, 1996) that notwithstanding the normative and hierarchical character of its analysis - permits to reflect about the existence of room to manoeuvre for social actors - are, in our perspective, a very relevant contribution to a stronger epistemological development of the field of adult education.

In our view the problematic of professionalization and professional development of adult education workers should be analyzed through research focusing on the uses these actors make of the official knowledge structuring their action, in their daily practice. Besides other aspects or dimensions, these studies can show that the degree of

proximity between the educational programs and the adults' needs and expectations depends on the type of knowledge use. In fact, this study demonstrates that a reproductive use of the official knowledge will lead to educational programs that are more distant from the needs and interests of the participant adults in adult education programs.

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