

Work-related basic education - Human resources development for low-qualified people?

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Abstract

This article focuses on the education-political strategy of reaching low-qualified workers in companies through work-related basic education. Starting from the question of why further education of low-qualified is currently so high on the agenda and of what the obstacles are we mainly present work-related basic education as an operational concept of education. Based on actual needs for competence development, this concept tries to overcome two barriers: to raise awareness for further education of low-skilled employees in the companies and to turn learning into a useful experience for both companies and employees. The following will become clear: after seven years of research and development we do not have any knowledge deficits about how work-related basic education can be designed anymore; the implementation still faces high hurdles.

Keywords: work-related basic education – low skilled employees – demographical development – literacy – competence development

The state of continuing vocational and in-company education and training of the low-qualified

If businesses in view of demographic changes are now forced to develop qualified professionals from their staff, they will focus on those who have not been in the centre of HR strategies yet – the so-called low-qualified without any recognised or in less demand professional qualification. Here lies an extraordinary reservoir in the companies. Out of the young adults (20 to 34 years), just over 2 million did not have a vocational degree in 2011; the quota of 14 to 15 percent of unskilled workers in that age group has remained stable over time (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung 2014). This shows that this group has not been in the focus of education-political interventions so far and has not played a role in the companies' HR policy. The results of PIAAC Germany have also shown that "people who did not adequately learn certain basic skills in the German education system (and therefore attained only low levels of proficiency in PISA) can hardly compensate for these deficits in later life. There are probably many reasons for this: These people have limited chances of obtaining (vocational) training, participating in the labour market or finding a cognitively challenging and stimulating job. Moreover, their participation in further education and training is comparatively low. Hence, opportunities to improve inadequate skills in adulthood are lacking" (Rammstedt et al.

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2013). The German PIAAC national supplementary study with the focus on the low qualified highlighted the result “that the subgroup with the lowest levels of proficiency has the lowest rate of participation in formal further education and training” (ibid.). This is also evidenced among other things for example by the education voucher system of North Rhine-Westphalia. In NRW, employees can receive a support of 50% for their further education from the state; the other half can either be paid by the employer (business approach) or by themselves (individual approach). The low-qualified are highly underrepresented in the business approach.

Another background for this is – amongst others – the result of the LEO Level One study which assumes that out of the 7.5 million people in Germany who do not have sufficient reading and writing competences, 56% are employed (Grotlüschen/Riekman, 2012). It is assumable that they often belong to the group of low-qualified people.

As aforementioned, this article concentrates on the low-qualified whose common feature is the lack of a recognised professional qualification. The Federal Employment Agency defines the low-qualified as those, ‘who do not have a professional qualification or those who do have a professional degree, but have worked in a semiskilled or unskilled job for at least the past four years and do not work in their original job anymore’. The Institute for Labour Market and Employment Research defines the low-qualified as those, ‘who do neither have completed any vocational training nor any education at a vocational school or university’. These definitions focus only on official formal qualifications and do not take sufficiently into account that some of those so called low skilled are highly capable and do a professional job. On the other hand the job income is no indication as to being qualified or low-qualified. Germany has gathered the quantitatively biggest low-wage labour market in Europe and watered down the connection between vocational levels and the level of income. The number of low-wage workers increased since 1995 from 5.9 to 8.4 millions in 2012. Just over than three quarters of those have a formal training qualification (66.8%) or an academic degree (8.6%). It is thus not that easy to find a clear definition for the low-qualified. Even trying to connect it to the complexity of vocational requirement structures is not very successful. Also supposed ‘simple job’ require increasing capacities. If you have ever watched an assistant for dement people – a typical so-called ‘simple job’ for the low-qualified – you would know how inappropriate the term ‘simple job’ is here.

More investment into education is necessary

Cost aspects

The employment risk of the low-qualified shows which economic and of course individual effects can be observed. It is not surprising that low-qualified workers have a higher risk of becoming unemployed than other groups of employees. The rate of unemployment for low skilled is with 19 % around four times higher as for people completed some sort of vocational training. In the group of those without training qualification is one in five unemployed. The central problem is that the duration of unemployment has changed significantly. When a low-

qualified worker lost his job in 1992, he had to expect to stay unemployed for 0.8 years; in the year 2000 it was already 1.4 years and in 2008 he had to expect to be unemployed for 2.5 years. The following applies to low-qualified workers: who becomes unemployed, stays unemployed for a long time. The descent to the so called “Hartz IV” (very limited unemployment benefit / payment of social security contributions) is predestined for this target group. What hinders low-qualified workers to ensure and broaden their employability through vocational training?

Reasons for abstinence – people far from education or education far from people?

When taking a closer look at empirical evidence (Schiersmann 2006, Baethge, Baethge-Kinsky 2004, MacKeracher et al. 2006), one can see some confusing findings about the reasons for abstinence from further training of this group. 41.9% of the respondents without professional qualification do see a demand for further training for themselves, but only 23% do attend training. What are the barriers that keep them from doing what they consider important? It is not – what would be likely to be expected – the costs, those are subordinate.

Barriers to further training	Without professional qualification	Unemployed	Older than 50
Lack of benefit	30,7%	44,0%	58,8%
Stress/lack of time	28,9%	10,3%	20,2%
Lack of information / supply	24,9%	24,5%	14,1%
High costs	12,7%	19,0%	3,8%
Lacking quality of further training	2,7%	2,2%	3,2%

Schiersmann 2006, p. 48

Hefler et al. find different barriers to further training (2013, p. 94):

Situational barriers	Conditions that hinder participation individually	Role conflicts, well-planned life, missing resources: time, strength, money Missing support from the environment
Cognitive barriers	Missing competences that are	Ability to read / write / calculate

	assumed in most training courses	Computer literacy Reflective faculty Attention span Provision of information
Institutional barriers	Conditions that limit the access to groups of supply	Missing entrance prerequisites Missing support
Dispositional barriers	Patterns of attitude that do not make participating in further training attractive	Self-confidence / self-reliance Attitude towards the use of training Negative early learning experiences Feeling isolated in the learning group Health impairment

One-dimensional attempts of explanation like assuming a general distance from education do not explain anything; at best they relieve the education-political decision makers because they put the responsibility for the lack of participation on the individuals.

Levers for reaching the low-qualified

Since the barrier issue is so differentiated there is not the one lever but there will have to be development at the different levels. This can apply to

- forms of knowledge that are supposed to be spread with the seminars
- the way of consulting which education providers offer respectively the design of access for people interested in basic education
- learning and teaching formats as a differentiated frame for learning design
- didactic considerations and therefore also the learning goals which are supposed to reach the low-qualified.

It has to be assumed that in light of the heterogeneity of interests and demands, of living conditions and the individual perspectives (cf. PIAAC results), we will need much more differentiated access forms, learning / teaching formats and didactic orientation than we have at the moment.

Design of vocational-operational training for low-qualified employees

We will now concentrate on work-related basic education as an area of practice of the continuing vocational and in-company education and training of the low-qualified and the question how employers and employees can be reached. What is to be considered for designing the learning surroundings and which didactic and methodical approaches have proven themselves useful? The background for this are practices of work-related and workplace-oriented basic education from the Ministry's first and partly also the second funding priority of basic education and alphabetisation of adults.

What is work-related basic education?

Work-related basic education stands in an education-theoretical tradition and is a pedagogic concept which includes broad educational goals like reflexion faculty, autonomy and identity. It is hence more than just imparting cultural techniques like reading, writing, and calculating and - not only in the case of migrants - also speaking. We inherently advocate viewing the understanding of work-oriented basic education from different perspectives (cf. Klein/Reutter 2014): the programmatic perspective, the pedagogic-didactic perspective and from the perspective of compatible communication with businesses.

Work-related basic education means a continuing vocational training and in-company continuing vocational training aiming at target groups that are usually not in the focus of HR development in companies and that do usually not participate in further training. The main aspects are (cf Klein/Reutter 2014):

- Basic education includes those bodies of knowledge that are vital for an orientation in society and labour market, and those that promote inclusion and decrease the danger of exclusion. Basic education is therefore to be understood as an open, context-specific and process-oriented educational process.
- Work-related basic education uses the workplace to be a place and opportunity to preserve or develop employability and to enhance the flexibility of workforce in the labour market.
- Work-related basic education has a compensatory function: Within this broad understanding, work-related basic education is based on the knowledge about inter-generative educational deficits.
- It focuses on the individuals.
- It is not deficit-oriented but uses existing, often hidden competences as a starting point for learning.
- It is focused on, but not reduced to work and does not exclude other life environments.
- It uses and develops a conducive labour organisation that supports and demands learning within the work process.

- Work-related basic education is an individual seminar concept developed and realised to match the particular company.

Using the learning potential of the workplace for training

When looking at the results of empirical research about further training, particularly the studies of Baethge/Baethge-Kinsky (2004) and Christiane Schiersmann (2006), the meaning of learning close to the workplace and work-related learning becomes evident, especially for the group of the so-called low-qualified. This does not mean that they would hold institutionalised learning places and forms of organisation of adult education to be unsuitable for them. Baethge/Baethge-Kinsky explicitly point at this: 'This indicates that the valuation of the most important learning context is mainly a matter of opportunity structures and not of motivational learning preferences' (p. 47). It is about gaining access to operational learning areas and enabling qualitatively inspiring learning experiences.

However, account being taken of the fact that work-related basic education in the company has two addressees: the employee and the organisation – the company respectively the management. There are a bunch of conditions that have to be considered during implementation; and a counselling approach is needed in addition to the teachings themselves in order to gain access to organisations and employees and to reach long-term effects. This will be discussed in the following chapters.

Finding and designing access to businesses – the challenges

Work-related basic education is not a sure-fire success

Companies see themselves as and are indeed mainly workplaces, and the actors do not simply see them as learning surroundings. Workplaces serve the gaining of business profitability and not the broadening of employees' competences which are still held to be an obligation to provide of the employees. Strangely, broadening competences is understood as an obligation to provide especially for low-qualified workers themselves (cf. Käßlinger 2009). The view into current practices shows:

- Contacting businesses works well with multipliers who are close to the company and who are convinced of the necessity to put employees into the focus of training, who are competent of building relationships, and who are experienced in building trust, or who already have a trusting relationship with the company.
- On the business side it is evident that in companies which are open for training their semi-skilled and un-skilled employees, operational concerns and the need for re-structuring processes correspond with an appreciative attitude towards their employees.

- Management and workers' representative committees only hold work-related basic education to be a useful option if they can not only see an individual benefit, but also a benefit for the company. This benefit has to be clearly describable and noticeable.

Outlining the benefits for the company: a must

Outlining the benefits is not necessarily a task close to pedagogues who are new to the field of professional-operational training. Benefit in an educationally ideal context is still a grubby category for many pedagogues; but it is compulsory for the business logic of thinking and acting. A look at the practice shows: it is not sufficient to only work with HR management because they usually do not know the on-site demands well enough. It has been useful in different practices to take the following steps in dialogic processes (cf. Abraham 2010; Behlke 2010) like initially mounted workshops for HR staff, employees' representatives, works councils and line managers (shift supervisors, nursing management, foremen):

- Informing them about chances and possibilities of work-related basic education respectively develop those approaches. One benefit from a business point of view is e.g. more qualified staff.
- Developing needs assessments and derive substantial priorities for basic education together with them
- Arranging options to take over possibilities for intervening and controlling in the process, i.e. taking management et al. into responsibility
- Making learning developments visible and getting them, especially the management, on board for the transfer.

The central message is to formulate learning causes,

- which result from specific work requirements (e.g. making short notes about skin alterations of residents, writing an accident log, criticise professionally while staying friendly and polite – cf. Behlke 2010),
- for which learning is directly connected to current day-to-day work
- by which an optimisation of this work activities can be prepared through learning, and therefore business and individual benefit is the goal.

It becomes apparent that formulating cause-related learning topics is also of interest for the low-qualified employees. They would not accept training for the enhancement of their reading, writing or calculating competences, i.e. a cognitive access to the learning subject. On the one hand because they would 'come out' as illiterate; on the other hand because they want applicable, useful learning for their working situation. If an education provider

advertised “DIY for people who are all thumbs’, it would probably reach those who rate their handicap confidently and casually; those who suffer from it would surely not be reached.

Approaching employees

A current study (Ehmig 2014) shows that

- insufficient capacities in reading and writing is not a taboo issue in enterprises (as we have often believed)
- employees with low competences in reading and writing in enterprises are quite known
- not least because the employees made no secret of the fact that they have problems to read and write correctly.

This fact must be taken into consideration when planning the access paths for the target group.

Nevertheless it still holds true: Avoiding discrimination – emphasising normality: For the development of specific seminars it is therefore mandatory that their titles do not contain unwanted discrimination of the employees and that they are matching the usual titles of business trainings. It is worthwhile to devote a great deal of energy finding labels which

- a) focus on the business relevance and do not form descriptions of the employees’ deficits
- b) refer to changing requirements at the workplace and connect to higher or new requirements for written language skills

Some specifying examples of seminars of work-related basic education¹⁷ :

Business German in working with the elderly. Mastering daily situations verbally.

Communication with clients – mastering new and old requirements confidently. Oral and written communication requirements of dealing with clients will be trained according to the working requirements.

Documentation of working processes and results – changing requirements due to QM systems. The central requirements will be practised and stabilised in a work-related way.

Mastering shift changes – documentation for colleagues

Job change: mastering the new role as a superior. If simple workers attain a superior position, this training helps to master the role change and to stay relaxed in critical situations.

¹⁷ See www.sesam-nrw.de: Unternehmensbroschüre

Understanding spread sheets. How do spread sheet programmes (Excel, Lotus 1-2-3, Quattro Pro etc.) work? What are their advantages, where can they be used efficiently?

Information technology – gaining basic competence for digital media. Basic knowledge will be imparted in short seminars and with examples based on real working tasks.

Developing and realising seminars with employees:

Learning content is realised together with the employees. A first reference point is their demands and their interests – e.g. enhancing their professional capacities and therefore their job satisfaction. The demands and interests are consequently used for didactics. This requires small steps. It has proven to be necessary and useful to consequently redeem this line from the first information and the first contact, during all clarifying steps until implementation. The briefings for the management and employees' representatives already have to communicate that content will be developed with the employees in order to be useful. Also informative notices have to point out that learning will refer to specific demands resulting from work. Information events which present the goals and broad subjects from the perspective of the management have proven to be useful. The management has to point out that the training will be used to meet changing requirements more accurately and that the training will refer to work.

The signal of the management's support for those purposes is essential. The developed ideas for content reinforce the seriousness of the purpose and shall be complemented, relined or even dismissed by the employees.

Didactics of work-related basic education

Learning based on real concerns

The didactics of work-related basic education are based on real concerns; these come from the employees themselves. This cannot be met by one single investigation of demands and interests. It rather requires a ritual of continuous reflection of working requirements and their action-oriented processing. An established example for this is the structural element 'current issues'. In every seminar unit, participants formulate specific issues and questions from their recent work which are then adapted as learning subjects. The descriptions first refer to certain situations and cases and will then be specified as particular action requirements, e.g. 'documenting skin alterations of residents' or 'showing error reports about XY' or 'approaching an interested client in a friendly way'.

These specific situations will then be worked on. It is thus about learners bringing up questions deriving from their work (and other living environments) and processing them with the goal of a better management which makes

them more content with their work. The examples show how manifold the demand behind the situations and cases can be and also how different the didactic concretisation can be: it can be about oral-communicative variants, about precise, briefly written and still understandable and legally correct documentation, about body language in communication, about alternative semantics in communication etc. The didactics of work-related basic education thus provide the broad range of social forms and methodical approaches, e.g. small group work, role plays, oral and written trainings etc.

Having different learning formats at hand

Work-related basic education can and has to be realised in different learning formats; and this refers to the learning surroundings as well as to size and composition of learning groups. In this article we have particularly strengthened the 'company/business' to be a good learning environment and pointed out its strengths, but also which action logics have to be considered when organising and realising learning there. The term 'work related' implies didactic thoughts about the learning environment as in that the learning environment does not mandatorily have to be in the company. Companies and/or employees are often interested in realising work-related basic education in an educational institution – be it because discrimination expected in the company can be avoided, be it because company processes will not be disturbed or be it because the learning equipment in the company is not sufficient. Work-related basic education can therefore be established in the company or in educational institutions, and it is an explicit part of negotiation to decide where the learning should take place.

Securing the learning transfer

Learning alone is not enough. The most important task for work-related basic education is to transfer what has been learned into a competence for working action. We can partly rely on this to happen incidentally but empirical evidence suggests promoting and accompanying these processes. The reason is that for one person it requires courage to apply newly learned knowledge into the reality of daily work; for another person it requires to overcome habits ('my colleague has always done this for me'); for groups of people who are labelled with the self-perception of deficits it requires breaking with traditional role patterns.

There are a few strategies for securing the learning transfer but there is definitely demand for development (cf Klein / Reutter / Rodenbücher 2014). The existing practices also show that hurdles have to be overcome in companies. The learning transfer can happen fruitfully when the system knows and practises a feedback culture which welcomes changing behaviour and changing role patterns and which makes room for changing behaviour of the employees. This feedback culture is rather underdeveloped in many companies and it can also not be developed

just everywhere. Securing the learning transfer thus has to be organised systemically, in the learning process with the employees and in regard to a promoting and encouraging behaviour in the company environment.

It becomes clear that work-related basic education is part of a systemic perspective and therefore the people responsible in the company – management, employees' representatives and CEO – have to be made responsible for the relevant decision-making processes. The goal is not only planning an isolated learning unit for low-qualified workers – this would not be sufficient. It is mainly about creating prerequisites in the company on how work-related basic education as 'business training' for these employees can be organised and realised in a way that everybody concerned – employees and business – can profit from it; this also implies the necessary prerequisites for the transfer of what has been learned into changing work action.

Enhancing the learnability of work places

It should be the long-term goal and didactic aspiration of work-related basic education in the company to not only couple them with looking at the learning potentials of the workplaces, but to design workplaces in a way that they become more learning conducive. Baethge / Baethge-Kinsky (2004) have worked out the main criteria. If you have looked into the concept of learning consultation (Kemper/Klein 1998; Klein/Reutter 2005), you will notice the tendential accordance with the leading principles there. According to Baethge / Baethge-Kinsky it is mainly about:

- Creating opportunities and necessities to learn something new while working and developing professionally. One prerequisite for this is that learning in the company is understood to be self-evident and not a sign for deficits.
- Designing working tasks holistically; i.e. working tasks are not specified in every detail and there is the opportunity to make independent decisions when carrying them out.
- Designing work in a way that requires cooperation with others. Intense communication and cooperation enhance the learning competences of the employees.
- Offering opportunities for participation; i.e. many agreements can be made among each other, and considerations and ideas of employees can be taken into consideration during changes; employees are included into main decisions.

What this means for the so-called simple jobs is yet to be developed.

The CEDEFOP Policy handbook "Access to and participation in continuous education and training (CVET) in Europe (CEDEFOP 2014) also emphasises that work-based learning can be promoted in different ways in enterprises:

(a) as part of training provision, for example, CVET courses that use work simulations, or planned and guided on-the-job training;

(b) through learning-conducive work organisations and workplaces, which favour characteristics such as autonomy, teamwork, task variety and task complexity;

(c) a combination of both; this requires comprehensive integration of various forms of learning with wider HR and management practices. (CEDEFOP 2014, pg. 35)

Esther Rossmann of the Kaiserswerth Seminars describes her empirical findings as follows: 'Basic education in companies requires a high level of organisation consulting competence. Dealing with the system and its actors has to be considered stringently. Hierarchic relations, cultural conditions, and informal knowledge have to be examined and to be tested for their influence on the basic education measure. (The top management has to be involved and to actively support the measure; managers have to be enabled to accompany the measure on a team level and to provide resources. Learners have to be involved with their interests; colleagues should be informed and involved.) (Rossmann, 2011, 108 f.)

In her project, Rossmann pointed at an important experience that has to be considered when carrying out measures of basic education. She points out that enhanced competences in the sense of "more abilities" also need growing competences in the sense of "being allowed to do more". This can threaten traditional hierarchic patterns, and matching counter-reactions have to be considered beforehand. The learning individuals have to face an organisation that sees itself as a learning organisation and is therefore able to deal with change. Enhanced competence has to be able to manifest itself in a changing performance if it is supposed to be a useful and beneficial effort. Learners in basic education measures have to be able to experience that their enhanced competences allow for enhanced opportunities of shaping and participating.

Challenges for teachers

The direct orientation on learners' working contexts brings new challenges for the pedagogues. It requires a high level of sensitivity for the action and thinking logics of companies, the understanding for company perspectives and the ability to deal with the company's communication culture which is often very different from pedagogic communication culture. In company contexts, the consulting competence of the pedagogues who are both learning counsellors and organisation consultants is of central importance. Work-related basic education is not just a matter between teachers and learners in the classroom but it is connected to the action logics of the company; it is therefore a project that requires a systemic view and a systemically holistic way of action if it seeks to be successful.

The systemic project will only be sustainable if HR staff and employees manage to design workplaces in a way that they are learning conducive and that the benefits of what has been learned are immediately visible for the employees and for the company.

Conclusion

Experience and research results show that *work-related basic education as a way of qualifying the endogenous potentials is a tedious and rocky road and that partings of way hold high risks of detours and wrong tracks.*

The existing knowledge about the design of work-related basic education cannot just be disseminated broadly. Even though requirements concerning written language have risen in many fields of work, companies do not see the demand for work-related basic education: it just has very low priority.

In order to strengthen work-related basic education in cooperation with enterprises, some preconditions should be laid down:

- sustainable structure to provide advice to companies with successful approaches to companies
- internal multipliers, key-persons, development drivers
- professional trainers who are able to work with and in companies and to develop tailor made work related measures (flexibility, conducive learning settings)

Despite all that: The experiences made so far bring the encouraging insight that basic education measures in companies can reach three, at first sight incompatible, goals: Empowerment in the sense of strengthening individuals, employability and ensuring company success.

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