

A qualitative approach to vocational training and education: What can we learn about “consequential transitions” from ethnography?

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This paper discusses the potential usefulness of an ethnographic approach to study how apprentices build meaning across sites of learning in a dual vocational system involving spending time both in school and in the workplace. Excerpts drawn from ethnographic fieldwork in the vocational field of car-mechanics are analyzed as an exemplar 1) to present procedures and techniques associated with the ethnographic approach, 2) to point to the limitations and ethical issues inherent to it, 3) as well as to illuminate some of the challenges associated with multi-site learning. Detailing how connections are made—or not made—by apprentices between school practices and work practices, it is argued, is informative both for curriculum design as well as for easing the sometimes difficult school-to-work transitions. Regarding curriculum design, the results of the analysis point to the need for developing a reflexive, intermediary space – a “third space” in the dual system – where the challenges and contradictions arising from multi-site learning can be discussed, processed and made sense of. The discussion also suggests that this “third space” could in turn serve as an alerting device to identify individuals at risk of dropping out of the system and to devise corrective actions to address the dropping out process.