

Organizational Positionings of the German Volkshochschulen to support the integration of refugees

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Abstract

The German “Volkshochschulen” play a central role in terms of the initial linguistic orientation of refugees. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the public refugee discourse media and policy focus their attention on the Volkshochschulen. We focus how the Volkshochschulen position themselves in the refugee discourse and which organizational strategies they use to support the integration of refugees? We analyze the prefaces of program booklets of representative-selected Volkshochschulen. Our findings show the self-positions are located between the poles of discourse reproduction and production. We can also point out that the published organizational strategies take place between active and reactive responses.

Key words: Discourse Analyses, Organization, Refugees; Germany, Qualitative Research

A. Introduction and Research Questions

The current refugee situation challenges the German society in general, as well as the institutions of General Adult Education in particular (Egetenmeyer 2015). The “Volkshochschulen” in Germany received a lot of public attention recently. As the most significant adult education centers in Germany and established cooperation partner of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, the Volkshochschulen play a major role in providing initial linguistic orientation courses for refugees. Due to the increasing rate of incoming refugees in 2015 the institutions have to face capacity issues. Therefore, the German Adult Education Association is calling for an "educational offensive for refugees" in order to strengthen community colleges as communal integration centers (DVV 2015). An

exemplary analysis shows the rising attention towards the Volkshochschulen in media and policy: In the period from June 2014 to June 2015 a query in google-news under use of the keywords “Volkshochschule” and “Integration” resulted 1.310 hits. One year later, the same keywords result over 2.900 hits.

Compared to this huge public interest the research discourse on the current situation of the Volkshochschule is rather underdeveloped. According to this research gap we focus the following two research questions:

1. How do the Volkshochschulen react concerning the huge demand for courses for refugees? How do they position themselves in the refugee discourse?
2. Which are their organizational-strategies to support the integration of refugees that can be seen?

To answer these research questions, we analyzed the prefaces of program booklets of 50 Volkshochschulen in Germany.

B. Data and Analyses Methods

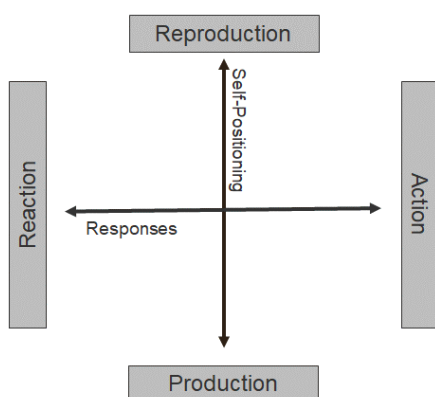
In our Analyses, we focus on prefaces of program booklets as Data Material. Prefaces of program booklets are a type of organizational self-descriptions. Their function is providing information about course announcements and to integrate these into a wider range of their own educational goals or actual social developments. Especially in the case of social or organizational changes, like the refugee situation, they are used to inform participants. In contrast to organizational mission statements, the organizations are able to response to current challenges within prefaces. In a system theory perspective (Luhmann 2000) self-descriptions are descriptions of the organization that used to distinct the organizational system from the environment. They have the function to maintain the self-image of the system and represent the organizational culture. Under the perspective of the New Institutionalism (DiMaggio/Powell 1991) organizations are reliant of the recognition by their organizational fields. The organizations have to use semantics, which are compatible and appreciated in the society. Against that background prefaces of program booklets are well-suited data to analyze our research questions.

To analyze the prefaces we used a combination of the method of *thematic discourse analyses* (Höhne 2004) and of the *documentary method* (Bohnsack 2003). First, we identify the prefaces of program booklets, which explicit refer to the current refugee situations in Germany. Afterwards we decided to analyze only prefaces, which were written by organizational members. The analyses each of these prefaces was conducted line-by-line, before a comparative analyses was included.

C. Findings

Our findings show that seventeen of fifty prefaces deal with the refugee situation, explicitly. By using comparative elements in our analyses, we were able to distinguish two general patterns concerning the statements towards the refugee situation. The pattern of *Self-Positionings* includes statements about the roles and tasks of the Volkshochschulen as an Adult Education Organization in the current situation. In contrast the pattern of *Responses* focusses on concrete measures to support the integration of refugees (for instance by providing integration courses).

The patterns of Self-Positioning and Response are both discursively constructed as a continuum between two oppositional argumentations.



(Figure 1: Organizational Self-Positioning in and Responses of the refugee situation)

Self-Positionings are located between the arguments of discourse reproduction and production. Discourse reproduction means that the need for the initial linguistic orientation courses is replicated, while discourse production means that further suggestions for the integration of refugees are described. In summary, the majority of the Volkshochschulen reproduce the public discourse, because they emphasize the welcome culture on the one hand and highlight the great challenge for society on the other hand. Only in a few prefaces, a production of the discourse becomes obvious, for instance when necessity of vocational trainings for the refugees is focused.

We can also point out that the published organizational strategies for dealing with the refugee situation take place between reactive and active responses. Characteristics of reactive responses are that these Volkshochschulen describe in the prefaces that they offer more courses for refugees. These organizations do not treat the refugee situation as a central topic in their prefaces. They outline themselves as still reliable partners for their German participants. In contrast, the active responses are characterized by descriptions of developing new training-measures for refugees or entering into new cooperation with schools, voluntary institutions or refugee organizations to support integration. In this prefaces the refugee situation is the main topic. These organizations present themselves as a key stakeholder for managing the refugee situation.

D. Discussion & Perspective for following researches

In summary, we distinguished two types of organizational statements: reactive-reproducing statements vs. active-producing statements. Both are used to maintain organizational self-image inside the organization and to communicate to organizational field (Schäffter 2003). The type reactive-reproducing can be understood as a promise of business continuity to the regular participants. These Volkshochschulen represent reliability, availability and stability in times of social change. The Volkshochschulen that use the active-producing type present themselves as role model and a key stakeholder to solve the current refugee situation. They create a new myth of their function in integration refugees.

Future studies should analyze self-descriptions of other adult education organizations in Europe to compare their findings with our findings. Furthermore, it would be helpful to have longitudinal incisions to research changes and continuities in self-descriptions of the

Volkshochschulen. Last, but not least we need program analysis to find out, which courses for refugees are offered by organizations of adult education in general and by the Volkshochschulen in particular.

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