Chapter 9
Guidance as an Interactional Accomplishment
Practice-based Learning within the Swiss VET System

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Abstract This chapter analyses how apprentices in the Swiss VET system receive practical instruction within training companies and how they are being supported and guided by experts in the workplace. It does so by paying special attention to verbal and nonverbal interaction between experts and apprentices, exploring the hypothesis that a fine-grained analysis focused on language-in-interaction could profitably inform the conditions in which learning arises from a practice-based training model. The chapter commences with a brief overview of the main issues and problems challenging initial vocational education in Switzerland. It then identifies and illustrates four distinct interactional configurations through which guidance progresses in the workplace: as spontaneously provided, explicitly requested, collectively distributed, or implicitly denied. This empirical and interactional approach, based on audio-video data analysis, contributes to a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of a practice-based training model as it is implemented in the Swiss apprenticeship system.

9.1 Introduction

Switzerland, like other European countries, has a long-standing tradition of initial vocational education and training (VET) based on apprenticeship and workplace learning. Consistent with other VET systems, Swiss apprentices spend most of their initial training in companies, where they experience real work-related tasks and are given practical instruction by progressively entering professional communities of practice through their workplace activities. From an economic perspective, this model seems to have proven its efficiency. It provides a renewed skilled workforce and encourages progressive transitions by young workers into employment after their completion of compulsory education. Nevertheless, recent research depicts a more complex portrait of the system and shows that transitions from school to employment are far from smooth and unproblematic (Stalder & Nägele, 2009; Lamamra & Masdonati, 2009). For example, one third of Swiss apprentices aiming at a federal VET diploma break their contract before completion and a substantial number of them fail at their intermediary or final exams.
Given these circumstances, it becomes vital to reflect on the conditions under which apprentices learn from their engagement in practice. This reflection needs to address both theoretical and empirical issues. At a theoretical level, it requires conceptualising in detail the complex relations that link work and vocational training (Billett, 2008; Durand & Filliettaz, 2009). At an empirical level, it calls for a better understanding of the real circumstances in which apprentices are being guided and supported once they enter the workplace. This chapter proposes to address these issues by applying and developing innovative research methods. It analyses how newcomers in the Swiss VET system receive practical instruction within training companies and how they are being supported and guided by experts in the workplace. It does so by paying special attention to verbal and nonverbal interaction between experts and apprentices, exploring the hypothesis that a fine-grained analysis focused on language-in-interaction could profitably inform the conditions in which learning arises from a practice-based training model.

To address these issues, the chapter commences with a brief overview of the main issues and problems challenging initial vocational education in Switzerland. It then outlines a research programme\(^\text{13}\) that aims at a better understanding of the training and learning opportunities afforded by practical experience in various technical occupations. Particular attention is then paid to the ways trainers provide guidance to apprentices in the workplace. The empirical and interactional approach, based on concepts and methods borrowed from various perspectives in the field of linguistics, contributes to a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of a practice-based training model. It underlines the importance of cooperation and coordination between trainers and apprentices in the process of learning at work, and argues for an enhanced preparation for trainers who have responsibilities to assist apprentices in the transition to an effective working role through their participation in the workplace.

### 9.2 Apprenticeship in the Swiss VET System

Organised as a multilingual and multicultural Confederation of 26 cantons, Switzerland has developed a rather complex and heterogeneous educational system.\(^\text{14}\) The VET system, for instance, is regulated both at federal and canton levels and comprises a combination of shared principles and a number of regional specificities. Amongst the various elements that enter into the organisation of VET in Switzerland, the provision of opportunities for practice undoubtedly plays a

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\(^{14}\) For a detailed presentation of the Swiss VET system, see Stalder and Nägele (2009), Dubs (2006), or Gonon (2005).