Les Compagnons Du Devoir: the emergent lessons for HRD

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Introduction

This paper presents a case study of a uniquely French institution, Les Compagnons du Devoir (CdD). It describes its history and functioning and presents it as an organization which is very successful in managing human resource development (HRD). The methodology used in writing the case is described. The paper then focuses on five reasons why it is successful. These are the:

- volume of off-the-job learning;
- central role of peer and near-peer mentoring;
- use of working and retired Compagnons\(^1\) in the training of younger members;
- importance of movement and change in learning;

We take as a starting point Swanson’s definition of HRD which sees it as a process of developing human expertise through personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance a term which embraces organization and work processes at group and individual levels. Training and development is seen as a systematic process for developing expertise in individuals. The three critical application areas are: human resource management, career development and quality management. Swanson sees psychology, economics and systems theory as the unique theoretical foundation of HRD (Swanson, 2001).

This case helps address two gaps in the literature. First, it is about a French approach to HRD. Thus it offers an alternative view of HRD to the Anglo-Saxon (specifically North American one) which dominates the literature (McLean and McLean, 2001). Secondly, it a case study of HRD for the younger worker, a group excluded in some definitions of the subject (see, for example McLean and McLean (2001, p.322) which see HRD as being uniquely concerned with adults. Lee (2001, p.336) points out that this definition excludes children. It also excludes young people who are entering the work for the first time, a group which attracts a significant HRD effort in all advanced industrial countries, yet remains on the margins of the disciplines HRD and HR.

Methodology

The four authors are members of the Conseil Scientifique de l’International Journeyman Programme. The International Journeyman Programme (IJP) is a project set up to offer high-skills training in construction and engineering to young people from the north of England by passing them through the CdD training system. The origins and early history of the

\(^1\) A Compagnon is a fully qualified member of Les Compagnons du Devoir.
Programme are reported elsewhere (Malloch and Redman, 2005). In brief, it consisted of a recruitment and selection procedure in the UK; induction training followed by a three-week sample of life in a Maison², and work in a French engineering factory. At the end of this trial period some youngsters could be offered employment in France and training by the CdD.

The Conseil Scientifique advises the IJP Steering Group on present and future policies. In this capacity the authors have had unrestricted access to the main participants in the UK and in France, including managers and trainers in factories in France, and the UK apprentices passing through the system. The research draws on over 70 interviews, visits to French factories, and to the Houses of the CdD.

Les Compagnons du Devoir

When we asked a UK Apprenti³ to describe the CdD he replied in these terms:

“You can’t really describe what the Compagnons are about to people who don’t know about them. The impression even here in France is the Compagnons are some kind of sect. – like you get branded when you enter … it’s a place where you learn a trade; that’s at its lowest level. But you can’t really explain what it is; it’s like a school in one aspect; but it’s also like a family. It’s lots of different things. There is no one way to describe the Compagnons. It will probably be the biggest experience of your life. If you join the Compagnons it will probably be something which will stay with you the rest of your life even if you only do a year or two and finish at that”. (Darren, UK Apprenti, Dijon House).

The CdD is best described as a French trade guild offering high-skill vocational and educational training (VET), rich in culture and humanity, in 22 trades in the engineering, construction, baking and confectionery. The forming of guilds in building trades such as stonemasons or carpenters can be traced back to the 12th century, and the building of the first cathedrals in Europe. Early on, and linked to the need for workers to travel from site to site across Europe, to pass on codified knowledge, and to find shelter and support at every new site, the guilds developed their own traditions, rites of initiation and passage, signs that were often kept secret from outsiders and ensured mutual recognition. They also developed a network of maisons throughout France to accommodate their members in these itinerant trades.

Their history is vague, but the first recorded mention of the word ‘Compagnons’ in the sense of a group of workers travelling from site to site across France, passing on their knowledge and learning from the locals dates from 1420. This makes the Compagnonnage the oldest workers’ movement in Europe. Between the 17th and the early 20th centuries, the Compagnonnage came under severe criticism from the Church who viewed with suspicion the secretive practices and initiation rites of the Compagnons. This and the fact that the Compagnons were gaining unwelcome political clout in some cities led some local potentates to ban the Compagnons from entering certain cities or working in certain regions. This led to a weakening of the Compagnonnage and an eventual break-up into three distinct associations. Today, the CdD is the largest of these.

² Maison is a place of residence and study owned by the CdD; the words maison and House are used interchangeably.
³ Apprenti is a term used to describe an apprentice in the first two years of a French apprenticeship.
In 2003 the CdD has about 10,000 young people in training at any one time making it a medium-sized player in French VET, standing apart from the mainstream of French VET which is conducted in lycées professionnelles and Centres de Formation d’Apprenti run by the state and Chambres de Commerces. The CdD is owned and managed by its members. It is a ‘closed’ organization and rooted in French culture, factors have made it difficult to access for Anglo-Saxon researchers. One exception is John Herzog, a former Professor of Education at North-Western University in the USA. Herzog, together with his wife, has written several papers on the CdD (Herzog, 2001; Herzog and Herzog, 1999b; Herzog and Herzog, 1998), but few are in the public domain and they are not addressed to an HRD audience. One of the great strengths of Herzog’s work is that he brings an anthropologist’s eye to bear on the Compagnons. Modern French accounts of the CdD (Iché, 1999; Iché, 1994) tend to be written from an historic rather than an organization or managerial perspective. Apart from the work of the Herzogs, and fragmentary pieces in the popular business press (Resch, 1998) there is little written about them in the English language.

This omission is a great loss to the student of HRD since the Compagnonnage is a system which is not only durable and produces a formation (the French word commonly translated as ‘training’, but formation of the whole person as it is understood in English more accurately describes what the CdD do) which, even by French standards, is high in skills, rich in knowledge and profound in its humanity.

The CdD as an HRD system: the tangible elements

Grades of membership

The CdD has three grades of member: These are: Apprenti, Aspirant and Compagnon. Apprentis enter at age of 16; a few enter later. Apprentis complete a training which lasts up to three years. On successful completion of their training they can become an Aspirant, and undertake the Tour de France; this is a period of work, study and training in different parts of France or other countries. Aspirants graduate to full Compagnon status after which they may serve the CdD for a further three years. Progression to a higher grade of membership depends upon certification of competence through trade tests controlled by the CdD.

The House

At the heart of the life of the CdD is the House, a place of residence and training in towns throughout France. Apprentis and Aspirants stay here working for local employers, or following courses offered in the CFA attached to the House. By night Apprentis and Aspirants sleep and eat together at the House. In the evenings they study or work on their test pieces in the House’s extensively equipped workshop. Every Compagnon has a responsibility to help the younger members. Young Apprentis share rooms with older members. An important part of every House are the Anciens; those Compagnons who live near the House and work in local firm.

Education and training

Education and training runs on an eight-week cycle; six weeks of work followed by two weeks’ study in the CFA. The CFAs offer theoretical training and common courses in

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4 Lycées professionnelles are secondary technical schools.
5 Centre de Formation Apprenti are technical colleges providing VET for young people in employment.
English, History, Art, Languages, Science, French and Maths. Apprentis take public examinations, but their reputation rests on their certification of competence by the CdD. Most teaching in the CFAs is conducted by Compagnons who work themselves. Grade of membership is linked to certification of trade skills assessed by trade tests controlled by the CdD. The two main trade tests are le travail d’adoption, which marks the transition from Apprenti to Aspirant; and le travail de reception successful completion of which leads to full Compagnon status.

Figure 1: The Assessment and Certification of Competence for a Compagnon

The workplace

During the day Apprentis work in local firms. It is not essential for the CdD to have any formal links with these enterprises. Many are owned and/or managed by Compagnons, but many are not. All workplaces agree to supply a craftsman to oversee the Apprentis on-the-job training. Liaison between the workplace and the House is by a carnet de progrès, a record of the Apprentis training, both on and off-the-job which follows him on his travels. Apprentis work for six weeks at the end of which they return to the House for two weeks formal training in the CFA.

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6 Prévôt is working is some general management post such as running a House.
7 Maître de Stage is in charge of the training of a specific trade group in a House.
The non-tangible elements of the CdD: *le devoir* and *le metier*

The CdD has a strong sense of mission which crystallises into two related concepts: *le devoir* and *le metier*. *Le devoir* is a complex, polyvalent concept which reaches to the heart of what it means to be a Compagnon. ‘Devoir’ means both ‘duty’, ‘work’ and ‘craft’; for a non-Compagnon these three meanings are separate, but for the Compagnon they are indissolubly linked. They define both the Compagnonnage, and the Compagnons as individuals. It gives meaning to the Compagnons’ roles as professionals, family men and citizens in the wider community. Icher (1999) defines it in the following terms:

“Today, as yesterday, devoir, can be conceived as a sacred value by the Compagnons upon whom it bestows an essential identity giving dimensions which eclipses the narrower domains of métier and work.” (p.444).

Icher quotes Jean Bernard, the editor of the journal of *Le Compagnonnage*, writing in 1943, a time of great crisis for the Compagnons, when their very existence was threatened by the German occupier of France:

“Le devoir envelops the entire Compagnonnage with its spirit. It is the very expression of its entirety which flows directly from the conscience of Man at work, especially manual work. It is the way in which in one must live and enact the metier, regardless of age or status. From this we can see that le devoir is a very far-reaching context which governs even the most detailed aspects of practice. Indeed le devoir envelopes the whole life of the Compagnon” (1999, p.443).

*Le metier* is a closely related idea. Very loosely it means ‘craft’ or ‘trade’ and the Compagnons have an obligation to *transmettre le métier* - to develop, improve and diffuse the trade and the notions of humanity and culture which, in the Compagnons view, must be part and parcel of the practice of their work. The aims of the CdD are summarised by (Icher, 1999) who writes:

‘… the Compagnonnage has always placed the craft at the centre of its concerns and values. Yet it is necessary to define that word which, for the compagnons, cannot and must not be confused with words like ‘profession’, ‘work’, ‘occupation’; and even less with other words which have no place in the compagnons’ vocabulary such as ‘job’ or ‘career’. ‘Craft’ can be defined in several ways; but first and foremost it is an encounter between man and work, but that meeting does not take place in isolation. We are at the heart of a Compagnonnage system which has as its … aim the transmission of its heritage. For the compagnons the essential part of that inheritance is the heritage and culture of the craft … always work better, teach the craft and help your fellow craftsman” (pp. 440-441).

The CdD is best viewed a social system for raising and spreading knowledge and standards. As part of this mission it offers a training which is liberal and wide-ranging. It seeks to develop the whole man, including his humanity and cultural adaptability. His technical skills are only one element in a much larger collection of abilities which rest on a conception of a worker as a citizen in a community rather than as factor of production to be bought and sold in a market place. For the CdD a good worker is more than excellent technical skills; it is as much concerned with developing a good attitude, awareness and spirit. One member of the CdD explained:

“The Compagnons is not like a firm. We do it for the idea of people growing up with us, of taking up the trade and keeping it alive. … The first thing you have to do as a
firm is to sell, to make money. We don’t have to make anything. Every Compagnon gives a bit of himself.”

*Le devoir*, the motive force and the *raison d'être* of the CdD is a tacit, but very powerful expression of the honour principle, a concept best described as a sense of duty emanating from membership of a certain caste which can find expression both in the workplace and in citizenship at large. It has important consequences for definitions of ‘job’, ‘career’, ‘skill’ and ‘motivation to work’. For d’Iribane (1994) the honour principle makes itself manifest in ideals such as ‘lover of the craft’, ‘skill involved’, and ‘nobility of work’ (p.90). D’Iribane expands on this idea in his analysis of Crozier’s (1963) reporting of his interviews with employees in French public sector organizations:

“These words give expression to the conflict between the nobility of work done out of love of the craft or skill involved and the lack of nobility of a job done for purely utilitarian purposes. This desire ‘to care about the work’ out of love for the skill involved rather than for the ‘result’ required by the hierarchy is associated with ‘conscientiousness’ and ‘professional pride’, terms whose use by the interviewers elicits enthusiastic approval from interviewees and sometimes ‘a great deal of warmth and emotion’ … This combination of group norms, desire to care about work out of love of the skill involved and professional pride matches the form of sense of duty that characterises the honour principle” (p.82).

The institution of *transmettre le métier* is driven by the honour principle which, in turn, can be understood to be deeply embedded in French culture. Notions of *le devoir* and *transmettre le métier* were encountered many times during the course of our fieldwork in our meetings with Compagnons and non-Compagnons alike. For many of the UK Apprentis passing through the Houses and factories in France it was the most noticeable aspect of French working life. One commented:

“It is different in France. They are mechanical engineers and metal-workers; that’s what they want to do and that’s what they are. They say ‘I love my job, I love getting up in the morning’; it’s just like a hobby for them, they don’t do it for the money. It’s strange; it’s weird when you first go there.”

In 2003 the CdD had nearly 8000 young people at some stage of training and professional development: these were 6000 Apprentis, 1700 Aspirants, and 700 Compagnons working as trainers, administrators and Prévôts in Houses, Head Office and in CFAs. It underwent a crisis of recruitment and retention in the 1980s, but since the mid-1990s it has experienced a steady growth in membership.

There is some evidence that the CdD training is a good preparation for future professional development. According to one survey (Icher, 1999: 553)) on completing training only about half work as tradesmen. Nearly thirty per cent move in to management and about ten per cent remain as Prévôts in the CdD system. Others enter professions such as architecture, engineering or teaching. Herzog argues that the CdD Apprentis qualify for the BPS faster and in greater proportions than their peers in mainstream programmes and that this pattern of success is replicated for Aspirants. He further argues that virtually all youths who successfully graduate from the CdD find jobs despite historically high levels of unemployment in France.(Herzog, 2001, p.3). For him the CdD offers a powerful system which develops human resources who would otherwise be the *refusés* of the collèges and lycées into ‘better craftsmen, businessmen and citizens’ with ‘well developed ideas about
professional ethics and family and civic life’ accompanied ‘by social skills in advance of their years and often of their individual social class origins’. (Herzog, 2001, p.3).

Analysis of reasons for success

Volume of off-the job learning

The pattern of alternance\(^8\) prescribed for an Apprenti was based on an eight-week cycle of two weeks of stage (full-time study in the classrooms and workshops of the House), followed by six weeks of work. In the stage phase they would be required to attend workshops and classes for 50-55 hours each week. During the work phase of the alternance cycle the Apprenti was expected to attend evening classes in the House for two hours for five evenings a week, followed by classes on Saturday morning. Attendance at these classes was compulsory and enforced. The UK Apprentis all commented on how they would be asked to account for themselves if found outside a class during scheduled work periods. One recounted how attendance at Saturday morning classes was encouraged by two Compagnons who overturned any bed they found occupied after 07h30. During the work phase of the alternance the UK Apprentis reported a minimum weekly average of 14 hours devoted to classes, workshop practice and private study. Often this was supplemented by voluntary study on Saturday afternoon and Sundays. Therefore over an eight-week alternance cycle they receive a minimum average of over 23 hours class and workshop time each week.

It is difficult to establish international comparison for this volume of off-the-job learning owing to differences in national VET provision. Perhaps the most eloquent testimony as to its meaning came from the Apprentis themselves.

“Dinner is at 19h00; everyone eats together; it’s a bit formal with collars and ties expected. At 20h00 everyone is in the workshop doing homework, which can be a practical piece or theoretical exercises; or in a class following a course. This goes on every night, except Saturday and Sunday, until 22h00. You’re also in classes on Saturday mornings between 08h00-12h00. Some Apprentis go out on a Friday night when class is finished, but a lot of them are too knackered. Saturday afternoon and Sunday is free time, but people don’t have a lot of money to spend” (Matt, UK Apprenti, Lille and Muizon Houses).

Another commented:

“Over here it is one hundred per cent work. If you are not up for the work, then it is pointless coming out here. My normal day would be to wake up at 06h00, get up, get washed, and get to work for 07h 00, start work at 07h 15; finish at 16h 30; have a rest, have a meal at 19h 00 and then lessons from 20h 00 to 22h 00. Then go to sleep at 23h00 to 23h30. And it’s the same day in, day our. It’s 13 hours non-stop work”. (Ben, UK Apprenti, Colomiers house).

Later Ben commented:

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\(^8\) Alternance is the pattern of work and study followed by the Apprentis and Aspirants.
“I admit that for the first month I thought that I am not up to working this many hours, but after a while I thought that this is something special, it’s a big tradition and that if you are up for the challenge then it is very rewarding one”.

There are two striking elements about this regime. The first is the extent to which it was enforced, partly by direct supervision and partly by economics. The Apprentis were paid about fifty per cent of the French minimum wage; after deductions for board and lodging there was little cash left to pay for leisure activities. These constraints combined with a rigorous work schedule meant that there were few distractions from the classroom, book or workbench. Second, the Apprentis actually welcomed this regime: words like ‘special’, ‘challenge’, ‘rewarding’ litter the interview transcripts. The regime was seen as demanding, but not punishing. This can be seen by their willingness to work extra hours to those demanded.

This evidence draws attention to the importance of the volume of the HRD experience which is perhaps overshadowed at times by attention by a preoccupation with process. A second reason for the success of the system can be found in the wide range of HRD support offered to the learner. Amongst the many pillars supporting the learner were the near-peer and peer mentoring systems and the use of working (ancien) and retired (sédentaire) members.

Near-peer and peer mentoring

One of the most interesting aspects of the Apprentis’ accounts is the extent to which the CdD relied on what has been identified as ‘near-peer mentoring’ (Herzog and Herzog, 1999a; Herzog, 2001; Herzog and Herzog, 1998). The term refers to the practice of the CdD of appointing newly-graduated Compagnions, or those with no more than two or three years post Compagnon work experience to key positions of responsibility. The Herzogs (1998, 1999a and 2001) analyse the relationship between the Apprenti and the Aspirant on the one hand; and their Mâitre de Stage as that of ‘near-peer’ mentoring. Appointments to these posts were thus reserved to Compagnons who were not much older than the learners they were guiding. This was a planned and deliberate strategy on the part of the CdD and its use seems to have been extended in recent years to include the Prévot responsible for running the House. The Herzogs observe that these near peers present themselves as positive role-models with whom Apprentis and Aspirants could form intense personal relationships (1998, p.6).

We found many examples to support this view of a relationship between learner and mentor which was so strong it could transcend language barriers. One UK Apprenti described how his Mâitre de Stage engaged with him in the absence of a common language:

“He works here full time and lives in a flat on the premises. There are lessons every week and he teaches drawing and technology? What’s he like? Cool and friendly. It’s a weird relationship; I tend to use hand gestures quite a lot and somehow we understand each other – not always. If I was stuck with a piece of work, I would understand what he would be saying. For example he would make a drawing of a job and as he spoke I would understand some of the words and I would remember them next time. One example is a piece I had to do a square and I was not sure how to calculate the angles on the plate metal. He said I will not show you how to do it for a square; I’ll show you how to do it for a different angle. I remembered what he had said and then used the same process with the angle I was trying to get and it seemed OK. I followed that.” (Ben, UK Apprenti, Colomiers House).
In other transcripts the Mâitre emerges as someone who encourages Apprentis to progress to Aspirant; liaising with the Anciens, Prévots and the workplace on the formation of his charges; physically helping the youngsters in his charge to finish work tasks; and acting as a diplomat to resolve the interpersonal difficulties which inevitably occur in any community of more than hundred young people. In so doing they enact some key messages of le métier and le devoir and render visible some central planks of the philosophy of the Compagnons namely mutual support, striving for success, fraternity and achievement of goals. Ben described one apparently small and apparently insignificant incident, but which was revealing to us, particularly when taken in conjunction with the lesson Ben took from the incident:

“There are two lads, Michel and Simon who are working on their travail d’adoption and are pretty close to finishing it. This is taken seriously. Does anyone ever fail? Not that I know of. With the amount of hours that you do and the amount of help that you get, it’s almost impossible to fail. The other night, Simon was stuck and the Mâtre de Stage helped him out a bit; he cut some metal and did some drilling for him. If you need help, you can get help. It is not a one man job, you know”. (Ben, UK Apprenti, Colomiers House)

The principle of near-peer mentoring extended beyond the hierarchy of the Mâitre and the Apprenti. We noted examples of the phenomena in the relationships between the Aspirants and the Apprenti and frequently it crossed trade boundaries. An earlier study noted that the Compagnons were not only highly skilled within their discipline, but multi-skilled: they could work in related trades (Malloch and Redman, 2005). Many of these polyvalent skills came from what Apprentis and Aspirants in different trades taught each other in the ordinary course of living and studying together. All the UK Apprentis in our study were chaudronnières,9 but they had been taught how to mix cement by a stone-mason, heat metal by a wrought-iron metal worker and tap holes by a fitter.

These mentoring processes extended beyond the acquisition of technical skills; they embraced acculturation and socialisations. Manners and convention were important parts of life in the House and in France. These were imparted by the older members to the younger ones. One UK Apprenti described dinners; these were semi-formal occasions with dress-codes and rituals.

“Everyone has to shake hands with everyone else at the table; collars and ties were expected. The Aspirants are more formal; they try and teach the younger ones. You watched what they did. You’ve just got to try and follow them.”

At times it was difficult for us to maintain a distinction between near-peer and peer mentoring. Neither could it be seen as a unique feature of life in the CdD. There were many examples of such mentoring to be found in the Apprentis’ accounts of life and work in the French factory. This leads us to conclude that it a general characteristic of French culture, rooted in the honour principle. It exists in an intense form in the CdD where the philosophy of transmettre le métier and le devoir lay upon all a general obligation to improve upon the trade and to pass it on to all who need it and could benefit from it.

The concept of near-peer mentoring is theoretically significant to the HRD student because there is little literature on near-peer or peer mentoring. For many the notion of ‘peer’ and

9 A chaudronnier is a sheet-metal worker.
‘mentoring’ are incompatible. For Fagenson (1993) a mentor is ‘an experienced, influential member of the organization’ a definition which would appear specifically to exclude peers, especially at lower levels of the organization. Kram and Isabella (1985) clearly distinguish between ‘conventionally defined mentors’ and peer relationships. For them the distinguishing features of mentoring are:

- There are ‘significant differences in age and hierarchical level’ between the mentor and the mentee (p.129). This is not the case in the CdD;
- That it is a ‘one-way helping dynamic’. In the CdD le devoir lays a general obligation on everyone to help all members of the community.
- Peer relationships last longer than that of the mentor and mentee. But the relationships between the Mâitre and the Apprenti can be long lasting and intense, placing the Mâitre much closer to the ‘Meister’, ‘Hoça’ or ‘Sensei’ than to the mentor.

The CdD experience shows that the definitions and relevance of distinctions between peer and mentors can only be interpreted in the light of the particular institutional context. The CdD is, in one sense, a cause devoted to the ideal of transmettre le métier and le devoir. This ideal was accepted and internalised by all members. As was pointed out to us on several occasions by the Compagnons, they did not have to make a profit. They were an organization with a moral objective and which elicited normative involvement from its members. Seen in this light distinctions between ‘mentoring’, ‘near-peer mentoring’ and ‘peer mentoring’ are neither useful nor relevant. Mentoring can come from anywhere in the organization or outside it as long as it is consistent with the CdD’s mission.

The relationship between the Mâitre and his charges has some parallels with what is known in Japan as the ‘Sempai-Kohai’ relationship, a term which can be roughly translated into ‘older peer’ and ‘younger peer’ (Journal of Japanese Cultural Arts, 2003). Both the Sempai and the Kohai will very quickly assume their respective roles: the Sempai that of an older brother, a near-peer tutor, an informal guide and interpreter. The Kohai’s role is that of younger brother, who owes a very subtle form of respect to his Sempai, and is supposed to learn from him. Both are bound together by a certain loyalty. Japanese culture is based on tate shakai, or ‘vertical (or class) society.’ This is a system that Westerners might compare to the relationship between a parent and child. In Japan it influences relationships between employer and employee, and teacher and student, in fact most relationships in Japan. In its ideal form it is a system of mutual service and duty, patronage and respect, alternating from one level to the other and back again.

Sempai-Kohai relationships can be found in families, groups of friends, schoolchildren, and, significantly for the present study, in Japanese corporate life. Newly hired young graduates are assigned a Sempai, typically a junior manager who has been hired a year or two before. The Sempai will smoothen his Kohai’s socialisation process, act as a role model, and provide psychological support; there are many overlaps here with the mentor’s role as defined by Fagenson (1993).

A survey of the literature on mentoring reveals two points of interest for this study. First, peer mentoring has mostly been examined from a very utilitarian viewpoint, focusing on the cost-benefit relationship of mentoring relationships, and especially social exchange theory (for example, see Ensher et al., 2001). Second, the literature on peer mentoring suggests that it is particular interest to HRD in health care, especially nursing (Davidhizar, 1995; Ensher et
This conjunction of Sempai-Kohai relationship in Japanese organizations, nursing and the CdD raises the question of what these three institutions could have in common. We would suggest that all are highly institutionalised; that is, highly codified and complex organizations in the case of Japanese organizations and hospitals; and with a strong professional role marked by le devoir and le métier, in the case of the CdD and nursing. All possess many rituals and are marked by explicit and implicit behaviour codes. All three rely heavily on tacit knowledge. These requirements seem to be met in part by forms of near-peer mentoring. This analysis suggests that an understanding of their work transcends utilitarian considerations.

**Use of Anciens and Sédentaires**

*Anciens* and *Sédentaires* emerge as key figures in the formation of the *Apprenti* and *Aspirant*. This was partly through the provision of pastoral support.

An Ancien Compagnon is someone who is in the same trade as you; he’s been through the whole system, done his Tour de France and he is still involved with the House. … Most of them are married and have children, but they still come to the House and talk to you about how things are going. They have meetings about the *Corporation* – your trade group – that live in the House. Some evenings you will go to their House and have a meal and have a drink. These are people you can ask anything you need. Normally you would ask them if you want to do your Travail d’Adoption. You have to ask them and if they say that you can then you go ahead. (Matt, UK *Apprenti*, Lille and Muizon Houses).

They were an additional learning resource available to the young learners in the House and took an active role in preparing the *Aspirant* for his travail de réception. In the quotation below the Ancien, like the Maitre de Stage, gives living expression to key elements of the CdD mission such as mutual support, co-operation and nurturing.

“They are the guys who set the work for the *Aspirants* travail de réception. If you are an *Aspirant* in your second year, every year they are given work to do and the Anciens will come and have a look at what you have been doing, to see if you have been doing it correctly or if you have been doing it off-form. My Ancien used to come in sometimes on a Saturday when you were working in the House workshop. He would just pop around to see who is in the workshop and who is in the classroom and he would have a look at the inter-stage that I had to do. He would give a helping hand if I was struggling. He helped me make a copper piece. I did not really know what I wanted to do. He helped me weld it as well, because copper is hard to weld. He welded it for me.” (Matt, UK *Apprenti*, Lille and Muizon Houses).

In conjunction with the Maitre de Stage the Ancien also played an active part in assessing the progress of the *Apprenti* in formal meetings. One UK *Apprenti* described the process

“The Ancien arrives and talks to the Maitre de Stage. He will tell the Apprentices to leave and they will discuss the Apprentices in private. … They bring in the Apprentis one by one and discuss the topics they discussed with the Maitre de Stage, saying you
are doing well here and not so well there. Then all the group will come in for a question and answer session – what do you want to know, what do you want to do, where do you see your life going. The afterwards there is an aperitif”. (Darren, UK Apprenti, Dijon House)

Sédentaires are retired Anciens who live in the vicinity of the House. They are closely in the assessment process. When an Aspirant decides to apply for acceptance as a Compagnon he must make a chef d’oeuvre for his travail de reception. A sédentaire guides him through the process. A travail de reception is more than carving an art-deco door or constructing a section of roofing in a particular style of tiling. The Aspirant must also prepare a report detailing the history of his chosen design, and justifying his choice of materials. This is an addition to a detailed plan of the chef d’oeuvre. His sédentaire is consulted at every step. When the design is finalised, the Aspirant makes a large-scale model of his chef d’oeuvre, which must be approved by the sédentaire. This yet another example both of the extent of the support offered to the learner in this system; and of the safeguards against failure, a rare event in CdD. As one CdD member explained:

"You cannot not do the job; everybody performs. All our time is spend talking about the job. Girl-friends complain that we only speak about the job."

**Importance of movement and change**

A key feature of the system of training and development is the Tour de France. This is undertaken by Aspirants wishing to become a Compagnon. The assumption is that Aspirants can only become Compagnons by being exposed to, and learning from, different firm, industry and geographical contexts. The Prévot responsible for the CdD's UK operations explained:

“… on the Tour, they encounter different skills, techniques, people, culture, food and character. Some are easy to acquire; others are hard. You discover who you are and what you must become. From each place we take the good and leave the bad. The important thing about the Tour is to learn well. Travel teaches one that the craft varies. In Paris roofers use zinc; in Burgundy it is clay tiles; in Nantes, slate is the preferred material. In the Pyrénées it is slate, but a different sort. The techniques vary with the material. You might say that engineering is not like this, that it is all the same material. But other things differ. In engineering there are different methods of organization; there are different attitudes, tools and procedures. In all regions there are generalities, but in each locale there are particularities. Accept the good and leave the bad and you will become very versatile.”

The Tour de France was the most spectacular example of spatial flexibility as a strategy for inducing HRD. Twice a year, in a process known as le changement de ville, each Aspirant was required to change towns, Houses and employers. He had to find his place in a new community and integrate himself into a new workplace; he would be compelled to work with different employers, each with a different specialist market niche, different workshops, patterns of work organizations and different workforces. This process was forced and it was one which induced change.

Apprentis did not have a Tour de France, but they did have an element of mobility in their Stages. Many had to change Houses to receive the specialist teaching that was necessary for training. Further, when Apprentis were on Stage in their mother House, they would usually
receive *Apprentis* from other Houses attending the course. So in this sense the world of the *Compagnonnage* provided an ever-shifting constellation of new faces, new places, different workplaces and practices. As one of the UK *Apprentis* commented: ‘It forces you to change’. Recent years have seen increasing numbers of *Aspirants* spending time in Houses abroad suggesting to some that the *Tour de France* is increasingly become a *Tour du Monde* with all of the increased potential for learning and personal development that is carried by that title.

What made this mobility for all learners possible was the network of Houses. One House on its own is of little value, but the network gave the CdD a means of managing the policy of changing working and cultural environments. It not only offered flexibility, but offered a degree of robustness which enabled the system to withstand disruptions to training caused by firms’ failing and de-skilling in some sectors. If an *Aspirant* found that his firm had been taken over, or that his work was no longer offering him the skilled work he required, then he could change Houses and employers. The network provided buffers against environmental tendencies such as Taylorism, massification and takeover which could have removed opportunities for high-class, culturally rich training offered by the CdD. We found examples of this in our interviews.

**Conclusions**

As an HRD system the *Compagnonnage* would be impossible to imitate. Its root-stock is grounded in the French soil of the honour principle; its binding agents are *le devoir* and *le métier*. Elements of these three do exist in other national, industrial, organizational and occupational cultures but, to our knowledge, they exist nowhere else in such a tightly-knit and highly-institutionalised constellation. Even if they could be located elsewhere, in some lush, fertile but uncultivated HRD ‘greenfield’, then other problems emerge. To the extent that the system does depend upon a geographically dispersed network of tightly co-ordinated residential colleges, then it becomes both difficult and expensive to imitate. The system has been built up over at least 800 years; it is not clear how this time scale could be compressed by anyone wishing to imitate it. The CdD should be regarded as a basket of good practices and ideas, some of which could possibly be rooted in a different soil.

For example, the case draws attention to the volume of learning offered to *Aspirants* and *Apprentis* on *Stage*; and at nights and weekends during the course of the working week. The volume of what is quite conventional class and workshop based HRD activity is important. It is clear, too, that what is described in this case is a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998; Lave and Wenger, 1991), but the case shows that key members of this community were retired workers and *Anciens* who were former members of the Houses. The CdD proved itself very adept at using them as resources to help the development of the younger members. This raises the possibility of using retired workers in HRD programmes. The *Anciens* themselves point to the fact that the CdD is a successful organization run and managed by workers, rather than firms, government agencies or trades unions. This can be seen as pointing the way to HRD strategies which more fully embrace workers, and see it less of a preserve of the HRD ‘professional’ or management. Taken together it paints a picture of an impressive degree of support for the learner.

At a theoretical level the case sheds some important light on mentoring in particular and HRD in general. The CdD is concerned with forming the whole man, and not just his technical training. His humanity, awareness, his socialisation and his acculturation are all concerns. What the case also suggests is that the distinction between the technically competent worker
and the skilled human being is a false one. Technical skills are developed by a training which is rich in culture and humanity and not just about technical functioning: these are complements, not competitors. There are some profound implications here for the structure and functioning of VET as HRD.

This suggests that there is a need for a theoretical approach to HRD, and especially mentoring relationships, which transcends purely utilitarian conceptions of HRD, such as social exchange theory and allows researchers to understand organizational contexts, and where HRD policies such as mentoring, are not seen as a means to an end, but as an integral part of a very coherent institutional environment. These contexts can be found in organizations that are institutionally grounded in concepts such the honour principle. HRD and its supporting practices cannot be separated from the overall functioning of the organization.

A related theoretical requirement is for an institutional perspective of an organization and its HRD. This can only be fully achieved if it includes an anthropological view. From this perspective Swanson’s (2001) contention that psychology, economics and systems theory are the unique theoretical foundation of HRD is therefore limited.

Bibliography


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