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Orr, Kevin and Robinson, Denise

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What is vocational pedagogy and who is it for?

Kevin Orr (corresponding author; k.orr@hud.ac.uk)

Denise Robinson

University of Huddersfield, UK

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Abstract

This paper examines the current debate around policy on vocational pedagogy in the United Kingdom and draws on the findings from an LSIS-funded research project which investigated the vocational pedagogy used in four different providers. Alison Wolf's Report on Vocational Education (2011) is the most prominent contribution to the debate but there have been many others. Amongst them City and Guilds produced a report in 2012 (*How to teach vocational education: A theory of vocational pedagogy*) as did Learning and Skills Network in 2011 (*Effective teaching and learning in vocational education*) and the Edge Foundation in 2010 (*Mind the gap: Research and reality in practical and vocational education*). Most recently the government instigated the *Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning*. As well as reviewing the related literature the researchers observed and interviewed vocational teachers in two colleges and two private providers to locate and analyse differing understandings of what vocational pedagogy means. Informed by the work of Michael Young and Leesa Wheelahan, the paper explores how understandings of vocational pedagogy relate theory and practice in ways that promote or limit access to abstract knowledge, with implications for social justice.

Introduction

If the state could be put on trial charged with the crime of consistent neglect of vocational education and training (VET), much in evidence could be called for the prosecution. (Unwin 1997: 75)

Lorna Unwin wrote those words about Britain in 1997 and even ten years later Clarke and Winch (2007: 3) could write about the "...continual puzzlement and anger about the undervaluing of VET in England compared to much of continental Europe...". Over the past three years, however, there have perhaps been some signs of a change in the tide as the government has begun to take more interest in VET. It was the Coalition Government that commissioned Alison Wolf's Report on Vocational Education (2011) that, for example, led to the closing of dozens of VET courses found to have had spurious value. Wolf's report is the most prominent example of this new interest in VET and especially in the related concept of vocational pedagogy, which includes, for example, a report commissioned by City and Guilds and published in 2012, *How to teach vocational education: A theory of vocational pedagogy* (Lucas et al 2012). Before that in 2011 the Learning and Skills Network published its report, *Effective*

teaching and learning in vocational education (Faraday et al 2011), along with a guide for teachers. The highly influential Edge Foundation published *Mind the gap: Research and reality in practical and vocational education* in 2010 (Lucas et al 2010a) as well as a report on teacher training in vocational education. Most recently in 2013 the government's Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning produced its well-researched report *It's about work...Excellent adult vocational teaching and learning* (McLaughlin 2013). Such interest in VET is to be welcomed. In this paper we examine the stated or assumed understandings of vocational pedagogy within some of these documents in relation to how those understandings promote or limit access to abstract knowledge. As discussed more fully below we follow Michael Young and Leesa Wheelahan in stressing the importance of abstract knowledge in allowing people "access to the knowledge they need to participate in society's debates and controversies...[and] to participate in 'society's conversation'" (Wheelahan 2010: 1). How the debate and consequent policy on vocational pedagogy evolves will shape teachers' and trainers' practice, especially through the stipulations of awarding bodies, which will have an impact on access to knowledge beyond a checklist of competences. We draw similar conclusions to Bathmaker who (2013: 88) has argued:

The issue of knowledge is not just a technical question, but relates to questions of equity and justice. If vocational education qualifications are to enable people to gain valuable knowledge and skills, and are to open up opportunities rather than constrain and limit futures, then questions of knowledge in these qualifications, and how these questions are decided, are crucial.

This paper, which focuses solely on formal institutional VET rather than workplace learning (Billet 2002), derives from a project funded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS): *Providing improvements to vocational educational and training through an examination of vocational pedagogy*. This project, which finished in December 2012, aimed to identify and analyse both practice in and perceptions of vocational pedagogy. It firstly reviewed the current literature on vocational pedagogy and then in the light of that review it researched practice in four case studies of providers of vocational courses in Yorkshire and Humberside: two large Further Education Colleges; and two much smaller private training organisations. Researchers carried out 11 observations of training sessions as well as 14 interviews with trainers and 4 interviews with senior managers who had responsibility for teaching and learning in the organisations. 19 trainees also took part in four focus group sessions. This

project served to highlight the position of VET in England, which despite new interest has altered little in generations.

The place of VET in England

The exhaustive Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education in England and Wales found that the long-term history of education in England had left a legacy that they summarise in five points (Pring et al 2009: 6):

1. *“Persistent ‘tri-partite mentality’ that constantly threatens to revert to seeing young people as ‘academic’, ‘technical/vocational’ and, to be brutal, all the rest.”*
2. *“Continuing failure to obtain parity of esteem between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ qualifications except by distorting the very aims of the new courses.”*
3. *“Ambivalence towards what is meant by ‘vocational’.”*
4. *“Inability to get the necessary recognition of new qualifications from employers and higher education.”*
5. *“Transient nature of new qualifications”*

Many of these points are demonstrated starkly in the recent debacle over the short-lived Diplomas, which were vocational qualifications designed by the former government to rival well-established academic qualifications. After barely three years and many millions of pounds these qualifications effectively died in 2011 (See Isaacs (2013) for a blow-by-blow account of their failure, of which the government had been well warned.). The weak position of VET has also led to a denudation of the concept of skill evacuating it of concepts of knowledge. This has not been accidental: one of the main thinkers behind the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and competence-based assessment of VET in Britain, Gilbert Jessup (1991:126 quoted in Boreham 2002: 227) wrote:

the knowledge and theory which actually underpins professional performance is acquired in a somewhat ad hoc manner, largely through experience, when the individuals encounter real problems in practising the profession or doing a job.

Much more recently the notion of learning to learn has been prevalent in discussion of the curriculum, not knowledge (see, inter alia Claxton, Lucas, and Webster 2010). Another symptom of both this undervaluing of vocational education and the wider inequalities in society that this reflects has seen VET schemes designed as much to tackle alienation as to provide worthwhile training in its own right. Examples of this include the Youth Training Scheme and Training and Vocational Education Initiative of the 1980s and 1990s. The long-term context of education in England has, therefore, seen vocational education undervalued in comparison to academic education. Given this rather unhappy history of VET in England the serious discussion of the aims of vocational programmes and of how they might best be run is significant and positive. Even this discussion, however, shows the weak position of VET, especially in relation to its pedagogy.

The LSN report aimed “to promote more effective teaching and learning in vocational education through encouragement of thought, debate and discussion around vocational pedagogy (Faraday et al 2011a: 7).” Yet the guide produced for teachers, though certainly valuable, makes no mention of the term pedagogy, as if the term might frighten the horses. Similarly, Ofsted’s report “*Twelve outstanding providers of work-based learning*” makes no mention of the term pedagogy. In response to the question “Can we use the term pedagogy?” the CAVTL report (McLaughlin 2013: 13) notes the following:

A robust vocational teaching and learning system must be underpinned by a serious focus on vocational pedagogy. And yet, as we have gone round the country visiting sites of vocational teaching and learning and in our seminars, of all the terms we have discussed the one that gets people most agitated is ‘pedagogy’.

This hostility to pedagogy may suggest the anti-intellectualism of British society or the narrow perception that all that trainers require is narrow knowledge of their craft or profession. As Winch (2010: 46) has argued, in the United Kingdom (UK) the concept of skill has been thinned out to “a conception of behaviour” evacuating “all sense of intention or purpose.” This antipathy to vocational pedagogy is not, however, shared elsewhere. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (quoted in Wheelahan & Moodie 2010:47) have argued the benefits of developing “pedagogy to assist VET practitioners in delivering skills and knowledge to learners” and elsewhere in Europe the idea of pedagogy in vocational areas is not controversial (Clarke & Winch 2007 and Brockmann et al 2008). Given the complexity of VET and skills “it is not sufficient from a pedagogical perspective merely to practise as a means to improve” (Winch 2010:

45), so we are in agreement with Lucas et al (2012: 13) who have argued for the UK:

The evidence suggests that serious consideration of pedagogy is largely missing in vocational education and ... vocational learners are the losers as a result of this omission.

Arguably, interest in vocational pedagogy has arisen at this time because of the convergence of those pursuing a skills agenda having greater political influence (such as the Edge Foundation and elements of the Coalition Government, including Michael Gove who commissioned the Wolf Report). The discourse of a knowledge society has been prevalent, even though certain forms of knowledge are being stripped from the curriculum (Wheelahan 2010: 3). This discourse of the knowledge society is counterbalanced by Wolf (2011: 28-29) who makes clear that the connection between lack of skills and the unemployment of young people is not sustained by the evidence from the labour market. There are still those, too, who perceive improved VET as a means to pursue social justice. In any case there is broad agreement that vocational teaching is only as good as the vocational teachers (Faraday et al 2011a: 13), even if the term 'pedagogy' remains controversial. Nevertheless, our interviews with practitioners and managers alike indicated little consistency in attitudes towards or descriptions of vocational pedagogy and the understandings apparent in the literature are similarly diverse.

What is understood by vocational pedagogy?

Bernstein's (1999: 259 quoted in Daniels 2001: 6) definition of pedagogy is a good starting point:

Pedagogy is a sustained process whereby somebody(s) acquires new forms or develops existing forms of conduct, knowledge, practice and criteria, from somebody(s) or something deemed to be an appropriate provider and evaluator. Appropriate from the point of view of the enquirer or by some other body(s) or both.

It is a considered approach to teaching and learning that can be articulated and which is related to both specific knowledge and behaviour. Lucas et al's (2012: 14) more instrumental report also has a wide view of pedagogy:

is the science, art, and craft of teaching. Pedagogy also fundamentally includes the decisions which are taken in the creation of the broader

learning culture in which the teaching takes place, and the values which inform all interactions.

Moody and Wheelahan (2012: 324) differentiate academic and vocational teaching because vocational teachers “have a greater role in mediating the social context of vocational education than they have in school and higher education.” They go on to argue (p326) that vocational teachers are distinctive because they:

reformulate vocational knowledge from work where it has mainly a productive function to a teaching-learning function, and they make this recontextualised vocational knowledge comprehensible to others – to students and novice practitioners or workers.

This recontextualisation of knowledge is significant and demanding. Nevertheless, features of pedagogy are shared between vocational and academic teaching (Faraday, Overton and Cooper 2011a: 2), but for the purposes of this study, and similarly to the documents discussed, we have identified vocational pedagogy separately. This reflects the particular “situatedness” of any pedagogy. Moreover, without this distinction there is at least a risk that vocational pedagogy will simply mimic academic approaches to teaching, such as essay writing, because they hold more status. In this vein, Edwards et al (2013) give an insightful account of how vocational students (in their case in hospitality) are required to use a wider range of literacies than academic students in an apparent effort to render their vocational qualification more valid (see also Brockmann et al 2008:554). Vocational pedagogy, in whatever way that may be defined, warrants independent analysis and whatever criticism may be made, that it is being discussed and promoted is a positive development.

Lucas et al (2012: 9) suggest “that there is, as yet, insufficient understanding about the relative effectiveness of teaching and learning methods used in vocational education” but they “offer a proof of concept that it is indeed possible to develop a vocational pedagogy.” Their extensive study is based on a categorization that is divided into three parts: physical materials; people; and symbols (words, numbers and images). The approach of Lucas et al is (p9) prescriptive, (“vocational education needs to be taught in the context of practical problem-solving”) and focused on processes. Their summary is that the:

best vocational education is broadly hands-on, practical, experiential, real-world as well as, and often at the same time as, something which involves feedback, questioning, application and reflection and, when required, theoretical models and explanations.

Nonetheless, Lucas et al identify “three very different ‘kinds’ of vocational education – working with practical materials, working with people and working with abstract concepts.” They also quote Richard Pring (p48) who argues, “You can be intelligent practically without being able to state propositionally what he standards are.” This distinction is important but while Lucas et al highlight the place of knowledge, this is not knowledge to allow students to “participate in society’s debates and controversies” (Wheelahan 2010: 1).

The LSN report (Faraday, Overton and Cooper 2011a: 1) “aimed to promote more effective teaching and learning in vocational education, by encouraging thought, debate and discussion about vocational pedagogy.” As noted above, however, their guide for teachers eschews the term and once again focuses exclusively on process through “teaching models” which “always [have] a structure with defined steps in it” (Faraday, Overton and Cooper 2011b: 5). This may well be useful for vocational teachers, but it is necessarily restrictive. Just as skill is a term that in a vocational context stresses individual capacity and has, in Britain, become separate from a concept of a knowledge base (Clarke and Winch 2006), so the teaching of vocational skill becomes procedural. Theoretical knowledge is difficult, so it is avoided (Bathmaker 2013, 93).

This limited conception of vocational pedagogy was mirrored in some of the responses from our own interviews. One senior manager at a college said:

... vocational pedagogy isn't about teaching and learning strategies; it's about being good at what you do... It's about knowing how to be a good chef and being in a realistic work environment of a professional kitchen and modelling that behaviour so that students can see what it looks like.

Throughout the responses on understandings of vocational pedagogy there was care and pride in approaches to teaching, which was also apparent in the observations. It was also evident in that all but a few of the trainers/teachers had teaching qualifications even when there was no statutory requirement (in the private sector). Nevertheless, the emphasis was on process rather than understanding of practice from trainers and managers; perceptions of what trainees needed was restricted, above all by the stipulations of the awarding bodies. In the absence of employer engagement and the neglect of older universities as well as the absence of statutory professional standards it is the awarding bodies that have the most influence over curriculum and assessment and hence how subjects are taught. That matters because as Bathmaker (2013: 88) suggests, knowledge and social justice are connected in qualifications.

In this context, the work of the CAVTL is distinctive because while it repeatedly emphasises the need for a “clear line of sight to work” its conception of vocational pedagogy stresses broader knowledge and they even cite Michael

Young's (2010) *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. Their report (McLaughlin 2013: 15) argues that:

The best vocational teaching and learning combines theoretical knowledge from the underpinning disciplines (for example, maths, psychology, human sciences, economics) with the occupational knowledge of practice (for example, how to cut hair, build circuit boards, administer medicines).

Importantly, this opens up the possibility of knowledge that is situated within a vocational area but which may also allow students "to participate in 'society's conversation'" (Wheelahan 2010: 1). This reflects Winch and Clarke's (2007: 9) distinction between training and education: "training is inculcation into a set of usually rigid routines, while education develops the whole person."

Who is vocational pedagogy for?

Pedagogy is a significant social relationship through which cultural reproduction takes place (Daniels 2001: 6) through providing access to knowledge and hence to power. This is not to say that reproduction is its sole purpose nor that pedagogy and curriculum should only be understood or discussed in terms of reproduction. Pedagogy and curriculum can and should be understood in their own right, but like any social activity or product they bear the mark of the society within which they were formed (Boreham 2002: 230). In the UK that society is marked by growing inequality, reflected in the weak position of VET with its restricted access to certain types of knowledge (Bathmaker 2013). Wheelahan (2010: 9) makes this clear.

The privileged access of the powerful to theoretical abstract knowledge provides them with the ability to mobilize knowledge to think the unthinkable and the not-yet-thought.

Similarly, Daniels (2012:8) makes the distinction between "theoretical or context-independent knowledge and everyday or context-bound knowledge [which] have different structures and different purposes." The latter can provide the "capacity for generalization." Not for nothing do Wheelahan (2010) and Young (2008) distinguish "powerful knowledge". Yet, the welcome focus on VET and vocational pedagogy has failed adequately to address this aspect. The restricted understanding of knowledge at a policy and awarding body level was reflected in the responses of our participants in colleges and other providers. The CAVTL report provides an opening for a broader discussion of knowledge, curriculum

and pedagogy which may lead to qualifications that encourage autonomy and engagement with society's conversation with itself.

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