

Reimagining the moral purpose of VET

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In this article I begin to sketch out a critique of an overly instrumental approach to Vocational Education and Training (VET) for young people aged 16–21. In so doing, my aim is to put the Education back into VET. This requires us to go beyond (or perhaps before) a focus on the technology of VET – the specification of competencies, the ‘delivery’ of training, and the construction of national and international qualification frameworks. This is not to argue that such entities are unimportant but that they are partial. My key text is John Dewey’s book *Democracy and Education* in which he reminds us that a vocation and a career is that which gives us a direction in life. But such, a direction, I seek to argue, is about much more than the accrual of competencies, specific or transversal – it is about life itself and how we enable young people, to whom we have a moral duty as a society, to live a good life.

The technologies of VET have at their heart a means-end rationality; that we can specify with ever greater accuracy the sorts of competencies that young people will need in the future, arrange them in hierarchies of levels and turn them into credits which are transportable across national boundaries. At the same time, we are being constantly told that the world is changing at an ever-faster pace, that jobs in twenty years time will be unrecognisable, and that our lives will be utterly transformed by digitisation. A dystopian future of robots and no work over which, we as humans, have no control but to which we can only react. This supposed future world is fundamentally ambiguous and under such ambiguity means-end rationality breaks down. It thus seems utterly futile to try to predict the future and capture it in competence statements.

This suggests to me that we need to spend time thinking about the aims and purposes of VET more deeply rather than fruitlessly speculating about how we can match our competencies, both specific and transversal, onto a world about which we cannot, or so we think, know anything about. In so doing I also wish to argue that the unknowability of the future is fundamentally incorrect. First, there is quite a lot about the future that we already know but which has always been challenging to prepare young people to participate for, a set of problems that education in antiquity also sought to address: how to prepare young people to participate as citizens in society. Such participation necessarily requires human qualities of trust, respect, empathy and love – qualities that make us human and which need to be cultivated. Today such qualities are fundamental to deal with burgeoning problems of climate change, the destruction of ecosystems and the dangerous rise of nationalism and populism. To develop societies that are open and welcoming of the other rather than closed and xenophobic. It seems to me that the new technologies of VET from European Credit Transfer Systems to transversal competencies in all of their vagueness have nothing

to say to us about the most pressing problems of the 21st century that we must help our young people face.

Second, human beings are both great learners and highly resilient. We coped, just about, with the changes of the 20th century, including two world wars, and I am pretty confident that we will cope with changes that technology undoubtedly will bring over the next eighty years. For me the issue is not so much the technology but the inequality that such change is likely to produce if we extrapolate current trends forwards: inequality that is clearly linked to the rise of populism and nationalism. For me the real issue will therefore be the supply of jobs which is a function of the product and market strategy of companies. No amount of VET, however well specified, will enable us to manage what is essentially a political and collective issue: how will we distribute rewards and resources in the future. Thus, VET must prepare young people to develop those all-important qualities of being human and develop their capability to live as citizens in democratic societies. I would argue that we, as VET practitioners, experts and policy makers, have lost sight of these fundamental educational aims which were just as important in the thinking of Confucius and Socrates 2500 years ago as they are today, and which seem to me to be fundamental to the ideas of *Beruf* and *Bildung*.

Educational policy making has become obsessed with education as an economic commodity – an investment to be banked and used later to maximise personal income. Now this human capital approach can be a helpful way of thinking about education and I am sure that Jacob Mincer would have seen his famous equation linking income to investment in education as just that – one way of thinking about education. But rates of return to education and training has become a fetish so that the higher the rate of return the better the education. Linked to that is the allied idea that education is the key means of helping young people to survive in a flexible and uncertain labour market. There is a certain truth to such an idea in that those with higher levels of qualification are more likely to be employed. But this is also associated with education systems producing more and more University graduates undertaking jobs that don't require University degrees. Policy makers have become so fixated with supply side reform that they seem to have forgotten the demand side of the labour market education system nexus in creating opportunities, and they certainly seem to have forgotten the moral purpose of education, of making us more human. So, we need to recapture in our discourse about VET the purposes of EDUCATION. Of course, young people will need to make a living, being economically independent is one aspect of being human. But they will also need to do many other things – be active citizens, good parents, caring people who can empathise with those less fortunate than themselves.

For me a central purpose of education is to cultivate our humanity which is clearly absent from the increasingly technical and instrumental discourse about VET. And yet the concepts of *Beruf* and *Bildung* seem to me to capture that humanistic ideal. However, for a non-German speaker quite a lot of VET discourse gets lost in translation, and *Beruf* and *Bildung* are both notoriously difficult to translate into

English. *Beruf* I think is captured in English by Dewey's conception of vocation and career presented in his 1916 book *Democracy and Education*. He wrote this seminal work after he had moved to New York but the crucible it was formed in was, I suggest, Chicago at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The city was growing rapidly, undergoing profound industrial change and striving to integrate migrants, primarily from Europe. Dewey really does speak directly to our times and this is what he says:

'A vocation means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders then perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates. The opposite of a career is neither leisure nor culture, but aimlessness, capriciousness, the absence of cumulative achievement in experience, on the personal side, and idle display, parasitic dependence upon the others, on the social side.' (p. 307) Together I think the idea of a vocation and a career capture the essence of *Beruf*.

Bildung is even more challenging for an English speaker. It seems to appear first in the 16th century in Pietistic theology requiring the devout Christian to cultivate their talents and dispositions according to the image of God, which was innate in the soul. As such, it has a family resemblance to the ancient Greek idea of *Paideia* and the Confucian concept of *Ren*, both of which involve cultivation of the self. The idea of development or unfolding of certain potentialities within the human seems therefore to be a very old idea and key to the concept of *Bildung*. We can follow the development of *Bildung* as a concept from Johan Gottfried Herder to Hegel via Goethe and thence to John Dewey who was heavily influenced by Hegel. This leads me to my current understanding:

- The self-formation/realization of an individual whose conduct is governed by a highly developed inner character, not by imitating the conduct of others (Bruford 1975).
- The identification and development of one's talents through education and experience; finding a **vocation** which contributes to your growth and maturation and the society in which you live.
- It involves a transition from inwardness to outwardness and the development of a fully rounded personality.
- This involves learning that is a passionate search for truth (self-knowledge) which is arduous and requires the exercise of responsibility (Hegel).

One German word clearly needs a lot of explication to render it meaningful in English. The second bullet point brings us to the Deweyan conception of vocation and this a link to *Beruf*. I trust the following chain works:

- *Beruf* is a process of formation, an ongoing process of both personal maturation as one pursues the vocations of life – work, being a parent, a citizen and so on.
- *Bildung* is an outcome, a tradition, an ideal to be aimed for.
- *Bildung* is commensurate with Dewey's conception of a vocation which leads us back to *Beruf*.
- Vocational **EDUCATION** and Training therefore needs to embrace both *Beruf* and *Bildung*.

So this would suggest that Vocational Education and Training for young people, by which I mean those aged 16–21, should:

- Provide the knowledge and skills needed to pursue competently the multiple vocations of life: work, parent, citizen
- Provide an education that will enable young people to adapt as the economic base of society changes
- Develop the capability to live intelligently and pursue a life worth living, as a citizen participating in a society not just as a worker
- Enable us to become more human

But what does the last enabling mean. It is concerned with the cultivation of reason – that great gift to us all from the Enlightenment – about the qualities of our thinking which we discard at our peril. Hannah Arendt argued, in the context of commenting on the trial of Martin Bormann in the *Banality of Evil* that the thinking was not primarily about knowledge but the ability to tell right from wrong, and the strength to do the right thing, and so prevent catastrophe, in those rare moments when the chips are down. Those who constructed the gas chambers at Auschwitz may have been highly competent architects and builders but they were not, on this account, very well educated.

But this analysis raises a very practical question – what should we teach and how? One response might be to specify a Skinnerian approach akin to moral education in the Soviet Union as described by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1972). This would require rules and practices essential to social survival to be listed with behaviour being shaped to conform to those rules through systematic instruction and modelling with positive reinforcement. This would suggest the formation of a highly controlled social environment designed to encourage co-operative and socially useful forms of behaviour. Such a regime might deliver a compliant worker who accepts flexibility (turn up on time, do what you are told, don't complain) but will you know what to do 'when the chips are down'? So, this approach is, in my view, fundamentally mistaken. The problem is that it reduces the human to a ragbag, a jumbled collection of virtues.

Making progress with what is a very difficult problem might be helped by a deeper analysis of virtues (die Tugend) which the English Philosophers Hirst and Peters suggests can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, those such as honesty, tidiness and punctuality which are not motives for action. They tend to be situation specific and dependent upon the probability of rewards and punishments. On the other hand, there are virtues such as gratitude, prudence and compassion that are motives for action, making them less context dependent. It is this latter group that we should be concerned about as they underpin the vocation of being a citizen, of making us more human. But when I talk to employers, who, we are told, are key to defining the competencies in vocational qualifications, it is often the first group that they emphasise typically using the word skill. I would argue that in our VET provision for 16–21 year olds we need to find a way of cultivating the latter in order to pursue Beruf and achieve Bildung.

Martha Nussbaum argues that cultivating humanity is the essential function of education in the arts and the humanities. But many VET students do not have the opportunity to study in these areas after the age of 16 and probably would not wish to do so. So, this does not seem a viable option. Confucius argued that ren, humaneness, was the essence of being human whereby an individual wishing to be established as a person needed to seek to establish others; wishing to enlarge themselves they needed to enlarge others. This seems not to be about studying the arts and humanities but about thinking about yourself in relation to others in order to cultivate virtue.

This then is the challenge we face, and I am not convinced that we can capture virtue in our current conceptions of competence (Kompetenz). Competence is a really useful idea for some aspects of designing and assessing VET provision; it works well for the concrete tasks undertaken by craftspeople for instance. But even if we stretch the idea of competence, as the construct 'transversal competence' strives to do, I don't think that it can capture the cultivation of virtue as identified by philosophers, ancient and modern, and which seems to lie at the heart of both Beruf and Bildung. So we are left with a new question and at least that is a beginning: how can we cultivate humaneness in VET programmes to prepare young people for their uncertain future?

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