

## Book review: Teachers and teaching in vocational and professional education

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### Book Review

Teachers and Teaching in vocational and professional education by Sai Loo, Routledge, New York, 2018, 172 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-05697-8 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-315-16507-3 (ebk).

The book is published in the series *Routledge Research in Vocational Education*. This series present the latest research on Vocational and further Education and provides a forum for established and emerging scholars to discuss the latest practices and challenges in the field. Sai Loo (PhD, MA, BSc, FHEA, ACA, FETC) is an academic at UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

### Purpose

The concept of the vocational teacher, as distinct from the general academic teacher, is receiving significant attention in emerging and transforming VET systems across the world. However, it is apparent from Sai Loo's new monograph 'Teachers and Teaching in Vocational and Professional Education', that even in established VET systems there are still many unanswered questions with regard to teaching that is work-directed. Much of the scholarly debate revolves around the nature, form, volume, depth and breadth of vocational/occupational knowledge required by VET students in particular programmes, and the implications of this for vocational teachers' knowledge. Notions of knowledge that are usually juxtaposed as if in opposition to each other include inter alia, Bernstein's theorisation of vertical and

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horizontal knowledge, context-dependent vs context-free knowledge, practical vs disciplinary knowledge – terms which circulate periodically in well-worn arguments related to what VET learners should learn and what VET teachers should teach. Indeed, Professor Simon's question posed in 1981, cited by Loo (2018) in the opening line of his introduction (see p.1), could today be rephrased to read simply 'why no vocational pedagogy?' given the concerns of Loo's new book.

## **Content**

Sai Loo in this volume shines a light on the teacher in vocational and professional settings, and brings what are mostly esoteric philosophical debates, into the realities of the classroom where the voices of teachers can be heard. A notable feature of the monograph is the range of occupations from which case studies have been drawn, spanning the better known disciplines of accounting, dental hygiene and tourism, but including equine studies, fashion, and social care, and from the level of technician training to professional clinician training. This is an important spectrum being presented, as vocational training is often seen as the poorer cousin of 'professional training', irrational as that distinction in terminology may seem, and VET has tended to be looked down on from a classist perspective, hence the struggle for parity of esteem with the traditional academic qualifications route. The deliberate terminology of 'occupational' to refer to all work related offerings therefore cuts across the three levels of training, as in pre-university (college); higher education (first degree vocational level); and the professional training level. Academic teaching is also not polarised from occupational teaching, with Loo preferring to see both as part of a continuum where they co-exist according to their immediate intent i.e. orientated more to the discipline in the former instance, and more to the workplace in the latter.

Loo's monograph therefore enables a holistic view of occupational/vocational pedagogy which traverses historical hierarchies of knowledge and practice, and treats the teachers in this domain as practitioners with similar concerns and interests who are ultimately 'facing both ways' (Barnett, 2006).

Having addressed the potentially distracting issues at the outset, Loo poses the two main questions that he will be grappling with in his research: 'what is occupational pedagogy?', and how is its related knowledge acquired and applied by those teaching on the programmes?

Chapters 2 and 3 together constitute a solid theoretical backdrop for the empirical work in the chapters which follow. In chapter two, Loo draws on a broad array of relevant scholarly works to circumscribe the knowledge relevant to pedagogy that is required for a 'dual professionalism' (Peel, 2005). Vocational teachers, as dual professionals with one foot in education and one in the world of work, require essential knowledge of both of these domains, i.e. from the knowledge of education foundations that inform teaching practices and curricula, to the

disciplinary knowledge and applications relevant to the workplace. From the works of such salient education theorists as, *inter alia* Becher, Shulman, Loughran, Mitchell, Polanyi, Collins, Verloop, Nonaka, Takeuchi – the varied modelling of knowledge types and its impact on the knowledge bases required for teaching, are gleaned, albeit that much of this theorisation has been in reference to general academic schooling and to higher education.

As a basis for the occupational teacher research, the literature on occupational practices is also set forth, for instance by scholars such as Clarke and Winch, Hager, Eraut, to name a few. In chapter two also, Bernstein's (1996) classificatory schema for horizontal and vertical knowledge, pedagogic discourses, and the concept of 'pedagogic device' are introduced, as this forms an essential explanatory framework for the investigations captured later within the monograph. Chapter three thus expands on teaching and learning in occupational settings, and the knowledge and pedagogies required for training in the domain of work. Here Loo draws attention to the foresight evident in Bernstein's theorising about occupational education and acknowledging the learning that takes place at, and for work, and which encompasses skills, practices, and collective learning, ideas taken forward in the post-Bernsteinian era but within a social constructionist paradigm. Regarding knowledge required for occupations, or occupational/work related knowledge, the idea of recontextualisation first posited by Bernstein and expanded upon by van Oers, Barnett, Evans and others, has been a recurring theme in attempting to articulate an occupational pedagogy for vocational/occupational teachers.

The literature reviews in chapters 2 and 3 constitute an essential resource for introducing emerging VET researchers and scholars to the theoretical complexities of this field, but in an accessible and engaging manner. In this regard the monograph makes a welcome contribution to the literature on VET, particularly for researchers new to vocational education debates and discourses. The summaries in each chapter provide a helpful synopsis of the ideas that move the reader incrementally and systematically to the conceptual framework in chapter 4.

The build up to chapter 4 has therefore been competently managed when the reader arrives at the conceptual framework which is premised on the notion of dual professionalism, *i.e.* the vocational teacher as a professional teacher but also as an occupational specialist, both of which are depicted in the conceptual framework diagram on p.50. The synergistic essence of the relationships captured in the conceptual framework model are encapsulated in the definition of occupational pedagogic knowledge as being "a result of the complex interaction between applied pedagogic knowledge and applied occupational knowledge via the integrated applied recontextualisation process" (p.54). This pithy summary of what has undoubtedly been an outcome of careful thought and distillation from the literature, provides a fitting entry to the three chapters that follow, which deal with each of three levels of occupational training in turn: TVET courses; first degree courses; and professional courses. Here the continuum of knowledge and practice is observed in action, as each programme type is

discussed in relation to how teachers have described and explained their occupational pedagogy and application in terms of the conceptual framework set out earlier.

The case studies in Chapter 8 are based on the narratives of five vocational teachers in the subfields of art and design; travel and tourism; dental hygiene; emergency medicine; and finally in clinical medicine. Each case has been constructed from the analysed data obtained through interviews, questionnaires, and documentary sources, and in each instance there are insights into their sources of 'teaching know how', and how this has been applied by these teachers. Their narratives have been carefully constructed, and provide a clear window onto their pedagogies and practices at different levels of the training system in which they operate.

In chapter 9 the empirical evidence obtained from respondents, the various levels and content of their course offerings are placed side by side for comparative purposes, and are viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework. Here analysis reveals the array of knowledges that vocational teachers in the study drew on for their classroom delivery – their applied pedagogic knowledge (disciplinary and life-wide knowledge), their applied occupational practices (work experience and knowledge), finally culminating in their occupational pedagogic knowledge (OPK) or occupational teachers' capacities (OTC) - the result of the recontextualisation of all their sources (explicit and tacit) of teaching 'know-how'. While the comparative empirical evidence reveals the particularities of the different milieus or 'occupational ecologies', it also reveals their commonalities, which could contribute to the development of a standardised occupational teacher training curriculum.

### **The contribution of this volume**

Loo's achievement in this monograph is a convincing illustration of the essential elements of a vocational/occupational teacher training curriculum, through careful empirical analysis of what occupational teachers in their practice rely on. In addition, the collective wisdom and scholarship garnered through the ages is acknowledged and built upon throughout the development of his argument. Second, the conceptualisation of occupational teachers' capacities (OTC) offers a holistic approach to training teachers that recognises and values their life and work experience. Several implications for policymakers, curriculum developers, and teacher educators are apparent from this study, but it will no doubt interest occupational teachers and their managers to reflect meta-cognitively on what it is that these teachers do, often implicitly, which this book illuminates.

The conversations started in this book are not new or unfamiliar, but they serve to confirm many suppositions and anecdotal accounts of what is needed in curricula for the training of vocational/occupational teachers. Loo has made a considerable contribution to thinking around occupational teacher development, and has pointed to the gaps with regard to appropriate teaching strategies and further codification of his findings through additional research.

**Biographical Note**

Professor Joy Papier, PhD is director of the Institute for Post-School Studies at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, South Africa. She has been active in vocational research, capacity building and policy development for more than 20 years, and currently holds the National Research Foundation Chair in TVET studies. Professor Papier is also the Editor-in-Chief of the recently established peer reviewed Journal of Vocational, Adult and Continuing Education and Training (JOVACET).