



# Being critical: inside and/or alongside VET

by Mike Brown

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I work in the field of vocational education and training or VET. VET looks at work and learning. Curriculum design within VET involves analysing work. The strengths and weaknesses of VET are part of a discussion questioning the contradictions of VET as empowerment and/or entrapment.

Recently I have begun to argue that a new conceptualisation with a broader scope than contemporary VET is required. Viewing the democratic potential, I suggest the more general and inclusive notion of 'work-related learning'.

I am reluctant to say that VET involves analysing work, because it does so in a very specific and selective way. The approach is extremely selective in what it examines and with what it finds. It ignores a whole range of important issues amongst which are the dynamics of work and workplaces that go beyond productive skills and performativity. It needs to include the dynamics of work associated with ethnicity, class, gender, age, able-bodiedness and location.

Throughout my working life, in factories as a metal worker, then in a college as a TAFE teacher and now as a University lecturer, I have been interested in work more broadly, including such things as pay, working conditions and work organisation. I am aware of many debates *about* work but yet notice that working people are so often excluded. It is as if it is said, no, this is not for you, it is about you!

It is probably more accurate to say that VET analyses specific jobs and breaks these down into the main components according to VET convention. The breaking down of the job takes the form of identifying competencies. These become the basis for teaching, training and assessing.

For a number of years I have engaged with questions about curriculum and in particular, 'what can, and should, we teach to whom, when, where, and how?' What does this mean for VET curriculum development and what does it mean for me working 'inside and/or alongside VET'?

VET is based on three principles: relevance, responsiveness and uniqueness. VET courses are relevant in that they are based on the current requirements identified and agreed to by employers. Employers as the purchasers of labour in the exchange transaction made in the labour market are presented as the major stakeholders in VET. VET courses set out with the primary aim of developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes that employers want and are therefore prepared to purchase and reward through wages. VET programs then, are about imparting 'market driven knowledge' or 'valuable knowledge'.

VET is responsive in that it addresses the skills and knowledge demands of the employers (and therefore of the market) and produces graduates to fit the existing job. The relevance and responsiveness of VET courses gives them utility and usefulness. The third principle is that VET is unique. This has become more problematic since these principles were first articulated. No other sector of education systematically hands

over such important determinations about knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy to employers and corporate interests.

On the one hand, the strengths of VET are that it is a form of empowerment for the participant learners in that they engage with courses that have currency in the labour market. Course participants will achieve competencies with assured utility and value. Achieving these competencies provides working people with potential for employment opportunities, for access to higher wages, more money. So what can be wrong with that? It constitutes a form of empowerment limited within existing relations of work

The turning over of the selection and determination of knowledge to employers, managerial prerogative and the market also constitutes a major weakness. The major objection is that it subordinates the interests of the worker/learners to the interests of employers. This can be considered contrary to the longer term and broader interests of many of the learners. In this light VET can become a form of entrapment rather than empowerment. The strengths and power of VET can evaporate and simultaneously become weaknesses. This allows a critique that suggests that VET programs are narrowly focused, instrumental, technicist, corporate, undemocratic and hegemonic. So what happens when working people want a real education and not one that keeps them dumb? Who do they turn to, educators? . . . or themselves?

In contrast then, it is hoped that a more general and inclusive notion of 'work-related learning' could spark the process where working people can engage with the issues, themes and debates and learn *about* work, workplace dynamics, political economy, and how these impact upon society. It might be possible for work-related learning to become a space to analyse work and consider the role and function of work in our lives and our society. A space to develop visions of alternative arrangements and possibilities and a space to work out how the best of these visions can become reality. How might this occur? Who would be involved?

What are your thoughts?