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Fritz K. Oser / Ursula Renold / Ernst G. John / Esther Winther / Susanne Weber
(Hrsg.)

VET boost: Towards a theory of professional competencies

Essays in honor of Frank Achtenhagen

Rotterdam / Taipei: Sense 2009

(460 S.; ISBN 978-9-0879-0736-5; 49,99 EUR)

Placed under one heading “research on VET competencies under an international perspective” (xi), this book is consisted of papers of an international conference in 2007 at University of Göttingen which was organized by the German Educational Research Association to honor Frank Achtenhagen, who retired from full professor and director in Göttingen (ix). The themes of the papers in the book cover mainly five areas of research, which are reflected in the structure of the book: measurement on VET (Vocational Education and Training) under an international perspective (part one); the concept of Leading houses of VET which is initiated by the Swiss Federal office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET) (part two); research on learning processes, curriculum theory and the use of technology (part three); social and emotional learning as important aspects of VET learning (part four); political and institutional aspects of VET research (part five).

Due to the relative big amount of papers presented in this book (27 papers) and the variety of topics they deal with, it is difficult to cover all of them in this review. Instead, the author attempts to give an overview of the different aspects of the book and mainly focus on some of the papers, simply as exemplary cases. However, the selection of the reviewed papers does not imply their superiority to the other papers.

With the title “measurement on VET under an international perspective” the part one of the book deals in seven articles with the measurement and assessment in VET, including that of competencies.

The joint work of Baethge, Arends and Winther (3-24) offers a rather comprehensive overview to the topic large-scale assessment on VET. After summarizing the five ways of different countries to deal with the basic problems of VET (such as the school-to-work transition, establishment or reform of VET system, etc.) and outlining the necessities and possibilities of an international VET comparison from the policy as well as scientific perspective, the authors describe the differences between measurement in compulsory /academic education and VET and then introduce a possible schema to measure competencies in VET. They go on to use tables to illustrate and explain the context factors for quality in VET and the correlations between institutional and individual conditions for development and utilization of competencies. In the end, after analyzing the problems of vertical and horizontal comparability in large-scale assessment, they come to the conclusion that it is not realistic to “involve the entire variance of vocational competencies requirements, institutional and biographical arrangements etc. into the research design” because of the complexity and variety of occupational fields; rather, a stratified sample, a sample construction “comprising a relevant as well as comparable extract” is therefore recommended (22).

Baumert’s paper (25-37) discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the new

generation of international comparisons as well as the possible ways to overcome the weaknesses. Based on the item response theory scaling and multimatrix models, the latest generation of international educational assessments has several strengths compared with the earlier ones: possibility to “estimate the probability of a given test item being solved correctly at each ability level (26)” – which enables the hermeneutic interpretation of ability levels, local stochastic independence of the individual items, the high quality of sampling procedures, as well as the “stability of the research structures and the quality of the international infrastructure”(27).

However, some structural limitations and weaknesses also exist in the cross-sectional and international comparisons, most importantly the inability to explain cross-country differences and difficulty to “identify potential points for intervention for political measures” (30). The reasons are as follows: aggregation of variables to a higher level may lead to a shift in meaning which is not immediately apparent; inadequate model specification at the aggregate level exist; methodologically advanced re-analyses of international large-scale assessment data can be used in a ill-considered way for political ends. The compensation for these weaknesses is, as the author suggests, to “to incorporate the merits of cross-sectional surveys within a broader research program”, especially that of teaching, learning and student progress (32). Extending the large scale assessment to a longitudinal one or stronger conceptual groundwork and qualitative analyses can also be useful.

The six papers in part two demonstrate different aspects of the research program Leading Houses, namely the VET and PET (Professional Education and Training) related issues that are grouped together into priority theme based on policy making decisions, which is initiated by the Swiss Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology (OPET). This review will not go deep into this part of the book.

The six papers in part three turn to the theme of learning and curriculum. Doyle’s article (175-188) takes a very deep reflection on the role “competency” is playing in curriculum as well as in scientific research on curriculum. After interpreting the nature of curriculum work as “interpretation and design” and “a theory of content”, Doyle uses the “activity theory” as an instrument to analyze educative activity; then he goes on to show how research on task in curriculum could provide useful insights into the fate of curriculum in teaching reality and how authenticity as curriculum theory could improve our understanding of the curricularization process. Based on the different perspectives mentioned above Doyle comes to the conclusion that “competency does not remain inert as one goes about inventing and carrying out design” and is a “blurred category” because of “the shifting contexts and the interpretive processes involved” (186).

The article written by Pellerino, Goldman, Lawless and Brown (189-199) pays attention to a very different dimension of the VET research, namely the accessibility and sharing of contemporary knowledge which appears mainly in academic publications among instructors who work with teachers or school leadership personnel. The authors regard the access to quality resources and tools supporting teacher education helpful in bringing knowledge into practice. Concretely speaking, the paper introduces the basic features of web-based system AIM (Adaptable Instructional Materials), the objectives of which are mainly supporting “engagement with the concepts and issues” in scientific reports and supporting “instructors with resources and activity ideas that they can use to create course”, as well as how the

system is used (190).

Part four of this book deals in four papers with aspects of social and emotional learning under the special focus of sharing competencies.

By reflecting on the fundamental meaning, value of scientific research and its relevance to educational practice concerning emotional experience and learning motivation, Krapp raises mainly two questions in his paper (261-276), namely, to which extent do scientific explanations differ from everyday interpretations, and does highly valued empirical research in certain domain always provide practically useful information for praxis? The author outlines the everyday belief about the interrelations between emotional experiences, motivation and learning and compares this with the interpretation of them from the perspective of psychological theories. As conclusion the author gives some very interesting statements: it is inappropriate to evaluate the “state of art” of certain research field in a simple way because “the primary products of research are highly specified contributions to an ongoing virtual discussion on the basis of publications and presentations at scientific meetings” (272); although there is “no essential difference” between everyday explanations and scientific theories concerning the superordinated relations between emotional and motivational factors on the one hand and learning behavior and academic achievement on the other hand, “clear and substantial differences” take place when it comes to interpret “specific phenomena and single relations within this theoretical framework” due to “specificity and accuracy of concepts and the elaborateness of explanatory hypotheses” of scientific theory (272). The author goes on and argues that although the practical utility is usually not a prominent criterion in formal evaluation procedures and therefore rarely a major aspect in research decisions, researchers doing empirical study shall “reflect much more seriously about the ultimate aim” of research endeavors because “applied sciences bear responsibility for the improvement of problem solving in a certain domain of professional practice” (273).

Compared with the paper by Krapp, the research of Lehtinen and Palonen's (277-291) represents a more empirical approach in studying the social aspects of learning. Intending to figure out the differences between experts and novices concerning their network characteristics, the degree of intentionality of experts in building and managing their social network and resources, as well as the influences of transitional periods on personal networks, the research applies different data collection methods including content analysis of curriculum vitae of participants, interview and questionnaire of social network. The results indicate apparent differences between experts and novices regarding not only the amount of social network but also its type: the experts have both internal and external networks, the latter serving as the most important strategic sources of information, whereas for the novices the “immediate environment of the company” (289) plays the critical role. Furthermore, the experts intentionally construct their social sources for their professional development and have several transitions in their working history.

Weber and her colleagues applied the theory of Achtenhagen in their study (293-313) on the key-competencies module of the bachelor program for business students. The paper begins with explaining the basic concept for the problem-based learning (PBL) module, posts the research questions as: “do the students recognize and perceive the opportunities offered by the open PBL environment, how the different dimensions

of the new PBL module relate to each other, as well as did the students perceive some moves into the intended direction considering the focused key-competencies" (301). Using questionnaire, a sample of 258 students is left. Through factor analysis, the results demonstrate that students had learned most regarding aspects of key-competencies such as "academic writing", "presentation", "teamwork", but not so much related to "argumentation" (305). Both positive and negative correlation among factors can also be seen in the results concerning the second research question, suggesting "a more individualized learning facilitation" (307). Further results also indicate that students perceive focused key-competencies and soft skills as significant.

Six papers in part five concern the political and institutional aspects framing VET research.

Buttler deals with mainly three topics which are interrelated in his paper (361-370). In the first part the author comments on some economic theories (like human capital theory, principal-agent-theory, and path dependency theory) relevant to competence learning and gives some suggestions on the basis for competence research, including, for instance, study on both the acquisition and the loss of competencies shall be encouraged. In the second part some developing trends in gainful occupation are described and it is deduced that to catch up with these developments, the "openness of entry, capacity and permeability" of the education system are crucial factors; the core notion of the paper is also drawn from the process, namely "learning make people grow large and strong" (365-366). The third theme is social inclusion. Mainly based on OECD report and PISA study, the author comes to three major conclusions from an international perspective: (a) the awareness that path dependencies of learning arises a lot earlier than at compulsory school age exist internationally; (b) the illusion, that family is the only institution of providing preschool learning and taking care of compulsory school children, has to be abandoned; (c) all current efforts to maintain and develop employability by means of continuing vocational education are internationally not very effective (368).

Through conducting questionnaires in higher professional colleges in the Netherlands, Reenalda, Nijhof, Veldkamp-De Jong and Veldkamp show in their study (371-383) that compared to factors such as personality characteristics, gender, age as well as previous learning, which have very limited affect on students' developments, the learning environment is of great significance in competency developments of the students.

In general the papers in this book present many interesting VET researches in different domains, applying a wide range of methods and showing interesting results. This variety on the one hand enables the book to cover a broad spectrum of VET researches, on the other hand there is however lack of depth in each aspect and the quality of the papers also varies from each other. Meanwhile, partly due to the extensive volume of the book, the relationship among different topics is to a certain degree not clearly presented. At some points a lack of clarity in format and pattern can be seen (for instance on page 308), it would be more reader-friendly if these aspects can also be improved. Researchers and practitioners working in different domains of VET may find the articles either inspirational for their own researches or useful in their daily praxis. With its high degree of diversity of topics and

methodologies, this book therefore presents a special contribution to the field and the community of vocational education and training.

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