

The Divide Between Vocational and Academic Education and How We Might Be Able to Repair the Rift

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Abstract:

The following article provides a historical perspective to the notion there is a divide between academic and vocational education and training (VET). The author explores the biases held by parents, teachers, administrators and policy-makers toward VET, and provides explanations of why these views might be held. Even though positive changes have been made in promoting VET there still remains an undercurrent of negative discourse. The autobiographical approach of the article provides the writer with the means to challenge the negative perspectives, and presents a personal view into how VET might be vindicated from denigrating attitudes.

Keywords: vocational education and training (VET), academics, curriculum, assessment, differences.

What do you want to be when you grow up? This is a question asked of children countless times. I had four major career choices, amongst many minor ones, like most children, but the ones that persistently came to the forefront were a skidder operator, the owner-operator of my family's logging business, a teacher, and in later years, a psychologist.

My parents believed that getting an education would open doors and opportunities which were never afforded to them, my father with a grade six education and my mother a grade ten. His lack of formal education always surprised me as my dad was extremely adept at math and designed, engineered and constructed roads and bridges, among other things. My mother was a whiz at math and bookkeeping, and a person who loved to read everything from mysteries to the classics.

From a young age I was told to go on to university or college. My father would jokingly say I had to get a university education so I could become the first female finance minister of Canada, reasoning I can operate efficiently in a deficit. Listening to my parents' wishes, I did enroll in community college in the early 1980's and completed most of my University Transfer program taking mainly option classes including psychology, sociology, history and geography, with the idea of becoming a psychologist. Funnily enough, my career path would take a 180-degree turn, and I ended up enrolling in hairdressing school, and I completed that program over 30 years ago. I worked in the hair styling industry where I finally earned my Red Seal/Journeyperson accreditation in 2007, and since then, I have taught hairstyling in a trade school and as support staff in a high school setting. Possessing my journeyperson credential gave me the opportunity to become a certified teacher through the CTS (Career and Technology Studies) Bridge to Teacher Certification Program, a joint initiative between Alberta Education and the University of Alberta. Through this program, accredited journeypersons can complete a teacher preparation program with a major in Career and Technology Studies (CTS) where they can earn a Bachelor of Education degree while at the same time teaching under a Ministry of Education letter of authority in their subject specialization (Alberta Education, 2016a). As a result of participating in the program, in 2012, I received my Bachelor of Education degree in Secondary Education. This long, meandering road eventually led me to the university education my parents so desperately wanted for me.

Along the way there were many conversations around the topic of the benefits of people going to university, or not. There were also many opinions offered about the importance of children enrolling in trade school programs offered in high school. Contrary to my father's steadfast belief in the importance of a university education, on the occasions he worked with university students he would quite often comment on their inability to see the big picture, and was surprised at how they could not transfer their book knowledge to real-world applications. Luckily, I was able to juxtapose academia and the trades by becoming a cosmetology high school teacher, and was able to merge the two worlds of academics and trades in such a way that demonstrates the importance of both.

Nonetheless, there still appears to be a divide between the two camps, and one where academics have been given a higher social and educational value to that of the trades. Using document analysis combined with an autobiographical methodology approach, I will examine the binary perspectives between academic and vocational education and training (VET), provide historical context, and explore the implications as they pertain to how vocational education is approached, implemented and valued in our schools today. The question that arises is: Can VET be promoted to higher esteem to equal the positioning of

academic education so as to demonstrate to parents, fellow teachers and colleagues, administrators, and policy-makers the importance of vocational education, and if so, how?

Literature Review

The Vocational-Academic Divide

Vocational education and training and academic educational pursuits have been on opposing sides for many years. Rose (2014) suggests that, since the times of Hellenic Greece, there has been a rift between the two. Although vocations like shipbuilding, carpentry and cooperage were necessary for the actual running of the country, philosophers like Aristotle and Plato had less than complimentary attitudes towards these trades. As Rose (2014) indicates, Plato scoffed at the idea of craftspeople becoming philosophers, seeing them as “warped and maimed; [that] such men are incapable of culture” (as quoted on p. 13).

The idea of tradespeople and crafters seen as less valued, having less intellect and therefore incapable of abstract thought and problem solving pervaded many cultures including ancient Rome and Imperial China (Billett, 2014; Rose, 2014). Billett (2014) provides a fair historical analysis of how tradespeople, and their crafting abilities, have been seen as less than important from the point of view of those in power, from members of society who came from more affluent backgrounds, from prominent families and from the clergy—as illustrated in Billett’s historical example of monastic traditions wherein the lay members would complete the manual work leaving the ordained monks and nuns time for contemplation and study. Another example of an academic hierarchy presented in a more contemporary construct is the Hope-Goldthorpe Occupational list of occupational status: this scale is broken into seven categories with “high-grade professionals, managers, administrators, and large proprietors” at the top, “semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers” at the bottom, and “skilled manual workers” one step above the bottom (Billett, 2014, p. 6).

Perceptions of the working classes and tradespeople coming from a lower social status has prevailed throughout history with the views of these people having the inability to negotiate complex thought and analytical cognition. Indeed, the division is often referred to as manual versus mindful, that is to say vocational versus academic (Billett, 2014). Such notions are ubiquitous today, and are evident in schools and post-secondary institutions, and are maintained by teachers, education policy makers and by parents (Rose, 2014, 2008; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010).

It is not uncommon to see children of doctors, lawyers, or teachers becoming doctors, lawyers, or teacher themselves. Parents who have attended post-secondary institutions and who have earned degrees want their children to do the same. For many parents the choice is obvious, and having their children adhere to the educational order is expected with little choice given to the contrary. Very few children from these families consider VET as an alternative to a university education. By contrast, children of parents from a vocational background have a higher enrollment in the vocational education stream. In addition, parents from an academic background can often afford to send their children to university, whereas children whose parents are in a lower economic status might not be presented the same options, and if they do go to university have a tendency to dropout due to financial

constraints (Drolet, 2005; Levine & Sutherland, 2013; Raty & Kasanen, 2010; Simmons, 2008; Raty, Leinonen & Snellman, 2002).

Historical Context

Lyons, Randhawa, and Paulson (1991) provide a historical perspective of VET in Canada. Because Canada fashioned its education system after the British model, a paradigm that stressed the importance of academics over that of vocational schooling, the Canadian government was required to look elsewhere for skilled tradespeople. Other European countries had a venerated history of skilled workers; Canada did not, and relied on immigrants to fill the employment void. Although the provinces had the constitutional responsibility to manage education and training, the federal government did initiate training programs and provided funding.

One such program was the Agricultural Act of 1912, agriculture being shared by both jurisdictions, and many other programs followed, including the Technical Education Act of 1919, enacted to encourage vocational education throughout Canada (Lyons, Randhawa & Paulson, 1991). A lack of technological preparedness of Canada during the First World War provided the federal government with the opportunity for jurisdictional involvement with the provinces when allocating funding and initiating programs for vocational education and training. After the First World War, VET development fell by the wayside under provincial care due to volatile federal funding support and programs not meeting local vocation training and employment requirements (Lyons, Randhawa & Paulson, 1991).

The Second World War left European infrastructure in a state of shambles, with limited financial resources to rebuild, and with many unemployed skilled tradespeople (Lyons, Randhawa & Paulson, 1991). The Canadian government saw an opportunity to have skilled immigrants fill the vocational employment shortfall, thus avoiding the need to fund and promote VET programs. Because of this short-sightedness, after World War II, Canada was left playing a game of catch-up, and vocational programs once abandoned were again allocated funding. By the 1960's and 1970's, courses were re-introduced at a high school level and VET was promoted by provincial and federal governments once again. Unfortunately, the confusing funding policies and inconsistent work programs which were initiated by the federal government were later withdrawn, thus leaving the provinces financially responsible for the VET programs. Many provinces could not afford VET programs and as a result they were terminated. The federal government funding was then re-allocated and funnelled into academic areas (Lyons, Randhawa & Paulson, 1991).

Money remained controlled by those in power, and as Rose (2014) suggests, these administrators and governmental policy makers were themselves a product of an academic pedagogical background, inculcated into believing academic studies as superior to VET. Lynch (2000) describes this attitude of superiority as:

an elitist view that says any formal context of education for work is not appropriate for students aspiring to a four-year college or university; and . . . a general perception that vocational education will inhibit rather than enhance youth's future career and educational choices. (p. 157)

Despite these attitudes, VET provided opportunities for Canadians from rural communities, returning soldiers, and interested students wishing to learn a trade as an alternative to academic studies. At times, many countries including Belgium, Canada, Israel, and the United States believed VET would provide prospects to people that might not otherwise be offered (Lynch, 2000; Raichel, 2013; Sharpe & Curwen 2012; Stevens &

Vermeersch (2010). For example, in Israel, VET was once considered an important element in the building of the newly formed State of Israel. Raichel (2013) explains: "Education for productivity was primarily expressed in the establishment of vocational high schools," and "education for work was glorified" (p. 559). However, by the 1980's, the perspective in Israel changed and vocational schooling was again less desirable. A shift of values had prevailed, and academics became highly vetted. Vocational schools in Israel became a holding place for immigrants and were stigmatized as a "place for failures" (Raichel, 2013, p. 559).

Similarly, Lynch (2000) contends that VET, in the United States, has "suffered from an image of a dumbed-down curriculum . . . [that] programs were often targeted primarily to educationally disadvantaged students" (p. 157). VET classrooms have been used as a space to house difficult students with academic and behavioural issues, those at-risk of dropping out, children from single parent or lower income families, and a space to socialize and educate immigrants (Raichel, 2013; Rose, 2014). Stevens and Vermeersch (2010) concluded that students in the Flemish vocational stream have been seen as less teachable, more disruptive, and less likely to learn. VET has been "considered the sink or "dustbin" of secondary education, composed of students who are either unable or unwilling to live up to the expectations of general education" (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010, p. 279). Why does such a prejudiced mind-set exist, and more importantly how can it be changed?

Discussion

This question of how vocational education has been denigrated, and it may be promoted in esteem, can be answered from several different viewpoints. On a personal level, and as a tradesperson myself, I must consider the possibility that the continued divide is a product of my own making. By not promoting my trade as more than a manual enterprise, I continue to extend the prejudicial belief, held by many, that trades people are just manual labourers. However, my skill as a credentialed hairstylist extends beyond the scope of just "doing" hair. Like me, many hairstylists are competent in managing businesses, cash flows, scheduling, and marketing. Further knowledge is required in anatomy, biology, chemistry, art, design, and communication. The next question is: Am I a product of the educational policies and program of studies (curriculum) which, in my opinion, further widen the chasm between academics and vocational education? The simple answer is yes; the more complex answer is yes.

My review of the literature highlights the importance of considering vocational teachers' backgrounds. Many, again like me, were in the trades before they became teachers. We are experts in our respective fields, and we are products of the system we were trained in. For me, the difference between teaching at a trade school and a high school became apparent with how students at each school were taught; in my case, in hairdressing, teaching has been based on an ideological belief that "vocational teachers are committed to values and practices linked directly to the workplace" (Kemmis & Green, 2013, p. 118).

In a trade school, rote learning, practice, and memorization is paramount to the success of the student passing exams, including the provincial licensing exam. Students punch in a time clock because attaining the required hours is a prerequisite to completing the course. The instructor is considered the expert who will provide the skills and knowledge of the trade, and to be successful, students are required to follow the instructors' directions

to the letter. There are little provisions provided for differentiated instruction and a one-size-fits-all instructional mentality prevails, which means those students requiring extra assistance are often left behind their classmates. The bottom line of a trade school is to make sure the trade is protected and continues to produce like-minded, efficient, and skilled workers. The teacher/worker approach of these tradespeople follows them into their pedagogical practices wherein high schools are viewed as both a training ground and a place of work, and students are considered to be tradespeople in training. Kemmis and Green (2013) have suggested similar outcomes in their research, stating,

They [vocational educators] are teachers of the knowledge, skills and values they practiced in their occupation, and they [want] to introduce their students to these not just as adornments but as necessities as a way of life and work – the work and life of the vocation. (p. 19)

It is worthwhile to realize that not all teachers in VET share the same position as mentioned above. Unfortunately, negative pedagogical practices and attitudes can be presented in the classrooms of teachers involved in VET if they adapt their pedagogy and curriculum to align with the expectation that vocational students are not as able as their academic counterparts. As Stevens and Vermeersch (2010) report, altering teaching pedagogy reflects the idea that students in a vocation stream are “less able, more disruptive and less interested in schooling compared to students in technical and general education streams” (p. 279). Additionally, they note that teachers adapt the curriculum to reflect their beliefs that vocational students are less than their academic peers by altering “their instruction style by lowering the instruction pace, and by explaining the course material repeatedly and in different ways, to make the course more interesting and accessible to students in a lower status stream” (p. 275).

There also appears to be a subsisting biased system of categorization with respect to how students are admitted into academics or vocational classes, wherein the conflict between hand and mind, brawn and brain, and manual and mental education persists. Rose (2008) enumerates these biases. To start, Rose notes that the introduction of I.Q. tests and aptitude tests created a systematic way of streaming children into either academics or vocational streams (see p. 634). Beyond the scientific justification of applying quantitative measurements to stream students into different tracks of education, students have also been streamed by social class, gender, and race, which also leads to a hierarchical positioning of academics on the top and vocations on the bottom. A layering effect of further stratification within VET has seen females placed in clerical and home economic classes, and racial minorities excluded from more lucrative training courses. Perhaps most troubling has been the blatant exhibition of exclusion of racial minorities and children from a working-class background into an academic stream even though they had similar records of achievement. In my experience, the biases that Rose points out, still trouble VET.

The limited scope of Alberta Education’s (2016d) cosmetology courses learner outcomes versus the learner outcomes of the social studies courses (Alberta Education, 2016d) provides another example of mind verses manual. The actual descriptor words used in the program of studies connote a suggestion that further investigation is required in the social studies curriculum, deeper thought, including synthesis, and using reasoning to denote a possible outcome. On the other hand, in cosmetology, the students only delve into lower order thinking, regurgitating memorized terms and phrases that, in turn, will fulfill the learner outcomes.

Regrettably, most VET taught in schools is based upon rote learning and memorization. The end product is the capability to pass a test based on tasks that have

been repeated over and over again. For example, the Alberta Advanced Education's (2016) Apprenticeship and Industry Training hairstyling practical exam requires the candidate to perform a number of techniques including colour application, a taper haircut, and a permanent wave wrap, among other hair services. The candidate has practiced these techniques repeatedly either on a live model or on a mannequin. There is only one correct way to complete these services, and examiners will deduct points if there is a deviation from the acceptable way. It is akin to following a recipe—repeat the steps, and produce a product. If you do not perform the tasks properly, your product will not turn out, and you will fail. In my opinion, the exam provides only a partial assessment of what is required to be a hairstylist. In fact, the exam ignores many of the undertakings which a hairstylist would perform on a daily basis, such as analyzing hair, developing formulas, and problem-solving, not to mention the social skills required to maintain, retain and attract new clients.

Social studies diploma exams present an entirely different approach. Alberta Education (2016b) provides the example of a social studies grade 12 diploma exam in which students are to read a given series of sources and a political cartoon on the topic of capitalism. They are then required to write an essay demonstrating their ability to interpret the material, and exhibit an understanding of how each source links to the topic, and then explain one or more of the relationships that exist among all three sources. Quite a different scenario from the expectations in the hairstyling practical exam, and one that epitomizes the divide created between vocational and academic knowledge—and again emphasizing the differentiation between the two educational streams by bringing home the notion of work and mind, and how we need to reassess the way we view knowledge and skill.

Because the two types of education have a legacy of distinct paths whereby separate curricula, assessment, teacher training, professional organizations and funding were developed, and is now so deeply and philosophically entrenched, bringing the two together is met with resistance (Rose, 2008). Collaboration is required between academic and vocational teachers to improve students' learning, and professional development becomes essential if vocational education is to be promoted to a higher status. However, many times the task is too difficult as pedagogical practices are deep-rooted and difficult to alter, and often the task proves too arduous. Both academic and vocational teachers are set in their ways, and newly trained academic teachers are ill prepared to cross interdisciplinary boundaries due of lack of instruction from teacher education programs. As a result, neither parties are affecting any positive change when it comes to teaching vocational courses (Rose, 2014). However, there is headway occurring in this respect, as witnessed with the aforementioned CTS Bridge to Teacher Certification Program.

Additional initiatives have been introduced that can bridge the two camps. In 2013, a Ministerial Order was introduced by then Minister of Education, Jeff Johnson (Alberta Education, 2016c). The order lessens the focus on teaching competencies in education and puts more emphasis "on inquiry, discovery and the application of knowledge than on the dissemination of information" (para. 4), and states that learning should focus on "inquiry, reflection, exploration, experimentation and trial and error" (para. 7). Cross-curricular development is also emphasized, promoting literacy and numeracy between all courses. Through inquiry-based learning and cross-curricular development, courses can be created that combine aspects of both VET and academics. Lynch (2000) and Saunders and Chrisman (2011) provide examples from the United States of partnerships between academics and vocational courses in a high school setting. Lynch (2000) advocates for the program *High Schools That Work*, suggesting the importance and the success of students in this program

lies in the ability of educators to link the importance of academic and vocational education. Similarly, Saunders and Chrisman (2011) report on programs such as *Linked Learning*, which also stresses the demand to combine academic and vocational courses by having schools provide real-world applications for course-relevant knowledge. They further suggest that implementing such types of school will disavow the segregation and social discriminations vocational students often face (p. 20).

Teachers are aware that a well-rounded education can require basic skills, but the basics should be presented in such a way that moves students away from repetitive learning and low-level taxonomic knowledge to a level that provides context and abstract application to what they have learned. Teacher training programs should include introductions to inquiry-based learning and employ syllabi that involve the research and development of integrated curriculum and lesson plans. It would involve making “unfamiliar connections: the historian investigating the health care or travel industry” (Rose, 2014, p. 17), or the cosmetology student exploring the French Revolution, social status and its effect on hairstyles of that era.

Researchers Backes-Gellner and Geel (2014) provide information for parents and others suggesting that vocational graduates entering the work force have greater employment prospects than academic graduates with the risk of unemployment lower over the long term. They point out that, initially, vocational graduates make more money upon entering the work force, though after a period of five years they make an income comparable to that of academic graduates (p. 281). They note that employers are searching for potential employees who are the product of the VET system, as they prove to be more skilled, do not have to be re-trained, and are ready to start work immediately upon graduation, whereas “academic graduates first need to complement their general knowledge with occupation-specific qualifications” (p. 281). A European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) report regarding vocational education in Sweden notes that “education and training are not just about developing human capital – someone’s knowledge, skills and competences; they develop social, cultural and identity, as well as human capital” (CEDEFOP, 2013, p. 40).

I have been a tradesperson for thirty-plus years and a certificated teacher for four years. During that time, I have witnessed and been on the receiving end of notions that academics are more important than vocational education. I have had interactions with professors, teachers, and fellow students who do not hold VET in high regard, and on occasion have been shunned for being a vocational education teacher. The belief I have maintained throughout all these interactions is my steadfast conviction that those of us who are part of VET carry with us an innate knowledge that cannot be solely procured from books. We have been provided with a foundation of skills, which afford us the ability to question, explore and evaluate the importance of different learning experiences. Although progress is transpiring in understanding and eradicating the negative perceptions of vocational education and its participants, there are improvements to be made.

If vocational education is to be elevated to the level of academic education, a few suggestions should be implemented. Courses have to be developed that incorporate all types of education, and administrators and policy-makers should realize that we are not living in a world consisting of two bubbles—academic and vocational. Parents must be made aware that their children will not suffer financially or cognitively because they chose to be in a profession where they might have to get their hands dirty. Universities and post-secondary institutions must realize that the doors should be open to all those who aspire to a higher education.

In the halls of the academy, pre-service teachers and those wishing to teach vocational education should not be relegated to the basement of the post-secondary institution with ill-equipped classrooms and antiquated tools. Funding for, and the promotion of vocational education should have an equal footing with academics—the elitist mentality of academia needs to be discarded. There must be a re-education and promotion of the benefits of trades and VET to the public and to parents. Saunders and Chrisman (2011) express my thoughts succinctly: “Perhaps most critically, policymakers, educators, [parents], and students must believe that given the right environment, all students can master complex academic and technical [vocational] concepts” (p. 21). Vocational teachers need to rise up and take their rightful place, not in front of or behind academic teachers, but beside them. Vocational educators have to self-promote and express that we have multiple intelligences that go beyond the boundaries of our trades’ professions.

Throughout my years of work, I have formed some opinions about vocational and academic education. Many of my opinions have been justified by the research presented in the contents of this paper, I have presented a number of ideas about promoting the status of vocational education, many of which I practice in my classroom. I have altered my pedagogical stance incorporating the importance of higher level cognition in my lessons. Moving forward, a process of open dialogue, discussion, and more input from teachers when designing VET curriculum, is imperative.

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