

Book review

Stevenson, John (ed.) 2003, *Developing vocational expertise: Principles and issues in vocational education*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Reviewer: Gail E. FitzSimons, Faculty of Education, Monash University

The back cover of this book describes it as offering a systematic foundation for vocational education and training and providing a theoretical basis for teachers and trainers to develop instructional strategies. The book consists of an edited collection of chapters written by the team of directors/lecturers/researchers at the Centre for Learning Research, Griffith University, Queensland — well known for its high standard of annual international post-compulsory education and training conferences for over a decade, as well as for the important contribution of its members to VET research.

According to the Introduction, this book is aimed at 'researchers in the field of vocational education and training, teachers and trainers seeking to understand and improve teaching and learning practices, and policy makers seeking to improve the quality of vocational education and training' (p. xiii). Its primary focus 'is on synthesising approaches to teaching and learning in vocational education' (p. xiv), and examining knowledge and meanings currently being targeted in the VET sector. It draws in a variety of theoretical perspectives, including activity theory, cognitive psychology, and discourse theory.

The book consists of three parts: Part I, Vocational expertise and its development; Part II, Developing vocational expertise for key pursuits; and Part III, Emerging challenges in instructional delivery. Following a brief introduction by John Stevenson which gives a concise overview of the whole book, Part I, also written by Stevenson, sets the foundations. The first chapter opens with a discussion of the concept of expertise for the workplace, and the second chapter explores the concepts of vocational teaching and learning in context. Part II, written by individual specialists, consists of six chapters which focus on developing literacy, numeracy, information literacy, problem-solving skills, and creativity, concluding with a chapter entitled 'Working values'. Part III embraces more

holistic approaches to the areas of flexible learning, guided learning, and concludes with an integration of the research from the previous chapters.

Setting the tone for the book, in the introduction it is argued that:

vocational expertise involves a meaningfulness that connects problems encountered in workplaces and in other individual and societal pursuits, and that it consists of a facility with situated, normative meanings that include both propositional and procedural knowledge. (pp. xiv-xv)

Chapter one concludes with a summary of eleven ideas about expertise, and a figure expressing the relationships of expertise and meaning — further developed in chapter two to include learning principles. The chapter's conclusion also points the way to later chapters, warning that it is not possible to proceed from generic labels of the kinds taken as denoting key competencies (in Australia, at least) to a view that these capacities may be taught as such. In essence, the book offers a theoretically well founded challenge to simplistic and unproblematic notions of transfer and competence development.

The chapters generally follow a similar pattern of introduction to the topic and layout of the chapter, a critical synthesis of research relating the topic to the workplace — enriched by original interpretations based upon the recent research of each author, implications for practice — curriculum development, teaching, and learning, a conclusion, and chapter references. The important features that I found helpful include the broad overviews, the definition and explanation of key terms, discussions of the major issues and, finally, the highlighting of key points and end-of-chapter summaries. I appreciated the links made between theory and the practice of the VET trainer in the case study in the chapter by Stephen Billett.

How well does the book achieve its aims?

As a lecturer in an undergraduate adult learning and development programme, I would recommend the book to my students to browse from, in addition to including more generic chapters such as Chapter 2, 'Vocational teaching and learning in context' as required reading for my subject of Program Design and Delivery. In other words, the book could be usefully included in reading lists for adult and vocational education students and lecturers, as well as for students undertaking practice-related masters or doctoral research projects in this field. For teachers and trainers who have little experience of academic reading, individual chapters could provide the basis for fruitful discussions among interest groups, as a form of professional development. The book would certainly be an asset to the libraries of policy makers — relevant chapters at least — in preparation for new policy proposals, changes in policy direction, or new research funding rounds.

A minor criticism is that, although the book was first published in 2003 and claims to draw on recent research, there are few listed references published since 2000 — which is a little surprising at first glance, particularly in areas that are developing rapidly, such as information literacy, adult numeracy, and literacy for the workplace. However, this might reflect the need for further theoretical development in these areas. Also,

given the shared institutional background of all the authors, there seems to be a certain repetitiveness in the messages, on reading the book from cover to cover, highlighted in the final chapter. Yet, most chapters are clearly designed to be stand-alone readings, so perhaps this is an unavoidable consequence.

Activity theory as interpreted by Yrjö Engeström is frequently and usefully called upon as a framework of reference for linking theory with practice in industrial and educational workplaces. However, one of his main contentions is that for expansive learning to take place there is a need for dialogue between all participants. I would really like to see a subsequent volume which addresses the tensions and contradictions between the synthesis of research underpinning the implications for curriculum development, teaching, and learning, and their enactment in the day-to-day realities of teaching in TAFE institutes, workplace training and community settings. In other words, working with VET practitioners and their students in order for the 'context to speak back' — to use a phrase coined by Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons (2001).

Overall, the book *Developing vocational expertise: Principles and issues in vocational education* comes highly recommended for its breadth and depth of analysis and critique in this developing research field.

Reference

Nowotny, H, Scott, P, and Gibbons, M 2001, *Re-thinking science: Knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty*, Polity Press, Cambridge.