

Sustainability of what and for whom?: unlocking the educational, democratic, and disruptive potential of VET

Lorna Unwin

**UCL Institute of Education,
London**



VET as a 'change agent'

Can we create John Dewey's (1915) vision of

'a kind of vocational education which will first alter the existing industrial system, and ultimately transform it'?

This could help us resist a **restrictive** approach to sustainability.




Who do we need as we float away to a new place to live?

- Plumber
- Carpenter
- Dressmaker
- Engineer
- Biologist
- Farmer
- Data analyst
- Hairdresser/Barber
- VET teacher
- Chef
- Baker
- Weaver
- Lawyer
- Nurse
- Gardener
- Musician
- Potter
- Novelist

**“Imagination, interest,
discovery and understanding
are in all good work.”**

**Chairman of the Consultative Committee on
Classes for Textile Distributors, London
County Council, 1926**

**Unsettling
continuities
hidden behind
smokescreen of
taken-for-
granted
categorisations**

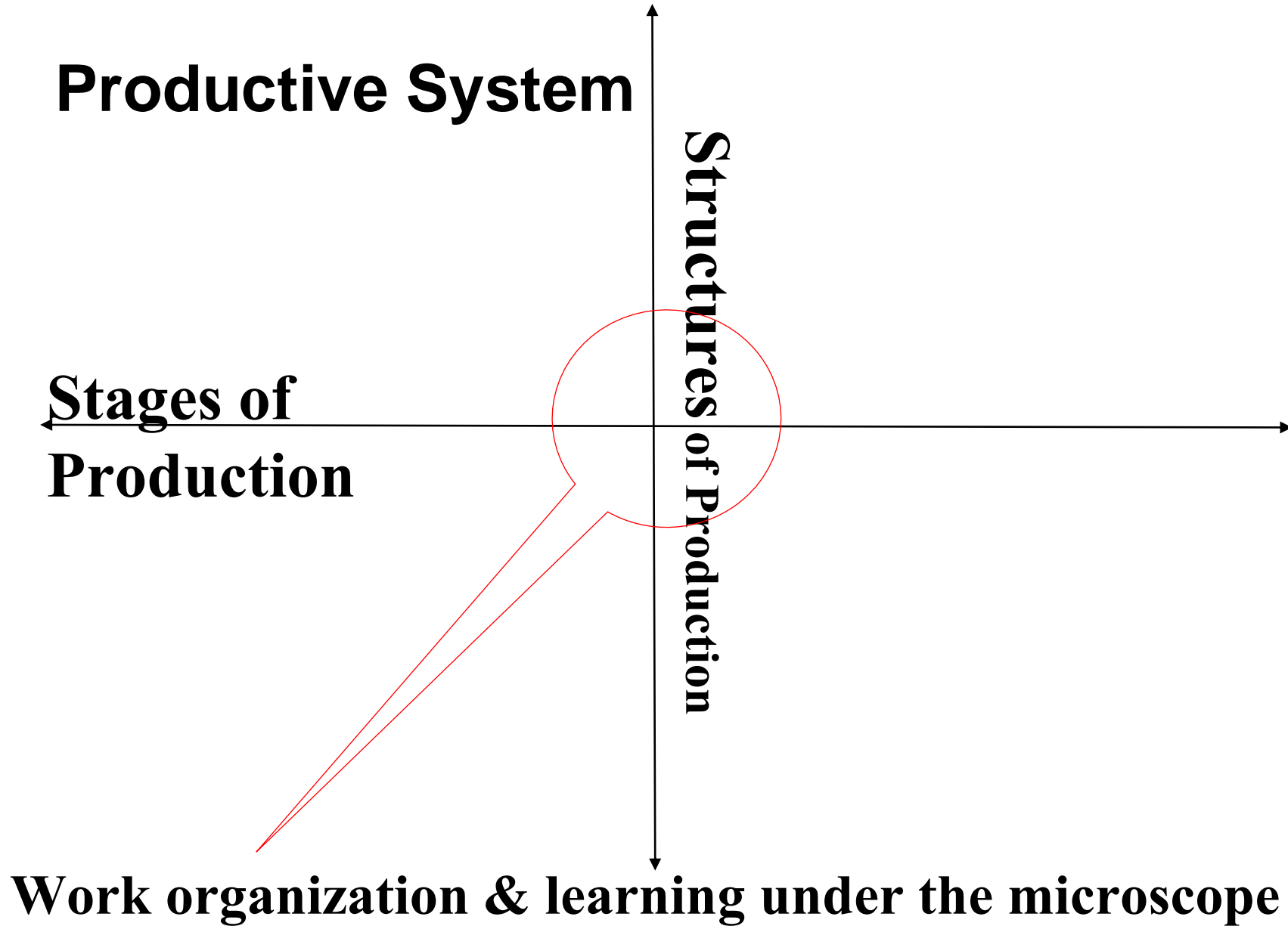
- ‘Job crafting’ (Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001 cited in Fuller and Unwin 2017) and ‘niche craft’ (Schwalbe 2010) – people break out of restrictive job roles to utilise their expertise – from hospital porters to academics
 - (De/Re)valuing of certain types of jobs until society discovers it needs them – in UK, lorry drivers have seen their wages rise considerably due to Covid pandemic
 - Gender stereotyping of job tasks and VET programmes
 - Big differences in way workplaces are organized and managed – display expansive and restrictive characteristics (Fuller & Unwin 2010)
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**Expertise as
autonomous
and attributed
(Kuhn and
Rennstam
2016 – cited in
Guile and
Unwin 2022)**

- **Autonomous** - expert acquires relevant training and accumulates experience to be able to perform at a level superior to a novice
- **Attributed** - label of expert is afforded by relevant others
- Expertise is a **negotiated** and **contingent** phenomenon whose meaning and status is constantly in flux.
- Individuals need to **communicate** their expertise through their practice in order to be acknowledged as experts.

Aerospace engineering and hairdressing apprentices – action-based conception of pedagogy

- Communicating with a range of internal and external actors affords recognition of expertise beyond trainers/teachers
- Conversations between clients and between clients and stylists create ‘participation structures that invite engagement with complex problem solving’ – this informs pedagogical practices in the VET schools (Majors 2015,5)
- Aerospace workplaces overturn concept of the ‘novice’ by developing apprentices’ capacity for problem-solving through early immersion in production/project teams – expected to contribute ideas and to solving disputes (Lahiff et.al. 2019).



Insights from Economic Geography

Jeannerat & Crevoisier's (2011) case study of the Swiss Watch Industry's response to Japanese competition in 1980s

- focused on authenticity and aesthetic appeal of their historic craft tradition
- deployed new synthetic knowledge to institute cross-industry technological improvements and modularise production.
- collaborated with the fashion industry and other producers of luxury goods to broaden the types and levels of expertise required to shift into a new way of working.
- combination of craft heritage and modern technology - long-standing VET practices of skill formation + learning new techniques required to meet new production standards.

Challenges for VET pedagogy, policy and research

- Workplace change reflects shift away from individual towards collective conceptions of expertise.
- Occupational expertise - dynamic, mysterious and evolving phenomenon demands constant attention. VET teachers and trainers need space, time and resources to sustain and enhance their professional expertise.
- VET overly dependent on labour market projections based on long-standing job demarcation – e.g. craft worker, manual worker, technician, managerial, etc.
- VET evolves whilst still being anchored in shared traditions and values, but needs to draw on and collaborate with people, places and ideas beyond its current comfort zones.

Everywhere is somebody's workplace

- What is YOUR WORKPLACE like as a learning environment?
- How much discretion do you have to organize and evaluate your own work and affect organizational change?
- Why are some workplaces more conducive to learning?
- Educational institutions are workplaces – so how does their learning culture affect curriculum and pedagogy?

Expansive – Restrictive Framework for VET sustainability

Expansive Characteristics

- VET framed as holistic and dynamic model of learning across the lifecourse.
- VET's lifeblood is the dynamic phenomenon of occupational expertise.
- VET develops learner agency to challenge outdated work organisation and practices.
- VET learns from embraces workplace innovation.
- Building workplace capacity seen as prerequisite for ensuring VET can reach its goals.
- VET programmes build a platform for educational and occupational progression – vertical and horizontal.
- VET institutions incentivised to collaborate with employers/sector bodies on innovative programme design collaborative projects.

Restrictive characteristics

- VET framed as vehicle for developing competences in young people based on strictly defined occupational standards.
- VET shapes learners to fit in with existing work practices and cultures.
- VET is slow to respond to workplace innovation.
- VET programmes build a permeable platform for educational and occupational progression within limited occupational and educational boundaries.
- VET institutions funded to recruit learners, meet assessment requirements, and meet employer/sector body needs.

VET in Austria – policy and practice

- Where does it sit on the expansive-restrictive continuum?
- What would help to move it closer to the expansive end?
- What factors are pulling it away from being more expansive?

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Still interested????

- Please email me – l.unwin@ucl.ac.uk
- And many thanks for giving me the honour of speaking to you!