Reflections on vocational Bildung didactics in vocational teacher education: two case studies

Ruhi Tyson, PhD student
Stockholm University, Department of Education

1. Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) is a matter of teaching skills and the knowledge needed to perform vocational tasks. However, it is also about educating reflective practitioners (Schön 1983, 1987), supporting moral development and vocational ethics (Tyson 2015b, Corsten & Lempert 1997) and educating for the development of competences or key-qualifications (Rauner & Bremer 2004). These latter issues have been repeatedly argued on a philosophical or policy level and it has been established that the major part of this takes place in conjunction with skill-training and cannot be separated off from it (Rauner and Bremer 2004). There has been less work devoted to examining how such educational processes are encouraged and enacted, i.e. their didactical aspects.

In previous research (Tyson 2015a, 2015b), part of which was presented at last years ECER/VET-NET (Didactical narratives as part of educating for vocational excellence: articulating relationships between techne and phronesis), I have argued that these issues can be conceptualized as vocational Bildung and explored empirically as a form of practical didactical knowledge narratively articulated as stories of vocational Bildung-experiences and affordances. The aim of this paper is to continue on the same line of inquiry with a presentation of further empirical research. This research is an attempt to take the concept of vocational Bildung didactics (VBD) and introduce it into two academically based vocational teacher education programs (one focusing on nursing teachers and one encompassing a multitude of different vocational teachers). This is a way of exploring how the conceptual framework developed can be brought back to practitioners and also to examine the ways in which this kind of inquiry changes as it transforms from an extensive single biographical case study into two less elaborate multiple case studies.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

The theoretical framework for this is located in the field of phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg 2001, Schram 2012) where the focus is not foremost to produce theory but to contribute to phronesis/practical wisdom in both social practice and social science. To characterize it Flyvbjerg writes (2001, p. 167):

The goal of the phronetic approach becomes one of contributing to society’s capacity for value-rational deliberation and action. The contribution may be a combination of concrete empirical analyses and practical philosophical considerations; “fieldwork in philosophy” as Pierre Bourdieu calls it.

This accurately describes the approach of vocational Bildung didactics. The practical philosophical considerations have resulted in the conceptual framework described in the next paragraph. The empirical case studies have both contributed to that process and resulted from it. The basic aim is to increase understanding of an element, roughly delineated as Bildung, in vocational education that is difficult to study empirically.
The conceptual framework for vocational Bildung didactics consists of the techne/phronesis distinction (Biesta 2013, Dunne 1993, Kinsella & Pitmann 2012), narratives as articulated practice (Clandinin & Connelly 1995, Gallagher 2013, McDrury & Alterio 2002, McEwan & Egan 1995, Moon 2010, Tyson 2016b), didactics (Uljens 1997) as an entwined practice of techne and phronesis, cases as units of articulated practical didactical knowledge (Jonsen & Toulmin 1988, Schön 1987) and finally, pedagogical imagination (Tyson 2016a) as the central concept in mediating between general ideas and particular practice, drawing on Schön’s (1987) idea that skilled practitioners have a *repertoire* of previous experiences that they reinterpret to enrich their confrontation with new situations.

To begin with Bildung and vocational Bildung are the traditions that VBD draws on in order to outline the kinds of educational actions and curricula in focus. Bildung is understood as those elements in education that lead to experiences of increased autonomy, coherence, integrity, depth of knowledge and understanding, development of character, ethics and aesthetic sensibility. Klafki (2000, p. 96f. italics in original) summarizes this in a similar manner:

> It should be clear … that [the classical understanding of] Bildung meant above all the awakening of self-determined moral responsibility, a readiness for moral action, and the capacity for moral action. Kant, Pestalozzi, Fichte and Hegel showed complete agreement on this score. And even interpretations of Herder, Goethe, Humboldt, or Froebel that describe their concept of Bildung as being one-sidedly aesthetic, or even aestheticizing, miss the mark.

By emphasizing the vocational two things are achieved. First, the focus of VBD is on various forms of VET rather than primary and secondary education. Second it highlights that vocational education affords experiences of Bildung and makes possible empirical study of how skill training interacts with Bildung experiences, which brings me to the conceptual pair of techne/phronesis.

Techne and phronesis are terms taken from Aristotle (2009) who distinguishes between two forms of practical knowledge. The first, techne, is craft-like in that it requires extensive practice for proficiency and is largely situational meaning that rules cannot be straightforwardly applied, the elements of perception and interpretation are indispensable. It could be described as broadly vocational (Squires 2003). The second, phronesis is most often translated as practical wisdom or prudence and is a form of practical knowledge oriented towards deliberating well or wisely about what promotes the good life (human flourishing) in any given context. VBD focuses on the phronetic aspects of vocational education and vocational practice, practical wisdom being, in a sense, the core of Bildung.

Given the focus on practice, ie. actions, a narrative approach is warranted because the aim is to stay close to the particularity of an event or process not to move into abstractions and generalizations. Narratives have the capacity to evoke action or to describe a curriculum as it is enacted and experienced. Not all practical knowledge is necessarily best captured as narrative. The more craft-like aspects of a teachers’ didactical knowledge is perhaps better made into an object of reflection through video or observation. But Bildung and phronesis related issues suffer from a) often becoming apparent much later, b) arising from unplanned situations, c) being rare, d) often being drawn out processes with interruptions and e) often being invisible to an observer and only available through first-hand accounts. All of these issues, to a greater or lesser extent, contribute to making narrative cases a central part in any didactical inquiry related to Bildung and phronesis.

Didactics is understood here from a practical perspective and covers what is taught, by whom, to whom, how, why, where and when. The point is that the practical perspective focuses the inquiry on actions, either descriptions of enacted Bildung and phronesis made by practitioners or descriptions of experienced Bildung and phronesis told by learners or others.

Cases as units of practical didactical knowledge are a consequence of the narrative approach, each story being a case. The term case narrative is used to clarify that this can be a
report describing an enacted curriculum (cf. Tyson 2016c), an educational biography (Tyson 2015a) or a more straightforward story of a single event (Tyson 2016a).

Finally, pedagogical imagination was described above as the central concept in mediating between general ideas and particular practice (Tyson 2016a). In the present context where the discussion aims at how VBD can contribute to VET programs the main point of emphasis is the enrichment of practitioner repertoires that the cases can provide and such enrichment necessitates imagination in order for someone to a) recognize a case as somehow relevant to a similar situation and b) reimagine that case so that the action is appropriate to the new situation. Imagination and the reflective practice of Schön (1983, 1987) are closely linked in this approach to VBD as part of VET programs because the narratives told (and telling them requires literary imagination as well) are a way of making one of the more tacit parts of vocational didactics available for shared reflection and discussion.

Having briefly introduced VBD as a conceptual framework I can move on to say a few words about the research design and method employed.

3. Research design and method

The research design consists of two multiple case studies where each narrative can be viewed as a case. In both the documentation has been made as a form of written assignment within the context of vocational teacher education. As such it has the strength of being comparatively easy to give to a larger number of people but with the drawback that the narratives become shallower and less reflective than they can be when the documentation method is interviewing.

Each case can contribute to several different viewpoints. As argued by Flyvbjerg (2001), Larsson (2009) and Thomas (2010) there are black swan cases, paradigmatic cases, extreme cases, cases that reveal patterns and information gathering cases that all hold relevance in the general context of VBD. The core precondition has been that each case narrative is unusually enriching, successful, wise, praiseworthy, etc. This has several reasons. First, it helps to ensure that the cases are likely to be extreme and information rich. All of them share the common attribute of being more likely to yield new and interesting knowledge/perspectives to the extent that they deviate from the norm and the expected. Second, it helps focus attention on experiences of Bildung which tend to be those in one’s biography that in retrospect appear richest. Third, the field of study, Bildung and phronesis, is not in any way a neutral field, inquiry into wise practice feeds back into that practice and thus it would be both unwise and unethical not to ask for the wisest and richest cases in order that this feedback can be as powerful as possible. This is also in line with a phronetic perspective where social science research should contribute to the development of practice (Schram 2012). There is a difference here between the initial explorative case of the educational biography of Wolfgang B. and these multiple case studies. In the former I was able to choose a person who was unusually well educated, experienced and reflective. In the latter, one relies rather on the assumption that most of us have at least a few peak experiences that warrant becoming case narratives. The cases received mostly conform to this although far from all seem like they warrant publication.

The ethical ramifications of such narratives are comparatively limited given that they focus on situations of human flourishing. To the extent that they risk exposing someone to harm they need to be adequately anonymized and care still must be taken when deciding if a narrative should be published or not. However, it is a point in itself to be clear that the stories one chooses to tell are ones that one would be comfortable telling also in a public environment. Each participant has been given the opportunity to not have their narrative included in the study and special care was taken regarding the existential Bildung narratives to ensure that these principles were followed given the more sensitive nature that many such stories have.
4. The case studies
The two case studies were designed around slightly different questions relating to vocational Bildung didactics. In the first one conducted with students in a vocational teacher program, the task given was to write about a didactically relevant vocational Bildung experience from their own vocational education. In the second one conducted with students in a nursing teacher program the task given was to write about a didactically relevant existential vocational Bildung experience from their own practice given that a significant part of care-professions is dealing wisely with the pain and suffering of those under care. Both groups were given a short description of the concepts of vocational Bildung didactics together with some examples of case narratives that fit these descriptions. This is an integral part of the approach. The exemplifying case narratives are much more information rich to participants than the more abstract conceptual introduction.

Here are two case narratives, one from each study, in order to give some access to the kind of knowledge expressed in them.

Maj
Case description
Maj lives in a service apartment and is, despite her comparatively young age of 73, severely disabled because of diabetes which, owing to reduced circulation, has forced amputation of both her legs. Maj has found it very difficult to accept this and experiences a lot of anxiety, especially at night time when she tends to lay awake pondering unjust events from her life. She keeps comparing herself to others, eg. look at her, she’s 96 and always seems so happy and content and both her legs remain, why can’t I have it that way? Maj has a large social network despite not having any children of her own with good contact to siblings and their families. She also has many friends who come to visit and they do a lot of fun activities together, theatre and concerts are often on the menu.

Dialogue 1
I: Good evening Maj, you rang the alarm for me? (friendly and inquiring)
M: Good evening to you! (Maj looks happy to see me)
I: So what was on your mind this evening? (throwing a quick glance at the alarm that beeps)
M: Nah, it wasn’t really anything, I’m sure you have lots of others waiting! (Maj seems to become a bit irritated)
I: Tell me what it was you were thinking about, I am here for you now! (Maj often likes a somewhat joking tone so I blink a little with one eye at her and nod in agreement)
M: Well, I’ve got a bit of pain but it’ll probably pass! (Maj doesn’t seem entirely convinced judging by the tone of her voice, she shrugs her shoulders and looks in another direction)
I: But Maj, what are we gonna do about that, you shouldn’t lay here in pain?! (I approach her and take her hand)
M: Give me a pill! (Maj sounds on the verge of tears but clearly shows that she doesn’t want to say more)
I: Ok, is it an OxyNorm you want? (I look at her and she nods and I fetch the pill)
M: Thank you that was kind! But you can hurry on now! (Maj seems a bit annoyed)
I: Are you sure there wasn’t something else Maj, I have time if you want to talk!?
M: No I know you don’t, everything is in such a hurry in the evening nowadays! (Maj has an irritated tone and shows with her entire body that she wants me to leave)
I: Ok Maj I’ll go but promise me you’ll ring the alarm again if the pill doesn’t help or if you want some more company!? Perhaps you want me to look in on you again in a while? (I look at her questioningly)
M: Yeah if you have time for it you can always come back in a while but maybe I’m already sleeping then. (Maj looks sad)
I: Then that’s what I’ll do Maj, I’ll be back within an hour! (I smile a little at Maj and receive a little smile back)

Analysis of first dialogue
In my conversation with Maj I think I start with an open question when asking what’s on her mind. My mistake here is simultaneously casting a glance at the beeping alarm. Maj probably interprets my look as saying that I am stressed by it so that my gaze and my verbal communication don’t really match. This also comes to expression in her reply. In my reply to this I try to encourage her to tell me what she wanted and I try to repair my mistake from before by explaining that I am here for her now. I think what I was trying to do was a simple form of mirroring her feeling that I wouldn’t have time for her by saying that I am here for her now. I also try to add some humor to my verbal sensitivity by nodding in agreement and blinking at her. Maj’s bodily expression when she tells me that she is in pain shows plainly that this is perhaps not the primary cause for her ringing the alarm but that it’s the loneliness that seizes her and that she feels unwanted and in the way. When I take her hand her feelings come into conflict with each other, her wish for me to stay and talk and her anger at not being able to take care of herself. This is when she curtly asks for a pill. Through a non-open ended question I gather that it’s a painkiller she wants and not something for her anxiety. Maj then again shows that she has experienced me as being in a hurry when she asks me to leave. Toward the end of the conversation I make another mistake by asking several questions in the same sentence but we solve this by deciding together that I will return within an hour. My smile gives her hope of talking some more later and she communicates non-verbally to me that she is comparatively happy with the arrangement.

Dialogue 2

I: Hi Maj! Still awake? (spoken softly in case she has fallen asleep)
M: Yes I am awake, I’ve been waiting for you! (sounds tired but satisfied that I’ve come back)
I: Has the pain subsided? (inquiring and friendly voice, I’ve also turned the alarm off since my colleague knows I am there)
M: Yes it feels better. But that wasn’t why I rang the alarm before! (she looks at me a bit impishly)
I: I figured Maj and that’s why I’m back now! I understood that you wanted to talk! Can I just get a chair so that I don’t have to stand? (Maj looks happy and wants me to get one of the soft chairs from the communal room)
M: Its so nice when you answer my calls because you don’t get mad when I snap, you seem to understand what I need! (Maj weeps a little while I sit down by her bed and take her hand)
I: Now tell me, Maj, what it is that weighs on you tonight? (I look her in the eyes and smile and nod encouragingly with my head)
M: My sister was here today and I am always so happy when she comes but just as sad when she leaves again! I know she has a lot to do with her family and that she visits because she feels sorry for me and that she can’t stay for very long! (She weeps a lot now, I give her a handkerchief and allow her to cry for a while before we go on talking)
I: So you think, Maj, that your sister visits just out of pity with you? (Maj looks at me and ceases to weep, she appears to be thinking)
M: Noooo, she probably visits because we’ve always gotten along so well and like each other! Actually, now that you mention it, she came for advice from ME! (Maj remembers that it actually was her sister who was unhappy today and needed her advice in a matter and that she called later that day and told Maj that she had taken the advice and that it gone well!)

Analysis of dialogue 2

I break off the conversation here because it would go on for too long otherwise! I open it with some non-open ended questions because I need to know if she is asleep and pain free. When I sat down and everything is calm I ask Maj an open question about what it is that weighs on her this night. Throughout the whole dialogue I try to be present and to use non-verbal queues to further substantiate my presence. I do this by nodding in agreement, smiling, looking straight into her eyes when speaking and listening to her. I also try to use encouragement when trying to get the conversation going: tell me, Maj, what weighs on you. I also confirm that I have understood that it wasn’t the pain that was her primary concern this evening. I make attempts at paraphrasing her when I reflect her feelings regarding her sister and try to clarify them. This prompts her to reflect more deeply herself and to conclude that the facts aren’t as crass as
she felt that evening. It is also possible to view this paraphrasing as a confrontational question where I redirect the center of her concern causing Maj to view the visit in a more positive way. She remembers that it was her sister who came to her for advice, which worked wonders for a lonely heart. This event is based on actual occurrences. Maj often experiences anxiety but when one takes the time to talk to her it subsides. Maj fell sound asleep after our talk, which didn’t last more than 20 minutes.

Reflection
In working with this assignment I have really begun to understand what communication is and how important it is. When analyzing my dialogues I could see both strengths and weaknesses in myself and … I think there is too little attention paid to the importance of communicative knowledge in everyday work. But it is precisely here in the minutiae of such work that important conversations emerge and where we build our relationships. When this everyday process works and relations are strengthened we stand better prepared for the more difficult conversations and events that we all experience in life. …

Making a mess
When I trained to be a carpenter I did it the traditional way, as an apprentice, which means that one gets one’s training at a firm with a mentor who provides guidance during the apprenticeship. I began it by travelling to Norway and it was there I was first introduced to Stefan who later became my mentor. He was to have a tremendous influence on my way of considering what’s important to think about when doing a task, both in the short and long term.

It was an early fall morning that Stefan and I went to do a job in a client’s home. We had been contracted to finish the upper floor of a house. In this the construction of inner walls dividing the floor into rooms was included. Stefan and I looked at the technical drawing we had received and discussed how we were going to do the job. Stefan wanted me to do as much as possible on my own and if there was any trouble or issue to ask him. I took out the materials I needed to make the skeleton or frame for the inner walls and began to cut the pieces to measure. After this it was time for me to begin assembling them according to the construction drawing I had. Stefan would come by once in a while to check that everything went well and asked some questions. I then had to explain to him what I had done and why. Sometimes there were things that needed improvement and then we would go through how and he showed me what I could do to solve the issue better next time.

When the skeleton or frame for the walls was done I checked that they were all in the right place and also that they were fully upright and not askew. I felt really good about my work. I then continued, mounting the plasterboards that were to be the actual wall-covering. When the boards were in place I went through it all to make sure I hadn’t forgotten any screws and I also checked that there weren’t any gaps between the boards that were too large. It was time to finish up and go home so I gather everything together putting it in a pile in the middle of the floor. I then sweep all the dust and scrap together and push that pile up to the first one with the materials. I feel really satisfied with the day’s work.

Stefan shows up in the entrance to room and steps inside to see how things have gone. After some time going over my work he brought a few things to my attention. He told me how I could cut the boards so that there would be less waste next time and then he told be that my cleaning and the order of my things wasn’t good enough and that it might have negative consequences both for the firm and for me as an employee. I asked him to explain why.

That’s when he told me that a client also sees the kind of order and cleanliness that we have as craftspeople and that they care a lot about this. Naturally one has to do high quality work too. He told me that a customer associates good order with a serious responsible craftsman and that this may have a decisive influence on him or her recommending one to a friend. Cleaning and keeping good order in your workplace at the end of the day could thus lead to more work both for you as an employee and for the firm that employs you. That’s when I realized that being a good professional isn’t just about being quick, skilled with tools and able to read construction drawings.
5. Results and conclusions

The two cases cannot demonstrate the variety of Bildung- and phronesis-related practical knowledge (cf. Tyson 2015a, 2016a, b, c, d). However, as the initial aim of this paper read: this is an exploration of how the conceptual framework developed can be brought back to practitioners and also to examine the ways in which this kind of inquiry changes as it transforms from an extensive single biographical case study into two less elaborate multiple case studies. I will consider each of these in turn.

The introduction of this conceptual framework in didactics courses has shown itself to be both intuitive and highly appreciated. With intuitive I mean that the participants were able to write relevant case narratives based on a 45 min introduction together with a written summary of the basic concepts and some case narratives to exemplify. I have not had the opportunity to conduct any systematic evaluation of the task but my colleagues in charge of the course have indicated that the evaluations they do for the course as a whole point to this task as being the one with most positive reviews. The conceptual framework allows practitioners to access and articulate what they themselves often consider the most important part of what they know but often lack appropriate terms for in order to reflect on it. It assists them in beginning to think of complex vocational knowledge from a didactical point of view and legitimizes this in a form that is close to their experience. As such it is part of an effort to bring research and practice closer together, to formulate theory that is phronetic, i.e. contributes to the advancement of practice.

These are only the first steps. The task of writing the case narratives was given in a course context that lacked time for any further individual and collective reflection. Thus, the potential of having course teachers read all narratives, synthesize their impression, have all participants read each other’s narratives and engage in collective reflection has not been explored. The approach is flexible enough that a series of case narrative tasks could be formulated. For example, after writing a story about a personal Bildung experience, the next task could be to interview a highly experienced practitioner one knows in order to document a further such story. Another task, if relevant to work-context, could be to pass the framework on to one’s apprentices and have them document a case from their context of apprenticeship. This does not even begin to consider the various reflective aspects where a group of relevant case narratives could be handed out as reading material for didactical discussion and reflection. There are several questions that could be asked in relation to the narratives like: what makes this a narrative of Bildung/wisdom? What are its didactical aspects? Can you imagine other forms of educational action in the same circumstance? How can you integrate it into your own practice? And so on. Here there has been a lot work already with critical incident analysis in higher education as well as other narrative approaches that can be drawn on to construct ways in which VBD can enrich academic education (e.g. Brookfield 1990, Browall et al. 2014, Mezirow & Associates 1990, Moon 2010, Orland-Barak & Yinon 2005, Rademacher et al. 2010).

The approach itself has changed as it has expanded into multiple case studies. Apart from the obvious things like cases being less contextual and often more superficial and brief the main changes that I have found are two. First, as the number of case narratives grows it becomes easier to see this as a kind of cumulative inquiry. This is in line with Shulman who wrote in 1987 (2004, p. 232):

One of the frustrations of teaching as an occupation and profession is its extensive individual and collective amnesia, the consistency with which the best creations of its practitioners are lost to both contemporary and future peers. Unlike fields such as architecture (which preserves its creations in both plans and edifices), law (which builds a case literature of opinions and interpretations), medicine (with its records and case studies), and even unlike chess, bridge, or ballet (with their traditions of preserving both memorable games and choreographed performances through inventive forms of notation and recording), teaching is conducted without an audience of peers. It is devoid of a history of practice.
... We have concluded from our research with teachers ... that the potentially codifiable knowledge that can be gleaned from the wisdom of practice is extensive. ... A major portion of the research agenda for the next decade will be to collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature ...

Even though the biographical case of craft-master Wolfgang B. owing to its depth and the more extensive narratives of entire educational processes affords a lot for the process of theorizing such cases take time and effort to make. The comparative ease of introducing these matters as tasks in various fields of VET makes it possible to gather a much larger mass of data and to let this feed back into the courses by enriching new examples as each course begins a new round. Thus the vocational teacher program is on its third round this fall and case narratives from the first one were made part of the examples given to those in the second round. In other words, not only does VBD enrich didactics courses, didactics courses significantly advance research. The main drawback is that the data produced, case narratives, are difficult to fit in article formats as soon as these progress beyond arguing for the conceptual aspects of the framework. In order to demonstrate the knowledge expressed it is often necessary to include several narratives that together can run to more than the average length of an article. This means that the normal venue for publishing research is made more difficult and a focus for article publication probably needs to be on paradigmatic narratives leaving more extensive considerations to the kind of case-books that Shulman argued for. In times when space for research is often scarce compared to that allotted for course work this approach has the potential to produce data as an integral part of academic courses which, it seems to me, is not an irrelevant aspect.

Second, there is possibility at least to begin considering if these cases can function as a kind of outlining of various practice fields. This is an issue discussed more extensively in Tyson (2016a, 2016d) but in brief the argument is that these narratives can be seen to cluster around common patterns or issues. Thus, in the narrative cases from the nursing students there are several that deal with wise practice in palliative care and the process of death. The suggestion is that as such narratives accumulate a kind of practice field in relation to this is surfaced. Furthermore, this is explicitly not a static field but one in which the cases can feed back into in order to advance it even further. In a sense these narratives function to enrich what we can imagine as possible actions in relation to palliative care, conflict resolution in after school care (the topic of Tyson 2016a), etc. This is something that the initial single case study couldn’t point to but that has become an exiting possibility as the inquiry has progressed.

References


