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## What Sense Can We Make of the Possibility of Vocational Didactics? An Approach from the Spanish School-Based System Complemented by Non-Formal Vocational Training

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**Abstract:** Our contribution attempts to review the development of the field of didactics in Spain in the past 35 years and its contribution to the development and improvement of vocational education and training. We intend to show that the concern of didactics is an issue of great concern (and dispute) in Southern Europe, for which we will use Spain as an example.

We will particularly analyse from a didactical approach (taking didactics as a normative applied discipline well established in academia) the possibilities that a traditionally school-based discipline has to improve the development of vocational education practice in and out of schools, for young and adult people, in terms of pedagogical innovation.

**Keywords:** Didactics, Teaching-Learning Relations, Vocational Education and Training, History, Training of Teachers and Trainers

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## 1 Contextualising VET and situating didactics: arenas of development and debate in Spain

The modernisation of the Spanish VET system can be officially located in 1984. Prior to 1970, the vocational offer was limited and most learning took the form of being work-based or apprentice-like. In 1970, vocational education became fully integrated into the school system and apprenticeship practically disappeared from the scene. In 1984, work-based learning through in-company placements was enabled; since 1990, the work-based module has been compulsory in order to achieve a vocational qualification (integrated work experience is therefore a fact, having stopped being a challenge more than two decades ago). In the mid-1980s, Spain also became a member of the European Union (which at the time did not yet have that name). Since then the development of vocational education has been in pace with European recommendations (recognition and accreditation policies, vocational guidance, quality assurance and qualification frameworks, among others). There are two fully acknowledged and recognised VET levels (intermediate (after successful completion of compulsory schooling) and upper (after successful completion of the academic *Baccalauréat*), the latter giving access to a range of university degrees) and there is a further basic vocational level<sup>1</sup> recently introduced, this one addressed for the so-called low achievers.

This process of modernisation was an agreed long-term process that finally took its current shape in 2002, through the only law on education that has not been disputed since 1978 (the year in which Spain agreed on its democratic Constitution after 40 years of dictatorship). The Spanish VET system is, without doubt, a school-based one, where the educational administration takes the lead responsibility, even if plenty of decisions have been shared by government mandate since 1990 with social agents (employer and worker representatives) in forms such as the definition of the mandated curriculum for each qualification as well as the assessment of the work placement out of the school, which is a responsibility that the system keeps to itself in all other cases.

Didactics is a discipline with the quest to improve processes of knowledge transmission and knowledge acquisition. Given the short history of vocational education in Spain, the field of didactics in any vocational domain is also short. However, both general didactics and specific didactics have a much longer tradition, even if referring to non-vocational forms of education delivery. Even if most of the academic community in the field of didactics in Spain has largely ignored the field of VET, there have been a few groups that have addressed VET as an object of research and reflection and have enriched the fields by considering the demands set by vocational education and training (Tejada and Jurado 1991; Marhuenda-Fluixá 2011, 2012; Marhuenda and Bolívar 2012).

In parallel to the process of schooling VET in Spain, the field of didactics itself has moved from an approach on didactics as the planning and delivery of content towards a reconstructive didactics where knowledge is produced, not just reproduced, within the teaching context. There has been a move from a normative and, to a certain extent, utopian didactics, clearly run by the Tyler rationale and spread in Spain through German (Stocker 1964) and Italian approaches (Titone 1966) towards a rather reflective and critical didactics (Gimeno 1982, 1988;

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<sup>1</sup> A paper on this basic vocational level can be found in Marhuenda-Fluixá et al. (2015).

Marhuenda-Fluixá 2000). This process has come together with the stress shown in political discourses and think tanks in the move from teaching to learning, which has contributed to the de-standardisation of didactics, strongly affecting its very core, for didactics is a normative discipline. In the following pages we address this development of didactics and its consequences upon the field of VET, in the scenario that VET has faced in Spain in the past two decades, in a context of a severe and continuous high youth (though not only) unemployment rate, and where precarisation of work is increasing and career as a notion itself is vanishing (Marhuenda-Fluixá, 2015). Which have been the developments within the field of didactics and what are the challenges that VET is posing upon it?

## **2 Didactics and its dependency upon and relation to other disciplines**

Didactics has often been narrowly perceived as an issue of methodology, of content delivery, and of instruction. The central question to didactic knowledge has been for decades how to teach in a good way. Given that teaching is always an issue of dealing with what (to teach) and to whom (to teach), the action of teachers (and trainers) depends on these two variables external to them. This has made didactics dependent upon two other neighbouring fields: On the one side, specific subject area didactics, which has emerged (firstly in terms of foreign languages, then mathematics, later on sciences, and finally the humanities and sports; and specific occupational didactics is here too) to the extent that its subject content has occupied a fixed space within the curriculum; and psychology of learning, on the other side, assuming (and replacing) the abilities to learn at different stages, as initially devised by developmental psychology. In this regard in the case of VET, there is no doubt that activity theory has played a major role in the past two decades. These neighbourhoods have distracted the attention that didactics may have paid (and still pays, to a lesser extent, in academic discussions) to other areas, e.g. sociology (of education, which should also include the sociology of work when it comes to didactics of VET) or even philosophy (of knowledge).

Even if didactics has to be aware of these other disciplines and take them into account, for its applied feature as a discipline it needs to develop a new approach, an approach towards teaching and training practice, that these other disciplines often neglect, regarding themselves at a higher academic status. But there is also trouble inside didactics itself, for in Spain and many Latin American countries the discipline covers a range of areas that in Anglo-Saxon traditions are often divided. On the one side, didactics has to do with the method of teaching and this can be considered elsewhere as pedagogy (as a wide understanding of delivery or processes of transmission of knowledge, a perspective usually taken from educational academic literature as well as in the sociology of education) but also as instruction (if the approach is mainly a psychological one, hence being related to the expected effect of teaching, say learning). But because of the first meaning, as transmission, we also find a new perspective, the curricular one, mainly to do with issues of selection and distribution of knowledge rather than a focus upon transmission itself. These three understandings - pedagogy, instruction and curriculum - are all subsumed by the Spanish notion, field and literature on didactics. It entails, then, both questions of method and questions of content, and the relation between both. Furthermore, when it comes to the consideration of content as knowledge, there are also two possible approaches: one is basically instrumental, while the second one is largely educational; one is focused upon content itself, while the latter focuses upon the personal development of the learner

in different regards.

There is one more issue we need to add to the consideration of the field of didactics in Spanish-speaking countries: for many years, the organisation of teaching and learning has been considered one more dimension to take into account in didactical decisions, as if it were another resource to consider; meanwhile, for the past decades, there has been a new view of organisation of teaching and learning as the conditions that make learning possible, where didactical availability becomes a real possibility. The organisation of coordination of the system, of schooling itself, of training provision (VET provision and system included), and the coordination among places of learning (when it comes to integrating work experience within the curriculum) – all of this lies often under the field of what is called educational policy studies in Anglo-Saxon countries, while it lies under the notion of the organisation of education in Spain. The reception of the works of Michael W. Apple (1986, 1996, 1997) is crucial in this regard.

Having such a wide notion of didactics in mind, it is time to move into the consideration of how the field has become so broad and whether a pedagogy of VET (above and beyond a pedagogy of Higher Education, which has taken its own autonomous direction) is possible or even whether it makes sense.

### **3 Approaches to didactics that might contribute to the development of vocational didactics**

The evolution of didactics in Spain has been shaped in a way worth considering for the purpose of understanding what and how it can contribute to the improvement of teaching and training practice in VET. From a mixed Italian and German basis, where didactics was pretty normative and focused upon a methodological understanding, several Anglo-Saxon approaches were discovered among academia during the 1980s that implied a revolution in the field, one to which Gimeno and Pérez (1983) clearly contributed by translating a series of very relevant papers that provoked an earthquake in the field.

Firstly, we can consider Doyle's (1984) analysis of the classroom tasks to be a completely new view of the issue of method, where students and the environment played a significant role not just as receivers, where content was also moved to a secondary role, for tasks took the centre of the scene. The debate shifted rapidly into the features that made scientifically valid knowledge deliverable and available to be acquired: soon afterwards, the debates held in the US about pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987) landed in the country and a range of new development arose in combination and confrontation between specific and general didactics.

None of this may be properly understood without the increasing value given to teachers as curriculum makers and developers, later even pointed out as intellectuals (Giroux 1990), but this is a trend that was started in the early 1980s, through the reception of the works of Lawrence Stenhouse (1984) at CARE in East Anglia, who had inspired and mobilised the Humanities Curriculum Project (which was translated in Spain as the first academic support to teachers as active policy-makers and, therefore, as people engaged in the construction of didactics and not just seen as mere appliers of decisions taken by their authorities in the ministerial offices). While the focus upon teacher-centred curriculum design and development spread with great success among teachers (and with decreasing enthusiasm among the Department of Education), another piece of work contributed significantly to addressing the problems of teaching practice. Ulf Lundgren's (1983) notion of

curriculum codes was translated into Spanish in 1992 and it implied a new approach towards the study of teaching practice. Furthermore, some of us saw in it (Marhuenda 1994) a major contribution to the application of didactics (from a curricular perspective) upon VET, for it allowed for the incorporation of work experience in an attempt to reunite the contexts of production and reproduction.

By the end of the 1980s, action research and critical theory (Carr and Kemmis 1988) had widened, moved, expanded and shaken the didactical debate in the country, colluding with the ideological debate which was then tense (and still is in the country, where education is one of the few arenas left to dispute between traditional conservative and socialist parties) around the reform and democratisation of the educational system, mainly affecting secondary education and vocational education and training.

That is perhaps one of the reasons for didactical approaches of a larger methodological nature, e.g. Fenstermacher and Soltis (1999) and Joyce and Weil (2002), to be translated only at a later stage. We can add to these Anglo-Saxon proposals others who arrived from South America (Camilloni 2007; Díaz Barriga 2009; Ibarrola 2009) and tried to bring didactical debate closer to the classroom level and into individual teacher decisions, which were also supported by research developments in the field of teacher thinking and beliefs, implicit theories of teaching, planning conceptions, and others that were widely conducted throughout the country in the late 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. In this regard, most of the national production relied upon imported models, those of Yinger and Clark (1988) and Clark and Peterson (1990). This paradigm acknowledges that teachers are able to construct their own theories upon the demands of the situation and that a synthesis of theories that they personally develop constitutes the basis for their didactical performance. Teacher thinking was then considered in Spain to be the structure upon which teachers interpret their relations to students, assess processes, and focus upon content and results. In most cases, this felt like a liberatory approach, given that this freed teachers from the power of the educational administration (which had a long tradition of mandating what to do in the classroom). This approach has been used in Spain since then and has been recently applied to the study of vocational education trainers (Ros-Garrido 2014), which has shown that it is neither the technical nor the productive implicit theories that reign in vocational training practices, but rather a focus upon the student/apprentice, a hypothesis also sustained by others during this period (Sosa and Tejada 1996; Ferrández et al. 2000; Molpeceres et al. 2004; Castro 2009). Instead of focusing upon outcomes and looking for a selection and control role, which remains in the shadows, research upon implicit theories of VET teachers and trainers shows that they focus upon their activities with apprentices, hence falling under the expressive implicit theory, which is a synthesis of active theories of teaching.

At the end of this section, we want to point to several didactic questions that have shaped the debates upon the field of didactics and its possible application to VET in Spain. Firstly, there is the didactic search for educational outcomes, to employ didactic procedures able to achieve an impact upon learning. Secondly, there is a quest for a suitable model of teaching, for the appropriateness of the method, that has been linked, on the one hand, to the content but, on the other hand, to the deliberative capacity of the teacher in order to apply his professional knowledge (in terms of both content and pedagogy) in a situational way.

This is a clear call for a didactics understood as a deliberative reflection and practice. Deliberation refers here to an educational approach towards the process of

curriculum design and development, and also to the planning and teaching processes as a matter of methods but mainly of models, approaches and strategies. In this sense, deliberation falls properly under the contributions to vocational education by Georg Kerschensteiner, the Russian 'school of work' of the early 1930s, as well as John Dewey's approach to the educational experience.

Finally, the implications of such an approach to vocational knowledge and to the debate on professions *versus* occupations play a relevant role here (including how to address in any vocational practice what the German tradition calls *Beruf*) for didactics: skills, but also jobs, identities and socialisation are part of that vocational knowledge, and the curricular perspective upon teaching practice is as relevant as the methodological approach to it.

#### **4 A didactics of VET or a didactic approach to VET?**

If we support a deliberative approach that comprises curricular thinking, raising consciousness upon one's implicit theories on teaching and planning, addressing organisational issues as well as methodological ones, we can then address the question of whether VET, as a teaching practice of its own, does need a didactic approach.

For sure, to neglect this possibility is to reject the very educational dimension of vocational (education and) training, to narrowly understand the meaning of this practice, and to reduce it to instructional guides on how to develop certain skills in certain segments of the workforce. While some might remain satisfied with this option, and it is indeed a view widely criticised by sociologists (among others), those of us in the field of education, particularly in the field of didactics, who have been busy with the development of VET have fought to strengthen its educational aspect. The most relevant efforts in the country have been made by the CIFO Group at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Tejada and Jurado 1991; Ferrández et al. 2000; Tejada et al. 2005; Ruiz et al. 2000; Navío 2013; Ruiz et al. 2013), who have supported academics all over the country in order to professionalise the work particularly of vocational trainers out of the school system, both in companies as well as in training and social integration measures, in initial as well as in continuing vocational education and training, and in vocational as well as in adult education, particularly when referring to the world of work.

Several issues affecting the structure of the VET system and the still-existing three parallel subsystems (formal vocational education, non-formal initial vocational training, and non-formal continuing vocational training) demand didactic decisions and concern: firstly, the sequencing of VET knowledge, the impact of the different levels of VET, and their interrelations in terms of curriculum and of teaching practice. Secondly, there is the pacing of VET knowledge and how it is distributed throughout a course or a year. We have no doubt that these issues are pretty much connected with individual (school-based) and collective (work-based) approaches to the acquisition of knowledge. The tensions between the professional and the occupational play a role here as well, insofar as it is the literacy dimension behind (or rather within) vocational education. Third is the pedagogical relation, where adult *versus* children learning habits and styles occur, which cannot be tackled in the way traditionally approached by both developmental psychology and school didactics.

The fourth issue concerns the reshaping of the curriculum's main concern: what knowledge is worth teaching when it comes to vocational education. Is it skills, occupational standards or rather adult and working life? Here, again, we find

the tension between the professional and the occupational, the tension behind the levelling of VET, and the different value attributed to qualifications achieved. Whose content is of most worth? What is the valuable knowledge that VET transmits? What is the relevant message (also in terms of discipline) that VET intends to be acquired by the workforce?

The issue, then, is for whom we want to devise a vocational didactics and for what purpose. Didactic debates about the reproduction and the production of knowledge are worth mentioning here, particularly in the current context of Spain, where the production system as well as the severe economic crisis have deployed a series of mottos that a didactical approach to VET must not avoid: preparing for employability, entrepreneurship and innovation is not the same as getting ready for work; moreover, we have no doubts that here lies an important issue to address from the traditional point of view of the question of didactic transposition.

Once we have shown that there is indeed room for a didactic approach to VET, the next question becomes whether we should move and push in the direction of developing a didactics of VET or whether it should remain a didactic approach but not a specific didactic.

The arguments we have provided so far are not against a didactic of each occupational area, insofar as such areas have a tradition strong enough as to support such a didactic (which is not the case except in some of them, e.g. nursery or FOL<sup>2</sup>). Perhaps there could be room for a didactics of work-based learning or a didactics of work process knowledge. As weird as it may sound, the expansion and export of dual types of VET (not necessarily a dual system) throughout the work, and indeed in Spain and some Latin American countries, are addressing the system level rather than the didactic one; meanwhile, apprenticeships, alternance and experiential learning do demand different approaches to learning and training practices from those that are classroom-based. We are not demanding a didactic of dual training, but the vocationalisation of most levels of the whole education system and the interest shown in making learning more practical (indeed, in many EU policy documents, in replacing training/teaching by learning) are mistakes in our view, because they hinder the important side of the teaching and training practice and, thus, neglect the role of didactics, leaving all acquisition of knowledge to learning psychology, which, in itself, leaves aside the very crucial issues that a didactical approach should address.

If we dare to recommend a certain type of VET didactic nowadays, perhaps that would consist of a didactic which entails at its core the very notion of work nowadays, in a context of growing precarity. Is a didactic of work possible? Is it needed anymore, when work seems to fade away, in terms of a career prospect? Where is the educational worth of work and what can didactics do for it? In the end, does a didactic of work without work make sense, or what can be reformulated as a vocational education without jobs?

Anyway, we are convinced that what vocational didactics does not need to follow is the same path as the didactics of higher education, which has blossomed in the past three decades, also supported by the increasing vocationalisation of higher education. We would rather stick to Ibarrola (2009), who supports the

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<sup>2</sup> FOL is the acronym for *Formación y Orientación Laboral*, a compulsory subject on both levels of the formal VET system that addresses content related to health and safety at work, legal aspects of work and work relations, as well as relevant content to enter the labour market.



didactic quest to provide answers to the demands of changing jobs, altering space, time and didactic strategies, resources, and assessment practices that surround the world of work itself.

## **5 Bringing didactics back**

We started our paper by contextualising the rather parallel developments of VET and of the academic field of didactics in Spain, and we have argued that the didactic debates are worth considering to address the current problems that VET practice on both formal and non-formal levels faces.

Our paper is therefore a plea for didactics. We want to bring teaching (and education as a result of it) back. Learning has dominated the policy (and educational) debate in the past 15 years, and all of the literature upon assessment in general and upon accreditation of prior learning in particular in the field of VET is, in fact, a displacement of didactics and, therefore, a displacement or replacement of the educational dimension of any teaching and training practice.

Didactical questions, concerns, decisions and procedures have to be developed for teaching, and training practices demand an answer: there are decisions to be made in terms of curriculum design and development, choice of textbooks, teaching practice, and formative (rather than summative) assessment of learning (for education and vocational education indeed are part of the right to education and are not a mere competition to facilitate selection of the best-equipped workforce, which, nonetheless, is the aim of education: to achieve the better preparation of each apprentice).

In the field of VET there is no such publisher market (as in compulsory schooling or even higher education). There seems to be not enough critical mass to invest in the production of a didactical device, which is what textbooks are, and changes in the content are much faster than for traditionally academic subjects. The cost-benefit ratio in VET is not as appealing as on other education levels. However, international publishers such as Pearson or McGraw are major actors in the game and they are ruling VET textbooks, alien to national curriculum developments, and contributing to the globalisation of VET knowledge and practice: let us all remember that textbooks embed almost every didactic decision, from planning to selection and sequence of content, learning activities and even assessment practices and emphasis.

A school-based system like the Spanish one rules working conditions of teachers and trainers, and it has been recently doing so for non-school vocational training practice, which inherits policies and practices developed by formal vocational education. The role of pedagogical accreditation of vocational trainers is a new demand and there is room there for the introduction of didactical approaches among new trainers. Such an opportunity also applies to quality management and educational supervision of teaching and training practice in VET.

Teachers and trainers plan, choose and devise their own material, teach (deliver content and manage class groups both in the classroom as well as in the workshop or the company), and assess their students' learning: how they address these tasks and how they think about them, not just how they do them, have an important effect.

Therefore, if teachers and trainers come to the stage, didactics has a role to play: pedagogical training, didactical approaches in both formal and informal VET, and in both initial and continuing VET. Perhaps teachers and trainers are not intellectuals, but that is often not the case for the educational administrators that

attempt to make decisions instead of them. Teachers and trainers are agents of symbolic control, and this is an issue particularly conflictive when it comes to lower levels of qualification.

There is currently a debate between curriculum-driven VET and assessment-driven VET, and it is the latter which is winning the battle, while most didactical decisions happen at the curriculum level. We would like to introduce didactical approaches even within an assessment-driven system, to allow to move from outcomes back to input decisions on planning and delivery, transmission and acquisition. To bring pedagogy back into the scene, we would like to see the development of professional didactical concern in the shape of teacher training and of professional literature and journals.

If vocational education and training has to do with careers of young people, young adults, and of adult workers within continuing vocational education and training practices, careers of VET teachers and trainers have also become an issue of didactical concern: learning (and professional learning) is often based upon expectations in the long term and how to address this in a context of high precarity and discontinuities of the professional careers of VET teachers and trainers is a concern that we share, together with the practices that rule access to and retention into the profession, as well as expectations of a career.

As Ros-Garrido (2014) has shown, there is room for hope in the country, and it comes from the side of non-formal vocational training and continuing education more than from the side of formal vocational education. For the first time in the past 30 years, there are new regulations upon the qualification of vocational trainers<sup>3</sup> and the pedagogical education of vocational training<sup>4</sup>. The didactic preparation of the trainers is supported by new regulations introducing didactic supervision of planning and assessment procedures as well as upon methods to train apprentices and trainees. Even if these are choices left to each individual trainer to develop, trainers have recovered some of the appreciation that they had been neglected for decades. Perhaps it is the right time for didactics to approach VET practices, listen to its demands, and supply it with rigorous concern and dedication, from deliberative perspectives and far from Tylerian solutions and receipts that have not proven useful in other teaching practices and educational levels.

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<sup>3</sup> Real Decreto 1646/1997, de 31 de octubre.

<sup>4</sup> Real Decreto 1697/2011, de 18 de noviembre, modificado por el Real Decreto 625/2013, de 2 de agosto.

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