Vocational giftedness: A helpful concept?

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‘The discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star.’
Anselme Brillat-Savarin, 1825

Brillat-Savarin’s assertion is both tendentious and salient, encapsulating the sibling rivalry between the practical and the scholarly, the academic and the vocational, that forms part of our cultural, social and educational landscape. In its rather truculent pro-kitchen stance, it applauds the efforts of the cook (practical, grounded, sensory, accessible), seems to slight those of the astronomer (cerebral, abstract, irrelevant, intangible), and hints at the competition for resources and recognition between the two. Something of this attitude prevails in our wider society. Even if we are not anti-intellectual, we know what he means.

Yet the dichotomy is both false and pernicious. Professional chefs and everyone else who cooks or eats may be delighted and intrigued by the discovery of a new star, while astrophysicists may be equally transported by the perfect chocolate soufflé or snail foam. Discoveries, whether of new dishes or new stars, entail both drudgery and inspiration, and require grounding in - and ability to transcend – an established body of knowledge and practice. To what extent are the talents and habits of mind of the scientist and the chef alike, and is it even meaningful to make the comparison?

The focus of this paper is the question of whether, or to what extent, the ideas, vocabulary and educational approaches associated with contemporary gifted and talented education, are relevant and/or useful to vocational education. It considers the similarities, differences and tensions between the most ‘academic’ strand of academic education, and the world-of-work-facing arena of vocational education, and asks whether there can be a fruitful conversation between them.

Why is this important?

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The relationship between academic and vocational education has acquired a new level of urgency in the current context of economic austerity and the retrenchment in public funding promised by the coalition government formed in May 2010. Current and projected constrictions in university funding spell the end of the former Labour government’s target for 50% of 18- to 30-year-olds to experience higher education by 2010. This, and concerns over economic growth and international competitiveness on the one hand, and increased levels of student debt and graduate unemployment on the other, is prompting a re-examination of whether university education is always the best option to help young people realise their ambitions and secure employment. In the week that saw a record number of school leavers turned away from their universities of choice, Universities minister David Willetts offered the consolation of ‘other good options including apprenticeships and college places’ (Independent 21 August 2010, p 11).

The assumption that university education is always the best option for young people has been questioned for some time in certain sectors of the press (Purvis 2005; Economist 2005?). The assumption that increased participation will automatically lead to higher levels of better-quality employment has been critiqued from a research basis in the academic community. Brown et al, for example, have warned of the possible emergence of a high-skill, low-wage economy in the UK as highly skilled and professional jobs migrate to lower-wage countries such as China and India (Brown et al 2008).

With the bursting of the HE bubble, news stories are emerging of young people opting to forego university in favour of direct entry into the workplace (independent 21 August 2010), and of fears that vocational learners will be pushed out of FE colleges by A-level students (BBC Radio 4 Today programme 24 August 2010). In such a volatile climate, many aspects of vocational education are likely to be re-examined, including its relationship with traditional academic education. It is equally likely that the uptake of vocational education will increase, and that its key purposes and remit will continue to be debated.

Definition of Terms

To ask whether vocational giftedness is a helpful concept requires that key terms are given at least a working definition. The first of these is ‘vocational giftedness.’ Writing of research conducted in Germany, where vocational education is accorded a considerably greater level of recognition and respect than in the UK, Manstetten defines vocational giftedness as ‘special dispositions which are shown in special achievements of (non-academic) vocational learning and action,’ that is, as a ‘disposition of abilities that explain observable (vocational) achievements’ (Manstetten 2000: 440; parenthetical terms are Manstetten’s). A more finely-grained discussion might spend time considering the various uses of ‘disposition’ in this definition (appearing as it does variably to mean ‘inclinations’ or ‘temperaments’ in the first quotation, and ‘orientation’ or ‘arrangement’ in the second). However, Manstetten’s
overall point, that vocational giftedness is a collection of attributes that gives rise to notable learning and performance in vocational fields, is sufficiently clear.

This understanding is echoed in the explanation of vocational giftedness offered by Gentry et al (2008), who examine the issue in the United States (where vocational education has been renamed Career and Technical Education or CET). This team of researchers invokes the US Department of Education’s characterisation of giftedness (1993): ‘Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor,’ asserting that this broad statement encompasses endeavour in vocational areas (Gentry et al 2008: 184).

From these two precedents, as well as from commonsense observation, we might offer a working definition of vocational giftedness as:

aptitude that gives an individual the capacity or potential to produce achievements of notable excellence in vocational domains.

Admittedly this leaves a raft of issues unaddressed for the moment, including the relationships between potential and performance, and among the various components – cognitive, affective, physical, dispositional, intrinsic and environmental - that combine to produce such capability. We shall return to the problematical term ‘giftedness’ later in the discussion.

Similarly, in defining ‘helpful’, I adopt an intuitive working description that equates helpfulness with benefit, so that a helpful concept is one with clear positive benefits and whose overall advantages outweigh its disadvantages. Of course this raises the issue of ‘helpfulness to whom?’ The key stakeholders to whom this question applies include: learners and their families, educators, and the wider society, including, but not confined to, government, employers, taxpayers, and the public at large. To judge whether vocational giftedness is a helpful concept then, is to weigh up considerations of:

- why, and under what conditions, it might it be helpful to some or all of these stakeholders
- why, and under what conditions, it might it not be
- whether the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

Literature review

In the decade since New Labour introduced its gifted and talented agenda in the compulsory phases of schooling, understandings of ‘giftedness’ and ‘talent’ have evolved. Debates around the definitions of ability and the claims of social justice and educational
inclusiveness have resulted in an emerging reformulation of these terms among specialists in the field (although evidence suggests that this view is patchy in the wider educational sector as a whole) (Balchin et al 2009; Ofsted 2009). This new understanding emphasises multiple types of ability, the importance of motivation and dispositional issues such as resilience, and ‘mastery over mystery’ (Matthews and Folsom 2009). The field is complex but there is an emerging ‘direction of travel’ toward a more inclusive, open-ended and multi-faceted understanding of ‘giftedness’. In line with this, the most recent definition of ‘talented’ from the former DCSF now encompasses vocational ability: ‘talent’ is defined as ‘ability or potential in one or more skills, whether artistic, sporting, interpersonal or vocational’ (Ofsted 2009: 16).

Since the mid-20th century, there has been a strand of research and theory in the scholarship of gifted education that is amenable to the notion of vocational giftedness. In the 1960s, Taylor’s Multiple Talent Theory emphasised the importance, for all learners, of world-of-work abilities such as productive thinking, foresight, planning, communication, decision-making and interpersonal skills. He insisted that if the full range of young people’s strengths and abilities were acknowledged, a much higher proportion of learners in an ordinary classroom would demonstrate giftedness in one or more areas (Taylor 1968, 1969).

‘Mechanical ingenuity’ was listed by Ogilvie in 1973 as one of the domains in which a child could demonstrate giftedness (Ogilvie 1973). In the same decade Renzulli’s research on high-achieving adults led him to conclude that intelligence is only one aspect of giftedness. His influential ‘three-ring model’ includes creativity and ‘task commitment’ as elements that combine in complex ways with above-average intelligence to produce notable performance (Renzilli 1978). He also distinguishes between ‘schoolhouse giftedness’ and ‘creative-productive giftedness’ in real-world contexts, with the latter not necessarily related to academic achievement (Renzulli 2003).

Sternberg’s work over the past several decades also explores the multi-variant aspects of ‘giftedness’ and its fit with real-world issues. His Triarchic Theory combines ‘practical’ with ‘analytic’ and ‘creative’ intelligence, defining ‘practical intelligence’ as problem-solving and the ability to actualise ideas and plans in the real world (Sternberg 1985). More recent features of Sternberg’s work include his influential definition of giftedness as ‘developing expertise’ (Sternberg 2001) and his description of high ability as a synthesis of wisdom, intelligence and creativity (Sternberg 2003). It is worth noting that his term for this, ‘WICS’ (Wisdom, Intelligence and Creativity, Synthesised), is a deliberate play on ‘WISC’, the abbreviation of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, an IQ test traditionally used to identify gifted children. Sternberg offers an alternative approach to identification that is better equipped than such tests to allow the talent of socio-economically disadvantaged young people to emerge. His protocol includes open-ended tasks such as devising presentations and supplying cartoons with captions (Sternberg 2003: 130-31). Working with educationally marginalised groups such as Native American tribes, Maker has also devised
alternative identification approaches that draw on the expertise, educational values and observational skills of community elders (Maker 2006).

The theme of ‘developing expertise’ is extended in the work of Ericsson et al (2007), whose rigorous empirical studies in a number of domains including music, sport, mathematics and chess lead them to conclude that talented individuals require 10,000 hours of practice to become ‘expert performers’. With the exception of certain physical traits such as height and body size in sport, they argue that in virtually all domains deliberate, focused, intelligent practice is more important than innate ability in determining elite performance (Ericsson et al 2007).

Dweck (2006) has discovered that the motivation required for sustained study and improvement depends on learners’ understandings and attitudes toward learning. Her work demonstrates conclusively that students who have a ‘growth mindset’ (the view that capability can be increased with practice and application) show more motivation and achieve more highly that similar students who have a ‘fixed mindset’ (belief in a static model of intelligence) (Dweck 2006; Blackwell et al 2007).

More recently a number of studies have considered the issue of giftedness in vocational and world-of-work domains more explicitly. Shavinina has analysed the attitudes and attributes of high-achieving entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates, Michael Dell and Richard Branson. She concludes that individuals demonstrating entrepreneurial giftedness often show scant regard for traditional academic learning as children, do not perform particularly well in school, and have a marked preference for applied, real-world types of learning. They are characterised by a stubborn persistence, an ability to learn from mistakes, and the resilience to keep trying despite initial setbacks (Shavinina 2006 and 2008) – all features of Dweck’s ‘growth mindset’. A small-scale qualitative study by Gentry et al has investigated the conditions which make for ‘exemplary’ education for the vocationally talented, and concluded that real-world learning experiences and engagement with competitions and trade associations in their field are key aspects of this provision (Gentry et al 2008). A recent study of engineering learners in a disadvantaged London borough revealed strong preferences for applied, practical and collaborative learning among the range of learners, including those identified by their teachers as having particular talent (Haight 2010).

A careful longitudinal cohort study by Stamm has demonstrated the presence of learners of exceptionally high intelligence (as indicated by standardised IQ tests) in the ‘lower’, vocational tiers of the Swiss school system (Stamm 2005). In Germany, where vocational subjects traditionally enjoy parity of esteem with academic subjects, an initiative for the ‘Promotion of the Gifted in Vocational Training’ was launched in 1991, accompanied by a programme of research and evaluation. Conclusions from the first decade or so of this programme indicate that vocational learners were characterised not so much by high levels of intelligence or creativity but by high motivation in the areas of both learning and work.
Trainees on the programme valued both general and job-specific vocational courses, with those from less academic backgrounds favouring the job-specific courses more highly (Manstetten 2000: 444-5.)

The German and Swiss educational systems embody the configuration of separate types of provision for technical learners originally proposed for the post-war British education system in the Butler Report, but never fully implemented (Jones 2003). Recently, however, the principle of more relevant vocational, technical and work-based education has received renewed attention in the UK. The educational charity Edge has mounted a national campaign to promote work-based learning, and partnered the Talent Foundation in formulating and publicising a new, employment-relevant model of ability: ‘New Kinds of Smart’ (Edge; Talent Foundation 2007; Lucas et al 2010a and 2010b).

On the eve of a new ‘Age of Austerity’ in education, Warnock has called for ‘radical change’ to ‘streamline education, and save the money now wasted on the academic bias that still bedevils our educational system.’ She deplores the waste ‘not only of money, but of the talents of children who all too often find nothing to engage their interest once they have left their primary schools.’ Warnock advocates a ‘tripartite’ educational system after Year 7, divided into academic, technical (ie scientific and technological) and practical courses, with different types of teaching for each, and parents ‘encouraged to think of the technical course as the elite’ (Warnock 2010: 46-9).

Recently issues of vocational learning and expertise have received consideration from more philosophical and theoretical perspectives. Winch has revisited Gilbert Ryle’s distinction between knowing how and knowing that and its implications for vocational education, and concluded that there is no single category of vocational expertise, but rather domain-specific expertises and dimensions of expertise (Winch 2010). In doing so, he also draws on Eraut’s work that identifies the similarities between vocational and professional learning and ways of knowing, such as the obvious similarities between the steadiness of hand of the surgeon and the jewel cutter (Eraut 1994). An insistence on this wider type of practitioner understanding appropriately challenges the invidious traditional distinction between the academic and the vocational. Sennett has considered the issue of craftsmanship and pointed out how conceptual knowledge is impoverished if hands are divorced from head (Sennett 2008). Crawford asserts the existential honesty of skilled manual workers, claiming that they stand against the narcissism fostered by our culture of ‘mass communication and mass conformity.’

_Summary: The concept of vocational giftedness is discussed, with a focus on the value placed on general and specific vocational courses by trainees from different academic backgrounds. The German and Swiss educational systems are compared to the Butler Report’s proposals for a post-war British education system, and the renewed emphasis on vocational education is highlighted through the work of organizations like Edge and the Talent Foundation. Warnock’s call for a ‘tripartite’ educational system after Year 7 is discussed, along with recent philosophical and theoretical perspectives on vocational learning and expertise, including Winch’s re-examination of Ryle’s distinction between knowing how and knowing that, and Eraut’s identification of similarities between vocational and professional learning. Sennett and Crawford’s contributions to the debate on craftsmanship and the existential honesty of skilled manual workers are also considered._

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What might be the advantages of a concept of vocational giftedness?

Recognising vocational high ability and taking it seriously would promote educational justice for vocational learners. It would enhance parity of esteem both for learners and educators in the sector and also, perhaps, by extension, foster increased respect for vocational occupations themselves. This is a tall order, but there are European examples such as Germany and Switzerland, and pioneer cultures such as Australia, Canada and the United States, where parity of esteem between the vocational and academic lines is much more embedded in the social and educational fabric.

A crucial consequence of such parity would be a more equal distribution of resources, enhanced social mobility and reversal of the dismaying waste of talent, articulated by Warnock, of learners ‘who all too often find nothing to engage their interest once they have left their primary schools’ (Warnock 2010: 46). A recent study of engineering learners from Specialist Diploma, vocational and university Access programmes found considerably higher levels of external support (such as a Royal Academy of Engineering-sponsored e-mentoring scheme, external speakers and field trips) for the Specialist Diploma students than for the FE vocational learners (Haight 2010). The Social Justice Foundation, dedicated to promoting social mobility through education and mentoring, focuses its efforts on talented A-level students and appears not to include vocational learners in its programmes. The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions noted the higher proportion of students from lower socio-economic strata in FE colleges and vocational courses, and called for increased structural measures, such as Apprentice Scholarships to university, to promote permeability between vocational and academic learning (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009: 84). Such measures would be predicted on the recognition of vocational talent.

Recognizing vocational talent would also increase the possibility of a paradigm shift to a healthier, more integrated understanding of the relationship between vocational and academic education and pursuits. Engineering is an example of a domain that already spans craft and professional levels in the UK, but it would be a welcome development to see this inclusiveness extended to other domains. Of course bodies such as Edge and the Talent Foundation are already working to promote the acknowledgement, in Edge’s strapline, that ‘there are many paths to success’. A further ramification of this position might be to strengthen understanding of the commonalities between the vocational and professional, the cook and the chemist. A healthier, more cohesive society, as well as enhanced economic benefits, could follow.

What might be the disadvantages of a concept of vocational giftedness?
Despite the advantages, a notion of vocational giftedness might entail at least two major disadvantages in the current UK climate. The first of these is the terminology and associations of *giftedness* itself. Critics have deplored this socio-educational construct on a number of grounds. In the United States, Margolin condemned the ‘assembling’ of the notion of gifted children as an exercise in Foucaultian power dynamics (Margolin 1994). Sapon-Shevin insisted that gifted education programmes are inherently elitist and divisive and mislead schools into a false sense of effectiveness, once their gifted population is catered for (Sapon-Shevin 1994). The tendency to establish invidious distinctions among children, based on one-off intelligence test scores was satirised by the humourist Lewis Burke Frumkes in *How to raise your IQ by eating gifted children*. His recipe for ‘Gifted Child *en Papillote*’ specifies ‘3 moderately gifted children, I.Q.s 130-140’ among its list of ingredients (Frumkes 1983: 11). In the UK, White has criticised the notion of giftedness for being both divisive and conceptually flawed, relying, as he argues it does, on the false, essentialist construct of measurable intelligence (White 2006).

The second disadvantage is associated with the recent gifted and talented agenda prosecuted by the New Labour government from 1999 to 2010. A full analysis of the policy permutations and outcomes of this initiative has not yet been produced, although there have been a number of interim evaluations of various programmes (Ofsted 2001 and 2003; for evaluations of programmes of the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, see [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cedar/atoz/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cedar/atoz/); for an evaluation of NAGTY see ACL Consulting 2009). From the perspective of racial equality, Gillborn cited the government’s own monitoring statistics to point out in 2005 that Black learners were under-represented in schools’ gifted and talented cohorts, a situation that apparently continues into the present (Gillborn 2005; Dickenson 2010). In 2009 the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions criticized New Labour’s gifted and talented agenda for spreading its resources too thinly, neglecting to win educators’ hearts and minds, particularly in relation to the ‘gifted’ aspects of the initiative, and consequently failing in its social justice objectives. It must be noted that this assessment considered the gifted and talented agenda only against the original Excellence in Cities aim of redressing educational disadvantage. This remit was widened by 2005, when the Education White Paper espoused providing for gifted and talented learners’ needs as an aspect of ‘personalisation’ for all learners in maintained schools, not just those in disadvantaged areas (HM Government 2005).

It is fair to say that the shifting demands of the initiative aroused a considerable degree of both disquiet and confusion in the teaching profession (for a typical range of educators’ views on this, see [http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/feb/02/gifted-talented-scraped-funds-redirected](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/feb/02/gifted-talented-scraped-funds-redirected)). Schools and teachers were often unclear about the criteria they were expected to use in carrying out government guidance to identify a cohort of ‘5 to 10%’ of learners. By 2006 this had become a requirement, monitored in the compulsory phases by the government’s online data tool Raiseonline and enforced in some LEAs by mechanisms such as the performance-related pay of Local Authority G&T Co-ordinators. A number of critics have deplored this socio-educational construct on a number of grounds. In the United States, Margolin condemned the ‘assembling’ of the notion of gifted children as an exercise in Foucaultian power dynamics (Margolin 1994). Sapon-Shevin insisted that gifted education programmes are inherently elitist and divisive and mislead schools into a false sense of effectiveness, once their gifted population is catered for (Sapon-Shevin 1994). The tendency to establish invidious distinctions among children, based on one-off intelligence test scores was satirised by the humourist Lewis Burke Frumkes in *How to raise your IQ by eating gifted children*. His recipe for ‘Gifted Child *en Papillote*’ specifies ‘3 moderately gifted children, I.Q.s 130-140’ among its list of ingredients (Frumkes 1983: 11). In the UK, White has criticised the notion of giftedness for being both divisive and conceptually flawed, relying, as he argues it does, on the false, essentialist construct of measurable intelligence (White 2006).

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educators experienced both ethical qualms about this *de facto* quota system and professional confusion about how to provide for cohorts with often mixed needs.

What conditions would foster the benefits of a concept of vocational giftedness?

The circumstances necessary to make the concept of vocational talent beneficial include structural permeability between academic and vocational educational systems and qualifications, so that learners can move between them. Equal respect and esteem for ambitions and pursuits in vocational domains are also necessary. One key benefit of this would be a social ‘blindness’ that ensures that vocational education and qualifications are not seen (or encouraged by league tables) to be an educational ghetto for learners of less affluent socio-economic status (Rajan *Independent* 26 August 2010). One useful starting point in England would be the dismantling of the system that equates one NVQ with 4 GCSEs and thus encourages secondary schools to use vocational qualifications as an easier route to their quota of 50% A* to C grades at Key Stage 4.

Teaching approaches that combine the most effective practices of both vocational education and training and the best elements and insights of gifted and talented programmes are a key requirement. From the VET sector, these include Authentic Pedagogy (Newman and Wehlage 1999), characterised by real-world-facing learning experiences and assessment (see also Lewisham College-Edge 2005). From the gifted and talented arena, these include talent-spotting in an inclusive and informed way (alert to signs of potential as well as demonstrated performance), and teaching for challenge, using a range of approaches to differentiation. In 2005 the government funded a short-lived training programme for teachers of gifted and talented learners on post-16 Level 3 vocational courses. This was overtaken by other initiatives such as the 14-19 agenda and the move to introduce Specialist Diplomas, but a number of relevant materials were developed by Oxford Brookes University and may be accessed at: [http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/education/rescon/cpdgifted/docs/](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/schools/education/rescon/cpdgifted/docs/)

Teaching and learning approaches that combine the best of both sectors have the potential to inform and influence all areas of education, including the academic and professional (Williams et al 2010).

Talent in vocational domains must be understood on its own terms, not as a poor relation of academic giftedness, and more research on this is needed. One model of vocational talent hypothesized by Clow and Haight suggests that it may be more multi-faceted than academic giftedness (Clow and Haight 2007). A recent study testing this model with a small sample of engineering teachers suggests that teachers regard dispositional characteristics such as intrinsic drive as the crucial defining feature of talented learners, a result that replicates Manstetten’s findings that vocationally gifted learners display notably high levels of
motivation rather than exceptional levels of cognitive ability (Haight 2010; Manstetten 2000).

What conditions would inhibit or pervert the benefits of a concept of vocational giftedness?

The loaded term ‘gifted’, and its associated connotations of divisiveness and elitism, are likely to alienate a number of learners and teachers in the vocational education sector. Taking a lead both from Ofsted’s usage and the terminology of the American CTE sector, it is better to focus on the more neutral term ‘talented’. It is perhaps even desirable to underplay the use of the adjective ‘talented’ to describe learners, in preference to a formulation such as ‘learners with talent’, in order to avoid the essentialist taint that bedevils some types of gifted and talented education.

This would also distance the VET sector from the worst aspects of the New Labour gifted and talented initiative in the compulsory phases. These included a heavy-handed central government bureaucracy that combined low-trust approaches to monitoring with an almost frenetic tinkering with policy and guidance. The compulsion on educators to identify a quota of talented learners, would de-professionalise teachers, create odious distinctions, and damage the self esteem of learners not designated ‘talented’ at any point in time. The culture of government monitoring and reprimand that sometimes accompanied the gifted and talented agenda would subvert the spirit of recognising and nurturing talent in the vocational sector. Unfortunately over-regulation and neoliberal approaches to metrics are a general feature of the educational landscape, pointed out by a number of commentators (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009; Winch 2010), and these alone have the potential to hinder efforts to maximize talent in the sector.
Conclusion

On balance I suggest that a concept of vocational talent, and the implications that flow from it, may be a beneficial working hypothesis for learners, educators and the wider society, for its potential to promote:

- social and educational justice for vocational learners and educators
- parity of esteem and enhanced equality for vocational workers in the wider society
- a paradigm shift that emphasizes similarities, commonalities and fluidity between vocational, academic and professional learning and occupations.

This is only likely to be the case, however, if the following conditions are met.

1. The terminology uses ‘talent’ and avoids the term ‘giftedness’
   The discourse should focus on vocational ‘talent’ rather than ‘giftedness’ in order to maximize clarity and avoid the unnecessary and unhelpful baggage of the term ‘giftedness’ (with its welter of stereotypes and connotations of elitism and essentialism).

2. Vocational education does not become over-academicised
   The ‘leakage’ of academic conventions and emphases into vocational education should be avoided. VET should not become ‘over-academicised’ in the sense that, in terms of teaching and assessment, the inherent skills and aptitudes in a particular vocational domain are not replaced or dominated by a demand for more academically recognisable performance such as literary skills. To echo Ryle’s distinction between knowing how and knowing that, writing about must not replace doing.

   Of course this is not to say that practitioners should be prevented from integrating the two kinds of knowledge to produce writing or other artefacts that illuminate the true spirit and experiences of vocational pursuits. Indeed these should be celebrated. A number of examples come to mind, including Sennett’s *The Craftsman*, Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, and Kamkwamba and Mealer’s *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind*.

3. Bureaucratization and enforcement must be avoided.
   The detrimental (if unintended) consequences of the last government’s Gifted and Talented agenda should not be replicated. These include: quotas and arbitrary cut-off points for access to appropriate teaching, low-trust reporting requirements to central government, and a bold-on, tick-box attitude toward provision.

   There must be no arbitrary ‘quotas’ or cut-off points for inclusion in an exclusive set of learners to give access to appropriate teaching, such as tended to result from governmental guidance to focus on ‘the top 5 to 10%’. These restrictions provoke justifiable ethical qualms.
among educators and have the potential to create ‘collateral damage,’ such as the unfair exclusion of deserving learners from opportunities and provision. The general ethical desiderata for gifted and talented education, respect for persons, openness, flexibility, the active promotion of benefit and avoidance of harm, should of course be present (Haight 2009).

4 Permeability between the vocational and the academic should continue and be extended. There must be sufficient structural permeability between vocational and academic qualifications to allow for progression into higher education and professional qualifications, status and income if learners want this. Existing measures that bridge the academic-vocational divide, such as Specialist Diplomas and Foundation Degrees, should be retained and improved; new measures such as the Apprenticeship Scholarships recommended by the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions should be implemented.

5 There should be equitable resource allocation between academic and vocational education.
Further education has long occupied the position of the ‘Cinderella sector’, and yet evidence confirms that it attracts more learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, more ethnic minorities and more disabled learners than HE, as well as learners not well served in mainstream academic secondary provision (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009; David 2010). Buildings, working conditions and resource distribution that reinforce the view that vocational education is second best promote neither parity of esteem nor the best chances of nurturing and maximizing potential in vocational domains.

6 The conversation should not be all one-way.
Vocational education should inform academic education, especially with regard to teaching, without dumbing down. What vocational education does well should be celebrated and publicised, and should inform academic practices at all levels, including tertiary.

Applied approaches, Authentic Pedagogy and practical learning, all common in FE vocational teaching, have been shown to ‘keep the door open’ for learners to continue with the high-level mathematics necessary to advance to the highest levels in STEM subjects (Williams et al 2010). My own research of engineering students in secondary, vocational and university Access courses in a disadvantaged area of London revealed a preference among all students, including those identified by their teachers as being most talented, for hands-on, problem-based, collaborative learning experiences (Haight 2010). Such approaches appear to work best for many kinds of learners, including university students.

Of course there are daunting constraints and challenges in this, particularly in financially straitened times. Yet the gains to be made in maximizing talent and promoting equity justify the effort.
References


Dickenson, M. (2010) Personal communication May 2010. Matt Dickenson is the Director of London Gifted & Talented’s REAL project (Realising Equality and Achievement for Learners), designed to address the quality of provision for high-ability learners from BME and English as an Additional Language backgrounds.


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