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# Nurturing inclusivity and professional growth among vocational teachers through communities of practice

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## ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the intricate balance between instrumentalism and the pursuit of a comprehensive perspective within higher education. Specifically, the study investigates the experiences of vocational teachers enrolled in a master's program at a Norwegian university, as they grapple with the challenge of reconciling academic requisites with their vocational expertise. Drawing on the transformative conduit of 'communities of practice' introduced by Lave and Wenger, the research addresses this multifaceted undertaking. Embracing an educational approach that values adult learners' prior experiences, the article advocates for the cultivation of communities of practice. This approach facilitates the exchange of insights and collaborative learning, empowering vocational teachers to adeptly navigate the academic landscape while integrating their vocational wisdom. The analysis illustrated how the program's curriculum, incorporation of real-world experiences, and development of diverse study techniques can enhance learning outcomes. Through Lave and Wenger's theoretical framework and its practical application, the article contributes to the discourse on fostering inclusivity within higher education. Centring on vocational teachers, who bring invaluable practical experiences, our study emphasises the potential to nurture engagement, bridge the gap between past experiences and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, and ultimately cultivate a more inclusive and impactful academic environment.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

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communities of practice;  
vocational teachers; inclusive  
higher education; holistic  
learning

## Introduction

This article discusses the use of situated learning practices through a development study centred on a master's program in vocational didactics at a Norwegian university, over a four-year period. The analysis is based on course material, students' and teachers' experiences, as well as written accounts. The program's participants constitute a diverse cohort of adults possessing craftsman or journeyman's certificates as well as years of practical work experience – prerequisites for their academic pursuits. These students bring with them a wealth of life experience and practical skills, which, while not always seamlessly transferrable to the academic realm where reading and writing dominate,

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serve as vital resources for their educational journey. Learning in higher education encompasses more than the mere acquisition of degrees to secure specific fields or professions – although this is communicated as a primary objective to numerous learners worldwide. However, higher academic education also contributes to individuals' lifelong learning journeys, which need not follow a linear trajectory, as exemplified by educational tracks that solely focus on prior schooling experiences.

As higher education gains heightened significance in contemporary society, students from various backgrounds enter what can be described as competitive learning environments (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Deem, Case, and Nokkala 2022). Although it is positive that higher education can serve more people, we also risk students leaving before completion or experiencing stress and discomfort because the educational system they enter is not prepared to facilitate their development (Reay 2021). While student-centred learning has been recognised in schooling for a long time (Eaton 2020), educators in higher education have not yet stressed the importance of developing teaching methods that create inclusive learning environments for adult learners. An evolving landscape of higher education, characterised by the increasing presence of mature learners (Caruth 2014; Statistics Norway 2018), underscores the necessity of catering to diverse learning styles and life trajectories. As more individuals enter academia with substantial real-world engagement, the 'effectiveness' of traditional teaching strategies comes into question.

While higher education undoubtedly plays a crucial role in developing individuals with the indispensable skills and specialised knowledge necessary for specific disciplines and professions, it also goes beyond this foundational purpose. It emerges as a dynamic arena that fosters both professional and personal growth, transcending the confines of a certification-based system inherent in the formal degree attainment process (Boyte and Fretz 2010).

Drawing inspiration from the seminal theory proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), this study presents the concept of 'communities of practice' within the context of vocational teachers enrolled in a master's program at a Norwegian university. By exploring the experiences of these 'unconventional' students within higher education, this article investigates and discuss how their participation can be enhanced in various meaningful learning activities. Beyond the conventional focus on certification and efficacy within higher education, this paper aims to challenge these assumptions. In an era defined by rapid global interconnectivity and technological advancement (Giddens 1990), the higher education landscape demands a reconsideration of traditional paradigms. As illuminated by scholars like Berg and Seeber (2016), Connell (2019), and Treanor (2006), the contemporary world necessitates an examination of the potential downsides of only prioritising speed and efficiency in academic pursuits. Amidst these considerations, the importance of fostering deep learning experiences gains prominence, echoing the sentiments of the 'Slow Science Manifesto' advocating for dedicated time for thinking, understanding, and assimilating information (The Slow Science Manifesto 2023).

Amid this transformative backdrop, the concept of lifelong learning gains prominence (Kehm 2001). In this perspective, the integration of varied study techniques becomes essential to fostering deeper understanding and empowering learners for success in higher education. This shift aligns with the transformative potential of communities of practice. In vocational education and training (VET), this view of learning is especially salient, as shown by Avis, Bathmaker and Parsons (2002) who highlight the role of social

learning spaces in shaping learner identities in multiple settings. Further, Mitchell, Young, and Wood (2001) have enhanced the relevance of communities of practice in the VET sector, emphasising its potential in shaping professional practice and organisational productivity. In the multifaceted world of vocational education, the field of practice is evident and recognised as being of great importance in developing the necessary skills and knowledge for professional success. While this prerequisite for learning is established for those who have already obtained vocational certification as the vocational teachers in this study, the academic world of formalised knowledge primarily acknowledges knowledge in written forms. Hence, students with practical skillsets and experiences can challenge the prevailing assumptions about effective learning and pertinent knowledge, provided they are equipped with the necessary tools to bridge different forms of knowledge and practical expertise. In the contemporary landscape of swift information exchange and global interconnectedness, the pursuit of meaningful learning experiences has taken on renewed importance. As society grapples with technological advances and the challenges posed by an information-rich environment, the significance of pausing to reflect, connect, and engage with knowledge has never been more pronounced. Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice emerges as a compelling framework for navigating this dynamic educational terrain. Rooted in principles of collaboration, shared expertise, and social interaction, the communities of practice perspective offers a timely and relevant lens for exploring complementary learning strategies in higher education.

In the context of today's higher education landscape, a pedagogical approach is urgently required that not only imparts knowledge but also fosters inclusivity and cultivates professional growth. As we stand at the threshold of evolving societal paradigms, how can university education transcend conventional boundaries and evolve into a transformative force? How might a reflective pedagogy cultivate a vibrant community of practice, enabling students to actively engage with the learning experience? What implications could such an approach have for students' understanding of contemporary societal dynamics and their ability to critically navigate these complexities? In this article I seek to explore the potential in working for a reflective university pedagogy equipping students, not only with academic proficiency, but also with the capacity to reshape their roles within an ever-changing society.

### **Effective study techniques?**

In our knowledge-driven society, international organisations and researchers (Kehm 2001) have highlighted the importance of the idea of lifelong learning. This significance has translated to a surge in the enrolment of mature students, aged 25 and older, in higher education over the past decades (Caruth 2014). Norwegian students, in particular, are among the oldest in Europe, with many enrolling in continuing education programs aimed at enhancing educational quality (Statistics Norway 2018). For vocational teachers pursuing higher education, such as in the master's program in vocational didactics, the entry point often comes after extensive work experience when they are typically in their 40s and 50s. Despite (or because of) their life experiences, these mature students have distinct prerequisites for engaging with academic requirements compared to their younger peers who follow a more conventional academic trajectory.

The development of effective study techniques is paramount in higher education. While recognising the importance of aligning learning-style preferences with effective strategies (Rogers 2009), it is crucial to understand that learning is a collaborative endeavour that requires active student engagement. Balancing individual learner needs with those of the broader educational context is vital. Students need to cultivate metacognitive awareness, particularly in academic reading, where strategic engagement is key (Yüksel and Yüksel 2012). Effective reading strategies, including prediction, connection-making, visualisation, inference, questioning, and summarisation, contribute to enhanced comprehension (Block and Israel 2005; Küçükoğlu 2013).

In the context of vocational teachers, the application of diverse study techniques becomes essential. Proficiency in strategic reading, beyond its focus on younger learners, holds relevance for adult learners too (Merriam and Baumgartner 2020). Hence, exposing vocational teachers to these techniques supports deep learning and advanced comprehension. Educators play a critical role in facilitating mastery by elucidating strategies, practical demonstrations, modelling through group activities, employing the think-aloud process, and fostering independent usage (Duke and Pearson 2009). By acknowledging the nuanced learning needs of vocational teachers and providing them with the tools to enhance their study techniques, higher education institutions can better cater to their unique journeys and contribute to their continued growth and success.

### Situated learning and reflective pedagogy in higher education

In contrast with learning as internalisation, learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world. [...] Participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning in the world. (Lave and Wenger 1991, 49-51)

Situated learning, as introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 'Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation' (1991), presents a transformative perspective on learning that challenges conventional views of cognitive processes. This theory emphasises the interplay between learning and its contextual environment, asserting that learning is not a solitary mental endeavour, but rather a social and cultural phenomenon shaped by community practices (Lave and Wenger 1991). According to this approach, learning is achieved through participation in social situations rather than through cognitive processes (Patel 2018). This concept holds profound implications for higher education, advocating for an experiential and holistic approach to learning that transcends traditional teacher-centred models. Lave and Wenger's theory posits that learning is a dynamic network of connections embedded within a social context. It introduces the notion of 'legitimate peripheral participation', suggesting that newcomers to a community initially engage in peripheral activities that gradually grant access to core practices, knowledge, and expertise (Lave and Wenger 1991). Within the context of vocational teaching, the transition between different occupational realms involves negotiations and mediations of competence as individuals integrate their prior experiences into the world of learning (Antera 2022). This process is inherently shaped by the specific community's goals, values, and interactions, thus underscoring the context-sensitive nature of learning.

Applying situated learning principles to higher education requires pedagogical shifts towards facilitation and context integration. Educators become enablers of active participation, reflection, and practical application within relevant contexts. This approach recognises learners' diverse backgrounds and experiences, allowing them to leverage prior knowledge as they engage with new concepts. By immersing students in authentic academic communities, this pedagogical model fosters deep understanding and practical skill development, transcending mere textbook learning. Furthermore, the concept of 'communities of practice', aligns harmoniously with situated learning in higher education. These communities, marked by differing goals and expertise, offer platforms for students to engage in activities relevant within their chosen fields (Lave and Wenger 1991). Participating students not only acquire subject knowledge but also develop problem-solving abilities and adapt to diverse viewpoints through shared experiences. As students become active contributors within these communities, they become able to bridge the gap between theory and practice, ultimately enhancing their learning outcomes.

Integrating reflective pedagogy complements the principles of situated learning. Reflective pedagogy moves beyond traditional transmission models, valuing critical reflection and self-awareness in learning (Biesta 2015). It acknowledges the multifaceted nature of teaching practices and the contextual nuances that shape them. Such an approach is particularly essential within the vocational teaching landscape, where student-adults with diverse backgrounds converge to construct their learning experiences. By empowering students to decode and translate their experiences within an academic context, reflective pedagogy equips them to pursue autonomous learning beyond the classroom. Developing joint group learning strategies not only enhances individual comprehension but can also nurture collective experiences. Incorporating situated learning principles into higher education acknowledges the diversity of learners' backgrounds and experiences. In such a manner, the educators can empower students to draw upon their prior knowledge while engaging with new concepts, fostering a dynamic and interactive learning environment. By embracing reflective pedagogy, educators can question traditional teaching models and recognise the diverse interests and perspectives within educational settings. This pedagogical approach embraces critical reflection and self-awareness in the learning process, acknowledging the dynamic nature of education and its ties to societal power relations (Biesta 2015).

Responding to ongoing debates surrounding the applicability of Lave and Wenger's social approach to learning, and recognising the inherently social nature of learning, Korthagen (2010) puts forth a compelling argument in favour of an educational pedagogy that embraces a holistic perspective. He posits that teaching is largely influenced by perceptual gestalts, rendering the mere presentation of theoretical concepts insufficient to impact these perception-based frameworks. As a remedy, Korthagen advocates for an educational approach in teacher education that seamlessly integrates meaningful practical experiences – experiences that shape the desired gestalts – followed by reflective processes among student teachers. This reflective approach aims to nurture appropriate mental schemata. This reimagining of teacher education practices holds the potential to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical implementation, thereby fostering a more profound and sustainable transformation in teaching methodologies.

Turning to the work of Hoekstra, Kuntz and Newton (2018), they delve into the nature of professional learning processes, drawing distinctions between adaptive and

developmental learning within instructors' roles. Guided by the insights of Ellström (2011), the authors identify four levels of action in vocational education and training: skill-based, rule-based, knowledge-based, and reflective action. Skill-based actions encompass implicit knowledge and immediate behaviour, often observed in teaching contexts. Rule-based actions necessitate conscious control for familiar scenarios. Both skill-based and rule-based actions evolve through adaptive learning, enhancing the efficiency of established routines. However, a dearth of reflection may lead to ineffective teaching behaviours. Conversely, knowledge-based and reflective actions come to the fore in novel situations, demanding professional judgement and innovative thinking. The authors accentuate the imperative of reflective practice in ongoing professional learning, making a distinction between action-oriented and meaning-oriented reflection. A reflective comprehension of routine-based learning and broader educational objectives proves indispensable for vocational teachers in Norwegian VET, as they navigate diverse levels of action and adapt their teaching strategies accordingly.

### **Empowering vocational teachers for success in higher education and lifelong learning**

Within the educational landscape of Norway, VET programs cater to nearly half of all upper secondary students (Statistics Norway 2023) emphasising the continuous need to equip professional teachers with the essential skills to foster their growth and development. One paramount objective within this context is to empower vocational teacher students with the capacity to reconcile the divergent and often conflicting modes of thinking and acting that are inherent to both their vocational and educational roles (Colley et al. 2003; Eraut 2004). The legislation in Norway particularly recognises the distinct practical expertise held by VET teachers, emphasising the vital role of practical knowledge and skills as prerequisites for qualifying as educators in these domains (Ministry of Education and Research 2023). This legal framework underscores the significance of integrating vocational proficiency with pedagogical skills, enabling teachers to successfully bridge the gap between theory and practice. In school and corporate settings alike, VET teachers assume a pivotal role in preparing students to tackle real-world practical challenges, imparting not only vocational knowledge but also the essential application skills that empower students to navigate the curriculum while fostering personal and democratic engagement within society.

This training of vocational teachers unfolds within an evolving educational landscape that places a strong emphasis on seamlessly integrating practical skills with pedagogical strategies to create comprehensive and enriched learning experiences for students. In line with this educational philosophy, a voluntary master's program in Vocational Didactics has been carefully designed to facilitate the professional development of VET teachers seeking to advance their academic journey, often after substantial years of teaching experience. This program has gained prominence in the wake of the transformation of general teacher education in Norway into a mandatory 5-year master's program (Smepllass 2018) which will leave VET teachers with comparatively lower degrees and status than their counterparts in traditional schools. This change has created increased interest in the continued education program.



With a deliberate focus on accommodating diverse educational and vocational contexts, this specific program is promoted to a wide spectrum of participants, including vocational teachers, and other stakeholders crucial to nurturing the next generation's vocational competence. Moreover, its reach extends to encompass leaders, instructors, skilled workers, and professionals engaged in vocational training, competency enhancement, skill enrichment, value creation, and quality assurance across various industries. At its core, the program emphasises experiential learning while fostering self-awareness regarding one's vocational practice. Rooted in participants' existing vocational expertise, the program's curriculum meticulously addresses the specific competency requirements of their respective fields, welcoming professionals from a diverse array of backgrounds, including healthcare workers, nurses, industrial mechanics, equine industry specialists, telecommunications technicians, industrial tradespeople, driving instructors, electricians, and more. The educational framework is built on invaluable exchanges between vocational professions, facilitated by the shared practical training present within these diverse backgrounds.

The master's program in vocational didactics serves as a platform for continuous competency development and professional advancement throughout students' academic journey and beyond (Norwegian University of Science and Technology 2023). By deepening their understanding of vocational practice, the program aims to empower participants to spearhead initiatives that augment competencies and foster innovation within their sectors. The curriculum equips them with a versatile skill set, encompassing systematic analysis of vocational practices, planning and execution of research projects, adept facilitation of impactful learning processes, and contributions to enhancing the vocational and didactic dimensions of their respective organisations. Conceptualised as a transformative educational journey, the master's program in vocational didactics seeks to arm students with the expertise and perspective needed to create learning environments that seamlessly interweave theory, practice, and pedagogy. This pedagogical approach nurtures professionals skilled in navigating the intricate complexities of real-world challenges. Spanning a two-year full-time program, students undergo diverse training in academic reading, comprehension, and writing, bolstering their ability to conceptualise and execute their own didactical projects and effectively communicate their findings to the academic community through their master's theses. However, despite substantial political interest in teacher education overall (Smeplass 2018), and more recent attention to vocational teacher training (Ministry of Education and Research 2015), numerous students within these programs still report grappling with the demands of the academic realm, particularly when engaging with the rigours of reading and writing academic texts.

## Methods

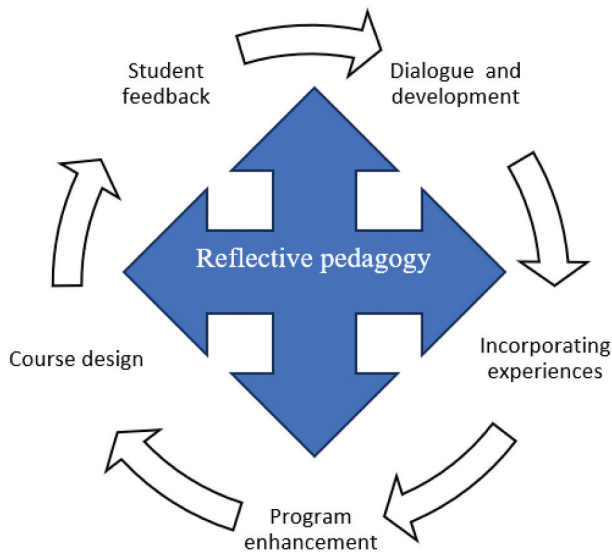
The study reported here employed a comprehensive and multidimensional methodological approach to explore the intricacies of vocational teacher training and its pedagogical underpinnings. Rooted in a critical pedagogy (Freire 1974; Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg 2011; Serrano et al. 2018), the project framework integrates qualitative insights, systematic analysis, and experiential narratives to provide a holistic understanding of the study program's design and its impact on participants (Beaty



1998). The study is part of an ongoing research project titled 'Teacher education in change', authorised by the Norwegian Ethics Committee and led by the author. The undertaking of developing the quality of the master's program on vocational didactics spanned four cohorts between 2019 and 2022 and encompassing diverse groups of 10 to 15 students. These participants, all of whom were enrolled at university, possessed varied vocational backgrounds. Central to this exploration is data gathered in the courses 'Vocational didactics and pedagogy - practice and reflection' and 'Vocational Didactics from an Organizational and Social Perspective'. These courses centres on professional competence, the interpretation of educational steering documents, and the further development of teaching practices. Over four weeks of data collection per semester, the students' pedagogical journey unfolded in long and intensive sessions that encouraged collaborative learning. These sessions provided an environment conducive to the implementation of various pedagogical tools to foster individual and group learning based on principles of situated learning. Course materials were thoughtfully curated to provide a well-rounded understanding of pedagogical concepts relevant to vocational education and training. The readings covered diverse topics including group dynamics, pedagogical theory, and quality assessment. Texts by scholars such as Ehn and Lövgren (2006), Dale (2003), and Elbow (1998) offered insights into group interactions, pedagogical philosophies, and academic quality creating a robust foundation for participants to engage with. Furthermore, the program included updated research on the development of VET, organisational theory, scientific methodology and more.

The analysis unfolded through a multi-step process, commencing with the introduction of the concepts of communities of practice and gathering initial reflections from both students and teachers in a vocational teacher training program. Subsequently, a diverse array of learning activities spanning group work, reflection notes, shared digital spaces, and more, were implemented to gradually foster inclusion, mutual engagement, and negotiation of meaning among participants in their respective cohorts. Throughout the program, experiential narratives were gathered continuously and comparisons were made between these accounts and theoretical community of practice principles. The iterative process involved adapting activities based on ongoing reflections, culminating in a final reflection phase. This comprehensive approach allowed for the synthesis of insights, revealing the dynamic interplay between participants' experiences and the theoretical framework, ultimately contributing to the discussion (below) about the program's pedagogical efficacy and its alignment with communities of practice (Patton 2014).

The illustrative figure presented (Figure 1) encapsulates the dynamic essence of a reflective pedagogy in the context of vocational teacher training. With the central concept of 'Reflective pedagogy' at its core, this visual representation unfolds the intricate interplay of dialogue and development, strategically guided by the incorporation of experiences. This figure outlines a continuous process that begins with a comprehensive exploration of student and educator experiences, captured through student feedback. The insights garnered from these experiences serve as foundational building blocks for enhancing the program design and course structure. This, in turn, fosters a cycle of dialogue and development, where the ongoing exchange of ideas contributes to an evolving educational framework. Ultimately, this model demonstrates how reflective pedagogy serves as a catalyst, propelling the progression from individual



**Figure 1.** Reflective pedagogy: a continuous cycle of dialogue and development.

experiences to collective program enhancement, all centred around a commitment to perpetual growth and learning in vocational teacher training.

Ethical considerations were meticulously addressed throughout the study. Participant anonymity was ensured, and the author actively engaged with students to cultivate a safe space for sharing thoughts and reflections. The study's analytical approach involved a systematic review of course material, student and author reflections, and qualitative insights derived from experiential narratives. This combination of data sources facilitated a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted impact of the methods.

In order to cultivate a dynamic and enriching learning environment within the context of vocational teacher training, a diverse range of pedagogical methods and activities are strategically integrated. These examples not only facilitate academic development but also draw upon participants' prior experience, fostering a powerful community of practice. [Table 1](#) outlines activities employed throughout the program, illuminating their intended purposes, connections to the community of practice, and incorporation of participants' background knowledge.

## Analysis

### *Program design and incorporation of experiences*

Central to the vocational teacher master's program is a curriculum carefully crafted to foster continuous development, reflective practice, and collaborative learning. As students embark on their educational journey, they progressively engage with courses that not only build their vocational knowledge but also cultivate their academic and pedagogical competencies. The structure of the program not only aims to bridge vocational expertise with scholarly pursuits but also promotes the growth of a supportive community of practice to bridge between practical skills and knowledge and the academic world

**Table 1.** Integration of academic development activities.

Encouraged/ facilitated activity	Purpose/Intention	Academic development	Incorporating Prior Experience
Group work on thematic topics	Foster collaborative exploration of course themes	Students collaboratively delve into course topics, sharing diverse perspectives	Draws upon participants' prior experience for enriched discussions
Presenting ongoing work and analysis	Enhance critical analysis and academic communication	Participants present and discuss ongoing projects, receiving feedback for academic improvement	Utilises participants' experience for insightful analysis
Slow reading in groups	Enhance comprehension and reflective engagement through joint discussion and reflection	Groups engage in slow reading sessions, fostering deep understanding and discussion	Leverages participants' prior reading skills for in-depth analysis
Individual reflection notes	Promote personal synthesis and application of learning. Naturalise writing as part of a process	Participants reflect on sessions, connecting theory to personal academic practice	Integrates participants' experience for meaningful self-reflection
15-minute volunteer sessions of pressured writing	Enable expression of ideas. Avoid future write lock	Participants engage in brief writing bursts, practising individualised brainstorming and reflection	Unlock the flow of experience and reflection through written language (Incorporating new knowledge)
Sharing summaries of literature	Enhance collective understanding of academic readings. Taking individual responsibility and receiving help from others. Practising summarisation	Participants share summaries of readings, promoting comprehension	
Creating shared digital spaces	Foster continuous engagement between meetings	Shared digital platforms facilitate ongoing academic discussions and resource sharing	(Incorporating new knowledge)
Recording and analysing film of practical tasks	Apply theoretical concepts to practical scenarios	Participants analyse filmed practical tasks, connecting theory to real-world situations	Integrates participants' experience with practical application
Mind mapping exercises	Visualise complex concepts for deeper understanding. Practicing communication	Participants create visual maps of key ideas, aiding comprehension	Encourages participants to map experience onto new academic content
Joint peer review sessions	Enhance academic insights through peer evaluation	Participants provide feedback on academic projects, improving scholarly outcomes	Encourages constructive feedback based on new and prior knowledge
Creating grade descriptions for courses together with the teacher	Develop shared understanding of assessment criteria. Participation	Participants collaboratively create grade descriptions, aligning assessment with academic expectations	Utilizes participants' experience for assessment alignment
Active dialogue regarding program content	Enhance engagement and tailor learning experiences. Provide experience for developing own teaching	Ongoing discussions shape program content, ensuring alignment with participants' academic needs	Draws upon participants' experience and insights for program development

of reading and writing. Students begin their trajectory with foundational courses that pave the way for deeper exploration and reflective engagement. 'Vocational didactics in an organisational and societal perspective' (15 ECTS) initiates participants into the theoretical realm of vocational didactics, offering insights into organisational theory and societal perspectives, including historic and economic analysis of various markets and their connection to education and training arenas. Complementing this, 'Vocational didactics and pedagogy – practice and reflection' (15 ECTS) emphasises the integration

of practice and reflection in vocational pedagogy, building the groundwork for subsequent academic pursuits through incorporating group reflection, excursions, the history of vocational didactics and development of assessment practices. As students progress, the curriculum becomes further specialised, paralleling the developmental stages of a community of practice. 'Theory and design' (7.5 ECTS) delves into specific theoretical underpinnings ensuring understanding of research design in educational studies, providing a theoretical scaffold for their development of their own projects. Simultaneously, 'Theory of science and methodology' (15 ECTS) hones students' broader set of research skills, nurturing their ability to engage with academic discourse and understanding of recent studies in their fields. One hallmark of the program are the 'Experts in teams' courses (7.5 ECTS each), where students collaboratively address practical challenges in collaboration with master's students from a number of other disciplines and educational programs. As the students participate in these courses together as an integrated learning group, it mirrors the engaged participation observed in vibrant communities of practice and further intertwine vocational insights with broader societal issues through joint experiences and reflections.

The second year of the program focuses on consolidating academic proficiency. 'Academic writing and reading' (15 ECTS) equips students with essential scholarly communication skills essential for their dissemination of the research or development projects, while the 'Master's thesis in vocational didactics' (45 ECTS) represents the pinnacle of their academic journey – a comprehensive research project that exemplifies the fusion of vocational wisdom and scholarly inquiry. Through the program, students continuously share their experience and knowledge based on a culture for community established during the first semester of the program. This tight-knit community fosters friendships and connections that extend beyond the learning period, often spanning different parts of the country.

Curriculum is specifically chosen to ensure that students share commonalities and develop their understanding of the potentials that lie in their educational investment. For example, we present some of the course materials used during the first-year block on 'Vocational didactics and pedagogy - practice and reflection'. First, the students use a variety of techniques to read texts on group process and collaboration (for example Ehn and Lövgren 2006; Røkenes and Hanssen 2012; Wenger 2006) which offer valuable insights into the dynamics of group interactions and collaboration in the educational setting. These texts delve into the complexities of group behaviour and the interplay of individual and group performance, providing a theoretical foundation for the students to discuss and develop their understandings of the collaborative nature of their work in the schools and companies they work in, but also with the added dimension as they are now in a new role as students themselves. Additionally, students study theoretical pedagogical literature (e.g., Biesta 2014; Dale 2003; Dewey 2005) to gain a thorough understanding of the philosophy and central theories of education. Works by influential educational thinkers such as Dewey and Biesta lay a solid foundation in the history and development of pedagogy, enabling critical thinking about education's role and teachers' responsibilities. Furthermore, literature on quality and process in the academic world (Elbow 1998; Rolf, Ekstedt, and Barnett 1993) provides students with the tools necessary for critically evaluating the quality of their academic and vocational work and the work of others. These texts focus on the importance of quality and process in the academic setting,

helping students to understand the importance of evidence-based practices and the need for continuous self-reflection and improvement, and further incorporates the experiences from VET with the academic world, as an attempt to foster new meaning making between the course participants.

In all parts of the program, the students' experiences are incorporated into the topics and working methods, while they at the same time provide students with strategically selected skills and knowledge that are integral to moving towards the end goal of obtaining their degrees. Students often choose topics for their written exams, presentations and thesis projects that align with their prior interests, current jobs or are derived from new curiosities fostered through the program. In this way, the community driven design of the course incorporates experience, while also triggering new perspectives and methods to ensure a more substantial impact on the individual learner. In this way, the program design incorporates fundamental functions from the instrumentality embedded in higher education by providing learners with clearly measurable skills and accomplishments, while also acknowledging the importance of their informal learning and community driven development.

### *Impact on learning outcomes from reflective pedagogy*

The continuous development process of the program has generated substantial impacts on participants' learning outcomes. By weaving participants' experiences and reflective pedagogical principles into the fabric of the curriculum, the program has yielded enhanced engagement, improved comprehension and skill development. The project illuminates a symbiotic relationship between students' contributions and the dynamic evolution of the program, underscoring the vital role of fostering community and collaborative reflection in shaping the program, its courses and the curriculum.

Despite this, the classroom atmosphere in a learning community more usually positions the teacher as an organiser than conversation partner and teachers are often seen as authorities. The initial meeting with a new group of students plays a pivotal role; students must feel secure and acknowledged if they are to freely express their experiences, reflections, and learning challenges as a collective. On this course, teachers take the time to know the students on the first day and conduct brief interviews, allowing students to share their backgrounds, motivations, irritations, and apprehensions as they embark on their master's journey. This personalised approach establishes a foundation for constructive dialogue, documented through reflections from all sessions held over four intensive weeks per semester. The teachers' recognition of the overwhelming demands of academia, particularly in reading and writing, fosters a climate where students are encouraged to openly disagree and reflect to cultivate critical and engaging discussions.

As an example, the 'slow reading method' used in the first semester aimed to provide students with a new tool for engaging with academic texts (Smeplass 2023). This approach creates a safe and inclusive learning environment, enabling students to meaningfully connect the theoretical framework to their life experiences. The teacher's role in cultivating an atmosphere of collaboration empowers students to share their thoughts and life experiences while serving as an organiser and conversation partner. This environment encourages students' full participation and recognition, culminating in a positive learning atmosphere where they feel valued and appreciated – an aim echoed in their

feedback. The diverse reading methods accommodate individual learning paces, alleviating the pressure to read quickly. Emphasising the absence of a single 'true meaning' in literature, the teacher encourages interpretation, reducing stress and prompting students to approach course materials with openness and confidence.

However, the teaching of slow reading also presents challenges, as teachers must embrace unexpected detours, derailments, and frustrations that may arise during discussions. Despite thorough preparation, the teacher often finds their interpretations challenged by students during slow reading sessions. This realisation underscores the diversity of interpretations and necessitates continuous negotiation and adaptation. The teacher's efforts to empower students to control their approach to each text were evident, with the slow reading sessions striking a balance between reading and discussion, with more emphasis on the latter. The reflective and collaborative nature of these reading sessions allowed for multiple re-readings and deep discussions, a testament to the power of slow reading in fostering profound understanding. One of the program's colleagues reported that, 'quality is often associated with efficiency and effective learning'. Her reflections on incorporating group reading strategies exemplify her perspective on the slow reading method's role as a counterbalance. She found the method to be valuable and intriguing, impacting both content comprehension and the group-learning process with students. She elaborated in her reflections where her insights provide a window into the profound engagement that slow reading facilitated, ranging from fostering relationships to diving deep into complex content.

We have read several types of texts with this method. The first text was about recognition and communication. It did not have a difficult content to understand purely linguistically. Here I felt that the purpose of slow reading was to build relationships, raise awareness of how important recognition is in collaborative relationships, and work forward and towards creating good group dynamics. We got to speak and discuss what it would mean to recognize each other in a group collaboration. [...] Other texts were more demanding texts from primary sources. Here, I found that the method was appropriate for understanding content. Once the group had discussed how to develop a common understanding of what the content might mean, some would like to reflect further on the importance of this in a larger context.

Joint discussions among the teaching team revealed that students created their own purposes for the slow reading exercise during the semester. The practice led to a positive group dynamic and an inclusive learning environment. Some participants displayed impatience when progress was slow regarding the text, a sentiment shared by one colleague who admitted: 'as one of the professors, I would normally have been stressed that we didn't get through as many pages as originally planned'. This reflection underscores that slow reading requires a pragmatic approach to sessions to allow for in-depth learning.

The analysis of teachers' reflections and students' experiences revealed the transformative power of practicing diverse study techniques in a group setting. These techniques empowered students to navigate intricate textual messages, fostered collaborative interpretation and shared relevance. Through lively discussions encompassing intricate terms, vocabulary, actions, and viewpoints, students engaged in a profound exploration of the diverse ways in which a text can be understood. Students reported that participation in the reading groups facilitated immersive and profound learning experiences, especially when discussions resonated with their individual learning journeys and objectives. This

connectivity to exploration and active engagement underscores the educational essence of shared knowledge creation. Consequently, the analysis of the specific activity reflects the delicate equilibrium between formal and informal learning within higher education programs.

### *Feedback loop and pedagogical enhancement*

Throughout the program's evolution, students were actively encouraged to provide feedback during sessions and at the end of each term. This participatory input remains integral to the iterative refinement of the program. The students' reflections encompassed a variety of aspects from course scheduling and workload distribution to content alignment and learning outcomes. This feedback resonates with the essence of a community of practice, where novices and experts collaborate to shape shared practices. The feedback loop cultivates shared responsibility, a core element of the community of practice framework. Students engage in ongoing dialogue, advocating for adjustments that align with their evolving needs, echoing the negotiation and shared enterprise principles championed by Lave and Wenger. This collaborative process mirrors the principles of reflective pedagogy and aligns with the dynamic interplay of perspectives inherent within the community.

Mary's (a student) feedback from 2022 exemplifies the empowering impact of pedagogical guidance on students' confidence and approach to learning. She said, 'I received a [high grade] on my master's thesis, and I'm thrilled! The assessors understood my thesis well. My supervisor's guidance motivated me and encouraged me to think more boldly. They shared knowledge, stayed positive, and boosted my confidence'. This quote illustrates how pedagogical support empowers students, fostering their self-assurance and prompting them to engage more daringly with their academic pursuits.

Showcasing a maturing outlook and highlighting the ongoing challenge of aligning educational systems with vocational domains, an anonymous reflection from 2023 echoed the evolving perspectives of vocational educators, emphasising the need to harmonise academic and vocational training:

My view of academia has perhaps changed somewhat over the years I've been studying. I see that I will need to use much of what I've learned. As a vocational teacher, I am still somewhat sceptical of the 'academic push' in schools and how the education system pays so little attention to vocational subjects, even though we make up over 50% of students in upper secondary schools.

The diversity of student backgrounds and learning experiences underlines the potency of cross-disciplinary interactions and how they enhance both personal and professional growth:

Although we in vocational education constitute a small group, we are diverse, and it has been very educational and developmental for me personally. Even though we have shared some classes with students from other disciplines and perspectives, I see that the instructors struggle with the same challenge as we do in vocational education—trying to be relevant to all fields simultaneously, which is impossible. Learning about different perspectives and theories has also positively impacted my role as a vocational educator, influencing how I interact with my colleagues. (anonymous student 2021)



Transitioning from industry to academia is a significant journey and pedagogical support played a transformative role in navigating career transitions and fostering inclusive teaching practices:

I worked as a skilled worker for over 20 years before starting my teacher education. Transitioning from being a results-oriented skilled worker/supervisor to becoming a teacher would have been extremely challenging for me without pedagogical guidance. I believe that one of the most crucial attributes a vocational teacher can possess is the pedagogical wisdom necessary to engage all students in a manner that makes them receptive to learning. A vocational teacher should contribute to shaping new skilled workers and therefore be prepared to assess the starting point of each student. (anonymous student 2021)

The benefits of collaborative learning and innovative pedagogies were evident in another reflective note from 2019. This one underscored the value of collaborative learning methods, demonstrating how strategies like slow reading enhanced comprehension and reinforced critical skills.

We have had interesting discussions that fit well with the curriculum. A lot of reflections have been added both individually and in groups, which has resulted in good use of the syllabus. The way lecturers have participated in the discussions has worked well. [...] Slow reading contributes to increased development and better understanding of difficult theory and helps us to translate other languages. The course has helped to strengthen us as students towards writing a master's thesis and has made us aware of the use of primary literature sources.

In summary, these voices in feedback collected over the years, illuminate the reciprocal relationship between student engagement, pedagogical enhancement, and program refinement. The diverse perspectives within the community of practice enriched learning experiences and facilitated continuous improvement. This data, collected across different years, underscores the program's responsiveness to student input, fostering an environment where dialogue, collaboration, and reflective pedagogy converge to create a dynamic and empowering educational journey.

### **Discussion and conclusion: cultivating dynamic learning communities**

In the pursuit of nurturing an enriching and vibrant learning environment for vocational teacher training, the integration of a diverse array of pedagogical methods and activities stands as a hallmark strategy. The examples discussed in this paper transcend conventional education paradigms, serving not just as instructional tools but as facilitators of academic development. Importantly, they embody the essence of a thriving community of practice, harnessing the collective wisdom of participants while incorporating their distinctive prior experiences. At the heart of this pedagogical approach lies the influential communities of practice theory, a framework posited by Lave and Wenger (1991) that emphasises learning as an active participatory process within a collective domain. By introducing this theory at an early stage of the program, students' perspectives were refashioned – they viewed their academic journey as a communal enterprise rather than an isolated pursuit. This theoretical grounding prompted a conceptual shift from individualistic learning to a collaborative journey where shared growth was paramount.

A distinguishing feature of the program's design is its emphasis on shared experiences that traverse the boundaries of vocational and academic realms. Collaborative projects,

interactive discussions, and reflective dialogues foster an environment where participants meld their occupational expertise with theoretical insights. This combination generates a profound synthesis, endowing educators with the ability to bridge the chasm between practical know-how and academic scholarship. Embedded within the program is a pivotal commitment to peer engagement. Through group discussions, peer reviews and joint endeavours, students not only contributed to their own advancement but also actively participated in the growth of their peers. This dynamic engagement breeds a culture of knowledge exchange, where diverse perspectives coalesce to enrich individual comprehension and refine collective insights.

Central to this approach is the cultivation of a supportive network that extends beyond academic boundaries. This network can thrive beyond formal education, providing participants with a dependable scaffold that guides them through the intricate terrain of academia. As a result, students have found themselves better equipped to navigate the intricacies of research, scholarly discourse, and intellectual exploration. The confluence of communities of practice theory and pedagogical strategies has yielded holistic learning outcomes. Graduates emerged not only with expanded academic horizons but also with a profound understanding of how their vocational backgrounds harmonise with theoretical underpinnings. This synthesis empowers them to navigate the complex intersection of practical expertise and scholarly pursuits, ushering forth pedagogical practices that seamlessly join the two. Acknowledging the diversity of responses and the social context of learning, it is apparent that the power of such an approach lies in its ability to foster learning communities rather than merely teaching techniques. Slow reading for in-depth-reflection and social engagement, among other pedagogical tools, offers students a gateway to enhancing their academic journey. The community leverages their past experiences and cultivates new ways of engaging with knowledge. The integration of communities of practice theory and pedagogical methods represents a transformative approach to vocational teacher training. By fostering a dynamic ecosystem of shared experiences, collective learning, and mutual support, educators steer learners towards a more profound understanding of their vocational and scholarly paths. This process not only fuels immediate academic growth but propels students on a lifelong journey of intellectual exploration, ultimately empowering them in supporting their own students in vocational education and training. To cultivate such an environment, educators must not merely impart knowledge but facilitate spaces for enriching, participatory, and transformative learning experiences.

Within the context of a rapidly evolving educational landscape, communities of practice can add value to higher education by promoting active engagement, collaborative learning, and the development of critical thinking skills. Key concepts from Lave and Wenger's theory of communities of practice can play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive learning environments in many ways. Central to the concept of legitimate peripheral participation is the idea that newcomers initially engage in peripheral tasks before gradually moving towards more central, complex activities within a community of practice. This concept resonates powerfully within the higher education framework, particularly in vocational teacher training where students enter the program with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of expertise. By providing a scaffolded learning trajectory, educators can create a structured progression that aligns with this concept. In practice, programs can begin with foundational

courses that introduce students to core concepts and theories, ensuring a common ground for all participants. As students gain familiarity and confidence, they can transition to more intricate activities, such as collaborative projects, group discussions, and peer teaching. This gradual immersion not only cultivates a sense of belonging and mastery but also mirrors the authentic journey of the lifelong learning of a vocational teacher who navigates various forms of knowledge, both at university and in schools and companies. Mutual engagement underscores the role of shared experiences and joint activities in fostering learning within a community of practice. In a higher education setting, mutual engagement transforms the classroom from the one-way transmission of knowledge to an interactive hub where students actively contribute to the construction of knowledge. In vocational teacher training this concept can be translated into practices that encourage collaborative learning, an exchange of perspectives, and the co-creation of understanding, even across students' different vocational tracks and experiences. Practically, this could involve organising group discussions, problem-solving sessions, and collaborative projects that encourage students to collectively explore topics, share insights, and jointly develop solutions. Such activities mirror the collaborative nature of vocational teaching itself, where educators often work in teams to design effective learning experiences for their students. By practicing mutual engagement, students not only develop the skills to engage in meaningful collaboration but also experience first-hand the value of shared expertise and diverse viewpoints.

The negotiation of meaning in learning situations underscores the communal process through which participants collaboratively construct and refine the understanding of knowledge and practices. In the higher education context, this concept challenges the traditional role of educators as sole knowledge providers and positions them as facilitators of a co-constructed learning journey. In vocational teacher training, this concept can be harnessed to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Practically, instructors can encourage reflective discussions, peer reviews, and joint exploration of complex but important concepts, such as learning, didactics, power, interaction, organisation and many more. For instance, in a vocational teacher training program, students could engage in critical analyses of real-world teaching scenarios, collaboratively identifying pedagogical strategies and applying theoretical insights to solve practical challenges. By negotiating meaning collectively, students not only deepen their understanding of the subject matter but also develop the skills needed to critically evaluate and adapt pedagogical approaches in diverse vocational contexts, also through the eyes of others.

Applying central concepts from Lave and Wenger's (1991) important work within vocational teacher training programs aligns with increasing demands for new groups of students to enrol in higher education programs. By nurturing gradual inclusion, fostering collaborative learning, and promoting the co-construction of knowledge, this project shows how educators can equip students with the skills and mindsets essential for thriving in their role as students and vocational teachers, understanding that their master's degree is more than a piece of paper; it is also an investment in themselves and others. Furthermore, these practices also align with the socio-cultural perspective on learning and principles of a community of practice where the boundaries between experts and novices blur and learning becomes a reciprocal process.

The integration of Lave and Wenger's concepts in higher education can transform the way learning is perceived and also enrich the pedagogical landscape by infusing it with active engagement, collaborative learning, and co-creation of knowledge. By embracing these concepts, higher education programs can empower students to navigate academic demands while fostering a supportive and inclusive learning community.

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