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Book Review

Technical and Vocational Teaching in South Africa: Practice, Pedagogy and Digitalisation

Edited by Reuben Dlamini, Ian Moll, and Vasidevan Naiker
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To review *Technical and Vocational Teaching in South Africa* within the intellectual and political project of reclaiming vocational learning is to engage a text that sits within a contested terrain—one marked by tensions between technicist adaptation, pedagogical reform, and the possibility of epistemic transformation. This *Educational Research for Social Change* special issue calls for a reorientation of TVET toward conscientisation, Africanisation, and epistemic justice, positioning vocational education not as a neutral pipeline to employment but as a critical site of struggle in the Global South. It is within this broader project of repoliticisation that the edited volume must be read.

At its core, the book seeks to address a recognised gap in TVET scholarship: the marginalisation of pedagogy. As the editors argue in Chapter 1, research in South Africa has tended to privilege policy, systems, and skills discourse, often neglecting the internal dimensions of knowledge and teaching practice. This shift toward pedagogy is an important intervention. However, from a Freirean perspective, the question is not simply whether pedagogy is foregrounded, but whether it is mobilised as a practice of freedom, or remains embedded within the logics of compliance, adaptation, and labour-market alignment (Majola & Geduld, 2025).

The opening chapter by Dlamini, Moll, and Naiker situates TVET within South Africa's enduring triple challenge of poverty, unemployment, and inequality, positioning vocational education as a potential lever for socio-economic transformation. While this framing is necessary, it also reflects the persistent dominance of human capital theory. As Majola et al. (2026a) argue, such orientations risk reducing vocational education to an economic instrument, thereby depoliticising its pedagogical and epistemic potential. The book, in this sense, occupies an ambivalent position; it acknowledges structural inequality, however, frequently returns to the language of "skills," "employability," and "industry

relevance." This tension is not incidental; rather, it reflects the broader crisis of meaning in TVET where questions of knowledge, purpose, and power remain unresolved.

This contradiction becomes particularly visible in the book's engagement with digitalisation and technological disruption**.** Chapter 2 (Khoza & Naiker), for instance, explores the implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, positioning disruptive technologies as both a challenge and an opportunity for TVET. The chapter foregrounds the need for institutions to respond to changing industry demands, emphasising the production of "work-ready" graduates. While this reflects contemporary policy discourse, it also reveals a technicist orientation that aligns with neoliberal logics of productivity and efficiency. As Mbembe (2016) cautions, the uncritical adoption of global technological paradigms risks reproducing epistemic dependency, where local knowledge systems are subordinated to dominant, often Eurocentric, frameworks.

A similar orientation can be observed in Chapter 12 (Mbatha), which advances the role of digital technologies in facilitating meaningful learning. While the chapter offers valuable insights into innovative pedagogical practices, it largely frames digitalisation as a neutral or inherently positive development. From a Freirean and decolonial perspective, this raises critical concerns. Technology is not merely a tool; it is embedded within relations of power. The absence of a sustained interrogation of whose knowledge is digitised, whose voices are amplified, and whose are silenced limits the transformative potential of these discussions.

However, the book does not remain entirely confined within this technicist paradigm. It gestures sometimes more convincingly toward alternative pedagogical possibilities that begin to disrupt dominant assumptions about vocational education. Chapter 7 (Mesuwini, Motheogane, Molele, & Gorimbo) and Chapter 8 (Sibisi), which engage work-integrated learning**,** attempt to bridge the longstanding divide between theory and practice. These chapters emphasise the importance of integrating classroom learning with workplace experience, challenging the rigid separation between head and hand that has historically characterised vocational education. While this is an important move, the analysis remains largely functional. As Moll (2023) argues in his critique of andragogy, the issue is not merely the integration of knowledge forms, but the underlying epistemological assumptions that shape what counts as knowledge. Without a critical engagement with these assumptions, work-integrated learning risks becoming a mechanism of labour market insertion rather than a site of critical learning and reflection.

A more substantive challenge to instrumentalist conceptions of TVET emerges in Chapter 9 (Moll & Naiker), which traces the evolution of learning theories in vocational education. The chapter's movement toward embodied cognition offers a more holistic understanding of learning, recognising the interplay between cognitive, social, and practical dimensions. However, the analysis remains largely within a psychological and cognitive frame, with limited engagement with the socio-political dimensions of learning. A Freirean perspective would insist that learning is not only about cognition, but about developing critical consciousness—enabling learners to interrogate and transform the conditions of their existence.

The most significant contribution of the volume, however, lies in Chapter 10 (Maluleke, Moeng, & Pepeta), which explicitly advances the notion of a humanising vocational pedagogy**.** This chapter resonates strongly with Freirean principles, foregrounding dialogue, relationality, and the lived experiences of students and lecturers. It aligns with Majola and Geduld's (2025) argument that humanising pedagogy in TVET must move beyond rhetorical inclusion to create spaces for dignity, agency, and critical engagement. In this moment, the book begins to move toward what this *Educational Research for Social Change* special issue calls a shift from instrumentalism to praxis.

However, even this promising turn remains incomplete. The concept of humanisation is invoked but not fully extended into a decolonial project. As Majola et al. (2026b) argue, the transformation of TVET requires a deeper engagement with Africanisation, student voice, and epistemic justice**.** While the book acknowledges historical inequalities and the marginalisation of TVET lecturers, it does not

consistently foreground African epistemologies, Indigenous knowledge systems, or multilingual pedagogies as central to transformation. This omission is significant because it risks reproducing the very epistemic hierarchies that decolonial scholarship seeks to dismantle.

The structural dimensions of TVET are most clearly articulated in Chapter 1, where the legacy of apartheid, institutional inequality, and lecturer marginalisation are foregrounded. These insights are crucial, particularly in understanding the socio-historical context within which TVET operates. Yet, as throughout the book, the translation of structural critique into pedagogical transformation remains uneven. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023) argues, decolonisation is not merely about recognising historical injustice, but about dismantling the epistemic structures that sustain inequality. In the absence of this deeper engagement, structural critique risks remaining descriptive rather than transformative.

The multi-authored nature of the volume reflects a diversity of perspectives, aligning with this special issue's emphasis on dialogical and participatory knowledge production. This multiplicity is one of the book's strengths, particularly in foregrounding practitioner voices. However, it also contributes to a lack of conceptual coherence. The chapters do not always coalesce into a unified critical project, resulting in a text that oscillates between technicist, reformist, and emancipatory orientations. This fragmentation, while reflective of the field itself, limits the book's ability to offer a sustained theoretical intervention. What emerges from this reading is a volume that inhabits a site of contradiction and transition. It reflects the ongoing struggle within TVET between competing paradigms: between adaptation to the labour market and the pursuit of social transformation; between the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and the possibility of epistemic plurality; between the reproduction of inequality and the aspiration for justice.

Conclusion: Reclaiming TVET Through Africanisation and Ubuntu

To fully align with the project of reclaiming vocational learning in the Global South, the work initiated by this volume must be extended beyond its current limits. A repoliticised TVET cannot remain confined to improving pedagogy within existing frameworks; it must fundamentally reimagine the epistemic foundations of vocational education. This requires a decisive shift toward Africanisation and Ubuntu-informed pedagogy, where knowledge is not abstracted from context but emerges from relational, communal, and lived realities. Ubuntu, as both a philosophy and pedagogical orientation, foregrounds interdependence, dignity, and collective becoming. In the context of TVET, this demands pedagogical practices that centre community knowledge, recognise students as epistemic agents, and create dialogical spaces for critical engagement. As Majola et al. (2026b) demonstrate, such an approach enables a process of decolonising from below—where students and lecturers co-construct knowledge that speaks to their lived experiences and aspirations.

Reclaiming TVET, therefore, is not simply about improving access, aligning curricula, or integrating technology. It is about confronting the enduring legacies of coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023), challenging the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems (Mbembe, 2016), and reimagining vocational education as a space of epistemic justice, democratic participation, and human flourishing. This requires moving beyond the narrow confines of skills discourse toward a pedagogy that is dialogical, critical, and rooted in African realities. *Technical and Vocational Teaching in South Africa* opens an important conversation within this broader project. Its contribution lies in foregrounding pedagogy and in revealing the tensions that define the field. However, its transformative potential remains only partially realised. The task that remains, and one taken up by this special issue, is to deepen this conversation, to push beyond reform toward repoliticisation, and to reclaim TVET as a site of struggle, possibility, and liberation.

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