

Book Review

Wheelahan, L. & Moodie, G. 2026. *Beyond Skills: A Capability Conception of Vocational Education*. London: Brill (Knowledge Economy and Education series).

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**Education is the right to knowledge:
Wheelahan and Moodie's challenge to the skills fetish**

I have always felt an unease with the phrase 'writing skills'. At first I thought it was simply that the word 'skills' felt reductive. But over time I came to realise that it's because the term 'skills' implies something that can be taught explicitly and therefore possessed or not. You are either a skilled writer or you are not; skill is a property of the individual, something you carry around with you like a tool.

The word 'practice', by contrast, suggests that human capability is always socially situated. Academic writing is shaped by the disciplinary norms, epistemic expectations, and power relations of the particular communities in which it occurs. When academic literacy practices are described as 'skills', the implication is that students can acquire them through explicit instruction and thereafter apply them anywhere. Would that it were so simple!

Coming to the understanding of why the notion of 'skills' is often problematic also helped me see how higher education consistently privileges some students over others. When institutions treat literacy, critical thinking, discipline-specific ways of being, and even knowledge itself, as simply a set of generic skills that students should either bring with them or quickly pick up through explicit instruction, they are treating the cultural and epistemic capital of dominant social groups as if it were a neutral baseline. But around the world, the strongest correlation with higher education success is social class (Guinier, 2015; Mettler 2014; National Student Clearinghouse, 2025). This indictment on the sector is in large part because, while academic language is no-one's mother tongue (Bourdieu, et al., 1994), some students arrive socialised into particular practices that are very similar to those that formal education values.

In their new book, Leesa Wheelahan and Gavin Moodie focus on vocational education; a sector that has suffered this reductive logic most significantly. Their central argument is that vocational education policy has been shaped by what they call the 'skills fetish': a reification of skills as discrete, atomised, individually held attributes that can be specified, added, moved about, and bought and sold in markets.

In contrast to this, they propose a deep commitment to the democratic purposes of education through a 'capability conception' of vocational education, grounded in the human development approach of Sen and Nussbaum, and extensively taken up in South Africa by



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researchers such as Melanie Walker and Mikateko Mathebula. In making this proposal, Wheelahan and Moodie offer readers one of the most theoretically rigorous and politically explicit arguments for an expansive vision of post-school education that I have had the pleasure of reading.

I have long found Wheelahan's work useful. Her 2010 book *Why Knowledge Matters in Curriculum: A Social Realist Argument* remains something of a set text for most of the doctoral candidates I supervise. The argument she developed there was, simply put, that if we do not understand how knowledge forms are differently structured, and how those structures in turn shape what learners can think and do, we cannot move toward epistemic access. She explains how knowledge is never neutral or generic, and how the power offered by disciplinary and theoretical knowledge is in how it allows learners to move beyond their immediate context to engage with abstract, generalisable understandings of the world. Without access to such knowledge, students are denied the epistemic passport that enables them to participate fully as expert knowers in an ever changing world.

Beyond Skills extends and deepens these arguments. It brings vocational education, long treated as the poor relation of higher education, fully into focus. The book is structured in three broad movements. The first (Chapters Two to Four) mounts a critique of contemporary vocational education policy, tracing the evolution of Human Capital Theory from a descriptive account of the relationship between education and economic growth to becoming a normative prescription and then finally to being a prescriptive doxa. They argue that Human Capital Theory has become a 'taken for granted and unquestioned truth that governments use as the basis for education policy' (18). The 'TINA' logic ('There Is No Alternative') that Thatcher used to justify neoliberal economics (as did Reagan and then many others) has been imported into education policy, with the result that skills are seen as the only legitimate purpose of post-school education.

Chapter Three draws on Marx's concept of commodity fetishism to show how skills have been endowed with magical thinking: they are treated as things that exist independently of the people who exercise them, separate from the social relations in which they are developed, and removed from the contexts in which they have value. The consequence is that skills are seen as individual attributes in which rational, self-interested actors can invest their time and money based on calculations of likely returns. The magical thinking makes it difficult to see how society shapes who gets to access skill development. The relational, collective, and social nature of expertise is also rendered invisible. And we're left with a bundle of competencies that can be specified in advance and bought and sold in the education and training marketplace.

Chapter Four extends this critique through a Bernsteinian analysis of micro-credentials (or, as we know them in South Africa, 'short courses'). These are arguably today's version of the skills fetish, demonstrating how the discourse of employability has cut the whole curriculum into marketable chunks of work-place tasks and roles. In the process, the theoretical knowledge that gives education its generative power is whittled away and the customer is offered 'just in time' skills instead.

Chapter Five, the 'turning point' of the book, explains why qualifications matter, not just as signals for the labour market to decide who they should hire, but as ways for people to access and share cultural and epistemic resources. Qualifications, in Wheelahan and Moodie's account, serve individual, educational, occupational, and social purposes. Each of these is elaborated in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Six's unpacking of the capabilities approach is honest about the need to use this framework in nuanced and contextualised ways and always to look to the structural conditions shaping any educational context. All of society needs to hear the argument that vocational education should be reoriented toward developing what individuals can *be* in work which they have reason to value, and not only what employers require them to *do*.

Chapter Seven, on the educational purposes of vocational education, is the chapter I think will be cited most widely. Wheelahan and Moodie's argument brings together various theoretical positions in really productive ways. They offer a realist account of the nature of knowledge (such as Bernstein's distinction between theoretical and everyday knowledge and Young's concept of 'powerful knowledge') with ontological realism (there is a material reality shaping the views and understandings of people) and epistemological relativism (our knowledge of the world is always partial and shaped by society and individual agency). This chapter explicitly addresses the concern that educational research is often blind to knowledge as a structure (Maton, 2014).

For Wheelahan and Moodie, the educational purpose of vocational education is to ensure that students have access to the disciplinary, theoretical, and abstract knowledge underpinning practice. This is not call for mimicry of traditional universities in order to garner some of the status attached to such institutions. But rather they argue for this because without it students cannot participate in advances in their field of practice or in debates within society at large. Their proposal is for a 'knowledge-rich' vocational education curriculum, one that 'faces both ways' toward the theoretical knowledge that underpins practice and toward the tacit, context-dependent knowledge of the workplace.

The third movement (Chapters Eight and Nine) offers an analysis of the social role of vocational education institutions. Chapter Eight's review of the empirical evidence on the match between education and employment in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom is eye-opening. In liberal market economies, the connections between vocational education and specific jobs are, with only the exception of highly regulated occupations, remarkably weak. This is a strong argument against the narrow, job-specific conception of vocational education that Human Capital Theory demands.

While the implications for higher education are found throughout this book, they are not the focus of the text. Readers hoping for a systematic analysis of how the skills fetish has colonised the university sector will need to do some of that work themselves. Similarly, while the book engages substantively with the Anglophone policy tradition and draws on evidence from Canada, Australasia, and the United Kingdom, the implications for the Global South are mainly noted rather than developed. The effects of competency-based training and marketisation of education on the African continent is referred to, but not explored in any great detail. Reading the book

from a South African perspective gave me the sense that more local research still needs to be done on the issues raised. The work of South African Stephanie Allais, which they draw on, would be key for undertaking this.

South Africa has its own history of what happens when education is deliberately reduced to the instrumental and the procedural, and it is a history that makes Wheelahan and Moodie's argument incredibly useful for research in our context. During the apartheid era, the dominant educational philosophy across the schooling and technical training sectors was what became known as "fundamental pedagogics". This was a formalist, pseudo-scientific approach to teaching and learning that stripped out questions of knowledge, context, and social purpose in favour of a highly prescribed, behaviourist procedures. Derived in part from Dutch Reformed theological and philosophical traditions and institutionalised in Afrikaner universities in around the 1950s to 1980s, fundamental pedagogics presented pedagogy as if it was a neutral, technical endeavour, reducing the whole of education to input-process-output. Questions about what knowledge was worth teaching, whose knowledge it was, and to what ends it would be put were considered irrelevant or dismissed as being "political".

The ideological function of this pretence of neutrality was of course itself highly political. By deleting from the curriculum any overtly normative epistemic content, fundamental pedagogics made it easier to implement Bantu Education. The deliberate provision of an inferior, vocationally oriented, and intellectually impoverished curriculum to black children, was designed explicitly to prepare them for subordinate roles in the apartheid labour market. The belief that there was no place for the black child 'above the level of certain forms of labour', as Verwoerd said in 1953, was implemented through a curriculum that offered practical training and rote procedure divested of theoretical knowledge, thereby denying access to concepts through which students might understand, and thus critique, the social order.

Technical colleges and the Technikon sector were also strongly shaped by these ideas: these institutions were structured around vocational tasks, with theoretical knowledge treated as, at best, a minimal supplement to practical training. Gamble (2006) has explicitly demonstrated the subordination of theoretical knowledge to competency-task models in South Africa's technical education sector. As national policy stated 'the corpus of scientific knowledge is not directly relevant to Technikon education and training' (Department of National Education, NATED 02-118,1988). The result was both educational impoverishment and epistemic dispossession through the deliberate withholding of access to powerful knowledge. And these withheld knowledges are identified by Wheelahan and Moodie as key to human flourishing, democratic participation, and the capacity to fully enact personal agency in one's work and in public life.

South Africa's post-apartheid Outcomes-Based Education reforms of the 1990s were, to some extent, an attempt to break away from fundamental pedagogics. But these reforms imported our own version of the skills fetish, adopting competency-based frameworks that, as critics including Allais (2014) and Jansen (1999) have argued, reproduced many of the same epistemic limitations of fundamental pedagogics in a new form. That the democratic dispensation reached for what appeared as progressive international policy and found instead another set of

tools for withholding theoretical knowledge from those who most needed it is one of the deeper ironies of South African educational history. Wheelahan and Moodie's work can provide the explanatory critique of how and why this continuation in new form happened.

That the book does not focus on traditional university education or on the South African context are, however, observations about what it does not set out to do rather than criticisms of what it does. Wheelahan and Moodie have written a book that is genuinely useful for anyone who cares about what education is for. Their human capability argument that a new 'social settlement' is needed in vocational education indicates a commitment to democratic access to powerful knowledge and to the social purposes of educational institutions.

I began this review by reflecting on why I find the term 'skills' so troubling, and I want to end by noting what Wheelahan and Moodie have helped me to see, and that is that the skills fetish is not simply an intellectual error. It is a body of belief sustained by power relations that benefit from keeping working-class students as 'supervised workers'. The counter-argument is not that skills are insufficient, rather it is that all education has a democratic obligation to provide students with access to the theoretical knowledge they need to understand the world and act within it. This book makes that argument with force, and it deserves widespread engagement.

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