

Pedagogical Practice in Vocational Education

Wouter Pols, Research Center Urban Talent, Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences
Email: wouterpols1@gmail.com

‘You must act at that very moment, not necessarily knowing whether you are doing the right thing.’

Abstract

What is it like to teach at a vocational school? What are the pedagogical challenges for teachers who are responsible for teaching young people going into the trades? Since September 2015, the Research Center Urban Talent of the Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences has conducted field research at six different schools of vocational education. As a member of the center’s research staff, I conducted a series of conversations with a team of vocational teachers at each school between September 2015 and May 2018. This paper offers an account of one of these conversations. It focuses on the pedagogical experiences of vocational teachers, and it aims to get the teachers to articulate their experiences and to investigate their meanings. My approach was phenomenological. The teachers were encouraged to share and reflect on their experiences.

A Phenomenological Inquiry

In the 1940s the Dutch educator Martinus Langeveld introduced the phenomenological approach to the field of pedagogy in the Netherlands. In his *Beknopte theoretische pedagogiek* [*Concise Theoretical Pedagogy*] he asks, do we really know what a child or young person experiences when he or she learns something? How can we assume that we are planning curriculum experiences when we do not know how they are being lived through? How do we know that our actions are pedagogically appropriate if we do not know how the students experience these actions?

Langeveld (1971) proposed that rather than theorizing we should be attentive to the concrete experiences of students and teachers. What really is at stake in the process of bringing up children and youths? And what is the meaning of what is at stake that we may not comprehend? When asking what lies at the heart of the phenomenon of pedagogy and how should we name it, he says: “We wish to analyze this phenomenon only as such for now. We do not want to interpret it from another source than from itself. We start in a phenomenological way” (p. 29). Langeveld argues that bringing up children should be approached by way of everyday experience first. He speaks about pedagogy or upbringing as a challenging phenomenon that is not yet understood: ‘something’ of which the precise meaning still lingers in the experience —something that still needs to be articulated.

The research I will now describe took place at six schools of vocational education, distributed through all the regions of the Netherlands. These schools are attended by students who have a lower secondary school diploma. Vocational schools in the Netherlands have four different levels: assistant training (level 1), basic vocational training (level 2), full professional training (level 3), and middle management and specialist training (level 4). I held conversations with six different teams who were responsible for training activities at different levels.

There were six meetings held per team. As a member of the Research Center, I led the conversations. The main question was: What do you experience – feel, do, think – when you are involved in an activity that you consider a moment that stands out for some reason? The teachers were invited to present such an experience, and, after presenting, to investigate the meaning of it. Initially, I took the lead, but gradually I drew the other teachers into the conversation.

The meetings focused on ‘pedagogical moments.’ “A pedagogical moment is that instant of a pedagogical situation or relation when a pedagogical action is required” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 35). Specific rules or general principles are difficult to formulate. Nevertheless, the teacher usually has to act. One must do something even before knowing what to do. We might say that the teacher unwittingly employs ‘tacit knowledge’ (Pols, 2016, p. 214-221). It is a “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do” (Van Manen, 2016). It is a form of ‘embodied knowledge’ that may have accrued from past experiences. Merleau-Ponty (1962) calls this knowledge “knowledge in the hands” (p. 166).

At each meeting, a teacher presented a pedagogical moment that he or she had encountered. This became the central theme of the meeting. I focused on the ‘tacit (lived) knowledge’ that was at stake in that moment. My approach was one of “cautious questioning” and “sensitive interpreting” of what the teacher recounted (Van Manen, 2017, p. 819).

An Experiential Example

Below, I give an account of a conversation that I held with a team. One of the teachers presented a pedagogical moment. As I indicated above, my basic question was: *What is it like to teach at a vocational school? What does a teacher experience in vocational education classrooms and what is the meaning of it?* Together with the teachers, I tried to find out what was the crux of such experience, the unnamed themes that could be at stake in the pedagogical moment. Next, I tried to address the meaning of these themes, first with the teacher who presented the pedagogical moment, later with the other teachers as well. Citing Merleau-Ponty (2007), we tried to find out the meaning in “the structure of the event” on the basis of a “plurality of interpretations” (p. 368).

The following conversation has been anonymized and edited to no longer factually reflect the exact discussion. In other words, it is no longer one teacher’s particular story. Rather the conversation and thematic reflections are now paradigmatic of what may happen in any vocational classroom. After all, phenomenological texts are not about real and concrete persons but paradigmatic of the meaning of certain experiential phenomena (Van Manen, 2017).

WP (researcher): Can you tell me what you experienced?

Teacher: It happened during a project lesson. I passed by a boy, Jeff (a pseudonym) who was looking at his phone and I saw a photo of a classmate

and said: 'Let me see.' It was a Snapchat¹ picture. Below the photo was written 'I have AIDS.' I found it pretty shocking. I felt I had to do something. I acted spontaneously and did what I thought to be appropriate. But, in hindsight, I don't think I did the right thing.

WP: What did you do?

Teacher: The first thing that occurred to me was: I should protect Steve [pseudonym of the victim whose picture was posted on Snapchat]. I was afraid that he was being treated as a patsy. Or that he was being bullied.

WP: So, you thought of the victim whose picture was put on Snapchat?

Teacher: For me, one of the most important things in education is a safe climate. If you notice that a student doesn't feel safe you must do something.

WP: What must you do?

Teacher: I asked who posted the picture on Snapchat. The boy who did, Mike (a pseudonym), confessed that he was the one who had posted the photo.

WP: So how did you handle that situation?

Teacher: I sent Mike out of the classroom and told him to think over what he had done and write down his thoughts.

WP: What next?

Teacher: Next, I talked with the other students in the class about what had happened. But they found that I took it too harsh. The photo on Snapchat was just a joke. Some students said that I should not have looked at the student's phone without permission.

WP: How did you respond?

Teacher: We had a conversation in a grown-up way. But they felt there was nothing wrong with the joke, though the illness was indeed not OK.

WP: A grown-up way? What do you mean by this?

Teacher: They comprehended why I was angry, why I made a problem of it. Some students advised me that I should apologize too, for infringing the student's privacy. After a while, Mike, the student who had posted the picture came back.

WP: Mike entered the classroom.

Teacher: Yes, and I asked him to read what he had written down.

1 Snapchat is an app by which pictures are made available to the receiver for only a short time.

WP: What did he write?

Teacher: I won't beat about the bush; his message was that I should say 'sorry' for looking at the phone. It was not fair of me that I looked at his phone.

WP: How did you feel?

Teacher: I experienced it as an attack.

WP: How did you deal with your feeling?

Teacher: I became very quiet. Normally, when someone gets in my face, I get angry. But at that moment, I got very quiet.

WP: So how did it end?

Teacher: I told Mike to leave the classroom again: 'I don't want you to stay in my classroom. You shouldn't have done what you did. Wait outside. I want to talk with you, afterwards. I will call your parents later.'

WP: Hmm.

Teacher: After a while, the lesson was over. I dismissed the class and then talked to Mike, who had posted the picture. It was a one-way communication. I told him: 'You made a big mistake.'

WP: Did you contact the parents as you said you would?

Teacher: Yes, I informed the Mike's parents; they told me that they agreed with me. Later Mike wrote a letter in which he offered his apologies.

WP: Was that the end of it? Did you try to find out why he had acted like that?

Teacher: No, however, I have a hunch, but I am not completely clear about it.

WP: Did you share your thoughts with him?

Teacher: No, not really. But I suspect that the way he acted had to do with his position in the class. It isn't nice to have to say that you made a mistake in front of all your classmates.

Teacher: Do you know what Steve thought about it?

Teacher: Yes, as for him, I think I made an error. I had asked him what he thought of it in front of his classmates. He said he didn't have any problem with what happened, with them posting his picture. I now feel that I should have spoken with him privately, of course.

WP: I am wondering how you came to your judgments.

Teacher: I didn't think before I acted. But I could not let go of it.

WP: What was going on in your head when you thought it over afterwards? How might you have done things differently?

Teacher: I would have shown my sentiments and concerns more seriously. I think that if Mike had understood what I really felt he would not have embarrassed me in front of his classmates.

WP: Why do you say that?

Teacher: I asked the class after I had sent Mike out again: 'What do you think? Do you think I am overreacting?' Some of the students said: 'It doesn't matter. It was not a big mistake. It is normal for kids to make a joke like that.'

WP: How did you feel about their opinions?

Teacher: I tried to explain: Suppose your father has AIDS. How would you feel about it then? [But it is difficult. Their fathers don't have AIDS, do they? So, I tried to give another example.] How would your boss think about it? What about your parents?

WP: So, you tried to broaden their view?

Teacher: The problem is that their view is the view of the group. They all agreed: 'This is nothing to worry about! Just a joke!'

WP: Okay. So, what happened next?

Teacher: Well, I tried to consider their point of view.

WP: I suppose that is a good pedagogical attitude to take?

Teacher: Yes, to be honest, now that I am thinking this through, I should have conducted the conversation differently.

A Possibility of Pedagogical Themes

When the group of teachers talked about this teacher's example, most agreed that this is not an unusual classroom event. A teacher notices something and does something in response and then some mistakes are made and some misunderstandings occur. Eventually it all blows over and things go on as normal though some sour feelings may linger for a while. These are pedagogical moments and if things go well then we all learn from it.

A more interesting discussion is what was at stake in such pedagogical situation. The point is not that we need to determine what the teacher should have done or not done. It is too late for that now. But it may be pedagogically interesting to identify and reflect on the theme or themes that were at issue in this case. In real life, even seemingly simple situations like

this are never truly simple. And it depends on our pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact what meaning we can make of this situation (Van Manen, 2016). Langeveld defines a pedagogical situation as the complexity of givens in terms of which we must act. For him, pedagogical situation analysis is concerned with gaining phenomenological insights into the structural aspects of pedagogy and concurrently with determining the meanings of the most fundamental phenomena at stake (Langeveld, 1971, p. 159).

Phenomenology is not just a method that one can employ like a set of procedures. It is first and foremost an attitude that relies on the attentive perceptiveness, creative insight, interpretive sensitivity of the person (Van Manen, 2017). The phenomenological attitude focuses on the uniqueness, the particularity of a thematic experience or phenomenon. Now, it is easy to articulate some possible themes that may make this pedagogical situation intelligible: the teacher's concern for his students' sense of safety, being honest about one's feelings, understanding why someone may be hurt by what we do, having respect for each other.

Pedagogical sense-making is not really a matter of 'naming' themes, or about how many times a certain theme occurs or is mentioned in a text or in an experiential account. Sometimes, a little noticed, an overlooked theme, such as fortuitousness may be more critical for understanding the import of pedagogical relations and acting than a more commonly occurring theme such as having empathy. Every theme of the phenomenon of pedagogy can be seen as a phenomenon in itself, challenging us to reflect on its meaning.

Fortuitousness

At the beginning of the conversation the teacher says, *I felt I had to do something. I acted spontaneously and did what I thought to be appropriate. But, in hindsight, I don't think I did the right thing.* This statement shows how any moment of acting may have reflective and nonreflective aspects. When acting 'spontaneously' (nonreflectively), one does not really have time to think 'what one thinks to be appropriate' (which would be a reflective moment). It is obvious that 'tacit knowledge' is involved here. The thought 'in hindsight' seems more reflective. So it is really a bit puzzling to what extent a teacher thinks about what is the right thing to do when doing something. How is such situation structured? What is really meant by acting 'spontaneously'?

So, the situation is that when the teacher walks by the students he happens to see the picture of a classmate on the screen of the smartphone of one of the students. Here precisely is the moment of 'chance' or 'fortuitousness' that may trigger a pedagogical instance and cause a problem, especially in the case of Snapchat. A picture on Snapchat stays on the screen for only a short time. The incident of glancing at the picture on the phone screen happened serendipitously, unforeseen. The teacher could have ignored this happenstance moment. Or he could have gestured for the phone to be put away. However, once the attention is drawn and some action has been committed, the pedagogical situation has been triggered. Now a whole series of further actions and happenings may take place that involve the teacher and the students.

Apparently, the teacher could not ignore what he happened to see. He had already responded to the situation before he knew what he was doing, so to speak. On reflection, a fruitful pedagogical question might now be: what is the role of coincidence or happenstance in teaching? Again, the point is not to blame or praise the teacher. The challenge is to understand the experiential meanings of the sudden fortuitousness of the situation, for the teacher as well as for the students. Is this pedagogical question of the meaning and significance of happenstance or fortuitousness ever considered in teacher education

programs?

Empathy

Another, possibly more obvious theme in this incident is the question of empathy or intersubjective understanding. It is easy to say that teachers should help students understand what it is like to stand in someone else's shoes. But what does that really mean? Does this mean to intellectually understand what the other person is experiencing? Or does it mean to vicariously and imaginatively going through the same experience oneself? Or is empathy like a contagious infliction? Obviously in this situation, students experience the events differently. The experience of the student who posts the picture on Snapchat is not the same as the experience of the student who receives the photo and both of these experiences differ from the victim whose picture was posted with the offending comment. As well, there are the other students in the class who witness the commotion but may not be clear what exactly was going on. How does the teacher practice empathetic insights about the experiences of all these various students?

Is empathy a skill that one must possess, or is it a spontaneous physical or psychological partaking in the other person's lived moment? Empathy poses the challenge of entering (understanding) the life or experience of a stranger. In this sense, empathy always involves an other person's experience that is not directly our own experience. Now the teacher has to understand what kind of empathy the student who posts the picture or the student who owns the phone is experiencing, if any. As well, the teacher increasingly seems to get emotionally and psychologically charged himself with the indifferent or casualness of the responses of the students. Can a pedagogical attitude be sustained when the teacher cannot help but feel personally offended or annoyed? The teacher says: *at that moment, I got very quiet.*

Just a Joke

The teacher recalls that *some of the students said: 'It doesn't matter. It was not a big mistake. It is normal for kids to make a joke like that.'* But the teacher obviously does not like this opinion that is seemingly shared by many of the students in the class. Still, this is not an unusual situation. Students may have a sense of humor that a teacher cannot accept. Perhaps there is an element of cruelty at stake in such joke? Yet, for the students such joking is not unusual. According to the teacher: *Some of the students said: 'It doesn't matter. It was not a big mistake. It is normal for kids to make a joke like that.'*

What does it take for a teacher to understand how students can merely shirk this instant off as 'just a joke.' Indeed, that is what students say. So how do students experience such situation? What kind of joke is this? Who is laughing? Is anyone laughing? If so, is it a laughing with, or a laughing at, or a laughing about? Is the victim of the joke laughing? If so what kind of laughing does the victim display? Is there an element of bullying going on? By pushing the question in a phenomenological direction and asking for the essence of the meaning of such 'joke' we gain a sense of what the meaningfulness and significance is of jokes, and certain kinds of jokes in students' lives.

Closed Openness

An other possible theme is the element of closed openness. The teacher seems troubled that

the students advise him to take the situation lightly and that he, the teacher, should apologize to the students for invading their privacy. One is not supposed to look at someone else's phone screen? Why? Because the exterior screen may reflect what is on the inside of the owner of the screen. Therefore, the screen can be a symbol of privacy. One may only enter it if invited. It is ironic perhaps that young people seem to care so little about privacy, and yet they know and disapprove when it is transgressed.

But it is clear that insofar the teacher becomes defensive and withdraws into personal feelings of hurt, the pedagogical quality of the interaction has eroded into a more closed attitude. It is hard to stay open and available and not reject the student when one feels attacked.

Conclusion: The Deeper Meaning of Pedagogy

Now, in all these thematic excursions there are two elements at work: determining what themes seem to be lying at the center the situation, and what is the phenomenological meaning and significance of these such as: serendipity, empathy, joking, and respect that seem to lie at the core of the situational relation, action, and experience. The more thoughtfully we understand the phenomenology of these thematic phenomena, the more likely we will be able to act with pedagogical tactfulness in such situation. Langeveld (1971) raised the important question what we understand by pedagogy. At the heart of these thematic explorations lies the deeper meaning of pedagogy to which we must open ourselves, and that calls on us. The calling derives from the responsibility we feel for our students. It makes us attentive. This attentiveness to the vocation of pedagogy in vocational education is precisely the openness that pedagogy asks of us to practice.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Max van Manen for critical reading of a previous version of this paper, and for giving me very helpful comments and suggestions.

References

- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). London/New York: Routledge. (Original work published in 1945)
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2007 [1964]). *Eye and Mind* (C. Dallery, Trans.). In T. Toadvine, & L. Lawlor (Eds.), *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (p. 351-378). Evanston (Illinois): North Western University Press. (Original work published in 1964)
- Langeveld, M. J. (1971 [1944]). *Beknopte theoretische pedagogiek*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.
- Pols, W. (2016). *In de wereld komen. Een studie naar de pedagogische betekenissen van opvoeding, onderwijs en het leraarschap*. Antwerpen/Apeldoorn: Garant.
- van Manen, M. (2016). *Pedagogical Tact. Knowing What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do*. Walnut Creek/California: Left Coast Press.
- van Manen, M. (2017). Phenomenology in Its Original Sense. *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(6) 810-825.