

## Vocational Pedagogy in Praxis: Lessons from Uganda

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### Abstract

This article discusses our experience building a Masters program in Vocational Pedagogy in Uganda and Southern Sudan. We have seen an enormous growth in educational institutions during the past fifty years both in the so-called North and South. The growth seems to be intimately linked to the universal belief that an educated population is crucial for productivity in present day society marked by constant development of new technology and the conduct of new labor processes and their management. In “the North”, education has become a branded commodity for export, as seen in many of the development projects mounted by the Western World for the “less-developed” countries. Educators in the “South” possess both a faith in, and a skepticism towards, constructing national copies of the educational systems found in the rich western countries. One theme for enquiry follows: If the modern, reason-based, hierarchically-organized education of “the Western World” is now a corporate cultural brand exported globally, both on the strength of its effectiveness and as a symbol of freedom, democracy, individualism and human rights, it engenders dilemmas and contradictions wherever it is exported. These conflicts are reflected in all social scientific disciplines related to questions of learning and teaching. Vocational pedagogy and vocational didactics are central new concepts in this discussion

**Keywords.** Vocational Pedagogy, Vocational Didactics, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, Action Research.

### Introduction

The background for this article is our experiences working in Kampala, Uganda, building up a Masters’ program in Vocational Pedagogy together with colleagues and students from Uganda and Southern Sudan.<sup>1</sup> The main influence in building the program was the empirical work in vocational education and training (VET) and adult education as it had developed in a Masters program in Vocational Pedagogy in Norway. This consists of building new knowledge on the basis of work and learning arising from the life experience of participants in both “the North and the South”. Another source of inspiration for us working with this Masters’ program has been the critical voices from indigenous local peoples demanding autonomy and self-government (see Botha 2013, Bhyat 2006, Mjelde 1993, 2017, Mjelde & Daly 2012 Bolton & Daly 2013). A third source of inspiration has been visits to vocational schools in Africa and Latin America over the course of the past 40 years. With their workshops and classrooms, their blend of “hands-on” and “theoretical” learning, vocational educational institutions look the same in Uganda and Tanzania as they do in Germany, Chile, Norway and Argentina (Mjelde 1986).

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<sup>1</sup>The Norwegian Masters’ program (NOMA- SIU) was financed by Norwegian development aid. The program started in 2007 and finished Dec 31 2013. The Kyambogo Masters’ Program had a budget around 1.7 million US dollars. Liv Mjelde was the Norwegian project leader from 2007 till March 1<sup>st</sup> 2011. Richard Daly taught and mentored on the Noma Project in the same period. We spent longer periods of time in Kampala between 2007 and 2011 building up the program together with colleagues at Kyambogo University. We also did preparatory work in both Sudan and South Sudan, spending short periods there. (See also: Mjelde, Liv & Richard Daly 2012)

They are all similar, though with certain variations and sometimes huge differences when it comes to resources and equipment. The biggest difference is the poverty of material and equipment in the South in contrast to the riches in the North and the fact that the South has been dependent on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in development questions. The IMF commands and the South jumps, sweats and struggles. Mike Mason (2013: 228) points out that after the states of Africa have been given their independence they continued to be dominated either by their former colonial rulers, Britain or France or by the United States, or by the two in combination through the institutions they control, the commodity markets, the IMF, the World Bank, the banks and the stock-markets in London and New York. From the point of view of the former colonial states, like Britain and France, “neo-colonialism” is what made apparent political independence acceptable. The Financial Times said in June 2012: “*After decades of outside assistance, the continent is as dependent as ever on the whims of foreign donors*” (Mason 2013: 222). The North brings money and programs to the South and the South is pressed into a gratitude situation and expected to comply with foreign protocols and foreign interests. The biggest question of them all is inequality (of power and wealth, or powerlessness and poverty of opportunities or living conditions, or both). Dambisa Moyo (2009 in Mason 2013:221) pointed out in that with regard to the world’s population, the proportion of the world’s people in extreme poverty fell after 1980, yet the proportion of people in sub-Saharan Africa living in abject poverty had increased to almost 50%.

The Ugandan “Poverty Eradication Action Plan 2004/05-2007/08” (pp.159-162) emphasizes the need for strengthening vocational education and training in relation to the economy’s need for skills and as an aspect of poverty eradication.<sup>2</sup> The “Joint Assessment Mission” (JAM) stresses that vocational education of youth and adults is urgently needed to address the skills’ deficits in the South of Sudan.<sup>3</sup> In the North there is a demand for vocational training both in schools and in workplaces. At the same time, it can also be argued that contradictions between vocational education and training, on one hand and academic education, on the other, are highly visible in both the South and the North. As well, both in North and South, VET is regarded by the wider society and its administrators as a poor cousin of general education . Vocational education and training, as well as adult education courses, have been the education intended for the working classes with their specific cultures and ways of learning and communication (Mjelde 1987).

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<sup>2</sup> Uganda Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic development 2004: *Poverty Eradication Action Plan. 2004/5-2007/08* Kampala. See also The World Bank, African Region 2002: Uganda Post-Primary Education Sector Report. African Development Fund 2005: Uganda Education 111 (Support to Post-Primary Education and Training) Project Appraisal.

<sup>3</sup>JAM Sudan, Joint Assessment Mission “Framework for Sustained Peace, Development and Poverty Eradication”, March 18, 2005.

### **Academic vs vocational education: A great divide**

The origins of both vocational education in schools and apprenticeships in workplaces developed in different ways in Europe in the last century but they have emerged from learning traditions dating back to feudal times (Mjelde 2013). There are also similarities between these vocational traditions in Europe and indigenous knowledge traditions in Africa, as elsewhere. One important similarity is that the work of the hand and learning through watching and imitation are central features in these traditions, and another is that learning praxis and learning through cooperation are integral parts of both. Anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (2003) have conducted empirical studies in Africa and in what they describe as “learning in communities of practice”. Their findings and their promotion of communities of practice, in which learning is socially constructed, have common roots with “learning in apprenticeship traditions”. Much research into, and pedagogical promotion of such praxis-based inductive learning shares another feature with apprenticeship learning, namely that in both “the North” and “the South” the managers of education portray these learning traditions as negative and backward, not to mention highly inferior to academic education. Hegemonic views around the globe regard not only indigenous ways of living and learning, but also working-class forms of learning and outlook as phenomena which are remote and inferior from “real education”. (See Botha 2013:134).

How are we to grapple with these contradictions as we promote research and development in vocational education and training? More specifically how are we to address fundamental questions concerning how to organize all teaching and learning processes everywhere, and especially if you are trying to implement ideas from the North in parts of the so-called developing world? What is demanded of the ‘eyes and ears’ of researchers from the North working in the South? Vita Florence, a South-Sudanese student in the first cohort of the NOMA Project delivered at Kyambogo University, the project described here, expressed the dilemma in these terms: “The colonial Masters were mental and psychological victims of racism and suffered from superiority complexes” (exam project 2009:21)<sup>4</sup> What does this “post-colonial” world look like today? How do we, researchers and program developers from the North, handle this problematic inheritance in our daily work of teaching and researching in the South? Is our situation the same as colleagues in the South? Is the call by the Kenyan writer Wa Thiongo Ngugi for “decolonizing the mind” a useful concept for developing critical analytical minds in

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<sup>4</sup>Our thinking about these complexities is that we need “new history lessons” in the North about African and colonial history and a lesson on the importance of being more humble and more open to learning the local conditions. The NOMA project has been a steep learning curve. One thing we did in the program was to make a huge effort towards grounding vocational education and training in Uganda and South Sudan. We wanted to ground the project in African soil, in the traditions of vocational education in relation to the labor markets in Uganda and Southern Sudan.

both North and South? Do we, whether in the North or South, need to decolonize our minds from today's hegemonic neo-liberal academic thinking? How might VET research deal with these dilemmas?

Vocational education and training are as much part of the contradictions in educational science in Uganda as they are in Europe, Latin America or Asia. A major trend in VET studies is the focus placed on comparative policy content and standardization in the face of an ever-changing labor market. Issues of class and other differences in power and influence in society tend to be ignored or at least seldom addressed in these studies. (see Mjelde 2013, Olsen 2013). The division between mental and manual labor, between learning in school and learning in workplaces, in workshops and classrooms are part of the contradictions all over today's world. The questions of form and content in VET and adult education are the same whether you are in Oslo or Kampala. Moreover, the complexities on how to do research in educational science are similar everywhere.

One of the main problems for Northerners promoting learning in relation to work in so-called developing countries is the national background of these Northerners, their countries' history in relation to the colonial era, as well as the lack of sufficient time to develop a healthy climate for the free exchange of ideas and activities given the prevailing "donor-giver" situation which arises in "development project" situations. The North provides the money and "hence enjoys power and control". Such situations prevail over much of Africa today. Which are the truths and which are the lies we live by? Is it possible to provide a relatively level "playing field" for interacting with our colleagues and fellow learners in the field of VET in the so-called South? Benson Okello (2009) poses essentially the same question to his colleagues in vocational education in East Africa.<sup>5</sup>

### **The NOMA project and its inherent contradictions**

The NOMA project was a cooperative trilateral initiative involving three partners: Kyambogo University, Kampala, Uganda; Upper Nile University, Malakal, Southern Sudan and Akershus University College<sup>6</sup>, Norway. The aim of the undertaking was to develop a Master program in Vocational Pedagogy at Kyambogo University (KyU) to educate and sensitize students in relation to labour market developments in Uganda and South Sudan. The focus of the program was to build up sustainable living conditions and economic growth for the populations in these regions. Vocational education and training are essential in this regard. South Sudan has been in a civil war for many years and there are neither sufficient vocational schools in the region nor much expertise in practical subjects. Uganda has also been through civil wars and

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<sup>5</sup> Benson Okello was one of our colleagues and a mentor in the NOMA project.

<sup>6</sup> In 2018, Akershus University College was absorbed into the new Oslo Metropolitan University (Oslo Met); in the [Norwegian](#) language: Oslomet – storbyuniversitetet serving the counties of Oslo and Akershus.

unrest during the past decades, although Uganda has some traditions in vocational education created by the British missionaries in relation to the need, identified by the British Protectorate administrators, for certain types of skilled labour power (Ssekamwa 2005).

KyU is the only university in Uganda with fully fledged vocational studies. It offers Bachelor degrees in food processing technology, art and industrial design, human nutrition and dietetics, agriculture, business management, mechanics, the electro fields, construction and information and communication technology (ICT). These bachelor programmes are part of vocational teacher education in Uganda (Lutalo-Bosa 2006)<sup>7</sup>. The need for strengthening vocational education by building a Masters program in relationship to the economy's need for skills is central. The NOMA project can be seen as a response to this need.

The NOMA project was wholly financed by Norway. This created a specific power relation between the North and the South which manifests itself by creating what we have called a “donor/beggar situation” such that economic and social development have their own dynamic and power structure. This may be one of the main contradictions and may have created a somewhat unbalanced situation between the different partners engaged in this and similar projects. Such development projects give the North a degree of economic power that is humiliating for our partners if it is not handled in an open and democratic way, where, for success within the framework of the goals and budget, all participants must play a full role in the decision making processes.<sup>8</sup>

Kyambogo University (KYU) and what was then called Akershus University College (AUC) both had years of experience training vocational teachers at the Bachelors level. South Sudan is in a different situation after decades of war; nevertheless, according to a recent assessment of the situation, vocational education and training for youth and adults is urgently needed to address the skills' deficit in the South Sudan (see Badinga 2011). The importance of vocational education and training is stressed for social integration. One aim of the NOMA project was to include demobilized soldiers.<sup>9</sup>The

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<sup>7</sup>Lutalo-Bosa,, James 2006: *Proposed Education Project for Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan*. Kampala: Kyambogo University. See also Egau 2002, Kyakulumbye 2008.

<sup>8</sup>The VET and Culture Network experienced the negative effect of this power relation in the Torino conference, September 2011. Four Kyambogo colleagues were budgeted to attend and present papers. They delivered abstracts for the conference, but weeks later, in July, the new NOMA project leadership refused to release the budgeted funds for these colleagues to travel to the conference. They were thus unable to attend.

<sup>9</sup>This was not achieved in the NOMA project. The recruitment from South Sudan was difficult.

reintegration of soldiers into civilian life is critical to reinforcing peace and establishing social stability. Education is a tool. The program describes plans for establishing vocational training centres, acknowledges the critical role of women and girls in the development of society and raises awareness of the need to promote training geared towards sustainable development.

The Department of Vocational and Technical Teacher Education at AUC has been developing and delivering a Masters Program in Vocational Pedagogy for the past 30 years. This program has created new knowledge of the complex field of vocational education, a form of education directly related to the ebbs and flows of the manual labour market, and hence the specific educational requirements needed to meet the challenges of changing market conditions and demands. What has been characteristic of Norwegian traditions in vocational education is that it has taken place both in schools and in workplaces and that this system is directly related to the economy's need for skills (Mjelde 1993, 2006).<sup>10</sup> A point of departure for developing the Masters program at KYU was the experience with the work-based learning approaches that Akershus University College (AUC) had developed in vocational pedagogy and vocational didactics (Mjelde 2006, 2013). Vocational pedagogical knowledge has its roots in the workshop tradition of the guild system and in school workshops that developed with industrialization and saw the growth of vocational education at school (Mjelde 2006 p. 31). Historical perspectives of vocational education in crafts and industry are essential for vocational education's own self-awareness, both as a scientific and scholarly discipline and as a field of pedagogical research. It is important to develop an understanding of this uniqueness within vocational education and how it distinguishes itself qualitatively from general pedagogical thinking. (Schriever & Harney 1999, Harney et al 2002).

This has been the basis for developing the Masters program at AUC. The students also demanded new ways of organizing teaching and learning processes. AUC has come quite a distance in generating learning and teaching praxis which integrate vocational "hands on knowledge" with "scientific teaching and learning knowledge." This integration has been made possible through a wide range of development projects in cooperation with business and industry in Norway and through research projects carried out by vocational schoolteachers enrolled in postgraduate studies. Vocational schoolteachers learned trades, developed their qualifications, and were part of the manual labour market before they trained as teachers and researchers. As a background to their teaching, such experience has provided a basis for

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<sup>10</sup> The first step building up the Program was to organize a meeting with, among others, educational authorities and labor organizations in Uganda (see Nabaggala 2009). There is a difference between educational institutions in the South and the North when it comes to the relation between vocational subjects and general subjects in schools and universities. State regulated apprenticeship traditions are strong in parts of Europe and this way of organising learning seemed to be absent in Uganda and South Sudan.

understanding the dynamics of changes in the labour market. In AUC's programs, such changes are recognized as the starting point for training and education; in other words, people's need for skills in relationship to sustainable development are given central emphasis. This has also led to innovative ways of understanding general dynamics of teaching and learning. Mentoring and group work are the central aspect of organizing learning processes. We can talk about "**a master/apprentice**" learning model where the central task may be **making a table, learning about products and sales** or writing a **Masters thesis**. The activities themselves are at the core of the learning process (see Mjeldel 2009, p.130). This is a social, "learning by doing" model that is well known in the everyday life of people both in Norway and the African countries concerned.

This approach also challenges Western ways of thinking about indigenous knowledge and the integration of knowledge systems. It also questions what knowledge is and, of course, how human beings acquire knowledge (Botha 2011, 2013, Broch-Utne 2000, Hoppers 2002, Smith 1999). In relation to this problematic, one of our Ugandan colleagues, Dr. James Lutalu-Bosa pointed out in a speech in 2006 (Lutalu-Bosa 2007) that, "**In Africa in general the most desirable trait one can have is to be practical and social, and in the West the star qualities are to be philosophical, theoretical, individualistic and inventive**". While this asserts a very categorical distinction, it can also be viewed as part of "the social organization of knowledge" as it has developed in Western hegemonic thinking over the past 300 years. Among the most central aspects of this line of thought is that technological rationalism and ego-oriented individualism are principal characteristics of human existence. Ego-oriented individualism, as codified in the liberal movement which accompanied the development of industrial production in Europe, assumes that what makes us into **human beings** is freedom from dependence on **the will of others** and our capacity for entering into **ego-oriented relations** with other people (MacPherson 1962: p.3). In this view, human society is first and foremost regarded as a set of market relations between individuals as possessors of their own person and capacities. "Buying and selling yourself" is what pays off and gives "the greatest amount of good to the greatest number of people". This is supplemented by the mantra of today: **Everything can be solved through competition**. As the Canadian aboriginal craftswoman and activist Rena Point Bolton has said in relation to the arrival of the Europeans and their focus on individualism: "And so this new culture was our downfall, because the people we now took in and helped and gave things to, they came from a very different way of living. They were used to buying and selling and owning everything and giving nothing back to others. We, the native people on this land cannot understand how you can dare sell land or sell food..... These things, these essentials are here to share. With us it is still shameful to want to buy and sell these things. (See Bolton & Daly 2013: 201-202) Here we see how different ways of seeing the world met each other. During the past centuries, aboriginal peoples were often silenced and efforts have been made to obliterate their culture. South African

scholar Louis Botha (2013: 136) explores indigenous and western knowledge traditions as a dialectical relationship that is in constant flux and in a “continuum between conflict and dialogue.” Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1993: 11) discusses another aspect of this relation in his book: *“Moving the Centre. The struggle for cultural freedom”*. He writes that every human being should be exposed to all streams of human imagination flowing from all centres in the world, while at the same time, retaining his or her identity.

Different world views have been contested terrains during the development of modern industrial society. Different voices meet and interact with each other in everyday life and politics. The experience in the everyday life of students in vocational education as well as being the experiences of apprentices and many students learning in relation to work in the “developing world”, often stands in stark contrast to the hegemonic messages from the so-called First World where individualism and competition are the mantras. In what follows we will consider how we may deal with these questions from a critical and scientific point of view, in relation to the Master program developed at Kyambogo University. The problematic has been how to analyse and act within this contested terrain, especially if you happen to be involved with the building up not only of a new Masters program, but also a program based on new dimensions of form and content that are far removed from standard traditions and assumptions that constitute practice in the academic world (see Mjelde 2011). In order to apply this approach to Uganda and South Sudan we stressed active participation with both Kyambogo University and Upper Nile University from the very beginning of the NOMA Project. The research proposal was written with full participation from “the delivery institution”, Kyambogo University, as well as representatives from Malakal University in South Sudan.<sup>11</sup>

From the outset we met contradictions and difficulties with both universities in the South when it came to the implementation of the program. The reasons for the difficulties were different in each instance; at the university in Uganda the difficulties were of an institutional internal character. The Vice-Chancellor was dismissed whereupon the university erupted and exploded, then closed down.<sup>12</sup> A new university administration came into power. The administrative and political bodies were deeply sceptical towards our program since the program was publicly associated with the former Vice-Chancellor. We found that in such difficult situations it is easy for local officials to be suspicious of such programs as “yet

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<sup>11</sup> The main background-work on the proposal took place at Sørmarka in Oslo in the course of one week in August 2007. and. The proposal was written in September 2007 in close cooperation with 4 colleagues from Kyambogo University who at that time had one year scholarships at Akershus University College. The NOMA project was expanded with funding for a third year. This application was mainly made in a workshop with approximately 15 persons from the staff at Kyambogo University and three persons from the North. Another application on support for “gender” promotion was made by colleagues in Kampala and the project coordinator.

<sup>12</sup> The intrigues and disputes in the academic world seemed rather similar in the North and South. But the level of violence seem to be somewhat different for the time being. The explosions at Kyambogo led to physical violence and the university closed for six months. The Vice-Chancellor took the university to court later on and he was freed of all accusations and rewarded economically.



another foreign project” imposed by another local official. The university in South Sudan, on the other hand, was caught in the crossfire and contradictions with building a new nation while Sudan’s civil war had not yet completely abated. The recruitment of students from South Sudan became a difficult question. Kyambogo University was the institution to award the Masters degree and their British-based higher education intake regulations and not the Norwegian procedures had to be followed.<sup>13</sup> Due to these difficulties the opening of the program was postponed for six months. Other difficulties in implementing the program arose from the contradictions between the more liberal Scandinavian traditions regarding formal evaluation and exams. Uganda’s education system was formed by the British traditions and had strict regulations in these matters. For example, due to poverty and completion for access to education standards of assessment and rules of admission tend to be very strict, academic and inflexible when viewed by European eyes. Another contradiction was of a more scientific character. Scandinavia has developed quite a strong tradition in qualitative research and a tradition for methodological variations in social science (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, Kvale 1996, Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). This was not well known at Kyambogo University<sup>14</sup> The scepticism that confronted the program at Kyambogo University was also nurtured by the lack of knowledge and understanding among the funders in the North for both the informal and formal rules and regulations that govern university management in British-oriented education systems in former colonies. Kyambogo’s concern was that the participants from the North would impose neo-colonialist ideas, ideas which could be implemented Euro-centrally, based on western pedagogy, experience and technology, yet without having a guaranteed positive effect on the employability of graduates facing local African social and economic conditions.

The situation was rife with contradictions and different points of view, both inside the institutions in the North and South, as well as between the different participants from all three universities. The questions we asked were: “How can we avoid being ‘best wishers’ and neo-colonialists? How to meet the undercurrent of ‘scientific’ scepticism towards the North?” The contradictions came into light with regard to both methodological questions and different views and experiences about exams and other forms of evaluation in the course of our everyday work.

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<sup>13</sup> The credentials of three of the students from South Sudan were not accepted by Kyambogo University. They were transferred to AUC, where they were to defend their Masters theses. Fourteen students from Uganda and 2 from South Sudan were awarded their degree in February 2011. We also had difficulties fulfilling the demand for a 50/50% gender balance in the first cohort.

<sup>14</sup> The main problem was actually the lack of books in social science in general and lack of reading material in vocational education.

**The Everyday Life of the programme**<sup>15</sup>

The program started in February 2009 with 14 students from Uganda and 7 students from South Sudan.<sup>16</sup> The second cohort of 21 students started in February 2011 and the third in August 2011. The program for each cohort is two full years in length and the first year has introductory courses in the foundation of vocational pedagogy: teaching and learning in vocational pedagogy, understanding vocational didactics and strategies for research and development work in vocational education. Social, cultural and historical perspectives on vocational education and training and its African roots are part of the curriculum. Efforts were made to ground the curriculum in African issues and epistemology and to avoid eurocentrism. The students came from different geographical places in South Sudan and Uganda and from different ethnic groups and various religious affiliations. They had backgrounds as mechanics and electricians, in home economics and textiles, from the police, the hospitality industry, the health sector as well as special needs training, adult education, art and design, wildlife management and fisheries. They were all trained vocational teachers. Gender equity was a program requirement from Norway – 50 % of students were to be women and 50 % men.

**Learning by doing** and **group work** are the central aspects of vocational pedagogy. Another central part of the program is **research expeditions to crafts and industrial worksites**. (Mjelde 2011) We prepared the students for doing “mini” research in these places and to write up reports from their findings. We started preparing for and implementing these research expeditions to various workplaces from the very beginning. Students worked in groups of seven in their designed group rooms on scientific mini-projects summing up experience from the research expeditions. They worked together producing a research report, in groups of two and three, within the group of seven. Two mentors are responsible in each group. Mentoring is the core of success in vocational pedagogy. Six teachers from Kyambogo University were connected to the project and their devotion became the beating heart of the program and its doings. The contact between students and mentors is marked by continuity and proximity. The counseling processes are not unlike an exercise in tailoring: they deal with planning, measuring, cutting and developing the students’ hitherto locked up ideas and potentials. The mentors are responsible both for the group dynamics and for the progress of students in their work. The goal of the mentor is also to organize and develop the students’ capacity to mentor each other. The goal for a mentor is to make her/himself redundant. The group members take care of their own progress together. Discipline, punctuality and responsibility for the progress of

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<sup>15</sup> One problem confronting the NOMA program was equipment and the material conditions. Where should the program establish its working space? Northern donors impose restrictions on how to use the money. But we got special permission to use funds to renovate, with the assistance of a vocational school and its staff, two old houses on campus to house the NOMA project

<sup>16</sup> The first cohort consisted of 2/3 Ugandan students and 1/3 from South Sudan. The next two cohorts had 50/50, Uganda/South Sudan. The competition over the scholarships was intense; the first year there were 160 applicants for 14 places in Uganda. To make the program known in war ridden South Sudan was complex and the recruitment process faced severe difficulties.

one and all—these factors were explained and emphasized from DAY 1. The conscious progress of everyone in the group was part of the curriculum. In the words of the shop steward, cohort 2, James C. Okvare: “*Our cohort is determined to adhere to our formal agreement to complete this two-year program with 100 % success- no one left behind*” (pc: email August 21<sup>st</sup> 2012). And indeed, despite many difficulties, this cohort made this come true in September 2013. All twenty-one students from the second cohort and one from the first cohort defended their theses in September 2013. The majority of the students who started their Masters studies in vocational pedagogy have finished their Masters theses and have defended their work. That is a major achievement by the project.

The “project report” submitted by the students in their first year and their graduating (Masters) theses were based upon the candidates’ own experiences and learning in vocational education. Their theses represent pioneering research that systematically reports important aspects of the field of vocational pedagogy in their actual local conditions.

Gender questions have been a central part of western hegemonic thinking during the past decades and gender parity has been part of that tradition. In NORAD’s Program for Masters Studies one of the overall objectives is to enhance gender equality in all program activities. The easiest road to securing equal opportunity is to provide access to both male and female applicants and to male and female mentors and teachers in the program. It is another matter to weave a gender understanding into the curriculum in a way that is neither euro-centric nor ethno-centric or male-hegemonic oriented. Thus, one of our challenges was how to integrate these perspectives into the modules and our own praxis. In the NOMA Masters Project in Vocational Pedagogy at Kyambogo, **gender** became a central question in the curriculum and we developed a module in the program on “gender, vocational pedagogy and multiculturalism” (see Gombe 2009). Historically, enduring and changing gender relations in the labour market and in family ideology have influenced vocational education (Mjelde 2004, 2005). We can trace some similar gender patterns in vocational education in the North and the South, for example, as women are found in home economics and men in the technical trades. However, there are also important and interesting differences. My impression is that there are more men in nursing and home economics in Uganda than in Norway and more Ugandan women in the field of engineering. These differences in North-South vocational education have received little scholarly attention, yet they raise new and interesting possibilities for comparative research in a number of areas (Arnfred 2004.)

The students took to “learning by doing” and “group work and collaboration” the way ducks take to water. Group work contributed greatly to the achievement of the students and enabled them to complete their Masters theses. But the results are also a testament to students, teachers and mentors overcoming hurdles and the project’s commitment to challenge the

contradictions and difficulties that we encountered. Some of these difficulties arose in our relations with colleagues and administrators in the North and the South. While they did not participate in the everyday life of the project, these colleagues occupied positions where important decisions about the project were made. Our teachers and mentors, and some of our approaches, were met with skepticism.<sup>17</sup> It seems that, in some ways and in some locations, the NOMA program represented an uncomfortable paradigm change in vocational education and research, and a shift in power relations between North and South.

The students included comments about group work in their written evaluations.<sup>18</sup> We want to highlight some of the comments made by students in the first cohort. Joseph Kikomeko, electrical engineering teacher (Cohort 1): *I changed from being a dispenser of knowledge to becoming a mentor, a facilitator as well as a counselor to my learners. I involve my learners in planning their learning and I respect their ideas more than ever before. Since I am teaching, I am learning.* Another student (Cohort 1) *I realized the benefits of group learning and extended it to our workplaces.* Grace Aninge, dental technician teacher (Cohort 1): *In a nutshell. I will forever be grateful that I went through the program. I have been transformed and I will leave the NOMA house a different person with knowledge, skills and attitudes that can be used to transform students in different vocational fields.* Arajab Mogoya, hotel management teacher, now lecturing at Makerere University Business School in Kampala (cohort 1): *My attitudes towards vocational education have changed tremendously.* The student assessments in the second cohort emphasize the dialogues: *“critiquing, agreeing or disagreeing, the group dynamics used in the learning processes and the sharing of knowledge as the key factor in the learning processes.*

Vocational pedagogical practices, as described above, represent alternative ways of organizing learning and teaching processes and alternative ways of conducting social science. The premise underpinning the vocational pedagogy that NOMA adopted – in terms of both mentoring and in the priority given to action research – is that the actual ontology of the researchers and the researched are crucial. Such ventures must start at the local level, situated within the context of the prevailing power relations wherever we focus our attention. Research in and about vocational pedagogy carried out by Africans in Africa provides a way for these researchers to assert their unique identities and use their rooted insights as they analyze, local and transnational themes that arise from work and learning around the globe.

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<sup>17</sup> We had very important support from Kyambogo University's former Vice-Chancellor James Lutalo Bosa and from Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Professor John Opuda-Asibo. Our cooperation with our counterparts, Dr Habib Kato and William Epeju at Kyambogo University was rich.

<sup>18</sup> The program was evaluated after each module and annual follow-up reports were demanded by the Norwegian authorities. These citations are from the different evaluations conducted among the students and cited in the Annual Report 2010 to SIU/Norad in Norway, delivered March 15, 2010. Some of the evaluations were anonymous and others were signed with the students' names.

## Conclusion

We are in a period of crisis that may well form the basis for constructive changes in education with its hitherto divisions between vocational fields and general fields, contradictions between mental and manual labour, as well as in scientific thinking. Post-colonial thinkers and researchers have posed new questions both in the North and the South. We have seen a renewed interest in the works of the great thinkers from the past century Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Kurt Levin and Paulo Freire and a development with this a renewed interest of Cultural and Historical Activity Theory and Action Research. (Portes & Salas 2011) A point of departure is that the social structure of science, its areas of application and technologies, the way in which it defines research problems and makes research designs, is not only **culturally** determined, it is also coloured by **racial prejudice** and **class- and gender discrimination**. As one of us, anthropologist Richard Daly, has written in relation to his work on ethnographic research **with**, rather than simply **about a** subject community, such endeavours are always weighed down by ignorance on both sides; that is, the ignorance of both the researcher and the researched, but particularly by the ignorance of the more empowered side of the equation. This is the main focus in Vocational Pedagogy. In relation to vocational studies, the less empowered are usually members of the subject community, namely those learning in relation to work and the more empowered are composed of the researchers whose formal education is imbued with the hegemonic view of the world, with the 'relations of ruling.' The hegemonic view all too often prohibits the researcher from grasping the daily realities of those studied. We draw on Dorothy Smith's (2006) work on the construction of meaning between interlocutors or between cultures. She shows how we understand one another and build new common paradigms by drawing maps and compiling indices in our own respective terms to better understand what the other has presented. If we are honest, we compare our maps and indexing of 'the other' against our understanding of common experience. As we know well, vocational education and training, and the processes of learning that we promoted in the NOMA project at Kyambogo University have a commonality to them. International experiences of problem-based, workshop learning, for example, provide a basis for common understanding across cultures, classes, gender and degrees of empowerment that should help alleviate blindness and prejudice, especially from the more empowered and thus contribute to building an ever more level playing field wherever vocational studies are being carried out (Point Bolton and Daly 2013: xxxvi-1, See also treatments of the same 'ethnographic' problematic in Nabaggala 2015 and Kekimuri 2018).

The contradictions we have experienced in developing vocational pedagogy, both in the North and South, are affected by these discriminations. We are constantly faced with how to secure the development of an educational system so as to give **hope** to marginalized groups, both men and women, groups that often are shunted aside due to poverty, the lack of work opportunities and the lack of education. How can we create new **hope** for human beings and new knowledge about the

complexities around the social and political relations that are woven into production and education? Our educational institutions, whether you are in the South or North, are enmeshed within the heritage, dilemmas and contradictions we have stressed here. We must find ways to transcend them, and we like to stress that inspiration for this transformation, this journey of transcendence, can be found in the traditions at the heart of vocational education. Workshop learning—whether in the kitchen, the mechanical workshop, the spinning and weaving floor, the hospital ward or the operating room—places fundamental emphasis on learning through activity and collaboration. Learning through praxis and experience—by trying and failing and trying again, and through taking action—is the basis of true knowledge. Even “in the realm of pure ideas”, whether it is through the activity of writing or teaching, one learns best when one is involved in an activity. (See also Applebaum 1992). People with experience in vocational education have a vital role to play in the future liberation of education (Botha 2013).

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