Education, Design and Practice – Understanding skills in a Complex World

• Paper / Proposal Title:  
  The role of theory in experiential learning: The complexity of finding the right skills balance

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• Abstract (300 words):
  In most current tertiary education systems, there is a clear distinction between higher education and vocational education. This distinction is usually clearly delineated through specific education systems (e.g. Polytechnics or Universities). However, in ‘the age of supercomplexity’ (Barnett, 2000), such delineation is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. In other words, the skills taught in vocational colleges increasingly need to be backed up by theoretical knowledge, while the theoretical knowledge in universities increasingly need to be supplemented with applied contextual skills. This also requires concurrent changes in the way we teach in these different institutions. Experiential learning can be seen as an umbrella term to identify a range of teaching and learning approaches that are responsive to this shift, which covers approaches such as Problem-based Learning, Project-based Learning, Work Integrated Learning, and Enquiry-based Learning, among others. However, it is questionable whether educational institutions are responding fast enough to the requirements of the job market, and indeed if they are equipped to do so. In this paper, we use two case studies of a vocational educational context and a university context to explore the ways in which the tertiary education sector overall is responding to the challenges of
the age of supercomplexity, and how effective these responses are. These case studies are drawn from two different contexts: Singapore and Australia. In each context, vocational education and higher education have followed different historical trajectories, but they both operate in a global context where similar changes and pressures apply. Based on experiences and critical observations in vocational and higher education institutions in both national contexts, we suggest a range of potential changes that could be made to equip students with the kinds of skills that would prepare them for the complexity they are facing, which requires more than skills and disciplinary content knowledge.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Henk Huijser, PhD, is Senior Lecturer, Curriculum and Learning Design in the Learning and Teaching Unit at Queensland University of Technology. He has worked in dual sector (vocational and higher education) institutions in the past. He is the (co-)author (with Megan Kek) of Problem-based learning into the future: Imagining an agile PBL ecology for learning.

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