Alan Rogers' message for vocational education and development

Simon McGrath

[part of a keynote address with Anna Robinson-Pant on Alan's wider legacy, delivered on December 2nd 2022]

Alan was not classically a VET writer but he was of great use to those of us who are more heterodox in the VET field, recalling earlier work in literacy traditions such as that of Lave. In particular, his work highlighted the possibilities for VET-AE rapprochement, e.g., his 2014 paper for CARE on skills development and literacy in Afghanistan.

Alan critiqued dominant assumptions of both literacy and skills fields. In typical Alan fashion, he focused not on the alleged skills deficit (cf. our collective Compare piece- below) but on the skills that people come with. However, he noted that much of this existing set of skills (and knowledges) is tacit and misrecognised by individuals, by trainers and the system. In response, he called for an asset-based approach to skill that has much resonance with a human development account of VET that I was developing at the time, and with which Alan engages in the 2014 paper though without explicitly naming it as such. In the Compare piece mentioned above on the deficit discourse in education, Alan writes:

"By advising people to learn literacy before seeking vocational training opportunities, their informal literacy practices and skills are overlooked and denied. Again, this points to the importance of understanding participants' and learners' aspirations and values." (Aikman et al. 2016)

This parallels our work on aspirations utilising Sen and the need for learning approaches to address purposes of learning systems including as understood by participants (and those excluded from participation).

At the heart of Alan's approach here was an argument that we all have learning resources (cf. his critique of the "learning crisis" rhetoric in his chapter in the Routledge Handbook of International Education and Development - 2015), what he sometimes called everyday literacies. The mark of good skills development, in this view, is where it builds from these literacies which are embedded in the vocational learning process rather than being separated off into literacy classes.

This embedded notion of literacy and vocational learning is something that we have come back to strongly in recent work in South Africa and Uganda (the latter with a team led by George Openjuru, another of Alan's long-term collaborators). Here we find that much of the vocational learning we are identifying is embedded in the everyday practices of dressmakers, chefs, farmers, and often linked to sophisticated and local, national and international literacy practices utilising forms of social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube to share vocational knowledge and skills.

Alan's frequent use of the tripartite structure of informal, nonformal and formal learning will be well-known to many in this audience. In the 2014 paper, he uses the same structure in talking about vocational programmes. Moreover, there he draws upon my arguments that the relationship between the three is (wrongly) hierarchical and exclusionary with the most marginalised locked out of the highest status parts of the vocational learning system.

This is a point he returns to in a 2019 piece on the Tanzanian folk high schools pointedly entitled the "homelessness of adult education". In this, he highlights the gap between a community based vocational learning tradition and the formal system - cf. its focus on gas in the region. Whilst the non-formal folk high schools are successful in themselves in building on everyday literacies, Alan showed how their graduates are unable to transit to the higher status formal system, largely

because they lack the one literacy that matters in the formal system- English literacy. This is a point he had made already about illiteracies and VET exclusion in the Afghan paper.

At times, Alan's analysis even shades over into a political economy of skills (PES) stance in noting that it is the labour market that too often limits utilisation of skills rather than inadequacy of these skills, something that, I would argue, is too rarely a part of the adult education debate. Like PES writers, he is also deeply sceptical about big solutions such as NQFs as lacking an organic existence.

Rereading some of Alan's work for this presentation made me reflect on how, often more tacitly – which he would have approved of – his thinking is with us in our current work on skills ecosystems in Africa. Here, led from the VET side, we have tried to renew a conversation with adult educators about everyday literacies and livelihoods. This work resonates with Alan's approach in stressing the range of learning forms and ways in which that learning is reflected in everyday practices; in the need to build from what people can and want to do rather than what the system values; and in a strong scepticism about formal solutions for far less formal lives.

References

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