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## Retrieving and recontextualising VET theory

Bill Esmond, Thilo J. Ketschau, Johannes K. Schmees, Christian Steib & Volker Wedekind (Eds.)

**Eli SMEPLASS, Jan Frode HAUGSETH & Johannes K. SCHMEES**

(Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

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## Understanding Plurality, Engagement, and Change in Vocational Education and Training through French Pragmatic Theory

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### Abstract

This paper argues for the use of French pragmatic theory for theorising about vocational education and training (VET) through a focus on understanding plurality, human engagement, and change within VET organisations and in various training situations and professions. Drawing upon the influential works of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, we propose that French pragmatist theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics of VET systems and practices. French pragmatic theory, as an analytical tool, sheds light on the existence of diverse perspectives and conflicting rationales in education as well as in work life. Additionally, Thévenot's engagement theory reveals the tensions between forms of attachment and the moral evaluations in humans' interactions with VET systems. We argue that utilising these theoretical perspectives can provide a richer understanding of social dynamics, conflicting values, and justifications within the VET context.

**Keywords:** *engagement, French pragmatic theory, vocational education and training, sense-making, order of worth*

### 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to present the French pragmatist approach as a valuable contribution to theorising about vocational education and training (VET) and to discuss how the multifaceted world of VET can and should be contextualised within this theoretical framework. By focusing on the French pragmatist perspective, this paper aims to shed light on the unique insights and practical orientation offered by revealing the complexities embedded in VET systems (Marhuenda-Fluixá 2022). Pragmatist approaches recognise the dynamic interaction between individuals and their social, cultural, and historical environments as well as the practical skills and knowledge required in vocational contexts. The proposed theoretical perspective offers a possibility to explore the complexities of education by integrating considerations of individual agency, organisational context, institutional frameworks, and societal conditions within specific contexts (Imdorf/Leeman 2023).

VET holds immense societal relevance worldwide, operating at the intersection of education, economics, the labour market, and various welfare arrangements. In this line, Bonoli/Gonon (2022) advocate for the incorporation of a *diachronic perspective* in VET research. Their schol-

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arly contribution highlights the importance of considering economic, social, and educational policy objectives when examining VET systems in order to comprehensively grasp how these systems serve a multitude of purposes. VET systems exist as a confluence of diverse stakeholders (Emmenegger et al. 2018), including schools, employers, unions, and governments – all driven by their specific interests, e. g., production rates, and their common goals, e. g. skills development.

VET research is still rapidly developing as is the need for appropriate theoretical tools to describe and analyse VET. The transfer of VET systems is currently an important topic in international debates (Li/Pilz 2021), although the transfer of VET policies from one country to another has been problematized (Maurer/Gonon 2014). Despite its significance, VET research remains relatively under-dimensioned compared to research on other educational pathways. International VET research is spread across multiple strands that have their own specific development histories (Gessler et al. 2020). VET systems exist as a confluence of diverse stakeholders (Emmenegger et al. 2018), including general education, the labour market, companies, and governments, all driven by their specific interests and common goals of recruitment, attractiveness, production, work opportunities, and investments in certain sector-specific competencies. Also, scholars argue that skills formation should not be regarded in isolation from other domains of the political economy (Busemeyer/Trampusch 2012). While researchers acknowledge the necessity of international VET research and comparative approaches to develop VET as a distinct discipline, there is still a long way to go in establishing a common ground within the international VET research community. This fragmentation may stem from the complexities of VET systems (Grollmann 2018), variations in national and corporate approaches to training (Pilz 2016), and differing perspectives on the relationship between the economy, education, and individuals (Ebner 2015; Saar/Martma 2021; Wheelahan et al. 2022).

While it is possible to regard VET as an object of study from various perspectives, a more comprehensive understanding of how education systems connect with economics, politics, culture, and individuals is crucial in order to develop a coherent research field that connects well with other disciplines and research areas, especially finding VET's rightful place within educational science. VET research needs to offer deeper insights into how VET is intricately connected to society at large, extending beyond national policy-making circles. Therefore, researchers must investigate the connections between individuals and structures as well as the dual purpose of learning for both personal opportunities and freedom as understood in perspectives of empowerment and democratisation *and* the development of human capital as embedded in economic theory (Avis 2018a; Di Maio et al. 2019; Thelen 2014). VET can be understood as both an important study object regarding work and learning, while also reflecting common tensions present in modern society. Therefore, the study of VET should spark interest within a broader research community. This paper explores how VET researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding of the connections between individuals and structures, as well as the dual purpose of learning for personal liberation and human development by applying central concepts from French pragmatist theory.

By integrating pragmatic theory, particularly drawing on the works of sociologists Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski into VET research, this paper argues that researchers can bridge the gaps between diverse perspectives and establish a more comprehensive understanding of VET as a complex phenomenon requiring diverse perspectives. French pragmatic theory and engagement theory provide a framework for understanding the complex dynamics of VET systems and practices. By analysing moral evaluations and justifications and by exploring orders of worth, VET researchers can uncover the nuanced connections between the worlds of work and education.

This approach facilitates the investigation of how individuals engaged in VET navigate a complex and multifaceted world in a pragmatic manner, leading to nuanced analyses of sense-making, negotiations, and power within modern training situations and organisations. By applying such pragmatic theory, we aim to explore how individuals connect to orders of worth and contribute to ‘the common’, shared understandings and moral systems. We argue that this approach is valuable for uncovering the intricate relationships between practical skills, labour market demands, educational systems, and the ways in which individuals find meaning in their valuation, in their practical and professional sense, and in their negotiations between different layers of worth and conventions.

## **2 Central concepts and their application to VET**

As part of a rather rich theoretical toolbox, we have chosen in this paper to focus on the concepts of orders of worth and conventions as well as on regimes of engagement. As opposed to idealism, pragmatic theory can be understood as a variety of approaches and schools of science that focus on the practical application of ideas and policy. Although diverse and sometimes diverging, pragmatic approaches share a fundamental characteristic rooted in classical pragmatism. This tradition, pioneered by influential thinkers like Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George H. Mead, places human action in the forefront (Gonzalez/Kaufmann 2012). Rather than beginning with an individual-centric or social structure-centric approach and subsequently examining their connections, pragmatist approaches begin with human activity and human reasoning in concrete situations as the starting point of inquiry. In doing so, French pragmatists have constructed a perspective to overcome the dualities of the individual and the collective (see e. g., Mouzelis 2013). These micro and macro approaches offer insights into the cognitive modes and coordination practices of actors within social contexts and thus can be highly valuable for VET researchers interested in investigating and understanding people’s sensemaking in connection to their environments. Central to this approach are the concepts of ‘forms of engagement’ and ‘orders of worth’, the latter representing a codified vocabulary of rationalities used by individuals to justify and critique activities in public disputes (Lamont/Thévenot 2000). This framework has its roots in the intellectual traditions of French sociology and philosophy and has so far been adapted and developed into a variety of research fields such as studies on law, health, labour markets, and (general) education.

## 2.1 Justification work in VET

Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot co-authored *De La Justification*, first published as a pamphlet in 1987 and then revised as a book in 1991. In 2006, an English version of the book – *On justification* (Boltanski/Thévenot 2006) – made the work accessible to a broader audience and has continued to spark interest. Boltanski and Thévenot developed a theory on the dynamics of justification and critique based on the specification of the common good (Blokker/Brighteni 2011, 392). The theory starts from the premise that humans are moral beings with value-laden relationships to other people and things. This perspective sought to challenge not only Pierre Bourdieu’s structuralist concepts of habitus and forms of capital, which they regarded as overly deterministic, but also institutionalism, network analysis, and rational choice theory. This new approach provides actors with a critical capacity to assess situations and act independently, hence focusing on actors in concrete situations more than structures as the point of analysis. A core assumption is that, when necessary, actors can legitimise or justify their actions, and Boltanski/Thévenot’s approach was to link this legitimisation and justification in different social situations with general forms of value or morality that have broader validity in modern western society. This approach, also referred to as ‘the pragmatic turn’ (Silva Corrêa/de Castro Dias 2020), shares some similarities with John Rawls’ theory of justice and Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action.<sup>2</sup>

General notions of the common good therefore discipline individuals in discussions, but there is no consensus on what can be considered good in any particular situation. There is instead a pluralism of common goods. Consequently, actors can, if necessary, challenge what is universally considered good. The key is that for arguments in social situations to have an impact, actors must qualify their arguments in a way that others can understand and agree with; in other words, they must relate their opinions, criticisms, and expressions to something that is more widely accepted. This applies at the macro level, where leaders and politicians seek to convince us that their policies are the best for the economy and labour market integration. It also applies to the micro level, where a father might want to persuade his daughter and the rest of the family to choose technical subjects over health care pathways in order to secure employment. Justification in VET requires that actors, including educators, policymakers, employers, and learners, engage in ongoing processes of justifying their actions, decisions, and choices. For instance, VET policymakers may justify the introduction of certain programmes or reforms by arguing that they enhance the economy and promote labour market integration. Educators may justify their teaching methods by claiming that they align with industry standards and meet the needs of learners. Learners may justify their choice of technical subjects over care subjects by emphasising their personal interests and future career prospects.

The legacy of *On Justification* lies in its profound impact on social theory and the study of justification processes in various domains of social life, including VET. By examining how

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<sup>2</sup> The approach of Boltanski and Thévenot shares similarities with Rawls’ theory of justice and Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action, focusing on moral dimensions and critical assessment of social situations. However, divergences exist, with Boltanski and Thévenot exploring moral evaluations and justifications across various social orders, while Habermas emphasises communicative processes and rational discourse.

different actors justify their actions, decisions, and choices, researchers can analyse the complexities of justification within VET systems. The framework presented in *On Justification* offers a comprehensive basis for understanding how actors justify their actions and decisions in diverse contexts, ranging from economic exchanges to political struggles (Boltanski/Thévenot 2006). The book is considered a classic contribution in French pragmatist theory, and even though the perspectives have been further developed and enriched, this contribution still serves as a basis for pragmatist analysis today.

## 2.2 Orders of worth and conventions in VET

The concept of ‘orders of worth’ introduced in *On Justification* has become a central theoretical concept for analysing the moral and normative foundations of social order, and it explores how different systems of valuation and evaluation shape individuals’ perceptions, judgments, and actions. The book’s emphasis on pluralism and the coexistence of multiple orders of worth challenges the traditional assumption of a singular, universal rationality. The framework has influenced fields beyond sociology, including organisational studies, political theory, and cultural analysis (Diaz-Bone/de Larquier 2020), and its legacy can be seen in the growing recognition of the importance of moral and normative considerations in understanding social dynamics and the complex interplay between different logics of justification that humans engage in. Its lasting legacy lies in its theoretical richness, its conceptual innovation, and its enduring impact on social theory, providing scholars with a valuable framework for examining the complexities of social justification processes in contemporary societies.

The influential work of Boltanski/Thévenot (2006) serves as a ground-breaking exploration of social interaction and justification. This contribution, considered a key text in the world of economic sociology, laid the initial groundwork for what is now referred to as convention theory. This insightful examination of social justification has been extensively built upon by subsequent researchers, with Diaz-Bone/Larquier (2020) notably viewing it as the foundational framework for convention theory. As a testament to its influence, *On Justification* is recognised as one of the founding documents of the ‘economics of conventions’ school, marking it as a transformative contribution to the field.

The identification of the orders of worth was based on extensive empirical research. Boltanski/Thévenot (2006) conducted detailed investigations of various social situations and observed how individuals justified their actions and how they coordinated their actions and cooperated with others. By examining a wide range of contexts, such as workplaces, households, public debates, and cultural practices, they identified recurring patterns of reasoning and justification. Through this qualitative research, they were able to identify *six main orders of worth* that actors commonly draw upon, namely the market, industry, civic, domestic, inspiration, and opinion orders of worth. Building on their initial work, Boltanski/Thévenot identified additional orders, namely the ecological order of worth (Lafaye/Thévenot 2017) and the project order of worth (Boltanski/Chiapello 2018). Each order of worth represents a distinct perspective or logic through which individuals assess the value and significance of their actions.

The *market order* is rooted in economic principles and the exchange of goods and services. It emphasises efficiency, competition, and the pursuit of individual interests, and actions and choices within the market order are evaluated based on their economic value, profitability, and demand. This convention is characterised by ratified competence and aims to develop human capital (Verdier 2003). In VET, the market order is relevant when educational institutions develop new programmes or courses, and they may justify their choices by emphasising their alignment with labour market demands, employability prospects, and future economic developments. Similarly, learners can make choices based on the perceived market value of certain skills or qualifications, thus prioritising pathways that offer higher employment prospects and greater future financial rewards.

The *industrial order* is centred around the organisation and production of goods and services within industrial systems. It emphasises productivity, technological advancements, and specialisation, and actions and choices within the industrial order are evaluated based on their contribution to industrial efficiency, technological innovation, and economic growth. This convention is characterised by measurable criteria, statistics, and a focus on infrastructure, projects, technical objects, methods, and plans. Educators and policymakers can, for example, emphasise the importance of industrial productivity, technological advancements, and specialisation. They might also argue that the integration of innovative technologies and industry-relevant skills will enhance graduates' readiness for the workforce and contribute to the growth and competitiveness of the industrial sector and thus contribute to the economy as a whole.

The *civic order* focuses on civic values, citizenship, and the functioning of public institutions and emphasises principles of justice, equality, and welfare. Actions and choices within the civic order are evaluated based on their alignment with civic responsibilities, adherence to legal frameworks, and the promotion of social well-being, and VET systems and practices in this order of worth can be justified based on principles of justice (Avis 2018), equality (Carstensen/Ibsen 2021), vocational *Bildung* (Tyson 2016), and societal well-being (Taua'a/Penaia 2021). Policies and programmes that also promote *bildung*, access, equity, social inclusion, and the integration of marginalised groups may be justified through civic values. By aligning VET with civic responsibilities and promoting opportunities for all individuals to develop their skills and potential, actors within the VET sector aim to contribute to a fair and inclusive society.

The *domestic order* revolves around personal and intimate relationships within households and families, and it emphasises care, affection, and emotional bonds. Actions and choices within the domestic order are evaluated based on their impact on family dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and the well-being of individuals within the domestic sphere, and educators and institutions may emphasise the importance of caring relationships, individual support, and fostering a nurturing environment (e. g. Dormeier Freire/Giang 2012; Lester 2010; Smeplass 2023). Actors may argue that a positive and supportive learning environment within VET contributes to learners' emotional well-being, motivation, and overall success.

The *inspired order* emphasises creativity, aesthetics, and artistic expression, and it focuses on individual and collective aspirations, imagination, and cultural values. Actions and choices

within the inspired order are evaluated based on their artistic merit, their innovation, and their ability to evoke emotions and inspire others. This order is evident in programmes and initiatives that promote artistic skills and cultural heritage, and creative industries may be justified within this order of worth (Manning et al. 2010). Actors within the VET sector may emphasise the value of the artistic and creative, but artisanal pursuits may also be important not only for personal fulfilment, but also for contributing to cultural vitality and the preservation of cultural heritage. Actors in this order often emphasise the uniqueness and aesthetic qualities of artistic expressions.

The *opinion order* revolves around social recognition and celebrity status, symbolic communication (semiotics), and public reputation. In this order of worth, it is considered important to present persuasive information that upholds the public image. Actors may justify certain choices or actions within the VET sector by emphasising the importance of gaining renown and fame. They often argue that by participating in or promoting specific VET programmes individuals can enhance their reputation and recognition within their field or industry. They also reason how certain training companies might be more valuable on a curriculum vitae than other options (Pernkopf et al. 2020).

The *green order*, also known as the ‘ecological order’, centres around environmental values, sustainability, and ecological well-being, and it emphasises the need to protect and preserve the natural environment, promote renewable resources, and minimise harm to ecosystems. Actions and choices within the green order are evaluated based on their environmental impact, their contribution to ecological balance, and their alignment with principles of sustainability. As sustainability and environmental considerations become more prominent, VET programmes and practices might be justified within this order by emphasising ecological values, promoting sustainable practices, and preparing learners to address environmental challenges (McGrath/Powell 2016). Actors within the VET sector often argue that integrating ecological perspectives and skills into VET contributes to a more sustainable future.

The *project order* emphasises activity, projects, and the extension of networks, and it centres around the idea of engaging in dynamic and evolving endeavours where the end of one project marks the beginning of another. Actions and choices within the project order are evaluated based on adaptability, the ability to integrate into new projects, and the demonstration of relevant skills and competencies. In this order, justification might revolve around the implementation of project-based learning and experiential education approaches in VET programmes (Megayanti et al. 2020). Actors often argue that these approaches provide learners with opportunities to engage in ‘real-world projects’, to apply their knowledge and skills in practical settings, and to develop adaptability and problem-solving abilities.

These orders of worth represent distinct sets of values, criteria, and conventions that guide decision-making processes and coordination among individuals, and they provide a framework for actors to justify their actions, critique alternative perspectives, and engage in meaningful social interactions. It is important how actors draw upon these orders of worth by referencing the objects, ideas, values, and phenomena associated with each order, thus enabling them to



navigate and negotiate social contexts. While the macro-level conventions are applicable across negotiation processes, the identified orders of worth are not exhaustive or fixed. Conventions are contingent upon social contexts and may vary across cultures, time, and fields of practice.

The theoretical framework of orders of worth provides a lens for analysing the complexities of the social interactions, power dynamics, and value systems that shape human behaviour in VET. It offers a bridge between individual agency and social structures, illuminating the intricate interplay between personal justifications and broader moral frameworks. By investigating the application and contestation of different orders of worth in various VET contexts, researchers can uncover the underlying dynamics that influence decision-making, cooperation, and conflict resolution. This theoretical framework not only enhances our understanding of social dynamics in VET, but also provides a basis for empirical research and analysis in various domains, thus shedding light on the intricate processes that underlie individual and collective decision-making in complex organisations and training systems. The orders can be understood as relatively stable and universal value systems that appeal to humanity in its current state. Table 1 provides an overview of the recognised orders of worth and their characteristics.

Table 1: Eight orders of worth (Thévenot et al. 2000; Boltanski/Chiapello 2005)

	Market	Industrial	Civic	Domestic	Inspired	Opinion	Green	Project
<b>Mode of evaluation (worth)</b>	Price, cost	Technical efficiency	Collective welfare	Esteem, reputation	Grace, singularity, creativeness	Renown, fame	Environmental friendliness	Activity, projects, extension of networks
<b>Test</b>	Market competitiveness	Competence, reliability, planning	Equality, solidarity	Trustworthiness	Passion, enthusiasm	Popularity, audience, recognition	Sustainability, renewability	The end of a project, the beginning of another
<b>Form of relevant proof</b>	Monetary	Measurable: criteria, statistics	Formal, official	Oral, exemplary, personally warranted	Emotional involvement and expression	Semiotic	Ecological, ecosystemic	Adaptability, integrating into new projects
<b>Qualified objects</b>	Freely circulating market good or service	Infrastructure, project, technical object, method, plan	Rules and regulations, fundamental rights, welfare policies	Patrimony, locale, heritage	Emotionally invested body or item: the sublime	Sign, media	Pristine wilderness, healthy environment, natural habitat	New technologies, informal relations, relations of trust, partnerships
<b>Qualified human beings</b>	Customer, consumer, merchant, seller	Engineer, professional, expert	Equal citizens, solidarity unions	Authority	Creative being	Celebrity	Environmentalist	Enthusiastic, involved, flexible, adaptable, versatile, having potential
<b>Time formation</b>	Short-term, flexibility	Long-term, planned future	Perennial	Customary past	Eschatological, revolutionary, visionary moment	Vogue, trend	Future generations	Project timelines
<b>Space formation</b>	Globalization	Cartesian space	Detachment	Local, proximal anchoring	Presence	Communication network	Planet, ecosystem	Project environments, collaboration spaces

### 2.3 Understanding plurality in VET through regimes of engagement

As shown here, French pragmatic theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex dynamics of VET. While the theory's concept of 'orders of worth' offers a systematic method for identifying common logics and critiques in various settings, it is still a limited theory of action. Since the early 1990s, Thévenot has further enhanced the theory's utility by proposing a set of *action regimes*, thus offering a practice-oriented perspective on how individuals *engage* with the world, *perpetuate* culture, and *create* meaning, eventually

introducing the ‘regimes of engagement’ as a typology of different regimes or forms of social action (Thévenot 2002; 2007). This includes publicly justifiable engagement, engagement in an individual plan, and familiar engagement, later coupled with engagement in exploration (Auray/Vétel 2013). Rather than understanding the mentioned regimes as a static theory, they should be recognised as a dynamic toolbox for analysing how humans can be invested in a plurality of goods on various levels (Hansen 2023). This approach recognises the diverse ways humans engage, thus moving beyond a single logic and embracing the complexity of reality. Each regime of engagement offers a unique perspective and approach for navigating social contexts (Thévenot 2014), including VET.

Altogether, four regimes can be distinguished from each other. The regime of *justifiable engagement* focuses on the common good and involves engaging in actions and decisions that are justified and aligned with broader social values and norms, and it emphasises coordination and cooperation based on shared principles and aims. Engagement in *planned action*, on the other hand, emphasises personal autonomy and agency, thus allowing individuals to pursue their own goals and aspirations within the world of VET. This regime recognises, for example, the importance of individual plans and self-directed actions in shaping one’s vocational path. *Familiarity* as a regime of engagement centres around established relationships, norms, and practices, and it emphasises the comfort and familiarity that individuals find within their social circles and existing networks. This regime often involves relying on trusted individuals, routines, and well-known conventions in order to guide actions and decisions within the VET context. Lastly, engagement in *exploration* embraces novelty, curiosity, and the pursuit of new experiences and knowledge, and it encourages individuals to venture beyond familiar territories, to challenge existing conventions, and to seek innovative approaches to VET.

Table 2: Four regimes of engagement with the world and examples in social VET situations (Hansen 2023; Thévenot 2014)

<b>Regime of Engagement</b>	<b>Evaluative good</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Justifiable engagement</b>	Worth (qualifying for the common good)	A VET teacher is engaged in their job because of professional identity and honour. A VET learner selects a vocational pathway that aligns with labour market demands and offers long-term career prospects.
<b>Planned action</b>	Plan, rationality, functionality, and choices	A stakeholder develops a new training programme to address industry skill shortages. A learner develops their career plan based on career goals and interests.
<b>Familiarity</b>	Ease, comfort, personal convenience	VET instructors create inclusive learning environments in order to enhance student engagement. An apprentice builds personal relationships with mentors, with other apprentices, and with the vocation.
<b>Exploration</b>	Experiencing novelty, excitement	A VET researcher explores new possibilities in theorising. Students explore learning through play and informal activities.

The ‘regimes of engagement’ framework expands on the pragmatic theory’s concept of logics, suggesting that individuals strategically select action modes based on their practical effectiveness in coordinating with others. It also recognises that actors can assess situations and shift between engagement modes as needed. This emphasis on strategic thinking and the socially oriented nature of action offers a nuanced understanding of the intricate dynamics of human behaviour within social contexts, making it a tool for comprehending the plurality inherent in VET.

In the world of VET professions, where tacit knowledge holds paramount importance, the regimes of engagement framework surpasses the dichotomy of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Instead, it offers a lens to scrutinise how individuals actively participate in, interpret, and extract meaning from the world through the processes of learning and professional development. The framework precisely underscores how individuals weave their personal and bodily experiences into shared understandings through their actions and expressions, thus establishing a profound connection between the individual and the collective. The regimes of engagement framework goes beyond the original orders that work like discourses and makes it possible to understand how humans engage through their bodies as well, thus providing a theory that is not only related to the mind, but also to the body. In learning theory, the dominating perspective for many years has been that of intrinsic motivation, but this overly emphasises the mental capacities of humans, while Thévenot’s contribution forms a bridge between the personal and the shared, ultimately describing how humans engage with culture.

Moreover, the framework becomes particularly pertinent in scenarios where individuals navigate the intricate landscape of multiple, and occasionally conflicting, logics. In these situations, the framework facilitates the fluid transition between diverse orders and conventions, thereby contributing to the co-creation of significance and the legitimisation of actions. It is important to note that the concept of regimes of engagement excels in situational analysis, especially within contexts characterised by communities of practice or specific situations where the convergence of personal, familiar, and justifiable aspects is evident. This convergence, achieved through engagement theory, not only unpacks the complex dance of human action and coordination within VET, but also forms a bridge between the micro and macro layers of social dynamics, thus offering a comprehensive lens through which to view VET's multifaceted landscape.

### **3 Potentials of pragmatic theory in VET research**

Pragmatic theory offers the potential for advancing our understanding of VET by shedding light on the cognitive modes and coordination practices of actors within social contexts. It provides a lens through which researchers can explore the complexities of VET systems and thus gain new and relevant insights into various aspects of VET. To communicate the potential of this theory as a VET theory, we will continue to explain how the orders of worth and the engagement regimes can be useful for different approaches to researching VET systems and actors and their agency within such systems. As mentioned, the pragmatic theoretical approach is well suited to investigating how people relate to commonalities or to what they perceive to be legitimate, how they argue for legitimacy, and how they engage in resolving tensions. Recognising that VET is intricately connected to broader societal contexts, the application of pragmatic theory allows for analyses at various levels within the VET landscape, and by analysing the multifaceted nature of VET we can illustrate how this theoretical framework can be most useful. In theorising on VET, we believe that by using the concepts of 'orders of worth' and the associated 'regimes of engagement' researchers can obtain valuable information about actors' decision-making processes, negotiation strategies, and the underlying rationalities that shape their actions. In VET research, the concepts can be used to understand modes of coordinating action among various network actors, in which areas conflicts arise, and how actors deal with these conflicts (Leeman/Imdorf 2015).

French pragmatic theory provides a historical and intellectual foundation for understanding the cognitive and coordination processes underlying human action. By applying this framework in empirical research, scholars can also gain valuable insights into the patterns and dynamics of institutionalised rules within organisations. This historical progression has not only deepened our understanding of the complexities of human behaviour, but has also opened new avenues for advancing research in the field of organisational institutionalism. Boxenbaum (2013) highlights how French pragmatism offers valuable insights into organisational institutionalism, and it provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of organisational behaviour, particularly in relation to negotiations and decision-making processes. By adopting a situated, relational, and practice-oriented approach, this theory contributes to the examination of how

embedded actors navigate the complexities of institutions, and it sheds light on how actors negotiate and justify their actions through shared moral ‘worlds’ that align with institutional logics.

VET systems are inherently value-laden environments that intersect with both the broader societal concept of education as a common good and the pragmatic realities faced by companies in competitive markets. They are the result of compromises between different worths and different regimes, where systems rely on coalitions of public and private actors who support these arrangements based on legitimate conventions. This implies that VET systems can be driven by compromises between neo-corporatist and academic discourses<sup>3</sup>, neo-corporatist and organised market conventions, or academic versus market logics (Gonon/Freidorfer-Kabashi 2022).

By recognising the multifaceted nature of value-making within VET, we can appreciate the complexity and significance of this educational domain, where references to worth are evident in many ways. For example, VET systems also embody and promote values beyond economic considerations, and civic and social values are inherent in various study programmes. In Norway, for example, the curriculum is designed to ensure that professionals are equipped not only with technical skills, but also with a sense of ethical responsibility and social awareness. In the field of early childhood education, the VET programmes focus on nurturing professionals who understand the significance of creating inclusive, supportive, and culturally sensitive learning environments for young children. Childcare and youth workers are expected to contribute to the holistic development of children, to foster social cohesion, and to promote values of equality, diversity, and respect (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2023). Furthermore, healthcare professionals such as nurses, medical technicians, and caregivers are trained in VET programmes. These professionals not only contribute to the provision of quality healthcare services, but also navigate the ethical complexities inherent in the industry, thus ensuring the well-being and safety of their patients. On an everyday basis they must relate to their industrial worth and to both domestic and civil logics. In this manner, actors within VET become specialised in bridging the gap between formalised and informal societal values and the needs of companies and the skills required for companies to thrive in competitive market environments.

As another example, VET systems in the area of technical trades equip individuals with the practical skills and knowledge needed to excel in professions such as electricians, plumbers, and carpenters. These professionals play a vital role in constructing and maintaining the built environment, thus ensuring the safety (civic), functionality (industrial), and sustainability (green) of infrastructure. By focusing on hands-on training and experiential learning, VET programmes have specific built-in worths because of how they enable individuals to acquire specialised expertise and how they contribute to the growth and development of industries while they simultaneously serve other functions.

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<sup>3</sup> In the original the term ‘regimes’ is used, but to not confuse our readers we have chosen to alter this word to something other than the original regimes discussed above.

VET systems also acknowledge the significance of domestic values within educational settings. Through education and training, they incorporate the fact that that learning is not solely a means of acquiring skills for employment, but is also a transformative process that shapes individuals' personal lives and relationships. For instance, in the field of culinary arts VET programmes not only teach cooking techniques and kitchen management, but also encourage values of creativity (inspired), craftsmanship and tradition (domestic), and the appreciation of food and sustainability (green). These programmes also emphasise the importance of family meals, cultural traditions, and the sharing of culinary experiences that give people meaning in many ways. Hence, such programmes can contribute to nurture individuals who not only excel in their professional skills but also embody the values of domesticity, cultural heritage and the joy of shared dining.

Recognising the inherent tensions and interconnectedness between the micro and macro levels of analysis, researchers can navigate the landscape of VET, and by embracing a pragmatic approach they can explore the dynamic interplay between individual actors, organisations, and the broader social, economic, and political structures that shape VET. The micro and macro level influence each other, and pragmatic theory can help us understand this interplay.

At the micro level, applying pragmatic theory enables researchers to analyse the intricacies of VET organisations, training companies, and public schools as well as the individuals involved, including trainees, pupils, teachers, professionals, and experts. Through qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and ethnographic studies, researchers can investigate the sensemaking processes of these actors. They can analyse spoken language, written texts, and everyday interactions in training arenas such as workshops or production lines in order to understand how individuals justify their actions based on specific orders of worth. By exploring professional roles, hierarchies, and dynamics within work and educational settings, researchers can gain insights into the coordination practices and decision-making processes regarding VET. Various kinds of interview studies can provide valuable information about how actors navigate and negotiate between different orders of worth in VET in order to justify their actions and reconcile conflicting interests. Moreover, the integration of pragmatic theory at the micro-level allows researchers to examine public places, firms, factories, and health and care institutions. Also, by employing methods such as content analysis and quantitative measures, researchers can analyse media outputs, including newspapers, internet forums, TV, and other outlets in order to understand how VET-related topics are discussed in public discourse. These types of analyses provide insights into the ways in which actors invoke orders of worth and engage in negotiations in the public sphere. Quantitative measures can also be used to explore the representation of words and terms associated with different orders of worth, thus allowing researchers to identify patterns and trends in the justification processes within various VET contexts.

At the macro level, pragmatic theory offers researchers a framework to study the broader social, economic, and political structures that shape VET. By examining states, companies, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, stakeholder networks, and public and private actors in the context of VET, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the systems and forces influencing VET. Dialectical methodological considerations play a crucial role in applying pragmatic theory to VET research, and researchers must carefully select

data collection techniques that capture the complexity of actors' justifications and interactions. Combinations of methods – such as interviews, observations, analyses of documents and media outputs, and ethnographic studies – can ensure a comprehensive analysis of VET landscapes. Furthermore, qualitative data analysis methods, such as thematic analysis and discourse analysis, can provide in-depth insights into the rationalities and conventions employed by actors within VET. Meanwhile, researchers should be aware of the subjectivity inherent in actors' interpretations and justifications as well as the context-specific nature of orders of worth and regimes of engagement.

#### **4 Exploring French pragmatism as VET theory**

Empirical research is crucial in order to fully understand the conventions at play in VET, and this calls for diverse studies on how individuals engage with established conventions within specific contexts. Examination of actors' engagement, their use of conventions, and their justifications, negotiations, and coordination practices can generate valuable insights into the interplay between orders of worth, social contexts, and human agency. Unlike the institutional logics' perspective, French pragmatism acknowledges that actors' reliance on collective rationalities is inconsistent, with the degree of justification varying across situations and criticism not always being countered through explicit argumentation (Boltanski/Thévenot 2006).

Eric Verdier (2013, 73-74) argues that national training models in the field of VET are undergoing a process of increasing hybridisation, particularly at the intersections between lifelong learning and VET systems. According to Verdier, the legitimacy of public policy regimes within these models is grounded in principles of justice and efficiency. These regimes rely on various forms of justification, including vocation, academic meritocracy, solidarity, utility of service, and transparency in the relationship between quality and pricing. The utilisation of French pragmatist theory provides a valuable framework for analysing the relationships between these logics within different national systems as well as for international comparative studies on VET. Applying pragmatic theory sheds light on the importance of such negotiations and compromises in understanding and addressing the complexities of VET systems in a variety of national contexts – namely Sweden, Germany, Denmark, France, and Great Britain – and explain how the various systems for lifelong learning can be seen as specific regimes connected to justice and efficiency.

Marhuenda-Fluixá (2022) further argues that VET systems continually undergo change and describes how tensions arise from the interplay between conventions and logics of coordination. In his view, the pragmatic approach of conventions serves as an analytical tool for understanding policy choices, negotiations of power among different actors, and the legitimacy of positions held by various stakeholders in VET systems as social groups negotiate and compromise based on different conventions or logics of coordination. While the literature on VET frequently refers to industry, civic, market, and project conventions, Marhuenda-Fluixá (2022) argues that there is little stability in VET and that the pragmatic approach of conventions can be a valuable tool for addressing how different actors deal with tensions and how they compromise in order to overcome such tensions. VET can therefore be investigated in connection with other aspects

of human life within the specific contexts where education and training take place, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and interrelationships that are involved.

Our numerous examples illustrate how the use of French pragmatism holds great promise for advancing VET research, and by incorporating these frameworks we can deepen our understanding and gain insights into the dynamics of VET systems. VET research should not be limited to a narrow set of theories but should instead explore a rich tapestry of established high-quality theories. By harnessing the possibilities from existing theories, we can tap into established knowledge and build upon these foundations in order to enhance the quality and attention of our research in the field. As shown in this article, the multi-dimensional approach in French pragmatist theory allows us to draw connections and find synergies between co-existing perspectives, thus encouraging a comprehensive understanding of VET. Furthermore, by incorporating this theoretical approach, VET researchers can disseminate our findings to a broader research community, thus fostering cross-disciplinary collaborations and exchanging insights with researchers from diverse backgrounds. This integration of perspectives enables a richer exploration of the interconnectedness between VET and other educational tracks, thus promoting a holistic understanding of education. The complex nature of VET systems necessitates theoretical frameworks that can successfully capture the intricacies of societal conditions, discussions, and trends in relation to humans' engagement, reflexivity, and ability to assess and value their surroundings. In this framework, Haugseth/Smeplass (2022) argue for the significance of reflexivity in fostering transformative practices and facilitating change. French pragmatism, with its emphasis on negotiations, compromise, and the orders of worth, provides a powerful lens through which we can navigate the specificities of VET and their broader societal implications. Moreover, embracing a reflexive approach to methodological development is essential in VET research, and by critically reflecting on our research methods and theoretical frameworks we can continually refine and enhance our approaches. By examining the interplay between education and work, we can better understand the evolving nature of skills, knowledge, and competencies needed in contemporary society (Billett 2011). Human beings often find themselves in situations where they must make assessments based on their values and priorities (Hodkinson/Biesta/James 2008), and static analytical tools can impede our ability to fully conceptualise human capacities and the multifaceted worlds in which they operate. By embracing theories that acknowledge and account for the diverse values, assessments, and priorities of individuals, we can further develop the understanding of VET systems and their impact on individuals and society (Guile/Griffiths 2001).

As researchers in VET, it is essential for us to acknowledge how orders of worth can provide perspectives on modern society. These orders extend across various dimensions, including individuals, companies, training organisations, public entities, international organisations, and states. In their work, Horvath et al. (2023) argue that adopting pragmatic perspectives can facilitate the bridging of inquiry and critique in educational research. This approach enables researchers to actively contribute to discussions and decision-making processes by clarifying and articulating conceptions of what is considered 'good' and 'fair' in policy debates. By doing



so, researchers expand the discursive spaces, thus influencing the shaping of educational futures.

We conclude that the integration and further development of pragmatic theory in VET research has the potential to enhance the understanding of the field and to offer valuable insights for policymaking, educational practice, and future research. By studying the connections between individuals, structures, and society, VET researchers can contribute to the advancement of the field and can address the challenges and opportunities encountered in VET.

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## The Authors

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### **Assoc. Prof. ELI SMEPLASS, PhD**

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Teacher Education

Høgskoleringen 1, 7034 Trondheim, Norway

[eli.smepllass@ntnu.no](mailto:eli.smepllass@ntnu.no)

<https://www.ntnu.edu/employees/eli.smepllass>



### **Assoc. Prof. JAN FRODE HAUGSETH, PhD**

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Teacher Education

Høgskoleringen 1, 7034 Trondheim, Norway

[jan.f.haugseth@ntnu.no](mailto:jan.f.haugseth@ntnu.no)

<https://www.ntnu.edu/employees/jan.f.haugseth>



### **Dr. JOHANNES K. SCHMEES**

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Teacher Education

Høgskoleringen 1, 7034 Trondheim, Norway

[johannes.k.schmees@ntnu.no](mailto:johannes.k.schmees@ntnu.no)

<https://www.ntnu.edu/employees/johannes.k.schmees>