



# Carving Space for Sustainable Futures through VET

Why and How Organizational Choices and Teaching Practices Matter




A person with short brown hair, seen from behind, is reaching up to a high shelf in a bakery. The shelves are filled with various types of bread, including round loaves and baguettes. The lighting is warm and slightly dim, creating a cozy atmosphere. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# Talk Overview

Why do we have to reorient our values and transform our systems?

How can teaching support such transformations?

So what?



Part I: Why do we have to reorient our values and transform our systems?

# The bigger picture

- Our planet is changing, moving towards greater instability and hotter climate (Thomas, 2022)
- change is inevitable, but can and should be influenced
- change is needed on a fundamental level



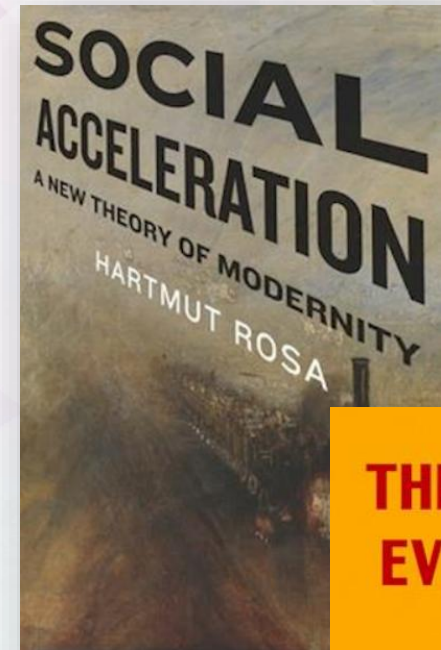
*drought in Spain, 2022 Source: DW*



# Modernity's lock-ins

- social acceleration (Rosa, 2013)
- the myth of progress (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021)
- education as techno-industrial alignment, justification of social hierarchy and division of labour (Alam, Heikkinen & Molzberger, 2023)

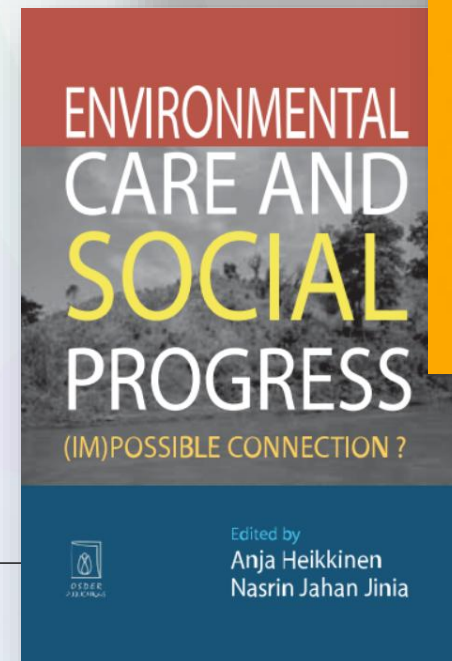
In short, modern systems, values, and assumptions cause us to **lose relation depth and mutuality**.



**THE DAWN OF  
EVERYTHING**

**A NEW HISTORY OF  
HUMANITY**

**DAVID GRAEBER AND  
DAVID WENGROW**



# The Current VET Paradigm

- Focus on producing skill-for-work
  - productivist mindset, core belief in industrial growth (Ramsarup et al, 2024)
  - narrow institutional priorities (Asaduzzaman et al., 2025)
  - the system often values getting students out and into jobs quickly more than education them as global citizens (Suhonen et. al, 2024)
- *industrial & market* conventions of worth (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006)

# Status-quo and (weak) reformist responses to sustainability in VET

- studies on VET and climate change are mainly *theoretical and reformist*, but *rarely rethink the whole system* (Poza-Vilches et al., 2025)
- current VET responses are largely reformist, minimal and incremental, keeping productivist mindsets in place (Ramsarup et al., 2024)
- despite claiming to promote sustainability, current policies continue to depend on extractivist, productivist, and consumerist logics (Alam, Heikkinen & Molzberger, 2023)
- This framing leaves little space for learners' broader development or for questioning growth itself (Suhonen et al, 2024; Schmelzer et al., 2022)


# Alternative priorities and responses in VET

- aligning training to real, local futures in service of learners and community (Muwaniki et. al, 2024)
- awareness of local conditions, the nature of the vocation as well as the underlying values we wish to promote (Sandri et al, 2024)
- plural criticality through a combined political-economy-ecology approach to VET, where we *also* examine how VET relates to issues like land rights, extractive industries, or water access, not just jobs (Lotz-Sisitka et al, 2024)
- foster modesty, humility, and care; promote simpler, locally embedded ways of life (Alam et al, 2023)
- mindful of the organisational tools and structures we use (Holmqvist, 2022, 2024)



# Alternative conventions of worth

- Civic worth
  - community and care
  - value repair, reciprocity and democratic engagement
- Ecocentric worth
  - ecological embeddedness
  - value the Earth system's integrity, the sustainment of Life and sufficiency
- Dialectical worth
  - complexity and reflection
  - value critique, diversity and plurality



## Part II: How can teaching support such transformations?



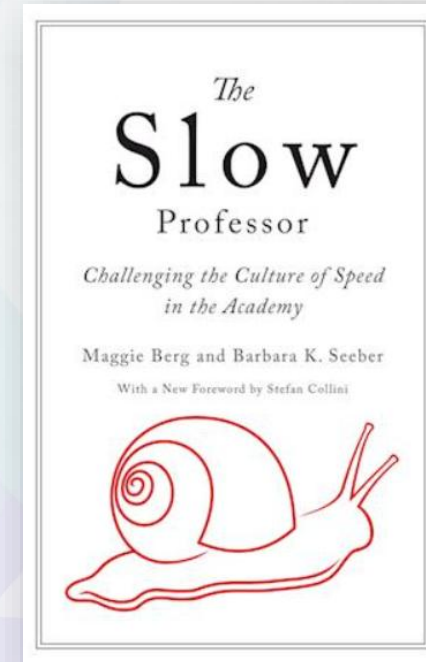
# Carving space as pedagogy

Teachers **carve space for learning**, by planning for, arranging and teaching in ways that give participants the opportunity to explore, reflect, be challenged and change. Such a space is not a physical place, but an educational and existential space, **where new thoughts and perspectives become reachable** and can take root. (Holmqvist & Millenberg, forthcoming)



# Time and pace

- carve space for reflection and deliberate acts, both in the planning process and when teaching
  - intentionally slow down (Berg & Seeber, 2016)
  - allow students to think, discuss and digest
  - adapt the pace to the content and aims





# Places as inherently pedagogical

Places teach us about *how the world works* and *how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy* (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621).

What is learned depends on *the types of places* people experience and *the quality of attention* they give them (Butler et al, 2018; Gruenewald, 2003; Lange, 2023).



# Relationships and relationality

- "the sentient body is the epicenter of morality" (Weber, 2016, p. 335)
  - Opportunity structure:
    - the psychomotor, manual aspects of VET ground abstract concepts in real experience (Hyland, 2018; Mulachy, 2000).
    - the *materiality and embodiment* of VET can be leveraged also towards teaching civic deliberation and carving space for students to experience ways of being-in-the-world that are not yet available outside the educational context
- the dialectical relationship between *the individual's lifeworld* and *sociological imagination* (Fleming, 2022)



# Hope and radical imagination

*“**Hope is essential** to any political struggle for **radical change** when the overall social climate promotes disillusionment and despair. [...] When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope.” (hooks, 2003)*

*Being able to **imagine futures** is crucial for both sustainability (Lange, 2023) and democracy (Rasmussen, 2021) but it **requires practice** (Jickling & Blenkinsop, 2021).*



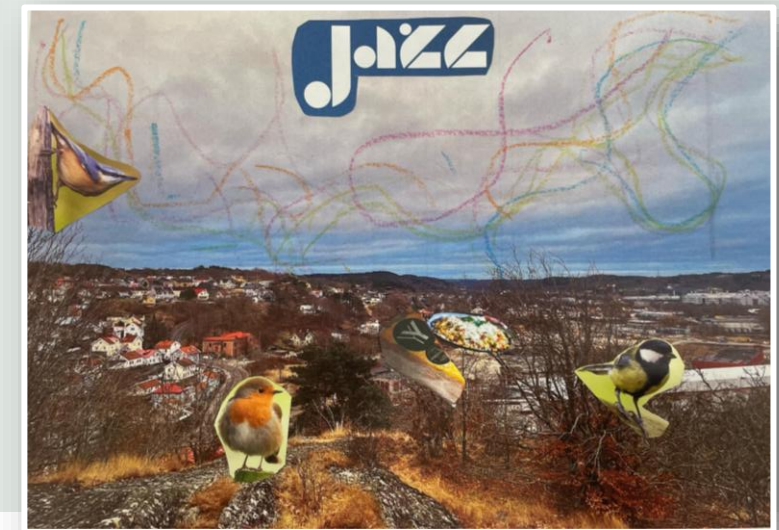
*bell hooks, mural by Matthew B. King*





*intervening in places and  
reimagining them... invites hope and  
a willingness to change that can  
expand our capacity to think  
radically about different futures*

(Holmqvist & Millenberg, 2024)





## Part III: So what?



# Academic responsibility and opportunity structures

- Revise curricula, embed LfS throughout VET teacher training
- Promote experiential, embodied, and critical place-anchored pedagogies
- Partner with non-traditional VET stakeholders
- Engage in collaborative research with VET teacher
- Highlight liminal/marginal practices in VET
- Consider which VET context and practices we chose to focus and contribute knowledge on



# In closing...

- **Transforming VET requires *systemic change***, but sustainable futures won't be achieved by one grand plan. They require that many people *redefine what they care about and how they act*.
- *How might our work, right here and now, carve space for the futures we value?* And what might happen, if VET were to shift its compass from growth to life – from *employability* to *liveability* now and in the future?





Thank you!

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