



Reflections on Being a Higher Education Researcher, and a Longstanding Member of EARLI: An Interview with Jan Vermunt

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Abstract

Jan Vermunt is a Professor of Learning Sciences and Educational Innovation at the Eindhoven University of Technology. He is also Scientific Director of the Eindhoven School of Education. From 2014 to 2018 he served as Editor-in-Chief of Learning and Instruction and has been actively involved in several international research projects. He authored over 100 articles and book chapters mainly in the field of higher education that have influenced researchers, instructors, and learners worldwide. In his research, he addresses a broad range of subjects related to student learning and teaching in higher education, for instance, effective ways to support personal learning pathways, using student learning data to improve teaching and learning, developing innovative teachers, or promoting deep and self-regulated learning. In this interview, he elaborates on his career, his involvement in EARLI, and his current and future research.

Keywords: Jan Vermunt; Interview; Academic Career; Higher Education; EARLI

I. Personal Career & Own Motivations

1. How and why did you start your academic career as a researcher?

Stefan T. Siegel: Thank you for taking the time, Jan, I appreciate that very much. Let's start without further ado with the first question – it's about your career and your motivations: How and why did you start your academic career as a researcher?

Jan Vermunt: Well, I studied psychology at university and in my master's degree I started with clinical psychology but very soon discovered that, although I find it highly interesting what can go wrong with people mentally, I thought this is not what I want to spend my time on every day of my working life. I wanted to focus on a let's say more positive branch of psychology. I still remember that in one summer I was going through the study guide of my university and came across educational psychology and I thought, well, this is something different: It's not about that people have to unlearn everything, but this is about learning new things. That's when I started to get interested in learning as a science, as a discipline, and education.

I studied educational psychology at Tilburg University and graduated on a thinking-aloud study of pupils doing their homework: I was trying to get a grasp on what goes on in the pupil's head when they are trying to learn something. I recorded that and tried to make sense of it. After that I graduated my supervisors, Robert-Jan Simons and Hans Lodewijks had written a grant proposal about student learning and higher education. At that time the Open University in the Netherlands had just started and the research focused on the question of what students do when they get those materials in their letterbox. The internet was not really developed yet then, so when you were studying at university, you got a couple of kilos of study material by post. We were interested in the question of what happens then. For us that was interesting because many of these students were second-career students, so students that might not have studied for a long time. This research project was a one year job during which I traveled through the whole country to interview these students who just started studying at the Open University, recorded the interview, transcribed and analyzed them, and tried to make sense of what they said about their approaches to and their conceptions of learning, their motivation and a little bit about self-regulation. Then I wrote a report about the project.

And then, there was a second research project: For one and a half years I did some more quantitative research, and then I got a temporary job as a junior lecturer. Then I could actually do some more research and write a doctoral thesis about it. So I was not a standard Ph.D. student. At a certain moment, my professor said: Well you've done quite some research now on a particular theme, now it's time to write a book on it. At that time, my supervisor thought that a decent Ph.D. was a book and not a series of articles. So I wrote such a book on student learning in higher education, defended it, and then it got published in 1992 (Vermunt, 1992). That was basically the start of my academic career.

2. What would you consider your most memorable early career accomplishment?

Stefan T. Siegel: Thank you for the insights into the beginning of your career. What would you consider your most memorable early career accomplishments?

Jan Vermunt: Well, basically three come to my mind: The first one was my first paper in an international journal (Vermunt & Van Rijswijk, 1988). As I said, my professor was not particularly interested in publishing his work internationally as he had a more national audience. But at that time I already had some contacts within EARLI and I just wanted to write a paper about one of my studies in English. We submitted it to the journal *Higher Education* and to my big surprise, it was accepted. That was quite a surprise as it was my first paper. Of course, your first paper is the paper you're most proud of.

The second accomplishment was that I received an award for my Ph.D. from the *Netherlands Association of Educational Researchers* which is probably similar to the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für*

Erziehungswissenschaft (German Educational Research Association). They had an annual award for the best doctoral thesis and my supervisors proposed my work to that committee which chose my Ph.D. as the best of that particular year in this small language area. So that was something to be very proud of.

And the third accomplishment was my first real job as a university lecturer after doing the mentioned research projects. My first real job was not a permanent position – it was not that easy to get at university. So those are some early career accomplishments that I'm very proud of.

3. Tell us about a person or mentor who made an impact on you or set you on your present path?

Stefan T. Siegel: These accomplishments are very impressive. Could you tell us about a person or a mentor who had an impact on you or set you on your personal path?

Jan Vermunt: Well, I have mentioned already Robert-Jan Simons who later became a President of EARLI. He was actually one of the founders of EARLI. But both of my supervisors had a very big impact on me as I was kind of their apprentice: I went to meetings with them and I saw how they behaved in the academic world. I wrote my first papers with them so that was influential.

Robert-Jan Simons was also the one who wrote this first research proposal for which I was hired. So he was an important mentor. After I had finished my Ph.D. and had worked for a couple of years at Tilburg University, I wanted to move on and I went to Leiden University. I applied for a job as an associate professor. At Leiden, Nico Verloop worked in the area of teacher education and he had quite a big impact on me. He was quite different in style, personality, and leadership compared to Robert-Jan, and I learned quite a lot from a different role model. He introduced me to a totally different field: the field of teaching and teacher education. In the beginning, I thought that it was quite connected to student learning and instruction, but at conferences, I saw that people didn't go to the same sessions. Special interest groups are quite separated communities.

And then, in EARLI I got to know a lot of new people and one of them was Noel Entwistle from the University of Edinburgh who is very well known in the field of higher education. I think he has been academically the main influence on my career. He did a lot of research in the field of student learning and introduced me more or less to this area. At that time, the big names were Ference Marton, Roger Säljö, Noel Entwistle, Gordon Pask and Piet Janssen – and other people mainly from England, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium. They have been quite influential on my early career, especially Noel Entwistle. Later in my career, he supported me, for example, when I needed a reference when I applied for Cambridge. So, these were the people who have been very influential and EARLI has played, of course, an important role.

II. Research in your Field & Future Research

4. What have been major changes in the field of student learning at university since you have been working on it?

Stefan T. Siegel: Let's move on to the second area: research in your field and also your future research. First, what have been the major changes in the field of student learning and teacher education, since you've started working in it?

Jan Vermunt: With my master thesis I started working in the field of student learning in secondary schools but later on I pretty quickly focused on student learning in higher education. At the time the big names in that domain were John Biggs, Ronald Schmeck or Noel Entwistle to name just a few. They had in common that they conceptualized student learning mostly as consisting of student motivation and student cognitive learning processes. Those were the let's say components of student learning. When I did my master's and did research on secondary school students who were trying to do their homework, we had a particular focus on metacognition which had just begun to develop as a research domain in the US. So also looking at metacognition and self-regulation besides motivation and cognition was an

important change in the conceptualization of student learning. When we developed our measurement instruments we incorporated those additional components. In the US, Paul Pintrich did very similar things, although we were not in contact at that time. Later on, a third generation of theories developed that put more focus on emotions and accordingly included emotional strategies in studying as part of the conceptualization of student learning.

Besides the conceptual changes, there were also developments regarding the measurement. In the beginning, mainly interviews and inventories were used that were later enriched by all kinds of other methods, for example, eye-tracking or thinking-aloud, and other ways to try to get a grasp on what happens in people's heads when they try to learn something.

Thirdly, I think the whole study of teacher learning is quite recent: Whereas student learning in that sense originated somewhere in the middle of the previous century, teacher learning, in the sense that you try to understand what happens in teachers when they are learning, not only when they're teaching, that's actually a quite young field of scholarship. One of the big projects we are doing now, funded by the *Dutch Research Council*, has its focus on teacher professional learning in the context of educational-innovation in higher education.

5. In your opinion, what will be the most important questions you are continuing to work on? What are your next goals regarding your research?

Stefan T. Siegel: Very interesting. What do you think – what will be the most important questions you're continuing to work on what are your next goals regarding your research?

Jan Vermunt: My next goals? At the moment I'm working on innovative pedagogies for higher education. That started already some time ago, but I see more and more people that are dissatisfied with the current teaching approaches that tend to not really actively engage students in learning. We see a lot of developments now in higher education: Institutes, departments, and teachers are experimenting with new teaching approaches that are more active, emphasize the relevance of students' self-regulation and self-direction, and that focus on real-life challenges instead of just studying books and reproducing the content. In the last 10 years, at least in the Netherlands, approaches such as project-based learning, design-based learning, and challenge-based learning became very prominent. They all have in common that they foster more active, self-regulated, collaborative, meaning-oriented and application-oriented learning.

What I find particularly interesting is to think about the question, how can you develop these pedagogies in such a way that students are challenged to gradually develop these competencies and skills. Also: what does it mean to be a good teacher regarding these pedagogies? It can be quite challenging to guide students towards increasing independence and self-regulation, critical thinking, and reflective learning. At the moment I see that not only individual teachers but also departments and even universities are trying to innovate or to modernize their ways of teaching. A lot of questions are associated with these processes, for example, how, to integrate the acquisition of fundamental knowledge and its application or how to assess complex competencies. Students have become better at critical thinking, self-regulation, etc, and here the question arises what teachers need to learn to be good coaches.

Stefan T. Siegel: I suppose that this is a quite demanding but also a very promising endeavor, especially in relation to the grand challenges we face today. At the Institute of Business Education and Educational Management at the University of St.Gallen, we, therefore, aim to embed sustainability in our further education modules by implementing these more active teaching and learning approaches you mentioned such as problem-based learning to foster not only the participant's knowledge but also relevant attitudes, skills, and competencies.

Jan Vermunt: That's a very interesting challenge. Many universities develop concepts using the sustainable development goals defined by the United Nations as a starting point for, for example, problem-based learning in certain domains. Many of these goals or areas have technological components and also

ethical components. The difficulty is here to define challenges that are not too easy and not too complicated: As a teacher, you have to simplify them a little bit but at the same time make sure that they are still open enough so that the solution is not known beforehand and students can really have their own say in the direction that they try to develop the solution. At the same time, one goal of university education is also to teach respectively acquire fundamental knowledge about for example basic topics and subjects. In our research, we're looking at how you can really combine the teaching of fundamental knowledge with the acquisition of contemporary skills and competencies that students need. It's not easy but, of course, easy things are not interesting for researchers.

III. Involvement in EARLI & Advice for Young Scholars

6. What does being a part of the EARLI mean to you?

Stefan T. Siegel: I absolutely agree. Let's move on to our second our third part – your involvement in EARLI potential advice. What does being a part of EARLI mean to you, and what are your most memorable experiences?

Jan Vermunt: EARLI has been very important to me and for my career. My first experience with EARLI was actually when it was founded. My supervisors Robert-Jan Simons and Hans Lodewijks as well as for instance, Noel Entwistle, Heinz Mandl, and Erik De Corte were involved in founding EARLI. I was let's say the apprentice of my supervisors, the young guy. So I went with them to meetings, listened to their conversations. Unfortunately, I missed the founding conference in 1985 at the University of Leuven but I attended the second conference in Tübingen in 1987 and that was my first EARLI conference. Since then, I've only missed one. So every two years I've attended the main conference and maybe even more important in the intermediate years I went to the SIG conferences. Especially the ones organized by the SIGs *Higher Education, Teaching and Teacher Education, and Learning and Professional Development*. Those are my favorite SIGs. I soon became the coordinator of SIG 4 *Higher Education*, together with Kirsti Lonka, and also was the coordinator of SIG 11 *Teaching and Teacher Education* for some time.

One of the greatest experiences was when I met Kirsti Lonka at the Nijmegen conference in 1992 and when I visited her in her office in Helsinki. I saw that she had nearly exactly the same books on her shelf as I had on mine at that time. And that was amazing because she was someone who has read the same papers and with whom I could talk about our already very specialized research on student learning in higher education. Put differently: The fact that someone can live and work over two thousand kilometers away or so but be with regard to experiences so close was one of the most memorable experiences.

Another great experience thereafter was a SIG conference that took place on a boat: I think it was a higher education SIG-conference organized by Sari Lindblom and Kirsti Lonka. The conference started at the University of Helsinki and in the evening, everybody embarked on one of those big ferries that sail between Helsinki and Stockholm. There we had dinner and a good time dancing as it was summer and in the Nordic countries, I mean there basically was no night: It was in June, got dark at two and light at three. So that was a very nice experience. Other conferences took place, for example, in a castle or in the middle of a forest in Finland. So especially the SIG conferences were helpful as you were there one time with 20 people, the next time with 80 people or 100 at most and you got to know the other participants very well. And you met them again at the main conferences. So that has been very rewarding.

Later, when I was a little bit older, I was elected as a member of the executive committee of EARLI for four years, and after that, I became the editor in chief of *Learning and Instruction*, which was my top function in EARLI. All in all, during 12 years I gave time to EARLI, but I also got a lot in return and I've learned to know an awful lot of people in those capacities, and had a lot of joy of being at conferences and talking to people or dancing, etc.

7. Could you give some valuable advice for future higher education researchers?

Stefan T. Siegel: That's very good. Could you give some advice for future higher education researchers?

Jan Vermunt: Well, the main advice is to connect to other researchers and peers, for example in EARLI, at a very early stage. You can, for example, join special interest groups and be active in these groups: You can organize symposia or conferences or serve as a coordinator. I think that being actively engaged in such communities is very good for your career but also for your personal well-being. I think it's important to have not only your supervisors with whom you can talk but also peers to talk to that are in the same situation as yourself and that face similar challenges.

I've served now many times on committees that hire hire young researchers and what you typically do when you read those CVs is to look for the things that people didn't have to do, but they just did. There are things that are more or less expected from a young researcher who applies for a job in academia, for example doing research and generating publications. If you don't have them you don't even have to apply. But interesting are the extra things like being a coordinator of a special interest group or organizing conferences just because you like it or you find it important or have a passion for it. So it's very important that you don't limit yourself to the things that are needed but that you also do the things you find relevant and that you are passionate about.

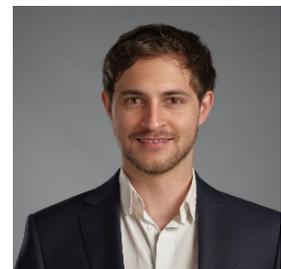
Stefan T. Siegel: I think that's a wonderful final word. Thank you very much for your insights, and your advice for the members of our community. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

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Interviewpartners

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