

BWP 2/2008

COMMENTARY

Learning within the work process – often demanded, rarely supported!?

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Dear readers,

People wanting to become employable need a solid and broad-based programme of initial vocational education and training. People wanting to remain employable and have successful careers must develop their competencies continuously. Often training offers the one way out of unemployment into long-term employment. Companies trying to remain competitive and administrations aiming to provide first-class services need to train up junior employees and effectively support the constant development of vocational competence in their employees.

These insights have become commonplace in vocational education and training (VET) policy and are largely undisputed. Countless papers and resolutions from political, business and non-governmental bodies at national, European and international level have emphasised that continuous 'lifelong learning' is the key to positive development for individuals, the economy and society. As to the question of how to anchor lifelong learning in society, the education system and the world of work, a range of proposals and demands have been put forward, some fairly general and some more specific in nature.

The crusade to promote and support continuous vocational competence development in Germany is directed at a target group of around 40 million working people plus the current total of at least 3.6 million job-seekers. 'Learning within the work process' is the magic formula that offers a feasible means of accomplishing the essential.

Indeed, the life experiences and career biographies of a great many people are proof that learning is never more self-evident, more productive, more successful and sustainable than in real work situations. Putting this fundamental insight into practice in active and work-process-oriented teaching and learning concepts and curricula (e.g. Germany's training regulations) is the formula for success in a modern dual system of initial vocational training. This formula for success is increasingly being emulated elsewhere: work placement phases and vocational orientation as part of bachelors' degrees; dual (campus and workplace) programmes of study; the dual organisation of school-based initial vocational training; efforts in EU countries with school-based VET systems to involve companies more actively; all these are evidence of the efficiency and appeal of practice-based and work-oriented learning.

The scientific discourse on the advantages and disadvantages of knowledge-based or experience-based competence acquisition in the vocational learning context does, however, raise certain dilemmas which are very difficult to resolve within routine work processes in the workplace context. In our knowledge society, the acquisition of systematic theoretical knowledge is undoubtedly gaining in importance. But formal teaching in structured learning situations does not automatically result in full occupational competence. This can only be acquired by gaining real practical experience at work. Moreover, learning in structured (artificial) learning situations predominantly appeals to groups who are already well qualified. Structured learning situations also carry heavy time and cost implications, which prevent the broad diffusion of this form of learning. In contrast, concepts which rely merely on organising work to be more conducive to learning hold a fundamental appeal for all groups, even the low-qualified and those unused to learning. This approach is well suited to fostering vocational competence development as a work-integrated –

and hence, at least, cost-neutral – activity. But its limits become apparent when it comes to teaching the heavily cognitive and theoretical competencies required in order to master highly complex, abstract work processes. And as a final, realistic observation, the majority of companies and administrations are not necessarily willing or able to consider their work processes from the angle of human resources, competence development and organisational development. Silence has fallen on the subject of group work concepts, which were once praised with so much hope. Some observers are already talking in terms of a return to Taylorisation.

Yet systematic acquisition of knowledge and experiential learning are by no means mutually exclusive. Well-designed initial vocational training on the dual principle is planned and strategically directed learning within real work processes; it is systematised and intentional experiential learning, designed not to gloss over theoretical principles but to provide integrated practice of them within workplace processes. Indeed the same is true of modern learning concepts within continuing vocational education and training (CVET), e.g. the process-oriented system of continuing education in IT. However, such ambitious concepts of systematised experiential learning currently have little resonance in company-based CVET practice.

Particularly in smaller and medium-sized companies, dual-system vocational training is based on company projects and work processes. These are used as a systematic curricular foundation for competence development supported by workplace learning coaches. In CVET practice this runs up against organisational constraints as well as sceptical views about the cost-benefit ratio. An surely significant factor may be a certain reluctance to give certification agencies and examiners deep insights into company processes and projects of potential interest to competitors. By and large, these comments apply equally to less elaborate models of work-integrated continuing education, like those introduced as good examples in BWP issue 2/2008.

Experience with dual-system vocational training gives German companies and education providers a head start, but so far they have not taken the lead in implementing work-integrated concepts of CVET or competence development. As yet, we have not essentially progressed beyond the stage of piloting developments and reviewing them scientifically. On a self-critical note, it is fair to say that BIBB research has treated the thematic complex of vocational competence development through learning within the work process rather diffidently so far, and the transfer of positive and encouraging results from relevant BIBB pilot projects into VET practice has been moderately successful at best. In international and European comparisons of in-company CVET and competence development, Germany achieves only a mid-table ranking – both for activities by companies and for employees' participation in continuing education – with no sign of the all-important upward trend. However, the lack of dynamic development is what separates Germany from many European countries, where the expansion of CVET is being tackled at a brisk pace.

The pace of progress in certain other countries, particularly in Europe, has been stimulated by education policy initiatives at EU level, not least the Bruges-Copenhagen process. The centrepiece of these processes is the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and corresponding national qualifications frameworks (NQF).

Potentially, the EQF and NQFs could upgrade the value of on-the-job learning quite substantially in relation to formal training courses. From the German viewpoint, they introduce a paradigm shift away from the dominance of formal qualifications and towards the recognition of acquired competencies. For example, the qualifications frameworks assume competencies on the same level to have equivalent value, irrespective of whether they were acquired through informal processes of vocational learning and work experience or, for instance, through university studies. With their concentration on competencies, they also emphasise the importance of occupational proficiency as the definitive standard-setting element.

Despite the necessity for constructive criticism of the details, we should conceive of this primarily as an opportunity to upgrade and promote continuous vocational competence development and to

implement lateral mobility within and between parts of the education system, and between the employment and education system, by means of recognition and credit transfer for vocational competencies. If Germany wants to move up from the middle rankings to join the leaders of the field, to compete within Europe to develop the vocational competencies of working people and the unemployed, it would do well to make active use of this opportunity to strengthen the links between the education and employment systems. This also means supporting and continuously developing competence-oriented learning within the work process, geared towards integrated occupational proficiency.