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Media competence, a new cultural technique

Dear readers,

Working life is now almost unimaginable without computers, mobile phones, email and the Internet. It is hard to name any occupational field that has not been affected. Media competence has developed de facto into a new cultural technique. It is a cross-cutting competency in practically all occupations. As such, it must be taught and made an integral part of initial and continuing vocational education and training. Over and above learning to use new applications proficiently, other important aspects are understanding the functional principles, knowing how to adapt applications to the given context, and planning and helping to design the implementation of new media.

Today's school-leavers already come equipped with a certain amount of know-how, and large companies have adapted in response. They make use of Web 2.0 tools and social media to recruit junior staff, and increasingly accept only electronic application forms for apprenticeship places. This has given rise to new patterns of segmentation: between those who have access to these media and know how to use them, and those who do not.

Informal learning is prevalent

Digital media have taken hold much more rapidly and enduringly in the world of work – and the world of leisure – than within the education system. With regard to this trend, the German federal parliament's Study Commission on the "Internet and Digital Society" states that "the expectations attached to the use of digital media in initial and continuing vocational education and training remain partly unfulfilled as yet." That said, past initiatives and programmes such as "Schools Online", "New Media in Vocational Training" or the "European Computer Driving License" have been the catalysts for considerable progress.

It is evident that digital media competencies are acquired less in formal or non-formal learning contexts than in the process of work itself, i.e. via the informal route. There is simply not time to attend a course or work through a self-study package for every single innovation. Learning is largely self-organised. It takes place in the process of using the application, and is supported by interaction with peers or experts. In contrast, training packages are seldom used. They are perceived not to meet learning needs, and often fail to keep pace with changes in technology or content. Thus it is all the more important for funding concepts to be tailored to the context and embedded within innovation strategies.

Strategic initiatives

Faced with falling pupil numbers, the challenge for Germany's *Länder* is to maintain a full spectrum of infrastructure in their vocational schools whilst also ensuring that part-time vocational schools continue to provide occupation-specific teaching. One solution might be the model of a "virtual vocational school" in which teaching is supported by new media. The idea is not new, and

pilot projects are already up and running, in Hessen for instance. What is still needed is wider implementation accompanied by an evaluation of the lessons learned and the development of support systems (e.g. suitable learning software, tutorial support, and in-service training for teachers). When it comes to basic and advanced new media training for the upcoming generation of skilled workers, inter-company vocational training centres (*überbetriebliche Ausbildungsstätten*, ÜBS) could take on important pioneering and multiplier functions. The German parliamentary Study Commission rightly urges broad-scale and effective support for cooperation between inter-company vocational training centres and individual companies.

Every year the competent bodies for initial vocational training have to organise and conduct around one million intermediate and final examinations, for which they must be able to call upon sufficient numbers of qualified examiners. Existing shortages of personnel will be further exacerbated by the demographic trend. IT-based examinations could be considered as an instrument for fulfilling the examinations mandate, and for ensuring the standards of examinations. They could also be used effectively for diagnostic purposes. Experience gained to date gives grounds for optimism. However, such a changeover imposes entirely new demands upon those responsible for setting examinations, and upon their IT-support technicians. Nevertheless, it appears to be feasible to overcome these technical and organisational problems. What remains to be accomplished is broad-scale implementation in major occupational fields, along with scientific evaluation.

Translation: Deborah Shannon, Academic Text and Translation, Norwich