

Work-based learning as a genuine learning experience

Almost all Americans are very surprised when I tell them that vocational training schools are not part of the contract in Swiss apprenticeships. And that only the company sponsoring the apprenticeship, the regional office for workforce development, and the parents of the apprentice sign the apprenticeship agreement.

They are even more astonished by the fact that the young people find their apprenticeship position themselves, and that neither vocational nor other schools are involved in this process. In the Swiss apprenticeship system, the school plays sort of a service role; this is a clear sign that apprenticeships are the business of businesses. Even though the recommendations of vocational training schools are considered very seriously by most organizations, the school does not have the decision-making power to terminate an apprenticeship, for example.

Worksite learning as school experiment and therapy

This is probably one of the main differences between our system and the American system. Work-based learning is considered by many here as (1) an add-on to school teaching and (2) as a welcome opportunity to regenerate the deteriorated educational system.

Worksite learning is an appendix, a methodical variety, a playscape for the schools and their students. This may account for the reason that many firms feel exploited and concede more or less publicly that they consider the students to be a burden, and therefore do not assign them any real work. In our apprenticeship projects here in Austin, we try to put the apprenticeship sponsors at the center of our

efforts as much as possible. I want to demonstrate this today by giving two examples in somewhat more detail.

The first example

You may remember that last fall a group of department heads from Advanced Micro Devices, one of the leading semiconductor manufacturers of the world, approached me and asked whether I could help them with the implementation of three types of apprenticeships. They had realized that in the future they would have a continuous need for employees who were responsible for the purity of the water which is required in production (ultra-pure water technicians). Furthermore, they needed staff members to install ultra-pure pipe connections (ultra-high purity piping technicians) and special technicians for temperature control and instrumentation. They mentioned that they envisioned four-year apprenticeships which would combine 50% school (community college) with 50% learning on the job. The apprenticeships would begin after high school, and would ultimately lead to an Associate's Degree.

With one eye on Swiss occupational standards, I then developed the model below, so that we knew from the beginning on which areas we should concentrate. I very consciously put the left side, the work-places, to the center of our preparations. It took me

quite some time and persistence to convince the occupational professionals at AMD not to think about study plans but about functions and tasks on the job - their own work -, and to list these activities in detail. Until the end of 1995, I also stopped each of their attempts to get in touch with the community college to discuss the study plans with them. I wanted to make sure that the on-the-job-training part stayed at the center of our attention, and actually corresponded with the needs of the organization. By now, all the outcomes are neatly written down, rotational plans have been created, an evaluation system is in place, our thoughts about practical tests have progressed, and an industry certificate doesn't seem impossible any more. We have registered the three apprenticeships with the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training (BAT) in Dallas, which is a kind of regional workforce development office. After that, our talks with the community college people were easy; and everything was prepared very well in-house. Next July, 15 young high school graduates will begin their German-style four-year apprenticeships at AMD. I am not the only one pleased to hear this; all the people involved at AMD are very happy about

it, too. And because AMD is building their newest factory in Dresden, Germany, there is even the chance that German apprentices may eventually come to Austin.

The second example

Last fall, the McDonald's Corporation came to the Capital Area Training Foundation with the intent of making Austin the demonstration site for their „Customer Service Management“ program. In this national demonstration project, the company famous for their „Golden Arches“ is working in conjunction with hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, amusement parks, and retail businesses in and out of the food service industry.

What is special about this project? All the participating firms are required to consider and treat their apprentices as the next generation of managers, and not just as cheap labor. To this end, the apprenticeships at McDonald's last for five years, and begin in the sophomore year of high school, making the apprentices approximately 15 years old when they start. All the companies involved are motivated by the conviction that they must educate their own future workforce. McDonald's estimates that by the year 2000 they will need 60,000 more managers in the United States alone. Walgreen's, one of their national partners and a chain of combination drug

and department stores, will have similar needs. Students interested in a McDonald's apprenticeship must pass a kind of entrance exam, which tests both scholastic and practical knowledge, in order to even be offered an interview. Those who do not pass prepare for a second chance in a special program. The current demonstration sites, which can be found in Chicago, Baltimore (MD), Portland (OR) and Muskegon (MI), are run by what they call a Site-Manager (a kind of apprenticeship coordinator) and a few apprentice advisors.

Currently, my wife, Ruth, is working very successfully as an unpaid volunteer for CATF, recruiting further partners in the Austin- San Antonio region. Only those organizations that have both staffing needs and a pre-existing management-development program, in which the apprentices could be placed, will be considered for partnership. In addition to all the hotels in Austin, the most important grocery store chain in Texas just informed us that they will participate. The project management in Chicago emphasizes that professional skills as well as the corresponding scholastic basics should be learned on the job. In order to check on this, national exams are given every year to determine if an apprentice will be allowed to continue on. These exams, called „Total Quality Management,“ are well-balanced and focus on the practical. Good scores depend

on assessments and observations made on the job. The achievement of scholastic as well as of practical goals is therefore left to the individual organizations and regional schools, in keeping with Step 3 of my Basic Model. The goals of the apprenticeship are an Associate's Degree, an industry certificate, and placement in a management position- all for someone only about 20 years old! And this for about 150 apprentices in our region!

The needs of business decide

What is missing from my discussion of these two examples is their consistency with the needs of business. To address this, it should be noted that both projects were started by the businesses themselves, and not by schools. I believe this is the only way that long-lasting partnerships will emerge between schools and businesses.

And if only the American authorities would grant us Green Cards, then my wife could use her extensive hotel and travel agency experience to make the Customer Service Management Program flourish here in Austin. It's too bad that the people at the Immigration and Naturalization Service don't seem to understand anything about School-to-Work.