

## Experiential Learning vignette 9: Competence and Skills-Based Experiential Learning

This vignette is derived from an interview with Susan Walker Academic Mentor in Engineering at the University of Strathclyde. It forms part of a [Collaborative Enhancement Project](#) funded by the QAA.

### What is competence and skills-based learning?

Professional skills naturally occur in the workplace. Apprenticeship degree candidates must be employed therefore there is a natural source for experiential learning available. Working with the apprentice and their employer, potential opportunities for the development of professional skills and competencies are identified, evidenced, and levelled against relevant professional standards. Within these degrees, the work-based learning specialists require extensive knowledge of the relevant business and industry practice, professional standards and skill development and works with the apprentice/employer (ideally their line manager) to agree a tailored activity plan. Each plan is unique.

My career experience is predominantly engineering however, as a Learning and Development Manager within an SME with 400 employees, it was evident that this applies to all skills, not only engineering.

By using professional competence as a measure of achievement, we use indirect, holistic evidence to assess learners' skill development. This is a key difference to skills-based experiential learning and traditional academic learning. ALL of the learning is relevant to the job role, and anecdotally we've found that apprentices tend be promoted or given acting positions much sooner and in return employers experience increased productivity, with responsibility, within a shorter timeframe.

The traditional "academic" element of the degree provides breadth and depth to knowledge enhancement whilst the work-based learning is specific to the business. Having the opportunity to study and practice synchronously significantly increases the development process.

Companies utilising apprenticeships operate within different Sectors and can be subject to an array of national and international legislation. Internally their structure and operations also differ which

## Equity of Experience

It's difficult to ensure everybody is getting an equal opportunity for experience. There are also challenges in applying fair and consistent assessments across the broad range of experiences gained in the workplace therefore robust quality control and assurance is necessary.

Recognising development opportunities requires extensive knowledge of business, industry practice and professional standards. The support provided by university skill professionals in the development of skills is tailored for the individual/employer partnership. This helps promote equity of experience for learners and particularly when a business recruits multiple personnel on a yearly basis.

Another issue can be the organisational structure for training within companies. An overseeing "training department" at national level is unlikely to have the same knowledge of skills and competence as a direct line manager/supervisor who is a subject expert. The development of skills within a learner needs to be nurtured by someone with subject-specific knowledge and experience.

1-2-1 coaching and mentoring helps to build equity, particularly if a specific deficiency has been identified. Also, the effect of competence and skill comparison in itself provides some level of equity. If we are all aiming for the same industry standard of competence, such as UK-SPEC, (the UK standard for Professional Engineering Competence) then we are all working towards the same goal. This should increase the likelihood of apprentices working for different employers, studying at different professionally accredited institutions being able to achieve the same skills based qualification.

## Skills Development Takes Time

The building of skills to the level of a standard or framework takes time. Learning Outcomes can be covered in a single term, semester or year but this is not true of skills. To get to the right level of skills over the course of a 4-year apprenticeship, learners need to cover the skills in depth and that by necessity takes time to build.

Recognition of skill development using levels can be employed to help demonstrate to the learners that progress is being made however to build up to professional recognition level takes time and opportunity.

will give rise to variation in experiences of the learners. Time spent with the learner and the with the employer is crucial to tease out the appropriate experience and skills needing to be developed in the workplace.

### **Recommendations to others**

Have a very good understanding of what's expected. There are people within the education sector charged with developing competence proficiency in learners don't fully understand competence-based learning themselves. That understanding needs to be there at the outset.

It is tempting to adapt to employers perceived needs and modify the practices of a learning provider to appease an employer. One piece of advice would be to stick to what you know to be fundamental as a provider and accept that you can't always please everyone. A provider utilising skill specialist, may be able to suggest a more succinct way forward than an employer when

it comes to skills/competence. That said, it's the employers' decision.

For example, there is a common trait in industry for new employees to enter departmental or role rotations over a number of months, sometimes years. This is carried out by many employers highly praised for the training they provide. Rotation gives new starts a taster of the opportunities and departments within an organisation however a person undertaking four six monthly rotations will not gain the same depth of technical experience as someone who is more embedded within a discipline over the same timeframe.

Whilst on rotation softer, transferable skills are likely to develop, along with a fuller understanding of a particular company's business, but the technical skill development is not deep, nor is it discipline-specific. The best skills-based experiential learning does include softer skills and it develops these in synergy with the technical and operational aspects of job roles.

Employers may take time to fully embrace a competence/skills way of training. This can be nurtured through building a relationship with the employer but also in building the confidence of the learner to ask for the right experience, to progress and get the workplace experiences that allow them to achieve their competence goals.

Again, it's the employers' choice. They pay the salaries.