

WBL-PRO Professional Peer Network: The team talks with the professionals – Alessandra Rossi from Italy

It is a pleasure for us to introduce to you today **Alessandra Rossi** from Italy. She graduated in Foreign Languages and Literature in 1991 and since then she has been teaching English in high schools and for ten years in "G. Medici" Hotel Management and Catering Institute in Legnago, Verona. She attended a two-year course to get teaching certificate with Cà Foscari in Venice and afterwards she got professional training certificates in "Teaching Modern Languages", "Teaching English Literature" and "English Culture, Literature and Civilization" together with a Master in "Competence Based Education" in Verona University. From 2011 to 2015 she was assistant principal in "G. Medici" performing duties in work-based learning, school guidance and fund raising. For two years she has been working full time for Consorzio Alberghieri del Veneto and been responsible for designing and implementing courses for teachers' training and professional development. Together with some colleagues, she published "Percorso di Alternanza Scuola Lavoro-Vademecum" ed. Spaggiari, Parma.



Please find below what she has shared with us:

"I think that everybody agrees with the statement that global competition increasingly forces countries to provide themselves with a labour force, with a wide range of high-level technical- professional skills, soft skills and tacit knowledge, in order to compete on the quality of their goods and services. A broad range of studies and experiences

have proved that work based learning can meet the aims of both improving young people employability and increasing economic competitiveness because of its several advantages. While school education ensures the development and strengthening of numeracy, literacy and academic skills, work based learning is essential for the acquirement of general, occupation-related knowledge, complementary practical skills and key competences such as communication, team working, problem solving, networking, critical thinking, and professionalism. Rapid technological changes usually need the use of expensive, dangerous equipment or devices and the performance of a variety of tasks that increase in complexity. Even if school education system more and more often sets up experiences simulating work environment and process or based on lab method teaching, the lack of resources, inadequate teaching training and technical support make difficult to offer what students need and the building of simulated work environments may be too cost-effective. In work-based learning, students have more chance to expose themselves to update technology already available in firms and to experience its advantages thanks to the presence of staff able to teach its use and associated techniques. Moreover being part of a community of practice, even if temporarily, allows students to grow both as workers and as citizens and to develop their own identity, self-awareness and self-esteem as future employees who cannot be fully reached in a simply school based environment. Career awareness and management is becoming more and more important but also harder because of the rapid job evolution and wrong choice in a future career may be very costly. In work based learning students can rely on formal trainers who, thanks to their training and mentoring skills and interaction with the student, can act as career guidance and make the students acquainted with labour market prospects, career opportunities and required career-related skills.

By preparing students for the world of work and making them understand the differences between education and training environment, work based learning has proved to be the best way towards a smooth school-to-work transition. The last but not least advantage of work based learning is its certification in the form of validation of learning acquired in work experience which can be shown to future employers as a proof of their skills and competences. Hosting a learner can also be an opportunity for companies because students can be trained according to the knowledge, skills and competences that companies need in order to stay competitive or face eventual skills shortages. Furthermore trainers engaged in work base learning are supposed to take advantage of their role improving their skills, competences and knowledge while dealing with students.

Even if work-based learning worth is widely recognized as a relevant experience, several challenges still remain to be faced.

First, in spite of the crucial role they play in work-based learning, trainers' competences and tasks haven't been specifically defined yet. Quite often trainers are chosen on the base of their minimum requirements rather than of specific competences. Furthermore they are usually selected according to years of experience and position in the company or, in the worst case, on voluntary basis.

Next, another key challenge is related to the engagement of teachers and trainers in sharing responsibility and co-operation for the settling of competence profiles and sets of skills. Far from being common practice, trainers and teachers meet problems in maintaining pedagogical, didactical and theoretical knowledge, skills and competences and in updating technical competences.

Then, difficulties must still be faced in carrying out high quality work-based learning programs for students with disabilities due to persistent low expectations and discriminatory assumptions about disability. Young people with disabilities must struggle to get jobs at higher wages after they graduate or even to achieve success in the labor market. If organizing quality work-based learning experiences is not easy, organizing quality work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities is even harder, owed to the lack of opportunity for settings, insufficient specialised staff to help and support them. On the contrary, what should be done is work-based learning programs with specified learning goals tailored to the student and with specific outcomes connected to his/her learning; train tutor staff able to support students with disabilities in parallel with the class specialised teachers.

Finally, there's a problem concerning the assessment of WBL outcomes, in particular, what must be assessed if students' work performance, the project carried out at work, or students' portfolio of work based on workplace experience. In fact WBL learning activities come in the form of current working activities so they are hardly structured into a progressive learning programme. Add to this, an investment in training for assessment should be carried out both to teachers and to trainers to get them acquainted with the definition of clear measurable learning outcomes, skill levels aligned with student learning and appropriate assessment activities with specified marking criteria. School system regularly provides teachers with specific training but companies are used to train their staff on specific professional-technical skills but hardly on general skills and often they are too small to afford the cost of effective training.

In work based learning all the involved stakeholders have to realize that they have essential roles to play and mutual benefits to share. It means that they have to foster regular forms of cooperation such as constant meetings in order to discuss professional subjects, curricula requirements, the implementation of specific training modules or measures to match students and workplaces or to ensure health and security

conditions. Stakeholders must also face the change in technologies and processes and consequently the updating of tasks and performances required as well as the planning of learning goals and outcomes to reach or concrete learning objects to evaluate.

The success in work based learning is mainly concerned with the availability of good trainers but finding qualified staff is particularly difficult in case of micro or small enterprises. A solution could become in the form of courses attended by trainers in order to improve their counselling and assessment tasks or enhance their pedagogical skills.

What still lacks in a well implemented governance of work based system is a codified path and prescriptive rules for the accreditation of employers with the required capacity to host learners. Codified forms of accreditation are in urgent need in order to establish the suitability of the workplaces from a health and safety perspective, the availability of trainers with technical-personal experience and qualifications as well as existing facilities and materials.

It's widely stated that WBL is one of the greatest opportunity for learners to acquire ranges and kinds of competences and behaviours which could hardly been developed, at the most, in a school based environment. However the extent of competence and skill acquirement varies, since it depends on the company workplaces learners are introduced in, and, on the company engagement in supporting and teaching them.

Generally speaking, a crucial element of WBL programs is that soft skills, increasingly important in the labor market, such as problem solving, conflict management, entrepreneurship, career awareness and career management skills, which are weak for students at school, can be more strengthened in workplaces. Through students' involvement into actual production, they have the chance to understand the importance of leadership as well as what makes a good leader so, thanks to the interaction with staff members and employers and analysing their behaviour, they ought to develop the same skills and attitudes in themselves.

Moreover WBL is an excellent way to develop communication, interaction and customer relation skills. In WBL in fact students are not only encouraged to work on their communication, written and oral skills, but, above all, through a constant formal and informal interaction with colleagues, employers and customers, students develop self-efficacy in communication, thanks to the many contestualised communication tasks they have to face.

Finally, WBL helps students develop a huge amount of job- professional specific skills, as WBL is mainly goal-directed and task-focused, and trainers are less concerned about

the development of the student applying academic or technical skills learned in school , and more concerned about the development of the student carrying out real practical tasks. But since, over the course of their future career, students will probably change employers and occupations several times, besides the acquisition of technical and job- or profession-specific skills, what is essential for students is to learn how transferring skills and competences from one context to another. Cognitive transfer is, in my opinion, the most important competence that students can learn in WBL which will serve them in future education and on the job.

I've been involved in planning and carrying out work-based learning projects for students from the second to the fifth grade of Secondary School for several years. Each work-based learning project is student-centered and differentiated for single student skill levels and includes appropriate support to students during the experience, to maximize their growth and development in the work field. Furthermore all projects imply appropriate safety and health training for students as well as career awareness activities, to understand skills required for specific occupations and job shadow activities to help students explore a sector of interest.

Thanks to a great variety of projects students in G. Medici Institute can explore the world of work and perform meaningful tasks in a wide range of industries and occupations in Veneto, Italy and abroad.

Students in the hospitality and catering sector are engaged in work-based learning projects providing work placement under the most favourable conditions and enable them to communicate in several languages, work in a multicultural environment, and develop interpersonal and customer service skills. In addition, projects provides further relevant learning experiences such as experts entering the classroom and teaching students understanding specific production processes or classes visiting companies in order to have a better understanding of both production processes and professional profiles or in school labs some production processes are reproduced by company staff.

Students in agricultural sector are involved in work-based learning projects focusing on competences related to sustainable development and new functions and activities in the field of entrepreneurship in the green sector and the process of transition from production to services.

Students in the health care sector are involved in work-based learning projects including hospital tours, guest speakers in the classroom, job shadowing or direct contact with a professional in the chosen occupation, according to the grade they

attend with the aim to get students ready to the transition into health care occupations and, in particular, to post-secondary education programs."

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