

Summary of United Kingdom concerning teaching-learning arrangement “Criticism”

“The teaching-learning arrangement promotes the ability of pupils and students, to handle criticism of their own behaviour and to respond appropriately to these criticisms. As part of this, different dimensions of communication and conflict are dealt with and reflected by the students.”

1. Importance of the teaching-learning arrangement “criticism”

All respondents thought the ability to deal with criticism was an important competence. Several respondents explained that it was important for young people to understand what was being said without taking it personally. Employer B (a major food retailer) suggested that retail assistants’ ability to deal with criticism also reflects on the business as a whole. The representative from the National Skills Academy, a private company responsible for facilitating the provision of employer training, pointed out that dealing with criticism was covered to some extent in the Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (‘reflective learning’).

There was general agreement that young people on retail programmes have to deal with criticism in a variety of contexts. Respondents made a distinction between criticism from managers (most notably in the form of receiving feedback on assessments), dealing with customer complaints, and having to resolve conflicts with suppliers. The food retailer A suggested that often young people become very defensive when criticised and that this reflected their lack of confidence. Several respondents raised the point that in terms of feedback from managers this then also becomes a question of how the criticism is delivered and how the young people are approached (so as to not put them on the defensive).

The trade union representative pointed out that retail can be quite a hostile environment and that retail assistants are taking the brunt of it. They have to be able to deflect it without being scathing to the customer. She also suggested that apprentices need to have coping mechanisms to deal with abusive customers (USDAW are running a campaign ‘Freedom from fear’).

2. Notions and options for modification

All agreed that the suggested tools would work well in principle, but that they will need to be put into the context of a retail environment, for young people to take them seriously. Several respondents (Sector Skills Council, food retailer B) questioned the value of a classroom based element (food retailer B also suggested that young people do not enjoy classroom learning). The Sector Skills Council representative was adamant that all the material would need to be integrated into the workplace, reflecting authentic workplace situations, and that it should be reinforced in the workplace. For example, the material could relate to giving feedback in the workplace. Food retailer B pointed out that role plays are an important tool, but that one has to be careful about pairing young people up as some of them can be very shy.

3. Reflective comment

It was clear that while all felt that dealing with criticism was a critical competence, the employers viewed it more in terms of the needs of the business while the trade union representative was more concerned about the young people themselves. Employer A also saw this competence more in terms of building up young people’s confidence which she perceived to be generally low. This may also reflect this company’s particular intake of trainees, many of whom are from less privileged backgrounds.

Summary of United Kingdom concerning teaching-learning arrangement “Time management”

“This teaching-learning arrangement supports the competency ‘time management’, with the goal, that students are able to handle tasks in an allowed time frame and that they are able to define and structure this time frame on their own.”

4. Importance of the teaching-learning arrangement “time management”

All respondents felt that time management was essential. Most thought about it in terms of punctuality. The representative of the National Skills Academy pointed out that time management was the first thing that was expected of apprentices as they enter a contract with an employer, who expects them to turn up for work on time. She explained that time management was covered in the Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (time/self management). The representative of the Skills Shop (as a structured learning environment) also viewed time management as important in the context of the apprenticeship, for example, in terms of attending classes and meeting deadlines for assignments.

Another dimension was how retail assistants manage their work on the shopfloor. The Sector Skills Representative argued that, contrary to popular belief, retailing involved a variety of tasks and not merely stacking shelves, and that retail assistants have to distinguish between urgency and importance. In contrast, the union representative pointed out that they have limited autonomy and are therefore not in a position to prioritise tasks. They work ‘on a production line’, on a task-by-task basis (‘do that aisle by 11 o’clock’). Nevertheless, as suggested by employer A, working to a tight time frame can be demanding (‘they only have a set amount of time to do certain things... they’re working to time all the time... if there are no products on the shelves, customers can’t buy anything’).

5. Notions and options for modification

All agreed that the tool (a comic strip) could work well in principle. The Sector Skills Council representative suggested there was an issue with aiming it at the right age group. While it could work with 16-17 year olds who have no experience of the retail sector, for older trainees it would need to be put into a retail context. This was echoed by both employers. Employer A, a large supermarket chain, pointed out that most apprentices were already disciplined to time keeping because they had already worked for the company for some time. If the tool was going to be used, it would have to be set within an authentic work situation. She gave the example of somebody working on the grocery, with one colleague off sick and another one on holiday. They would have to take five minutes to plan how they can work around this.

6. Reflective comment

While all respondents stressed that time management was key, they varied in their views of how this should be taught. It is interesting that the representatives of the Skills Shop were almost alone in embracing the tool as part of a structured learning process (as the only environment with a more significant, structured off-the-job element). The employers seemed to see it as part of workplace learning, although they could see the benefits of a more structured approach (on the job!).

Summary of United Kingdom concerning teaching-learning arrangement “Team competency”

“The teaching-learning arrangement ‘team competency’ focuses goal-oriented work together in teams. Thereby, the students should be enabled to work together with other students in cooperative-communicative and task-oriented situations.”

7. Importance of the teaching-learning arrangement “team competency”

All respondents agreed that the ability to work in teams was ‘absolutely vital’. Of the four Teaching and Learning Arrangements, team competency was seen as the most important one. Most retail operations are team-operated and retail assistants always work as part of a team. The Sector Skills Council representative pointed out that it was one of the attractions of the job to work with other people.

‘Working effectively in a retail team’ is the one mandatory unit of the Retail Skills element (all other units are optional). The National Skills Academy representative explained that currently the team-building exercise was not built into the framework, but ‘one would expect it to be’. The representatives of the Skills Shop explained that they include exercises whereby young people are given tasks to do in a team, showing the benefits of team effort and the effects of somebody not fulfilling their part.

8. Notions and options for modification

All respondents were familiar with this or similar tools (building bridges or towers) and most were in favour of using it. The Sector Skills Council representative felt this could be any practical exercise that brings out the team-building competence. Employer A again viewed it in terms of building young people’s confidence. She said it could be useful as a way of ‘breaking the ice’, getting the young people talking to each other and enhancing their confidence by meeting different people and developing their social skills.

The union representative had reservations about the tool as she thought it would ‘feel artificial’ to the apprentices. She argued that relating it to the job was always better. It would make it more relevant to the young people so that they were more likely to ‘understand the point’ of the exercise. She suggested a problem-based exercise set in the retail context. For example, this could be a scenario whereby a customer wanted to exchange a product and wanted to have various types of information about alternatives. The apprentices then would have to assign different tasks within the team.

9. Reflective comment

It seems little surprising that the team working competence was regarded as the most important given the nature of retail work. Particularly in the British context, where most retail assistants’ level of autonomy and scope of activity is highly restricted, it seems unsurprising that this competence was more highly rated and more enthusiastically embraced than the other three competences in this project. A team-building exercise could also be more easily integrated into a workplace environment (given that most retail apprenticeships have no significant off-the-job element).

Summary of United Kingdom concerning teaching-learning arrangement “Self-evaluation ...”

“The teaching-learning arrangement ‘Self-evaluation of the own performance potential’ promotes the competency of students, to evaluate their own performance potential by themselves, to reflect these estimates and to align them with the complex environmental requirements.”

10. Importance of the teaching-learning arrangement “Self-evaluation of the own performance potential”

Respondents were generally of the view that this TLA was less important as a taught element and that knowing your strengths and weaknesses comes with time and experience. However, all respondents agreed that it was important for young people to be able to reflect on their performance. They saw this as being developed on the apprenticeship through giving and receiving feedback. The Sector Skills Council representative considered this vital and argued that people should be coached on how to give and receive feedback as this was key to improving performance. Respondents from the Skills Shop pointed out that the retail programmes contained self-evaluation and reflective practice (it is part of PLTS). The trainees have to evaluate their own performance against the learning outcomes. For example, on being observed in the workplace they are asked how they think the observation went. They will then get feedback, including how they can develop further. Similarly, the union representative felt that feedback was important in terms of recognising a young person’s strengths and building on them. In the same vein, Employer A pointed out the importance of building young people’s confidence in their own ability. She thought that this was a big hurdle as many of them never had any praise. The representative of the National Skills Council argued that it was important for people to know their strengths in terms of planning their career in retail but that this would evolve over time.

11. Notions and options for modification

Most respondents voiced reservations about the proposed tools. The Sector Skills Council representative was adamant that the TLA be more usefully implemented in the workplace, as otherwise the impact would be short-lived. Feedback is only effective if it is delivered in the right way. Several respondents (Skills Shop, National Skills Academy, Employer A) suggested that, while it might work with adults, the tool would be difficult to manage with young people. They would find it difficult to talk about their strengths and weaknesses due to peer pressure, especially if someone was already being bullied. The Skills Shop representative suggested something like ‘What do you think are the skills of a retailer?’ with the young people having to measure themselves against the skills identified. The union representative pointed out that it would have to be a safe environment and the young people would need to understand the benefits of the exercise. Employer A suggested that this might be more easily achieved in the work environment. They do this already, e.g. through SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and team exercises, such as making something with a set amount of money, a set of ingredients and then selling it, reflecting on their own ability and that of the team.

12. Reflective comment

Respondents were critical of this TLA. One major concern was young people’s lack of confidence which may reflect the fact that many young people going into retail are from disadvantaged backgrounds. There was a sense that most young people underestimate their own ability, partly due to negative experiences at school. Most respondents felt that it should be about building on young people’s strengths and that it should be embedded in the work environment.