

A Vocational Staff Development Model:

Learning from and Working Together with Hotel Staffs Based on Career Knowledge and Skills

By Yingli Xi (yinglixixi@126.com)

Shenyang Polytechnic College PR China

Abstract: Staff development has been one of the issues facing technical vocational education and training. In order to develop an effective and practical vocational training program, college vocational educators are expected not only to understand the theory and practice of vocational education, but also to have a thorough knowledge of what specific skills and knowledge are needed in a particular field. One way to achieve that goal is to go to hotels, learning from and working together with hotel workers.

This article is intended to illustrate the necessity and importance of college staff training and development in fostering career knowledge and skills through on-site training and work-study mode.

Introduction

Facing the competitiveness and challenges in the job market, public spotlight and educators both have been focusing on the issue of staff & student training mode. According to the analysis of market survey on graduate employment of higher vocational education in Shenyang Polytechnic College (SPC), college staff training has become a crucial and more important issue than others. Career knowledge and skills play an important role in the success of students' career in the future. College teachers should first have a firm understanding and grasp of such knowledge and skills in order to help students learn. College teachers' training, therefore, should be based on such career knowledge and skills.

Our foreign language department in the college offers students courses of 3-year study with a diploma in Business English and Tourism English. The program has been under a gradual change, focusing more on practicum than on the English

language learning. Five years ago, we moved the third year courses from classroom to the business sites, emphasizing hands-on activities in the training room. Internship now carries 6 credits and is mandatory to all students. We especially pay more attention to teachers' training and development on the one hand and to students' training on the other. We have been trying hard to fulfill the practicum in the 3rd year instead of students studying on campus. The practicum includes working in the certain posts relating to students' majors for the whole year. The college teachers development program includes on-site training, and the program has been very successful. Most of the teaching is now on the business site, instead of in the classroom. "Hotel English Service and Reception at Star-ranking Hotels" is one of the major project-based training programs of our college.

For the past several years, we have been trying hard to carry out the curricular reform in order to meet the challenge of job market and stay current with the era of knowledge economy.

1. Necessities of College Teachers' Training

Students' learning outcomes often depend much on how they are taught. Therefore, the comprehensive quality of teachers is a very important factor in student learning. In order to evaluate the teaching quality and performance, from 2006 on we have conducted surveys to our graduates and business staff at our training bases. The business staff include experts from different kinds of companies. We recognized the importance of teaching quality and teachers' training in the process of course delivering and student training. The survey results indicate that our graduates and business staff put teachers' training as the most important factor that contributes to student learning. They emphasized teachers' role as a model, as someone who have a thorough understanding and experience of career knowledge and skills.

Our surveys consist of more than 30 questions and cover various areas such as teaching styles, modules, methodology, and projects. The areas surveyed focus on two major issues. One is about the qualifications of dual qualified teachers, i.e., qualified both as classroom teachers and as on-site trainers. The other issue is about

the qualifications of high-level language teachers with experience in certain working posts. The survey respondents indicate that college teachers' training is urgent, and it should come before students' training.

The research about teachers training on the business site reveals that the professional development does not only depend on their "educational theory"; what's more important is to apply theory in the on-the-job training. However, previous pedagogy did not lay any emphasis on what teachers must do but paid close attention to what teachers should know.

The most commonly used methods include: 1) instructors acquired knowledge about certain career and more importantly to put them into practical use, especially for fostering vocational education; 2) teachers should observe and imitate the behaviors of business staff in the companies or enterprises by doing the job with them together, collecting more information of job-related skills, and integrate them into their instructions. Observation and experience often contribute to the quality of college teachers (Lewin & Grabbe, 1945).

The traditional method of staff training is usually conducted in the classroom with students learning from books and materials. What we emphasized in our curricular reform is that teachers first should have the practical ability, working skills and experience before exemplifying and instructing to their students.

Through talking and contacting with different kinds of people we met in businesses, we collected much information about practical teaching and realized if we want to guarantee a successful program of vocational training for third-year students, we should aim at designing our practical program more practically. On-the-job training plays a leading part in the process of student training and is a key procedure to faster career knowledge and skills. It's necessary to change some of our programs and syllabus in order to meet the needs of employers and future jobs

Only by this way, can teachers be the objective observers of themselves, and they can make their "applying theory" and practical knowledge be the subject for analysis and can make the critical reflection possible.

2. The Knowledge and Skills Training at Star-Ranking Hotels

A qualified teacher should have good qualities ranging in many aspects besides his/her knowledge in certain fields. Personal and professional qualities no doubt would show a person's degree of qualification, capability of handling problems, values and ideas, sense of morality and responsibility, views on the outside world, etc. Most of these can be accomplished through professional training.

By participating in activities and being influenced by the hotel culture, teachers and students have promoted many dimensions of qualities.

Hotel working contributes to teachers' qualities as follows:

- **Etiquette and Courtesy :**

By being coached in the star-ranking hotels, and being exposed to professional manners and behaviors, our students have become more polite and courteous.

Hotel etiquette has been created. It covers such contents as grooming & hygiene, service and table manners, telephone answering standard, telephone courtesy, etc.

These contents have been integrated into the materials and skills in the course.

Examples include: if you are a person answering the phone call, you should know leaving message skills; you must have a smiling voice, and must pronounce the words properly. The telephone answering technique also covers the skill of managing difficult guests. They are expected to:

Always speak required language and speak slowly.

Always have a pen near the telephone.

Always ask the guest to leave a message if it's necessary.

Always give your full attention to the caller, do not try to do two things at once.

Smiling is required in almost all the hotels. Guests are made to feel like home. Politeness should be shown vividly from each member of the staff.

In some of the hotels, managers are from different countries. The diversity actually creates more opportunities for teachers to be exposed and to learn the manners and behaviors from different cultures. They have been influenced by the fine cultures from well-cultured and very polite guests all over the world.

- **Business and Skills of Hospitality**

The integration of theory and practice is of utmost importance for a good professional preparation of English major teachers and students. During the training they are exposed to all the practical aspects of hospitality in our own teaching base hotels.

Answering the phone involves:

Taking reservations; providing detailed information about the hotel's Operations, and policies for routing phone calls to the proper source when the information is not available; confirming reservations; handling complain calls, etc. They will also have to answer phones, as well as greet guests as they arrive; saying good-bye when departing, and thanking guests for their business. Students are also expected to be able to fulfill different tasks for several people, including their coaches both from college and hotel, department managers, and guests. The following checklist includes some of the required tasks in western-style dining halls of the hotels:

- Greeting guests in English (required language) when they are approaching a table.
- Be sure to gather all information from each guest when taking orders.
- Orders should be written and made in relation to the position number.
- Pay much attention to customers' ordering of entrees or specials.
- serving bread from customers left, beverage from right.
- Whenever serving a course, position the plate so that the 'meat' of the course is closest to the customer.
- Pre-bussing.
- Clearing tables;
- Re-setting tables;
- Re-filling beverages and bread baskets;
- Maintaining tables and floor appearance;
- Cleaning and re-stocking service stations;
- Overall floor maintenance;
- Wiping down high chairs and boosters with clean bar towel.

(Restaurant Training Manuals)

The business training schedule has been mainly adopted and managed by each department of the hotel, the content depending on skills and techniques needed for different jobs. The business skills being trained in common include the following:

- 1) Skill of communication;
- 2) Skill of customer serving;
- 3) Skill of management and supervisory;
- 4) Skill of handling with rough problems and conflict;
- 5) Skill of staffing and scheduling;
- 6) Skill of teamwork building.

● **Server Functions and Social Responsibilities**

Successful service training often results from confidence which can be developed through efficient knowledge.

In order to become efficient, service people must be constantly aware of their customers' needs, anticipate what they want, and learn to read expressions and body language. Good service often involves the following traits: courtesy, good manners, enthusiasm, and team work. In short, the staff with professional attitudes will be able to provide the high quality service if they follow the rules.

The more attentive, enthusiastic, and patient they are, the sooner they will develop the work habits, which make them excellent servers, capable of taking great care of their guests.

Our teaching staff have more helpful suggestions on making the service more profitable and enjoyable for the guests.

The more time they have been working in the hotels, the more attentive, positive and enthusiastic the teachers learn to be. They have developed the good work habits and attitude eventually and think more of the occupation.

Social obligations and personal/collective responsibility could also be shown from staff in the practical training. The development programs have made our college

teachers strengthen their courage and more confident than before. When facing difficulties and rough problems, they understand the task and have confidence in their performance. The training has provided them space of growth and development.

Here is one of the examples. One hotel expects you to have: Room to be yourself; Room to be a good start; Room to be involved; Room to grow; Room for yourself. Some hotels have their own motto: Do the right thing, show we care, Aim higher, Celebrate difference, Work better together.

3. Teachers' Training Based on Work-study Mode

Generally speaking, training is a process in order to change a human being's attitude, knowledge, skills and behavior. For teachers, the term training in this context refers to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies regarding the vocational and technical education. In addition to the basic knowledge training required for teaching staffs, more things should be done in the process of occupational or professional training. Hotel working experience contributes to the successful training of staff. It has been evidenced that through our on-the-job training in the hotels, teachers gain much more practical knowledge. It has been also evidenced that trying the innovations of project-teaching reform contributes to students' learning as well as the development of teachers.

Why do we carry out work-study mode and project-based practical teaching?

The main impetus for our team of staffs to try the work-study mode and project-based practical training came from the survey feedback of our graduates and business cooperators of college-business cooperation. We tried to make changes in the methods of teaching and learning from the original type five years ago,

The projects include "Bilingual secretary assistant" for training office staffs in the company, "English teacher assistant" for training assistant teachers or coaches in the foreign language training schools, "Hotel English Service and Reception at Star-ranking hotels", and "Practice of foreign trade business" for training those salesmen or waiters/waitresses or businessman in tertiary fields. We revised teaching programs and syllabus each time for the purpose of improving students' career

knowledge and skills.

Through revising the later part of syllabus, the third-year programs were replaced by more and more project-based instructions with innovation. Courses have been moved gradually from classroom to the business sites. The project-based or competency-based methods have contributed a lot of college teachers' development, and have made students' training more effective.

4. A project of Teachers' Training at Star-ranking Hotels

In order to develop an effective and practical vocational training program, college vocational educators are expected not only to understand the theory and practice of vocational education, but also to have a thorough knowledge of what specific skills and knowledge are needed in a particular field. College vocational education staff went to hotels, learning from and working together with hotel workers.

Hotel English is the main language course in the curricula reform in project-based practical training. Teachers who have the task of coaching in the hotel first have a good command of hotel English, they collected large vocabulary of hotel English and make up conversations according to the real background situation, for example, the language and hospitality project program, will help students develop English language skills to meet the job requirements of the waiters or waitresses working in the hotel, so teachers in turn to make up materials which has been divided into several parts, from front desk to other departments in the hotel, from telephone extension to customer complaints, from polite English sentences 100 to situational hotel English 100, each semester and every year the material to be revised and put something new into the Guidebook, especially listen to the advice of staffs and managers from the hotels.

Besides teaching and learning some language knowledge in the real environment, improving certain skills in the hotel has also been integrated into the curriculum.

The 1-year program provides both teachers and students who are having internships, with a thorough understanding of hospitality operations and complements their background.

5. Good and Satisfactory Results

Students used to speak hotel English with teachers or classmates for practice. When they are working in the hotel, they can speak hotel English with foreigners and the real situation makes them study harder than on college campus. For instance, students who are working at the front desk, business center, executive floor, western-styled dining hall, cafeteria and telephone extension, have improved their level of oral English quickly.

Our data from 3- year surveys indicate that the employment rate was 93 percent for the past three graduating classes; our graduates adapted themselves easily to the working environment, and many have been promoted to higher ranks.

Nearly 100 students who are making internships and most of them were employed by both local and international employers as far as South Korea and Singapore. Take Singapore for instance, students who have been doing working practice in UMC Electronics Company Ltd., HP Company, Zhangyi International Airport and other famous units, Starbark Café Train Shops, department stores and other business firms, have been highly praised by employers there, some feedback when common on the project-based teaching method students described that “through being given the chance of working as bilingual volunteers at international exhibitions and expos pushed us to raise our oral English level when we studied at college, it’s really an enjoyable experience, the communication with foreigners from all over the world provided us the situational background and the pressure on each day when we took on our duty at the exhibition exerted us to make double efforts for completing our task, the experience of doing that is so important for us to make more progress in the study of oral communication, so we can communicate well with customers in English when we do the product promotion abroad now and improved the ability of communication by and by with the English-speaking people around us.” till May in 2011 two undergraduates have been applying for SP visa instead of WP, another two have been promoted for higher ranks in the working units and the case is

the same as those working in Shenyang, such titles as section manager, assistant manager, private hotelkeeper, language coach in the training school and etc. were separately given to them, one of our students had won the first place in a technical competition among staffs in a five-star hotel.

Besides our own simulation building on our campus, we also have built nearly twenty practical training bases in our local businesses so far. We have established harmonious relationships with ten star-ranking hotels. We together try to create an environment for our students to do those kinds of jobs with close relation to their majors and learn as many skills as future jobs require, let students grow as well as both college and business expect.

6. Conclusion

It's well known that all genuine knowledge originates from direct experience. Our work-study mode of staff training and development has been evidenced to give students a feeling of safety, and as a result, giving them enough confidence to spread their wings.

The staff development program for our college educators not only helped us gain a clearing understanding of how hotel business runs and what skills are needed for particular posts, but also enhanced their own skills in helping students obtain the required knowledge and skills for their future jobs.

Regarding vocational and technical education in our college, an orientation of training cooperation between college and business has been formed that provides a vast space for teachers' comprehensive quality improvement on site. Star- ranking hotels have been consistently designed to be an area which makes the further approach to the innovation in the aspect of teachers training and development.

Reference

Lewin, K. & Grabbe, P. Concept, Knowledge and Acceptance of New Values. *The Journal of Social Issues*, 1945, 1 (3).