

"We built and realized the vocational school of the future"

Interview by [Caroline Smrstik Gentner](#)
November 6, 2019

Learning for the 21st century extends just as well to vocational schooling. Specialist teacher Denise Merz tells how she and her colleagues redesigned everything around their teaching, even the school building.

Caroline Smrstik Gentner: When you set out to re-design the teaching program at the Bildungszentrum Limmattal, a regional center for vocational education in Switzerland, what did you use as a model?

Denise Merz: We started from scratch. Our principal, Claudia Hug, wanted a completely new teaching and learning program that would suit the demands of the modern working world in terms of digitalization and skills. Our project team was made up of teachers at the school and we came up with a concept ourselves. Then we consulted experts, like the [Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education](#) for support with didactic methods. It was clear that we couldn't just use a standard template for anything: at every step, we thought about how to make it fit for *our* students, for *our* school.

CSG: That's a very bold move. You did more than just change the way you're teaching, though.

DM: We changed everything, even the school building. We set up a custom digital learning management system (LMS) and rebuilt the testing system to reflect how the content was mapped in the LMS. We installed scan-able icons throughout the school building that lead students to further information. The former auditorium was rebuilt into a learning space for individualized study, with furniture designed and built by the students.

"If we as teachers really wanted our students to change, then we would have to dive in completely, not just test the waters."

CSG: How did the other teachers react to this new, individualized study program?

DM: Many wondered if it wasn't too risky to completely turn the system on its head as we did. For us it was clear that we didn't want to spend years working on a theoretical concept. We wanted to put something into motion and see how it works. We also realized that we couldn't move gradually. If we as teachers really wanted our students to change, then we would have to dive in completely, not just test the waters.

Launching the 360-degree learning space took a fair amount of courage. We made participation voluntary for the teachers at the beginning. There was a lot of work at the start, since we had to re-

formulate the content of the curriculum. There were certainly skeptics who thought this is a trendy idea that will blow over. But the first pilot group was really engaged. Now there's not a single colleague who wants to go back to the old way of teaching. We work much more as a team, prepare lessons together, have become closer and have a far better exchange of ideas than before.

“Now there's not a single colleague who wants to go back to the old way of teaching.”

CSG: What do the students think of the 360-degree learning space?

DM: Our students are not the easiest to teach. Some of them never much liked going to school, and this raised some doubt when we started: is a sophisticated system like this worthwhile for weaker students? This logic is flawed: it is exactly for people like this, so that they can learn at their own pace and have better, personalized support when problems arise. And the system works just as well for the strong, independent students who move ahead at their own pace and aren't held back by others. For me it's a model for the vocational school of the future.

The effort has been really worth it because of the effect on our students, especially in terms of interdisciplinary skills: how do I work with others, how do I plan, how do I manage my time, how do I not allow myself to be distracted by others. For the students, there's no going back. They must work together with us and develop these new skills. It's still not always easy for them, but we work much more as partners now and that's more appropriate for young people at their age.

A huge advantage for everyone is that there are almost no disciplinary problems anymore. The negative group dynamic that existed before has defused itself.

“The decision makers in the educational administration need to show more enthusiasm for supporting schools that want to change.”

CSG: Is your school now considered a model for other vocational schools? How can the educational policy makers support the further spread of this kind of innovation?

DM: We've had over 100 other vocational schools look at our model, but so far we haven't heard of anyone who has gone the whole way. The decision makers in the educational administration need to show more enthusiasm for supporting schools that want to change. Like reducing the teachers' lesson plans so they have time to develop the curriculum. We've been re-designing the system on top of our regular teaching load, and it's hard to be a pioneer that way.

Denise Merz is a specialist teacher and project leader for “n47e8” at the *Bildungszentrum Limmatal*. Together with school head Claudia Hug, she led the creation of the learning management system (LMS) that transformed the school's curriculum. She is one of the Spotlight Switzerland 2019 award winners.

The **Bildungszentrum Limmatal (BZLT)** is a regional center for vocational education in Dietikon, Switzerland. As part of Switzerland's dual educational system, the BZLT provides basic vocational training in logistics and technology for students aged 15 to 18, as well as higher vocational education and training.

The **360-degree learning and teaching** space at the BZLT turns the entire school building (“n47e8” is the geographical

coordinates for Dietikon) into a learning space. A learning management system (LMS) divides course content into “missions,” which may be in physical or digital form. During their work on the missions, students move about the building with their cell phones to find knowledge in certain places by scanning icons where they pick up further orders, download solutions, or explore new topics. Teachers function as coaches and provide more in-depth content in workshops, while planned exchange sessions with other students strengthen students’ social skills and their ability for cooperative learning. By charting their course in logbooks, students discover which learning strategies work best for them, and learn to reflect independently and take more responsibility for their own learning.

The “n47e8” 360-degree learning and teaching space was one of the ten **Spotlight Switzerland** projects presented at the **HundrED Campus Seminar** on 30 October 2019 in Zurich. The prizewinning projects highlight emerging best practices for digital transformation in the schools. The initiative is a collaboration between We Are Play Lab Foundation, Gebert Rüt Stiftung, Jacobs Foundation, Stiftung Mercator Schweiz, Beisheim Stiftung, digitalswitzerland next generation, and the Zurich University of Teacher Education.

This article was published on BOLD, the Blog on Learning and Development. If you would like to share it with others, please do not use this PDF but instead link to the original post at <https://bold.expert/we-built-and-realized-the-vocational-school-of-the-future/>.