

“We enabled interdisciplinary competences and saw performance improve”

Interview by [Caroline Smrstik Gentner](#)
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Matthias Lang, a learning coach at a Swiss secondary school, describes how changing the school structure gave teachers and pupils more room to experiment and eventually succeed.

Caroline Smrstik Gentner: *Why did the secondary school Seehalde change the structure of its classes and teaching?*

Matthias Lang: Our goal was to strengthen interdisciplinary competences. We had already tried out “studio hours,” in which the students planned their own learning, for those in their last year of secondary school. The students then asked us why the whole school week was traditional and they had to organize themselves only for two hours each week. So we flipped the “studio hours” ratio in the other direction and noticed after a year that the learning system had become a bit too collegiate. That wasn’t the answer either.

We realized that we couldn’t initiate a change with just a few building blocks; we’d have to make several reforms at once to achieve what we wanted. That’s when we created three *learning houses* (Lernhäuser). Mine is the smallest, with 50 students and three learning coaches who teach core subjects, plus the subject-specific teachers. Now I see 50 students daily, sometimes several times daily, and spend more time with them than I did in the traditional system.

For about one-third of their time, the students have what we call “Office,” where they work individually and plan what they’re going to do each week. At the end of the week, each student reviews the week with a learning coach.

CSG: *Your school went from an experiment with the older students to a system change for all students. How is that working out?*

ML: One completely unexpected development is that the hierarchical fighting between the 15- and 16-year-olds and the 12-year-olds disappeared. Now they’re a single unit: the older students don’t pick on the younger ones anymore. Mixed-age learning is happening and it’s wonderful. First-year students ask third-year students how they did something; everyone puts their heads together to figure something out.

“Mixed-age learning is happening and it’s wonderful.”

For me personally, I have more contact with my students than before because I’m doing coaching

sessions instead of standing in front of a class teaching traditionally. And I have time to really give professional advice. Before, these sessions were always something that had to be organized outside regular class time.

I find that I spend time talking with the students much more about learning than I do about the content of their work. For understanding content, the kids can watch a YouTube film, or a tutorial on the iPad. We're working more on a meta level where the students have to think about what went well in a particular learning sequence and why. I'll ask them questions like "What do you want to change, or adjust?" or "What else can we try out together to help the learning work better?"

CSG: *Does this model work for all kinds of students?*

ML: We're really trying to give the students the responsibility for their own learning: don't just passively consume, but try to create something. For one student, this clicks right away, for another it takes a bit longer, but that's to be expected.

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In the five years since we started with this model, the scores on standardized testing are going up in our school. That's pretty amazing, since it wasn't a goal of the new learning model at all. We just wanted to support and enable interdisciplinary competences, and student performance generally improved. Even more interesting is that the weaker students showed the largest increase in their scores. That seems to prove everyone wrong who said that the weaker students were going to go under in the new model because they weren't cut out for more self-direction and independent learning.

CSG: *Tell me how you integrated project-based learning into the school structure. What were your considerations?*

ML: We agreed that in a project the main theme should be to go beyond one's own limits, and to have contact with other people outside the daily school environment. Part of that is acquiring performance skills: talking to adults, explaining things. For some kids, making a phone call to someone they don't know, or visiting a jobs fair and going to a stand to ask a question requires a huge effort.

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We also wanted to have different types of projects according to student preferences: we have a creative section, a social studies section, and a technical section. Our techies tend to be the introverts, so we had to think hard about what they could do that would get them out talking to people. That's how we came up with the Makerspace Days, where our students design and carry out a full-day workshop for sixth-graders who visit from one of the local primary schools. It gives them a chance to talk about something that they think is cool.

CSG: Apart from overcoming their shyness, how else do the students benefit from teaching sixth-graders?

ML: During the Makerspace Days, they learn how to plan and structure a sequence of activities, which requires patience and constant self-questioning. In teams of two, they run each full-day workshop twice. At the end of the first day, we sit together and talk about what went well, what didn't, and what they want to change. Then they adapt their lesson plan and after the second day we talk about if it was actually better.

Matthias Lang teaches at the lower secondary school Eduzis Schulhaus Seehalde in Mettmenhasli, Switzerland. His project is one of the Spotlight Switzerland 2019 award winners.

The **Eduzis Schulhaus Seehalde** is a three-year public lower secondary school that teaches students aged 12 to 16 in mixed-age classes. Students go on to vocational training, a challenging apprenticeship, or further education.

Makerspace Days is a change of roles project that encourages technically-oriented students to step into the teaching role. The teenagers design and teach a one-day, hands-on workshop for sixth-graders from the local primary schools in Niederhasli, Niederglatt, and Hofstetten, Switzerland.

Makerspace Days 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 Rűf Stiftung, Jacobs Foundation, Stiftung Mercator Schweiz, Beisheim Stiftung, digitalswitzerland next generation, and the Zurich University of Teacher Education.

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