Using Work-Based Learning to Enable Practice Development

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Summary of project
Involvement of service users, including relatives must be a priority on the political agenda if we are to move some way towards meeting the needs of older people to provide high quality services. The evidence indicates that there are many barriers to effective implementation of satisfactory involvement which include lack of an agreed definition of involvement, attitudes of staff, power relations, and communication.

This short report outlines how work-based learning was used to facilitate a project which aimed to implement guidelines that seek to involve relatives of older people in decision-making processes. (See Dissemination Series Vol.2. No.2. for further information about the project). Two Clinical Development Nurses (CDNs) who work with older people were invited to undertake a work-based learning module at Queen Margaret University College. Each CDN worked with a team of practitioners in the hospital setting to develop practice in relation to the guidelines. The process of work-based learning and how it was used to support the CDNs is described and the value of using this approach to facilitate practice development is discussed.

Background
If involvement of relatives in care processes is to become a reality, then attention needs to be given to helping staff to explore the meaning of involvement and to develop meaningful relationships with relatives that seek to value them as experts. However, the process of implementing research findings in practice is complex and problematic (Closs and Cheater, 1994; Rodgers, 1994). There is clearly an interplay of many factors which influences this process and it is not simply a matter of identifying a problem, gathering evidence, implementing this and monitoring the effect. Kitson et al. (1998) would argue that this linear model is too superficial and that one needs to consider the evidence, context and facilitation if research is to be effectively implemented in practice.

Given the complex nature of implementing research in practice, new ways are being sought to narrow the gap between research and practice that will help practitioners consider the evidence, context and culture. Practitioners need support in evidencing their care, by developing skills to critically evaluate theoretically generated knowledge in their real world. This can be facilitated through reflective processes such as action learning, which is embedded in the work-based learning approach. This approach seeks to collaborate with practitioners in implementing research, whilst meeting their needs by offering relevant learning strategies through which they can develop their own practice (Dewar and Walker, 1999). A study evaluating work-based learning (Walker et al. 1998) identified several benefits of this approach to nursing practice.

These include:
- Learning how to use knowledge in practice
- Recognising the importance of teamwork to initiate change
- 'Seeing the broader picture' – that is, the social, political and financial contexts in which they work
- Gaining accreditation for learning in the workplace.

Within the context of this project, the educational framework of work-based learning offers the opportunity for the practitioner to understand not just how the

guidelines fit with practice, but the processes of implementing them, including the cultural and organisational barriers that need to be challenged to bring about effective change.

Work-based learning

There are four main characteristics of work-based learning which make it attractive to higher education and to employers:

1. It involves a tripartite relationship between the employing organisation, the education institution and the student. Thus, the employer and the education institution both contribute their expertise to the student's learning process (Spurling 1993).

2. Work activities and professional roles are the starting point of work-based learning, and, therefore, the structured learning is fundamentally relevant to the activities of the workplace. This means that the way in which the student utilises (a) their existing knowledge and skills, and (b) theoretical structures and research, is directly relevant to the particular work-based task which is being undertaken.

3. Work-based learning provides a structure to support student autonomy. The student is responsible for identifying their own learning requirements, and for planning and implementing the course of action which may meet those requirements. The academic and workplace supervisors are there to facilitate the learning process. The flexibility of work-based learning in enabling students to select their own focus of study, and to negotiate their own learning outcomes, endorses the view that `ownership' of learning belongs with the adult learner. The student effectively designs their own course content, and, in so doing, is able to make it as relevant to them as possible (Shepherd 1992). In addition, self-directed learning enables the student to develop their own understanding of the subject matter by reflecting on their knowledge and previous experience (Entwistle et al. 1992). This process represents a 'deep' approach to learning which educators seek to encourage (Richardson 1995).

4. Work-based learning acknowledges and accredits the process of learning rather than just the product of learning. Thus, although the assessment process looks at what the student has achieved in terms of action taken and tasks completed, its primary focus is on what the student has learnt along the way. Work-based learning encourages the student to reflect on and to articulate their learning, thereby providing an opportunity for the student to develop the transferable skills needed to become an action learner.

In summary, work-based learning supports partnerships between education and employers; the learning which occurs through work-based learning is directly relevant to the workplace; it provides a framework within which students can direct their own learning; and its underlying philosophy supports the development of reflective practitioners who are able to learn through their experiences. These characteristics make it attractive within the changing context of health care.

Programme of study

In this project the CDNs were invited to undertake a Work-Based Learning module at Queen Margaret University College at Masters level. They undertook initial teaching sessions, which included developing learning outcomes and reflective writing. During these sessions the CDNs identified individual learning outcomes about involvement which they wanted to develop. The Project Director, an academic supervisor and workplace supervisor supported them in the workplace. This support involved the use of action learning and supervision which comprised two days per month for a period of six months.

In-depth interviews with the CDNs took place following each monthly visit to their workplace by the project director. These evaluated progress both in relation to the implementation of the guidelines and the effect of the work-based learning module. Several themes about the value of work-based learning to the individual emerged from the reflective sessions and these will be discussed briefly.

Relevance of the learning

By being responsible for identifying their own learning outcomes, the CDNs were able to ensure that their personal learning experiences were significant to the contexts they were working in. The framework of work-based learning made learning deliberate and easy to transfer to other situations because the learning had been analysed and articulated.

Linking of theory to practice

This is about the benefit of work-based learning in facilitating the process of relating theory to practice. One CDN was able to identify how the work-based learning had enabled her to: 'examine the theory and unpick it, and challenge it in relation to my practice experience. This analysis of theory was made easy because I had to work with theory all the time throughout the work-based learning module. The theory was related to a real, live, ongoing practice issue.'

Importance and challenge of producing evidence

Being continually challenged to produce evidence to support claims that are made was a particularly powerful learning experience for the CDNs. It taught them about the power evidence can have in helping us to articulate arguments and in providing a strong rationale for bringing about change. They also learnt about the different sort of evidence that can be used. It is not always about evidence from theory or the textbooks. Asking some relatives about a particular issue and feeding this back to staff was also considered strong evidence. In addition, evidence that came from systematic reflection on an issue was powerful in analysing particular actions.

Realisation that experimentation is an important aspect of everyday practice.

The idea of continually experimenting in everyday practice is something that is part of the work-based learning process and has now become a more integral part of the CDNs' roles. The need continually to evaluate developments, reflect on these evaluations and change practice accordingly is something that they now recognise as a crucial part of a practice developer's role. There was also recognition that there is no end to this process. There is a need to continue to reflect, evaluate and change practice as necessary.

The value of work-based learning to practice development projects

People need support in bringing about change in practice. Work-based learning offered an effective framework to enable the CDNs to work through this project systematically. It enabled them to use theory in practice, for example the theory of 'effective participation', and to plan evaluation strategies from the outset, which helped to provide continual evidence throughout this project. The emphasis on process in work-based learning allowed them to reflect on both the successes and failures of bringing about change in the complex world of practice and to share these with others. Several key benefits of adopting this approach are identified below:

- Emphasis on process of change
- Flexibility of approach
- Development of ownership over own learning
- Development of transferable skills
- Added value to practice development projects
- Enhanced collaboration between higher education institutes and the workplace.

Support systems

Practice developers fulfil a demanding and complex role that has rich learning opportunities, but it may not always be possible to capture these if their learning is not supported in some way. As Nolan et al. (1995) state: 'Creating assertive, reflective and analytical nurses may be the vision of the future, but such individuals will only flourish if the correct support systems are in place'. Box. 1. highlights the support systems that need to be in place to enhance the success of using work-based learning frameworks.

Support systems

- Support from management
- Funding
- Support network for students to minimise the isolation of this experience
- Work environment which support new ideas and development
- Educators that relinquish control over learning
- A culture that supports students taking responsibility for their learning
- Flexibility – acknowledging the need for flexibility – learning outcomes can be modified, which is particularly useful as there is often unexpected learning
- Recognition that learning takes time and is continuous

Conclusion

Work-based learning provided a systematic framework to identify and develop individual learning in practice. The individual learning included learning how to evidence practice, valuing the emotional nature of learning, developing one's own practice-based theory, refining theory and developing evaluation skills. The CDNs in this project felt that they enhanced the outcomes of this project as work-based learning enabled them to become more effective in their role as practice developers.

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Further Reading

A copy of the original full report can be obtained from the website: http//www.fons.org/projects/