



Committing to Learning in and from Practice: Using the Workplace as a Classroom

The workplace makes a great classroom because learning can be facilitated using opportunities arising from everyday practice. This can make the learning more specific to individuals and teams, and to the context within which they are working – perhaps helping people to connect emotionally with the learning, to become more fully engaged and take responsibility for identifying their own actions.

Billett (2001) has written quite extensively about the ways in which learning can take place in the workplace, these include learning through:

- Doing in the workplace - direct engagement in tasks at work
- Being in the workplace - observing activity and tasks at work
- Practice in the workplace - rehearsing and undertaking tasks and procedures
- Guided practice in the workplace - working with and/or being supervised by others

All the above can create opportunities for learning; however, for learning in the workplace to be effective there are some factors which should be taken into consideration. These include the nature of the activity, contextual and/or situational factors such as availability of support, guidance, time space etc. and finally how people interact, engage and work together (Billett, 2001). Translating this to health and social care workplaces, opportunities for learning in practice will often require some planning and preparation to ensure patient safety, support of staff wellbeing and that environmental and contextual factors can support learning.

Below are some examples of learning opportunities that can be created:

Learning conversations during handover

The pressure on time and shift patterns can leave little opportunity for staff to come together and learn from each other. However, events such as handover can be a chance to share knowledge and enable learning. Whilst this may not always be possible, perhaps you could identify a day each week for a slightly extended handover, where questions about practice can be shared and discussed. Maybe you could create a space in the staff room where staff could post questions so the activity can be pre-planned.

Huddles

Again acknowledging that time at work is often limiting, creating opportunities for huddles where small groups of staff can come together for short periods can be achievable. Huddles provide several opportunities for staff including: promoting staff wellbeing by keeping staff connected and feeling supported, especially when they are working on their own; identifying problems and prioritising activities; and talking through care issues to share and to learn.



Working alongside staff and supporting learning through patient care

Taking time to work with and alongside staff can create great opportunities for learning. Whilst some of this may be talking about what is happening in practice, another effective approach is to create a learning opportunity through care giving with the patient or service user.

For example, when working alongside a healthcare assistant in a care home to meet the hygiene needs of an older person, the registered nurse asks the older person how they would like their hygiene needs met and what clothes she would like to wear. Alongside this she explains what will be happening and how the healthcare assistant is going to be involved in helping with the care. Whilst giving care, the healthcare assistant notices the older person has a sore elbow and asks the nurse what they should do. The nurse acknowledges this question and goes on to respond by again talking with the older person, suggesting what might have caused the problem and how it may best be treated. This type of approach to learning has many strengths. Firstly by working with the healthcare assistant, the nurse is sharing knowledge and skills. Secondly, the patient, in this case the older person, is fully involved in the conversations and decisions rather than being talked over. Finally, the healthcare assistant is able to engage more fully in care giving as they are listening and hearing cues about what is happening. Such learning opportunities can be enhanced further by creating a short time for reflection and discussion between the two members of staff away from the patient.

Modelling care interventions

Using the experience and expertise of staff is an excellent way of sharing knowledge and enabling learning. For example, you can create opportunities for staff to observe and experience the expertise of a colleague in undertaking an activity or task. Whilst some pre-planning or discussion can be helpful such opportunities can be quite spontaneous. For example, on a surgical ward, a newly qualified nurse hasn't experienced a particular type of wound dressing procedure. The ward sister notices this and suggest the nurse watch her undertake this intervention. To enhance the learning opportunity, the ward sister takes 10 minutes after the procedure to talk over the intervention and clarify any questions.

Using the patient as an expert

There may be occasions when a patient or service user is willing to share their experiences of living with a healthcare problem that could support learning for staff. For example, a person living with diabetes may be willing to talk to an individual or small group about their experience for 15-20 minutes during a quieter time of the day. When planning such an opportunity it is important to make sure the patient is appropriately supported, safe and well briefed on who they will be talking to. Such learning opportunities could be enhanced by follow-up reflective time and/or discussions in small groups.

These are just a few examples and you may be able to come up with some ideas of your own. To get started, begin to think about the workplace, or the setting where care takes place, as a place where everyone can learn, develop and expand their knowledge and skills and have a go at one activity.

Reference

Billet, S. (2001) *Learning in the Workplace: Strategies for Effective Practice*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.