



Learning to Learn: the Collaborative Challenge

Author: Louise O'Connor

Senior Lecturer
London South Bank University

Course details

Course title: BA (Hons) Social Work & BSc (Hons) Nursing & Social Work Studies

Level: Undergraduate

Year: 2

Module title: Partnership & Participation

Discipline/Subject areas: Social Work

Activity details

What I did

This case study describes stage 1 of a two-part research project which aims to explore the impact of an innovative learning and assessment process. The BA (Hons) Social Work / BSc (Hons) Nursing & Social Work Studies module focuses on partnerships and participation in social work. The study aims to evaluate the contribution to collaborative and individual learning and to explore skill and knowledge development across and within professional boundaries.

Why I did it

The original module, assessed by an essay, comprised traditional lectures and seminars. A group learning activity and presentations were piloted in June 2007. Student and lecturer evaluations identified challenging but valuable learning achieved.

A revised module was developed which aimed to:

- maximise collaborative inter-professional learning
- incorporate explicit emphasis on group skills and theory
- emphasise experiential and reflective learning

Learning took place via lectures and closed groups which addressed specific tasks culminating in an assessed group task.

An individual poster presentation completed the overall assignment.

What I wanted to achieve

The aim was to evaluate whether this group-based approach to the learning process enhanced the skills and knowledge implicit in partnership working and whether this type of learning contributed to 'intrinsic motivation' as described by McDowell (2001).

A short description of what I did

Stage 1

Questionnaires were distributed to 37 students from two cohorts, 28 questionnaires were completed. These were from both BA Social Work groups from the Employment Based Route (EBR).

Following an initial analysis of the data from questionnaires, a focus group was held with students from both cohorts.

Stage 2

Questionnaires were distributed to two further cohorts of BA Social Work and BA Nursing & Social Work Studies. 57 out of 70 questionnaires were completed. Preliminary analysis is underway and a focus group is planned for Sept 2008.

What worked well

- High response rate from both groups.
- Focus group facilitated a more in-depth discussion and identified significant challenges and behaviours which occurred but were not reflected as clearly in the questionnaire responses.

Problems and/or issues

- Timetable changes resulted in two BA Social Work EBR groups taking the module together, rather than the expected nursing and social work students. This produced unexpected results and significant messages for the course team regarding perceptions of cohort and student identities, boundaries between employment and university and the possible impact of location on learning.
- The teaching and learning process experienced by the respondents in stage 2 may be influenced by the findings of stage 1. Due to the levels of conflict experienced by some groups academic staff were made aware of this and the potential need for facilitation or support.
- Some students in stage 1 were reluctant to provide details of age, ethnicity or gender and may have had concerns about being identified although the process was fully anonymous. This may also have reflected the level of conflict experienced in some of the small groups.

What students thought about it

- The vast majority described the learning process as challenging but valuable.
- Data analysis highlighted the range of skills, knowledge and motivational factors that students felt the module improved.
- A significant minority of students experienced conflicts and distress working in the small groups.

Key messages

Initial analysis of Stage 1 suggests that experiential learning and an assessment task that demands interaction and negotiation has pedagogical benefits for the vast majority of the student group.

Skills in team work, communication, negotiation and time management, coupled with personal awareness, reflection and assertiveness were identified as improved by between 70%-92%* of the student group.

Improved understanding of theory / literature related to group work, partnership, participation, anti-oppressive practice and the application of theory to practice was reported by 64%- 77%* of the group. Improved motivation to participate in collaborative learning and explore different perspectives was reported by 70-78%.*

Tensions, power dynamics and strong emotions challenged perceptions of safety and professionalism.

* Figures from preliminary analysis

Related documents or links

Barr, H. *Interprofessional education, today, yesterday and tomorrow. A review*. Learning & Teaching Support Network for Health Sciences & Practice, CAIPE.

McDowell, L. (2001) *Students and innovative assessment*. York: LTSN Generic Centre [available online] www.heacademy.ac.uk

O'Connor, L. (2008) *Learning to learn: the collaborative challenge*. Presentation at 8th International Conference of PEPE, *Practical Learning: Achieving Excellence in the Human Services*. January 23-25 2008, Edinburgh. Available online:

<http://www.iriss.ac.uk/pepe2008/abstracts.html>

Taylor, I, Sharland, E, Sebba, J, Le Riche, P, with Keep, A & Orr, D. (2006) *The learning, teaching and assessment of partnership work in social work education*. Knowledge Review 10. Social Care Institute for Excellence

28.07.08/mj



The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)
University of Southampton School of Social Sciences
Southampton
SO17 1BJ



Printed on recycled paper