LEARNER SUPPORT AND PROMOTION OF TRANSFER IN THE DISTANCE LEARNING PROGRAMME "PSYCHO-SOCIAL ASPECTS IN NURSING"

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Abstract

The paper describes an open and distance learning programme for health care professionals developed by the Centre of Distance Education. The course consists of a self-learning component in the format of open and distance learning as well as of integrated weekend seminars. Within their learning process the participants of the programme are supported by the mentors in charge who help them to work out possibilities of content application regarding the contents of the course. The support of transfer motivation is an integral part of the course design. The results of a transfer evaluation are presented. They allow to draw conclusions concerning learning success of the participants and quality of courses of further education.

The Oldenburg Open and Distance Learning Programme "Psycho-social Aspects in Nursing"

The academic in-service learning programme "Psycho-social Aspects in Nursing" was developed by the Department of Psychology and the Centre for Distance Education at Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg. It is offered and conducted by a network consisting of one Swiss and eight German universities (Bernath, 2000). The training course is based on regularly revised printed course material for independent study as well as on compulsory weekend seminars, which apply the course content to nursing practice. A course unit or module was defined quantitatively as 60 – 80 pages for 20 hours of self-instructional learning. The authors of the modules were university faculty and outside experts. They were supported by experts in instructional and text design. The course consists of six modules on the topics "Relation between body and soul", "Reflecting the role as a helper", "Illness in its social context", "The art of mindful communication" and "Influencing patient behaviour". The course was carried out with nurse practitioners in a non-degree programme for professional development, which formed a 220-hour training programme undertaken over 6 months with six integrated seminars.

The aim of this course is to promote the psycho-social professional competence of nurses. The course contributes to professionalization by aiming at the development of a psychologically oriented health-promoting knowledge that can be applied to many different professional situations. All in all the course furthers professional competence, manifest in the ability to critically analyse professional situations and to look at them from different angles. Expanding the professional action repertoire should contribute to improving and intensifying the contact to patients and other interaction partners. By integrating psychological knowledge in healthcare delivery, quality and efficiency of such services are increased and additionally, professional action will be geared towards promoting patient, or rather, client health.

Course Concept and Learner Support

The course is conceived as advanced professional training in an open and distance learning format, which consists of study materials and seminars. The programme aims at integrating individual learning

processes into group communication during weekend seminars explicitly for professional training. At first, participants occupy themselves individually with study materials, working on exercises and contemplating how and in which professional situations they can apply conveyed knowledge (3-4 week-long individual and independent learning phases). The following seminars serve as a chance for participants to encounter each other, as well as to clarify positions and to practice action strategies (social learning phase).The two components refer to each other. Within the seminars the mentors go into the particulars of the contents of the texts. Among other things they explain complex concepts and clarify questions of the participants. Furthermore they compare the written products of tasks, which are included in the given texts. Moreover they exceed the course material by showing further perspectives and working out connections to practice and their concretization.

In order to fulfill the above mentioned aims and claims the course text and the assignments must be designed accordingly:

- The theoretically founded approaches and concepts discussed and taught in the course are to be grounded in the professional practice of nurses. This is achieved by presenting examples of application and giving advice for putting them into practice.

- Assignments do not pre–eminently aim at reproducing transmitted knowledge but focus on transferring the subject matter to the specific circumstances of the professional context in question. Thus e.g. participants were asked to observe a patient over a certain period of time and to make a case study of the data by applying certain given criteria. Among others they were asked to analyse the structure of relations between the staff of their ward and to give an account of their own ways of coping with professional stress. The authors´ comments on the solutions were passed on to the participants. These comments presented the chance to influence the professional competence of the participants and to counsel the transfer processes.

As the solutions of the assignments can not be standardized in a course concept like this the people assessing them must thoroughly consider each single case. Thus, however, the learning process reaches an especially high quality standard because the extremely individual and diversified learning processes of the participants are taken into account.

One of the instruments ensuring the quality of the course is the learning diary (Fichten, 2000). The participants are asked to enter their learning activities into a diary, as to intensify the acquisition and discussion of the contents of the texts. The assessment and comments on the text contents that the participants have to give are part of the reflection process by which they actively and independently integrate theory and practice. In addition the participants receive feedback by the mentors concerning their learning diaries.

Promoting Transfer of the Course Content

In a distance learning course designed as further education improvement of professional competence means an integration of theory and practice. Health workers, whom we can regard as nursing specialists, assess the knowledge transmitted in the course in the light of their professional experience; they relate it to their own professional practice and partly use and adapt it. A special characteristic of the course is that such a transfer is not only encouraged but also counselled. Participants are given advice during the transfer partly by comments on their solutions to given assignments. Thus in this course concept the mentor fulfils not only the function of a counsellor in the learning process but also that of a "facilitator of competence".

Participants should benefit from professional training in the long run, i.e. the every-day routine should change noticeably. This is the case when knowledge and expertise acquired within the training context or learning field (source) is applied in the profession or function field (target) (Wittwer, 2002). The requirements for interlocking learning processes acquired in training with the practical application of the learned are the following:

- The learning materials relate to professional practice, they contain authentic case studies, references to professional situations, strategy descriptions and models for professional procedures, allowing participants to recognize the practical relevance of the subject matter, to relate conveyed knowledge to their own areas of profession as well as to associate the latter with professional expertise (cf. Greeno, Smith & Moore, 1993).

- Impulses to reflect upon possibilities of application and implementation are necessary. The learning materials include reflection impulses, which encourage thoughts on knowledge application in the professional field during independent learning phases. Since not all areas of nursing can be addressed in the course materials, participants must generate possibilities of implementation themselves by undertaking cognitive operations such as building analogies, comparisons and contrasts. Within the constructivist transfer theory, this is called "constructing an area of subjective application" (Prenzel & Mandl, 1993, p.706).

- Transfer is supported in the social learning phase. In the seminars, the application of course content in the professional fields is explicitly be focused on transfer and the motivation for implementation is promoted. Transfer competence can be strengthened by appropriate measures. The components of such a transfer-oriented seminar design are, for instance, integrated phases of application planning, personal commitments and learning partnerships, which offer mutual support for implementations in the function field (Mähler & Hasselhorn, 2001; Preiser, 2000; Rank & Thiemann, 1998).

Knowledge acquisition is a prerequisite for transfer. "If something is not learned and practiced soundly, there is (...) nothing to transfer" (Steiner, 2001, p.196). Transfer therefore depends on the quality of learning processes, the depth of processing for presented information and the intensity of reflection carried out by participants for topic application in various professional situations. Since participants can introduce and discuss ideas for application, these transfer prerequisites, originating in individual learning processes, are enhanced and set in a social frame during the seminars. Training elements and action strategy practice (role-playing, simulations) emphasize the connection to professional practice.

If transfer depends on quality and intensity of learning and exchange processes in training for professional development, the extent to which conveyed knowledge and acquired skills are applied in the professional field becomes an indicator for learning success and therewith a quality criterion for advanced professional training (cf. Schroll-Decker, 1999; Uschatz, 1993).

Transfer Evaluation Results

Verifying transfer effects is difficult due to the following reasons:

- It is unclear how long it takes for changes initiated by advanced education to appear in practice, making it difficult to indicate a favorable investigation time period.

- It is unclear and difficult to determine the extent of transfer, because it is hard to make an exact distinction between skills and expertise participants had before training and what they acquired afterwards.

- It is not easy to make assertions regarding connections between advanced education and changed action strategies exhibited by participants in the work field, since a number of variables interact in practice. Their interaction is difficult to control, complicating the definite attribution of changes to advanced education participation.

Due to these reasons, evaluation of transfer is a complex matter. Principally, (a) participant knowledge, expertise and skills must be assessed before and after completing advanced professional training (Pre-post design). Parallel to (a), a profile of career tasks and demands must be created and potential changes during the training period registered (b). Finally, (c) individual transfer success must be tested (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Consequentially, registering transfer success must occur in the work field, including judgements made by colleagues, superiors and external observers (Harney, 1997). Usually,

the latter is restricted to questioning earlier participants, which delivers data on subjectively perceived transfer effects.

Evaluating transfer reveals advantageous and supportive, as well as inhibiting and hindering factors, which strongly determine extent and length of implementation and application of knowledge conveyed during training (cf. Barnett & Ceci, 2002). Not only do factors specific to the individual reveal importance, but also factors with an institutional-organizational dimension. These factors can be consolidated in a "condition model for transfer" (Rank & Wakenhut, 1998, p.15f.; cf. Sternberg & Frensch, 1993). This kind of complex model was the fundament of a survey conducted with previous participants of the Oldenburg programme on "Psycho-social Aspects in Nursing". Using an extensive questionnaire with 89 items, subjectively perceived changes due to course participation in the areas of personality, career role, relationship to patients and career satisfaction were assessed. Additionally, data regarding changes in institutions due to course participation as well as estimation and evaluation of transfer success was registered. On the basis of 192 analyzed questionnaires, several results from the participant survey are presented in the following.

Work Environment: From a transfer perspective, parameters describing the work environment are important, because they can either benefit or hinder the transfer process (cf. Rank & Wakenhut, 1998). According to subjective assessments, the institutions employing previous participants are characterized by willingness to innovate. Only 29.2% claim their workplaces show little, and 5.2% no open-mindedness towards changes. This complies with a high level of independence during task execution: 45.8% widely experience autonomy during work, 12% can work completely independently. This result is due to the relatively large percentage of participants in leadership positions. The ability to criticize is less appreciated: 40.6% admit that in their institutions the ability to make independent and critical judgements is hardly promoted. If one assumes that the newly conveyed views possibly imply criticism on existing routines, it could present an obstacle for transfer efforts.

Applying Course Objectives: 85.4% state they applied course topics in the work field, 78.6% admit also applying them in private life. The conveyed objectives and skills are especially used in the following contexts:

- Communication: Conveyed skills regarding a helpful way of leading conversations are implemented when making contacts to patients, working with relatives and during team meetings.

- Dealing with conflicts and stressful situations: The course conveyed strategies for effectively managing conflicts.

- Relationships to patients: Comprehension of the psycho-social situation of patients increased, allowing a more appropriate handling of difficult patient behavior. Patients are more strongly regarded as active partners compared to before course participation, emphasizing and facilitating the promotion of health.

Difficulties with Implementation: The professional training objectives are mostly used in situations, which participants can organize in a relatively autonomous manner. Personal contacts, communication and interaction processes especially belong to the latter. Difficulties with implementation and transfer are particularly due to institutional obstacles and blockades. Problems arise because of

- Institutional factors and circumstances particular to a certain workplace (e.g. lack of personnel and time, short stay of patients)

- A lack of interest shown by colleagues and superiors (e.g. the practicability of objectives is generally doubted)

- A clinging to routines (e.g. inflexible courses of work).

One can conclude that the general conditions of nursing and healthcare delivery must be changed and institutional and organizational transfer obstacles dismantled. This would give way to conveyed and acquired skills, allowing them to take influence on the work field.

In addition, according participant remarks the following areas reveal significance for transfer in practice:

- The objectives of the training program gradually fade, yet there is not enough time to refresh them
- Success comes middle-term, which means participants require patience to a certain extent
- Implementing objectives long-term without any feedback is hard to bear.

Graduates of the Oldenburg certificate programme see an implementation obstacle in fighting alone, the "lone-ranger approach". They are referring to an interface between individual application intentions and socially, or rather, organizationally determined application possibilities. Instead, transfer appears accomplishable on the basis of cooperation with colleagues. Innovations are more easily initiated and carried out when they are supported by the entire station team. For transfer support and assurance in hospitals one can, for instance, draw upon experiences made with so-called "setting conferences" (Siebolds & Weidner, 1998). They consist of members from various professional areas and are quite efficient, since work in hospitals is characterized by interprofessional cooperation and innovations must therefore be supported by all healthcare providers (Waltos & Waltos, 2002).

Concluding Remarks

Due to the focus on transfer, qualitative and didactic-methodical changes are emerging in training for professional development. Implementing and applying knowledge imparted during the training programme was mostly considered the job of participants until now, and therefore it was not viewed as an integral requirement of the educational and training programme. This viewpoint is currently changing. Measures to assure and promote transfer are gradually being seen as components of education and training. Since transfer does not always occur without assisting circumstances, initiating transfer decisions and practicing steps to transfer must be integrated in training programs. Learning processes in the learning field (source) and the implementation and application processes in the function field (target) must be observed as one unit.

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