

Course Design: Promoting good practice in learning disability services

Tim Fawns. April 2009.

Course Descriptor

Course title: Promoting good practice in learning disability services

Credit rating: 20 credits, SCQF 11

Short description of course

Providing a high-quality service to people with a learning disability requires a critical understanding of the context and values in which the service operates. This course aims to increase understanding of the issues underpinning service to people with a learning disability. To be eligible for this course, you must be employed within a service which provides support to people with a learning disability. This will allow constructive discussion of the application of key concepts within your professional role.

We will begin by analysing the definition of learning disability and what it means to those to whom this label is applied in terms of their cognitive capacities. We will then critically appraise the communication needs of people with a learning disability and examine how communication can be improved by interventions at individual, environmental and organisational levels.

We will build on this knowledge through an examination of the social and policy context within which learning disability is defined and the way this has shaped service provision over time. These factors also shape the value base that underpins service provision and the balance that must be struck between promoting choice for people with a learning disability and fulfilling our duty of care. We will investigate how improving knowledge and understanding of learning disability can contribute to getting this balance right.

Course learning outcomes

On completion of the course you will be able to:

- construct a clear definition of learning disability, incorporating associated cognitive capacities and needs of your clients
- identify the range of communication needs of people with a learning disability and critically appraise the extent to which you meet the needs of those you support at an individual, environmental and organisational level
- identify the value base that underpins your current service provision and evaluate this within a social, policy and historical context
- design strategies within your service which take into account the cognitive, communication and cultural context of your clients
- illustrate the application of the concepts of duty of care and informed choice to your own practice.

Teaching methods

The course is delivered entirely online via WebCT Vista. Teaching methods will include moderated asynchronous group discussion, guided reading, self-study, online role-play activities, self-reflection and case presentations. Participants will also be supported by e-mail and Skype conferencing.

Resource requirements

As the course is taught entirely online, you will need easy and regular access to a networked (preferably broadband) computer. Core and secondary readings are downloadable or will be provided online via an e-library.

Outline of content

The course runs over 12 weeks, involving 10 weeks of teaching and group work, with two weeks for supported assignment preparation.

Block 1: Orientation and Defining Learning Disability

During the first week, you will be given the opportunity to explore the course learning environment, introduce yourself to the group and begin to use the discussion board which will form a key part of your learning.

We will then consider our understanding of the term 'learning disability', explore how the concept of learning disability has been socially constructed and examine the development of the name and definition over time. We will look behind current definitions of 'learning disability' and explore what having a learning disability might mean for the individual.

Towards the end of the block, we will discuss the ways in which having difficulties with memory, comprehension, perception and other cognitive

abilities impacts on the day-to-day lives of people with a learning disability and explore strategies that can help. We will investigate the concepts of capacity, choice and duty of care and examine how a firm understanding of learning disability underpins the appropriate application of these principles.

Block 2: Communication

Communication is extremely important to us all. Many people with a learning disability have marked difficulties in this area and this, in turn, impacts on their quality of life in a variety of ways. In this block, we will examine the range of ways we communicate with each other, explore common communication difficulties and investigate the ways in which we can facilitate communication with people with a learning disability, ranging from the manipulation of individual variables through to organisational change.

Block 3: Values

In this block we will critically-appraise the values that have underpinned service provision in the past and which continue to be influential today. We will analyse recent policy documents in Scotland, England and Wales and explore the implicit and explicit values that these embody. We will ask you to explain the value base of your own service including an appraisal of the extent to which this challenges your own, personal value base.

Block 4: Assignment preparation

You will spend the final two weeks of the course preparing for your final written assignment (see course assessment).

Indicative reading

- Andrews, J. (1996). Identifying and providing for the mentally disabled in early modern London. In *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities*. D. Wright and A. Digby (Eds.) (London, Routledge).
- Barr, O. (1995) Normalisation: What it means in practice. *British Journal of Nursing* 4(2): pp. 90-94.
- Caine, A., Hatton, C. and Emerson, C. (1998). Service provision. In *Clinical Psychology and People with Intellectual Disabilities*. E. Emerson, C. Hatton, J. Bromley and A. Caine (Eds.) (Chichester, John Wiley and Sons).
- Gates, B. (1997). What is a learning disability? A question of semantics or political correctness. *Journal of Learning Disabilities for nursing health and social care* 1(2): pp. 51-52.

- Scottish Executive (2000). *The same as you? A review of services for people with learning disabilities*. (Edinburgh, HMSO).

Course assessment

During block 1, you will be asked to choose a person you work with who has a learning disability which leads to the presentation of challenging behaviour. You will focus on this person for all three of the assignments in this course. Each item of assessment is intended to build on the work done in the preceding assignment by continuing to build profiles and strategies which can be used in your professional role.

Assignment 1 – cognitive profile (25%)

For this assignment you will create a cognitive profile of your chosen client. Outline the difficulties presented by the cognitive impairments reported in the profile and develop strategies for overcoming these difficulties in order to improve the service you provide to this person. These strategies should relate specifically to the selected individual and include practical examples of how you would apply them.

(1000 words +/- 20%)

Assignment 2 – communication profile (25%)

For this assignment, you will describe the person's communication skills, linking what you write to the evidence base. It is your responsibility to modify communication to "fit" the situation and to modify the environment of this person to enhance communication. How would you do this, utilising up-to-date literature, and how would you measure success?

(1000 words +/- 20%)

Assignment 3 - values analysis (50%)

This assignment asks you to formulate a model of the value base of the service in which you work and compare this to a value-based model drawn from current literature. You will be asked to illustrate any potential challenges in applying your value base model in practice with the person discussed in assignments one and two. These challenges might include, for example, misinterpretation, lack of resources, or aspects of informal workplace culture. Design strategies to address these challenges.

(2000 words +/- 20%)

Rationale

Thanks to tutors Karen McKenzie, Lucie McAnespie and Ralph Broad for their help in designing this course.

“Promoting good practice in learning disability services” is designed to be taken as a continuing professional development (CPD) opportunity or an introductory module to an online MSc in Learning Disability. The audience is comprised of healthcare workers such as service managers, community nurses and social care staff, who have people with a learning disability as part of their client base. Many of these healthcare workers may have limited experience with MSc-level assessment as, in many cases, their employment will not require them to have an academic qualification (Jasper and Fulton, 2005). Applicants who do not meet the normal MSc entrance qualification standard of first or upper second-class Honours will need to show evidence of intellectual ability of an equivalent standard to an honours degree.

An additional entry requirement will be that students are employed within a learning disability service, with the consequence that study will be undertaken part-time. This allows the course learning outcomes to involve the application of theoretical concepts to the student’s community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in line with Alexander and Boud’s (2001) claim that experience is the foundation of learning and Gee’s (2007) assertion that active learning is more effective than passive learning.

Such a link with the community of practice brings with it the additional consideration that learning outcomes must appeal not only to the students but to their employers who, in many cases, will fund the course fees. There may be external pressure to meet certain competency requirements as part of the employee’s CPD plan and the measurability of competency-based outcomes may appeal to heads of service upon whom the course will rely for their staff. According to Smith (2000), however, there is an inherent danger that a competency-based curriculum could lead to a focus “on the parts rather than the whole; on the trivial, rather than the significant.” The course outcomes are designed to enhance students’ understanding of the reasoning behind service guidelines and rather than using competency-based outcomes, students will be directed to discuss, critique and reconstruct practical skills using personal experiences and reference to the evidence base.

Recent developments in psychology point to the importance of examining the values which underpin service provision to people with learning disability (Ager, 2002). Where ritualised rule-following may have been engendered through performance-based vocational training, the course aims to give meaning to these processes through authentic problem-solving activities (Perkins, 2006). As suggested by Keesing-Styles (2003), a socially-critical perspective may be necessary to overcome the kinds of attitudinal legacies inherent within a community of practice possessed of socially-constructed ideas about learning disabilities which are, in many cases, significantly out-of-date (Ager, 2002).

In some cases, there may be a tension between the educational and marketing goals of the course, caused by those learning tasks and events informed by the socially-critical approach. If, for example, students are asked to critically appraise practices within their service, this may not be welcomed by those who pay the fees. An effective and transparent evaluation of the course outcomes and benefits may be necessary to convince employers of the value of the chosen approach.

In essence, the course aims to help its students better understand people with a learning disability in order to provide the best possible service to them. The design of the learning environment has been influenced by the views that knowledge is socially-constructed (Vygotsky, 1978) and that learning is not merely epistemological but ontological (Meyer and Land, 2006). In other words, learning indicates not only a change in knowledge but a change in identity (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

A productive perspective on the facilitation of such an identity shift can be gained via Meyer and Land's (2006) discussion of threshold concepts. These are conceptually difficult or troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2006), the grasping of which requires learners to move through an irreversible and, therefore, transformative "liminal" state (Meyer and Land, 2006). Since a change of identity can not be transmitted by the tutor (Land 2008) as in the traditional approach and the outcome cannot be pre-determined or performed as in the performance-based approach (Toohey, 1999), this transformation is most likely to be achieved through cognitive, experiential or socially-critical learning.

Grasping a threshold concept can be equated with the successful construction of a personalised mental model which allows the concept to be viewed in different contexts (Norman 1993). Though such a mental model might be constructed incidentally from discipline-based content presented by a tutor, the purpose of the traditional approach is to transmit knowledge in an objective form (Toohey, 1999). This seems to endorse the sort of ritualised learning and mimicry that Meyer and Land (2006, p 382) claim to indicate a "false proxy" or simplified threshold concept, adding further evidence that the traditional approach, while suited to covering broad content in a limited timeframe (Toohey, 1999), is not suited to the deep learning required for threshold concepts.

The traditional and performance-based approaches may be useful, however, for the scaffolding (Crotty, 1998) required for grasping threshold concepts. A useful lens for considering this can be found in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development where collaboration with tutors and peers can help the student reach levels of problem solving beyond their independent capabilities. In the case of the course under discussion, complex problems are broken into component parts by the tutor. For example, in week five, the problem of reconstructing a definition of communication is broken into a series of component tasks: watch a video; list observations; compare with others on the discussion board; create definition; examine literature; revise definition.

This reduction of problems into their component parts is reminiscent of Toohey's (1999) performance-based approach which seems appropriate due to a need to move rapidly through fundamental knowledge. Performance-based assessment may not be appropriate, however, because it does not ensure that each student understands the processes behind the performance. Consequently, students could pass the assessment but be left in a liminal (or transitional) state (Meyer and Land, 2006) ill-suited to the building of subsequent knowledge.

Boud (1995) claims that it is assessment, rather than content, which drives curriculum. It is important, then, to relate the key threshold concepts to the learning outcomes from which the assessment criteria are defined. The results of a pilot learning event involving the construction of a definition of learning disability showed the importance of clearly-defined assessment criteria in creating an aligned curriculum (Biggs 2003). The assessment criteria form the basis for designing the assignments which require the application of concepts to the students' professional roles. This is intended to afford personalisation and contextualisation of theory (Kolb, 1993) and it is hoped that this experiential approach to assessment will enhance students' critical thinking and problem-solving capacities (Gee, 2007).

Two minor assignments feed forward (Hounsell *et al*, 2007) into a major assignment. The three assignments build complementary analyses and strategies around a particular person with whom the student works, creating a direct benefit to the client, the student and the employer. Though the student does not choose the task, they do choose the client and the aspects on which to focus their analysis. In the cognitive profile assessment, the student decides which cognitive difficulties to target in their analysis and strategising. In the communication profile, the student outlines how they will modify their communication and the environment to suit their selected client. In the values analysis, the student outlines strategies for overcoming challenges in applying a value-based model to their daily practice. These are all personally-relevant, authentic problems which students will face in their communities of practice (Wenger 1998) and they indicate an experiential approach to course assessment and, therefore, according to Boud (1995), curriculum.

Framework

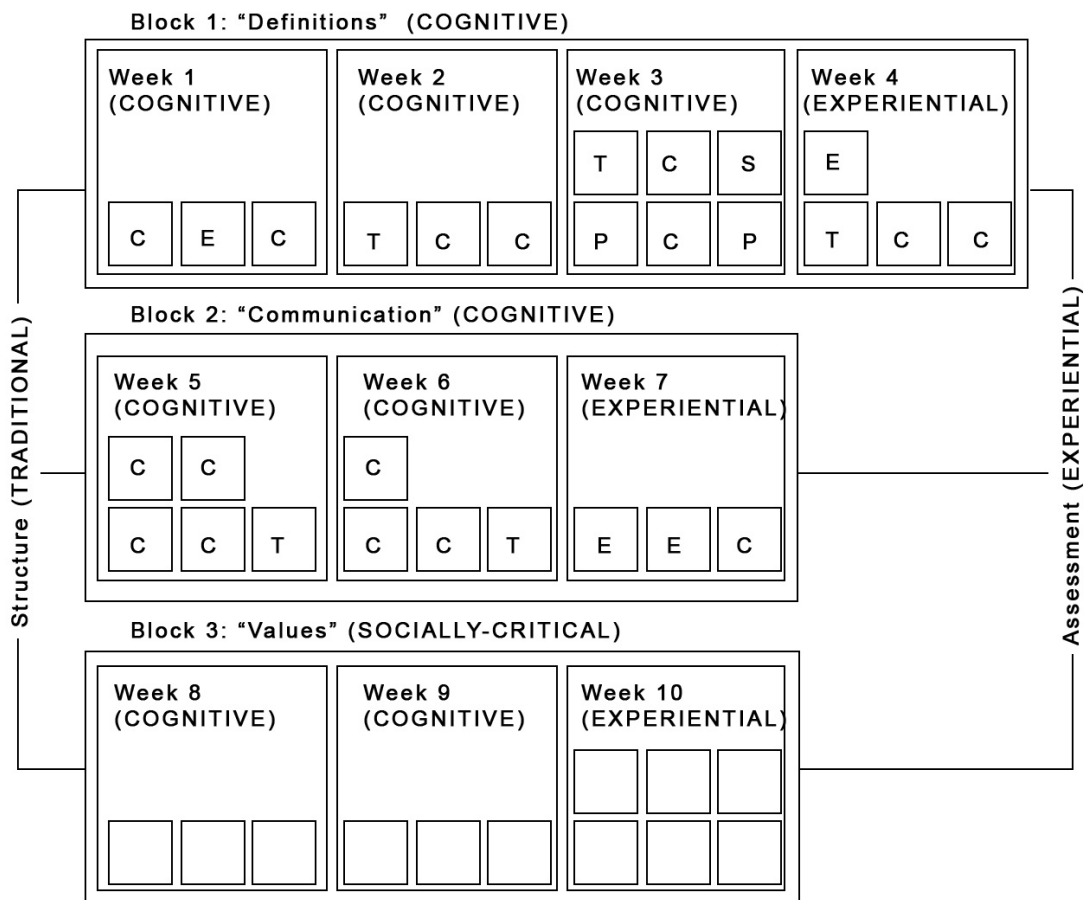
The course is designed to afford a transformation in students by helping them to conquer threshold concepts drawn from the course learning outcomes. Examples of these threshold concepts are: the complexity of the definition of learning disability; the difference between intentional and unintentional communication; or the concepts of capacity and duty of care.

Rather than fitting into a single theoretical category, the course design combines all five of Toohey's (1999) approaches. This can be explained by the need to facilitate the acquisition of background knowledge (traditional approach), fundamental skills (performance-based approach), the construction of mental models (cognitive approach), the application of theory

to practice (experiential approach), and the ability to critically-analyse situations within a social and cultural context (socially-critical approach).

Social constructivism places the learner at the centre of the learning environment (Rovai, 2004) and shifts the traditional role of teacher to a facilitator of learning (Hay and Barab, 2001). This necessitates a level of responsiveness from the tutors in that content cannot be pre-determined. The topics studied can, however, be bounded to ensure that learning outcomes are covered, and this is done in two ways. Firstly, a traditional approach to structuring the course dictates certain discipline-based, culturally-valued content which forms the boundaries of discussion. It should be noted that this is different from what Smith (2000) describes as the transmission of a syllabus in that the elements of learning remain in constant interaction through discussion and contextualisation, reflecting a model more akin to Smith's curriculum as process (ibid). Secondly, assessments are tied to pre-determined learning outcomes which means that, while students are encouraged to relate their assignments to their own experience, the concepts they will be contextualising are chosen by the tutors.

Figure 1 – course framework (indicative).



*T: traditional; P: performance-based; C: cognitive; E: experiential; S: socially-critical
Tasks shown are indicative only.*

Figure 1 shows that the overall structure of the course content is divided into three blocks according to topics chosen by the tutors. These topics are: “definitions”, “communication” and “values”. Each block is divided into week-long learning events, each covering a sub-topic (e.g. “history”) which is comprised of learning tasks. These tasks might be informed by any of Toohey’s (1999) five approaches and the learning event they comprise will be informed by the approach considered most appropriate to the concepts covered. Week 2, for example, might be thought of as having an overall cognitive approach in that students engage intellectually with the history of learning disability by examining misunderstandings (Toohey 1999). The students examine the origins of learning disability as a socially-constructed idea and the myths which have developed around it. Within this cognitive event, however, there can be found some traditional transmission of information (e.g. the reading of an overview of the history of learning disability), some performance-based tasks (e.g. applying historical diagnoses within the history quandaries), some cognitive tasks (e.g. critical thinking around the suitability of the various constructions of the definition of learning disability), experiential learning (e.g. where discussion of these concepts relates to people the students work with) and socially-critical learning (e.g. examining agendas behind the construction of definitions of learning disability).

In addition, the discussion board is to be used extensively throughout the course, and the style of facilitation will influence the type of learning experienced through this medium. If the tutors dictate answers, for example, then it is likely that the discussion board will become another method of traditional transmission or an agent of performance-based skill development. If the tutors ask students about their personal experiences and challenges, the discussion board may facilitate experiential learning. If understandings are challenged, then cognitive learning is encouraged and if the tutors encourage the questioning of social context and values, socially-critical learning is likely to occur.

Conclusion

While the content structure implies a traditional approach, the course assessments suggests a stronger influence from the cognitive, experiential and socially-critical approaches. This is reinforced by the learning tasks which make up each block, which are informed by the threshold concepts derived from the stated learning outcomes.

The possibility of conflict between the process-based focus of the course and potential product-based preferences of learning disability services will need to be addressed through a clear and relevant course evaluation. Particular care must be taken when introducing socially-critical learning tasks that the benefits are clearly explained. Failure to do so could lead to a lack of endorsement from employers upon whom the course relies for its students.

References

- Ager, A. (2002). 'Quality of life' Assessment in critical context. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 15(4): pp. 369-376.
- Biggs, J. (2003). Aligning teaching for constructing learning. *Higher Education Academy*. Retrieved: 4 April 2009.
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id477_aligning_teaching_for_constructing_learning.pdf.
- Boud, D. (1995). Assessment and learning: contradictory or complementary. In *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. P. Knight (Eds.) (London, Kogan Page): pp. 35-48.
- Crotty, M. (1998). Introduction: the research process. In *The foundations of social research: meaning and perspective in the research process*. (London, SAGE): pp. 1-17.
- Gee, J. P. (2007). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Revised and updated edition. (Palgrave MacMillan, New York).
- Hay, E. and Barab, S. A. (2001). Constructivism in Practice: A Comparison and Contrast of Apprenticeship and Constructionist Learning Environments. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 10(3): pp. 281-322. Retrieved: 20 April 2009.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/1466753.pdf>.
- Hounsell, D., Xu, R. and Tai, C.-M. (2007). *Balancing Assessment of and Assessment for Learning*. Retrieved: 9 September 2008.
<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/publications/>.
- Jasper, M., A. and Fulton, J. (2005). Marking criteria for assessing practice-based portfolios at masters' level. *Nurse Education Today* 25 (5): pp. 377-389.
- Keesing-Styles, L. (2003). The relationship between critical pedagogy and assessment in teacher education. *Radical Pedagogy* 5(1). Retrieved: 28 October 2008.
http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue5_1/03_keesing-styles.html.
- Kolb, D. (1993). The process of experiential learning. In *Culture and processes of Adult Learning*. M. Thorpe, R. Edwards, and A. Hanson (Eds.) (Buckingham, OUP): pp. 138-156.
- Land, R. (2008). *Traditional approaches: Threshold Concepts*. Effective Course Design for E-Learning 2008/9 wiki. Retrieved: 16 April 2009.
http://holyroodpark.pbwiki.com/2008_traditional_threshold_concepts.

- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). Legitimate Peripheral Participation. In *Situated learning : legitimate peripheral participation*. (Cambridge England ; New York, Cambridge University Press): pp. 27 – 44.
- Meyer, J. and Land, R. (2006). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge. In *Overcoming barriers to student understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge*. J. Meyer and R. Land (Eds.) (London, Routledge): pp. 3-18.
- Norman, D. A. (1993). The Human Mind. In *Things that make us smart : defending human attributes in the age of the machine*. (Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley Pub): pp. 115 – 138.
- Perkins, D. (2006). Constructivism and troublesome knowledge. In *Overcoming barriers to human understanding: threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge*. J. H. F. Meyer and R. Land (Eds.) (London, Routledge): pp. 33-47.
- Rovai, A. P. (2004). A constructivist approach to online college learning. *Internet and Higher Education* 7(2): pp. 79-93.
- Smith, M. K. (1996, 2000). Curriculum theory and practice. *The encyclopedia of informal education*. Retrieved: 07 March 2009. <http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-curric.htm>.
- Toohey, S. (1999). Beliefs, values and ideologies in course design. In *Designing courses for higher education*. Toohey, S. (Ed.) (Buckingham, SRHE and OUP): pp. 44-69.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. (New York, Cambridge University Press).