An evaluation of Team-Based Learning in practice

This paper looks at the findings from the evaluation stage of the Change Project: Developing Child Social Care Workers’ Skills in Assessing Parental Capacity to Change and Evaluating their Impact. In the evaluation stage, Professor Nicholas Clarke from the University of Southampton carried out a mixed methods research project to examine the extent to which the training received by project participants had been transferred into practice and whether the training method of Team-Based Learning had a more positive effect on training transfer than a traditional style two-day workshop covering the same content.

Team based learning has been an area of growing interest for learning and development professionals interested in maximising the impact of training for participants. In 2013, Research in Practice started a new project to look at whether there would be benefits to professionals of learning as a team and sharing that journey. There are two main differences between standardised learning and Team-Based Learning approaches:

1. An existing team learn together, enabling them to work through issues relevant to their unique team dynamic and discuss there and then how the training could work in reality. This allows a level of in-depth problem solving which isn’t possible in standard training settings.

2. Planning becomes a more active and present part of the workshop. The group make a plan of action which is agreed by everyone, meaning that training is more likely to be implemented once teams are back on the floor.

Theoretically, teams who learn together are better placed to have a shared understanding of topics and issues, consistent approaches to dealing with these in practice, and can be enabled at the point of training to formulate plans to implement the learning across their current working practices.

Read previous articles about the Team-Based Learning project.

Background

This Change Project was made up of three major elements:

Phase 1 – Training programme development

In phase one of the project, social workers and learning and development professionals worked together to create a training programme on the topic of Assessing Parental Capacity to Change.

The course content was informed by the following research and resources:

- Harnett and Dawe’s work on Capacity to Change: [http://www.capacity2change.com/](http://www.capacity2change.com/).
The programme used a case study to take delegates through a four-stage process for assessing parental capacity to change which included the use of standardised measures to measure change and the use of SMART planning and Goal Attainment Scaling to set and measure achievable goals.

The standardised measures used in the course are all free to use and do not require specialist training. The measures are:

- AUDIT – C
- Depression, anxiety and stress scale
- Emotional Regulation Questionnaire
- Home Conditions Assessment
- Maternal and paternal ante-natal attachment scales
- Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support
- Parenting daily hassles

They can be downloaded together with scoring guidance from the Research in Practice website.

**Phase 2 – Training delivery**

Training was delivered in two ways:

1. A two-day workshop version of the training programme was delivered in five local authorities to mixed groups of delegates from different teams.
2. A four x half-day version of the programme using the Team-Based Learning delivery method was piloted in one local authority and then delivered in three others. These authorities were among the first in the UK to train Children’s Services staff using this method.

Team-Based Learning offers three main differences from standard training:

1. Training is delivered to whole teams at once, including managers.
2. Participants are given work to do in between sessions.
3. Participants are tested on this work at the beginning of each session. Testing takes the form of a written test and feedback is given by the facilitator as a group.

The full methodology for Team-Based Learning (TBL) can be found in Michaelsen L, Sweet M and Parmalee D (2009).

Their paper highlights the benefits of learning in this method:

‘In addition to ensuring that students master the basic course content, TBL enables a number of outcomes that are virtually impossible in a lecture-based course format and rarely achieved with any other small-group based instructional approach. With TBL:

1. Most students progress well beyond simply acquiring factual knowledge and achieve a depth of understanding that can only come through solving a series of problems that are too complex for even the best students to complete through their individual effort. Virtually every student develops a deep and abiding appreciation of the value of teams for solving difficult and complex and real-world problems.'
2. Many students gain profound insights into their strengths and weaknesses as learners and as team members.
3. Compared to a traditional curriculum, faculty members in a wide variety of contexts have observed that introducing TBL enables the ‘at risk’ students (probably because of the increased social support and/or peer tutoring) to successfully complete and stay on track in their course work.

**Phase 3 – The research study**

Professor Clarke’s research study ran parallel with the delivery of the training and had the following objectives:

1. To compare the impact of training and Team-Based Learning approaches on participants’ knowledge and practice in assessing parental capacity to change.
2. To assess the impact of Team-Based Learning on key behavioural indicators (improved quality of assessments and the progress of cases following assessment).
3. To identify if co-worker support enhances the transfer of learning from training and Team-Based Learning approaches to professional practice.
4. To identify factors associated with the effectiveness of Team-Based Learning in supporting participants’ knowledge and practice gains in assessing parental capacity to change.

In order to meet these objectives Professor Clarke designed an ambitious research methodology.

**Participant Groups**

Participants in the study were split into three groups:

1. Those attending the two-day ‘traditional’ training course.
2. Those attending the Team-Based Learning course.
3. A comparison group who received no training.

**Measuring the impact of training**

Professor Clarke was looking for evidence of both an increased understanding of key elements of assessing parental capacity to change and increased evidence of these elements being used in participants’ practice post-training.

These key elements were:

a) Greater use of setting SMART goals for families.
b) Greater use of Goal Attainment Scaling.
c) Greater use of standardised instruments to assess change.
d) Greater use of evidence-based interventions as part of the change process compared to those attending training or a comparison group.

The impact of the training on the above groups was measured in the following ways:

- **The completion of baseline measures.** This took the form of online questionnaires completed by the participants.
- **Baseline case audits.** Participants’ case records were audited to determine whether the key elements identified above were already being used in practice and to provide a baseline from which to measure improvements.
- **Follow-up questionnaires four months after training was delivered.** These were made up of 19 questions designed to test participants’ ‘declarative knowledge’ of the topic and two ‘case vignettes’ designed to test participants’ ‘procedural knowledge’. The vignettes presented participants with two short case studies with four questions each designed to test their ability to apply knowledge from the course in realistic situations.

- **Follow-up telephone interviews with participants at six to twelve months after the delivery of training.** A semi-structured interview with ten questions focusing on participants’ thoughts on the training methods and content, its impact on their practice and the support they received from their supervisor and colleagues to implement the key elements of the course into their practice.

- **Follow-up case audits six months after training.** Participants’ case records were again examined to look for evidence of the four key elements of the course content having been used in practice.

**Challenges**

This ambitious project proved to be very challenging and some significant obstacles were faced during each stage.

**Team-Based Learning delivery**

Initially it was planned that the members of the Change Project group who were involved in developing the course would deliver the Team-Based Learning version to teams within their organisations and Research in Practice would deliver the two-day workshop to other colleagues in the same organisations.

However, it became clear during the development stage of the project that organisational pressures (such as major restructure and changes to senior leadership) meant it would be necessary to recruit additional organisations in which to deliver both versions of the course. This impacted on sample size for the study and had significant logistical implications (eg, training additional facilitators to deliver the TBL course who had not been involved in the development project and were less familiar with the content and the method).

**Low response rates and high staff turnover**

Although participation in the evaluation of the project was communicated as a pre-requisite for attending the courses, many participants did not complete their questionnaires nor agree to telephone interviews, making it difficult to gather a large number of complete results.

There was also a high turnover of staff during the project with many individuals not being available to complete post-training evaluation work due to having left the organisation, changed roles or being on long-term leave etc.

The total sample size across both versions of the training and the comparison group was 167 and complete data sets, including baseline measures and four-month post-training questionnaires were collected for 39 participants.

29 of the 84 delegates who took part in the traditional training completed the four-months post-training questionnaires.

Only 6 of the 64 delegates from the Team-Based Learning courses completed the four-months post-training questionnaires.
9 delegates from the two-day course completed telephone interviews as did 6 from the Team-Based Learning course.

Although the final results sample is small, we feel there is a lot to learn from the findings and clear indicators of where further work can be focused to improve training impact.

**Results**

One of the chief findings from the study was that participants on the two-day training course showed improvements in both declarative (knowing what) and procedural (knowing how) forms of knowledge as indicated by performance on the knowledge test and case vignettes.

What was surprising is the failure to find any significant improvements in procedural knowledge from those attending Team-Based Learning, and improvements in declarative knowledge were less than those shown by the two-day training group.

In this study, no evidence was found of either training or Team-Based Learning resulting in key elements assessing parental capacity to change being applied to practice post-training.

The telephone interviews revealed some interesting insights into the challenges for transferring learning into practice once a participant leaves the training room.

**Lack of organisational reinforcement of learning**

Respondents to the telephone interviews were asked, ‘Did you receive any support from your supervisor or your colleagues to implement the training?’

No respondents were able to speak of any significant post-training support in supervision.

In his report Professor Clarke highlights the importance of organisational support for training transfer:

‘A number of comments by those interviewed unfortunately echo much of what is already known in the literature as to why training (and seemingly Team-Based Learning) fails to transfer to use on the job both in social care agencies (Clarke, 2002b; Curry, McCarragher, & Dellman-Jenkins, 2005) and more widely (Cheng & Ho, 2001). These include significant problems with the workplace environment in adequately supporting the transfer of learning from programmes such as this. A considerable body of literature has accumulated indicating that both an organisation’s learning culture and training transfer climate are key to support the transfer of training (Rouillier & Goldstein 1993; Tracey et al 1995; Tziner, Fisher, Senior & Wiessbein 2007). Saks & Belcourt 2006). Key aspects of these dimensions include social support from supervisors and peers and organisational policies that are aligned with the use of training (Chiaburu & Harrison 2008; Cromwell & Kolb 2004). Supervisors for example, can assist with training transfer by giving feedback on performance, ensuring trainees are held accountable for implementing training and assistance with managing workload (Chiaburu, Van Dam & Hutchins 2010). Antle et al. (2009) previously found that supervisory support was positively associated with training transfer in child welfare whereas Clarke (2002b) highlighted the lack of supervisory support in social care agencies was a key factor impeding the transfer of training.’

It is clear that the method of training is just one part element of successful training transfer.
Clarke goes on to say:

‘A significant problem remains that most organisations persist in the belief that simply participating in training programmes is sufficient in order for training to be effective. As a result, considerable effort is placed in the design of training programmes with a minimal understanding of the broader contextual factors that influence whether training is effective or not.’

Team-Based Learning requires more work from the learner in between sessions than traditional training. If an organisation does not support participants with time and opportunity to consolidate and review new knowledge the advantages brought by this method may be lost.

**Lack of confidence in using standardised measures and Goal Attainment Scaling**

Several of the respondents to the telephone interviews expressed that they found the scoring of the standardised measures and the Goal Attainment Scaling used in the course difficult or confusing.

Some responses also suggested that combining the measured, mathematical approach of standardised measures with their own, individual professional judgement was a significant challenge. The interviews revealed that practitioners’ assessment practice still relied far more on professional judgement, tending to revert to familiar approaches and practices.

As Barlow et al (2012:20) set out, this is a cause for concern:

‘Professional judgement alone is not enough, just as standardised tools without professional expertise and skills can never be enough. Using measures helps professionals to avoid decision-making approaches that are prone to error or what has been described as the ‘similarity heuristic’. The similarity heuristic can arise when a case is very similar to another that the practitioner has previously worked on. In such a situation, it is tempting to use the logic: ‘The previous family had outcome x, therefore this family will have outcome x.’ A problem arises if, despite the similarity, there is a crucial difference between the two cases that the practitioner is overlooking. Research has demonstrated that the use of standardised methods of assessment can help overcome such potential bias.’

Respondents also stated that other methods of assessment in use within their organisation (Signs of Safety was one cited example) would be prioritised over those covered in the training.

**Team-Based Learning in the future**

With disappointing sample sizes and logistical challenges such as were faced here, it is important to remember that ‘absence of evidence is not evidence of absence’ and that these results do not provide sufficient evidence as to whether TBL does or does not improve training transfer.

Nevertheless, there is a growing evidence base for the effectiveness of TBL (see Clarke’s report for references). Clarke also makes the point that TBL may be particularly suited to supporting learning in our sector:

‘It has been suggested however, that this form of pedagogy offers significant advantages to the social work profession (Macke & Tapp 2012). Robinson, Robinson, & McCaskill (2013) for example, suggest “The field of social work... seems to be a natural fit for active and cooperative instruction because the very nature of the professional'}
environment is one where social work professionals are collaborating cooperatively with clients and stakeholders at every level of the profession” (p774).

This study provides clear evidence to show that in order for training to have a positive impact on practice, organisational support is essential. Participants need protected time to complete the required reading and tasks in between sessions and supervisors must follow up training, supporting participants to reflect on new knowledge and skills and to discuss and plan how it will be put into practice.

References


Harnett and Dawe’s work on Capacity to Change [http://www.capacity2change.com/](http://www.capacity2change.com/)


