

Developing inter-professional learning

Evaluating boundary crossing in higher education

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Abstract

An evaluation of the second cross-faculty, inter-professional learning day for students on professional qualification award programmes in the Faculty of Education and Sport and Faculty of Health and Social Science, highlights the importance of developing an understanding of others' values and perspectives. Consideration of occupational and organisational professionalism supports analysis of the way in which students in the early stages of professional formation can interact and engage in boundary spanning and 'knotworking' activity.

Introduction

Movements in the policy framework governing health, social care and children's services since 2000, 'The NHS Plan' (DOH 2000), 'Working Together-Learning Together' (DOH 2001), alongside successive enquiries and media analysis (Kennedy 2001; Laming 2003) highlighting interagency communication issues, have made inter-professional learning a key focus for higher education institutions delivering professional qualification and pre-registration programmes. Additionally, 'Benchmarking Academic and Practitioner Standards' (QAA 2001) and 'The Common Core' (DfES 2005), emphasise the importance of multi-disciplinary working as a key thread to all practice and professional development.

At the University of Brighton in recent years, inter-professional learning (IPL) and the examination of multi-disciplinary practices have gained greater prominence across children and young people's workforce professional development programmes, principally through the Faculty of Education and Sport (School of Education and Chelsea School) and the Faculty of Health (Schools of Applied Social Science, Nursing and Midwifery and Health Professions). In the School of Education, for example, study at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels through the work-based learning foundation degree programme, the BA (Hons) Professional Studies in Learning and Development, and the MA Education, is beginning to more directly reflect developments in practice in the field, evident across children and young people's services.

The Faculty of Health and Social Science (FHSS) have extensive, well-established IPL activities across all faculty disciplines (nursing; midwifery; occupational therapy; physiotherapy; social work; podiatry) which link to, and work closely with Brighton and Sussex Medical School and the School of Pharmacy and Biomolecular Sciences. The work spans both pre-registration/

qualification level and post registration/qualification level, with an integrated graduate programme that enables students from all disciplines to access modules across all FHSS schools.

The initiative by the university-wide Every Child Matters (ECM) working group to develop IPL across all schools working with the children and young people's workforce, has been a proactive response to developing policy in this area that is increasingly impacting on practice, and therefore requires a wider engagement within professional training settings.

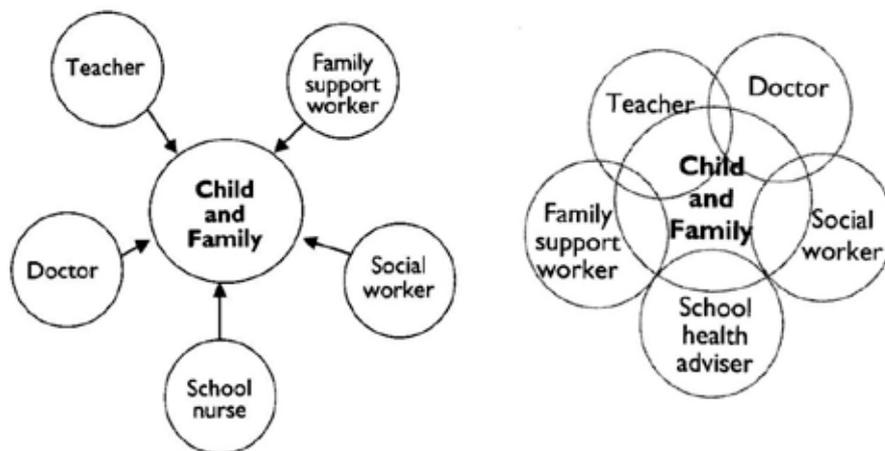
The second IPL day (November 2009) was organised through the ECM working group, comprising course leaders from professional award programmes for those working with children and young people. It involved approximately 180-200 students in their final stages of professional preparation from nursing, education, social work, youth work, early years and midwifery, alongside lecturers and practitioners in these fields. The broad purpose of the day was to foster inter-professional understanding and awareness, and so facilitate multi-disciplinary working in the field.

Supported by a University of Brighton Research Fellowship, Dr Teresa Cairns was appointed to undertake an evaluation of the 2009 IPL day. The purpose of this evaluation was to review the experience gained from the two IPL days to date, to facilitate feedback to professional practitioners and educators, and to support the IPL/ECM working group in considering the focus of future IPL work within the university. The evaluation and feedback process was also intended to inform the development of IPL work across the university and with professional groups beyond the institution. The final report was presented to the ECM working group at its meeting in February 2010, and shaped the subsequent IPL day in November 2010. The workshop held at the Learning and Teaching Conference in July 2010, focused on learning from this evaluation, and the subsequent implications for the development of IPL and boundary crossing between professions within the university and its partner colleges.

Background to professionalism and inter-professionalism

Whilst many definitions of professionalism exist, Sims et al (1993) highlight some common themes, particularly of the older, established professions. These themes relate both to the social principles of professionalism (for example, having an altruistic orientation and being subject to the sanction of the community at large), as well as *practice* orientated principles (such as a systematic body of knowledge and a monopoly of powers over its applications; a self-regulating code of ethics, an emphasis on values such as respect for the confidentiality of the client; control over the profession's own qualification and entry procedures). These more traditional principles or themes of professionalism are described by Evetts (2009) as 'occupational professionalism, where 'collegial authority' and 'discourse constructed within professional groups' (ibid: 23), are recognised and given prominence. Evett compares this with 'organisational professionalism' typified by managerialism, 'accountability and externalised forms of regulation, target-setting and performance review' (ibid: 23).

Barker (2008), in considering the development of models of practice from what might be defined as *multi-professional* but with little or no *collaboration*, to *integrated* working, represents networks thus:



(Barker 2008)

The emphasis here is on the overlap of practice discourses and co-ordinated provision, with an identified 'lead' practitioner managing the 'team around the child'.

In promoting such inter-professional and integrated working, the 'refreshed' common core of skills and knowledge (CWDC 2010) for multi-agency working, acknowledges differences in professional understandings but places perhaps greater emphasis on 'organisational values, beliefs and cultures' (ibid: 20). The interactions between professions and professionals therefore, are likely to involve accommodation and management of different *occupational* values and cultures, as well as inter and intra organisational professional hierarchies, values and practices.

The Inter-professional learning day and the evaluation

The IPL day itself comprised four sessions, an introductory plenary, including a contextualising presentation and case study explored by panel of expert practitioners; exploration of one of two additional case studies in single professional groups, followed by exploration of the same case study in multi-professional groups (approximately 12-15 students in each group with two facilitators); final plenary question and answer session with a panel of experts.

The data analysed for this evaluation included reflections on the IPL day from six facilitators/tutors, by email; evaluation forms returned by participants on the IPL day, divided by discipline (students were requested to indicate their occupational group at the bottom of the form); post-it notes collected during the IPL day on a comment wall; informal conversations during the day by the evaluator with a range of students and facilitators; the evaluator's own experiences of the day from attending the two plenaries and a single professional and a multi-professional case study group.

Findings from the evaluation: learning about other professional roles and responsibilities

The IPL day was considered '*very valuable as a way to spend time discussing similar issues*' with professionals from other disciplines, while the range of people involved in the day '*provided a wider diversity of opinions*' than they might normally encounter. Many students indicated that they had learned about roles they hadn't known existed, such as that of Social Work Duty Officer; others felt they had gained an understanding of how 'Every Child Matters' could be differently interpreted in practice across professions. The comment was made by a large number of students across professional groups about understanding and appreciating the different

processes and roles across sectors. Several students indicated that, through meeting people from across professional boundaries, they had increased their knowledge of other sectors and no longer saw other professionals as ‘*just roles set out on a page*’; they could have shared values despite having different perspectives.

The evaluations also indicated an understanding of how the professional focus of others could influence their interpretation of a problem and its solutions: ‘*the nursing perspective tends to see illness in everything; what is negative to one could be positive to another*’ profession. There was also an indication in the evaluation responses of a desire to inform other professional groups about student practitioners’ own fields: a social work student commented on the value of ‘*being able to educate other professions about the role of social workers*’; a midwifery student highlighted the midwife’s role as ‘*a professional friend*’. Students additionally indicated an appreciation that differences in practice were not just evident across professions, but could also exist ‘*within the same geographic area*’. A comment from an education student encapsulates the general feeling about the day that was evident across all the evaluations: ‘*...powerful opportunity to meet to discuss these issues whilst in training, rather than waiting until in post*’.

Working together

Identified tensions over professional boundaries on the IPL day were found to mirror challenges within the field. For example, an emerging theme of the evaluation, was how professional boundaries become the arena for maintenance of status and power, and a particular challenge for students and practitioners alike relates to the extent to which individual professional identities can be maintained, whilst embracing the need to traverse and navigate professional boundaries within networks and partnerships.

Hudson (2002) identifies three inter-related potential barriers to effective inter-professional working:

- **identity** – how professionals understand themselves and their roles
- **status** – how professional hierarchies and different distributions of power are generated
- **discretion and accountability** – how professionals exercise discretion on a day-to-day basis

The difficulty which the evaluation of the IPL day began to uncover, was the extent to which students identify themselves professionally in the context of their membership within a professional community (reflecting *occupational* professionalism), as opposed to those who see their professional identity defined within their immediate and specific organisational role (reflecting *organisational* professionalism). For part-time students on work-based learning programmes, it could be argued that their academic study (including the IPL day), gives them opportunities to explore the subtle tensions and develop the required creativity and flexibility to manage the barriers Hudson identifies. For those on full time courses, yet to be fully immersed as practitioners, their ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) is limited, as is their experience of occupational and organisational professionalism.

The IPL day is deliberately situated at the final stages of students’ professional qualification study. Hence, as professional identities are formed and working practices become established, so the potential and actuality of inter-professional practice is explored from an increasingly firmer footing. An emergent feature from the IPL day, is the way that inter-professionalism begins to be co-constructed through the process of working together. This co-construction involves the beginnings of understanding the use and implications of emergent vocabulary spanning

professional boundaries. CWDC (2010) point to this, and some professions (perhaps those newer professions?), encourage integration of the role of boundary spanning into their practice. Sewell (2007) defines the 'boundary spanner' as:

'an individual who understands the specific interests and needs of the various groups involved in the change process and promotes a dialogue that transcends the familiar limitations of categorical thinking that restrict the activities of traditional managers'.

This practice and what Engeström et al (1999) refer to as 'knotworking', point to a way of working where traditional concepts of teams and stable centres of networking are regarded as insufficient. Hence inter-agency collaboration 'requires active construction of constantly changing combinations of people and artefacts over lengthy trajectories of time and widely distributed in space' (ibid). This requires a confidence and subtlety that challenges many experienced practitioners, but one that nevertheless was recognised and welcomed by students on the IPL day.

Support for tutors

There is often little attention given to the difficulties faced by teachers when assigned IP teaching. Morrison et al (2003) discuss the logistical and practical problems, while Freeth et al (2005) assert that teachers/staff require support and development to engage effectively in IP teaching. Holland (2002) indicates the importance of addressing 'the needs of the future teaching community', in order to effectively respond to the drive for inter-professional education and practice across the education and health care sectors (ibid: 221). The development of IPL is now an essential and embedded element in professional programmes, and raises issues regarding the skills, confidence and level of personal security with professional identities required of tutor/practitioners involved in delivering training programmes.

Work is needed across professional groups to explore the implications of IPL for tutors as well as for students, and a key task is to engender a greater self-confidence in working together across professions. However, it is also necessary to engage with those aspects of IPL where existing imbalances of power relations in the work situation are replicated in training and learning, and thus hamper effective and ongoing development of IPL. Facilitators reacted very differently during the IPL day to the process of facilitation according to their own experiences of IPL in their ongoing professional training. Some reported that domination of discussion by facilitators in the small working groups, may have been influenced by a conscientiousness and sense of responsibility for their role as tutor trainers, and a felt need to be seen to fully understand inter-professional working and all aspects of the wide range of professional roles involved in the case study scenarios, itself an unrealistic expectation.

Development of IPL work across professional groups

Comments from participants on the IPL day indicate that they would all value the involvement of more professional groups in IPL events. This poses some significant logistical as well as curricular challenges. The value of meeting in single professional groups before the inter-professional sessions later in the day, was widely acknowledged in the evaluation. However, these single professional group sessions might have been better held in advance of the IPL day to consider the case study scenarios as preparation for the inter-professional sessions.

The inter-professional sessions demonstrated the value of detailed consideration of cases studies from multiple angles, and illustrated the effectiveness and potential for work in inter-professional groups. However, the extent to which students' professional formation is developed and

the students' ongoing experience of their professional role in practice, has significant implications of their capacity to engage in IPL.

Ways forward

The experience of leading and facilitating the IPL day, the evaluation process, report, subsequent analysis and reflection, led the ECM group to develop the approach to the third IPL day in 2010. The case studies were explored in single professional groups prior to the day, giving more time for engagement and learning in inter-professional groups. Boreham (2007) suggests that inter-professionalism requires the development of 'collective competence' through making sense of events in the workplace, and developing a collective knowledge base and sense of inter-dependency. On future IPL days, facilitators will be encouraged to take a more *enabling* role with the groups, focusing on supporting exploration of inter-professional communication and fostering the potential for collective competence. Parallel to this, tutors and those involved in promoting IPL within the university, will need to be mindful of issues of professional power and status internally, be willing to explore the edges of professional identity themselves, and acknowledge the need to engage in boundary spanning and knotworking.

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