
The 'Learning Lab' concept – A recommended approach to practitioner practice development within social work organisations

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Abstract

This paper describes how a 'Learning Lab' contributes to the continuing education and competency of social work practitioners. Key elements and principles, including theories in support of the process, are identified; the framework is discussed and the benefits and challenges of this approach are explored.

Background

In 2001 the New Directions strategy was launched in response to the Brown Report as a comprehensive plan to refocus the efforts of the Department of Child Youth and Family to better work with families. It included building leadership capability, improving practice, increasing collaboration with communities and strengthening the professional workforce.

The Strengths-based Practice project was a major initiative arising from the New Directions strategy. It was aimed at contributing to the outcomes of improved wellbeing, protection and safety for clients through developing and strengthening staff, systems and processes using a strengths-based approach.

In September 2003 the Strengths-based Learning Lab was initiated in the Tauranga site of Child Youth and Family. The purpose of establishing a Learning Lab was to explore how strengths-based practice could be applied to the day-to-day work with clients, other providers, colleagues and staff, and also how the approach would impact on systems and processes of service provision. Practitioners were directly engaged and involved in identifying, describing and developing existing practice and building on it through a formal process and cycle of action/reflection and practice skill and knowledge improvement.

In June 2004 the Learning Lab was officially concluded and was followed by two independent evaluations and the subsequent publication in 2005 of *Quality Practice Development: The Strengths-based Approach* (Jack, Appleton and Weld, 2005) which drew on, described and documented the wide variety of learning and experiences gained from this Learning Lab.

The idea and practical implementation of creating and using a 'Learning Lab' approach to contribute to practice development was an interesting journey for all concerned and one we believe offers further opportunities for practice development in a variety of social work settings. We want to explore and share the philosophy, theory and thinking that constitute our definition of a learning lab, a suggested framework to implement it, and the advantages and challenges of using this type of approach.

The concept of a learning lab

Senge (1990) recommends 'learning laboratories' as effective practice fields for participants to develop the knowledge, skills and temperament needed to foster and support continuous learning in organisations' (Senge, 1990: 21). The concept of a learning lab is further supported by theories such as experimental learning (Kolb, 1984), reflective learning and social learning theory which argue that most learning is gained by people's perceptions and thinking about what they experience (Horwarth and Morrison, 1999; Bandura, 1977). This experimental learning approach is seen by Horwarth and Morrison as being particularly appropriate for the professional development of reflective practice.

For us, it was important to both the Strengths-based project and the learning lab that the methods and processes we chose modelled and demonstrated strengths-based principles and beliefs in order to enhance a reflective approach. Intrinsic to the design of the learning lab was the idea of reinforcing a reflective practice approach by adopting a holistic model that views all participants as "whole persons who each bring their own background, values and culture to the specific context of professional practice" (Yellooly and Henkel 1995: 29).

By integrating Kolb's model into the learning lab design, practitioners were involved in creating a 'learning system' that also ensured an active ongoing contribution was being made to their continued professional education.

In summary, the Strengths-based project defined the learning lab concept as a:

... practice development process driven by frontline staff, where they are invited to co create the practice approach, within the parameters defining it, with the project team. It is distinct from a pilot project in that the details of the practice approach are not prescribed prior to implementation, but emerge from the experience of the learning lab staff as they develop the approach in their practice.

A learning lab creates, defines and refines the practice, whereas a pilot demonstrates and tests a previously developed practice approach. (Jack, Appleton and Weld, 2005: 1).

We see the learning lab concept as a way to build practice initiatives from the ground up and top down. It does this by enabling the staff to manage and develop individual and organisational change and implement improvement that reduces the level of dependence on external change agents. A learning lab concept allows for the crafting and development of a unique product for a specific agency or organisation that is shaped through reflective practice and continuous improvement to meet practice change.

The learning lab concept we are discussing is essentially a simulated practice field that is applied to a business-as-usual setting. We have expanded on some of the philosophy and

theory that supports the concept of a learning lab to develop our own ideology as outlined below.

Firstly, we used elements from the Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) and solution focused models to formulate specific questions for the initial exploration of existing practice and then for use in the follow up 'action reflection' forums. These models work from a premise that it is more useful to understand what is working well in situations and to explore aspirations for the future rather than overly focusing and becoming potentially stuck on the problem. Through the use of careful crafting of questioning to inquire and determine what is working well, the scene is then set for further practice development.

Secondly, to establish the foundation that sits behind the learning lab concept, we used the following key principles of strengths-based thinking developed by the St Luke's centre in Bendigo: complementing not compensating; everyone has expertise in their own lives; recognising, acknowledging and assisting to mobilise strengths; capability and collaboration (St Luke's Innovative Resources, 2001).

Thirdly, we used the social constructionist perspective of exploring the existing story and co-constructing change, to contribute to the ideology for a learning lab. Parton and O'Byrne (2000), see constructive social work practice as building on the key skills that practitioners bring to the process of social work. These skills encompass positive relationships, negotiating human systems, identifying connecting and collating resources, mobilising energies and efforts into constructive action.

Put simply, the worker is not the only expert; users are often more expert than us in the problem – we may be expert in thinking about solution development but we can only build solutions with people since they have the raw materials. (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000: 140).

From this foundation we have constructed the following framework for the setting up and establishing of processes for a learning lab:

Framework

- Identify the how, what and why of the required practice development, and be able to articulate how the learning lab process can enable this to happen.
- Identify the basic key components or principles of what is to be developed.
- Identify any learning and development needs associated with these components and the requirements of the group to be able to meet them and manage change. In particular, practice development and support for the leadership group including supervisors must be identified.
- Design training and resources for the identified learning and development requirements.
- Have clear intervention logic, evaluation, and knowledge building processes in place.
- Deliver training from a whole of system perspective so maximum participation is generated.
- Build structured action/reflection follow up forums facilitated by leadership group.
- Link intervention logic to action/reflection forums so information is continuously gathered and reflected on.

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- Affirm the learning and evaluate and shape product for further testing.

This framework broadly uses the Appreciative Inquiry concepts of 'Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny' (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) and for the purpose of the learning lab adapts these to 'Dream, Discover, Develop and Design'. The first task is to visualise what is wanted and why, then to conceptualise this more concretely by detailing the key principles and purpose of it, and finally to identify what is required to bring it into action. Each area of the framework has a further range of specific tasks, and the connections between these are articulated so the development of a purposeful process is always evident to those involved.

From our experiences, using the learning lab concept for practice development has provided the following opportunities and advantages for practitioner competence, which were reinforced by the practitioner feedback gathered from two independent evaluation processes:

- A lowered resistance to change and increased participation, ownership of and involvement in the new practice initiative.
- Access to the wisdom and expertise of those doing the work.
- Identification of cultural realities through the process of shared reflective practice.
- Change has been sustained because of the commitment to shaping the product.
- Practitioners have had opportunities to grow and expand their professional learning through the action reflection session.

Challenges that arose

- Time pressures and expectations from internal and external sources e.g. Government.
- Keeping the wider organisation informed and connected to the lab group so a sense of isolation does not occur.
- Preparing the rest of the organisation for the practice change while waiting for the results of the application and identifying the learning to be gained.

Conclusion

The learning lab approach to social work continued professional education and training is an interactive way of discovering, exploring and developing practice. We believe the learning lab concept is an effective way of valuing and acknowledging practitioner knowledge and wisdom. It uses components of training and critical reflection, while following strengths-based principles to recognise and extend existing expertise and to 'grow' practice. Because this approach recognises the current levels of knowledge and builds from this foundation the end product is shaped and tested by the experiences of the workers.

As in social work practice with clients, responsibility for improvements and changes made are consolidated with internal staff involved, so they can continue to build expertise and lead the practice independently. It enables practitioner confidence and increased competence in their professional development and day to day work. It also removes some of the challenges of change implementation for practitioners by their involvement in the discovery and designing of practice components through a structured collaborative process.

The learning lab process draws and builds on the notion of a 'learning organisation' and highlights the 'continuous learning cycle' present in this.

Although we have drawn largely on our experiences of using it to develop strengths-based practice in a statutory setting, we believe it could easily be adapted and used in a range of situations. Overall the learning lab concept offers practitioners and others opportunities to explore, develop, create and design through an inclusive participatory process.

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