

Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning

Project Case Study

An Integrated Model of EBL in Practice

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Abstract

The Mental Health Research and Practice Development Unit ensures its viability by identifying and responding to the trends and shifts impacting upon the personal health and social services – the sector that constitutes our main customer base.

One such trend is an increasing public recognition by government, of the counterproductive effect on public services of its attempt to implement financial investment and strategic change via a ‘top-down’, ‘command-based’, centrally-devised bureaucratic system.

This emphasis on system and target-driven change is increasingly acknowledged as ultimately damaging for service performance, as it marginalises individual contribution, initiative and creativity in developing locally sensitive and relevant services – also a stated government priority.

It was in this broader context that planning for the new MSc/Diploma in Mental Health Practice was approached. The programme was designed from the perspective of raising the significance of the individual practitioner as a key player in locally-based practice and service development. It was recognised that this perspective needed to be underpinned by an educational approach based on active, participative models of enquiry and learning, incorporating authentic work events and experience as a key source of learning material.

Although the Unit had fifty years of unbroken involvement in professional practitioner education plus considerable experience in devising and implementing field-based research and staff and service development, the Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) initiative offered a timely overarching conceptual framework for facilitating programme planning.

This report provides an outline of the work achieved so far in embedding EBL as a root and branch programme perspective and, in addition, offers two detailed illustrations from the ‘Research Methods’ and ‘Practice Analysis’ sequences of the programme.

Background

Project Team

- Professor Michael Kerfoot – Head of Mental Health Research and Practice Development Unit
- Penny Kerfoot- Programme Director- MSc/Diploma in Mental Health Practice
- David Pottage – Research Fellow

Programme

MSc /Diploma in Mental Health Practice, offered by the Mental Health Research and Practice Development Unit and located within the Faculty of Medicine, Division of Psychiatry.

Programme Purpose

- To produce mental health practitioners who seek to actively contribute to the development of their practice and workplace as an integral feature of their professional role.

The programme will contribute to the creation of self-generating, locally-sensitive services through the mechanism of:

- Small-scale, front-line field research initiatives;
- Incorporating work and practice analysis as an everyday feature of the workplace;
- Devising and implementing small-scale local development projects.

Target Student Group

- Post-graduate/post-professional mental health professionals i.e. nurses, social workers, psychologists, doctors and service managers operating in the statutory, 'not for profit' and private sectors in the U.K. and other countries, who are seeking to broaden and deepen their mental health knowledge and practice.
- The intake is 12 to 18 participants each year.
- The programme can be taken on a full-time or part-time basis.
- It is a condition that all students are involved in continuous practice in a relevant work setting for the duration of the programme.

The Project

Purpose

- Design, describe and market all aspects of the programme i.e. infrastructure, teaching resources, learning methods and assessment instruments from an EBL perspective. With particular emphasis on achieving consistency and congruence between the style of delivery of the programme and its stated purpose, to avoid EBL being experienced as a mere gesture or crude 'add-on'.

For this to be achieved it was necessary to consider EBL from two main standpoints:

- EBL as a series of *outputs* reflected in all aspects of the programme design and delivery.
- EBL as a series of *outcomes* reflected in student performance.

Rationale

The launch of the first round of EBL project initiatives by the CEEBL was timely in coinciding with the design and launch of the new MSc programme, which we were committed to designing from scratch rather than as a re-packaging of the previous programme.

We had used the term 'learning from work' to reflect the skill base in the Unit acquired over many years of active involvement in practice and service development, professional education and research, both in the UK and in Eastern Europe. The concept of Enquiry-Based Learning/practice appeared useful in devising an education programme for modern service practitioners needing to actively incorporate the continuous development of themselves and their workplace as an integral feature of their role.

The Project Product

The Permanent Developmental Agenda

- Explore ways of accessing and utilising the creative potential in the service front-line workforce as a key developmental resource.

- Access and analyse the events, incidents and processes of actual day-to-day work through field research, practice and service development and education.
- Clarify the features of healthy working environments as a key factor in effective worker and service performance.

Programme Credibility

- We demonstrate internal consistency between the programme ethos, infrastructure, teaching resource and learning methods.
- We ensure that all aspects of the programme are grounded in first-hand, authentic and current experience and practice. It is never abstract, aspirational or contrived.
- This is made possible through an extensive unit portfolio of field research and service and staff development initiatives, providing access to current and authentic case study material.
- Access to an expert and diverse regional teaching resource based in practice.
- Involvement of the student group as a resource both for the programme and for each other.

Programme Ethos

- We ensure that all teaching and learning is grounded in real (rather than simulated) practice.
- We emphasise the difference between theoretical possibilities and what is currently actually achievable.
- We facilitate an enquiring relationship to events rather than the delivery of a prescribed learning programme.
- We achieve this through building an interactive working relationship with a mature student group who are encouraged to spend time refining their questions rather than looking prematurely for answers.

Illustration 1: Practice Analysis and Case Consultation

Purpose

- The sessions are designed to raise the students' awareness of their work environment, to look analytically at day-to-day events, and to stimulate their curiosity and interest in the potential for learning from their own direct experience.
- The process has value as a means of bringing day-to-day reality into the classroom and of demonstrating how clarity and shape might evolve from what begins as essentially 'messy' content.
- The focus for the sessions is on the dynamic interaction between the person(s), their circumstances and the wider environment- a familiar concept used in client-based practice, but one reworked here as a perspective for undertaking organisational analysis.

Design

- The sequence is based on weekly two-hour sessions throughout two-thirds of the programme.
- The opening sessions are based on broader themes which allow the session leaders to model interactive and discursive presentation skills for the students and to act as facilitators, making links to theoretical concepts and the literature.
- Subsequent sessions involve students in presenting current material from their own practice. The plan is for each student to make two presentations.

Outputs

- The sessions allow for the exploration of broader contextual themes e.g. mental healthiness rather than a narrow focus on mental illness.
- Each student presents current case material for discussion, exploration and clarification.
- The sessions emphasise development of questions rather than looking for answers.
- Importance is given to evidence in support of judgments.
- A focus on a wide variety of viewpoints and to consider how wider contexts impinge on a situation.

- Students are encouraged to be open, flexible and active, not closed, rigid and passive in the way they participate in the sessions.

Assessment

Assessment has five staged elements, designed with the dual purpose of serving as a means for the student to meet the programme requirements and also as a developmental exercise for facilitating learning.

Stage 1: 'The Agency Developmental Conversation'

The module tutor visits students and, with the use of a pro-forma, facilitates them in looking analytically at their current work setting and the duties they perform on a daily basis.

Stage 2: 'The Agency Context Report'

The students each prepare and submit a report based on four elements:

- Locating the agency within the wider service framework.
- Describing the nature of their role, its core elements and how it fits within the agency infrastructure.
- Provide an example that conveys what their job is all about and the way they do it.
- Provide an example of their attempt to change something in the workplace.

Stage 3: 'Preparation of a Proposal for Change'

The student prepares a proposal for change based on an aspect of their practice that is a cause for concern, or a suggestion for improvement, or an area of organisational functioning potentially worthy of detailed investigation. The student is then allocated 15 minutes to make a presentation to the Practice Analysis (closed) group, to speak to the proposal and be questioned on it. The proposal is retained by the module tutors for use by the Assessment Panel.

Stage 4: 'The Advocacy Brief'

Following the presentation, the student further develops the proposal (or an alternative) into an Advocacy Brief. This is a more refined and 'polished' version, prepared as if it is destined to be submitted to higher management within their work organisation. With the document the student will be advocating a thought-out idea, plan or course of action and providing a rationale, reasoned argument and evidence to support the brief. The 'Advocacy Brief' is submitted for formal assessment.

Learning outcomes

The EBL characteristics we look for at assessment:

- Personal and professional integrity;
- The capacity to 'think on your feet';
- Demonstrate lateral rather than linear thinking;
- Having the confidence to do nothing rather than rushing to judgment and action;
- The confidence not to be overwhelmed by new situations;
- Having an interest in ideas 'in and from action' rather than in ideas for themselves;
- Having authority without being authoritarian i.e. helping to develop others, not control them;
- Being able to spot development opportunities and working them into feasible proposals.

Illustration 2: EBL in Research Methods

Purpose

The 12-session series on Research Methods is designed to provide students with a broad introduction to the research process, and to the different kinds of design, methodology and analysis that are commonly used in Medical and Human Sciences. More specifically:

- To help students become familiar with the form and content of published research.

- To help students focus critically on different aspects of a paper, such as the literature review, the research design, methodology, analysis and discussion.
- To provide students with a list of potential sources of error in published work to enable them to work through a paper.
- To reduce the intimidation students invariably feel when faced with a paper by a prestigious author in a high-ranking journal.
- To learn a clear, concise and focused way of reporting research material to others.

Design

It was decided that the most feasible way of incorporating the EBL perspective would be through complementary parallel activity within each of the twelve sessions.

- The first hour of each session is based on a formal presentation on a given topic.
- A short break gives time for initial assimilation.
- A session of 1.5 hours with students working in pairs to present to the group a research paper, selected by the session leader to reflect the topic of the day.

Method for student presentations

- Papers for presentation continue the theme of the first part of the session.
- Papers circulated one week earlier to presenting students only.
- Presenters given a 'crib sheet' to help navigate their way through unfamiliar and complex papers.
- Presenters encouraged to use whatever resources are available to aid their task.
- To encourage discipline and precision, presenters allowed 15 minutes for presentation and 15 minutes for questions and leading discussion.
- Students allowed to choose to present singly or jointly, but each must make a distinct contribution.
- The research paper presented is made available to the whole class on completion of the session.

Outputs

- All students completed one or two presentations.
- Even those who opted for single-person presentation had clearly worked as a pair on preparation.
- Students tended to rehearse their presentation with those they were most comfortable with.
- There was clear evidence of creativity and initiative in using various resources to complete the task.

Learning Outcomes

- Students had the confidence to say when a paper was difficult and why.
- They were no longer intimidated by distinguished authors in high-flying journals.
- All papers presented were subsequently read by all the students out of curiosity as to how they might have 'read' and presented the content.
- Working in dyads and small groups generalized by students to other parts of the programme.

Conclusions

- Although still very much 'work in progress', our experience so far has shown both the feasibility and value of designing and delivering the MSc/Diploma programme from an EBL perspective.
- The EBL perspective, as is to be expected, seems compatible with action-oriented programmes designed to achieve performance outcomes.
- Programmes with performance outcomes have a built-in capacity for effective evaluation of EBL, i.e. whether students achieve the performance standards, rather than needing to devise more contrived evaluation formats.