Can interdisciplinary collaboration contribute to the widening concept of knowledge in work-based learning? (0188)

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Work-based learning and the sharing of interdisciplinary knowledge within teams have been hailed as ways of promoting change within the NHS as a large public organisation (Caley, 2006). Such claims may be based on assumptions that the NHS workforce are mature collaborators and have developed the skills of independent learning. However, McKee & Burton (2005) suggest that there is a need to develop these skills if practitioners are to succeed.

This paper will explore interdisciplinary learning as a possible contribution to the widening concept of knowledge in work-based learning. Early evidence suggests that interdisciplinary collaboration, using soft systems methodology (Checkland & Poulter, 2006), can make a difference to the widening of knowledge through a heuristic approach of learning sets and participation in agreed activities to aid problem solving in the workplace. It is important, however, to understand various perspectives of interdisciplinary working to appreciate how it can widen knowledge.

The word 'interdisciplinary' is a term which is often used interchangeably with others such as multidisciplinary and interprofessional (Schofield and Amodeo 1999). Interdisciplinary learning is similar to interprofessional learning in that both arise when two or more disciplines or professions work together to learn how to improve a situation or gain more understanding of a problem and often having an effect on established perspectives (Rowntree 1982, CAIPE 2007). However, D'Amour and Oandasan (2005) suggest that there is a distinction between the interprofessionality

and interdisciplinarity in that the former is "a response to the realities of fragmented health care practices" and the latter is "a response to the fragmented knowledge of numerous disciplines." (p.9). Interdisciplinary knowledge arises out of collaborative practice when disciplines within a team "open up their territorial boundaries in order to ensure more flexibility in the sharing of professional responsibilities." (D'Amour et al, p.120). Interdisciplinary collaboration is vital for the radical change initiatives steered initially by the Modernisation Agency (MA) of the NHS (Prowse & Heath 2004). Such initiatives indicated how interdisciplinary teams could work together on an issue and learn to pool professional knowledge and make sense of tacit knowledge which evolved from working together on a common focus. However, it is true to say that this way of working is also extremely complex due to many diversities and disparities in professional practice such as values and tribalistic behaviour (Lindeke and Block 1998, Moore 2007a & b). The MA saw WBL as a means of raising the importance of tacit knowledge as well as combining radical workplace change with personal development (Inglis 2005, Caley 2006). It is the tacit knowledge, which Blake et al (1998) believe is a major source of innovation, where the decision-makers can, in conducive environs, demonstrate a "high level of metacognitive control" (Eraut 1995, p.19). This control is the ability to think about one's thinking; a form of reflection and self appraisal (Paris and Winograd 1990), and learning to act with new insights, which in itself is an essential skill for learning to learn. However, when a team comes together it is important to have a common focus or goal (Petrie 1976). While et al (2005) and Williamson (2005) also stress that developing the processes needs attention and careful facilitation. An important attention is the time needed to explore broad briefs given by managers. All of these aspects could be catered for within a conducive environment.

A conducive environ can be interpreted in many ways. One interpretation of a conducive environ is an action learning set where interdisciplinary teams can meet to explore issues, agree and take actions (Williamson 2005). As McGill and Beaty (2001) confirm the sets are a safe place 'to learn the link between ideas and experience; to generalise from the past and to plan for the future.' (p.232). A learning set is a democratic space where all participants are respected and enabled to contribute. Major advantages to the organisation of action learning sets are that leadership and teamwork skills are developed as well as technical skills (Williamson 2005). Also, Raelin (2000) suggests, the lessons learnt by the participants are remembered longer than those learnt from a book or lecture. This may be because the WBL accelerates the 'real time' learning which helps individuals to make sense of practice and tacit knowledge, and develop new theory (Inglis 2005, p.141). Crucial to the development of the interdisciplinary learning set is the facilitation process conducted by a leader who understands the tensions in the workplace and transitions and transformations that learners can make, especially in challenging situations (Spinks & Clements 1993, Bee & Bee 1998, Jacques 2000, Brockbank & McGill 2007, Moore 2007a). Facilitators need to be skilled at facilitating the learner locus of control, especially when exploring complex issues.

Learning to share practice and new knowledge across professional boundaries can be intricate and challenging processes (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998, Moore 2007b). Whilst boundaries can be negative they can also provide some valuable depth to learning. Wenger (1998) likens boundaries to "fault lines," where:

> they are the locus of volcanic activity. They allow movement,
> they release tension; they create mountains; they shake existing
> structures.
> (p. 254)

This explicit quote could also describe the processes of group formation described by Tuckman (1965) and Jacques (2000). While group or team working can be a challenge there is an established recognition of the importance of frameworks, interpretive models, systems and flexible methodologies in enabling groups, or specific teams, to identify common values and to learn to work collaboratively and systematically to achieve a common goal (Senge 1990, Flood 2001, Ivanitskaya et al 2002, Hall 2005 and Checkland & Poulter 2006).

So working collaboratively in interdisciplinary teams has been hailed as complex but does have the potential to produce new theories, new knowledge of the realities of the workplace which may not be effectively learnt in the classroom. It is this potential that could be a rich source for future research in establishing the widening concept of knowledge in work-based learning.

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