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New partnerships for learning: meeting professional information needs

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New partnerships for learning: meeting professional information needs

Introduction

This paper has been inspired by the challenges created by recent and proposed reforms to social care services in the United Kingdom (UK) services which are being reformed or 'modernised', a term ubiquitous in policy documents but difficult to define with confidence. Modernisation was introduced by the Labour government in 1999 but, as Newman et al (2008) comment, it is a contested concept subject to much analysis (e.g. Giddens, 2000; Finlayson 2003; Stewart, 2003; 6 & Peck, 2005)

For the purposes of this article, modernisation will be regarded as being designed to "persuade and motivate change" (Finlayson, 2003: 67) This is not to make light of the impact of the drive to embed new public sector management values and practices in the public sector. It is acknowledged that this process can be seen as undermining professional autonomy since the drive for modernisation comes from the Government not from senior managers within the social care sector. The 'change' which is being motivated involves regulation, standards, policies and implementation processes.

Modernisation has been applied to a raft of public services; is multi-faceted; and encompasses: more 'user centred' approaches with concomitant issues of 'choice' and personalised models of care; reform of the workforce involving staffing and leadership issues; and organisational innovation (e.g. more joint planning, synergies and partnerships, commissioning and delivery of services). Changes made in the name of modernisation also imply new systems and ways of managing, processing disseminating and accessing information, frequently associated with accelerating adoption of information and communications technologies (ICTs).

Governmental modernisation and e-government programmes highlight with renewed urgency the need for social care practitioners on the front line to have up-to-date, reliable information. Practitioners who have direct contact with service users are the people who need to develop practice knowledge and implement higher level policies. Yet the rise in the rate and volume of information published (over new and old channels) has, paradoxically, made it increasingly difficult for them to be keep up with new developments. It is not just a case of reading about policy or consulting research with an evidence-based practice perspective. It goes beyond answering questions such as: 'How has the authority I work for interpreted this particular government policy?' or 'What should I be doing as a social care professional?' It is also about answering the question 'How can I use what I know more effectively', 'How can I become a better / more effective / less stressed social care professional/ team member?' Newman et al (2008) touch upon this compliance: commitment aspect of the modernisation/transformation of social

care when the discuss the strong value base and staff motivation of practitioners in their encounters with transformational processes

Placing service users at the centre of services forefronts their need for accurate, timely and clear information, which may or may not come from service providers. Information sources including intermediaries and self-help groups with access to the Internet may help to transform the nature of professional-client relationships. Some have argued that the Internet in particular is likely to facilitate a more interactive relationship between public service providers and their clients, who are increasingly becoming 'expert' citizens (Hague & Loader, 1999).

The need for organisational change

Enquiry into information use by practitioners and service users in social care settings is multifaceted and cuts across disciplinary boundaries. The authors take the concept of 'the informatization of the contemporary worldview' (De Mul 1999) as a guiding metaphor for current restructuring in social care. As a high level theoretical approach it proffers an account of transformations in the nature of knowledge and social relations in ways that resonate with contested discourses around an 'information age'. The 'informatization' approach has been harnessed with some sophistication to reading and interpreting changing medical practice. Literature on the subject of professional workers' information needs has also developed around medical practitioners but later work such as that of Harrison et al (2004) has drawn out the differences between norms in information behaviour in the social care and medical domains.

It should be stressed 'informatization' includes but goes beyond the development and deployment of new information and communications technologies. Changes in the workplace, for example, are not just in terms of the 'informating' work contexts in which social care professionals operate but also in terms of changes to the clientele with whom they work. The nature of professional-client relationships has changed so that street level bureaucracy has evolved into system level bureaucracy, with citizen participation.

One of the responsibilities of any professional is to maintain expertise and this responsibility is particularly critical and difficult in the social care environment. As Calder (2004) indicates, agencies may be falling short of equipping workers with the time and the materials to discharge this aspect of their responsibilities appropriately. The implications for social care practitioners of not having up-to-date, appropriate information and information literacy skills to cope with directives and documents emanating from the modernisation/reform agenda include accountability issues, risks of litigation, and the concomitant stress of participating in an age of digitisation, informatization and 'modernisation'.

In social care there is not the same expectation as there is in medical sciences that staff will have ready access to resources or that they will use journals, databases and libraries to obtain information. Continuing professional development (CPD) and evidence-based practice (EBP) play a

major role in the recruitment and retention of staff, contributing to the quality of service delivery. However the concept of a learning culture is not familiar to many social care staff who may have to adapt to an information culture and become comfortable using online resources. This is not to suggest that learning can take place only where social care staff are using ICTs. It is quite possible for CPD for professional teams to be based on group discussions of research focussing, e.g., on an article downloaded or photocopied by a member of the group. The ESRC funded MATCh (Multi-Agency Teams working for Children) project corroborated this in its exploration of professional knowledge sharing in action in multi-agency teams focussing on aspects such as developing new professional knowledge and practice in multi-agency teams and workplace learning.

However, if the potential of ICTs is to be exploited to ensure accessing the best available evidence for EBP, Harrison et al.'s (2004) research suggests that a cultural shift is required in order that social care decisions are based on such evidence. As Calder says:

“The field of social care is relatively new and as such there are huge gaps in the available evidence base....workers lack the opportunity for reflective practice or time to read and digest the emerging materials. Agencies are falling short of equipping workers with the time and the materials to discharge this aspect of their responsibilities appropriately.” Calder (2004 p.233)

Harrison et al's (2004) findings and those of the authors (Gannon-Leary, 2006) corroborate this, identifying a degree of information poverty among social care professionals in terms of access to ICTs and, concomitantly, to information sources. There was also little evidence of a research culture, with information seeking being verbal via face-to-face contact. Booth *et al.*'s (2003) literature review reveals a workforce poorly equipped by professional education, relying heavily on personal communication and 'gut instinct' to deliver packages of care. Horder (2004) too suggests that social work practice in the UK is imbued with a strong oral culture, and that practitioners are unsure what to read and face problems in accessing material.

Interpersonal communication can be viewed as informal learning in the workplace if it is accepted that such learning is something incidental, integrated into daily activity (Marsick & Volpe, 1999; Hodkinson et al, 2003), and, as such, may satisfy needs that formal channels do not satisfy. Face to face communication was the second most popular mode of informal learning (after reflection on previous knowledge and actions) in Berg and Chyung's (2008) study and such communication can act as a form of current awareness service, with colleagues collating, translating and evaluating on each others' behalf. However, there can be tension here, since not all recipients of such 'transmissions' may be exposed to equal amounts of information. This was discussed by the authors (Gannon-Leary 2006), whose findings indicated that managers and meetings were the most popular sources of information for practitioners but that attendance at meetings on the part of some managers

was erratic or non-existent. What may be needed is less peer-to-peer communication and more common information space.

Wilson and Streatfield's (2003) observation of senior staff at work suggests that they are on the 'look out' for information affecting their immediate work priorities and, to a lesser extent, their areas of responsibility and that most of the requisite legislation and the government circulars reach them 'eventually'.; However, problems appear to centre around digesting and acting upon the information received; ensuring that their knowledge of developments in their immediate sphere of work is up to date; and that they are being sufficiently alerted to trends relating to their work more generally.

Although the growth of electronic media offers the possibility of overcoming these barriers, their use requires skills that are underdeveloped. Gorman (1995) discusses the fact that the heavy reliance of practitioners on human sources of information has implications for the nature of information needs, including the narrative structure of their knowledge and the need for more than information alone. Increase in such resources as "validated reviews" or "expert networks" might help meet these needs. New technologies and the increase in the flow of information have expanded the possibilities for what Wenger calls 'communities of practice' (CoPs). In the social care sector, there is an emergent interest in building communities among practitioners who are seeking peer-to-peer connections and learning opportunities. For example, the ESRC MATCH project used Wenger's ideas as part of its theoretical framework.

Writing in the late 1980s, Timpka *et al.* (1989) recommended that consideration be given to ICTs for communication between practitioners. Fifteen years later Booker *et al* (2002) discuss how the Internet has made the transfer of knowledge of successful community development programs and processes possible by allowing practitioners to connect. Electronic networking facilitates communication between organisations and between sectors in multi-agency working and web-based community networks afford opportunities to share information through online databases more efficiently updated than printed sources. The best information sources provide relevant, valid material that can be accessed quickly and with minimal effort. New information tools are needed: they are likely to be electronic, portable, fast, easy to use, connected to both a large valid database of knowledge and the client record, and a servant of clients as well as practitioners.

Conclusions emerging from the research would therefore recommend a requirement for a robust ICT infrastructure to enable easy and rapid access to the knowledge base from the desktop, augmented by the provision of information literacy training. Again, ICTs should not be over-stressed for, as Brown and Duguid (2000) point out, in order for the users to be empowered, practitioners need to be empowered and that power is derived from the information, not the technology that delivers it:

“E-learning is fundamentally about learning and not about technology. Strategic development of e-learning should be based on the needs and

demands of learners and the quality of their educational experience.”
(JISC, 2004: 9)

Attwell (2005) has pointed out that the focus should be less on the development of ICTs but more on what works and does not work in the workplace. For this reason, information literacy training is stressed over information skills training. Current use of ICTs within the workplace setting may not incorporate CPD needs and social care staff may not be given protected staff training time. Booth et al (2003) and Moseley and Tierney (2005) describe the social care workplace as one in which action is valued over reflection. Workers lack the opportunity for reflective practice or time to read and digest the emerging materials. Practitioners feel uneasy taking time out to search out evidence or read research during working hours. It would appear there is a need for protected educational time for practitioners, especially those with an education and training remit, such as mentors. Glen 2002; Netteland, 2007)

Developing as a learning organisation that uses ICT requires a complex organisational transformation. So-called ‘slow’ adaptation to technological change is actually a characteristic of major innovations, particularly those requiring significant organisational change (Freeman, 1997). The implementation of ICTs to support government sector working is no exception to Freeman’s viewpoint - the implementation of major e-government projects is likely to be much slower than that predicted by government visionaries and technology producers (Carr and Gannon-Leary 2007a). Key themes identified by e-government project leaders which can be related to common issues in the Social Shaping of Technology, Technology Implementation and Strategic Information Systems Planning literature, include the following:

- the problem with narrow technological determinist views owing to the high expectations that often surround the introduction of novel technologies to existing organisational practices;
- technology implementation is a complex and uncertain socio-technical practice comprised of interrelated technical, cultural and organisational issues;
- innovation is not restricted to technology supply but continues throughout the entire implementation process;
- the need to create the space for *innofusion*¹ (Fleck, 1987) to occur within and between organisations through the development of learning organisations.

A key overall lesson for government visionaries is that complex technological change programmes take a long time to implement effectively owing to the disorientation they cause to practitioners and users alike – there is no such thing as a “quick-fix” solution (Carr and Gannon-Leary 2007a). E-government experiments require the transformation of local authorities into learning

¹ *Innofusion* is a term introduced by Fleck (1987) to describe the mutual adaptation of technology and work within specific organisational contexts.

organisations. This important cultural shift can be assisted through partnering with universities that have a track record in the social sciences and informatics disciplines. This key lesson and recommendation are equally applicable to the development of social care learning organisations.

Partnership with HEIs

There are a number of questions to consider in terms of the development of higher education institutions (HEIs) and social care partnerships. For example: How can HEIs best add value to the social care community through a period of profound ideological and structural change? Does the qualifying training presently on offer deliver a workforce fit for current (and future practice)? How can we ensure that what we, as educationalists, are offering is valued by the service providers and their users? How can HEIs form effective partnerships with social care practitioners?

To draw an analogy, a social care student going out into practice for the first time might be compared with a new driver who, having passed their test, immediately undertakes to drive from Newcastle to London on the motorway! Clearly some alignment is needed of the modernisation/reform agenda with curriculum development.

The authors participated in informal workshops or thought-showering exercises to canvass the opinions of academics and students on some of the issues explored above. They also engaged in participant observation of informal workshops.

In talking to academic staff, they voiced concerns that their students find class discussion of the modernisation agenda 'dry' and wonder how far they can make a difference and how far they can impact on services. Representation on committees is a potential way for practitioners/professionals to impact but, in respect of this and certain other workforce developments, academic staff were unsure of their own expertise, capacity or capability. Another area where this concern was expressed for example was in commissioning. Some cross-disciplinary input may be necessary: some academics felt that they, and their students, could learn from colleagues in the Business School.

In talking to students, a suggestion was mooted that, in order for students to keep up with recent developments in their area of study (i.e. the issue of accelerated knowledge renewal), an optional weekly session should be provided. There was some discussion about the issue of staff overload which could be addressed by different lecturers each covering one week per semester. Further discussion about the feasibility of this approach and its applicability to work-based learners, such as social care practitioners, raised questions about how far students would be prepared to turn up to optional sessions. As an alternative, the idea was developed into making the sessions available on a virtual learning environment which could have a discussion board/CoP feature to enable students, practitioners and staff to discuss such developments. Again, as a measure to avoid excessive staff workload, the informal student discussion group suggested that a partnership be formed

between staff, students and information professionals. The last-mentioned could help in this endeavour by guiding staff, practitioners and students to current awareness and alerting services, as well as helping with information literacy generally.

It would seem that HEIs face three key challenges in respect of this: firstly, keeping abreast of research; secondly, keeping abreast of changes in the social/organisational/professional context of social care; and thirdly, gaining knowledge of how social care practitioners learn. With regards to the first challenge, EBP demands the increasing use of research as a key tool to improve practice. However, there is little point in simply increasing the rate at which research flows to the social care workforce unless that research can be directly applied to practice, unless practitioners are equipped to digest research and unless appropriate support systems exist. The second challenge requires a better understanding of the relationship between social care research and the work of social care practitioners, including what organisational structures are needed to realise the aim of using research to improve practice. The third challenge is closely linked to the second challenge, but is perhaps more profound since it requires that academics try to put themselves in the shoes of social care practitioners to understand how they learn and how they use that learning in their day-to-day work. This is not an easy task, but it is one that educationalists need to master if they are to keep pace with the changing face of education and training both within HEIs and in the workplace.

At a policy level, the assumption by funding bodies about HEIs' expertise in the learning domain is mistaken, particularly when learning technology programmes are being developed for learners from non-educational fields (Carr and Gannon-Leary 2007b). Expertise-led visions can be as misguided as technology-led visions of learning technology implementation. It also leads to the question of how far education and training have actually merged: social care practitioners are likely to be more interested in training for immediate needs (at least initially) and HE offerings tend to be more long term. As it is difficult for learning technology developers and educators operating in the HE sector to envisage how practitioner learning occurs, learning materials developed in the HE sector are likely to contain embedded assumptions about learning based on HE rather than learning in social care contexts. Such assumptions are 'hardwired' into the material at the development stage, making adaptation to different users' requirements across different learning contexts more difficult to achieve.

Implications for HEIs are that the shaping of their interventions by approaches rooted in education may be inconsistent with learner needs within the social care context. To apply *learning* as a generic term is misleading. Traditional HE pedagogical approaches are likely to meet with limited success. Informal learning places much of the responsibility for learning with the individual, but various support mechanisms may be available in social care settings, such as teamwork, coaching, mentoring, job shadowing, networking, and the Internet. However, this may be somewhat limited, particularly in the smaller units with low staffing levels, fewer resources (including ICTs) and, possibly, lower

levels of ICT-based skills. While practitioners may enjoy formal training on occasion, their needs are likely to require that a compromise be reached between formal and informal training solutions. Indeed the two are likely to be complementary as informal knowledge-based learning 'chunks' may act as an incentive to undertake more formal training solutions.

The potential benefits of learning technology to support practitioner learning are unlikely to be realised unless learning technology developers and training providers take into account three important factors:

1. the requirement for appropriate content development through detailed needs analysis;
2. the difference between formal and informal learning support; and
3. issues surrounding the socialisation of learning technology.

These last-mentioned issues are likely to centre on providing the types of support on which practitioners normally draw when learning informally, such as networks of others, mentors, consultants and coaches. Support mechanisms to encourage the use of learning technology need to mirror the types of informal learning found commonly in social care contexts.

If HEIs are to position themselves as facilitators of learning and enablers of transformational change, agendas may need to be synchronised in order to exploit people, processes and technologies. People need to be flexible, adaptive, lifelong learners, constantly challenging, exposing to critical scrutiny, peer reviewing and self-reflecting. Processes need to ensure that promotion of learning, a learning culture and a research culture are core line management tasks. Technologies need to be harnessed to more innovative and flexible use. Indeed use of the term 'exploit' in relation to people, processes and technologies may be deemed inappropriate here because, in order to manage a learning environment that demands harnessing technology, it is vital that strong, trusting relationships are forged (Gannon-Leary, Baines and Wilson 2006).

Determining professional information needs: a case for action research?

In determining professional information needs, it is necessary to delineate the quantity, nature, quality, and media of information available to practitioners and professionals in social care; to assess their information seeking and handling behaviour; and to determine the information resources they use and reject. In addition it is necessary to explore the sources and attributes of information about policy available to *users* of social care services, and examine how various information resources are accessed, valued and used by them. In addition, consideration must be given to the changing roles and relationships between service providers, service users and intermediaries (e.g. support groups) in the light of new information resources.

- Ask practitioners/professionals about their perceptions of the adequacy of their undergraduate education to prepare them for practice, in respect of a variety of skills and abilities, including self-directed learning, enquiry based learning, evidence based practice and information literacy.

- Ask employers if HEIs are providing practitioners/professionals prepared for practice, in respect of a variety of skills and abilities, Check whether professional accrediting bodies are keeping pace with developments
- Do academics appreciate the new realities? If they do, do they understand how they fit together?
- What are the expectations of service organisations?
- If we are to use electronic formats, which media are the most appropriate for practitioners, employers, organisations

As a result of this delineation and exploration, it should be possible to draw upon the findings to provide a framework of appropriate methods to facilitate the information seeking and acquisition process for professionals, service users and intermediaries. It should then be possible to engage with the stakeholders to test the findings and feasibility of the framework, e.g. the development of a curriculum, training manuals in a variety of formats including CDs, DVDs, podcasts, digital repositories, virtual learning environments and online communities of practice. Results from the action research should help to close the gap between learner expectations and the actual experience of e-learning to try to produce quality, personalised e-learning services (Frydenberg 2002; Dagger et al 2004; Taylor 2008). By being able to access a variety of formats and approaches, the learner should feel more responsible for, and in control of, their own learning experience. Use of concepts and examples from the real world of social care work should ensure that, whilst resources are accessed virtually, the social aspects of learning are supported by face to face communication between colleagues engaged in the same learning process.

If e-learning is integrated into work-based activities involving use of information, evidence, policy documents etc then it becomes part of the culture and has the potential to break down the divide between e-learning and knowledge management. Andragogically it integrates the acquisition of knowledge with working practices, developing what Fischer (1998) has referred to as work process knowledge. Nyhan *et al.* (2003) discuss the promotion of the learning organisation and of 'developmental work tasks' which develop work process knowledge and, as Attwell (2005) points out, the challenge in developing work-based e-learning is to integrate ICTs in such a way that they support these developmental work tasks.

The challenge would appear to be the more effective integration of practice, research and education. The growing expertise gained by HEIs in the implementation of learning technology can be improved and adapted for use in the social care learning context if HE educators, learning technology developers, social care trainers and public funding bodies recognise five key factors:

1. That learning technology implementation is a socio-technical practice;
2. The importance of informal learning to practitioner learners;
3. That the more the intended use of learning technology deviates from the developing institution's practice, the more attention must be paid to the context of learning use;

4. The value of involving end-users in the development stage to provide an understanding of the context of learning use; and
5. The need for analytical frameworks for studying learning technology in use to provide a feedback loop into the context of learning development.

Essentially ICTs should not only be viewed as a tool for placing learners in the midst of the learning process, but also as a tool which should be developed in conjunction with the intended learners, i.e. placing the learners in the midst of the *learning design process* should be the prime objective of any e-learning initiative. Otherwise it is akin to putting the proverbial cart before the horse, with the usual disappointing results in terms of learner progress.

Research networks and collaborative partnerships between HEIs and services have the potential to facilitate the development and implementation of career pathways and CPD capable of recognizing the integration of practice, research and education (Glen, 2002). Such networks or partnerships may take the form of CoPs or multi-actor learning communities. Ellström (1997) argues that practitioners need to adopt a broad developmental and interactive view of occupational competence to complement work process knowledge if CoPs are to flourish. Social care practice is not only informed by research, but new knowledge about practice is capable of being generated by the practitioners themselves. In the process of acquiring and transmitting knowledge, they also construct and create knowledge to cope with the complexities of their everyday practice. Recognition of the key role practitioners can play in the generation and application of new knowledge can foster CoP development (Engeström, 1995; Hara & Hew, 2007). To cope with the demands of EBP, Karvinen-Niinikoski (2005) suggests extension of the concept of 'research-mindedness' to 'practice-research-mindedness' and the conceptive of the researching practitioner, engaged in a knowledge-creating and knowledge-sharing community.

Concluding remarks

Changes in HE and the partnerships they form have continued in response to, or indeed in anticipation of, an increasingly competitive environment, technological advances and shifting demands of users. Across the HE sector, the rationale for e-learning and its benefits are largely accepted. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) strategy for e-learning (2009) demonstrates a commitment to supporting sustainable e-learning in HEIs and is indicative of an acknowledgement that students learn in different ways and wish to have information presented in alternative formats. It is also indicative of a response to changing student needs that include the desire for flexible learning opportunities, including work-based learning.

The authors acknowledge that it should not be assumed that knowledge learned via the use of ICTs transfers unproblematically from one context to another. A decade ago Sfard (1998), in her discussion of the Acquisition Metaphor (AM) for learning, focusing on knowledge as a prized possession to be appropriated, and the Participation Metaphor (PM) for learning, focusing on

becoming a member of a community and assimilating its language and norms, described such metaphors as a double-edged sword. They make abstract thinking and theorising possible but they also constrain us within our past experiences and (pre)conceptions. Sfard believes that researchers can produce a patchwork of metaphors rather than a unified homogenous theory of learning.

Currently, Hager and Hodkinson (2009) argue that much contemporary educational policy makes assumptions about learning that are directly contradicted by research, assumptions largely attributable to adherence by key stakeholders (e.g. policy makers and employers) to simplistic notions of learning transfer. Indeed the authors of this paper have made similar arguments in their research of attempts by the Higher Education sector to 'transfer' online learning material to the small business sector (Carr, 2005; Carr and Gannon-Leary, 2007b; Gannon-Leary and Carr, 2010, *in press*). Hager and Hodkinson (2009) argue that 'transfer' is an inappropriate metaphor for thinking about vocational learning. Furthermore they suggest that it is more realistic to view 'transfer' as renovation and expansion of previous knowledge via the experience of dealing with new situations in new settings, so that learning is more fruitfully viewed as an ongoing process rather than as a series of acquisition events. Much transitional learning will take place within the workplace and Hager and Hodkinson believe that educational courses will not produce the 'oven ready workers' described by Brown and Hesketh (2004). In technological transformation it is critical to address the concerns and perceptions of the stakeholders in the light of the need to change their attitudes and maturation of their practices in effective use of ICTs alongside the ICT maturation process (Calverley and Dexter, 2007) At the same time, consideration should be given to the appropriateness of existing learning, teaching and assessment mechanisms, whether their delivery may be enhanced using e-methods appropriate for the context of use, and how far such methods can facilitate practitioners' development.

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