Enhancing your healthcare practice

Unit 2
Managing your learning opportunities
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Unit 2 Managing your learning opportunities

With the increased pace of change in healthcare delivery, how confident are you that what you think you know and understand is indeed current thinking? It can be frightening to think about how quickly things change, with knowledge constantly moving forward. Some basic concepts have a longer life expectancy, but the knowledge base is changing so quickly that you could never learn enough from one module like K117 to last a lifetime. All we can do is encourage and stimulate you to want to learn. You must be committed to learning throughout your career – as the saying goes, knowledge ‘does not keep any better than fish’ (Whitehead, 1932, p. 147).

For the past decade, the Department of Health has viewed lifelong learning as being linked to both organisational and individual needs (Department of Health, 2001). This is not unique to England – for example, the publication of ‘Better Health, Better Care’ by NHS Scotland in 2008 also stresses the importance of lifelong learning. Employees have a need to meet career goals and learn things that are satisfying and enlightening. At the same time, employers need staff who can change as their organisation changes and maintain high standards in practice by developing new knowledge and skills. This has become increasingly important in the first part of the 21st century with responsibilities for care often shifting away from the registered workforce to other healthcare workers (Skills for Health, 2011).

In this unit you examine the interplay between your needs and those of your organisation as your career and learning progresses. Learning and development is a major priority for workers in healthcare, and while this unit draws your attention to organisational factors that impact on your practice, you also have opportunity to examine your motivations for learning. You then consider the career structures in the healthcare fields before concluding with an examination of some of the obstacles to ongoing learning. This unit also has a practical outcome in that it provides guidance to help you negotiate the development of your Portfolio with your supervisor and from this, the learning agreement that will be used to support your ongoing development.

2.1 Your learning, a personal business?

While your learning may feel like a very personal matter, it does not exist in a vacuum. The political climate, the requirements of statutory bodies and
professional bodies that impact on your practice area, and the changing needs of your service all influence the kinds of learning available and required of you. In the first activity of this unit you consider what influences your learning.

Activity 2.1 Influences on learning
Allow 30 minutes

The following press release was issued by the then Chief Nursing Officer for England, Chris Beasley, at the height of significant infection rates in the NHS.

Read the press release and identify the influences on how and what you learn. Can you think of any other influences beyond those mentioned in the article? For example, you might think about how you could promote cleanliness if working from a community base.

New Chief Nurse says all staff must play their part in fight against MRSA

Over one million NHS staff will receive infection control training to help in the fight against MRSA, the new Chief Nursing Officer Chris Beasley announced today. All staff covered by the new NHS pay scheme Agenda for Change – including nurses, porters, cleaners and healthcare assistants – must show that they are able to reduce the risk of healthcare associated infections, including MRSA.
Chris Beasley said:

‘Tackling hospital acquired infections is my top priority, and I have set out a number of ways to do this in the Matron’s Charter, published last month. However, there is another front on which we will fight MRSA: through Agenda for Change. The proposed new Knowledge and Skills Framework – a key part of the Agenda for Change package – will help staff to recognise they can play a part in maintaining high standards of cleanliness in the NHS.

‘All staff covered by Agenda for Change, whether nurses, healthcare assistants, porters or cleaners, must show that they can develop and apply the appropriate knowledge and skills to reduce the risks of healthcare associated infections. Personal development plans will give staff and managers an opportunity to identify how to raise standards of cleanliness.

‘So Agenda for Change will not just be good for nurses’ pay and careers but it will also be another weapon against the number one concern for patients.’

Chris Beasley was speaking on the first day of the Chief Nursing Officers’ conference, held [in November 2004] in Manchester.

Government News, 2004

Discussion

The first influence on the learning agenda was the rise in the occurrence of Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA). At the time of this press release, the UK had one of the highest rates of ‘superbug’ MRSA in Europe. At the height of the outbreak, MRSA contributed (was part of the reason for) approximately 5,000 deaths annually, with costs to the NHS estimated to exceed £1bn (National Audit Office, 2004). The story shows the way that the learning agenda is closely tied to the quality agenda.

The article also highlights the structures in place to provide directives, support and incentives for learning. Agenda for Change (linked to career progression and salary), the Knowledge and Skills Framework (KSF) and personal development plans are all being used to shape the workforce’s learning. You may have encountered these initiatives in your practice setting already and you encounter Agenda for Change and the KSF later in this unit.

In terms of other influences on your learning, you may also have thought about your own plans for career progression. What you need to learn in order to move into a particular role is partly determined by employers. The NHS is addressing problems with staff recruitment and retention by using the KSF to provide clear career pathways and opportunities to ‘learn while you earn’. Moreover, professional courses, such as those for nurses, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, are developed with reference to the requirements of the respective statutory/professional bodies guiding these professions. Your continuing professional development is influenced by issues of public protection and regulation of practitioners.
With the implementation of Agenda for Change, the NHS has developed a transparent system of career pathways and recognised skills and attributes needed for progression between grades. At a conceptual level, the Skills Escalator is a model career framework which operates at all levels in the NHS workforce, offering a recruitment message of opportunity for progression. In theory, staff potentially can progress from being a cleaner or porter to a consultant or chief executive (DH, 2007).

The principles of progression are mirrored in all the national government departments. For example, in Northern Ireland, a document entitled ‘A Workforce Learning Strategy for the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Services 2009 – 2014’ confirmed its support for skills escalation by stating that:

individuals should be supported to expand their skills in line with individual aspirations and organisation needs. [...] We have a responsibility for describing possible routes for career progression and the development of opportunities to facilitate appropriate upskilling.

DHSSPS, 2009, p.16

To meet the need to recruit and retain more staff by expanding their opportunities for progression, the Skills Escalator offers a variety of step-on and step-off points in a journey towards a career goal. There are traditional entry points through formal academic programmes leading to professional registration, but these are complemented by other entry routes such as cadet schemes, role conversion and foundation degrees. Figure 2.1 demonstrates how the Skills Escalator concept enables an individual to progress in their career.

Within this career framework, learning is essential to career progression, with progress linked to ongoing development. The KSF is a tool for ongoing staff review and development. It identifies the skills and knowledge staff need to do their jobs. It is both the basis for staff development and for pay progression. Although you probably have some awareness of both the KSF and Agenda for Change, the next activity will help you consider their relevance to your practice setting.

Activity 2.2 The Knowledge and Skills Framework
Allow 1 hour

Read Resource 2.1: Ladder of success, which describes how the KSF affects career progression, with your practice setting in mind. Thinking of your personal development, both immediate and in the future, what advantages and challenges does this framework offer to your learning and development?

Discussion

You probably identified a number of advantages:

- Having a pathway and development plan for your career may help motivate you to stay in what can be perceived as a demanding job.
You may enjoy the rewards of being paid for what you have learned and can do.

The annual review may mean that the ‘unseen activities’ of your work become recognised.
The personal development plan may provide you with opportunities to learn on the job and to have that learning recognised.

Some of the challenges might be:

- The article mentions the challenges of ensuring that everyone has learning and development options. Funding is often short and this may mean that regardless of what you or your manager want, funds are not available to advance your learning.
- The framework may be seen as just another initiative in a wave of initiatives leading to weariness and apathy.
- The framework is driven by the need for service and business improvement. The individual benefits of learning may be secondary to these organisational benefits. In other words, the things you need to learn may not be what you are most interested in.

It would be easy to get the impression that career progression is a matter of clear strategy and planning – of going up escalators, climbing ladders and moving across frameworks. Is this the reality though? What has been your experience?

### 2.2 Career pathways

For many people life just seems to happen. We follow childhood ambitions, respond intuitively according to our beliefs and values, or go the way that circumstance demands or that society expects of us at the time. However, reflecting back on our lives we may recognise patterns that tell us a lot about our goals, motivations and values. In the next activity you consider an example of one possible career path.

#### Activity 2.3 Developing in practice

Allow 30 minutes

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Read the ‘Developing in practice’ case study below. Make notes on the following areas:

- What were the significant experiences in Margaret’s career?
- What were the main sources of motivation for Margaret?
- How has Margaret changed throughout her life?

#### Developing in practice: profile of a healthcare assistant

Margaret left school aged 15 and went to work as an office junior in a local company office. When I interviewed Margaret, she described this as an ‘interesting enough job’ until she met her husband to be. ‘Getting married and then having my three girls was wonderful, the most
important of all jobs is being a mum and caring for your family’, she told me with a beaming smile.

When her youngest daughter was five Margaret became a dinner lady at a local school, a job she enjoyed very much – so much that she stayed there for 15 years. Unfortunately at this time her mum became ill with lung cancer and Margaret left her dinner lady role to look after her in London. Back home after this event, Margaret applied for the role as cleaner for a GP practice, where she continued to look after everyone and ensure everything was kept in good shape. A change was taking place however, and Margaret began to notice that new roles were being developed in the Primary Care Trust (PCT) initiatives. Not thinking this would affect her in any way, she carried on supporting everyone until Helen the practice manager asked her if she would like a change as there was a new healthcare assistant (HCA) role being developed to work in GPs’ surgeries. She admitted that at first this came as a bit of a shock, as she felt she could never have the confidence to do this type of thing – after all, she had always put doctors and nurses on a pedestal and could not imagine working alongside them.

Thankfully, with a little persuasion and a lot of support from Helen and her colleagues, she agreed to give it a try and put her name down for the next HCA course being run at the PCT. The study groups were interesting and she quickly learned new clinical skills. She began supporting the nurses, observing practice and keeping the treatment room in good order. Little by little, the nurses began asking her to do things, and looking back she knows that she learned something new every day (and that she is still learning). Margaret feels very much supported by the nurses in the practice and appreciates how they have guided her and bolstered her up when she felt her confidence waning. ‘I have learned so much!’ she says.

‘Both my mother and father died of smoking related diseases and I agree that I used to get angry with people who smoked but were ill. Since starting the course I have recognised that my beliefs, culture and
attitudes caused me to react angrily rather than be constructive with people, and now I can provide support through encouraging them to make lifestyle changes.’

Margaret’s role has grown phenomenally since she began. Her favourite thing is wound care and she feels a great sense of achievement when she can see things improving. She loves the patient contact and the caring side of things, and is helping to run diabetes and asthma clinics with the nurses. Other parts of her role include blood pressure monitoring, taking ECGs, ordering and sterilising the equipment. She also runs a lifestyle clinic. Here, she is able to measure Body Mass Index and discuss healthier ways of eating with patients who have been referred by the GP.

Margaret readily admits that she always wanted to aspire to a role where she could be recognised for her skills and knowledge, but always felt no good and had no confidence. She is still unable to believe how well she has done, and after getting to grips with the next stage of the module is getting glowing reports from her assessor, Sally. She loves her new role and is keen to carry on learning.

Discussion

You may have identified the following as significant points in Margaret’s career:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points in career</th>
<th>Driving forces and motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Office junior</td>
<td>Convention, maybe biding time. Margaret seems to have drifted into this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time mother</td>
<td>Possibly one of Margaret’s main ambitions at the time as she says that this is the most important of all jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinner lady</td>
<td>Convenience, and the fact that Margaret seems to enjoy the caring aspect of the role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer for mother</td>
<td>Family bond, need to nurture, expected role of daughter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaner in surgery</td>
<td>Margaret saw an opportunity to nurture and support people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare assistant training:</td>
<td>Margaret needed persuading about her potential from someone who believed in her abilities, but she was excited at the chance to develop her role in direct patient care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Who knows what other opportunities will follow!

A key motivation in Margaret’s career was her desire to nurture and care. However, this was not enough on its own to develop her career. She needed other sources of motivation, such as her practice manager’s encouragement, to help her to see what more she could offer. Her colleagues were a continual source of support and encouragement.

Margaret changed throughout her career. Until she started to work towards and achieve goals she seemed to have a low self-esteem. She now
recognises herself as a learner and an achiever. She also stresses the importance of her role as a mother and wants people to recognise that this is also important work.

In reviewing Margaret’s life, you might have thought that some of her most valuable learning experiences were as a wife and mother. In the next activity you examine the significant points in your own life, your motivations and how you have changed as your experiences and aspirations have developed.

Motivations and aspirations

Activity 2.4 Your career

Allow 1 hour

In this activity, you need to consider the key drivers and events in your career. Open the timeline below (Figure 2.2) and mark the main learning experiences and career changes in your life by writing detail of each on a post-it note and adding them to the timeline. You might like to add the age you were for each of the post-it notes as well.

Figure 2.2 Your career timeline

Once you have finished, review your timeline focusing on these questions:

- What were the significant experiences in your life and career?
- What were the main sources of your motivation?
- How have you changed?

Discussion

The significant points in your career may have been a mixture of opportunity, accident and surprise. You may have initiated some of the significant events, such as applying for a particular job. Others may have been imposed on you, such as any enforced changes to working roles. In terms of where you are now, are you doing things that are helping you to achieve your goals or are you still finding out what it is you want to do with your life and career? It is likely that you have had to balance different roles such as carer and healthcare worker. This will now be further challenged by your role as a student. You may find that having multiple roles affects your movement towards your goals. For example, you might find it difficult to balance caring responsibilities with studying, but the need to support the person you are caring for may increase your determination to move on in your career. It is important that you find ways to study effectively within the confines of your existing roles to increase your opportunity for personal and practice development.

Sources of motivation vary. They may be financial, driven by personal aspirations or you may be motivated to work or study because you enjoy the
job or subject. Supportive colleagues or friends may be important to keep you on track. Of course, there are the realities of life as well. The jobs you choose may reflect other priorities – for example, you may be working part time so that you can focus on parenting. As each role has developed, it is likely that your self-confidence has grown in parallel.

You have spent some time looking back over the progression of your life and your career, and explored the kind of experiences that have had an impact on you, and what motivates you. These issues are important in negotiating your learning agreement with your supervisor (which you will do in Activity 2.8) to determine the knowledge and skills needed as you consider your future role(s). You have probably thought about this and may have some plans already. The next activity will help refine your thinking in relation to your learning agreement.

Activity 2.5 Where do I want to go?
Allow 1 hour

In this activity you begin to develop some ideas about where you would like your career to go. While you may like to spend some time daydreaming about your future, you will also need to do some focused thinking and a little research.

Start by jotting down some notes about what role you would like to hold in the future. To spark off your thinking, look at your notes from the previous activity and from Activity 1.2 in which you identified your personal strengths. What do these notes tell you about what career you would like? Perhaps they suggest you would like to work with children or older people. Maybe you would like to manager a team or a service. Your notes may suggest that you are interested in a very specific area, such as helping people with speech difficulties or mental health problems.

Next, consider how well informed you are about the area of work in which you want to develop or move into. What options are open to you? You can learn more about potential roles and professions in healthcare by clicking on the following web links:

- NHS careers for England
- Healthcare careers in Scotland
- Healthcare careers in England and Wales
- The Health Professions Council for information about the allied health professions
- The Nursing and Midwifery Council.

You do not need to read everything on these websites: try to focus on the specific aspects that interest you. When you find the career field that you are most interested in, take notes on what it entails and what study and experience you might need to fulfil your career aspirations.
Discussion

As you scanned these websites, you will have become aware of a number of ways your career could progress. You may have found the sheer number of options inspiring or even possibly confusing. Did you identify any roles that you thought would suit you?

It’s not ‘pie in the sky’ to plan your career. You don’t have to follow your original plans slavishly, or think that you have failed if your ideas change and you go in a different direction. But it is worthwhile taking your aspirations seriously enough to find out about all the educational opportunities open to you. Knowing about your chosen career, keeping up to date with how it changes and finding ways into the role can help you recognise and optimise opportunities when they arise. You may want to share your plans with your supervisor when you meet to discuss your practice development and when you negotiate your learning agreement.

So far you have considered career pathways and focused on the role you wish to develop or the kind of role you wish to move into. The opportunities available in practice need to be captured in a way that supports career development. It is important that you recognise the value of practice and use this as a resource for learning.

2.3 Practice – a resource for learning

You can learn about healthcare practice through a vast range of experiences and learning opportunities. Some of these experiences will be immediately obvious, others less so. How can you increase your awareness of the learning opportunities available to you in practice?

To start with, let’s question what learning is. ‘Learning involves making changes – in your knowing, thinking, feeling and doing’ (Rogers, 1992, cited in Waldman, 1999, p. 11). Some of these changes are permanent, others temporary. In essence, learning is a change in yourself that leads to changes in your working practices.

Learning through experience is extremely powerful. Learning often connects with what you value and already know. Learning isn’t always easy: new ideas take time to absorb, skills need practice and old habits need to be broken as you look for new and more effective ways of practising. Learning challenges existing ways you practice and can offer solutions to complex issues arising from healthcare. In order to develop, you need to leave yourself open to learning and be prepared to be corrected. How do you learn from practice?

Activity 2.6 Learning in practice

Allow 2 hours

Make a list of the things you have learned since you have taken on the role of a student on K117. Include direct care activities as well as some of the related work such as dealing with paperwork or participating in meetings.
Next identify how you have learned the things that you have listed. You may be tempted to write ‘learned on the job’, but push yourself to think about how you have been exposed to new ways of doing things. Discuss your learning with your supervisor.

You might wish to create a simple table in your notes to record your responses, for example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I have learnt about</th>
<th>How I learnt it</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

You may be surprised at how much you have learnt since taking on the role of student although you are only a few weeks into the module. While your learning will be highly individual and related to your specific role and the learning opportunities available from practice, the methods you use for learning are likely to be varied. They may include:

- shadowing other staff to observe an element of practice and then practising the skill under appropriate supervision
- receiving feedback from your colleagues
- discussing care situations/events with colleagues
- thinking/reflecting about your day and trying to do it better next time
- reading specialist magazines or journals such as the Health Service Journal or Community Care that may be pertinent to your practice.

You may have noted that most of your learning was informal and arose from what you bring to learning in respect to life and practice experiences. You may find times when you think you don’t have time to think, let alone sit down and try to learn something new. Indeed, there might be occasions when you think that your job is an obstacle to learning. What are some of the barriers to learning?

Obstacles to your learning

Activity 2.7 Obstacles to your learning

Allow 1 hour
Go to Resource 2.2: A study of occupational therapists' perceptions of clinical governance. This article focuses on the issues for occupational therapists, but even if this is not your intended professional pathway, it is likely that much of the detail will be relevant to you. The article’s introduction and method will provide some useful context, but focus your reading on the ‘discussion and findings’ section. As you read, note down:

- the obstacles to professional development
- the enablers of professional development (things that make it easier).

Reflect on your own practice and experiences. What enablers or obstacles are you aware of that impact on your learning and development?

Next go to your tutor group forum and share with other students up to three enablers and three obstacles that impact on your learning and development. With those things that are seen as obstacles, highlight what you may do to make these less problematic. Read the postings by other students and consider if any of their strategies might help you in your practice setting.

**Discussion**

It is likely that your experiences and reflections will not be unique. Other students are likely to contribute similar issues that cause difficulties for them in their learning and development. Think about how best you can use the learning community in the forum for peer support and development.

Recognising that personal difficulties are shared by others can help create a sense of perspective and de-personalise the problems you are encountering. You may have found that you identified with the occupational therapists and realised that your own concerns relating to staying on top of your learning are not a personal failing. Your list of enablers and barriers is likely to include some of the following:

**Obstacles**

- limited time available for learning
- feeling guilty over taking time for learning activities when colleagues are under pressure, or prioritising learning over client contact
- resistance to and defensive attitudes about change limiting opportunity for learning
- working in an environment where there is constant change and reorganisation creating staff wariness and defensiveness
- unease about knowing how to reflect, with whom to share reflections, how to record them and finding time to reflect.

Enablers
- working with managers who prioritise training and education
- feeling valued as a student, included and understood within the team
- working in a culture that is reflective, collaborative and non-blaming where you can learn from mistakes
- where opportunities exist to reflect with a trusted colleague or supervisor.

The article you read suggests that professionals feel that professional development time can erode the priority for patient care. However it is important to remember that at its most effective, professional development facilitates improved patient care and never detracts from it.

Leaving personal development to chance is risky. Negotiating a learning agreement to support your study can help you focus on what is important for your development. This agreement is not designed to replace your professional development plan (probably developed as part of your review process if you are working as a support worker). If you have had a review recently, you will find it helpful to refer to this when developing your learning agreement.

Activity 2.8 Your negotiated learning agreement
Allow 2 hours 30 minutes

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In this activity you will create a learning agreement to help you focus and personalise your learning during K117. At your initial review meeting with your supervisor and practice tutor you should have agreed some practice-focused learning needs and recorded these in the Ongoing Achievement Record (OAR) pages of your Portfolio. If you haven’t completed your initial review meeting yet, you need to do this as soon as you can, as information in your OAR will contribute to your learning agreement and to your first TMA.
Go to the Learning agreement template. You will see it is divided into three sections. The first section is for your practice learning needs: copy the information from your OAR initial review meeting into this section. The second section relates to your professional/career-focused learning needs and the third section to your personal learning needs.

If you’re not sure yet what you might achieve by studying K117, it is worth reviewing the learning outcomes for each block. As you read through the outcomes think about the following:

- Which outcomes will particularly help you to meet the requirements of your role, whether this is your current role or a new role that you are working towards?
- Which outcomes will help you to develop a professional approach to your current role or new role?
- Which outcomes will you find challenging because you know they require personal skills that you have previously found difficult or have not yet had the opportunity to develop?

Make a note of the outcomes that you think will be especially important to you and the sort of learning experiences that you think will help you to meet them.

Now go back to your learning agreement template and add at least two learning needs relating to your professional / career development and at least two relating to your personal development. You will also need to identify how you plan to meet these learning needs. These plans are likely to be influenced by the way your prefer to learn (Activity 1.7) and your access to resources.

Share this learning agreement with your supervisor, so that he/she knows what you are working towards with respect to your professional and personal learning as well as your practice learning. Your supervisor may offer suggestions or advice about how you might meet your learning needs, so add these to your learning agreement.

Discussion

Your learning agreement is personal to you. It should reflect your particular interests in studying K117, the context in which you work, the role that you aspire to and areas for personal development. It provides you with a clear structure and focus for your learning and is an essential part of your first assignment.

Unit 2 summary

This unit focused on the personal, organisational and policy drivers for your learning and career development. You may be feeling quite focused on where you want your development to lead you. Alternatively, you may feel that by considering other options you have become less certain. You have identified the ways in which practice may support or create obstacles to your learning and career development. Your discussion with your supervisor
should have helped you identify some strategies to overcome these difficulties to learning and led to a shared understanding between your supervisor and you on what your learning needs are and how they can be met.

**Practice-based activities**

In Unit 2 you have looked at personal and professional development. The activities are intended to stimulate thinking around how these factors influence practice. When in practice, you should identify:

- the drivers in your practice setting that influence learning
- what opportunities you see in the medium/long term in your organisation for career development along the Skills Escalator
- how your learning can impact on your assessment within the KSF
- what your motivations are for personal and professional development
- who you can draw on to help lessen any obstacles to learning in practice.
References


Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources:

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