

THERAPISTS AS TEACHERS: IMPROVING YOUR SKILLS

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Introduction

As therapists we wear many hats. With these hats come many roles, differing interpretation of these roles and high expectations. Our work is sometimes hard to define because we instruct volunteers, provide information to caregivers, and make reports to staff and peers. We lead support groups, programs and organize events. We raise funds, advocate for our clients and promote both our profession and the organizations we work for. Is it any wonder that we give the impression that we can attempt anything? I have observed that this image of diversity has resulted in us justifying our jobs, constantly educating others about our work and clarifying what we really do. It seems to me that depending on what philosophical foundation our employer has and what the financial climate is, we then focus our attention on one of the following three factors: clarifying our roles, demonstrating the value of our work or documenting the impact that we have made. As the nature of our work changes with multi-tasking and job definition, accountability is more of an issue than ever before.

It was this pressure that led me to the literature to find solutions to the problems facing our profession. As I explored the literature it became clear to me that I needed to be proactive to resolve these issues. Part of this process was the need to be clear about my contributions to the team, the amount of time it takes to articulate these contributions and how I actually communicated this information about my contributions. As I explored the literature I discovered concepts in the field of adult education that supported my thinking, and also gave me strategies that I could use in my practice. As I developed an understanding of, and an appreciation for, the links between therapy and education, I adopted teaching principles. To better understand these teaching principles and the similarities between the work of therapists and teachers we need to refer to the literature. In the literature, the processes of teaching and learning are grouped into several categories of influence or responsibilities. Each of these categories includes responsibilities for the learner, the teacher and the environment. In conceptualizing these roles for ourselves as recreation therapists, I suggest that you think of the "learner" as the client, the caregiver, volunteer or anyone who would be listening and responding to your instructions. The role of the "teacher" would be the recreation therapist as you define the job. The "environment" includes all of the components and dynamics of your place of work. The learner, the teacher and the environment participate and work together to increase satisfaction for everyone. This would be exemplified by the learner applying new strategies, the teacher observing and supporting the learner, and the workplace acknowledging and supporting the learning. To exemplify the interactions among the three variables, the learner, the teacher and the environment, I presented a visual analogy of a juggler with three balls. Two volunteers assisted in the demonstration. One individual recorded the audience's response to the question "What were the responsibilities of the three variables?" The second volunteer was a student who was taught the skills of juggling. This visual analogy gave the audience an opportunity to experience the variables in another sensory mode, observe modeling and participate in the articulation of the concepts. The results from the exercise were as follows:



Learner's Responsibilities

- to know what their needs are
- to be aware of their expectations
- to have questions
- to be informed of the content before attending the learning session
- to be willing to attend the presentation and participate fully
- to listen, think and concentrate on the presentation
- to reflect during the presentation as to how to use the information
- to be motivated
- to take risks

Teacher's Responsibilities

- to know the needs of the learners and of the workplace
- to know who the players are
- to know what the main issues are and what the stakes are
- to be enthusiastic
- to feel confident as an expert
- to take risks
- to be patient
- to be aware of different learning styles

Environment's Or Workplace Responsibilities

- to have clearly defined objectives and outcomes
- to be congruent with service delivery and education goals
- to be able to articulate the needs of all parties involved
- to provide a supportive environment for the exchange of information
- to inform all levels of administration of the content and process
- to be aware of the presentation level in relation to the audience
- to provide the necessary resources

Defining these responsibilities makes it easier to see the complexity of each of these variables. It is not difficult to see why or how some educational interventions fail, for that matter, how or why some of our therapeutic interventions fail. Since each one of these variables can be re-labeled as client, therapist, and the workplace. It seems evident that there are similarities in the way that teachers do their work and the way we do ours. Using the perspective of the recreation therapist as teacher, we can see that the responsibilities of the learner, the teacher and the environment provide a basis for choosing strategies that will increase the chances of our messages being heard and used. This exercise exemplifies the connections between teachers' and therapists' responsibilities as communicators of information. The relationships and outcomes seem to be parallel in promoting the exchange and use of strategies as a way of getting the job done.

Another point that I believe needs to be acknowledged is that each one of these variables is value laden. This compounds the very nature of each variable. How we think and behave is directly linked to what we believe to be true. The learner (client), teacher (therapist), and environment (workplace) is each part of the team. Each variable brings values, experiences, and issues to each situation.

This thorough discussion of the balls as variables has not brought into focus the role of the juggler. The juggler represents the concept of transfer of learning. Transfer strategies are the interventions that each of the three variables use to increase the probability of their message being heard and used. This is not to say that all of the strategies identified need to be used but, that an awareness and select use are necessary.



Clearly the degree to which each of the variables takes on their responsibilities significantly contributes to the juggler being able to juggle and not dropping any of the balls. Hence, the extent to which these variables are addressed will determine the degree of transfer of learning.

As a reader you may be thinking that, this is all very interesting. I know how complex my job is and I have a better understanding of the different roles in the process of learning. But I am not a teacher, I am a therapist. I do not have time to think or even do anything differently. I am overextended now, and the nature of my work is changing in such a way that more is going to be demanded of me. What does this really have to do with me? How can I use any of this information in a practical way? From my experience, when I invested the time and energy and used two strategies consistently, I was amazed at the significant difference it made in relation to the learners' use of information that I shared with them. Yes, I broke the rules in how I defined an educational intervention. The literature defines clear parameters around the definition of a learning setting or educational intervention. However, I see our work in the hallways, at the bedside, in team meetings and delivering programs as educational interventions. I believe that you do not need an hour to implement these strategies. I believe that you can implement any of these strategies as part of your work within five minute contacts. I have experienced that it does make a difference in how that learner/listener uses the information.

I would suggest that you begin by thinking about the specific place where you do your work. Think about how you do it and with whom. Then identify an issue. Examples might include, sharing resident information at a team meeting, training new volunteers, leading a support group for caregivers. When you have defined the "who", "what", "where" and "when", you then proceed to select from the following transfer strategies that best suits your circumstances.

Pre - Intervention Strategies

Take advantage of your perspective, acknowledging that you have expertise to share. Share your observations and opinions through objective measurable examples. **Example:** charting process, sharing at case conferences, sharing at team meetings. Make a conscious choice regarding your actions. Prioritize your actions. It is not possible to be in all places and do all things all the time. Determine who the key players are. Be sure these people have the facts. Create some "Hoop la" before a formal educational intervention. It is very important that a message of support be given by management to reinforce the significance of the training for the individual and team. **Examples:**

Familiarize the management with the content prior to the session. Encourage the content to be shared with all staff before the session. Offer training at a variety of times and dates to allow for maximum participation. Ensure information is distributed to all verbally and visually.

Distribute to all participants and management a self-assessment questionnaire prior to the event. How do I rate? (example Appendix 1) This will establish a baseline for evaluation. It will give direct feedback to the teacher, learner and management. This assessment will also provide an opportunity to stimulate self-reflection, critical thinking and expectations. This exercise also assists in self-awareness and enhances the concept of responsibility.

Work groups

It is essential that management be informed of the importance that learners attend educational sessions in their natural work groups. Work is not an individual activity. The result is that staff will support and reinforce each other as they work. They will naturally review and practice in the work setting what they have learned. They will more likely try new behaviors, be more observant of each other and compliment



each others work more. Morale increases with job performance.

Create Expectations

All participants involved need to be aware of and articulate their expectations. Expectations are directly linked to accountability and responsibility. If expectations are not clear, how can you know if you are meeting their needs or the needs of the organization.

Intervention Strategies

Rapport is key to the development of relationship and must be established quickly during the exchange of information. This can be done in numerous ways but should be done quickly so that sufficient time remains for conveying the intended content. Modeling as an instructional method is effective. Learners need to see, hear and experience a concept. A teaching principle articulated by Brundage & MacKeracher, (1980) is that facilitators model behavior that is relevant to the learners. Life-like situations can be included for discussion and analyzed by focusing on specific issues. This encourages learners to think of how they can use the information.

Mental Rehearsal

Imagine that Mrs. Brown did this, how would you use (select a technique) in reaction to the situation. This encourages reflection, critical thinking, expectation and responsibility. Over learning, or the repetition of content is crucial because it encourages mastery. With mastery comes confidence and this directly relates to the degree of later use. Learners have a need to experience and feel competence with new knowledge or skill before they actually use it.

Performance of the task is used to demonstrate and explain the nature or use of the concepts. Without this practice there is less chance that learners will use the information. **Example:** "Let's see you do it or give me an example as to how you would use this..."

Post Intervention Strategies

Trigger mechanisms are used when back at work to remind us of the learning situation. **Example:** These can be in the form of posters with statements of content, directions or reflections from the session. Follow up support is needed to refresh the learning or answer questions that occur after the learning event.

Example: This can be offered through the work setting or by negotiation can be provided by the trainer as part of the training package, (example Appendix 2).

Commitment validates the learner's experience and provides additional incentive to take responsibility. Ideally, the organization should actively support the individuals' responsibility for learning.

Example: Verbally reviewing content and stating commitment to the group as a closing activity, including commitment as part of the performance appraisal procedure, or writing a letter of commitment to yourself after the learning activity, (example Appendix 3)

Conclusion

Transfer of learning strategies are powerful tools that have the potential to impact our work positively. Through my research, I discovered that using only one or two of the stated strategies makes a difference. My hope is that through the exploration of these ideas, that you too discover the teacher within yourselves and try something new. Remember the words of Jack Canfield (personal communication, October 19,1993)" Those in life who succeed, take action."



Appendix A
A self-assessment tool
Therapists as Teachers

Please rate your current knowledge and understanding of the following topics related to adult education, training techniques and transfer of learning.

- Rating System:
- 1 - know nothing
 - 2 - am familiar with the topic
 - 3 - have a basic understanding
 - 4 - have fundamental knowledge of the concept
 - 5 - have extensive knowledge and understanding

Please circle the number corresponding to your answer

- | | | | | | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Principles of adult education | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | Strategies for pre-training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | Strategies for good training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | Definition for transfer of learning | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | Definition of soft skills | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. | Strategies for evaluation, etc... | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix B
Follow up assignment
Therapists as teachers: Follow up food for thought

1. When you are back at work, share three of the most important things that you have learned with two people every day for one week.
2. The next time that you have to give instructions to someone regarding a task that they have to complete think about the process and implement at least one transfer technique.
3. Before you go to bed tonight, write down two things that you want to do differently when you go back to work.
4. When you return to your normal routines at work take time to reflect about the work that you do and give yourself credit for the great job that you do.

Appendix C
Commitment Letter

Date _____

Dear _____
(your name)

The most important things that I have learned at this symposium are ...

I plan to try the following things when I get back to work...

The most relevant things that I learned today from this session were ...

I plan to share this information with the following people...

I enjoy learning and discovering new things because...

(sign your name)



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