

Section II
Professional Development

Learning to Grow and Change: Using Action Learning to Inspire Effective Professional Development Within Deaf/Hard of Hearing Support Service Programs

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Abstract

It has become cliché to refer to the lightening speed of change happening in the field of post-secondary deaf/hard of hearing services. However, it is a fact that professional development is mandatory in order for the field to stay abreast with these ever-present changes.

This article will encourage deaf/hard of hearing program staff to rethink traditional approaches to professional education and explore some truths about how professionals really learn. The article will introduce strategies called action inquiry technologies that can be powerful tools based in the critical approach to professional development. One particular action inquiry technology, action learning, will be outlined and suggested as an educational strategy that could benefit postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing staff's professional growth.

Introduction

Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) outlines the importance of an organization becoming a "learning organization," that is, becoming an organization that is open to transformation through shared vision and learning. In our field of post-secondary deaf/hard of hearing services, in order to move forward and continually grow to meet the needs of our customers, we must model ourselves after this learning organization concept. Therefore, it is important that the professional development activities offered to program staff foster the critical skills of visioning, personal growth, and taking risks.

Successful continuing professional education programs need to be grounded in a basic philosophical frame. A framework involves analyzing the profession's role in our society and establishing a philosophical perspective regarding the goals of the continuing professional education (CPE) program.

This paper will explore three philosophical frameworks of CPE and will then propose that professional learning for postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing staff members could be most effective when developed from a critical perspective. The discussion will primarily focus on two groups of professionals that comprise these program staffs: sign language interpreters and real-time captionists. The article will suggest that using action inquiry technologies and, in particular, action learning will provide not only effective CPE from the critical perspective, but also would begin to produce a new body of research and establish a repertoire of "best practices" for the benefit of this emerging profession.

The Functionalist View of Professions

A dominant perspective on a profession's place in society has been that professionals possess an expertise to solve well-defined problems. This expertise is drawn from a technical body of knowledge derived from scientific research. This functionalist viewpoint, sometimes coined the "Marcus Welby approach," sees the professions as service-oriented occupations that maintain the status quo (Cervero, 1988).

If, as the functionalist viewpoint supports, a profession possesses a fixed body of knowledge, then a professional education program must emphasize the mastery of this knowledge base. When designing a continuing profession education program to prepare for mastery of this knowledge base, the focus is on a traditional behaviorist approach to learning. The behaviorist approach focuses on ensuring “that learners attain previously defined learning objectives, many of which are specified in terms of clearly observable, behavioral outcomes” (Brookfield, 1986, p.202).

In his discussion of the functional framework's emphasis on technical expertise, Cervero (1988) discusses the issue of “whether educational programs should always be related in some fashion to the improvement of performance” (p. 25) and states that particularly those that employ professionals often strongly support this position. The postsecondary institutions that employ interpreters and captionists would most likely support this behaviorist approach because the institution must satisfy the legal mandate of providing services to students who are deaf that are delivered by “qualified” staff (ADA, 1990). This idea of “qualified” has traditionally been defined as a staff member's ability to score at a prescribed level on a performance test. Thus, continuing professional education offered to interpreters and captionists at postsecondary institutions is likely to be based in a behavioristic, performance-oriented perspective.

There is a general agreement that there is certainly a place for the behaviorist approach to learning in every professional education program (Cervero, 1988), but it is unfortunate that this behaviorist approach is often offered as the only learning method. Certainly, for example, if one counts the training opportunities for working sign language interpreters, a majority of the workshops and classes offered currently are geared towards the objectives of technical skill improvement. Among postsecondary sign language interpreters, there are certainly some core performance skills that every interpreter must possess, but the current offering of CPE programs often fails to address the other linguistic, institutional, and ethical issues that this group of professionals face.

Brookfield (1986) addresses this issue by explaining that the behaviorist paradigm “is seen most prominently in contexts where the objectives to be attained are unambiguous, where their

attainment can be judged according to commonly agreed upon criteria of successful performance, and where a clear imbalance exists between teacher's and learner's area of expertise.” (p. 202) In a developing profession without an established “best practices” such as postsecondary sign language interpreting, the objectives are often very ambiguous. There are no existing experts who are looked up to as possessing core knowledge, attitudes and skills, but instead, there are practitioners who are inventing modes of practice for themselves through their daily work.

Brookfield critiques the behaviorist approach by contending that “the paradigm (behaviorist) is far less suited to contexts in which learners are trying to make sense of their words, to develop self-insight, to scrutinize critically the assumptions underlying their thoughts and actions, or to interpret and to find meaning within their experience” (p. 203). This need to critically reflect and find meaning in their daily experiences is a crucial need of postsecondary interpreters and captionists. In order to effectively develop their profession, these professionals need to go beyond mere skill development to understand how to find their place in institutions that have understanding of their profession. In developing CPE for these postsecondary staff members, institutions must offer programs that go beyond the technical, behaviorist paradigm.

The Conflict View of Professions

The conflict viewpoint challenges the functionalist view that professionals possess a technical expertise that rightly affords them special status. The conflict viewpoint sees this technical expertise as putting professionals in “conflict with other groups in society for power, status, and money” (Cervero, 1988, p. 26). A further conflict perspective critique of the behaviorist approach is that the behaviorist model “ensures that knowledge is never created by, but rather transferred to the worker, ...management can use this learning design to instill within its employees the skills and attitudes necessary to maintain production, thus reproducing the capitalist ideology” (Vincere, 1994, p. 29). Proponents of the conflict viewpoint argue that, unlike the behaviorist focus on an individual's acquisition of skills, educational intervention must be at the social level. The conflict perspective views CPE programs as perpetu-

ating a system of oppression in that the programs continue to support the status quo and not strive towards affecting fundamental changes in our social structure.

Relating to postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing programs, issues of power and oppression are found on two levels: the power relationship between the deaf student and the interpreter or captionist and the power relationship between the interpreting or captioning professional and the postsecondary institution. In the interpreting profession, deaf consumers of interpreting services have been seen as a historically oppressed minority. Interpreters have been criticized because it has been perceived that they do not challenge the system of oppression but instead are often themselves part of the oppressive system (Baker-Shenk, 1986). Deaf students often enter postsecondary institutions with minimal self-advocacy skills as a result of paternalistic K - 12 educational systems. Often the student's interpreter is the only professional on campus with which the student has regular communication and the only person in the institution that has an understanding of the student's background.

Interpreting and captioning professions have very specific Code of Ethics detailing these professionals' roles in the college classroom. The Code of Ethics for interpreters dictates that interpreters "shall not counsel, advise, or interject personal opinion" (Solow, 1981, p. 81). The interpreter's role in a postsecondary institution can become quite confusing because the interpreter is often in the middle of situations where the deaf student is rendered powerless, but the interpreter feels constrained by the profession's code of ethics.

The sign language profession has historically been dominated by women (Humphrey, Alcorn, 1995). This characteristic of the profession contributes to power issues between the interpreters and their employing institutions in that these interpreters have not been traditionally socialized to maneuver through the political maze of the institutions. This group, being relative newcomers to postsecondary institutions, has not formed the coalitions necessary to affect the decision-making processes of the institutions (Bolman and Deal, 1991, p. 190). This lack of access to decision making limits these professionals ability to gain status from which they could affect policy changes affecting their daily practice.

Working from a conflict perspective, CPE for postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing professionals would focus on exploring these professional's ethical obligation towards changing the oppressive system for deaf students. CPE programs would also need to begin to address some of these power and status issues between the professionals and the institutions. A CPE program developed around the conflict perspective could assist the deaf/hard of hearing staff to better understand how many of the linguistic, ethical, and institutional issues faced by these staff members are a result of the unequal distribution of power in our society.

Bolman and Deal's exploration of the political framework discusses how conflict over power issues can also be used in positive ways. They state that "there is clearly a need for both organizations and individuals to develop constructive and positive ways to master organizational politics" (p.200). They also see conflict as "a means of creating visions and collective goals" (p. 206). A problem with a CPE program based solely on the negative side of power and conflict in an institution is that learning to use power in a constructive way can be easily overlooked.

Another problem with a CPE program that embraces only the conflict perspective is that while it can raise a professional's consciousness about power issues, it often does not leave room for a critical analysis on some of the basic assumptions on which the conflict view is based. It is important that CPE programs for postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing staff not be developed solely around the ideas of power and control, but rather these ideas be one component of an approach that teaches the skills of critical analysis.

Also related to power and control in CPE programs is the question of who has the power to create and disseminate knowledge. The traditional gatekeepers of the research and instruction in professional education settings have been white males (Bailey, et al. 1994). Because postsecondary sign language interpreters, for example, do not have an established postsecondary interpreting practices knowledge base, it is very important that this group of traditionally female professionals understand the power and control issues around the creation and dissemination of professional knowledge. This paper will later suggest that action inquiry technologies can be educational strategies and at the same time allow the

practitioners to themselves control the development of a body of professional research.

The Critical View of Professions

While the functionalist and conflict views differ greatly in their perspective on how professionals should use their expert knowledge, both viewpoints are alike in their acceptance that research-based knowledge can be used to solve well-formed problems (Cervero, 1988). The critical viewpoint does not accept this assumption that problems are well-formed but instead views professional problems as messy and unique. This viewpoint perceives the process from problem setting to problem solving as non-linear, often ambiguous, and most successfully undertaken by relying on the practitioner's own experiences and not on a formal, research-based knowledge.

Recent literature related to organization theory underscores the importance of an organization encouraging its members to develop the learning skills necessary to challenge accepted organization's assumptions and values. Senge (1990) emphasizes the importance of an organization becoming a "learning organization," a concept that he defines as "an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future" (p.14). Bolman and Deal (1991) stress that members of an organization must learn to view issues through a variety of frameworks and that the organization must give the members the tools to match the correct frame to each situation (p.12). In order for organizations to achieve both these goals, CPE programs that teach the skills of critical reflection must be offered.

If postsecondary sign language interpreters and captionists are to transform their emerging professions into established professions on par with others found in postsecondary institutions, they must have access to CPE programs that foster these critical thinking skills. Especially for postsecondary sign language interpreters who are without an existing body of research, this critical approach to CPE is especially imperative in that it would allow these professionals opportunities to develop their analytical skills and at the same time take on responsibility for establishing a professional body of knowledge from which to further form their profession.

Action Inquiry Technologies

One approach to professional development that is grounded in the critical perspective is action inquiry technologies (AIT). AIT is an umbrella term for several related strategies that all have the common focus of combining practice and reflection (Brooks, Watkins, 1994). Some of the AIT related strategies are action learning, action-reflective learning, action science, collaborative inquiry, participatory action research, and popular education (Brooks, Watkins, 1994).

The focus of the various AIT strategies are to allow "practitioners to work collectively in solving practice related problems but at the same time develop individual and group competence in the process of problem solving" (Tolbert, Reason, Heron, 1995, p.13).

Brooks and Watkins (1994) discuss the common characteristics of AIT that appear most often in the work of AIT researchers. These researchers found that action inquiry technologies are:

- 1) collaboratively conducted and participatory
- 2) enhance the overall learning capacity of individuals as they work to solve problems
- 3) focus on change and empowerment
- 4) create a body of research that comes from the "local" practice not "expert" knowledge

This paper will frame its discussion as to why AIT could provide effective CPE strategies for postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing program staff by exploring how each of the previously listed characteristics of AIT would be beneficial to this profession.

Action Inquiry Technologies are Collaboratively Conducted and Participatory

One practice common in many postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing programs is the amount of informal discussion around professional issues that takes place among staff members. Interpreters in particular, explain that this need to "debrief" often is due to the fact that during the interpreting process, an interpreter makes

constant linguistic and ethical choices without opportunity for feedback from either the information source, the class instructor, or the information target, the student (PIN, 1997).

AIT would be quite effective for these interpreting professionals because there already exists a tradition and culture of group reflection. In teaching the interpreters the skills involved in AIT, these informal “debriefing” sessions could be transformed into a more systematic form of critical reflection. In this way, AIT could be incorporated into the daily practice of the postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing program staffs.

The skills of working collaboratively that are promoted by AIT are skills that are vital to the success of any postsecondary work team. If these teams are to realize the goals of being able to navigate through the power structures of their institutions, establish a body of professional knowledge, and deal with the everyday challenges of their jobs, the team members must first be able to successfully work together as a cohesive team.

Action Inquiry Technologies Enhance the Overall Learning Capacity of Individuals as They Work to Solve Problems

Although practitioners in many professions traditionally experience collective learning through group reflection, what distinguishes AIT from mere group discussion and dialog is that while the group members are reflecting on specific problems, they are also reflecting on the learning/research process itself. By working on real work-related problems, group members are collaboratively solving problems and at the same time become better skilled in the process of problem solving (Brooks, Watkins, 1994).

Mezirow’s theory of critical reflection differentiates between problem “posing” and problem “solving” (Brooks, Watkins, p.22). Many traditional professional educational activities focus on this problem solving, but AIT—with its roots in the critical perspective—focuses on the framing of the original problem. In the professional development of postsecondary sign language interpreters, this work on “setting the problem” could give structure to the common “debriefing” sessions explained previously. AIT could give postsecondary teams the tools with which to critically analyze the basic assumptions on which issues and problems are originally presented. By learn-

ing to focus their energies on the original setting of a problem, interpreters could avoid some of the pitfalls of assuming that all are viewing a problem from the same perspective.

AIT could also assist interpreting and captioning professionals in viewing their professional issues as learning opportunities. This more positive approach can foster a “learning organization” attitude such as supported by Senge.

Action Inquiry Technologies Focus on Change and Empowerment

Not only is AIT a process by which practitioners collaboratively reflect on and research their practice, but it is also a process that can assist practitioners in finding their place within their larger organization. As relative newcomers to postsecondary institutions, interpreters and captionists need to learn the skills of successfully navigating through their organization’s traditional constraints.

AIT strategies have been described as cycles of action and research. This continuous nature of the technologies is quite a different approach to CPE as compared with traditional educational interventions. This ongoing, cyclical nature of AIT makes it a flexible learning method that is well suited to the ever-changing nature of postsecondary environments.

Reason and Heron (1995) explain that there is no exact methodology in developing AITs but that the ideas and method should be used as stimuli for the creative development of a form of collaborative inquiry which suits the purposes and opportunities of the situation. Unlike traditional CPE, the research encouraged by AIT promotes “reflection on action” as a basis for the generation and testing of informal theory (Brooks, Watkins, 1994, p.6). AIT could provide empowering experiences as the deaf/hard of hearing program professionals learn to value their own observations and informal theories as valid contributions to the profession.

Create a Body of Research that Comes from “Local” Practice not “Expert” Knowledge

As was discussed in relation to the conflict perspective, knowledge production and research should not remain solely in the hands of researchers and schol-

ars, but instead should be the responsibility of those who work in the daily practice (Brooks, Watkins, 1994). AIT is an especially useful CPE strategy because as it develops a professional's capacity for critical reflection, it also synthesizes a body of research that is situated in the professional's daily practice (Reason, Heron, 1995).

Because postsecondary sign language interpreters and captionists do not have a body of research on which to base their practice and because, at this time, there are few scholars who focus on this unique group of professionals, there is much merit in allowing the practitioners themselves to develop this body of knowledge. Part of the CPE process would need to focus on teaching interpreters and captionists the skills necessary to cultivate this body of research, but the benefits of a research tradition generated in the field make this a worthwhile goal of a CPE program. This body of research could have a positive influence on the systematic development of a more formalized practice for these emerging professionals.

Action Learning

Action Learning is one example of an action inquiry technology. Action Learning stresses small groups working on real problems and at the same time, focusing on what they are learning about themselves and their organizations. Many corporations around the world are currently using action learning to encourage organizational learning, improve self-awareness and self-confidence, and improve teamwork.

Action learning is composed of the following six distinct interactive components:

1. The set: A set is a group composed of four to eight members.
2. The facilitator
3. The problem: A set is structured around an issue or challenge that does not have one clear solution. It is important that set members work on true problems and not waste time trying to solve puzzles. Puzzles are contrasted to problems in that puzzles have one clear solution that already exists.
4. Insightful questioning (IQ): The art of asking good questions is at the heart of action learning. The purpose of IQ is to encourage fellow set members to ques-

tions each other's assumptions that, if left untested, could block the discovery of truly creative solutions.

5. The commitment to learning. In an action learning set, personal and organizational learning are as important as solving a problem. Stopping periodically for personal and group reflection as to new insights and changes in perspective, and also to analyze the group process in general, is a vital part of the action learning process.

6. The commitment to taking action. Every action learning set ends in the formation of an action plan. The action learning set will then meet again at a later date after set members have had opportunities to carry out this action plan. The success of the action plan is the basis for insightful questioning during the next action learning set. (Marquardt, 1999)

Action learning is cyclical; that is, it must take place over a period of time during which sets regularly meet to focus on a problem, frame and reframe the problem through insightful questioning, develop alternative solutions, and set-up action plans. The action plans will be the basis for the next meeting during which the set will evaluate and question the action plan, identify new problems and the start the process again. Ultimately this cyclical process benefits an organization in that members are taught critical thinking skills, set members control their own learning, groups are strengthened, and problems are solved.

Summary

This paper has explored the functionalist, conflict, and critical viewpoints of professions and the implications of each viewpoint for the development of CPE programs. The paper specifically discussed each framework as to its implications for CPE programs for the new professions that are emerging in the area of postsecondary deaf/hard of hearing services. The critical paradigm was depicted as the most appropriate approach to CPE for deaf/hard of hearing program professionals, and action inquiry technologies were examined as educational strategies that effectively fit this critical framework. These technologies, and

specifically action learning, not only could teach the skills of collaboration and problem solving and provide a mechanism for empowerment, but also could provide the tools to research professional issues and establish a base of “best practices” on which to develop professional standards.

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