

A MODEL OF CAREER TRAINING IN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS(1)

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Abstract

This article describes a model for the training of career practitioners in international contexts. This model uses an “active engagement” approach and has as its foundation the following factors: 1. Competence / Skill Based; 2. Experiential Learning; 3. Strength Challenge; 4. Critical Reflection; 5. Dynamic Interventions and Processes; and 6. Imbedded Learning and Innovation. There also is discussion of other practical training issues.

Key Words: Training; Counselors; International context; Active engagement

Introduction

Changing social and economic conditions (increasing globalization, advances in technology and information, and significant demographic shifts) have helped to create a climate where career guidance is becoming of increasing importance for many countries (Homer-Dixon, 2000). Skill shortages and worker mobility have become issues of international concern. In developing a response to these issues, industry and governments are beginning to search for more assistance from career guidance workers. In meeting these challenges career guidance workers have to face a number of challenges. The client population has become more diverse and multibarriered and there is a demand for a greater range of services. Many people are being mandated to come for counselling and that has created more resistance and reluctance issues. The presenting issues from clients have also become more complex (Amundson, 2006).

Meeting the above needs requires both increased resources and greater levels of training and preparation for guidance workers. A recent OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) study has compared career counseling policies and practices in many different countries (Watts, 2003). This study has created an impetus for change but more remains to be done.

The focus in this paper is on a dynamic model for the training of career practitioners in international contexts. This approach has been developed through years of training in Canada and in many other countries. The model is based on a number of theoretical concepts with particular focus on an “active engagement” intervention approach (Amundson, 2003). This first section will describe some foundations for training and in the

second section there will be a description of some of the issues that have arisen through training in a variety of international contexts.

Foundations for Training

Listed below are some of the key factors that form a foundation for training within a small group context.

Competency / Skill Based

Competency / skill based training has a long history in the preparation of career guidance practitioners. The modular training program initiated by the Canadian federal government in the 1980's utilized a competency / skill based model (Foord Kirk, 2002). This approach set a foundation for training in Canada and also in many other European countries.

The form of competence/ skill based training that is being suggested here emphasizes cognitive behavioral learning that is accomplished within a person-centered relational framework (Tursi & Cochran, 2006). This approach ensures both a client centered approach and a strong connection between the learning needs of practitioners and the training that is being provided.

Experiential Learning

In order to ensure an active learning stance there needs to be a focus on experiential learning (Jarvis, 1995, Kolb, 1995, Kim & Lyons, 2003). Learning in this manner includes discussion, observation, and practice. It is not enough to just talk about guidance methods, people have to also have the opportunity for carefully sequenced behavioral rehearsal (Amundson, Westwood & Prefontaine, 1995).

In order to learn in this manner it is important that sufficient space be available for the training i.e. room for people to work together in small groups. Participants also need to have minimal distractions and this means that it is often advisable to hold training away from the work site.

Strength Challenge

In order to engage in new learning participants need to feel a certain level of emotional security. This sense of security is achieved in several different ways. When training groups are formed there usually is an attempt to create a positive emotional climate in the group (Borgen, Pollard, Amundson and Westwood, 1989).

Despite efforts to create a positive group climate, however, we observed that many members still maintained a high degree of performance anxiety. Many people could name all of their weaknesses but had more difficulty identifying any of their strengths. In order to address this discrepancy, we developed a system of “strength challenge” where focused feedback efforts were focused on first helping people to identify their strengths and then to challenge themselves with new learning challenges (Borgen & Amundson, 1996). This approach to supervision and training has been well received and there are many examples of people overcoming their anxiety with this approach. This focus on more positive elements of training fits well with the current emphasis on human strengths that is helping to redefine the field of psychology (Seligman, M.E.P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2000; Harris, Thoresen & Lopez, 2007).

Critical Reflection

One of the key elements of an active engagement approach is the willingness to step back from existing structures and ask questions about traditions and conventions (Amundson, 2002). Learning to be an effective guidance practitioner is more than just learning a set of skills and techniques, it also involves a critical reflective capacity where one learns to step back from what is happening and critically evaluate options.

It seems most effective to encourage critical reflection right at the start of training. I have found it helpful to encourage participants to consider the structure of guidance itself i.e. two people sitting in a room talking with one another for a set period of time. Some of the issues to be considered in this context include social conventions, time structure, mode of communication, and the involvement of other participants.

More recently I have come to appreciate the small “inner voice” that helps to direct counselling practice (Hansen & Amundson, 2006). This is another example of critical reflection, where the implementation of intervention strategies is informed through intuition and greater awareness of one's inner voice.

Dynamic Interventions and Processes

Career practitioners need to be aware of a wide variety of counselling methods and apply these interventions in a flexible and dynamic manner (Amundson, 2003, Van Esbroeck, Tibos & Zaman, 2005). These methods include strategies such as storytelling, metaphors, symbols, mind mapping, card sorts, writing, games, and various forms of questioning. In a sense, these strategies are like the tools that a craftsperson might use in putting together a new creation (Poehnell & Amundson, 2002). To become good at one's craft one needs to have the right set of tools and a vision for what might be possible.

The career counselling process is not linear and career practitioners need to be willing to make adjustments along the way. Thus, in addition to learning about specific methods, practitioners need to become aware of when best to use a particular method and also how to adapt methods to fit with new situations and challenges. As practitioners move forward they need to do so with what Gelatt (1989) terms “positive uncertainty”. They need to move with conviction but at the same time be aware of emerging changes. This emphasis on emergence and possibilities fits well with some of the current work on chaos theory (Pryor, Amundson & Bright, in press).

Imbedded Learning and Innovation

Learning can occur at many different levels. As someone involved in counsellor education I have found that I really know if I have understood something when I can teach it to others. Applying this principle in training, it is often helpful to have trainees put themselves in the role of teaching others about a particular idea or technique. Through this process their personal learning is greatly enhanced.

As a final point of development, it is important that trainees begin to use their own imagination to develop intervention strategies. Part of active engagement training involves an emphasis on imagination and creativity, both for clients and for career practitioners (Amundson, 2003). While it is important to learn a set of techniques, it is equally important to learn how to apply creativity and develop appropriate innovations.

International Training in Action

This next section will illustrate some practical issues related to the implementation of guidance training in an international context. As mentioned earlier, I have been involved in guidance efforts for over twenty years in a number of different international settings.

Starting in Sweden in 1984 I have worked on different projects in the following countries: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Iceland, The Netherlands, Romania, Hungary, Greece, Japan, China, United Arab Emirates, Australia, New Zealand, Peru, and Chile. This work has involved professional associations, government ministries, universities, and other groups such as the Chamber of Commerce.

Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness

As a starting point it is important to take account of cultural differences and to spend time learning about the new context. Rather than talking about what “others need to learn” it is better to start by trying to understand their situation and to look for ways of coming alongside. For example, many guidance professionals in other countries are trained with a

greater focus on disciplines such as economics, sociology, philosophy, and political science. They have no difficulty understanding broader social and economic contextual issues, what they need to develop are basic communication skills and the utilization of a more process oriented or experiential approach. In working with people from Hungary to set up their employment system we were pleasantly surprised by the breadth of knowledge that many people brought to the training. While they needed training in individual and group communication processes they were quite advanced in their conceptual frameworks.

Cultural differences can be experienced at many different levels. I found it interesting when training in Sweden to see the ways in which group members influenced one another using non-verbal communication. This was at a far more sophisticated level than what I had experienced in North America. A glance or the raising of an eyebrow worked wonders at communicating disapproval and maintaining certain group norms.

There also are situations where it can be difficult to really understand how people are receiving the information that you are communicating. In Finland, for example, the group gave little indication of real interest in the material. After a few days of this non-committal atmosphere there was an opportunity for more in-depth conversation and people indicated that it was the best training they ever had received.

Language

People in other cultures often learn more than one language and increasingly English is one of the other languages. In professional training there is the recognition of the importance of English as an international language. Young people in particular are usually very good in speaking English. Despite the prevalence of English, however, there still is a need to take account of the fact that people are working in a second language. This means speaking slower and also organizing the curriculum so that people have breaks where they can talk about concepts in their own language. When translation is needed training needs to be adjusted to account for the extra time that is needed. Also, some activities are more difficult to use when the process involves translation. For example, demonstrating a communication skill is slower and more complicated when translation is involved.

Some of the terms that we take for granted can be confusing to people from other countries. Even a basic term such as “career” can be misunderstood. For many people outside of North America, having a career is something that only applies to a few people. It also can mean trying to climb up the ladder and get ahead in an organization. These

connotations are quite different from the way we have defined the term in North America. Discussing these type of differences can be an important part of any training.

Materials

Most people who do not have English as a first language find it easier to read English than to speak it. Many of the universities insist on some English literature in their training. Despite this general guideline, however, there still is a strong desire to have material translated into their own language. A number of my books have been translated into other languages and these translations are a real asset when offering training. For example, I just finished doing a workshop in Greece where Euroguidance translated the career workbook, *CareerScope* (Amundson, Poehnell & Pattern, 2005). This material provided a useful framework for the training and it was very helpful in getting across many basic concepts.

One common problem with translated material is that some of the translations can be poorly done. In some earlier work with the counselors in Greece the term “career craft” was translated as “career knitting”. In other instances direct translations were made of various metaphors and some of this information can come out sounding very strange. It is important that the persons involved in translation have some background in career counseling, otherwise there usually are difficulties.

Standards and Accreditation

Counselors in other countries are beginning the process of developing standards and moving towards competence based accreditation. The recent OECD study has been a real impetus for this movement. Following the comparative evaluation of career counseling there has been renewed energy in some countries for making changes. In Norway, for example, the government initiated training seminars for school counsellors in a number of different cities. They then followed this up with more focused training for a group of university trainers.

Even though attempts are being made to increase the general level of knowledge there is the realization that the level of standards will need to be set at quite a different point than what we have in North America (as supported by National Career Development Association and by the Canadian Counselling Association). Even though some countries like Sweden are developing quite an extensive university based training system, this training is primarily at the undergraduate level.

Given the interest in standards and accreditation, the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) has just initiated an Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioner accreditation process. This designation is designed to provide a structure for qualification recognition at a global level. The National Board for Certified Counselors and Affiliates (NBCC) has also been active at an international level with its National Certified Counselor (NCC) designation.

Training Efforts

My personal involvement in training has evolved in a number of different directions. Some countries have chosen a broader based training approach where short seminars are given to a large number of school and/or employment counselors. Norway, Iceland, Peru, Chile, Denmark and Greece are good examples of countries where this expansive approach has been used to set a foundation. As mentioned above, this initial training in Norway has led to a more focused “train the trainers” model. The same might emerge in some of these other countries.

With the “train the trainers” approach certain key trainers are identified and then special training is provided. This training usually takes place over an extended period of time with multiple visits. My work in Hungary, Sweden and Finland are good examples of how this model has been incorporated. Currently I am working on a European Union contract with a group of trainers from Eastern Europe and some Mediterranean countries using a similar model. This training will take place over a period of three years.

Many of the trainers who have been trained using the train the trainers approach have gone on to train many other groups. The trainers also have gone beyond their national boundaries and have begun to get involved in the training needs of other countries. Swedish and Danish trainers, for example, have been actively involved in doing training with a number of Eastern European countries, often funded through the European Union and/or the World Bank.

Length of Training Courses

When I first started training outside of the university for the government of Canada it was not uncommon to do up to twenty days of training with one group of trainers (in two segments). This same training model was then transferred to Europe and similar in-depth training was done in Hungary, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. Over time, however, the funding for such training decreased and the length of courses was shortened. A maximum length of time for training is now usually no more than five days, often divided into two segments. This does not mean that this is the only training that happens, just that

this form of training is now more concentrated. The idea of split sessions is popular since it provides more opportunity for follow-up.

Summary

This is an exciting time for career guidance at the international level. There is growing interest in the field and a need for more trained guidance professionals. The purpose of this article was to outline some of the factors that contribute to effective group training and also to share some personal observations from over thirty years of training in many different countries.

Notes

1. NCDA / IAEVG Symposium – Italy, 2007.

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