

CHAPTER IV

ELEMENTS OF QUALITY

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4.1 SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ORGANISATION OF TRAINING COURSES...

Assessing Staff Needs

We cannot stress enough the importance of assessing staff needs before devising a training course, although it is mostly common practice now, especially in Leonardo da Vinci projects. If staff are allowed to express where they need training and what their difficulties are, you clearly have a higher chance of delivering appropriate, relevant training and satisfying demand. In this way the trainees are also involved from the outset, rather than imposing a service initiative on them 'for their own good'. Training should build on a foundation knowledge participants already have.

Training not lecturing

Methodology: bear in mind that a training course is different from a seminar – it should not recreate a classroom situation whereby experts deliver their expertise in lecture form while participants take note. Training is more interactive. The objectives of the course should be reiterated at the beginning and approved by the trainees. A classic formula is to have a trainer give a theoretical presentation at the beginning and have the trainees work from this and develop solutions for themselves, in small groups, via role play or with a specific task and then come back together as a group to share and discuss.

Trainer Communication skills

It goes without saying that a trainer should be knowledgeable and competent in his/her field, should preferably be a practitioner rather than just an academic, but what is often overlooked is the ability to communicate ideas. A good trainer should essentially be this: a good communicator, with the gift of explaining, stimulating, and enthusing participants for the subject concerned. Such individuals are fairly rare –for this reason it is always useful to have on hand someone who can assume the role of facilitator (like the chairperson at a meeting) who will be present throughout the course, put speakers and subjects into context, facilitate debate, be the interface between trainer and trainees if needed, move the whole course on smoothly through the various elements of the programme.

Programme development

The participants trainee needs assessment will already have provided key elements for the programme, but the actual development of the programme should be done in a small team, either brainstorming or working around a proposal, and if this team consists of a trainee supervisor, a trainer and/or facilitator, someone familiar with the official requirements (if the training has external funding) then the programme is more likely to cover all necessary elements, and certainly more than can be considered by only one expert in the subject field.

In a social sector training course which necessitates the exploration of different psychological or therapeutic approaches, a small team has more chance of representing various theoretical approaches and achieving a good balance.

Define the Target group

A common criticism in course evaluations is that participants are too heterogeneous in experience or background or professional level, and that the knowledge is therefore too unequal for comfortable group discussion. While it can always be argued that differing levels can only result in benefit, our experience is that mixing qualified experts with untrained staff might benefit those who are confident and articulate – but it might also hinder others from speaking out and make it difficult for the trainer to pitch the delivery at the right level. We have tried to stick to an approach which demystifies dual diagnosis for front-line staff and draws on their undervalued experience, avoiding jargon wherever possible and constantly bearing in mind the real application of theory into practice.

Preparation beforehand

Since training courses are usually fairly compact and time-limited, this time can be maximised through preparation beforehand. Participants should be presented with the programme about two weeks before, along with limited essential reading and, crucially, be asked to prepare a task or presentation. In the Triadd project participants were all asked to prepare specific case study vignettes in a structured way a few weeks before the course. If there has already been active involvement before the course participants are keener to discuss.

Training methodology

A variety of methods works best, as does ice-breaking warm-up game at the beginning, small group role play to enable participants to have constructive feedback. and it is easier to assimilate visually presented information (overheads, video, powerpoint etc.) Bear in mind that the average person has an uninterrupted concentration span of about twenty minutes. If the physical comfort factors of the room and schedule are not right (room too small, wrong temperature, poor air, late lunch, too heavy a lunch etc.) then concentration will be even further diminished! So take some time to check these externals BEFORE the course and make sure the equipment you use actually works in the room chosen. Obvious points but if not right can lead to real distraction and time-wasting.

Timing

In our experience training was appreciated more when delivered in one block of two or three days, with a follow-up session a few months later to check on usefulness and go over any problems which may have arisen in the meantime. A series of separate one day courses was found to be unsatisfactory by participants, in terms of coherence and opportunity to develop ideas and discussion.

Course evaluation

(maximum one hour) at the end of the course for written feedback on your questionnaires. While the answers might benefit from reflection and hindsight after the course, in reality few questionnaires are returned once trainees resume their normal activities and other things take over. The evaluation questionnaire should be clearly structured to reflect the different elements of the course and could offer a combination of one word answers and blank space for comment. Bear in mind how you will analyse and compare them all at the end!.

4.2. BENEFITS OF EUROPEAN COLLABORATION

It may not seem so at the time of meeting the administrative and bureaucratic demands of a European project application (in this case a pilot project under the Leonardo da Vinci programme) but on balance there are definite advantages, as well as challenges, to organising a training project at European level.

The first, being totally honest, is financial – without the support of the Leonardo da Vinci project this initiative would not have been possible. Front-line staff training in dual diagnosis would have remained a localised national concern for many partners, in an already over-stretched training budget curriculum, and not received the prominence it has now been given. In at least three of the countries involved the training may not have taken place at all, and there would certainly be no web site accessible to staff in English and French.

There would also have been no collaboration between seven European countries on the specific topic of front-line staff training, and the meeting of cultures and traditions that this entails in a project partnership, where the occasional temptation to go it alone and carry on as before has to give way to a certain compromise within the framework of the project partnership. The European Model ideal also has to withstand compromise, in as far as it is almost impossible to agree on a single one-size-fits-all model at the European level, so there has to be the flexibility to allow this while still calling it a European project. A useful method of encompassing these differences was the principles and guidelines approach; core values which all partners can agree and which need to be reflected to a certain degree in the ‘decentralised’ components of the overall product.

4.3. THE NEXT STAGES FOR THE TRIADD PROJECT

Between now and the end of the project in Spring 2005, we will concentrate on wider dissemination of Triadd in the training and social sectors at European level and networking with people and organisations working in this field, starting with the Lisbon conference in July 2004. We will be building on the collaboration we have already begun with Hôpital Neuropsychiatrique in Luxembourg and have organised joint training courses with them. We will also be building on collaboration with the psychiatric and psychiatric sectors in Luxembourg and in the partnership as a whole.

There will be the completion of external evaluation of the project, to be undertaken by SIRM (Società Italiana per lo Studio del Ritardo Mentale, Italy) and the organisation of final training course, Dublin, October 2004, encompassing the most successful elements of the four previous course and tailored to meet local need.

There will be further development of web site and interactive message-board for staff on specific individuals with dual diagnosis. Even though the project will officially end in April 2005, the contacts, the web site and above all the mission to develop staff training at European level will, we are certain, continue.

Sources:

Triadd Project documents, reports and partners!

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