

ORH-Stepping Stones: Literacy in a healthcare workplace

by Alexander Braddell



The UK National Health Service (NHS) is currently undergoing a radical overhaul. In 2000 the Department of Health published the NHS Plan – an ambitious ten-year program of investment, expansion and 'modernisation'. Human resource development is a key issue. The NHS needs to not only attract more staff but persuade the 1.2 million staff already employed to embrace new working practices designed to deliver a more patient-centred service.

To support these changes, the NHS has embraced the concept of the learning organisation wholeheartedly. 'There is increasing evidence that lifelong learning, as part of good employment practice, lies at the heart of effective organisational performance.' Moreover for the first time, the emphasis is on learning and development for all staff – cleaners as well as consultants.



This extension of learning beyond clinicians and senior managers has led to a new interest in literacy – coinciding with Skills for Life, the UK's national strategy to improve adult literacy and numeracy. As a result, literacy programs have sprung up in numerous healthcare workplaces across the UK. ORH-Stepping Stones is one of the more ambitious.



Based at the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals Trust – a 10,000- employee teaching trust spread over four hospital sites – ORH-Stepping Stones aims to do more than just improve the reading and writing skills of individual employees. The program which is staffed by literacy workers and paid for by an economic development agency offers communications, IT and maths training, but it also offers consultancy around operational systems and procedures, organisational strategy development, mentoring and management development. From 2000 - 2003, over 400 staff members participated in the program.

The program's motto is 'Towards a workplace learning culture'. By that we mean the sort of "enchanted" workplace envisioned by NHS policy-makers: a workplace where everyone is a committed partner, fully engaged in meaningful work, understanding and controlling their own job, supervising themselves, and actively seeking to improve their performance through communicating their knowledge and their insight².

To achieve a workplace even remotely resembling this high performance ideal, an organisation must ensure:

- management that is (and is perceived to be) supportive of subordinates' efforts
- participatory decisionmaking
- staff trust in management



- freedom to communicate openly
- an organisation-wide commitment to high performance.

Teamwork based on mutual respect is at the core of this fairytale workplace. To achieve such teamwork, each member of the team must have a voice and a voice worth not only hearing but listening to. For its part, the organisation must be willing not only to listen to such voices but respond to them. Developing such voices and the organisation's ability to respond are the goals of Stepping Stones.

ORH would be the first to admit it faces challenges as an organisation – and yet this very willingness not only to own its problems but to welcome the literacy team's engagement with those problems is precisely what makes ORH-Stepping Stones such a fruitful collaboration.

ORH-Stepping Stones' mantra is 'The learner is the workplace.' The ultimate measure of any intervention we make is: What is its impact on the workplace? We believe that if it doesn't make an impact on the workplace as a whole, its impact on any single individual will be limited.

Meanwhile, the mantra of NHS modernisation is 'Improving the patient experience'. The ultimate measure of every initiative – from pay modernisation to the creation of the new NHS University (www.nhsu.nhs.uk) is: How does it improve the patient experience?

To better understand how this plays out in practice, listen to two stories...

STORY 1

“Wake up and smell the toast”

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there was a hospital.

In this hospital there was a child. The child lay in a coma, mother at the bedside.



The ward cleaner looked at the child and at the distressed mother. "I'm sure your child will wake up soon," the cleaner said in the morning.

In the afternoon the cleaner said, "Wave toast under your child's nose. That will wake your child."

"Leave us alone," the mother said.

Her child did not recover.

A week later the hospital received a letter from the bereaved family complaining about the cleaner's inappropriate overtures.

When confronted by hospital managers, the cleaner was mortified.

"I only meant to help," the cleaner said. "I saw doctors on television use toast."

The television 'doctors', it transpired, were actors in a medical soap opera.

STORY 2

“Here are the paper towels we used”

Elsewhere in the hospital, an internal audit of catering procedures was underway. The inspectors were particularly interested in temperature probing.



(At the hospital, pre-cooked patient food is delivered chilled by a contractor ready for hospital staff to reheat at mealtimes. Before reheating the food, catering assistants must probe it to check that it is still safely chilled. After reheating the food, the catering assistants probe it again to check that it has reached a safe heat.)

That day, the inspectors entered a ward kitchen and asked to see the daily temperature probe record sheet. The catering assistants claimed there had been a rush and they had forgotten to record the probes that day.

“But we really did probe the food,” said the catering assistants. “We can show you the discarded paper towels used to clean the probe thermometers.”

“It is hospital policy to clean probes with alcohol wipes,” the inspectors said. “We’d better see your managers.”

The managers arrived. The inspectors asked them why their staff had not used alcohol wipes.

“Why didn’t you use alcohol wipes?” the managers asked their staff.

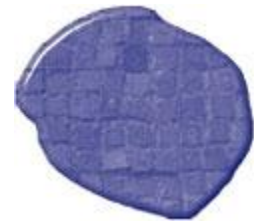
“We know nothing about alcohol wipes,” the catering assistants replied.

“You should have requested alcohol wipes from us,” the managers said.

On the inspectors’ instructions the managers wrote disciplinary reports on the catering assistants, documenting the events and omissions, to be put in the staff’s files. During the process one of the catering assistants was asked to sign and date a piece of paper on which nothing had yet been written.

Later that day the catering assistants asked their colleagues in other ward kitchens if they had been told of the policy to use alcohol wipes. No one had. Next day, management issued alcohol wipes to every ward kitchen.

The catering assistants, employees with good track records, handed in their notices shortly afterwards, citing this incident as the reason they had decided to go.



These stories illustrate the close relationship between general literacy in a healthcare workplace and health literacy. They also illustrate the kind of teamwork healthcare demands and the barriers to achieving it. To make any impact on these issues, one has to address more than the skills of the cleaner or the catering assistant. At the same time, the cleaner and the catering assistant, – even more than their managers, – must understand the relationship between the tasks they carry out and healthcare.



Learning and development for this group of staff should offer not only a more effective healthcare system but a growing pool of people taking an expanded awareness of health back into their homes and communities.

NOTES

¹ Department of Health (2001) Working Together – Learning Together, London p vii

² Gee, J. Hull, G. & Lankshear, C. (1996) The New Work Order Sydney, p. 30.

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