

## Practice exchange

# The use of Practice-Based Learning Days on Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner training programmes: A Self-Determination Theory perspective

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*Practice-Based Learning Days (PBLDs) account for approximately one-third of the total university-lead days on Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (PWP) training courses. In this article, I consider a number of challenges facing teachers of PWPs and describe a recent attempt to respond to these challenges by restructuring the content of our PBLDs in a manner informed by Self-Determination Theory. I suggest that by designing these days in a manner intended to facilitate the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for competence and autonomy, the PBLDs offer a way in which teachers of PWPs can promote more autonomous learning and greater psychological wellbeing amongst trainees. Further, I suggest that such use of these days supports education providers in developing learning opportunities that are optimally challenging for all students across each cohort. I finish with a call for future research into the effective use of the PBLDs on PWP training programmes.*

### Introduction

**P**SYCHOLOGICAL Wellbeing Practitioners (PWPs) are trained to support people with mild-moderate depression and anxiety disorders using approaches based on low-intensity cognitive-behavioural therapy (UCL, 2015). Training programmes are guided by a National Curriculum designed to develop clinical competency and an understanding of the theory and research that informs evidence-based practice. Training is a collaborative process between education providers and services, in which trainees typically spend 1–2 days a week in university and 3–4 days shadowing peers, practising clinically, and receiving supervision in an IAPT service.

Training programmes usually last up to a year and consist of 45 university-lead days combining a mixture of theoretical teaching, role-play practice and problem-based learning. Programmes are advised that between 15 and 20 of the total 45 days should

be ‘practice-based learning days’ (PBLDs) in which a combination of tasks including shadowing peers, role-play practice, self-practice of interventions and directed, problem based learning are set by the university and carried out independently by trainees (UCL, 2015).

### PWP training: Challenges and opportunities

A drive to attract a more varied range of applicants with differing academic backgrounds and life experiences is again featuring high up on the national PWP training agenda (UCL, 2017). This drive clearly represents a positive move towards training a representative and stable workforce.

Such moves are not without their challenges however, and education providers must find ways of providing a learning experience that develops clinical competence and offers an optimally challenging experience

for students entering the programme with significantly varied academic and work histories. To date, relatively few researchers have enquired in detail into how trainees experience and perceive IAPT training (Rizq, 2010) and consequently, future research designed to help understand these challenges from the trainee perspective would be of value. The available research, drawn primarily from studies exploring the experience of working in IAPT more generally, suggests that training is frequently perceived as stressful and demanding. In such studies, the volume of work to complete, the perception that there is little time to do it and the fact that continued employment depends on passing the course have been identified as significant sources of stress (Walklet & Percy, 2014). Anecdotally, student feedback on our programme often identifies that the perceived difficulty of training varies between students. Happily, many students report finding the pace of training and complexity of work appropriate. Some students however clearly experience the volume of learning and the limited time within which to master it as problematic, whilst others have reported wanting further and more stretching activities.

With these points in mind, this article describes an attempt to structure aspects of our training in a manner intended to help address two challenges facing teachers of PWPs. Firstly, how can teaching activities be designed in such a way as to ensure that all students are challenged and stimulated optimally in their learning? Secondly, as trainees enter (or return) into the fields of mental-health work and higher education simultaneously, how can teaching activities be designed to reduce the experience of stress and burnout associated with these two fields? (Neves & Hillman, 2019; Morse et al., 2012).

Before considering our attempts to address these challenges, it will be useful to briefly consider the context for our suggestions, by reviewing the evidence surrounding the points raised above.

### **Stress and burnout in IAPT**

Worryingly, experience of stress and problematic levels of burnout appear to be common across many areas of our mental health workforce (Morse et al., 2012). In recent years, a number of articles have enquired into the rates and causes of burnout amongst IAPT workers and the emerging results from such studies suggest that reported levels are comparable to those found in the wider mental health workforce (Walklet & Percy, 2014; Westwood et al., 2017). Whilst very few studies have explicitly explored the notion of stress and burnout in IAPT *training*, the available evidence suggests that many trainees do experience the process as problematically stressful (Walklet & Percy, 2014; Rizq, 2010).

### **Academic stress and reduced wellbeing in student populations**

Of course, IAPT trainees are not only mental health workers, but also university students (UCL, 2015). Research reports that students typically experience lower levels of wellbeing and higher levels of stress than the general population (Buckley et al., 2015) and factors relevant to PWP training such as a heavy workload, the requirement to meet deadlines or the pressure to perform well in exams are often cited as significant contributing factors to this (Neves & Hillman, 2019). Importantly, research has clearly demonstrated the negative impact that increased symptoms of stress can have on academic achievement and motivation (Pascoe et al., 2019).

### **A training that optimally challenges all**

In order for students to develop and to flourish academically, they need to be stimulated, interested and challenged by their work (Sharp et al., 2017). Clearly, designing learning activities that function in this way for all students across a cohort is a difficult task. As noted, this challenge is particularly acute in PWP training programmes, where previous relevant work experience may vary between students by many years, and

academic backgrounds range from those with no experience of further education to those who have already graduated from more than one postgraduate degree.

In a recent article, Scager and colleagues have described how teachers in higher education are faced with the ‘nearly impossible’ task of creating a learning environment that optimally challenges all of their students (Scager et al., 2017, p.330). If learning activities are pitched to challenge and engage one section of students they ask, what is the impact on the learning of those who sit either side of this group? My suggestion is that the PBLDs may offer teachers of PWPs a way of partially addressing this challenge.

### **Using Practice-Based Learning Days to address these challenges**

Directed Independent Learning is an important feature of much Higher Education and plays a central role in the PWP curriculum (Buckley et al., 2015; UCL, 2015). The benefits of well-planned directed independent learning are reported to include reduced stress, increased feelings of efficacy and a greater sense of personal involvement in the learning process (Thomas et al., 2015). However, this approach places a significantly greater responsibility on learners and so requires greater self-control and motivation on the part of students (Rawlinson et al., 2014).

In the remainder of this article, I suggest that designing the PBLDs in a manner informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) may help teachers of PWPs offer a more individualised approach to learning that stimulates motivation and helps to reduce stress and burnout.

### **A Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective**

SDT is an empirically based theory of motivation and psychological development that is primarily concerned with the idea of human flourishing and growth (Ryan & Deci, 2016). According to the theory, humans are innately curious and social beings, all of whom expe-

rience the basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2016). Whilst suggesting we are innately motivated to seek opportunities to satisfy these basic needs – to feel competence and effectance in what we do, to feel cared about and to care for others, and to feel self-determined in our actions – SDT draws attention to the way in which our social environments may either support or thwart our basic need satisfaction. Significantly for our interests here, environments which support the satisfaction of these basic psychological needs have been shown to promote a range of positive outcomes including higher psychological wellbeing and lower levels of burnout (Sheldon et al., 1996; Fernet et al., 2004), higher-quality learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2000) and greater motivation (Zuckerman, 1978).

One of the central claims of SDT is that motivation exists on an autonomy-control continuum (Deci & Ryan, 2016). At one end, people acting with intrinsic motivation are motivated by the interest or enjoyment inherent for them in the task itself (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Whilst intrinsically motivated behaviour is associated with high-quality learning and creativity (Deci & Ryan, 2000), much of what we as teachers ask our students to do isn’t intrinsically motivating in itself, and thus we must rely on extrinsic motivation in order that our students engage with the required learning activities (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

According to SDT, extrinsic motivation can differ significantly in terms of quality and behavioural outcome. On this view, extrinsically motivated behaviours can be more or less autonomous, according to the extent to which the value of and motivation for the behaviour has been internalised (Deci & Ryan, 2000). People motivated to do a task solely in order to achieve a reward or avoid a punishment will experience their behaviour as controlled, and will be unlikely to persist with a task once the reward or threat of punishment has been removed.

People, however, who have taken in and comprehended the value of an activity – even when initially prompted to engage by an external force and carrying out the activity with an external end in view – act with greater autonomy and therefore engage more actively with tasks (Deci et al., 1994).

Importantly then, the autonomy-control continuum described by SDT includes four different types of extrinsic motivation. At one end, externally regulated behaviour (such as that done to achieve a reward) represents the most controlled form of extrinsic motivation. Whilst it is clear that rewards or punishments can readily prompt behaviour, the behaviour is unlikely to persist in their absence, is generally perceived as being merely instrumental and is likely to be engaged with in a way that requires minimal effort (Ryan & Deci, 2016). To consider an example relevant to our purposes here, the trainee PWP required to complete a reflective essay evaluating their performance in a recorded OSCE will likely carry out this task in order to avoid failing the training. But unless the motivation for carrying out such reflective activity is internalised, they are unlikely to continue with this critical aspect of professional development once the threat of failing the course has been removed (i.e. after qualification). Introjection describes a form of internalisation in which behavioural regulation has been partially internalised but is still experienced as relatively controlled, with behaviour carried out despite not subscribing wholly to its value. The trainee PWP motivated to practice role-playing a LI-CBT assessment by the feeling that they ‘have to’ practice ahead of their OSCE, or to avoid the feeling of guilt associated with not properly preparing, would be an example of introjected regulation. Moving along the continuum towards greater autonomy, identified regulation describes a form of internalisation in which the value of a particular behaviour has been more fully identified with. The trainee PWP who understands the value of role-play practice or learning about diagnostic classification systems for

example, and who identifies with the value or meaning of such tasks may act from identified regulation. Here, students may no longer need the threat of a looming OSCE to motivate their behaviour. The decision to engage in learning tasks is moved by having personally identified with the usefulness of such learning and comprehended the tasks’ instrumental value. The most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation is integration. Here the value of the task has been assimilated with the trainee’s wider sense of self and identity. A substantial degree of autonomy is experienced and the value of a particular behaviour is both subscribed to and consistent with the person’s broader values.

So how can SDT help teachers of PWPs design learning activities in ways that reduce stress and encourage motivated, independent learning? In particular, how can the theory support the effective design of PBLDs, in which lecturers are less actively involved with learning activities at the time they take place?

### **SDT in the educational environment**

SDT has been widely applied to educational settings (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). A variety of studies across all age groups have demonstrated that need-supportive environments facilitate higher-quality motivation and deep approaches to learning (Yamauchi & Tanaka, 1998; Evans & Bonneville-Roussy, 2016) as well as greater psychological wellbeing and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Yu et al., 2016).

### **Facilitating basic psychological-need satisfaction**

In light of the reported value that satisfying our basic psychological needs has on motivation and wellbeing, researchers have sought to uncover practical ways in which to facilitate the satisfaction of these basic needs. Writing about educational motivation, Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that the groundwork for promoting internalisation is laid through facilitating the satisfaction of the

basic psychological need for relatedness; by ensuring that students feel cared about and respected by their teachers. As such, a critical foundation for any attempt to ensure that trainee PWPs' wellbeing is maintained and their motivation enhanced, is that lecturers develop an environment in which trainees feel supported and respected. Beyond this, a number of the findings in relation to the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for competence and autonomy appear highly relevant for our purposes here.

Given that controlling environments lead to lower quality motivation, providing a degree of choice in relation to the tasks to be carried out appears to be important in promoting feelings of autonomy and higher quality motivation (Zuckerman et al., 1978). Where students are required to carry out activities over which they have little choice or for which they feel little intrinsic motivation, research suggests that autonomy can be supported in a number of ways. By providing a meaningful rationale for tasks and conveying a sense of choice in the language used to describe them, instructors can promote feelings of autonomy and facilitate internalisation by enhancing the extent to which students comprehend and identify with the value of an activity (Reeve et al., 2002; Deci et al., 1994).

Similarly, by setting optimally challenging tasks, research suggests that teachers can facilitate feelings of competence in students and thus promote further internalisation and higher quality motivation (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

### **Practice example and recommendations**

In response to student feedback, we decided to review the way in which our PBLDs were structured. Feedback had often identified that whilst some students felt overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of work set on these days, others found them under-stimulating and reported having finished the set tasks well ahead of time. As such, by drawing on research from SDT and in an effort to ensure that these vital days of training are

experienced positively by all students, the PBLDs were redesigned in a way intended to facilitate the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence.

In order to promote choice and facilitate autonomy within the confines of a tightly packed curriculum, the PBLDs were restructured around three different types of activities. Firstly, '*Core Activities*' set out a small number of tasks that form the heart of each PBLD and which all students are required to complete due to their central significance to relevant learning outcomes. Such tasks include self-practice of interventions, role-play and the observation of practice, as well as reading of relevant materials for LI-CBT interventions. '*Further Activities*' list a number of activities including watching videos of clinical practice, reading theoretical papers about the development of key areas of LICBT practice, carrying out problem-based learning activities or undertaking further role-play. '*Further Activities*' lists generally include approximately half a dozen activities and suggest that students undertake between one and three which feel most relevant and interesting to them. Finally, '*Optional Extras*' include a small selection of additional tasks that interested students who have completed the *Core* and relevant *Further Activities* can complete in order to enquire more deeply into relevant topics and expand on the knowledge gained so far.

Importantly, given the fact that PBLDs thus designed include both activities about which students have complete choice and others which they are required to do, we have sought to provide meaningful rationales for why each activity has been included. In line with the research outlined above, it is thus intended that even when carrying out *Core Activities*, students will complete the tasks with a greater sense of autonomy, having understood the value and internalised the motivation for completing each task. By providing students with some choice about which activities to complete (in the *Further Activities* and *Optional Extras* for example) we

are also seeking to further facilitate feelings of autonomy.

The wording of instructions has also been carefully selected to minimise the use of controlling or restrictive language and promote feelings of choice and autonomy. Phrases such as ‘You might find it useful to...’ or ‘By completing x in this way, you will be able to...’ have been used where possible, and the use of controlling language such as ‘You are required to...’ or ‘It is essential that’ has been minimised.

In structuring the PBLDs in this way, we have also sought to facilitate the satisfaction of the need for competence. The challenge discussed above of providing optimally challenging learning activities for students across a cohort is of course not completely eliminated by these suggestions, but, we hope, it is attenuated. With a degree of choice regarding not only *how many*, but also *which* activities students undertake on these days, it is hoped that students can now work on activities that are likely to be most helpful to them and at a level at which they feel challenged but also competent. Students with a strong academic background but less clinical experience for example, may choose to focus more of their time developing their clinical competence through shadowing and role-play activities. Similarly, those who entered the course with a host of transferable clinical skills but less theoretical understanding of relevant topics, have the option to focus more of their time on reading or problem-based learning activities designed to enhance their theoretical understanding of key topics. Similarly of course, after completing the *Core Activities*, those with a strong academic focus may also choose

more of the traditionally academic activities from the *Further* or *Optional Extra* activities, again facilitating feelings of competence and autonomy whilst also ensuring the required learning takes place to meet the necessary learning outcomes. It is hoped that this more flexible approach to the PBLDs will facilitate feelings of competence both by allowing students to focus their time where they believe they need it most, and also by ensuring that more stretching tasks can be included in a way that promotes their value where appropriate but minimises the risk of them playing an unhelpful and demotivating role in the experience of others.

### Conclusion

Following the last PWP training review, education providers were provided with further guidance regarding how to use the PBLDs (UCL, 2015). However, still relatively little is known regarding how they are experienced and used by students or how to ensure they are utilised in the most effective way possible. Further research examining this area seems likely to be of significant value. The changes described here remain in their infancy, and the extent to which (or indeed, whether) they impact trainee wellbeing and learning in the ways intended has yet to be fully determined. But by restructuring the days in the ways described, we hope to have opened a useful avenue for exploration and to have offered some considerations relevant for the development of high-quality and stimulating PWP training.

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