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Can Continuing Education Curricula Effectively Teach Professionals? A Case for Using a Curriculum Assessment Tool for Initial and Ongoing Evaluation

James P. Coyle and Irene Carter

Introduction

Continuing professional education (CPE) is expected and required in most human services professions (Cantor, 2006). Many professional organizations and professional licensing bodies require continuing education credits for membership or licensure renewal, and human services agencies "are increasingly challenged with developing meaningful training programs for its members as a way to compete and succeed in today's volatile environment" (Lingham, Richley, and Rezania, 2006, p.335). In addition, certificate programs and skills-building workshops are increasingly accepted as necessary specialized education that follows fundamental skills learned in university and college degree programs. This increased use of CPE has challenged educators and human service organizations to develop methods for evaluating and credentialing trainings or workshops (Craven & DuHamel, 2003).

In addition to assessing participant learning outcomes, these methods should examine CPE components that influence outcomes, such as evaluating the purpose and relevance of the training, assuring that curricula accurately and completely present training concepts and skills, setting standards for ongoing evaluation of learning, and assessing teaching methods that match adult-learning needs (Thoms, 2001). This article presents a curriculum assessment tool (CAT) that was developed by a School of Social Work to efficiently evaluate the curriculum content and instructional methods of several CPE trainings created for the direct services staff of a mental health organization. The authors first discuss three foundational elements used to develop the CAT: the needs of social workers for CPE, theories of adult learning, and assessing CPE curricula. They will then describe the collaborative process used to create the CAT and discuss the benefits and limitations of its use.

Needs of Social Work Continuing Education

CPE supports life-long learning and encompasses a variety of training or educational experiences with the goal of improving professional or occupational knowledge and skills (Cantor, 2006). It is a necessary part of professional career advancement (Stevens, 1996) in which employers and employees work in partnership to assess learning needs, opportunities, and outcomes. The ongoing changes in social services delivery methods and the broad range of social work settings and domains require CPE opportunities for updating professional skills (Kane, Hamlin, & Green, 2001; Lingham et al., 2006). Moreover, professional status and identity require that individuals continuously update their knowledge and skills (McMichael, 2000). CPE supports the ethical obligation that social workers have to assure practice competency. Further, it can enhance workers' confidence, morale, and perceptions that their work is valued by their agency and community (Crohn & Berger, 2009; McMichael, 2000).

The need for standardized educational programs that assure competent social work skills in specialized settings has encouraged the creation of certificate programs (Mathieson, Smith, Graham, Barbanell, & Cash, 2002; Smith, 2001). Craven and DuHamel (2003) define certificate programs as "a single course or a linked series of credit or noncredit courses that constitute a coherent body of study in a discipline" (p. 14). They serve to provide the adult learner with the opportunity to master new learning, and, in some cases,

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they provide an option for earning academic credit. Clear learning outcomes, participant evaluations, and ongoing content updates are used to assure the acquisition of professional skills. (Smith, 2001).

While much of social work CPE focuses on improving professional practice skills related to specific populations, intervention targets, or settings (Beddoe, 2009; Dia, Smith, Cohen-Callow, & Bliss, 2005), studies have also indicated that social workers have identified several critical elements of CPE. These include achieving cultural competency, acquiring practice research skills, accessing available resources (Kane et al., 2001), developing critical thinking skills that help workers respond to constantly changing client needs and community influences (Beddoe, 2009), and providing opportunities for colleagues to share experiences about what works in which situations (Crohn & Berger, 2009). These priorities highlight the importance of selecting training content that addresses the needs of diverse client groups, identifying agency and community resources, and recognizing various types and levels of intervention. In addition, the relevance of the training was an influential motivating factor for attending CPE (Beddoe, 2009; Crohn & Berger, 2009; Dia et al., 2005). Relevant training reflected participants' practice setting, presented new knowledge and skills, fostered occupational skills development, and met professional development needs. All of this indicates that CPE curricula that simply present facts about a topic are inadequate. CPE should delineate goals, be relevant, help develop critical thinking, support experiential learning, and have a clear application to practice situations or settings.

Theories of Adult Learning

CPE training is often developed by human services professionals who have expertise in the training topic. Although this expertise may present accurate information and aspire to the development of appropriate skills, it does not always assure the effectiveness of the learning. Success often depends upon instructor presentation skills and the employment of teaching methods that match adult-learning characteristics.

For many years, education theory focused on a child-learning model which directed learners to memorize or master topics that experts decided were necessary for life. More recently, there has been a discussion of adult learning based on theory proposed by Malcolm Knowles (1998). Adult education is learner-centered, an approach that puts the instructor in the position of managing a learning process rather than prescribing a learning content. Adult learning emphasizes teaching methods that are task-oriented, goal-directed, and relevant to the learner. It builds on the accumulated experiences of the learners and the perceived value that they ascribe to the learning content (O'Connor, Bronner, & Delaney, 2002). It motivates learning by connecting training content with learners' previous knowledge and experiences and with their current work tasks and job advancement (Leib, 1991; Thoms, 2001). Additionally, adult-learning styles affect training outcomes (Cartney, 2000). Teachers and trainers should strive to vary course presentation, work, and assignments in order to address all of the primary learning styles identified by Kolb (1976): concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing). Learning is strengthened when CPE delivery includes all of these styles, such as explaining content in terms of concepts and experiences, presenting real-life examples, and using experiential exercises. A variety of teaching methods also accommodates differences in participants' learning styles, and can address learning needs influenced by ethnicity, age, and disabilities (Kaplan & Kies, 1995). This type of learning requires a high level of interaction between instructor and learners that challenges instructors to assess participants' current knowledge and skills and include relevant examples, reflection, and experiential learning

that applies concepts to learners' practice settings.

Relevance and application are also clarified by defining the expected learning outcomes, i.e., the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that participants acquire from the training (Shipley, 1995). These outcome statements describe observable behavior using Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains (Aviles, 1999; Bloom, 1956), which categorizes levels of learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Illustrating the participant's predicted levels of learning and post-training behaviors communicates the training purpose, and it guides training delivery methods that will accomplish the desired outcomes.

Research has supported the importance of these adult-learning concepts. Scott (2003) interviewed students in accelerated learning courses about the quality of their learning experiences. Participant responses described the attributes of high-quality learning experiences: courses were interactive, encouraged active and experiential learning, and applied learning to real-life situations. Students were encouraged to share their ideas and experiences, and teaching methods focused on depth rather than breadth of course concepts in order to better connect new knowledge with learner's needs. Likewise, participants in Beddoe's (2009) study of social work CPE highlighted the importance of promoting critical reflection, acknowledging underlying values, using workers' experiences, and focusing on the learning process rather than simply presenting facts. Additionally, Crohn and Berger (2009) reported that agency-based training participants valued opportunities to discuss their work with colleagues more than receiving "cutting-edge knowledge" (p. 32). These findings demonstrate the need for linking CPE to workers' experiences and for conducting interactive workshops that include reflective and experiential learning methods.

Assessing Continuing Professional Education

Assuring workers' professional competence and the effectiveness of CPE training requires employers, CPE developers, and professional organizations to evaluate training quality and outcomes (Curry & Chandler, 1999; Lingham et al., 2006). Assessing participant learning outcomes often focuses on measuring the acquisition of knowledge and skills by the learners (Buttell, 1999; Kane et al., 2001), their ability to transfer learning to their workplace, and their satisfaction with CPE delivery (Curry & Chandler, 1999). However, in addition to participant learning, other guidelines for assuring the quality of CPE have been proposed. CPE assessment should consider the purpose of the training, review training curricula, and establish standards of excellence (Craven & DuHamel, 2003). Evaluation should, therefore, occur during training design, following initial training presentation, and continue through subsequent trainings (Lingham et al., 2006). Evaluation methods and instruments are more effective when influenced by input from employers, trainers, participants, professional organizations, and evaluators. Ongoing assessment should evaluate participant learning outcomes and the continued relevance, accuracy, and delivery methods of the CPE training (Craven & DuHamel, 2003; Lingham et al., 2006). This evaluation has a formative function in which CPE goal attainment and achievement of participant learning outcomes guide CPE updates and delivery improvements (Smith, 2001).

Furthermore, the risks and benefits of CPE content should be assessed. Bates (2004) articulates the ethical responsibility of evaluating training beneficence: "the quality of doing good, taking positive steps to help others, or the notion that one ought to do or promote the action that benefits others" (p. 343). This requires evaluating potential risks and benefits of training content, assessment tools, delivery methods, and explanations of concepts and models. Ultimately, risks and benefits affecting potential clients should be

considered. Bates (2004) describes a number of examples. Contextual factors, such as resources and organizational culture or support, may have a greater impact on measures of learners' practice skills than their participation during CPE. Intervention models may have convincing benefits in some situations but be contra-indicated in other situations, which obliges CPE trainers and evaluators to appraise training content according to evidence, relevance, completeness of presentation, and assessment of the ability of learners to ethically implement interventions. Therefore, CPE assessment must consider purpose, content, teaching methods, criteria for measuring participant learning, ongoing formative evaluation, and the ultimate benefits and risks to clients.

Developing a Tool for Evaluating CPE Curriculum Design

The authors were part of a team that was asked to evaluate CPE curricula designed for human services workers employed by a large mental health services agency. Several two-day training workshops had been created and presented, and the employer asked the team's School of Social Work to consider issuing a continuing education certificate for workers who satisfactorily completed the series of trainings. These trainings included topics related to mental health services, such as *Fundamentals of Mental Health*, *Fundamentals of Addiction*, *Motivational Interviewing*, and *Basic Pharmacology in Mental Health and Substance Abuse*. Each workshop had a manual for participants that included agendas, learning objectives, presentation slides showing content, handouts, exercise materials, and supplemental information. Creating a certificate program required a method for assessing and approving the quality of these pre-existing workshops and additional workshops not yet designed. Since reviewers were not able to observe trainings and participant feedback data were limited to satisfaction items, the team reviewed the training manuals in order to appraise content, instructional methods, and mechanisms for evaluating participant learning.

The team used four overlapping steps to evaluate the CPE curricula: 1) identify standards and criteria for satisfactory training curricula, 2) develop an assessment tool, 3) review assessment criteria and tools with the agency and CPE program managers in order to create a mutually beneficial assessment procedure, and 4) use the tool to assess each CPE workshop and to track changes made by CPE developers in order to meet identified standards.

First, the evaluation team briefly reviewed the existing workshops and compiled initial ideas about content and teaching methods needed for effective learning. The team reviewed information about the following: workshop purposes, job descriptions and educational backgrounds of participants, credentials of workshop developers, educational needs of workers providing mental health services, effective teaching methods, and curricula evaluation processes and tools. The adult-learning styles, practitioner needs, and assessment strategies discussed in the previous sections of this article provided a foundation for assessment criteria. In particular, the team recognized that workshops should be relevant to practice and to the needs of the participants (Beddoe, 2009; Crohn & Berger, 2009; Dia et al., 2005), present accurate and current content (Kane et al., 2001; Lingham et al., 2006), include interactive and experiential teaching methods (Beddoe, 2009; O'Connor et al., 2002; Scott, 2003), identify learning outcomes or goals (Shipley, 1995; Smith 2001), and include assessment of participant learning (Bates, 2004; Craven & DuHamel, 2003; Lingham et al., 2006; Smith, 2001). The team initially identified the following assessment standards:

- Curriculum content is accurate and corresponds to current research.
- Concepts are clearly defined and sources of information are clearly cited and referenced.
- Learning outcomes are relevant to the practice setting.
- Content and presentation are effective for learners with a range of educational and practice backgrounds.
- Training is interactive and includes experiential exercises.
- Training material encourages ongoing learn-

ing and skill development.
- Learning outcomes and training effectiveness are assessed.

Each CPE workshop would need to meet these standards in order to be included in a certificate program. In addition, the evaluation process required a framework that guided multiple evaluators, pragmatic rating scales that identified needed changes, comments that defined those changes, and a general focus that could be applied to disparate workshop topics and goals. Therefore, a standardized assessment tool that would define the necessary components for any training and allow several team members to consistently assess different training modules was proposed. The general nature of the tool was offset by assigning each review to a team member who had expert knowledge of the training topic and effective teaching methods.

The second step was to develop a curriculum assessment tool (CAT) that would clearly rate the criteria for achieving standards and define the changes needed for approval. The CAT identified the workshop being evaluated, the evaluator, and date. Assessment criteria were ordered to parallel the organization of the workshop manual: agenda, learning objectives or outcomes, definitions of terms and concepts, continuity and sequencing, accuracy, use of experiential learning, references, additional resources, and evaluation of learning. Each item was rated as satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and evaluators were asked to specify the changes required for improving unsatisfactory ratings. The third and fourth steps were used to revise and improve the CAT.

Consultations and meetings between agency administrators, trainers, and the evaluation team comprised the third step for developing an effective evaluation. Administrators and trainers requested more specific descriptions of standards and criteria. For example, "Continuity and sequencing of material is clear and logical" was changed to "Continuity and sequencing of material advances clearly from simple to complex or fundamental to specialized," and "References are included and listed" was revised to "References cited in workshop slides or manual are included on the slide/page or in a reference list." These changes better defined standards for curricula design. Further revision requests included simplifying the CAT by reducing the number of categories, briefly describing essential criteria, and avoiding overlap between items. Separate items that assessed the accuracy, organization, and clear presentation of content were combined into a single item stating, "Workshop content from presentation slides and manual is clear, has sufficient depth, and reflects current evidence and ethical standards." Content organization was omitted in this standard since it was assessed in the continuity criteria previously mentioned. Assessment criteria were numbered, and words describing the assessment item topic were placed in boldface in order to make it easier to refer to specific elements of the tool.

The fourth step began with conducting pilot workshop assessments using the CAT. These assessments were used to further refine the tool, and three improvements were recommended. First, evaluators believed that the satisfactory or unsatisfactory rating scale was insufficient to distinguish between training elements that clearly met standards and elements that could be improved even though they met the minimal criteria for the standard. For example, the content on presentation slides may be acceptable, but evaluators could suggest additional content that would strengthen learning, or recommend format or layout changes would improve delivery. Agency and training personnel agreed that three rating categories would be useful: 1) acceptable – meets standards, 2) satisfactory (suggestions will improve), and 3) needs improvement for acceptance. Second, it was apparent that evaluators should provide detailed comments that would clearly indicate needed changes for approval, including slide numbers, manual page numbers, and descriptions of requested revisions. A flexible form for including these details was constructed by using word processing table functions to compose a form with expanding rows for these comments. This assured that the evaluator's recommendations responded to the specific CAT criteria. Finally, two items were added to the tool. "Other" provid-

Table 1: *Curriculum Assessment Tool (CAT)*

Workshop/Course Title:		
Evaluator:		
Date:		
The evaluator assesses the workshop/course by rating each standard and describing specific recommendations for improvement, including page/slide numbers, in each feedback section.		
1.	**Agenda** is clear and well planned.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
2.	**Learning objectives/outcomes** are clearly stated, specific, measurable, attainable, and realistic.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
3.	**Definitions** of terms and concepts are accurate and well explained.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
4.	**Continuity and sequencing** of material advances clearly from simple to complex or fundamental to specialized.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
5.	Workshop includes **experiential and critical reflection exercises** that are well designed, and advance the learning process.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
6.	**Workshop content** from presentation slides and manual is clear, has sufficient depth, and reflects current evidence and ethical standards.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
7.	**References** cited in workshop slides or manual are included on the slide/page or in a reference list.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
8.	**Additional resources** included in the manual are appropriate, helpful, and easy to use.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
9.	**Evaluation forms** assess training effectiveness and ask participants to suggest improvements.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
10.	**Other** comments or suggestions.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		
11.	**Overall summary**: meets all standards or summarizes overall needs for acceptance.	[] Acceptable – meets standards [] Satisfactory (suggestions will improve) [] Needs Improvement for acceptance
Feedback:		

ed space for giving feedback that did not fit in the listed standards, and "Overall Summary" communicated the overall strengths and limitations of the workshop.

The revised CAT, which was approved by the evaluation team, agency administrators, and trainers, is presented in Table 1. The pilot workshop assessments were updated using the revised CAT, and other workshops were reviewed by evaluation team members who were knowledgeable about the workshop content. Evaluators used an "X" to designate the rating category and inputted detailed descriptions of changes required to meet acceptable standards following each standard. Completed CAT forms could be emailed to the agency and curricula developers and used to guide revisions of workshop manuals, presentation slides, or materials, which were resubmitted to the reviewer for further assessment. When all standards were met, the evaluation team reported this to the certificate program developers. All workshop assessments were reviewed by the evaluation team leader and agency training coordinate to judge the utility and consistency of the evaluations.

Benefits and Limitations of the Curriculum Assessment Tool

CPE, continuing education programs, must have methods for assessing the quality of workshops or trainings, and this is particularly necessary when trainings from multiple sources are used. The CAT identified standards that were meaningful and realistic for evaluators, agency administrators, CPE trainers, and workshop developers. It provided a consistent method for clearly communicating expectations for current and future CPE workshops. Collaboration between agency administrators, trainers, and evaluators assured that training needs would align with organizational goals and could be tailored or customized to meet the needs of participants, as suggested by Lingham and colleagues (2006). The CAT standards provided specific workshop expectations but were not limited to a particular training topic, which made it useful for evaluating future workshops or workshops from other sources.

In our case, the collaboration between the university-affiliated evaluation team and the agency in-service training unit provided a tangible benefit for both. The agency trainers became more knowledgeable about adult-learning concepts, needed training elements, and the benefits of formative and outcome evaluations. This knowledge improved the overall agency CPE program development. Specifically, reviewer suggestions motivated trainers to clarify and update concept definitions, illustrate practice applications, and use collaborative and experiential teaching methods. Additionally, the evaluation team was challenged to better articulate effective teaching methods and learning outcomes. Members of the team also increased their awareness of educational needs beyond the learning that occurs in college and university programs.

On the other hand, since the CAT focused on evaluating workshop or course curriculum it was not able to assess two important elements of CPE effectiveness: participant feedback and trainer presentation skills. The team was asked to evaluate workshops that had been previously presented and feedback from participants was limited. Workshops would not be scheduled again until evaluated by the team. The CAT form, therefore, did not include criteria that required observational or participant feedback to assess the standard. Ongoing workshop evaluation should include methods for assessing these training elements, and additional items could be added to the CAT if the evaluator is able to observe the workshop and to review participant feedback. Asking workshop presenters, participants, and experienced practitioners to evaluate CAT items would also improve the tool's validity.

A possible third limitation was related to decisions about choosing courses to include in a certificate program. While the CAT assesses the quality of individual workshops, it does not evaluate the number or range of workshops or courses

needed to reach a defined level of competency. A separate needs-assessment process (Smith, 2001) that reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of participants and the skill sets needed for competent intervention in the agency's mental health setting was used by the authors' team to determine the trainings required for the certificate program.

Currently, the CAT is a mechanism for enhancing training presentation. However, it could be adapted to study the relationships among CPE content, instructional methods, and participant learning outcomes. This would strengthen its ability to propose and evaluate formative changes for CPE trainings. Accomplishing this would require composing operational definitions of standards, expanding the rating scale to measure criteria levels, and determining reliability and validity of the tool. Adding observational measures and input from multiple sources to the curriculum materials examination would also improve assessment.

Team members who evaluated curricula confirmed that the CAT did help them assess specific standards and organize feedback. The agency administrators and workshop trainers reported that the standardized criteria, rating, and feedback format expedited workshop revisions and clarified expectations for designing quality CPE trainings. Although the CAT may be amended to reflect different assessment needs, its present form is flexible enough so that it can be used to assess various workshop contents and learning methods, and it is easy to use. It can facilitate efforts to design and improve training quality and to monitor training effectiveness by continuing education coordinators, human relations departments, training consultants and developers, and credentialing organizations. It is a useful addition to the spectrum of instruments and methods for evaluating professional continuing education workshops and trainings.

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