

Training in Vocational Services: a European project

As a result of a dash of over-enthusiasm 18 months ago in a bar, I landed my team with a commitment to a European project for the next couple of years. After a fair amount of cursing under the breath (from them not me) and finger-crossing that the bid didn't pass muster (from me not them) the bid was duly accepted and last Autumn the TRAVORS project was born. After a few months of settling down the partnership is now working well and I wanted to share the experience along with the principles of the project because I feel that, over-enthusiasm aside, the project has allowed me and my team to crystallise a collection of training principles that we have been working to for some time but have never really expressed concretely.

TRAVORS stands for Training in Vocational Services and is a Leonardo da Vinci project. Leonardo projects, as you may know, are about the transfer of innovative training products across Europe. As I hope you will see, the TRAVORS products have the potential to be both innovative and provide additional research evidence on the effectiveness of the training principles embodied in the transferred products.

The partner organisations represent Greece, the UK, Spain, Estonia and Austria and were drawn together from previous contacts and an invitation to join the partnership by the lead organisation RNL (Rehabilitation Network Limited) from the UK. Within this partnership the DWP is the technical partner for the UK (RNL being a delivery organisation) responsible for pulling together the research principles, developing a specification for an innovative product, assisting partners in implementing the product and running technical evaluations. Partners' main responsibilities are:

DWP (UK) - Trainer training content, design and evaluation

RNL (UK) - Rehabilitation training content and programme management

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Parnu University (Estonia);

IDEC (Greece);

Karriere Club (Austria); - Training development in each member country

IFI. SL (Spain)

E-Isotis (Greece) - Consultation with users and IT development

VFA Ltd (Greece) - Programme management and evaluation -

The rationale for the project, and the reason for the particular mix of partner organisations, is that disabled people have lower employment levels across Europe and have broader risks of social exclusion. Evidence has been presented that employment is generally beneficial to health and also provides some protection against social exclusion. In Estonia the unemployment rate among disabled people is three times the average with 1/3rd of working-age disabled people employed. 85% of disabled people in Greece that are able to work do not have a job. In the UK, about 1/3rd of the 2.5 m people receiving Incapacity Benefit wish to work. The number of employed disabled people in all countries remains low at around 25% to 50%. Experience in all countries shows that those who support disabled people into work need to have a mix of complex skills in order to do their work effectively.

The TRAVORS project, then, aims to mix 2 innovative approaches to training trainers who train employment advisers. The first is that my team has assembled a number of training principles that we build into most of our training and development work these days. The research evidence behind these principles is sound and mostly well known but the combination of them into a prescription is, to my mind, new. The second innovative approach is a menu of skills and the relevant training content devised by RNL. This is a deconstruction of their existing training courses, albeit with some new features, and this menu approach allows partner organisations to assess the learning needs of their target learners; the requirements of their individual country, eg. welfare regulations, and then to reconstruct a whole training course from the relevant menu parts. The partner organisations, then, take the menu items as described above and reconstruct them according to the prescribed design principles. Effectively, this is like building an Airfix kit with RNL providing many of the parts and DWP providing the instructions for assembly. Talking to the partner organisations, some of whom have worked on many European training projects, this approach to tailoring training products would appear to be new and to some of them it is both exciting and challenging!

To move on to the specifics of my team's contribution, we have been responsible, along with DWP colleagues, for re-designing major training interventions across the Department in recent years

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and we have often written about our approach but we have never constructed a 'how to do it' guide. This project represented an opportunity for us to do exactly that whilst also allowing us to gather additional evidence for the effectiveness of the approach. Below is a brief description of the core principles of the training design. There are others but I have selected just a few so that the piece is readable and gives a flavour of the main components of the work.

The core principles are:

1. Self Efficacy – Self –Efficacy underpins many of the things that my team does. It is the main active ingredient in many recent interventions and training designs and goes a long way to understanding how people succeed. As you may know Self-Efficacy is a theory about how belief in one's own capabilities to secure success in valued outcomes affects the achievement of those outcomes. In other words it explains why people act, how their beliefs impact on the success of that action and why people continue to act in the face of obstacles. Self-Efficacy has been used extensively in various branches of psychology and is being applied more and more to job-seeking and job-keeping behaviour an area that we are heavily involved in and an area that we hope to add knowledge to as a result of this project.

2. Skills First – Once again, this has formed a key principle in much of our work over recent years. Many courses that my team has reviewed at all levels of the academic spectrum appear to be knowledge-based. Knowledge is undoubtedly a good thing but these courses claim to be teaching skills, often vocational skills, yet we find it difficult to identify the actual skills allegedly being taught. Our principle, for this training, starts by identifying the behaviours required of the trainee for successful completion of the work-task and then teaches those skills broken down as micro-skills training session that build up into a repertoire mirroring the skilled complex performance. Knowledge is built in around the skills and used within the work context. Any knowledge that is useful but an adjunct to the skill can be taken out of the face-to-face scenario entirely, eg. On a web site, workbook or as part of an action learning set.

3. Learning Needs Analysis – It seems self-evident that a LNA ought to be part of a training transfer project but properly conducted LNAs are not as common as you may think. The LNA contributes substantially to success because, from a Self-Efficacy point of view, the trainee needs to believe that the skills they are learning will allow them to do their jobs more effectively. This is undermined if the LNA has not been done properly, has been rushed or an off-the-peg or sheep-dip approach to training has been used.

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4. Consolidation – In-work consolidation allows for the application of classroom learning to the specific job task within the live environment. Key to this, though, is that mentors, coaches and managers are able to provide appropriate feedback on performance to the learner. Once again it is often assumed that the manager, etc. is already skilled enough to do this but in our experience the manager needs preparation if they are not to get in the way of the learning by, say, poorly constructed or delivered feedback. We advocate constructing usable quality checklists, manager briefings or training to help ensure that the learner is adequately supported in the workplace.

5. Usability and Accessibility– These are closely related concepts. Usability refers to the ease with which people can operate systems in achieving set goals (effectively, efficiently, safely, satisfactorily and comfortably) and Accessibility is the extent to which products can be accessed by people. As a minimum we would recommend that usability and accessibility conform to industry standards. These terms are often applied to IT systems and we certainly support this but we go a little further in applying these terms to the training experience in its entirety and include things like physical documents and whether the training can be accessed equally by part-time staff members or those with caring responsibilities.

Currently, partner organisations are familiarising themselves with all the research evidence that supports our choice of design principles and with the principles themselves. Their next task is, with our help, to begin the construction of the individual training products based on a thorough understanding of their target trainees. We have included a self-assessment checklist within the product specification documents so that partners can check on whether their products meet the principles and this, along with ongoing dialogue with my team, will mean that the evaluation is a rolling cycle of design, assessment, negotiation and re-design. This in itself is fairly innovative as way of designing training products.

So there, this has been a brief but hopefully interesting description of a new European project that applies a number of innovations to skills development and hopes to have an impact on the way that professionals in the rehabilitation field are trained. It seems an awfully long time since that conversation in the bar but the moral of the story is probably...prefer the folly of enthusiasm to the indifference of wisdom.

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