

Thinking in Practice: Redefining the Relationship

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenge of reconnecting probation knowledge, theory and practice throughout Europe. It will describe the history and rationale of the Thinking in Practice Seminar Series which was intended to promote thinking and debate about the supervision of offenders. It will consider how a collaborative approach might produce a greater groundswell of opinion and shared vision. The paper will draw upon practice literature and will use the seminar series as a case study to explore ways which allow probation services to continue to develop best practice. The paper will argue that the seminars have had some success in connecting with wider debates and could be replicated and developed further in other European jurisdictions.

Keywords: Probation training – Europe – Desistance - Theory into practice - Post-qualifying training.

Introduction

This paper examines the challenge of reconnecting probation thinking (knowledge and theory) and practice in a dynamic and evolving way by describing the rationale and history of a collaborative series of seminars in the English Midlands. The Thinking in Practice Seminar Series (hereafter the seminar series) was intended to promote thinking and debate about the professional task of supervising offenders and of managing those people who supervise offenders. Each seminar was a stand-alone event, intended to attract a range of different participants. Events were therefore designed to ensure that individual attendees found their particular seminar valuable. On each occasion presentations informed participants about new

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areas of knowledge and relevant research into practice, the practical implications of which were explored in workshops. At the same time the seminars were intended to form a series of dialogues between academics and practitioners which would complement each other and expand upon issues as they emerged. It was a two-tier process and issues that came out of the seminars related both to the 'here and now' of practice and this ongoing dialogue.

Through its reflection upon the seminar series, the paper raises questions particularly relevant to the development of post-qualifying practice in the UK and more widely in Europe. It will consider whether and then how a collaborative approach, as exemplified by the seminar series, might produce a greater groundswell of opinion, especially where people (organisers and participants) come from different settings and begin to develop a shared vision. The paper will draw upon other literature relating to significant changes in practice such as the 'What Works' movement. It will use the seminar series as a case study or mechanism to explore ways which allow probation services to continue to change and develop without losing the best elements of practice that have developed over the past decade.

Whyte (2009: 205) argues that "an evidence-led approach to practice development requires closer working relationships between agencies and independent academic institutions to ensure a two-way flow of information about policy and practice issues". He, like many commentators about evidence-based practice, takes a view that it is not set in stone and that it should evolve in the light of new knowledge, research and lessons from practice. The current training structures in probation in Europe, particularly at post-qualifying level, do not readily lend themselves to these close working relationships; ongoing training beyond the initial qualification stage is often primarily technical. It is a challenge to establish a meaningful dialogue between theory and practice in an operational climate and occupational culture where, arguably, services to offenders have been overly focused upon targets and procedures and practice has become routinised and less connected to its knowledge and theory foundations.

The paper will start by outlining the main trends in the post-qualifying arrangements in European probation. It will go on to describe the seminar series itself, drawing on theories relating to individual and organisational learning, responses to the seminars themselves and ideas explored by critical voices in probation literature focussing on de-professionalisation, managerialism and core knowledge for practitioners.

The paper will conclude by reflecting upon the experience and outcomes of this seminar approach to developing a research-practice dialogue and how far and in what ways this approach can actually have an impact upon the future development practice; what else might need to happen? If the seminars have succeeded in connecting with wider debates on engagement and desistance, could they be successfully replicated and developed further in other European jurisdictions?

European Context

In aiming to build a link between practice and contemporary probation research and scholarship, the seminar series made a local contribution to filling the gap that had been created by the absence of formal post-qualifying arrangements in England and Wales since the introduction of the DipPS in 1998, followed by the Probation Qualifying Arrangements in 2010. Although this gap in post-qualifying provision is regretted by practitioners and academics in England and Wales, this situation is not unusual in Europe. Across Europe,

there is considerable variation in the relationship between scholarship and practice after qualification. Variations in occupational traditions and culture lead to differences both in qualifying and post-qualifying probation training and it is worthwhile to consider the initial training arrangements to gain some insight into these differences.

The diversity of probation training and post-qualifying training across Europe can best be demonstrated by considering some examples.

Western Europe

Countries in Europe where post-qualifying training has been established include Norway and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands all probation officers have received a social work education at higher education level and officer in-service training is then delivered by probation employer organisations (Van Kalmthout and Tigges, 2008). In Norway, similarly, probation officers are qualified social workers. After appointment, in-service training is provided by the Prison Service training unit, KRUS. This is done through workshops and seminars, often on a residential basis and sometimes in international partnerships (Ploeg, 2008). In Belgium, Croatia, Denmark and Germany probation officers are appointed with degrees and are then expected to undertake professional training in-service (Lauwers, 2008; Rajic and Babic, 2008; Heine, 2008; Mutz, 2008). There is variation in the role played by universities. In Croatia the training is provided by the Training Centre of the Judicial Academy; in Belgium training is offered internally but training leave for external courses is offered; in Denmark post-qualifying training opportunities are a combination of compulsory and voluntary, internal and external. Arguably, some of the most structured post-qualifying arrangements are in Germany, where probation officers are appointed with a degree in social work and then provided with a on the job training for a year. They are then required to participate in further training courses provided by the Ministries of Justice in the various states and local training institutes.

The maintenance of the link to the social work profession seems to be a key factor in maintaining a strong post-qualifying structure. Indeed, the Social Work Task Force (2009) in England recently identified the importance of a stronger career structure for (social work) practitioners underpinned by a revised framework for continuing professional development as a mechanism to produce a high quality workforce. Probation training in Scotland and Northern Ireland has remained within Social Work even when separate training arrangements were introduced in the rest of the UK and probation officers continue to participate in social work post-qualifying arrangements (Whyte, 2008; Fulton, 2008). In both these jurisdictions, universities are involved in providing ongoing training and qualifications for both practitioners and managers (Whyte, 2008; Fulton, 2008). Senior (2010:1) acknowledges the situation for the probation service in England of having no formal post-qualifying framework for staff which is “leading to (a) more agency-dominated and technically-defined operational practice” and “an increasing amount of in-service post-qualifying training with its prescriptive and tight delivery regimes, sometimes pejoratively referred to as ‘sheep-dip training’” which he believes does not promote critical thinking and reflective practice as established within the basic training programme. This description of post-qualifying arrangements in England could apply to much of Europe.

It is also important to note that there may be significant variation in the content of probation training provided both at qualifying and post-qualifying level. Little systematic record has been kept of what is taught to practitioners in the various jurisdictions of Europe but it is notable that probation research and scholarship tends to derive from a small number of countries. Herzog-Evans (2011) has recently reflected on how desistance research – fast becoming the cornerstone of probation practice and training throughout the UK – remains almost unknown in France.

Ongoing in-service training of any sort does help practitioners to stay up to date and current with regard to required practice skills. It is particularly important in jurisdictions where probation staff are appointed without any previous direct probation training. However, if training is simply provided on an ad hoc basis, outside a formal, accredited structure it may simply focus on technical competencies and employer needs rather than the wider, more reflective approach associated with higher education. It may also fail to keep up-to-date with the latest research and scholarship, instead merely involving one generation of practitioners passing on skills and knowledge to the next generation. The seminar series model can contribute to ongoing training by building partnerships between probation organisations and academic institutions.

Eastern Europe

Probation training in Eastern Europe involves another dimension to qualifying and post-qualifying training in Western Europe in that on some occasions it does not merely involve transfer of knowledge from the academy to practice but also a policy transfer from one jurisdiction to another.

There are a variety of ways in which probation policy is transferred into Eastern European countries from the West and a variety of organisations who participate in doing this. The Council of Europe promotes human rights and the development of alternatives to custody, the CEP (European Organisation for Probation) promotes best probation practice and there are individual partnerships established between jurisdictions. Such transfers can sometimes take the form of one-off conferences or events with key policy makers that can have the effect of promoting the values and purposes of probation but with little direct impact on the day to day work of practitioners. However, there are some examples of effective, sustained partnerships. Canton (2006; 506) outlines how work in Ukraine was based around demonstration projects and the publication of a concept paper. He describes the use of an initial five day training programme, with follow up visits utilising reflective seminars. The training also involved visits to project sites, case studies and specific training with managers. This example of a model of policy transfer does have some similarities with the Midlands seminar series in that it focuses on bringing people together in small groups and bases the training around real life situations, applying theory to the day to day work of practitioners and managers. The work in Eastern Europe raises the question of what counts as a successful transfer both generally and also in relation to the seminar series.

Demonstrably, therefore, the nature and structure of initial probation training in European jurisdictions varies greatly. The variation falls into four main areas and is discussed in more detail in Stout and Canton (2010) and Stout and Durnescu (2011, forthcoming). In summary, firstly, in some jurisdictions probation training is part of social work, in others it is not; secondly, in some jurisdictions there is a very close relationship between probation training

and the prison system, in other places that link is not present; thirdly, probation training is sometimes centralised and sometimes decentralised and fourthly, there is considerable variation regarding the academic level of initial probation training. All of these variations have implications for training post initial qualification: probation officers may or may not be able to participate in post-qualifying training structures of prison or social work; the level of centralisation of an initial training programme may apply equally to post-qualifying arrangements or in some jurisdictions post-employment training may be concentrated on what would be considered basic training skills in other places. In some jurisdictions what appear to be extensive and structured post-qualifying arrangements may simply be covering material that is covered by basic qualifying arrangements elsewhere.

It is suggested that the seminar series model could contribute in two different ways to probation training in Europe. Firstly, in jurisdictions where probation training is established (mainly in Western Europe) it could be used to continue to transfer recent scholarship and research, in a similar way to the approach taken in the Midlands. Secondly, in jurisdictions where probation practice is being newly introduced (mainly in Eastern Europe) the model could be used as a way of introducing best practice models.

Occupational Culture

A probation service's ongoing training arrangements are intrinsically related to its occupational culture – the training influences the culture and the culture influences the training. Any organisation's occupational culture influences staff attitudes and expectations towards learning and development. Although the probation service in England and Wales has not had an established post-qualifying framework for its staff there has always been an appetite for professional development and training particularly in ways which help shape the development of work with offenders and create a sense of shared purpose. Leech (2003: 23) talks of “an expectation of continuing learning and improving expertise amongst qualified practitioners and an enthusiasm for maintaining and developing the knowledge base on which the work of the service rests, through study, research and recording and writing up developments”. He acknowledges that this exists despite what he identifies as a greater inclination on the part of the service to develop management rather than advanced practitioner qualifications.

Until recently probation culture had been little discussed, particularly in comparison to police culture (see, for example, Waddington, 2008) but the merger between probation and prison in England, creating the National Offender Management Service, has inspired discussion about what that might mean for probation's distinctive culture and values (Gough, 2005; Nellis, 2005; Whitehead and Statham, 2006). This is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this special edition (Mawby & Worrall, 2011). Europe wide, the factors discussed previously, such as the relationship with prison or social work, are significant determinants of occupational culture. However, this is not the only cultural influence, Robinson and McNeil (2004) have compared the occupational culture of probation in England (where probation has separated from social work) and Scotland (where probation remains in social work) and identified a key commitment to rehabilitation in both jurisdictions. Part of the intention in running the seminar series was to begin to shape the occupational culture in the Midlands, encouraging a culture of sharing and applying research and knowledge.

The seminar series in the English Midlands in context

In considering the context and content of the seminar series it is worth reflecting briefly upon the history of 'What Works' and evidence-based practice, and its influence on probation practice. For nearly two decades 'What Works' has been at the heart of debate about how to work face-to-face with offenders (Farrow et al, 2007). Its evolution in many ways exemplifies how research knowledge is disseminated, incorporated into general practice, taken into organisations and then influences, and is influenced by, policy and context.

In the early 1990s the 'What Works' conferences took place, the outcome of a largely practitioner-led partnership which included a small group of influential researchers and chief officers who were keen to challenge the 'nothing works' consensus of the time (Raynor, 2002). Practitioners were enthusiastic about the possibility that some aspects of their work *were* effective and could bring about real change. Research recognised the importance of committed, well-trained staff. It also stressed the need for good management support. Probation services took some time to incorporate the key principles of 'What Works' into their policies and practice and when that eventually happened the emphasis began to shift to the content, methods and programmes at the expense, some argued, of the professional knowledge and skill of workers.

In 2003 Leach, reflecting upon a changing probation service, wrote about 'What Works',

nobody in their right mind could possibly object to...(it)...because to do so would be to oppose practice that is effective, which would clearly be nonsense". At the same time he argued that "(w)hen it comes to implementation...there is often a subtle shift to a synthetic approach, under which 'What Works' is seen as referring to a relatively narrow corpus of cognitive-behavioural programmes, enforced on the service by a heavy central bureaucracy (Leach, 2003: 21).

More than a decade later McNeill argues that the 'What Works' body of knowledge got entangled with public sector reforms and the managerialisation and technicalisation of probation services, so that it was applied without "sensitivity to the complexities of offenders' lives" or recognition of the significance of or need for "professional reflexivity and ingenuity" in working with individuals (McNeill, 2010:7). In the intervening years there has been an ongoing debate (often in the pages of such as the Probation Journal) about 'What Works' and how it has been applied, extended (e.g. Maruna et al, 2004; McCulloch, 2005), and affected probation officers' view of themselves and their professional confidence (Farrow, 2004; Annison et al, 2008)) and influenced the relationship between probation services and offenders. McGuire (2005) identifies a cultural resistance to research-based interventions within probation due to a concern about an implicit political agenda. Throughout this time few have ever disputed the need for practice to be evidence-based even though, for many, practice itself has become disconnected from its original 'What Works' knowledge and theory base.

The idea for some sort of arena for qualified practitioners and managers to meet together with academics came from ad hoc feedback on teaching and training courses with probation staff during 2008. Concern was frequently expressed about the difficulty, once qualified, of keeping up-to-date with research and practice developments and there was also little opportunity to meet with other practitioners to discuss challenges within the work. Staff supervision focusing on case management issues at the expense of discussing complex cases and personal development left some practitioners feeling dissatisfied and unsupported. This

feedback was not collected in any systematic way but chimed with our own experience as practitioners/managers and now as academics/trainers of the importance of ‘intellectual space’ to reflect on the impact of work with offenders as part of support and personal development. There was also the recognition of what seemed to be declining interest or value placed on Probation staff attending higher education establishments for post qualifying learning opportunities, preferring to train staff internally on very specific task activities. This reinforced a sense of a growing separation between academia and probation organisations and a pre-occupation with more technical competence type learning.

A ‘Steering Group’ was set up with representatives from Birmingham University, De Montfort University, Midland Probation Training Consortium and KWP, a partnership providing training for Probation and Youth Justice services. Drawing on theory (Glasby and Dickinson, 2008) about creating effective collaborative partnerships, emphasis was placed on getting the steering group physically together in order to agree a rationale, structure and process for a seminar series. As there was no commissioning funder it was recognised that the series would need to be run as economically as possible with members of the Steering Group contributing largely ‘in kind’ according to what in-house resources were available.

The challenge that the seminar series was designed to address crystallised as follows:

All too frequently in the current target-driven environment in which work with offenders takes place the pressures on staff encourage an approach to supervision – of staff as well as offenders - which is procedurally driven. Qualitative aspects of the work can be taken over by the more quantitative ones, resulting in a lowering of staff commitment and motivation. The impact of high caseloads and requirements to reorganise and to achieve targets can deflect the supervisory focus away from re-energising and supporting practitioners and from other ways of developing skills, knowledge and values which underpin effective work with offenders (Thinking in Practice Steering Group, 2008).

Designing the seminar series structure

Wenger (1998) emphasises that learning cannot be *designed* but it can be *designed for* in terms of when, how and why people are brought together. People need to be brought together through a shared and meaningful purpose that helps promote learning which can be taken back into the organisation as new knowledge. He is not dismissive of formal or in-house training programmes but that they should be not seen as the only source of learning for the workforce. The question for us at this stage was how to design a seminar series which brought practitioners, managers, trainers and academics purposefully together in ways which enabled us to bridge the emerging gaps between theory and practice of working with and managing offenders most effectively.

Much discussion took place about who the participants might be and there was a commitment within the Steering Group to encourage the bringing together, of what might be regarded as, aligned ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) who would have much to offer each other in terms of looking at many of the same issues but from differing perspectives. The Steering Group also chose to have open access to the seminars rather than invited participants on the basis that certain themes would have more relevance to some people than others. There was also recognition that some Probation Areas were trying to share out learning opportunities across the workforce so it was unlikely that any practitioner would be allowed to attend all of

them. The ‘downside’ to this approach was that it would be harder to build a sense of cumulative experience with many participants only attending one or two events across the series.

The proposal was to offer:

A series of occasional one-day seminars which engages with these concerns. The targeted audience will include managers, practitioners, academics and staff development specialists from a range of settings and disciplines who have a shared interest in the identification and development of quality in both the supervision of staff and their supervision of offenders (adults and young people). The aim of the series is to promote thinking and debate about the professional task of supervising and managing the practice of those professionals who work with offenders. It will also explore new and exciting research which may not be currently filtering through into practice (Thinking in Practice Steering Group, 2008).

The vision of this as a ‘seminar’ rather than a ‘conference’ was to ensure the event was small enough to allow participants to engage in research-practice dialogue rather than being ‘talked at’. The structure of the day, with presentations (from academics and those engaged in practice developments) in the morning and structured debates in the afternoon, emphasised the value of both academic and practice wisdom. Careful notes were made of the small group discussions so that these could be fed back in a plenary session and also written up and put on the seminar series website so that participants could access them again and also read the presentations and discussions that had taken place at other events in the series.

The Steering Group chose to provide 4 events over a two-year period thus allowing time between events to ‘post’ the presentations and summaries of the group discussions on the seminar series website for anyone to access. Each seminar had a specific theme recognising current issues of concern. The themes of the four seminars were;

1. ‘Engaging with risk: limitations and opportunities of risk assessment tools’ (May 2009)
2. ‘More than just compliance: linking desistance theory to practice’ (November 2009)
3. ‘Responsivity in Supervision: Enlisting offenders as agents for change’ (June 2010)
4. ‘Where next for working with offenders: “doing more with less?”’ (December 2010)

The decision was made to have each seminar as a ‘stand-alone’ open access event rather than targeting invited participants for the whole series as it was recognised that different people would be more or less interested depending on the topic. The charge to participants was kept to a minimum to avoid participants being unable to attend simply on the grounds of cost, particularly with reduced budgets for training and development in organisations. This was

made possible by many speakers and the Steering Group members not charging for their time and host venues absorbing the cost of room provision for each event.

All the academic contributors were able, in outlining their research/project, to look at the implications for future practice whilst remaining committed to the principles and core messages of Effective Practice relating to work with offenders, as well as the continuing importance of managing and reducing their risk of offending and to the public. Each seminar also explored the challenge for managers and practitioners of applying research knowledge within practice.

Learning theory underpinning the structural design of the seminar series

There are a number of theoretical concepts underpinning individual, organisational and community learning which emphasise the value of making provision for practitioners and managers to have opportunities to discuss current experiences and practice developments with relevant others. They also support the seminar series model as an appropriate vehicle for promoting the connection between theory and practice development. These concepts include the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984; Honey and Mumford, 1986) reflective practice (Schön, 1983) the learning organisation (Senge, 1990) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). The learning cycle, originally developed by Kolb (1984) and refined by Honey and Mumford (1986) suggests that adult learning can be seen as a four-stage circular process where actions and experiences occur, data and observations are collected and subsequently reviewed which allows for the generation of ‘theory’ about those experiences in terms of future implications for actions. This ‘theory’ then acts to guide the design or choice of future actions. Honey and Mumford (1986) argue that although all adult learners go through this cycle, differences between individuals mean that some skip through some stages and spend longer in others. These differences in learning styles also result in some people learning less effectively from experience than others do. To counteract this effect practitioners and managers are likely to benefit from processes which reinforce all stages of the learning cycle. The theory of the learning cycle reinforces the need for practitioner training to be ongoing at post-qualifying level, rather than simply be provided at the start of a professional career.

Schön (1983), in his description of the ‘Reflective Practitioner’, also emphasises the importance of a systematic review of options before action as part of learning. He encourages the practitioner to be aware of their own thoughts, feelings, values, knowledge and previous experience to inform judgements and to determine future actions. Schön (1983) distinguishes between ‘reflection-on-action’ (how else might I have done it?) and ‘reflection-in-action’ (what choices of action do I have at this point?). By reflecting after an event or action as a matter of routine the ‘reflective practitioner’ develops the ability to make informed choices during actions and this is seen as a critical part of learning and professional development. Reflection on learning was at the heart of the seminar series with participants encouraged to reflect on real life practice examples in the afternoon discussions.

The concept of the ‘Learning Organisation’ was first introduced by Senge (1990) and again refined by others (Finger and Brand, 1999; Kerka, 1995; Pedlar et al. 1991). Pedlar et al. (1991: 1) define a ‘Learning Organisation’ as one which “facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself” in response to changing situations. In the 1990s this was a hugely popular concept with many public service agencies proudly declaring that

they were a 'learning organisation' particularly in their recruitment advertisements. Although the concept is less frequently used in publicity materials, perhaps because of the difficulties of making it a reality, the concept is useful in understanding how an organisation can facilitate learning particularly through dialogue. Kerka (1995: 3) suggests that organisations need to recognise that "learning is valuable, continuous and most effective when shared and that every experience is an opportunity". Within a learning organisation the workforce is encouraged to develop a sense of the whole through shared vision, values, culture and networked intelligence (Morgan, 1997). In response to changes in the outside world the workforce is allowed to do things differently, occasionally making mistakes as part of a culture of creativity and also evaluating the impact of actions taken. Through this process, the workforce is developing "double loop learning" (Argyris, 1976: 16), that is, the testing of current thinking and practice and not simply working to established norms. The organisers of the seminar series included the Midlands Regional Probation Training Consortium who are part of probation organisational structures. Their involvement was a reflection of the aim to create a culture of a learning organisation, rather than impose learning from the outside.

Mabey and Iles (1994) acknowledge that organisations can find this process threatening as new ideas may conflict with established ways of thinking about or undertaking work. Even if managers and employees are not resistant to learning, structures within an organisation can make the implementation of change difficult. Mabey and Iles (1994: 80) argue that organisations need to integrate experiences 'on the job' with more formalised training courses so that the workforce has a greater capacity for learning from the widest variety of opportunities. Wenger (1998), like Pedlar et al. (1994), emphasises that learning, particularly the creation of common understandings, is encouraged by interaction with others doing similar, related tasks. Wenger sees learning, more often than not, as a social process which gives newcomers access to competence and for those with more experience the opportunity to explore the implications of what is being done and what might be done differently to better effect. Wenger (1998: 214) coins the phrase "a community of practice" and by this he means "an ideal context for leading edge learning which requires a strong bond of community competence along with a deep respect for the peculiarities of experience... a privileged locus for the creation of knowledge". Although participants may belong to different localities of practice the process of mutual engagement can result in discourses which travel across boundaries. Wenger (1998: 218) suggests that "in negotiating alignments across discontinuities we can be forced to perceive our own positions in new ways, to have new questions, to see things we had never seen before and to derive new criteria of competence that reflects the alignment of practices". The seminar series was an attempt to create some form of 'community of practice' by bringing together many of those who work with offenders and think about that work, including academics, trainers, managers and practitioners from the public, private and voluntary sector.

The changing context and the impact of the seminars

The seminar series coincided with a re-focusing of attention upon the fundamental principles of effective practice and as the seminar series itself evolved, it both responded to and was informed by developing debates (academic, political and practical) about what was likely to be effective in future work with offenders.

There has been a growing impetus for people to revisit 'What Works' and there are two significant research drivers for this. Firstly, evaluative evidence accumulated about the outcomes of mainly CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Treatment) programmes, developed in the light of the original 'What Works' research, appears to suggest that, in terms of outcomes,

these are of limited effectiveness. This has led to a re-emphasis on the value of active engagement with an individual offender and of delivering interventions in ways which are relevant and accessible (McNeill, 2006). Secondly, there is an increasing body of research about desistance (e.g. Maruna and Immarigeon, 2004; Farrell and Claverley, 2006; McNeill and Weaver, 2010), strengths-oriented approaches even with the most serious offenders (Ward et al, 2007), the importance of the relationship between practitioner and offender and the skills employed to deliver interventions (Bonta et al, 2008; 2010; Raynor et al, 2010).

The themes of the first three seminars specifically addressed these concerns and presentations were made by significant criminal justice research figures including; Hazel Kemshall, Kerry Baker, Fergus McNeill and Gwen Robinson (see 'Thinking in Practice' website for presentation summaries and subsequent discussions, <http://www.probationtraining-midlandsconsortium.org.uk>). The final seminar of the series addressed the new Coalition government's priorities outlined in the Green Paper (MOJ, 2010) and the straitened economic circumstances which made further changes in probation roles and responsibilities more likely due in part to the fragmentation/specialisation of the probation service's role in England and Wales. Again the seminar series was fortunate in attracting presentations from Mike Nellis and Sue Rex which gave a currency and authority to the event. Sue Rex spoke about the Offender Engagement Project, a centrally driven initiative to move from a high level of prescription and input-driven mandatory standards towards a more flexible and outcome focused approach to offender management.

Evaluating the seminar series

Participant responses

It is difficult to be sure of the exact impact of events of this nature. Each seminar was attended by 30-45 people. There was a mix of practitioners, managers, trainees, academics and occasionally someone from a linked profession, for example, a police officer or someone from a third sector criminal justice organisation. We learnt quickly that a steady proportion of about fifteen to twenty percent of those who had booked a place would not turn up so in order to achieve our optimum number of about 40 we usually accepted about 48 applications. A small number of participants managed to attend 3-4 events though the majority were only able to attend one or two. Some probation areas sent a significant number of participants to each seminar whereas others allowed only a small percentage to attend. It was apparent at all the seminars that the presentations proved thought provoking and there was a real 'buzz' during coffee breaks and lunchtime as participants, often from different areas, exchanged ideas. All participants were invited to complete an evaluation form before leaving each event and information collated from these feedback forms informed planning of subsequent events but also evaluation of the series as a whole.

It was apparent from anecdotal extracts from the evaluation forms that participants particularly valued the opportunity to hear from academics about new research findings but also the opportunity to support and share experiences about practice with colleagues from other areas:

“(An) excellent way of sharing practice and connecting with academics and other colleagues”.

“Nice to have so much research and references”.

“I really enjoyed the academic input. It is good to challenge my own way of working and raised a lot of questions for me to consider about my own practice”

“The seminar served to refocus my practice on what’s important: I realise how much I focus on targets despite never wanting to do so!”

“I think there is momentum for continuing the professional agenda. This is an incredibly difficult time for practitioners, out jobs are under threat and we need support from all to maintain standards of practice”.

“I enjoyed the opportunity to share current practice and ideas with other areas”

It was also clear from the evaluation forms that the final seminar which focused on the likely policy and agency changes following the election of Coalition Government in 2010 was the least successful in terms of usefulness and what participants were looking for from the day¹:

“Coming so soon after the Green Paper was published the seminar was in many respects dominated by the political issues. Hence, much of the discussion and debate about desistance was focused more on which bodies/agencies would be undertaking this work.”

“I found the inputs a little too global and did not really focus on new ideas for practically working with offenders. It appeared to concentrate more on the government and the spending review limitations”.

“Maybe the weakest of the three that I have attended, but still a worthwhile use of my morning”.

The atmosphere at each seminar was hugely motivational and participants usually departed declaring a determination to try and hold onto and use some of what they had learnt at each event. In this respect the seminar series was successful fulfilling our original purpose and rationale and reinforces our belief in the seminar series as a model which encourages individual, organisational and community learning.

Impact on practice

Probation services across Europe are usually aspiring both to develop the knowledge base of their practitioners and managers and also to develop their practice skills. In this respect the seminar series model would need to be supplemented by other mechanisms such as clinical-style supervision.

This view is supported by the work of Bourgan et al. (2010) who use the concept of ‘technology transfer’ to discuss knowledge exchange and practice development in probation. ‘Technology’ is defined as the practice used to achieve a desired goal and ‘transfer’ as the processes employed to develop the proper use of that technology. So, within probation the relevant ‘technology’ is particular practice that has been shown to be effective. However, the process by which this ‘technology’ is transferred to be used by practitioners is not always

clear and the effectiveness of particular approaches is critically affected by the way in which they are transferred to practice. Bourgan et al. (2010) observed that workshop training is the most common way to affect this technology transfer but argue that the most effective way to achieve change is through the provision of ongoing clinical-style supervision. Although the seminar series model does have strong similarities to the workshop training model, by including managers alongside practitioners in discussion groups an opportunity was provided to begin to develop supervision which reinforces the adoption of new practice knowledge and skills.

Arguably the seminar series might have developed a greater momentum for change if it had limited invitations to the seminars to a small number of key players within criminal justice circles. However, this approach did not fit with our purpose or rationale for the series. When the idea for the seminar series first came into being, in 2008, there seemed to be little appetite amongst Probation Areas in England and Wales for discussion which challenged established ways of working. We chose not to seek a commissioning funder nor did we negotiate the programme of seminars beforehand with Probation Boards preferring to focus on what appeared to be most relevant to practitioners involved in face-to-face work with offenders. Three years on the political and organisational context seems to have changed and there appears to be a greater receptivity to new ways of working with offenders as is illustrated by the primacy given to the Offender Engagement Project within NOMS. Sue Rex, the manager of the Offender Engagement Project participated in two of the four Thinking in Practice seminars. Whilst it is therefore difficult to quantify the wider impact of the seminars as a stand-alone sequence of events, there may be some merit for developing this approach in the future.

Conclusion

The framework for qualifying training within probation services across Europe is varied and there is limited provision for post-qualifying training and education in countries where probation provision is disconnected from social work, including England and Wales. The absence of a post-qualifying framework leaves practitioners and managers with few opportunities for keeping up-to-date with new research findings and limited scope to meet up with colleagues from neighbouring areas and professions to reflect on practice experiences. The seminar series was designed to promote debate about theory, knowledge and practice development. The experience of this series suggests that by bringing practitioners, managers and academics together to create a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) with a shared sense of purpose, there is the potential for individual, organisational and community learning about best practice and practice development. Arguably the seminar series model is one which could be successfully replicated in other European jurisdictions. However, if the model was to be replicated the impact on knowledge and skill development is likely to be limited unless practice managers also attend the seminars and subsequently provide clinical-style supervision focusing upon skill development within the work setting.

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