Refereed Articles

Researching the Professional Practice Context: The Integrated Practice Perspectives Model

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Abstract

The *Integrated Practice Perspectives (IPP) Model for Needs Assessment* was conceptualized in response to the literature review which demonstrated the need for the creation of a more practice-linked continuing professional education and the need for a multi-faceted needs assessment strategy to achieve such a link that would include (a) the study of practitioner work behaviors in the practice setting in order to develop a composite of working roles, (b) the determination of the tasks and functional roles for practitioners within a given profession, and (c) the establishment of minimum levels of practitioner competencies and proficiencies needed for credible professional practice. The IPP Model was operationalized through research on the practice context of the two groups of professional, continuing higher education administrators and evangelical Protestant clergy.

Although the need for CPE seems axiomatic, until the second half of the twentieth century most professionals were both self-initiating and self-directing in their educational activity (Houle, 1980). The reality of an exploding knowledge base rapidly outdating the practitioners' preparatory educational foundations, regulatory agencies creating various continuing educational requirements for the maintenance of professional certification, increasing organizational complexity, the pressure to maintain professional excellence and competitiveness, and threats of litigation combined to cause a rapid expansion of course offerings, a proliferation of educational providers, and a changed context for continuing professional

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education (Cervero & Scanlan, 1985; Frandson, 1980; Galbraith & Gilley, 1986, 1988; Gessner, 1987; Houle, 1980; Nowlen, 1988).

    Although the various providers of CPE have traditionally made theoretical knowledge (research or theory-based knowledge) the priority consideration in program curriculum, procedural knowledge (professional skills) and reflective knowledge (experienced-generated expertise and professional wisdom) are increasingly recognized as important factors in competent professional practice and a necessary dimension of effective CPE offerings (Boreham, 1988; Cervero, 1988; Houle, 1980; Nowlen, 1988; Schön, 1983, 1987).

    Efforts to combine the theoretical knowledge base with the dimensions of procedural and reflective knowledge have led CPE program developers to an increased interest in the *practice context* of professionals (Cervero, 1988; Nowlen, 1988; Queeney, 1984a, 1984b; Smutz, Kalman, Lindsay, Pietrusko, & Seaman, 1981). Contemporary research efforts attempting to forge a stronger linkage between CPE and the realities of professional practice have concentrated on the development of needs assessment procedures that uncover data on at least three important dimensions of practitioner context: (a) the actual work behaviors of the professional (Donaldson, 1993; Kmetz & Willower, 1982; Lanzilotti, Finestone, Sobel, & Marks, 1986), (b) the functional roles of practitioners (Green, 1984; Nowlen, 1988), and (c) the minimum levels of procedural competency required within a profession (Klevans, 1987; Nowlen, 1988; Pottinger & Goldsmith, 1979; Queeney, 1984b; Shimberg, 1983). Pottinger and Goldsmith (1979) have suggested the need for multidimensional and sophisticated techniques to assess the complex skills normally associated with professional practice.

    The research literature also suggests that a more practice-linked CPE will require the utilization of needs assessment techniques that permit the observations of practitioners (Mahoney, Jerdee, & Carroll, 1965; Martinko & Gardner, 1985; Mintzberg, 1973). Strother and Klus (1982) identify *direct observation of practitioners* as as a key element in needs assessment. Nowlen (1988) also affirms the *priority of observation* in needs assessment when he suggests that the analysis of the actual work context of the client is central to drawing useful conclusions about the client's needs. Pottinger and Goldstein (1974) suggest that task delineation efforts, combined with *observation of personal performance*, creates a right context for needs assessment. Boyle (1981) affirms the importance of situational analysis in needs assessment, while Griffith (1978) underscores the importance of developing factual descriptions of the current

context of learners. Levine, Cordes, Moore, and Pennington (1984) stress that continuing professional education must be based upon specific practice-setting requirements. Such stress upon the study of clientele context through actual observation and measurement clearly provides the needed apologetic for the utilization of *structured observation methodology* in any balanced needs assessment program.

The Integrated Practice Perspectives Model
for Needs Assessment

The Integrated Practice Perspectives (IPP) Model, illustrated in Figure 1, is an integrative model for needs assessment that generates data on both the work content and the practice context of professionals. The IPP Model involves three essential elements. First, the approach entails the study of the actual work behaviors and practices of practitioners within the practice setting in order to understand the work activity patterns of the professional and develop a composite of *working roles*. Second, the approach entails the determination of the *tasks and functional roles* for practitioners within a given profession. Third, the approach entails the establishment of *minimum levels of practitioner competencies and proficiencies* needed for credible professional practice. Implementing the IPP Model will require programmers to both integrate existing research and initiate new research in each of the three elements.
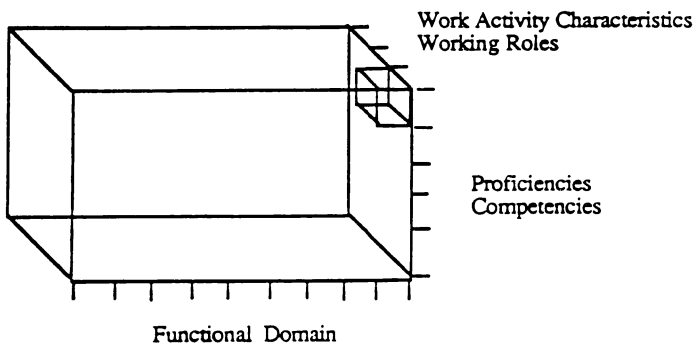

Figure 1. Integrated Practice Perspectives Model (IPP)

When seeking to apply the IPP Model to various professions, program developers will often find that research already exists on one or two of the three IPP elements. Many professions and occupational groups have carried out extensive studies to identify core practitioner proficiencies and to establish minimum levels of practitioner competency (Shimberg, 1983; Smutz, Crowe, & Lindsay, 1986). The literature also reveals that significant research has been done to determine tasks and functional roles within various professions and occupational groups (Buchanan, 1989; Donaldson, 1993; Mintzberg, 1973; Nauss, 1972, 1983). It is the third element in the IPP Model, i.e., the development of working role composites based upon actual practitioner work behaviors and practices, that has generally received little or no attention from researchers and program developers. The limited research that is available on practitioner work behaviors has largely been generated from a variety of non-observational techniques (questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, diaries), with the notable exceptions of observational research with managers and educational administrators (Donaldson, 1993; Kmetz, 1982; Martin, 1980; Martinko & Gardner, 1985; Mintzberg, 1973; Stewart, 1982). The IPP Model suggests that effective continuing professional education will require observational measures of what practitioners *actually are doing* (the recurring events in actual practice settings), not simply what they *are supposed to be accomplishing* (functional roles) or *how well they are supposed to be doing it* (competencies and proficiencies) (Smutz & Queeney, 1989; Smutz et al., 1981).

Measuring what practitioners are actually doing (the recurring events in the actual practice setting) requires some form of observational methodology, and the IPP Model uses *structured observation*, a method of observation that combines the flexibility of open-ended observation with the discipline of seeking certain types of structured data (Mintzberg, 1973). The researcher observes the practitioners as they perform their normal work during a pre-arranged period of time (usually three to five days). Each observed event (a verbal contact, a piece of mail, or a form of desk work, etc.) is recorded and categorized by the researcher in a number of ways (duration, purpose, domains, etc.). The recording and categorizing of each action of the practitioner eventually delineates both a comprehensive description of the actual work activity characteristics (the quantity and pace, patterns, relationship between action and reflection, use of different media, relationship of work activities to a variety of contacts, and the interplay between rights and duties in the work activities) and a broad taxonomy of working roles. The theoretical development of working role

composites requires that (a) each role must be observable, (b) all observed contacts and activities must be accounted for in the role set, and (c) roles may be described individually, but they form a gestalt or integrated whole. The use of a structured observation protocol as one element in the IPP Model, and integrating such information with research on practitioner competencies and proficiencies and practitioner functional roles and tasks develops a richer practice description and provides a more adequate basis for the development of more pertinent CPE.

To deepen the programmer's understanding of the professional practice context, the IPP Model suggests that linkages between working roles and functions, as well as linkages between working roles and core competencies and proficiencies, be examined. Each element of the IPP Model thus makes a unique contribution to our understanding of professional context. The working role element aids in conceptualizing the actual work activities, the functional roles element aids in better understanding relative value of different work activities and behaviors, while the competency/proficiency element identifies more fully the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to carry out the functions and perform the working roles. The integrated findings of research suggested by the IPP Model permit a more comprehensive platform for developing professional education programming for any profession or occupational group. The IPP Model also shows how roles, functions, and proficiencies are conceptually related and inseparable in day-to-day practice.

Applications of the IPP Model

Although a recent conceptualization, the IPP Model has already been employed in two research projects reported elsewhere in the literature. One project examined program administrators in continuing higher education (Donaldson, 1993; Donaldson & Kuhne, 1994). The second project examined evangelical Protestant clergy (Kuhne, 1991, In press). The picture of administrative work provided by Mintzberg (1973) was one of much work at an unrelenting pace, characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. This picture was reflected in the studies of both CHE administrators and evangelical clergy. In each study the IPP Model provided affirmation of the unique and important contributions of each of its components. Linkages and gaps between role content and functional domains and proficiencies added to the depth of understanding of practice realities for each group. Table 1 provides a sample of comparative findings

from the two research studies and Mintzberg's (1973) original structured observation research on CEOs.

Table 1
Selected Findings on a Work Activity Characteristics In Three Studies Different Study Subjects.

Characteristics	CEOs (Mintzberg)	CHE Admin.	Clergy
% of Time Spent in:			
Sch Mtgs	59	38	46
Unsch Mtgs	10	18	8
Telephone Calls	6	19	6
Desk Work	22	25	23
Tours	3	3	5
Travel	*	*	13
Ave. Hours Worked/Day	8.1	8.7	102
Ave. # Activities/Day	22	91	41
Ave. Duration of Act (min)	26	6	15
% Time Spent with Others	78	75	66
% Time Spent with:			
Superiors	7	4	11
Subordinates	48	32	13
Others in Org.	*	31	49
Others Outside Org.	44	33	27
% Contact Initiated by:			
Self	32	62	54
Others	57	31	23
Mutually	1	7	23

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