Rhoda MacRae, Research Officer at the Institute for Research and Innovation (IRISS) discusses the ways learning can be maximized using the evidence on learning transfer and through evaluation of training.

IRISS have been working with a range of social service organisations to use evidence to inform service delivery. These projects are part of building the use of research in Scotland’s social services (Towards a Research and Development Strategy, 2007).

Research evidence has been used to inform not only direct service delivery but to inform staff learning and development. Evidence from research can be used to inform and develop every corner of social services; this includes the learning and development of social service staff.

Training is an important part of workforce development and often comprises a substantial part of spending by public sector agencies including those delivering social services. While there is agreement about the need for investment in developing staff, it is essential that the investment is effective in terms of cost, and in meeting its aims.

In relation to learning and development, this needs to be translated into improved service delivery and ultimately outcomes for service users.

References
Time constraints, cost and geography can all impact on our ability to access face-to-face learning and networking opportunities. The Scottish Social Services Learning Network engages with these challenges in its capacity of supporting the learning and development of the social services workforce in Scotland.

Four regional Networks make up the national Learning Network and take forward this work in the West, South-East, Tayforth and North. In 2007, Learning Network North consulted with its members to ascertain what alternatives to face-to-face options they would be interested in. As a result of the feedback from this, an eLearning and Communications portal was developed, called the Innportal, in collaboration with Robert Gordon University.

The Innportal provides facilities for learning, networking and sharing practice online. It is essentially a secure online environment where groups can create their own private, interactive websites. Tools and activities are available that promote active learning, discussion, reflection, research and critical analysis. Portal users are given different access rights depending on whether they are developing or participating in a site. A site facilitator develops their site and ‘adds’ the content and tools they want e.g. documents, discussion rooms, wikis, databases.

Current members of the portal are using it to:
• engage with colleagues throughout the sector as part of an online community,
• lead or participate in rich, interactive learning,
• communicate with team members through sharing calendars and documents, creating knowledge bases, engaging in group work and using the discussion facilities to converse and hold online meetings.

Whilst there are many transferable skills we can call upon to engage with online discussions and other activities, by developing some additional skills we can really make the most of the opportunities the online environment has to offer. In order to enable those working in the sector to use the facilities offered by the Innportal and other online environments, a part time eLearning course has been developed and delivered jointly by the Learning Network North and Robert Gordon University. The Learning Network North Online Communication Course is currently open to those working in the social services sector in the North of Scotland. Participants learn how to engage effectively with a range of online activities as well as how to facilitate online communication and learning, through actively participating in these activities themselves.

The course introduces participants to learning online, online discussions, how to build an online community and moderate interactions. It consists of reading materials and ‘e-tivities’ (online activities) that the participants undertake on their own and in collaboration with the group. Participation in the course opens up the potential of the online environment through exposing participants to facilities and tools that can be used to support online communities, learning and collaborative group work with anyone and from anywhere with internet access. The skills participants develop during this course should give them the confidence to engage with a variety of online activities and resources and to be able to communicate effectively online. For many participants, the course provides their first experience of learning or communicating online but in each run, numerous ideas are generated about how these online opportunities can effectively be applied to practice.

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Sharing practice - what are other people doing?

Judith Midgley, VSSSWU Director, met with Mary Burn, SVQ Assessor and Practice Learning Development Officer at Enable Scotland, to find out how undertaking the stage 3 Practice Learning Qualification is helping her to develop practice learning opportunities in her organisation.

**Why did you decide to undertake the PLQ (SS) Stage 3?**

We have been trying to develop practice learning opportunities in Enable Scotland for some time. We have lots of staff willing to be link workers but not staff who could support social work students in a practice learning capacity. There are lots of other voluntary sector agencies in the same position, so freelance practice educators are in great demand. There are simply not enough of them to go around. So in Enable Scotland we realised we had to ‘grow our own’.

**How have you found the course so far?**

It has been a really good opportunity for me to reflect on the skills and knowledge I have already and look at how I can use it to support students and create good practice learning opportunities. Now that I have been on the course I realise that we have a wide enough range of practice learning opportunities to offer students. I had been anxious that as a voluntary organisation we might not have. Indeed we can offer opportunities in areas such as group work where statutory agencies might struggle.

I have been encouraged since doing the course that my skills and experience are actually very relevant to the role.

**How do you plan to use the qualification?**

I am hoping to have an ongoing role in supporting students. Additionally I am hoping to encourage more link workers to come on board.

In that way I will be able to build on practice learning opportunities across all our services and localities.

I will be able to support the link workers and I plan to set up a practice learning forum in Enable Scotland.

Advocacy - the voluntary sector voice

Judith Midgley reports from the August meeting of the Changing Lives Workforce Group.

The first part of the meeting received updates on pieces of work being overseen by the group. The work in the first phase of the Change Academy project, which focussed on building partnership working between employers and universities, is now complete. Discussions are underway about how to build on the achievements of this phase.

The Group considered a research report on direct payments, which had been commissioned by Unison and the Scottish Personal Assistants Employers Network. The main findings include the need to better train and support employers and employees.

The Continuous Learning Framework early development and consultation phase is complete. An implementation plan is now being developed to take the work forward and embed it in organisations.

It has been recognised that the Strategic Framework for Workforce Planning Project, (see Newsletter 12) will take much longer than the proposed six months to complete. A plan will be developed setting out what the project will involve, who will be involved (the Unit will continue to press for voluntary sector involvement), a work plan and timetable for delivery. The SSSC will take the lead role.

The second part of the meeting focused on the future. Key questions discussed were how to bring the current work to a close, how to communicate the group’s achievements and what might need to be put in place to promote and give leadership to workforce development in the sector. Key challenges identified included:

- a need for joined up thinking and planning
- asking the critical questions
- providing a national picture
- a need for a single champion and group to advocate and articulate aspirations.

The characteristics of a new group were identified, it must:

- have political and strategic endorsement and authority
- focus on the social care workforce
- be strong enough to shape education and training, the workforce, the challenges of service design
- influence policy development.

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Standards for Practice Learning:

‘New Degree, New Standards’

A summary from Judith Midgley

The recently published report from the Institute of Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) entitled ‘New Degree, New Standards’ looked at the understanding of academic levels in practice settings of social work students and their assessors.

Both students and assessors were asked about their understanding of the expectations placed on students to perform at different levels during their practice learning experiences. They were asked whether they understood what was expected from a student at the different Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework (SCQF) levels and to what extent their assessment or contribution to assessment of students reflected this.

The fieldwork research with students and their assessors found:

- stakeholder groups lack knowledge about SCQF
- the majority of current practice learning assessment is based on pre-SCQF models
- stakeholders would welcome greater clarification of expectation of student learning at different SCQF levels
- there is a lack of clear documentation to support a consistent approach to student learning and assessment across both university and practice settings.

These are significant findings for voluntary sector providers offering practice learning placements.

A key recommendation from IRISS is that universities, with their stakeholder partners, articulate and develop more materials identifying expectations of student learning and guidance about assessment at different academic levels and make these widely available.

In the meantime, voluntary sector providers offering practice learning placements are advised to seek clear guidance from the placing university as to both the content and level of the learning they are expected to provide and assess.

The full report can be obtained from the IRISS website at www.iriss.ac.uk/publications

If you would like to know more about the SCQF, you can find information at www.scqf.org.uk

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