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Working Together to Train Child Welfare Workers on the Impact of Domestic Violence on Children: A Faculty-Staff Collaborative Research Project

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Abstract: This paper outlines a collaborative research project focused on improving domestic violence training for child welfare workers. Collaborative research provides faculty the opportunity to inform adult education practice, while meeting professional obligations.

Keywords: collaborative research, e-learning, domestic violence

The Center for Development of Human Services (CDHS) at the Institute for Community Health Promotion (ICHP) at SUNY Buffalo State designs and delivers high-quality, outcome-based training and technical support throughout New York State to an average of 60,000 participants and program area stakeholders each year. The largest professional development programs CDHS is contracted to develop and deliver are for the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). OCFS' (2014) "Common Core" course and (2016) "Child Protection Services (CPS) Foundation" course were developed for child welfare workers employed by local Departments of Social Services within New York State. The two courses offer similar content, but "CPS Foundations" is specifically designed for child protection workers whereas "Common Core" is a more general course for all child welfare workers regardless of their roles. These trainings encompass a blended learning design wherein workers attend up to 16 days in the classroom and complete another four days of learning online during the first six months of their employment. One of the most powerful and important required online components for both of these courses is a three-part web-based training on domestic violence. This is not the only training workers receive on the topic, but it is their first encounter with domestic violence in their career-based training and as such it sets the foundation for their understanding of domestic violence and its connection to child welfare.

The training components on domestic violence focus on building workers' understanding of the basic dynamics of domestic violence, the intersection of child welfare and family violence, the experience of the child, and an introduction to assessment and casework practice on issues related to domestic violence. These components are intended to provide a framework for practice that focuses on skill building related to assessment and intervention. The government data that support these components in the current training largely date to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Outdated data create training "noise" and distract learners. When training programs include data and references that are 10, 20 and even 30 years old, the validity and quality of the training may be questioned. Ultimately, old data do not prepare workers for new realities. Thus, a research initiative was required to update the information needed to appropriately train child welfare workers to engage their clients on the sensitive matter of domestic violence and, ultimately, to save lives.

Match Project

To fill this research gap, OCFS requested the assistance of the Collaborative Research

Institute (CRI), a branch of ICHP at SUNY Buffalo State. CRI develops collaborative working relationships between faculty at SUNY and the staff of CDHS/ICHP by creating a "match." A match project matches a faculty member's research interest with a sponsored program's research need.

The match created, entitled "Research in Domestic Violence for Child Welfare Trainers and Case Workers," identified a faculty member, Andrea Nikischer, PhD in the department of Adult Education, and paired her with a Senior Education Specialist from CDHS/ICHP responsible for updating the aforementioned domestic violence training components, Jeanette Koncikowski, Ed.M. Dr. Nikischer is an assistant professor in the Department of Adult Education at SUNY Buffalo State. She has extensive knowledge of and experience working with domestic violence issues, along with years of experience teaching online. This is the ideal scenario for a match project, as it leveraged Dr. Nikischer's interest and experience, creating a situation where the research completed would contribute both to the child welfare training and to the faculty member's professional obligations and personal passions.

As a selected CRI Fellow for 2015, Dr. Nikischer received an array of supports for her scholarly development, including a small budget and research and work plan design assistance. Dr. Nikischer also has the ability to use the research findings to contribute directly to her teaching and scholarship, and her work is credited as both campus and community service. Both she and her match partner have access to project-related professional development opportunities throughout the match period.

Purpose

The purpose of this match project was inform the creation of the most up-to-date and accurate online learning module for adult child welfare workers about the impact of domestic violence on children and families. The original domestic violence training has been presented to workers in three parts as a standardized, self-directed web-based training (WBT) available to them via a learning management system. Workers are instructed to view and complete the modules midway through the Common Core training program and as a preclassroom activity for the second CPS Foundations training. Each of the three domestic violence components was originally built in an early version of Camtasia, an eLearning authoring tool. The components were later converted to Articulate Studio and then Storyline to be SCORM compliant. While the software was updated for peak performance, the content remained unchanged as OCFS had directed CDHS/ICHP to other curriculum priorities.

Design and Frameworks

This match research project was a large-scale statistics and literature review. All relevant information related to the impact of domestic violence on children, in both statistical databases and peer-reviewed publications, was included. Specific attention was paid to the following:

- National statistics
- New York State statistics
- Information about how domestic violence impacts children and families
- Strategies that are effective in influencing change that promotes safety, permanence, and well-being in families impacted by domestic violence
- Best practices for child welfare workers addressing issues of family violence

CDHS/ICHP, as a vendor of New York State's Outcome-based Training System for OCFS, utilizes the ADDIE (i.e., Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate) instructional

design model for all its educational programming and match research projects involving curriculum development. ADDIE is a common instructional design approach although its theoretical origins are somewhat obscure (Molenda, 2003). Instructional designers and training developers began using the acronym in literature somewhere between 1970s-1990s but a concrete original source for the acronym remains unknown. ADDIE has become the hallmark instructional systems approach for training until very recently, when newer, more agile instructional models like SAM, the Successive Approximation Model have become more popular. Regardless, ADDIE is currently the approved OCFS curriculum development methodology and therefore, was used as the framework for this match project.

E-Learning

Shown below is a sample screen as the domestic violence training was originally designed and currently remains. Each screen is synched with recorded narration that provides more in depth information about the bullet points on the screen.
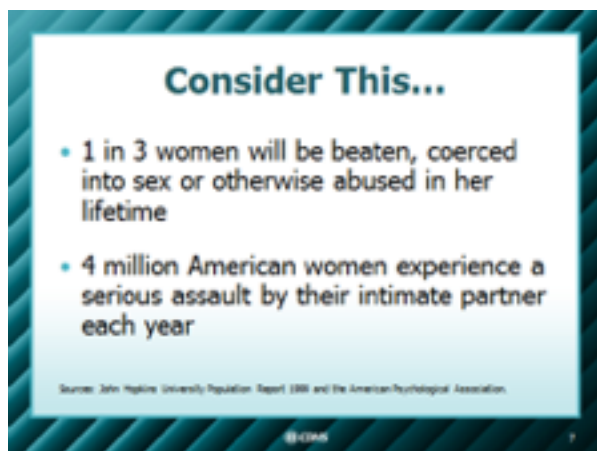

Figure 1: Statistics in *Domestic Violence: Part I*

In the language of the eLearning field, the current presentation is essentially a "content dump" where information is presented on both screen and through narration. It is not particularly engaging for the adult learner. While there is some video also built into the training programs, they are largely narrated lecture. At the time these components were first developed in 2009 they were considering "best practice" in the field. The use of eLearning in the field as a whole and within CDHS' child welfare programming development has grown leaps and bounds since then. The match project will take the updated domestic violence content and develop it into engaging eLearning program using adaptive and responsive instructional design.

Findings

Domestic violence is an epidemic in the United States. Nearly 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the U.S. have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a partner (*The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey*, http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf). Such violence has a major impact on the health and safety of families and homes. "Studies show that 3-4 million children between the ages of 3-17 are at risk of exposure to domestic violence each year" (Domestic Violence Rountable, http://www.domesticviolenceroundtable.org/effect-on-children.html). This

exposure puts children at increased risk for abuse and neglect, and has the potential to cause devastating emotional and physical health impacts, including anxiety, depression, aggression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and substance abuse (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/QA_Groves_final.pdf).

Myriad information about the impact of domestic violence on children was collected, analyzed and synthesized for this project. Statistics from national databases and research reports and surveys, such as *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2015* (http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/) and *The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence* (http://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/248547.pdf), provided the most up to date data about the extent of domestic violence in New York State and the United States, and the impact of such violence on children and families. An additional review of peer-reviewed literature provided a wealth of information about recommended best practices for child welfare workers. The following references were included: Chiodo, Leschied, Whitehead and Hurley (2008), Day and Bazemore (2011), Douglas and Walsh (2010), Friend, Shlonsky and Lambert (2008), and Moles (2008).

Importance

The importance of this project can be found not only in the research findings and the training materials that will be created from those findings, but in the larger conversation about faculty-community collaborations and opportunities for faculty to bring research directly to community organizations for immediate distribution. This project provides the foundation for an important discussion about potential ways in which academic faculty can collaborate with community organizations to conduct and distribute research to inform projects, improve practice and inspire positive change. Breaking down traditional barriers related to the dissemination of research and scholarship will allow faculty members to contribute to communities in concrete and meaningful ways. Ultimately, collaborative research projects create a situation where all parties "win," as communities benefit from faculty expertise and research and faculty members are provided support to meet their required professional obligations.

Challenges

Throughout the match research project, it became clear that there are fundamental differences in the structure and administration of academic work versus government-controlled work. For example, while ADDIE is the OCFS required framework for the match project, it did not work as a framework for the research. ADDIE is a practical, instructional design framework appropriate for creating training modules, but it is not a theoretical framework appropriate for guiding research. In this case, Dr. Nikischer relied on Social Learning and Development Theory to guide her work.

As to the findings, although the statistical and report data were appropriate for immediate inclusion in an online training, the peer-reviewed literature did not speak directly to the needs of child welfare workers. Bureaucratic limitations within the systems of child welfare worker practice make many of the suggested "best practices" unrealistic for inclusion in a child welfare worker training. The academic lens through which the best practices were created seems to be disconnected from the realities of the on the ground work. Nikischer and Koncikowski discussed this disconnect in terms of "what should be done versus what can be done." Here Dr. Nikischer was forced to confront her privilege as a researcher unrestrained by the limitations, both small and large, of the real world of practice. As an academic researcher she was able to imagine

perfect solutions without having to navigate the real limitations that exist on the ground.

We point out this challenge not to imply that academic scholars should bend their understanding of what is right and good and true to fit the constraints of what can easily be done, but rather we offer it is an important note to encourage academic and professional staff to talk openly and honestly throughout the collaborative research process. It is critical for the collaborative team to work together to strengthen the ability of faculty to provide data and recommendations that support better practice while also balancing any political or practical restrictions that may exist. Professional staff should share any known limitations early in the research process and faculty members should be open to engagement throughout. Importantly, faculty must remember that it is one thing to envision changes in practice and another thing to implement those changes on the ground.

Limitations

This paper covers but one example of a collaborative research "match" and ultimately, the success of this match has not yet been determined. During the year that this match project was undertaken, OCFS' priorities for curriculum redesign shifted. While the need for updated data on domestic violence and child welfare remains, it is no longer one of the primary instructional design responsibilities in the calendar year. Therefore, the data collated in this match project has yet to be transferred to a final training product. Despite this set back, conversations regarding alternative uses for the data collected are ongoing, and the data are being used in an updated version of ADE 575: Family Violence and Adult Education to be taught by Dr. Nikischer Summer 2016.

Recommendations

Collaborative research projects provide opportunities for faculty members to use their research skills to directly inform and improve community adult education efforts, while fulfilling their professional obligations of teaching, scholarship and service. While such collaborative efforts face some challenges related to the differences in administration of academic work and that of government and community agencies, these challenges are far outweighed by the potential for positive and far-reaching contributions to local, national and global communities. Faculty are encouraged to seek out and create new opportunities for community collaboration in adult education research and practice.

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