

Trainee Learning Experiences for the Demonstration of Practitioner Competence: A Commentary on the Commentary

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So, there we have it. Six case studies that, in their own particular ways, provide ‘good practice’ examples of the consultancy competencies integral to the demonstration of BPS and HCPC threshold standards of proficiency, which have ultimately enabled these trainees to register to practice. It was an explicit intention of this special issue to provide you with further examples of QSEP case study work, which have been recognised, through the assessment process, to make a positive contribution to the trainee’s portfolio of submitted work. I hope you’ve found these useful in a number of ways; perhaps you’ve learned more about the different approaches used within Sport and Exercise Psychology consultancy (whether it be cognitive behavioural, mindfulness, humanistic or integrated sport/clinical based), and some of the current and innovative ways in which they can be operationalised with clients. You might also have gained a clearer insight into parts of the consultancy process, for example, case formulation and evaluation, which sometimes appear to be the components that lack rigour and presence in trainee submissions. On a more pragmatic level, if you’re a current or future QSEP trainee, these examples will help you shape your own QSEP case studies, and be more confident that your work will demonstrate consultancy competence in the eyes of your assessors when the time comes!

In this final article, the focus is less about discussing the broader implications of consultancy work for conducting professional practice, but more about identifying considerations for demonstrating consultancy competence in professional training, and how these might helpfully inform the case study work of those undertaking QSEP. The intention to include commentaries in this issue was to provide a rarely captured insight into the respective ‘inner thinking and reasoning’ of trainees, supervisors and assessors when producing, supervising and assessing QSEP case study work, and also the way in which feedback might have informed the learning experiences that were taking place.

On reading the commentaries, there are a plethora of professional practice learning experiences to note from each, and I’m sure you will have soaked up these ‘nuggets of advice’ as you read! With my QSEP Chief Assessors hat on, there were a number of

important learning experience that ‘stood-out’ from each case study for me, which trainees (and supervisors) might choose to consider in demonstrating their own professional competence:

Case Study 1 - To demonstrate diversity in, and reflection on, case study submissions, consider and exploit the opportunities afforded when outcomes and experiences do and don’t go to plan (in addition to population and model of approach) in selecting what to include in your QSEP submissions. Competence can be developed and demonstrated through both types of experience, and QSEP assessors do appreciate and value hearing about both forms of experience when making their judgements about trainee competence.

Case Study 2 - To demonstrate effective consultancy process (in this case across athletes, the interdisciplinary support team and coaching staff) and the efficacy and impact of your intervention in case study submissions, reference the underpinning literature base to justify your work and the multi-dimensional forms of ongoing evaluation you undertake. The QSEP assessors will expect to see this evidence in case study submissions.

Case Study 3 - To demonstrate strong and stable consultancy foundations in case study submissions, establish a ‘spine’ (what may be referred to as an authentic and congruent philosophy) of applied practice that informs the model of approach and the tools and techniques (including the ‘Sport Psychologist as tool’) that are positioned around it. This can (as in this case) involve embedding a research informed tailored intervention that meets the client’s needs through shared case formulation and support from coaches and multidisciplinary team members.

Case Study 4 – To demonstrate how competency can be evidenced in case study re-submissions, address the assessor’s feedback thoroughly, and, as good practice, write a cover letter to outline how this has been done. As in this case, underpinning practice philosophy, case formulation synthesised to the model of approach, and methods of evaluation are the consultancy areas that most frequently catch trainees out in case study submission, so devoting attention to ensure that they are clearly and appropriately evidenced is a worthwhile exercise.

Case Study 5 - To demonstrate effective consultancy process in case study submissions, ensure there is a working client-practitioner relationship, where resultant rapport and trust can positively impact the client's needs, even in an approach that might not (as in this case) be wholly congruent with the core beliefs and values that underpin one's practice. In situations where trainees find particular approaches challenging, and have prevailing urges to resist a different approach, the QSEP assessors are interested in hearing about this experience and how it has informed practice philosophy. By 'trying' a different approach, does it begin to resonate, or rather affirm that it isn't for you?

Case Study 6 - To demonstrate integrated models of approach in case study submissions, trainees are encouraged to document multi/inter-disciplinary or cross domain approaches. In this case, the inter-professional working between sport and clinical psychologist is a good example of how, when circumstances permit, case formulation, graded intervention and monitoring and evaluation can be done effectively using a collaborative approach.

As QSEP Chief Assessor I am in the privileged position to be able to review and approve all the QSEP assessment reports, which, alongside external examiner feedback enables me to get a true sense of the common challenges faced by trainees in the strive to demonstrate competence against the QSEP standards. The trainee, supervisor and assessor commentaries provided in this issue do reflect the most commonly reported points of concerns made by assessors and examiners. In particular, there are 3 professional training issues which are worthy of a little more discussion and emphasis here, which serves to assist QSEP trainees in their case study preparation.

Having a Clear Practitioner Philosophy and Compatible Model of Approach

In the concluding paper of the previous special issue of Professional Training in Sport and Exercise Psychology (Eubank and Hudson, 2013), it was suggested that "it is not uncommon for the trainee to be uncertain and doubtful about the philosophies, theoretical paradigms and models that underpin and govern their applied work" (pp.64.) This has continued to be one of the key aspects of consultancy that trainees find most challenging to i) embrace in their training, ii) document in their submissions and, in particular, iii) verbalise in their viva. Having a really clear answer to the question 'what philosophical assumptions govern your

'practice' is definitely worth having in the locker; trainees will certainly have to open and discuss it to complete QSEP!

To avoid turning this article into a lengthy discussion about professional practice philosophy, reading on the subject (e.g. Corlett, 1996; Poczwadowski et al., (2004; Keegan, 2016) would be a worthwhile exercise for those who haven't been exposed to this level of thinking previously. Poczwadowski and colleagues' provide a particularly useful representation of how a practitioner's core philosophical beliefs might be developed and implemented into their practice. Trainees are encouraged to explore and understand their professional practice philosophy and where it comes from, to then be able to select congruent and related models of approach to consultancy. It is suggested that this should be formed by consideration of the congruence between practice philosophy and personal core beliefs and values, but too often the start point of the consultancy process is, prematurely, the chosen model of practice. Having a clear practitioner philosophy is an important component of the training process (and the assessment of the trainee). It also implicates the supervisor in encouraging exploration of these key underpinning aspects of practice, and providing appropriate guidance and support along the way. As Corlett (1996) argues, the supervisory process needs to focus on developing a trainee sport psychologist's understanding of self and self-in-practice through Socratic dialogue and asking important questions about one's philosophy. It is also important to recognise that philosophical thinking about applied practice is a continual, even like long professional development process. By definition, the QSEP training process is not expecting to see trainee's claim that they've reached the end of their philosophical journey, but it certainly expects a demonstrated awareness of philosophical positioning and evidence of this in case studies and consultancy reflections.

Understanding the Value of Thorough Case Formulation

Keegan (2016) explains that evidenced based practice, professional judgements and case formulation represent key sources of information vital to our decision-making in choosing psychological intervention. In QSEP case study terms, what sometimes happens is that following the reporting of a needs analysis, the intervention choice is immediately described without evidence of any explicit connection or explanation of how one informs the other, and why, out of all the intervention choices available, "that one" has been selected. By

creating a working model of the core issue/problem to inform the intervention from all the available possibilities, and drawing on the evidence base and personal experience to start to infer / theorize, an accountable and informed guide to the decision-making process is provided. This is, in essence, what case formulation is about.

The nature of case formulation is, of course, linked to philosophy of practice, where a more ‘certaintist’ practitioner-led approach might place more emphasis on theory and evidence informed practice, rather than the use of client led experiences emphasised in a more ‘construalist’ client-led approach. This provides another illustration for why having a clear professional practice philosophy is important! There are numerous approaches to case formulation available, with the most commonly adopted model in Sport and Exercise Psychology appearing to be the 5P’s model (e.g., Page, Stitzke & McLean, 2008). This article is not intended to be devoted solely to case formulation either, but instead highlights that the QSEP assessors are looking for it to be a competent feature of trainee consultancy practice, and something that is clearly in evidence within the QSEP case studies they review. Requests from QSEP assessors for trainees to engage comprehensive case formulation are quite common, so hopefully my signpost here is big enough!

Adopting a Comprehensive Method of Evaluation

The final issue to discuss is evaluation, more specifically how, in the case study, evaluating the impact of consultancy (key role 2.6) can be documented. Methods of evaluation are of course very much dependant on the nature of the case study and what that affords, but the general feedback here indicates that, on the whole, evaluation methods evidenced in QSEP case studies are limited / narrow and trainees miss opportunities to acquire valuable sources of information that will help to establish the impact of their work. Evaluation takes two forms. Firstly, it is necessary to continually strive to improve our own effectiveness to provide the best possible service to clients. We can adopt methods that evaluate our own effectiveness, through, for example, our own reflective practice (e.g., Cropley et al., 2007), professional judgment and decision making (e.g., Martindale & Collins, 2007) or client evaluations, e.g., the Consultant Evaluation Form (Partington & Orlick, 1987). Secondly, the impact of our interventions should be evaluated during and following their implementation, so identifying objective and subjective indices of client ‘change’ are required. At the

subjective end of the continuum, consider social validation i.e. what the client(s) think the impact of your work with them is as a key source of evaluation. We can also look beyond the client (commonly the athlete) to, for example, coaches, managers, other specialists, parents etc. to gather other evaluative information about the impact of our practice. As you move along the evaluation continuum, consider forms of profiling as a useful means to monitor and evaluate impact, and at the more objective end draw on quantitative measures, such as questionnaires that quantify the psychological construct you might be trying to impact or other psychological indices or outcomes of client performance and behaviour that you have the opportunity to measure. Some form of multidimensional / triangulated approach to evaluation is advocated to provide as thorough an account as possible of your impact. There are some ideas here for trainees to consider for implementation. The bottom line is to ensure that QSEP assessors don't have reason to question, as they commonly do, the rigour of consultancy evaluation when they assess case study work.

It's time to sign-off. I hope you've found this this 'Professional Training Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology SEPR special issue useful. I would like to thank again the trainees, supervisors and assessors who have contributed to the issue and made it what I hope has been an informative read. To echo the comment made at the end of the last special issue, the QSEP board is always open to suggestions for important professional training and development topics that will generate helpful future outputs for dissemination. On that score we will, via the DSEP conference QSEP workshop, be returning to the philosophy of practice issue in more depth, and in a later edition of SEPR there is intention to publish an article that 'de-mystifies' the QSEP systematic review! Finally, as I said in my opening guest editorial, I very much hope that this special issue will become an annual event to showcase QSEP and the work being done by all concerned. Keep up the good work!

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