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Continuing Professional Education

In 2010, I became a Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES). I have paid my dues and completed my requisite Continuing Education Contact Hours (CECH) in order to maintain my certification, yet I have often wondered about the degree to which those required contact hours have contributed to my development as a health educator. While I obtained and maintained my own certification, I had the opportunity to work alongside those who conducted the continuing professional education (CPE) activities offered by the non-profit health organization for which I worked. I heard over the cubicle walls, entirely too often, of nurses, social workers, and technicians who had waited until the last minute to complete required CPE activities and were frantic about whether their credits would be reported in time for certification renewal. I also heard of professionals who had made repeated attempts to pass quizzes without actually viewing any of the content provided. Unfortunately, the sense of CPE as solely a burdensome obligation—just another annoying, time-consuming checklist item to be completed—was unsurprising. I had heard these same sentiments expressed by other CHES in the office.

The accumulation of these experiences has led me to question the value of many credentials and our general approach to CPE. Below, I will explore the current approach to CPE, suggest ways in which CPE could be reimagined to more effectively promote professional development, and discuss some of the challenges that we must overcome if we are to make these changes.

What is CPE? Why Do We Do It?

Continuing professional education activities are the learning activities in which professionals engage after they have obtained a formal degree (Collins and O'Brien, 2003, as cited in Cantor, 2006). Bullock, Firmstone, Frame, and Thomas (2010) add the important distinction that CPE activities do not

typically, at present, include educative experiences that occur in daily practice. Instead, they are usually separate activities that professionals chose to do, such as attending professional conferences, participating in courses (either in person or through distance learning), or reviewing professional journal articles.

In today's "Information Age," technology and techniques change rapidly. Cantor (2006) notes, "The traditional credential, the degree, is no longer sufficient for life," (p. 4). Continuing professional education is intended to help professionals update their knowledge and skills in order to keep pace in ever-changing fields. Employees and employers alike turn to CPE to help them gain a competitive edge in the marketplace (Cantor, 2006), and the requirement for many professionals to engage in CPE activities serves as a means of reassuring the public of practitioners' accountability (Boud & Hager, 2012).

Continued professional education has become so valued that nearly all professional organizations require some amount of it in order to maintain certification, licensure, or registration. In fact, in some cases, proof of participation in CPE, alongside payment of a fee, is the only requirement for recertification (National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc., n.d.). We have mistakenly come to depend on participation in CPE as proof of continued competency (Daughhetee, Puleo, & Thrower, 2010). While it holds that CPE is a necessary component of professional development, our current CPE methods are not truly conducive to achieving the professional development we desire.

How Do Current CPE Methods Fall Short? How Might They Be Improved?

Most problematic in our current approach to CPE is that the nature of most CPE activities hinders their educative value. Additionally, while there may be an abundance of CPE opportunities available, many professionals lack the resources necessary to select and engage in CPE that will truly further their professional development.

The nature of CPE. Perhaps due in part to the persistence of traditional learning theories (Boud & Hager, 2012), the ease of implementation, and the influence of the CPE industry that has developed (Cantor, 2006), CPE activities tend to be individualized, isolated from practice, and relatively passive. Professionals often step away from their practices to attend annual conferences, view lecture-style webinars, or review pre-selected journal articles in order to fulfill the CPE requirements mandated by professional organizations. Doing so places CPE in isolation, devoid of the potential benefits of collaborative learning, and outside of the meaningful context of daily practice. Further, much of CPE to date has followed traditional theories of knowledge "transfer" from subject matter experts to learners through passive means such as lecture or text (Boud & Hager, 2012), and evidence suggests that these more passive methods are among the least impactful (Bullock, Firmstone, Frame, & Thomas, 2010).

While relatively quick and more passive traditional CPE offerings may be convenient, they are not necessarily effective in promoting professional development. Fenwick (2009) offers that, "The problem with this model is that it cannot indicate the nature and depth of engagement in learning, or the actual outcomes of engagement in terms of personal understandings and changes to practice. The learning events are not necessarily connected in any meaningful way with the actual contexts and dilemmas of a professional's practice," (p. 234). Boud and Hager (2012) similarly stress the "importance of work and context in the fostering of learning," (p. 18), a stance that aligns closely with educational theorist John Dewey's (1938) emphasis on continuity and interaction in learning.

Were our approach to CPE to be reimagined to address these issues, it would place greater emphasis on collaborative learning situated in the context of actual practice (Boud & Hager, 2012). This is not to suggest that lectures and text will no longer have a place in CPE. Quite the contrary; both are helpful teaching methods that allow for the rapid disbursement of information and ideas to a large audience. Yet, these methods, which have become the primary means for CPE are not sufficient alone.

Continuing professional education must require greater and more meaningful learner engagement if it is to positively and effectively impact professional development. Rather than asking professionals to remove themselves from their colleagues and their context, the focus ought to shift to learning opportunities within professionals' practices. To this point, Boud and Hager (2012) suggest that, "It may be that some environments need to be accredited as necessarily generating development, rather than accrediting attendance at activities that may or may not generate anything," (p. 27).

  Lacking resources. The popularity of brief, lecture-style webinars and pre-selected journal articles for CPE is understandable when we consider the time constraints that many professionals face. Further, considering the hefty costs associated with many CPE activities, the desire to pick and choose the most cost-effective CPE activities available is understandable, no matter how disjointed those activities might be. Dewey (1938) warns, however, that, "experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another. Energy is then dissipated and a person becomes scatter-brained," (p. 26). Learning activities must be relevant and related in order for them to contribute to the development of the professional. When CPE is selected not because of its relevance or meaning but because of its convenience or cost-effectiveness, as our current CPE approach inadvertently encourages, it fails to meet its intended purpose.

  Guidance is another resource that is lacking for many professionals. Many fields offer little or no guidance to help professionals identify knowledge and skills gaps, set learning goals, or develop plans for CPE. Fenwick (2009) offers that "it is very difficult for anyone to develop awareness of what one does not know," (p. 236). External assistance, particularly from more knowledgeable and experienced professionals within the field, may be necessary to help professionals select CPE opportunities that will truly further their development.

To the extent that a professional's CPE is disconnected, particularly due to lacking resources of time, funding, or guidance, his or her professional development may be stunted. Greater allowance of CPE opportunities integrated in daily practice, as proposed above, could help to alleviate some of the time and cost burdens that professionals carry in order to participate in CPE. Insofar as "Professionals collectively construct, modify, resist, and select different meanings of knowledge within the complex dilemmas of the everyday," (Fenwick, 2009, p. 234), it is conceivable that credit could be awarded for at least some of the learning that takes place during the course of daily practice. Professionals could spend fewer resources attending CPE activities outside of practice, and greater efforts could be made to ensure that meaningful CPE becomes a part of the routine work day. Careful guidance, perhaps through mentorship programs, could aid in this effort, as well as help to identify complementary CPE opportunities outside of practice, maximizing the developmental return on the resources spent on those activities.

What Challenges Can We Anticipate?

Reimagining and actually shifting our approach to CPE will not be easy. Among the most significant challenges we can anticipate is that of how to quantify CPE that takes place within the context of practice. Most professional organizations currently measure CPE in terms of professionals' attendance or "participation" in CPE activities, typically through credits or contact hours. Boud and Hager (2012) propose that we, "reconceptualise formal [CPE] through a focus on the notion of practice, away from a perspective framed by acquisition of points or hours," (pp. 17-18); though, exactly what this might look like is unclear.

Actual implementation of practice-based CPE will present its own set of challenges as well. Not only will CPE activities themselves need to be reimagined, we can anticipate some resistance to a change in approach. For example, we can anticipate considerable resistance from today's CPE providers

who, under our current approach, "realize significant revenues through charging for services and overhead," (Cantor, 2006, p. 11). Cutting into providers' profits in favor of practice-based CPE will not be a welcome change. Many employers may also resist, as greater emphasis on CPE through practice may force them to take a greater and more direct role in the development of their professionals. Employers will need to find innovative ways to ensure that rich learning opportunities are available to their professionals through daily practice in order for them and their professionals to remain competitive.

In Summary

Our current approach to CPE tends to be individualized, isolated from practice, and passive in nature, which degrades the educative value of the learning activities and fails to provide the level of professional development intended. Constraints on professionals' time, the expense of CPE activities, and a lack of guidance to help professionals engage in meaningful CPE act as additional barriers. Shifting our CPE approach to allow for greater emphasis on more collaborative, practice-based learning has the potential to increase the value of CPE and positivley impact professional development. Developing acceptable quantitative measures of CPE under the new approach, as well as overcoming resistance from current CPE providers and other groups, will make this proposed shift a challenging undertaking; however, it will better position CPE to more impactfully further professional development.

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