

Clinical Interaction

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Most of us accept as gospel the assertion that the Comprehensive Treatment Planning Session is at the heart of the Seattle Study Club concept. The point is hammered home to directors in a series of consultations with Michael, and reiterated ad nauseum in the SSC Journal. The treatment planning session makes up the bulk of Michael's one-day program for new clubs, and once he shows directors how to run a session he figures they've "got it." As the study clubs mature, however, Comprehensive Treatment Planning Sessions sometimes fall either to the bottom of, or entirely off, the study club educational menu. Directors have trouble finding cases, coordinators don't know how to help, and it becomes much easier for everyone simply to schedule a series of fabulous one-day lectures by nationally known experts. So what's the problem?

An old joke goes something like this. A notorious bank robber is finally captured, tried, and imprisoned. A popular television journalist persuades prison officials to grant a live interview. She is sure that her probing questions will reveal valuable information about the twisted criminal mind. Once in front of her subject, she asks, "Why, when there are so many easier ways of making a living, do you bother to rob banks?" The criminal looks at her blankly, shrugs his shoulders and says "because that's where the money is."

Why bother with Comprehensive Treatment Planning Sessions? Because that's where the learning is.

The Proof of the Pudding

Michael's experience with his own study club provided him with empirical data to support this assertion. After years of providing a purely didactic experience, in the early 1980s he started offering clinical sessions to assist doctors in becoming comfortable incorporating new technologies into the treatment they offered their patients. In the course of these sessions, he discovered that the doctors in his club were far more interested and excited about learning when he facilitated their educational process by providing a challenging but secure environment where they could learn with and from their peers. By using real cases drawn from the doctors' practices, the learning was "hands-on" and reflected the experiences and needs of the group. Over time, doctors took ownership in the process and the study club became self-directed as members found personal growth and satisfaction in building on their collective knowledge base. This model of facilitative, participatory learning forms the basis of the Seattle Study Club concept and virtually guarantees study club longevity because it meets individual needs.

Two Models of Learning

Traditional Didactic: A lecture format where the professor controls the content and delivery of the program and there is little or no interaction or input from the students (e.g., college survey course).

Modern Facilitative: The professor (or director) creates a secure but challenging environment to encourage learning. A variety of instructional techniques can be used. Learners are expected to assume increasing responsibility for specific content determination and acquisition (e.g., the study club).

He's a Poet and He Don't Know It

Research on adult learning strongly supports the supremacy of the facilitative method of education over the traditional model. Why? Because studies show that adults learn differently than do children. Although there is considerable debate about whether adults actually process information in a different fashion than they did when they were younger, most scholars agree that adults have different influences on their learning than do children and adolescents. Kids and teenagers are essentially “sponges” who absorb everything to which they are exposed. They generally have few responsibilities other than attending school; have limited prior knowledge or experience, and no need to apply the information immediately. They also represent a captive audience for instructors. Adults, on the other hand, present with a lifetime of past experience, beliefs and knowledge. They have multiple responsibilities and limited time. Because they can “vote with their feet” and choose to leave a teaching or learning situation, it is crucial to understand the needs, desires and fears of adults when undertaking the task of designing an engaging and satisfying learning experience.

We've All Got Something in Common

Studies of individuals participating in adult education have revealed that while all adult learners obviously have their own concerns, they share four basic characteristics:

1. Adults learn best when they feel the need to learn, and when they have some control over what is to be learned.
2. Adults use their experiences as resources in learning and look for meaningful relationships between new knowledge or information and prior experiences.
3. Adults are most motivated to learn when they can apply the information immediately to a job or task.
4. Adults learn best in supportive environments where differences in personality, background and learning styles are acknowledged and encouraged, and threats to self-esteem are minimized. (Indeed, research suggests that developing an environment in which adults feel both safe and challenged should be the goal.)

What Knowles Knew

How best to meet these four basic needs? Malcolm Knowles (1913–1997) devoted his life to the cause of adult learning and is often called the Father of Adult Education. The method of instruction that Knowles championed was essentially learner-centered in nature and required the instructor to facilitate the educational process by:

- Creating a cooperative learning climate;
- Developing mechanisms for mutual planning;
- Arranging for a diagnosis of learner needs and interests;
- Enabling the formulation of learning objectives based on the diagnosed needs and interests;
- Designing sequential activities for achieving the objectives;
- Executing the design by selecting methods, materials, and resources; and
- Evaluating the quality of the learning experience while rediagnosing needs for further learning.

In Knowles' vision of the ideal learning environment, instructors still structure the process but act as guides rather than teachers in leading adults. Although some have criticized Knowles for advancing not so much a theory of learning but rather one of instructing, it may be a “distinction without a difference” because his ideas continue to resonate throughout the world of adult education and form the basis of most models of adult learning.

Researchers have found that Knowles' facilitative approach provides a stimulus for learners to: (a) become excited about a subject area; (b) want to learn more about it; and (c) be willing to dig into available resources. (In other words, if the facilitative model is structured correctly, learners take ownership.) In commenting on this research, Professor Roger Hiemstra suggests that the development in individuals of a positive attitude about learning and the relevancy of the subject matter to personal needs may be more important than actual subject matter mastery.

And Then There's Mr. Rogers

Carl Rogers (1902–1987), another educational pioneer, distinguished two types of learning: cognitive (academic knowledge) and experiential ("learning by doing"). In Rogers' view, cognitive is seen as "meaningless" while experiential is "significant." According to Rogers, personal involvement, self-initiation/ evaluation and long-term retention are the hallmarks of experiential learning. Like Knowles, Rogers believed that the instructor should act more as a facilitator and should endeavor to:

- Set a positive climate for learning;
- Clarify the goals of the learner;
- Organize and make available learning resources;
- Balance intellectual and emotional components of learning; and
- Share feelings and thoughts with learners but not dominate.

Rogers maintained that the process of adult learning is enhanced if the learner has control over the nature and direction of the process and the focus of the learning is primarily upon direct confrontation with practical, social, personal or research problems. Rogers drew the following conclusions from his research:

- Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is relevant to the personal or professional interests of the learner;
- Learning which challenges long-held beliefs or knowledge is more easily assimilated when external threats are at a minimum;
- Learning proceeds faster when the threat to loss of self-esteem is low; and
- Self-initiated learning is the most lasting and pervasive.

The Evidence Is Overwhelming

Although Michael's process in designing the clinical session was one of trial and error and was not based on studies, research, professional advice or a review of the available literature on the subject, it should be clear by now that the model of learning that he ultimately came up with and promoted as the "Seattle Study Club concept" represents the best of the facilitative and the experiential theories. We don't need another chart to tell us that the SSC Comprehensive Treatment Planning Session provides an ideal environment for postgraduate dental learning to occur. It is problem-oriented and offers challenge, relevancy, self-direction, personal growth and satisfaction, all within a safe and secure, nonthreatening, collaborative environment. It just doesn't get any better than this.

Conclusion

If our study clubs no longer have the emphasis on the Comprehensive Treatment Planning Session, are they really Seattle Study Clubs? In my view, they would be Seattle Study Clubs only in name. The Comprehensive Treatment Planning Session is the "magic" of the Seattle Study Club concept that few other continuing education programs can provide. It's the mechanism that gets doctors excited about learning, involved and wanting to take ownership in the process. As the primary goal of our study clubs is to promote lifelong learning in dentistry, it behooves us to capitalize on the facilitative model of education that already exists inside our clubs. The Comprehensive Treatment Planning Session is something with which the traditional clinical lecture format simply can't compete. It truly is the heart and soul of the Seattle Study Club, and the place where the learning is.