Flipping research-based Master’s degree dissertations for service improvement

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Problem
As academics we struggled with the ability of the traditional, research-based, Master’s degree dissertation to impact practice and improve services. In 2011, we began to ask the “flipped” question:

Why couldn’t an emphasis on service improvement be the focus of a dissertation?

Changed Required

1. Focus:
Traditional dissertations usually answer specific research questions based on analyses of collected data. To move to a programme facilitating improvement, this focus had to change to an approach driven by improvement principles, of which primary data collection forms a (secondary) part.

2. Professional judgement:
To facilitate practitioners to reason, make decisions and enact ways to improve care and services required a two-stage programme process of ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’.

3. Intervention:
Few academic service improvement programmes require practitioners to implement a proposal in practice.

4. Involvement:
Involvement of academics, frontline practitioners e.g. nurses and social workers and employers.

Our response

New ‘thinking’ unit - 20 Master’s level credit unit
- 4 taught days
- Focus on Model for Improvement questions around aims, changes and measures (Langley et al. 2009)
- Critical literature review
- Proposal design
- Employer involvement

New ‘doing’ unit - 40 Master’s level credit unit
- Proposal implemented in practice
- Focus on PlanDoStudyAct cycle
- Employer involvement
- Blended support e.g. tutor, website and support groups

Improvement?
Since 2012:
- 51 practitioners have registered on the programme.
- A 6 fold increase (6 to 36) in numbers of social workers registering to complete their degree.
- Many positive examples of practitioners developing their professional judgement and actions around improving services and achieving their aims.

Key Messages
- The fusion of academia, service improvement principles and research in the form of this programme has provided a well-received, robust improvement training for front-line practitioners.
- Few academic programmes of ‘service improvement’ study require practitioners to implement a proposal in practice.

Positive feedback on thinking unit

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