Reviewer’s report

Title: The New South Wales Allied Health Workplace Learning Study: barriers and enablers to learning in the workplace

Version: 1 Date: 11 January 2014

Reviewer: Stephen Billett

Reviewer’s report:

Thanks the opportunity to review your manuscript. It is pleasing to see comprehensive and well considered qualitative research being undertaken in healthcare settings of the kind which you report in this manuscript. Overall, it seems that your study was undertaken carefully, you have secured some rich and purposeful data, and effectively and you are identifying some key conclusions which have implications for improving learning experiences in healthcare settings and through health care work. In my view, the manuscript draws upon the insights of a range of health practitioners, is careful about its method and sets out its findings very methodically. Then, reports some discussion and findings.

However, despite concluding that you have done much good work, I'm going to suggest some revisions that should permit the manuscript to more effectively articulate its case. It is unusually long manuscript for the health area, and some of my suggestions are going to increase the length. This means that some parts may need to be reduced in length, or else the Journal can tolerate a longer manuscript.

Overall comments

Overall, the manuscript appears as being in three separate sections which are not as explicitly linked as they could be. First, there is a overview of literature and concepts associated with learning through work, and an outline of the study reported in the paper. Then, secondly, there is a long section presenting qualitative data. Finally, a discussion section. For this reader the second section needs particular attention because from pages 10 to 31, there is the presentation of data, not much in the way of drawing out findings from that date across these pages and no one engagement tall with the literature in the first section. It is as though the second section proceeds without reference to the first section. Then, the links to the third section are not always explicit.

To address these problems most of the comments here relates to how the second or middle section reporting the data might be improved to secure a greater carriage of the argument across the manuscript.

Suggested revisions to each of the three sections

Section 1 – background. A simple point to make here is that work and learning
co-occur. That is, as people engage in that work they are learning. Therefore, although this is not all was recognised within considerations of learning with an occupation is, this seems to be the case and this has been argued and demonstrated by learning theorists for the past 120 years. So there is nothing special about the learning process that arises through everyday work activities and interactions. However, intentional efforts such as professional development programs are those which are organised individuals engage in often for purposes intended by the sponsors. So, for this reader there is a clear distinction between learning arising through everyday activities in the workplace, which is properly the most central form of ongoing professional learning, and that which arises through intentional learning interludes. The latter are sometimes very important because not all of effective learning can be acquired in the workplace and through work activities. Whether referring to manual handling or understandings about areas of health or medical specialism it may well be necessary to have specifically designed and enacted educational interludes to learn the kinds of knowledge which might not be learnt through everyday activities and interactions.

Presentationally, in this first section you might join up the short paragraphs (p.4 - 8) as this will assist develop a narrative across these pages. As it is, these short paragraphs render the text as being piecemeal rather than advancing the case through a narrative. Also, in this section, you need to describe in Figure 1. It is not helpful simply to place a figure in without describing it and how it contributes to the case being made. It is the author's job to make it clear to the reader what this figure conveys, rather than the reader having to figure out what are it's purposes and how it contributes to the argument.

Section 2 – findings (it is quite unusual to refer to section which reports qualitative data as Results, as the latter has a connotation of an intervention or experiment.) Suggest you use the heading Findings or something even more descriptive which captures what this section reports: Learning through practice.

You have really great data – however in this publication you are not using it optimally. As it stands, this section comprises a set of subsections which largely comprise dated but no drawing out findings or discussions about these. It really breaks the flow of the argument. In essence, this entire section (p. 10 to 31) could be removed from the paper and discussions at the end simply carry forward the discussion from this section. What is required here is some drawing out of findings from the data and then conclusions at the end of each of the subsections. As it is, all of these subsections finish with a quote. That is not usually acceptable. This is because you are asking to be reader to draw out meaning from the data, when this is clearly the authors’ role. The reader's job is to make sense of what you are arguing and arrive at some judgement about its worth. Hence, to suggestions are made here. Firstly, that more is done with the data. For instance, the extract from the Manager, Nutrition and Dietetics (Rural/Regional) provides important evidentiary statements about the efficacy of practice-based learning experiences. References to what initiates the problem solving interludes or impasses which are generative of learning are explicitly stated, as is a reference to ‘observation’, one of the key sources of learning.
through practice, and one which may well separate these experiences from those in classrooms, for instance. So, for all of these data the engagement needs to be more thorough and the findings need to be drawn out were the date is presented, are not reserved for discussion section pages and pages away. Moreover, the discussion does not address the specific contributions made in the data presented here. I guess, you may be doing that in another publication elsewhere. But, for this reader each of these data extracts require discussion and findings drawn from them. Otherwise, why is dated being included in the paper. Secondly, at the end of each of these sub-sections the least of your concluding statement which advises what the data in the section above has proposed and how it contributes to the overall argument being made.

Again with Figure 2 - you cannot just insert the figure and not describe the figure in detail and explained to the reader what it depicts and why it depicts that. A figure of the complexity of this one requires probably a couple of pages of text to explain the elements within it and into relations amongst the elements which are depicted in this figure.

Importantly, here you are presenting a lot of very rich and important data. But you are not drawing out findings and deductions which are so important for advancing the case, and these findings and deductions might carry the argument from the ideas that were presented in the first section. Making reference to these sources and concepts as you report your findings and draw deductions builds the argument effectively across the manuscript.

Section 3 – discusses the findings, but might want to make more of the actual data, than is currently the case. The level by which the actual findings from Section 2 are advanced here is quite difficult to identify and seems to be underrepresented. Instead, the discussion seems to take place largely in the absence of these data.

Of course, what I am suggesting means additional work and lengthening the second section. Options here might be to only present part of the data and perhaps present the other part of the data in a different paper. You have heaps and heaps and heaps of data being presented here and it might be far too much for one manuscript. However, that is for you and the editors to decide.

Fundamentally, I conclude that the work you have done is very good, careful and thoughtful and you have captured some very rich from across a range of health care practitioners. My simple project here is to suggest ways in which the overall manuscript can achieve greater coherence, your central arguments have courage and greater validity across the manuscript and that the rich – are you have gathered is used more effectively.

Put simply, if I didn’t conclude there was great worth here I would not be spending the time providing this feedback.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interest below