

Transforming an idea into a scholarly project

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Abstract

Objectives: This article describes components of a workshop designed to orientate psychiatric trainees to the task of conducting a scholarly project. The aims are: to promote an approach that incorporates principles of adult learning to guide trainees who are undertaking research; to allow trainees to transform their ideas into more tangible research questions; and to enable supervisors to reflect on delivering similar content in scholarly project workshops.

Methods: The workshop comprised: creating a safe space to explore ideas; discussing the process of posing a question or hypothesis; using group interactions to generate concepts; and considering personal values that influence the choice of research methodology to answer a question.

Results: Examples are provided from the workshop. The process enabled trainees to generate and distil ideas into more concrete questions and methods in three phases: introductory, exploratory and tangible.

Conclusions: Adult learning principles may assist trainees to develop their ideas for a scholarly project into research questions that are relevant to clinical practice. Harnessing the creative potential of a peer collective may encourage deeper inquiry, shifts to a tangible output and a sustained interest in research.

Keywords: research, psychiatry, training

The practice of psychiatry evokes conundrums. Clinicians may seek various forms of evidence-based guidance, but answers to particular conundrums may not be forthcoming. It is from this context of challenge and discomfort that some of our most original ideas will emerge. These ideas may percolate in our minds or be placed on a back burner for a while. The ideas are shaped as we reflect on our practice, review scientific literature around the topic or present a case study at a journal club. A scholarly project is an opportunity to transform a good idea into tangible research. This requires several steps: to discover that a problem exists, to define a question or hypothesis and to work out how best to solve it.¹

Scholarly projects engender excellence in critical thinking and scientific enquiry.² The endeavour requires a significant investment of time and energy,³ as well as realistic expectations about what can be achieved in a projected time frame.⁴ A researcher needs a strategy to

frame a research question that is informed by appraising relevant literature⁵; awareness of the breadth and depth of study design that fills a gap in knowledge⁶; and an ability to synthesise findings into a cohesive report that adds to existing evidence for a given topic.

This article shares an approach to a workshop focused on developing research questions that incorporates principles of adult learning. The approach acknowledges that trainees are independent and self-directed learners who have accumulated a reasonable degree of experience. As adult learners, they value integrative learning, are intrinsically motivated and interested in

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problem-centred approaches. The workshop employs role modelling and reflective practice within the context of small-group learning to enable trainees to develop self-efficacy in conducting research. Ideas that are generated from this workshop may assist supervisors of scholarly projects to consider what content they might deliver to trainees to stimulate an ongoing interest in research.

Methods

The one-day scholarly project workshop was organised as part of a local college-accredited formal education course, facilitated by academic psychiatrists. It was attended by trainees who were at the early stage of their research and yet to submit a scholarly project proposal.

There were four components to the workshop process:

1. Creating a supportive environment to explore ideas

To set the scene, facilitators and trainees introduced themselves, including the reason they chose to work in psychiatry, the sub-speciality they were working in and the research area of interest. The trainees were asked to consider how the CanMEDS roles of professional, advocate, leader, collaborator and communicator could be integrated into a scholarly project. Trainees were asked to write a research question they had in mind on a whiteboard. It was explained that the research questions were not permanent, that writing down the questions signified intent to develop these questions further. The aims and scope of the scholarly project were outlined.

2. Discussing how to formulate the question or hypothesis

It was explained that research questions are not ordinary questions but formed from focusing a topic of interest into a series of questions. Trainees were asked to carefully consider the words that comprised the main research question and how this related to the aims of the research project. Examples of scholarly projects were given, focusing on objectives and questions that were asked.^{7,8}

3. Reflecting on values that influence study design

The concept of values in research was introduced with regard to how these determine decisions in designing studies. Reflection and discussion were encouraged on how values influence the approach to research; for example, positionality,⁹ theoretical orientation, sampling,^{10,11} access to participants¹¹ and approach to collecting and analysing data.

4. Using the group to generate ideas and feedback

Each trainee was asked to present research ideas to the group. The group was asked to provide feedback such as key words that could be used to search literature,

perspectives on the topic and suggestions for resources. This gave trainees an opportunity to experiment with generating primary and subsidiary questions.

Results

This section describes the process of generating preliminary research questions based on a trainee's area of interest. The workshop emphasised the process of generating new knowledge in three phases. The introductory phase aimed to create a positive learning space for trainees. The second exploratory phase enabled trainees to explore research ideas and shape them into more substantial concepts in the presence of facilitators and the peer collective. The third tangible phase allowed trainees to generate a research question and obtain concrete advice on potential methodology and study design to progress their project to the next stage.

The introductory phase: a safe space

The facilitators created a safe space for the trainees to reflect on the connection between clinical practice and research by sharing their personal journeys in clinical psychiatry and research, the satisfaction of developing a research proposal and the fulfilment of producing a finished product. This enabled discussion about issues of personal importance, such as social justice or a holistic approach to medicine, giving permission to trainees to express their values and the reasons why they had chosen a particular area of psychiatry or research to explore further.

The exploratory phase: examples of developing research ideas

Trainees were invited to present their preliminary questions. It was explained that questions did not need to be well formulated at this stage. For example, one trainee expressed an interest in addiction psychiatry with the following questions: *Are referrals from emergency department to community alcohol and drug services always appropriate? What are the barriers for people attending community alcohol and drug services? Should specialist alcohol and drug clinicians be integrated into community mental health teams?* The trainee identified a common theme about access to alcohol and drug services. He was encouraged to transform his ideas into research by investigating issues in local access. The trainee refined the question to: *What proportion of people presenting to an emergency department with alcohol-related issues received referral and a face-to-face assessment by the community alcohol and drug services?* He explored the feasibility of identifying study participants by using existing electronic records and coding systems in emergency department and community alcohol and drug services over a defined period. The group discussion supported the trainee to construct a

specific question with a potentially achievable method that would answer his research question.

The research questions presented by the trainees led to inquiries about methodology. For example, one trainee had a question: *In what circumstances can electroconvulsive treatment (ECT) be performed on people with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?* This provoked dialogue on the use of quantitative versus qualitative methods; for example, the potential to conduct a Cochrane systematic review seeking evidence for effectiveness of ECT in ASD as opposed to a qualitative approach of interviewing families affected by ASD to explore their attitudes and preferences. It was highlighted that the choice of method is informed by values and the nature of the research question.

The tangible phase: refining research questions and study methodology

Each trainee was given time to individually distil their ideas. After regrouping, the trainees presented their newly refined research question and potential study design. The focus on the process of formulating and framing the question enabled further discussion about research methodology that included study design, sampling, ethics and analysis. The group also reflected on ethical considerations for observational studies that included human participants and the different processes required for research involving various groups, such as service users or health professionals.

Trainees provided feedback that they valued both individual and group work to develop their ideas and clarify the required tasks (note, trainees elected to give verbal feedback instead of completing standardised teaching evaluation forms used in the local training programme). They identified having a concrete timeline as a valuable tool for project planning. Writing down preliminary research questions, potential methods and a timeline (such as a Gantt chart) were tangible products to take away from the workshop.

Discussion

This approach to a scholarly project workshop aimed to help trainees to transform a good idea into a research question that they could answer by selecting a suitable methodology. The exercise of directing trainees to express why they chose to work in psychiatry provided a critical space to refocus their motivation. There was an affective component to this exercise as trainees were encouraged to reflect on their values. Reflection is a critical part of developing research questions and methods; as trainees explore their own experiences, they can shift to a new understanding and appreciation of why and how doing research should matter.¹² The linking of this affective component may reinforce internal motivation for trainees to further their interests in psychiatry by

undertaking a scholarly project that promotes deep learning and scientific enquiry.

To promote self-efficacy, providing role models to share academic experiences and career choices may help to shape a professional identity and commitment through observation and comparison.^{13,14} Trainees were provided with guided practice and corrective feedback to refine their ideas into answerable questions. Time was set aside for self-directed learning and regrouping enabled the further development of their ideas to be validated.

Small-group learning was promoted by active discussion between the facilitators and trainees. This encourages curiosity about research as trainees employ critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills.¹⁵ Attitudes and skills from the workshop may give trainees confidence to participate in other research forums where they can consult researchers from wider disciplines to advance original and innovative thinking about question formulation and methodology. One of the facilitators completed a scholarly project with senior colleagues, learning to provide constructive and critical feedback on answering a research question with specific methods and practical do-ability in a given time frame.⁸ Such an experience can lead to continued interest in research and other productive collaborations.

The verbal feedback provided by the trainees following the workshop is a limitation. Future workshops could include a more objective and structured approach. For example, a feedback session at the end of the workshop with an independent person might enable trainees to be more open about providing critical feedback.

Conclusion

To help trainees develop a research question into a scholarly project, facilitators can utilise a series of techniques, based on adult learning principles, to impart knowledge and encourage reflection. Harnessing the creative potential of a peer collective may encourage deeper inquiry, shifts to a tangible output and a sustained interest in research.

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