

WCES-2010

Transfer of learning in a boundary crossing training: The case of speech therapists

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Received October 14, 2009; revised December 23, 2009; accepted January 7, 2010

Abstract

This study explores the speech therapists' transfer of learning in boundary crossing from the university to the field, in order to understand how to support students in developing an epistemic agency. Our case concerns the qualitative analysis of student's assignments about academic knowledge and professional experiences in order to explore the change (in epistemic agency and boundary crossing) that takes place within the course. The results show the students' difficulties to link their former readings with their present observations; the impact of emotions; and the types of expertise they need in terms of educational/therapeutic activities.

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Keywords: transfer; boundary-crossing; speech therapy; training, learning.

1. Introduction

This study explores boundary-crossing in a seminar offered to speech therapy students during their professional and academic training in the university. The general aim is to explore the transfer of learning in boundary crossing from the university to the field, in order to understand how to support students in developing an epistemic agency. We try to contribute to the discussion about the transfer of the formal learning to professional practice and vice-versa through the observation of a pedagogical and professional scenario. We think that the academic knowledge and the practical know-how are elicited in two different settings. To some extent they pertain to these settings and it is not easy for a single person to connect them. For this reason, we intend to explore to what extent we can be successful in developing a pedagogical approach to help students to transfer learning and to bridge their former experiences and their professional demands.

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2. Theoretical aspects

The notion of transfer has been conceptualized by different theoretical approaches (situated cognition, active learning, activity theory). In our study, we are mainly interested in the conceptualization of transfer based on socio-cultural views, with an attention to the contexts in which students go back and forth from school to workplace. According to the activity theory, the notion of transfer concerns “*boundaries between multiple activity systems, like schools and workplaces*” (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström, 2003, p. 30). The focus of this approach is not anymore on the individual and how he/she transfers knowledge from one place to another, but on the collective “*conceptualization of transfer*” (Tuomi-Gröhn, 2007, p. 44). More specifically, we refer to the term of “boundary-crossing” as a process of going beyond the boundaries of one’s knowledge and competencies by deliberately searching for contacts with others, experts, peers, cultures or theories. This term mainly conceptualizes how different systems, tasks, and actions are related and how agents move between situations (Ludvigsen, Havnes & Lahn, 2003) with a specific attention to the whole world of the communities implied in the process (Arcidiacono, in press).

In this study, we focus on how speech therapists cross boundaries during their internships: after being at university, these students have to get confronted to what will be their future profession.

3. Methodology

Our research concerns the training for speech therapists offered during four years. It involves different courses in linguistics, psychology, education, medical sciences and speech therapy. Students have three semesters of internships in schools, hospitals, day care centers under the supervision of professional speech therapists transmitting techniques and clinical aspects of the profession. Students have then a final semester back in the university for seminars and the writing of the master thesis. Specifically, we chose to analyze the seminar “Relationships: psychological approaches” (hereafter the “seminar”) offered to speech therapists in the university, in order to encourage participants to share their ideas, and to cross-fertilize their knowledge practices. It encourages participants to distance themselves, psychologically, from their everyday practices and, perhaps, to give up too inflexible and rigid routines and taken for granted practices. It requires a transfer of learning between academic theoretical knowledge and the professional practices experienced during the training and vice-versa.

A large part of the students’ training is devoted to theoretical contents. Students encounter difficulties in linking their academic background with the demands of the professional field. Our pedagogical approach has the goal to understand why students feel these difficulties and to teach them to gain control over the processes of learning, understanding, verifying, inquiring, and reporting.

We constructed our pedagogical design to create a space of shared reflection, discussion and observation of students’ practical experiences. By concentrating on the emotional and relational demands of the therapeutic situations, by teaching to observe behavior and uphold judgments, by giving students opportunities for collective discussions of events, our design is meant to invite students to interiorize individually what has been co-elaborated within the groups. For this reason, our design is conceived as a longitudinal study and an open-ended authentic activity.

3.1. *The context of the observation: the seminar*

The seminar calls students to meet about every three months for a whole day. About a month before each meeting, students receive an assignment. It requires from them to report cases, to elaborate their experiences during the internship, to reflect on readings, on the conceptual and procedural artifacts and other forms of knowledge they have received during their training, in order to master and improve the professional role and the responsibility as speech therapists.

3.2. *Goals and research questions*

The goal of this study is to explore how speech therapists involved in cross-boundaries practices can bridge their former experiences and knowledge and the present demands of a professional situation. Previous iterations of the

seminar have been considered as a preliminary study and allowed us to draw some hypotheses about our research. It seems that students manage limited models of action as speech therapists, and declare to have difficulties in gaining a general understanding of their interventions in terms of therapeutic activities. Our hypothesis is that academic knowledge and practical know-how are not two different settings, but they are two dimensions within the same person. For this reason, students need to be helped via boundary crossing objects.

In order to attend the goal of this study, we intend to answer the following research questions:

- What is the role of the seminars' activities in students' reflection about their practices?
- Can this kind of pedagogical design help students in internships to distance themselves from the immediate pressures, to reflect on their everyday professional and academic practices and to enrich them?

3.3. *Participants and instruments*

The participants are 112 students attending the seminar available at the University of Neuchâtel between 2001 and 2009. For this specific study we consider 448 assignments we collected along years. They concern different topics such as professional difficulties during the internships, relationships to the clients and to the other professionals, the management of the therapeutic treatments, psychological aspects (emotions, personalities, expectations) in the relationships between them and others.

4. Qualitative analysis

Our qualitative analysis of some excerpts of the assignments aims at showing the students' difficulties trying to bridge their academic knowledge and their practical know-how. The first aspect we observed concerns the fact that students seldom report using their previous academic knowledge (nor being asked to do it by the professionals). The second aspect concerns the fact that their clients often confront them for the first time with important existential problems. And thirdly, we observed their difficulties to manage at the same time the double role of "professional speech therapist" and "student".

The first excerpt concerns the answer of a student to a question about the possibility to link the theoretical knowledge with the training activity. The question was the following: "*In your academic education, you have gone a theoretical instruction: does it play in your training? Could you present an example of the use of theoretical knowledge in practical activities?*".

Excerpt 1, report of student A:

Young girl with a lower IQ: in the speech therapy she always has a little evasive smile, she understands with difficulty games and exercises to be made. The problems concern how to proceed with this child to whom so much knowledge is missing and to understand if there are methods to approach these children and to help them to make acquisitions.

In this excerpt, the student A states a problem to link the theoretical knowledge and the definition of an appropriate therapy. She avoids to use theoretical knowledge to explain the case of this girl, which she states in a very naïve way. Actually she doesn't answer the question demanding an example upon which she could reflect with the help of theoretical notions. This difficulty seems to be a common problem for many students during the training.

The second aspect concerns the students' confrontation to new and important existential life problems. The following excerpt shows this kind of difficulty for another student.

Excerpt 2, report of student B: *During some treatment sessions, the mother was present to talk about the evolution of the work accomplished with the child. She started to confide in me and talk about her problems. How can I manage this kind of situation? How can I limit her?*

In this excerpt, the student seems to be on the defensive while being confronted to the mother's problems. She wants to avoid facing the situation and the probable pain by creating some limits between them. During their internships, students get confronted to these life situations which they rarely had to face before. They tend to protect themselves instead of trying to look at the situation from the other's point of view, which could be a great help to understand the client and to improve the therapeutic treatment. They have difficulties to find a professional position and to manage these situations of "intimacy" with the clients and their families.

The third aspect concerns the students' difficulties to position themselves between their double role of "student" and "professional speech therapist". The problem of the position to be taken during the internship is an issue that students declare as relevant in their answers, as in the following case.

Excerpt 3, report of student C:

The student's position is particular, especially at the beginning of the training, where is needed an observer's position. I have often the impression to be intrusive during the speech therapy [...] I find difficult to have an unspecified relationship, even empathic, with a patient that I only observe.

Student C declares a clear difficulty to position herself as a competent speech therapist because, as a student, she is in an *observer's position*. So she says having the *impression* to be intrusive. She has problems to find her role not only vis-à-vis the other professionals, but also vis-à-vis the clients. This excerpt shows the students' difficulties to create a relationship with the other actors of the situation, clients or professionals working in the same institution.

In our analytical work we considered each student's answers on the basis of the individual history, which can contribute to the vocational training of the speech therapist. Students' answers underline the presence of certain difficulties, above all concerning the management of the therapy, and the clarity of the role. They also talk about their difficulties concerning the relationships with the supervisor, as well as their meeting with parents and other clients.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of the data shows that, when students try to analyze a situation in psychological terms, they often tend to "explain" the clients and never themselves (nor the relationships). Students give labels to clients, in order to simplify the process of understanding situations, and they idealize the therapeutic process, without considering the specific character of each situation. They also resort to stereotypes, without taking into account the theoretical resources acquired within the framework of their training. This is also why they fear to lack practical procedures in order to face the complexity of the situations.

These results of the study allow us to draw some lessons learned for the pedagogical design. If we want students to transfer knowledge from the internships to the academic context (and vice-versa), we need to carefully design a space sustaining three interrelated steps. The first one is to allow students to become aware of what they encounter in the field. So they need to learn to present their practical experiences. In this case, our first pedagogical concern is to help them learn to talk about their experiences at work in a narrative way.

In the second step, the narrations of their practices can become objects of reflection because the pedagogical design offers a time and a space to think about them. Actually we consider them as boundary-crossing objects offering students a material from both settings on which to reflect. Finally, the third step is to encourage students to think about these objects with the help of the theoretical concepts they have acquired during their academic training. This is an essential step where a transfer of knowledge can happen. This 3-step process of reflection can offer students an opening to different possibilities for action in the therapeutic treatment, instead of their unique self-centered points of view.

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