

In search of the professional voice: The professional communication practices of radiation therapists in the classroom and the workplace. B.D. Wyrley-Birch Cape Peninsula University of Technology

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Context:

The focus of this study was the professional communication practices of radiotherapists as clinical practitioners and as teachers of student/novice radiotherapists. This work on professional communication was based on practice and discourse theory as relating to a local context of professional practice and education. Professional communication was seen as a social practice which operates within educational, work and social discursive practices of radiation therapy. The study was undertaken at a higher education institution and a radiation oncology department in South Africa.

Aim:

The research question asked what are the communication practices of radiotherapists in their professional practice and as higher education teachers. Methodology: A case study approach was chosen as the most appropriate research strategy for capturing the authentic communication practices of radiotherapists in clinical and educational practice. The professional communication practices of ten student and five qualified radiotherapists were investigated through typical teaching and learning interactions in a work integrated learning curriculum. Communication interactions were observed, video-taped in the classroom, tutorial, and demonstration room; and observed and audio taped in the clinical workplace. The research participants, using the video footage as part of their reflections, were interviewed about their communication practices. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Analysis of the data was by means of thematic analysis where the data was coded and categorised by means of pattern matching.

Results:

The findings from the study showed that the communication practices of radiotherapists include multiple 'languages of learning' which range from an 'academic language', to a 'professional language' and the necessary 'language' for patient care. Novice radiotherapists are required to master this professional language within their own 'language of learning' practice. A multilayered model of professional communication developed within the analysis process. This model identifies three genres of professional communication: intra-, inter- and extraprofessional communication with both formal and informal registers. Technical communication was further identified as a subset of intra- and interprofessional communication. Multilingualism was identified as a discursive practice within the professional communication of the radiotherapy classroom and workplace. Conclusion: In conclusion, it is argued that the professional communication of radiotherapists comprises a continuum of communication practices that has significance for both professional and pedagogic radiotherapy practice, and it is shown that communication practices play an important role in the establishment of professional identity and expertise and enable the novice radiotherapist to find their professional voice.