

Keynotes

Continuing education: organising programmes

Catherine McGinley offers advice on how to plan, organise, promote and evaluate a formal continuing education programme for physical therapists.

Continuing education is a personal, professional obligation. Learning can be acquired informally through reading, talking, listening and reflective practice. Formal programmes are another, more structured way of furthering professional development. Keynotes, paper 2, emphasised the importance of identifying the need for a programme. This paper provides advice on how to organise an event.

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY

Anyone who has organised a major programme while working full-time and running a family knows just how much work is involved, and how the details can become overwhelming.

Project co-ordinators

A project coordinator will help avoid the most common reasons for failure, which are inconsistency in planning and poor management of budgets and promotion, caused by oversights and inability of a busy volunteer to devote sufficient time to the project. Employing a project coordinator is worth the expense. Include the cost in the budget. This person will work with and be accountable to an advisory committee drawn from the profession, and the group identifying the need.

Volunteer groups

If organisation is to be carried out by a volunteer group, be sure that one person is appointed coordinator, who must accept responsibility for bringing the plans to completion. Tasks can be allocated within the group, but one person must monitor them, be prepared to pick up tasks which are not being done well or quickly enough, and manage the budget. The group itself can act as the advisory body whose role it is to draw up the blueprint for the event and monitor quality.

CONTENT

The course content and learning objectives have to be clearly planned. This requires knowledge of the field and a clear profile of the learners.

For example, if a manual therapy course is requested, should it focus on peripheral or spinal;

paediatric, adult or geriatric; should it be at an introductory, intermediate or advanced level? Should it be in lecture or workshop, small or large group format? Will it analyse a particular technique or provide a general update?

Matching expectations

A group of potential learners together with experts in the field will be able to guide the planning of content to meet stated objectives. It is vital that there is a match between the expectations of the students and the material delivered. The organisers are responsible for communicating what the learners want to the instructors.

It is important that what is taught in programmes is based on valid research and evidence. Opinion alone can be misleading and is unacceptable unless clearly identified as such. Instructors should be able to show evidence to support the content of their programmes if teaching theory or techniques.

Discussion periods

Sometimes the professionals just want to hear a controversial speaker expound personal theories. The inclusion of a period for discussion and debate within the programme provides perspective to new ideas and allows for healthy scepticism to be aired if appropriate.

TIME AND PLACE

When are the students available? Many private practitioners cannot attend on working days. Some cannot travel, so what method of delivery would make a programme accessible to them? Successful methods of delivery are as unlimited as the needs and numbers of the students. Consider correspondence courses; video or computer courses; travelling workshops as well as the traditional class room or clinic-based delivery. Avoid family or religious holiday times. Consider locations that are affordable yet attractive. Many people like to combine holiday time with learning time.

INSTRUCTORS

Once the precise learning goals have been clearly defined, it is time to choose the right

Keynotes is a series of occasional papers dealing with important professional, practice and policy issues relevant to physical therapists across the world, and to the development of physical therapy internationally.

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instructors for attaining them. An experienced instructor will offer suggestions to improve the planned content to meet the stated objectives.

Locating instructors

There are many sources for locating instructors:

- Books, journals, research reports will give you names and identify the author's expertise.
- Peer recommendations are valuable. A colleague whose opinion you trust may have "found" a likely instructor or topic on a course they have attended. Make sure they have not been simply impressed by the location, the meals or the charisma of the presenter. Presentation skill is important but cannot replace strong content. Ask your colleagues to collect contact information while on courses.
- Your own attendance at conferences will expose you to presenters. Listen critically;
- University faculty members spend their time in education and research, and are good sources for recommendations;
- Local professionals are often overlooked in our searches for the best instructors. They must, of course, meet the criteria by which you would evaluate any instructor. But look closely at home before turning abroad. A local resource may be able to impart the same information or training for a lower cost.

Making contact

Having identified possible instructors for your programme, get in touch with them by letter, phone, fax or in person. You may have to do this up to two years ahead for recognised instructors. Often the well-known instructors have trained others to deliver the same content, and will vouch for their quality.

Give the prospective instructor your carefully identified learning needs. Ask if they can fulfil the learning expectations of your target audiences. Ask them to send you copies of brochures and evaluations from previous presentations, and references of their publications. You should also ask them to outline the terms of the contract they expect.

Contact those people your prospective instructor has taught in the past. Their evaluation of the instructor's content and style is invaluable. Good presentation skills are important. If poorly delivered the best material falls on deaf ears. A boring lecturer will not improve the knowledge of your students. A waste of time and money!

Closing the deal

When you have satisfied yourself that this is the appropriate instructor, negotiate terms and talk about money. You must look for value for money. Many excellent instructors price themselves out of the market, others are very aware of varying abilities to pay and adjust their charges accordingly. Instructors do, however, have to make a living and should be compensated fairly, so do negotiate in good faith.

At the end of negotiations the terms of a contract should be set out in writing and signed by both parties. The contract should refer to the learning package and all pertinent financial and administrative details. It is wise to include a cancellation provision – usually a date before which you can cancel the engagement without being obliged to pay the instructor.

EVALUATION

Amateur organisers of continuing education programmes can and should undertake evaluations of their courses. Although they may not be able to scientifically measure true learning outcomes, there are less complex evaluation techniques which are reasonably indicative of quality and satisfaction.

Experienced instructors often have a "pre-test", delivered at the opening of the course. At the end of the course, a simple "post-test" is delivered to the students, and the variance in knowledge is taken as showing the information absorbed.

The most common tool is the satisfaction questionnaire. This is designed to give a simple reading of students' reactions to the content, instructor and organisation, and can help assess needs for future programmes. Use a simple 1 to 5 rating system and provide space for comments.

BUDGETS

With information from the instructor about his/her fees and handout materials, the type of space required, the number of students and the length of programme, you can draft your initial budget.

- Be very detailed, down to telephone and postage charges.
- Build in a margin for the unexpected.
- Estimate the minimum number of paying students needed to cover the costs.
- Look for and secure non-fee revenue such as grants or sponsorships. If you find it, subtract the grants from the costs and divide the balance by the minimum number you think will attend. This gives a fee to the students.

Your budget should be reviewed regularly. If costs decrease you can run the programme with fewer registrants or provide some attractive extras. All financial arrangements with facilities and providers should be in writing.

PROMOTION

The best programme in the world will fail if no-one knows it is available, or if it is not clear from the description what is being offered, or publicity does not reach the target audience.

A simple brochure or notice, sent out well in advance to the right people, and announcing the dates, instructor and content, is important so that students can plan ahead. A well-written article about the topic and/or the instructor in an appropriate newsletter or journal will create interest.

Reading list

Continuing education, identifying the need, Keynotes paper 2 by Catherine McGinley, published by the World Confederation for Physical Therapy. See also full reading list on Keynotes above.

Catherine McGinley is a private physiotherapy practice owner and a consultant on professional development. She was a member of the Faculty of Continuing Education at the University of Calgary for 16 years, providing continuing education for rehabilitation professionals. She has taught and organised continuing education programmes internationally.