

## Interprofessional Education (IPE): Strategic Questions

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## Commentary

# Interprofessional Education (IPE): Strategic Questions

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The necessity for inter-professional education (IPE) is obvious (Brandt, 2015; Reeves et al., 2013). However, experience suggests that well-meaning educators attempting to develop inter-professional teams from individuals immersed within disciplinary silos often simply aim to mix individuals from numerous disciplines as frequently as possible. Although there are many examples of activities that can be used to facilitate such inter-professional team development (Frank et al., 2010; Chown et al., 2015; Bridges et al., 2011), as well as the development of conceptual frameworks supporting IPE (Stutsky & Spence Laschinger, 2014), basic questions remain to be answered in this evolving field of research and practice.

In approaching this matter it may be useful to remember Kipling's (1902) poem from *The Elephant's Child*:

*I keep six honest serving-men  
(They taught me all I knew);  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who.*

Interestingly the issue of 'Who' is last in this poem, and we would suggest it has not been a primary focus in IPE circles. Obviously part of the answer to the 'Who' question is health and social care professionals. Beyond that there appears to be a paucity of research

and discussion. There are different ways to approach the issue of who should be included, or at least prioritized in IPE initiatives. A common approach is to include the 'willing', although perhaps this can involve 'preaching to the converted'. Alternatively many initiatives simply progress opportunistically using whatever disciplines are conveniently mutually accessible and available. Another strategy might be to examine all interactions between different disciplines and then focus IPE efforts on those disciplines with the greatest volume of interactions, although perhaps focusing on less common interactions might be equally valid. In contrast it may be possible to quantify and explore critical inter-disciplinary interactions with potentially life-threatening outcomes and focus on these first. A similar and valid approach might be to examine reports from hospital-based investigations resulting from adverse outcomes for patients and identify the inter-professional interactions involved in critical communication breakdowns and focus on these disciplines.

Each of these approaches could justifiably be defended. However, we suggest an alternative approach involving a more sociological perspective when exploring the 'Who' question. Drawing on work in the field of social distance (Bichi, 2008; Bogardus, 1925) and sociometry (Moreno, 1941; 1951; 1952) it may be useful to explore

how perceived social distance might help target IPE initiatives.

Our commentary is based on preliminary research involving the authors who explored the issue of social distance (Bogardus, 1925) between students in the health sciences. Our analysis involved asking students in six different health disciplines participating in an IPE event whether members of the other disciplines were “really JUST LIKE ME”. Our results indicate significant and mutually perceived differences between Occupational Therapy and Dental Hygiene students. In contrast, Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy students each view the other discipline as being relatively similar.

Social distance is a barrier to team cohesion, efficacy and communication. Having identified notable differences in social distance between different disciplines, the next question is one of strategy. Should prioritization and resources focus on those disciplines with little social distance between them or instead be targeted towards those demonstrating greater social distance? Working with relatively ‘close’ disciplines offers the potential for relatively early and easy success. However, perhaps the more distant relationships may be deemed more problematic given the perceived gulf that exists between some disciplines. We hope to initiate a dialogue to explore in more detail prioritization of, and resource allocation issues for, IPE initiatives.

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