

Quick Tips: Methods of Learning Needs Assesment



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MEDICINE

Office of Continuing Education
and Professional Development
Faculty of Medicine
University of Toronto
500 University Avenue, Suite 650
Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V7

Phone: 416.978.2719
Toll Free: 1.888.512.8173
Fax: 416.971.2200

Email: info.cepd@utoronto.ca
Website: www.cepd.utoronto.ca

Quick Tips: Assessing Learning Needs

Assessing learning needs – Accreditation principle #1 RCPSC and CFPC: The activity is planned based on the identification of needs (perceived and unperceived)

When a patient first presents to a health professional it is quite common for that professional to take a history, examine the patient, perhaps order diagnostic tests. This is done in order to provide the most effective and appropriate care possible. Well, learning needs assessment is to education what these procedures are to health care. Essentially the intent of a needs assessment is to match the interests and needs of the learner and their professional environment with an appropriate educational activity. In order to do that we must know more about the learners and the working environment in which they are situated.

Finding out what learners want and need to know is a demonstration of adherence to adult learning principles, the key principle being:

Learners are more likely to learn if they can see the relevance to their own practice.

If you want to know what motivates participants to choose your program over others – these are the 4 questions we ask ourselves before deciding to commit our time and resources:*

1. Is it relevant to my practice?
2. Is it credible?
3. Is it worth my time?
4. Is it accessible?

What is a learning need?

A learning need is described as the gap in knowledge, skill, attitude and/or practice between what currently exists and what is desired.

"What is"

"What is desired"

What is a learning needs assessment?

A needs assessment then is the tool that we use to identify and measure that gap.

"What is"

"What is desired"

There are different types of learning needs. They can be:

1. Self recognized or Perceived needs: *I know what I want and need to know*
2. Unknown to the learner or Unperceived needs: *I don't know what I don't know*
3. Miscalculated or Misperceived needs: *I think I know something I don't*
4. Emergent needs: *Now I have some new information I realize I want or need to learn something else instead of or in addition to what I am learning now.*

The different types of needs (perceived, unperceived and misperceived) are all important when designing continuing education activities. As a program planner you may be aware of the need for new knowledge or skill on behalf of your target audience but if they are not aware of that need, they will not be interested in attending your program. If they do attend but are still not aware of the learning need they will simply not pay attention or not be able to see the relevance to their own practices. The more you know about how your audience thinks and what their everyday problems in practice are in relation to the topic you wish to deliver, the more effective your program will be and the more likely a change in practice behaviour will occur.

Determining Perceived Needs – “I know what I want and need to know”

Different methods are used to determine the different types of learning needs. If you want to know what learners perceive as their learning needs, it is important to ask them directly. The most popular methods are as follows:

Survey:	A paper and pen or electronic questionnaire with any number of questions directed at determining what potential participants may want or need to know.
Interview:	A one on one process in which representatives of the target audience are asked a series of questions pertaining to program preference or current level of knowledge.
Focus group interview:	An interview conducted with several representatives of the target audience led by a trained and impartial facilitator. Participants are asked for their candid views and opinions.

Determining Perceived Needs (cont'd)

Key informant:	<p>A delegate from the target audience is chosen to represent the views of their peers. They are asked to talk with their colleagues, gather information on perceived learning needs and then report this information to the CHE planner or organizing team.</p>
Representative planning committee:	<p>The planning committee is carefully constructed of members who represent the target audience. For instance, for a program that is targeted to specialists, FP's, pharmacists or RN's- the planning committee would have a member of each profession included. This is one of the easier methods of needs assessment as it does not require data analysis or time consuming methods of data collection. However, it is also less scientific than some of the other methods and should be used in conjunction with a broader method.</p>
Meetings with colleagues:	<p>A formal or informal activity aimed at identifying educational needs based on a meeting between two or more people, excluding focus groups and other group techniques. The information obtained has to be set down in writing in order to avoid a subjective interpretation of the relative importance of each identified need.</p>
Evaluation of previous CHE activities:	<p>Questionnaires to evaluate previous CHE activities can be used to identify needs if the program is to be repeated. In particular, any comments can provide useful information for planners.</p>
Representative planning committee:	<p>Members of the target audience are included in all phases of the planning process and represent the views of their colleagues.</p>

Determining unperceived learning needs - “I don’t know what I don’t know!”

Unperceived needs are outside the awareness of the learner. They are also referred to as “objective needs”.

If you want to find out more about what a learner does not know or their level of competence or what they actually can demonstrate they know or methods of needs assessment are implied such as the following:

Knowledge test:	Learners are asked to respond to questions that test their knowledge. These can be multiple choice quizzes, a true/false quiz, a presentation of cases with questions attached or any variation thereof. An Audience Response System, such as I-Clickers can be used in large group settings.
Chart audit:	Chart audit is a method that systematically examines patient charts looking for patterns of care that can be appropriate or inappropriate (it is expensive and complex to perform properly).
Critical incident:	Information using this technique can be gathered by using a hypothetical case situation e.g. “What would you do if a patient presented with ...?” Or it can take place as a review of clinical records after an important event such as a missed diagnosis has occurred.
Duplicate prescription/health care diary:	Obviously this is a method that applies to physicians and is exactly as it implies. When a prescription is filled out, it is filled out in duplicate. In this way, over time, patterns in prescribing and their effectiveness can be determined. Health care professionals can also be asked to keep a practice diary for a few weeks before a program and after a program related to specific topics. For instance, family physicians registered for a course in Dermatology might be asked:” Keep a diary of every patient that comes in with a nail disorder over the next two months and record how you worked with this patient.”
Expert Advisory group:	Experts often know a great deal about the unperceived needs of other health professionals because they receive patients as a result of referrals. The referrals can give a lot of information on unperceived learning needs of the target audience. In addition, experts are asked a lot of questions by other health care professionals and these questions can point to learning needs quite effectively. It is recommended that this method be used in conjunction with other methods that are more objective.

Determining unperceived learning needs (cont'd)

Patient feedback:

Patients are asked to fill in surveys or respond to interviews about specific aspects of their care.

N.B.:

A combination of needs assessment methods is most likely to yield the best results in creating an excellent learning event.

How can unperceived learning needs be translated to perceived needs?

As stated earlier, if someone is not aware of a need to learn something new it is unlikely that they will. Most professionals want to be the best they can be and so providing information or feedback on gaps in knowledge, skills or practice is an invaluable tool for motivation to change or learn.

Non threatening techniques such as anonymous quizzes at the beginning of a presentation is an easy method that can be used using an Audience Response System such as I-clickers

Or

Presenting a case with lots of opportunities for participants to reflect on their own practice vs. what is recommended.

Or

Presenting a “disorienting dilemma” to the audience in which something that is commonly believed to be true is proven to be false (or vice a versa). For instance – did you know that studies have proven that homework is detrimental to children’s learning?

Attached on page nine are a variety of examples of needs assessment tools used by others – feel free to use and adapt them to best meet your purposes.

Contacts:

Should you wish any further assistance or clarification, please do not hesitate to contact one of our Educational Consultants:

Kate Hodgson Phone: 416.978.4957 E-mail: kd.hodgson@utoronto.ca

Jane Tipping Phone: 416.946.7904 E-mail: jane.tipping@utoronto.ca

Do you have examples, comments, information or references you would like to share and see added to CEPD Quick Tips? Please contact Jane Tipping or Kate Hodgson, Education Consultants with the Office of CEPD.

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Quick Tips: Examples of Needs Assessment Tools

To view an example please click on its title:

[Sample 1](#)

[Sample 2](#)

[Sample 3](#)

[Example of discrepancy analysis needs assesment questionnaire](#)