RCOT launched the continuing professional development (CPD) short course ‘Managing and supporting people with dementia related visual impairment’ in May 2018, coinciding with Dementia Awareness Week in England and Wales. This caught my eye as a potentially useful piece of CPD, since I currently work in memory services with older adults with dementia.

When I saw it was made up of three components – individual pre-session work, a facilitated group session, and evaluation and reflection – I initially wondered if I would be able to find a group running it, or if the team I work with would have time, or whether finding a group was beyond me at this point in my career, having qualified only in January, with my growing but limited networks.

However, the course provides materials and notes to help someone from the group facilitate the session, so I thought I would give it a go.

I have previously undertaken some CPD activities related to dementia, including visual impairments, out of personal interest and in preparation for applying for and starting my job.

Facilitating other people’s learning is something I wish to gain more experience of and is part of my CPD plan, so once I had completed the first component of the course, I felt that it was a good opportunity for me to put myself out there to facilitate the group session.

The idea for facilitating a CPD session with students from Leeds Beckett was born.

A partnership with Leeds Beckett Occupational Therapy Society

Current MSc second year students at Leeds Beckett University had founded the Occupational Therapy Society last year.

I was already in contact with a couple of the committee members through social media and contacted Nicky Phillips, events manager, who was a great help throughout with organising the CPD event.

We agreed to block a whole afternoon in a computer classroom. The students had a lot on their timetables with placements, research, and taught sessions, so allocating time and facilities to do the individual preparation work and then going straight into the other two components seemed a good idea.

Knowledge and experience gained from the course

The enthusiasm of the students was fantastic. Sixteen students joined me for the session, on a Friday afternoon, and the engagement and friendly but productive atmosphere made the experience really enjoyable and gave me a useful introduction to facilitating such learning.

The group component involved discussion of the learning from the individual pre-session work, and then we split into groups to look at how occupational therapists can support those living with dementia-related visual impairments.

After feeding this back to each other, we looked at integrated services and how we can work with other services, both locally and nationally.

I found this useful for my own learning too, looking at local professionals and third sector organisations that I could link with to support my service users.

The course content also linked nicely with work the first year students had been doing on dementia, and the second year module on occupational justice. One thing we considered was how occupational therapists can influence on micro, meso, and macro levels, and not to forget the bigger picture with our role in advocacy, lobbying, consultations, and education, for example.

The RCOT learning materials gave a helpful structure to the afternoon. I was also able to add information, images and case studies from my own experience, and decide how to organise the group working together.

The third component of the CPD short course includes reflecting on the key learning points, and all of us liked how ‘tidy’ the course was, with the workbook, links to the materials, and easy way to get evidence for our CPD records.

In terms of completing the RCOT CPD short course, the students and I found the variety of learning materials, including articles, videos and discussion, good.

It was interesting to learn about rarer types of dementia, some of the visual impairments experienced, and the narratives of those living with these. It also bought home an important point to remember – that dementia is not just about memory loss, or something that happens only to older adults.
Our discussion around issues for younger adults, such as work, driving, childcare, and lack of knowledge among professionals, got people thinking.

One of the student participant’s comments echoes my own thoughts. ‘The course was a great opportunity for me to learn more about this specialist topic in a very accessible and engaging format,’ says Nichole Yam. ‘It was short enough to fit into our busy schedules, but in-depth enough that we felt we could take away valuable learning points for future practice.

‘In particular, it was useful to learn about the importance of distinguishing between visuospatial difficulties and other conditions with similar presentation, which could have significant implications in supporting people with dementia.

‘The multi-media involvement, or immersive videos, was also useful in helping us understand the lived experiences of the conditions. I also appreciated the facilitated group discussion, which helped synthesise and apply the learning.’

Emily Suffield adds: ‘The CPD dementia short course was a great experience, the sources used varied from articles to videos to suit different learning styles, with an interactive element. It was really interesting to hear about some of the lesser known types of dementia and I would recommend others to take part.’

Dr Stephanie Tempest, RCOT professional development manager says of Ellen’s experience: ‘I’m delighted to hear of Ellen’s successful learning experience using the new pilot CPD short course.

‘The RCOT professional development team collaborated with RCOT member Dr Anne McIntyre and the “Seeing What They See” research team. I think it’s great that members can access contemporary, evidence based learning directly from experts in the field.

‘It also provided the research team with an innovative way to disseminate their outputs to a broader audience. We’ve had such positive feedback that we are launching a new partnership next year so that we can work with other expert RCOT members, to develop more accessible learning resources, including CPD short courses, across all four Pillars of Practice, as we continue to support all RCOT members with their CPD and lifelong learning.’

Seize these opportunities

I would not have imagined I would be leading a workshop at this stage in my occupational therapy career. The RCOT CPD short course was a great opportunity for me to further my knowledge, but also my skills and practice in facilitating learning.

I would highly recommend it. Working in partnership with the Leeds Beckett OT Society also made this possible, and I would also like to thank the students for their engagement and the society – particularly Nicky – for their help in making it happen.

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