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Workplace learning in midwifery education in Flanders (Belgium)



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ABSTRACT

Workplace learning plays a crucial role in midwifery education. Twelve midwifery schools in Flanders (Belgium) implemented a new competency framework and aimed at implementing a more standardized and evidence-based method to learn and assess competencies, as well as to guide continuous competency development in practice. This paper describes the introduction of 'Embo's continuous workplace learning model', a holistic and competency-based method that integrates all workplace learning components. Available research evidence helps concluding the learning model is a feasible approach to organize workplace learning in such a way that continuous professional competency development is achieved.

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Context

Belgium is a small country with a complex administration. The latter influences midwifery practice and education. There is one federal Minister of Social Affairs and Health who is responsible for all Belgian qualified midwives in terms of legislation and budget and there are two Ministers of Higher Education, one in Flanders (the northern Dutch speaking Region) and one in Wallonia (the southern French speaking Region), responsible for midwifery education in their Region. These Ministers are bound by the European Directives, federal legislation and professional standards but they are autonomous as to how education is being organised. This leads to the unfortunate situation that midwifery is a three-year bachelor programme in Flanders and a four-year bachelor programme in Wallonia. For over two decades, Flemish Midwifery Associations have been asking for a four-year programme, by preference resulting in a masters level degree. This seems logical because all Belgian midwifery students are educated to work as independent midwives reflecting the same midwifery competencies.

Flanders has 12 midwifery schools within nine institutes for higher education. These midwifery schools have – as joint undertaking – developed a new competency framework. This framework was based on the European Directives (European

Parliament, 2007), the International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) Essential Competencies for Basic Midwifery Practice (International Confederation of Midwives, 2013a), the relevant Belgian professional legislation and professional competencies (Federal Government of Health, 2006), and the existing education profile (Flemish Education Council, 2008). In view of this state-of-the-art competency framework, behavioural indicators and competency components (knowledge, skills and attitudes) were defined for each competency. This resulted in the design of a standardised and validated midwifery education profile (Flemish Education Council, 2014) building on additional ICM documents: Global Standards for Midwifery Education and Companion Guidelines (International Confederation of Midwives, 2013b), Curriculum Mapping Tool (International Confederation of Midwives, 2013c), and Standard Equipment List for Competency-Based Skills Training (International Confederation of Midwives, 2012). This new education profile challenged the available curricula, and especially stressed the need to reconsider workplace learning as an integral part of the midwifery training, as recommended in the European Directives.

Background

Worldwide, workplace learning plays a crucial role in midwifery education. Midwifery workplaces continue to be critical learning environments in which knowledge, skills and attitudes

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are acquired within a real-life professional context. To benefit from workplace learning, learners must take an active part in their own education by setting goals and monitor their progress towards these goals (Spencer, 2010). This calls for self-regulated learning skills and the ability to learn effectively from experience. The latter are also critical skills in view of a lifelong process of midwifery competency development. Supporting this continuous process sounds ideal, but workplaces are complex environments often resulting in discontinuous learning processes. To realise its potential, midwifery educators reconceptualised workplace learning within midwifery practice, resulting in the adoption of 'Embo's workplace learning model'.

This reconceptualisation was discussed in connection to the development of the new competency framework. Heads of Midwifery departments questioned how the newly defined midwifery competencies could be trained and assessed in such a way that continuous workplace learning in midwifery education could be established. They also wanted to put an end to related differences in evaluation instruments and different assessment criteria. In fact, they aimed at implementing a more uniform and evidence-based method to train and assess midwifery competencies and to guide competency development in Flanders. They felt strongly that a consistent workplace learning strategy would optimise the overall quality of midwifery education and consequently also the quality of perinatal care provided by future midwives. Heads of the midwifery departments committed themselves to implement 'Embo's workplace learning model' in their programme. This integrated and holistic competency-based workplace learning model aims at supporting self-regulated and continuous competency development at the workplace. The model was designed by Mieke Embo, head of the midwifery department at the University College Arteveldehogeschool Ghent (Belgium) during a doctoral research project at the university of Maastricht (The Netherlands): 'Integrating workplace learning, assessment and supervision in healthcare education' (Embo, 2015).

Description of the content of the model and how it is implemented

This continuous workplace learning model was described in Embo et al. (2015a) (Fig. 1). The model shows that focusing on self-regulated and continuous competency development during a workplace learning programme is effective when (1) different components of workplace learning are integrated, (2) continuous workplace learning and assessment are described in six recurrent steps, and (3) stakeholders are encouraged to collaborate along the lines of the same integrated learning and assessment instrument. Integration, continuity and collaboration are the cornerstones of this holistic and competency-based workplace learning model.

The first cornerstone, **integration**, refers to the integration of components and processes in one continuous workplace learning model. The integration of components is intended to better understand the complex phenomenon of workplace learning. The key components are: workplace learning theory, competency framework, curriculum structure, stakeholders, instrument, processes, educational conditions, and lifelong educational continuum. The integration of processes aims to optimise the effectiveness of the different educational processes. The model integrates (1) learning (reflection and feedback on performances and competency development), (2) assessment (self-, formative and summative) and (3) supervision (observer of performances, learning guide of competency development) in a competency framework to support self-regulated learning before graduation and to teach learners how to meet the expectations of continuous professional development.

The second cornerstone, **continuity**, is created by designing the workplace learning processes in six recurring steps: (1) competency selection; (2) formulating learning goals; (3) self-monitoring of performance; (4) self-assessing competency development; (5) summative assessment of individual competencies and (6) summative assessment of global professional competence. Importantly, this model differentiates between the concept of 'midwifery competency' (a combination of knowledge, professional

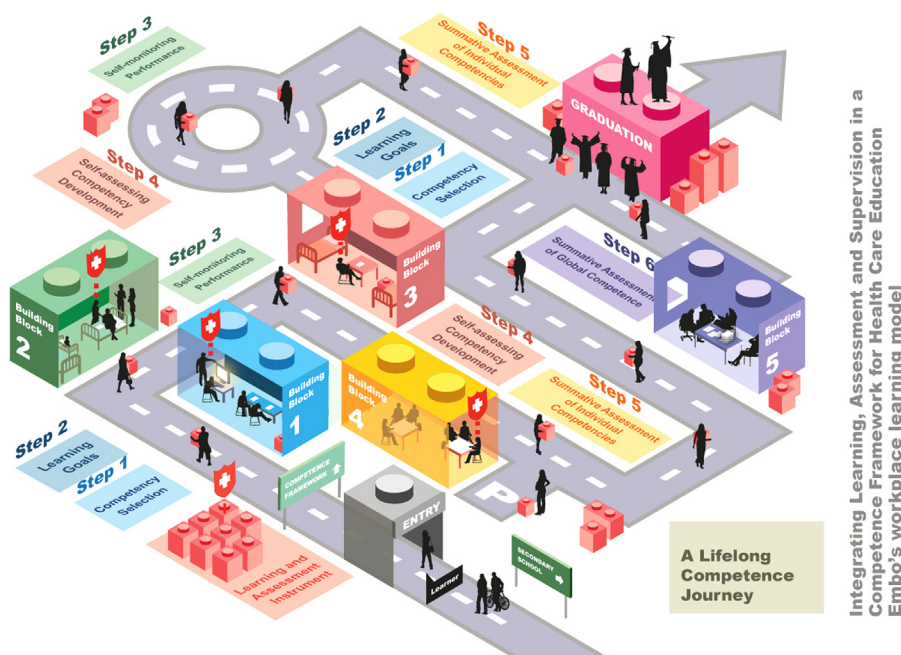


Fig. 1. Embo's continuous workplace learning model.

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