'I would take more students but …': Student Supervision Strategies

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Short Report

Introduction

How many times would fieldwork coordinators in tertiary institutions hear the phrase 'I would take more students but ...' when approaching clinicians to take students? Many therapists would like to take students but may feel constrained in doing so by a range of factors, such as limited resources, restricted time, their level of expertise and the emotional capability required to provide support to each student (Tompson and Proctor 1990).

The authors of this paper work in different settings: one full time in a small acute district hospital and the other part time in a rehabilitation hospital. In both settings, students are seen as valuable members of the team despite limited resources. To ensure that the placements meet the needs of all the parties concerned, a variety of strategies has been developed and adapted to streamline the placements and alleviate some of these barriers. This report describes the strategies that the authors have found most suitable for their own and their students' needs.

The strategies have been grouped into four broad categories: self-directed learning, peer learning, structural strategies and project strategies. Each of these has further subsets of activities (see Table 1). These particular techniques are not unique to the present hospitals and supervisors and most of these options will not be new to experienced fieldwork supervisors. However, as a combination, these options represent an eclectic approach to the management of students that has been refined and evaluated, by the authors and past students, over a number of years.

Table 1. Fieldwork strategies

Self-directed learning	Peer learning	Structural strategies	Project strategies
Specific learning objectives	Multiple student placements	Pre-placement information	Quality assurance projects
Student learning contracts	Peer projects	Shared student placements – With another occupational therapy area – With a non-clinical area	Student facilitated patient groups
Student-generated tutorials	Peer teaching		
Student orientation folders		Use of staff counsellor	

Strategies of self-directed learning

Self-directed learning has been shown to be more meaningful in student learning and is a current trend in undergraduate education (Gaiptman and Anthony 1989, Heath 1996). The four strategies in this category are specific learning objectives, learning contracts, student-generated tutorials and orientation folders.

Specific learning objectives

Specific learning objectives for student placements are well documented as an educational tool (McAllister et al 1997). The use of objectives is not new, but continues to be quite useful for most students. The pre-set objectives clearly detail exactly what is required of the students from both the university and the clinical supervisor. Christie et al (1985a) identified that clear student expectations are important, allowing students to progress their learning themselves within guidelines. As an evaluation tool, the authors also use objective attainment, to keep track of student progress or lack thereof during the placement.

Learning contracts

A learning contract is a document that allows the student to direct his or her own specific learning needs and has been described as valuable in the fieldwork setting (Gaiptman and Anthony 1989, Molineux 1999). By using a self-determined learning contract, students have to outline not only their goals but also how they will achieve them and what evidence they will produce to demonstrate this and to set themselves a realistic time frame. The supervisor can then become an adviser and a resource to facilitate the student's goals, without being the driving force. Along with the objectives, the contract is reviewed by the supervisor and the student at their weekly supervisory meeting. The authors and their students have found contracts to be a successful learning tool.

Student-generated tutorials

The purpose of tutorials on placement is to ensure that specific knowledge parameters are covered which are relevant to the clinical area, enhancing the integration of theory and practical knowledge. Student knowledge is expanded by

maximising the opportunities for relevant student learning and knowledge can also be imparted to a group of students at one time, which reduces individual student/supervisor time.

Over long placements, supervisors provide standardised tutorials initially. During the remaining weeks, each student then chooses, prepares and runs a tutorial of his or her choice, which is presented to the other students and occupational therapy staff. Students gain valuable experience in the preparation and setting up of such a programme. The topics do not have to be related to the current clinical placement, but should have some clinical relevance. The authors have found that this works best with four or more students, providing a range of supervisor-generated and student-generated tutorials. This programme has been well received by both students and supervisors, demonstrating a range of interesting topics and fresh perspectives.

Orientation folders

Orientation folders are self-explanatory, in that they contain information relevant to students over the duration of the placement. In both settings, the folders are living documents in that they were first put together by students and have subsequently had relevant information added to them by other students. This process results in useful resource folders that are continually being reviewed, for appropriateness and content.

Peer learning strategies

The second broad category is peer learning. Molineux (1999) reported having students in groups to be a positive experience, which resulted in 'greater flexibility in designing learning opportunities' (p129). He also identified that students on fieldwork placements in groups learnt from one another, without relying on the therapist alone (Molineux 1999). The strategies within this category are multiple student placements and the opportunity to teach other students.

Multiple students

It is current practice in both settings to take two or more students at a time on fieldwork placements. Although it seems difficult to take more than one student, the experience has been that two or more students can actually be more time efficient. The allocation of more than one student per supervisor has also been identified as positive in allied health literature (Tiberius and Gaiptman 1985, Martin and Edwards 1998). The advantages that have been found in both settings include student peer support and peer problem solving, which have occurred with minimal supervisor involvement. Set projects and running groups can be approached with more confidence by students when there is more than one person to share the work. As many occupational therapists work in a team setting, learning to work as part of a team is an important skill which working closely with a student peer resembles. Challenges can occur when the personalities or abilities of the students clash. One solution that has been found is to ensure that each student has a designated activity of his or her own, as well as shared projects.

Opportunities to teach other students

In both settings, the students are given the opportunity to teach their peers, either from their own or other years. These times have been reported by students as being positive for both the teaching and the learning student and help to develop the clinical reasoning skills of both. The advantage for the teaching student is that it allows newly acquired skills and knowledge to be taught to another, reinforcing his or her own learning and reasoning. The advantage for the learning student is that being taught by a peer allows the student to focus on the learning, without fear of asking basic questions or being in an assessment situation.

Structural strategies

The third broad category is structural strategies. These strategies are pre-placement information, placements that are shared between sites, supervisors or non-clinical departments and the use of a staff counsellor.

Pre-placement information

Students can often be quite anxious prior to a placement and this can be reduced when they receive relevant information preceding their arrival (Gilbert and Strong 1997). The information packs contain essential knowledge, such as maps, transport access, hours of work, uniform expectations and suggested pre-reading. The packs are sent to the students prior to their placement and thus orientation on arrival can concentrate more on essential clinical issues. In the present settings, the pre-placement packs were written by students, based on their own needs prior to the placement, and presented in a user-friendly style of font and graphics. Students have given positive feedback about pre-placement information and have reported feeling less anxious about placement expectations.

Shared placements

Traditionally, it has not been easy for part-time therapists to take students. One alternative is to share student supervision, allowing these therapists to participate in fieldwork placements. In the present settings, students have participated in placements with two supervisors on one site, two supervisors on different sites and sharing student supervision with a non-clinical department.

Sharing students with another clinical area on two sites allows therapists who may work in a sole, part-time position to take students, for example sharing a part-time community placement with a larger hospital department. Shared student supervision with a non-clinical department can also be valuable. In one setting, senior students in pairs have the opportunity to complete project placements with a health promotion unit, co-located with the hospital. The students gain valuable project experience and health promotion gains the benefit of senior students to work on projects that are occupational therapy related, such as falls prevention. The feedback from students, supervisors and health promotion has been extremely positive over the 2 years that this has been in place.

Overall, shared placements have been found to be most

suitable for senior students because they are encouraged to be more independent. In all settings, it is important that both supervisors collaborate regularly in order to ensure that the students are only responsible to one supervisor for direction and evaluation, so that they are not torn between differing attitudes and expectations.

Staff counsellor

Some students may experience stress whilst on placement (Yuen 1990). The causes may include the exacerbation of life issues, further complicated by being on placement. For others, the process of being on placement itself may be quite stressful owing to past experiences or the nature of the placement. Within the rehabilitation setting, it is the practice for all students to meet with the staff counsellor once a week for support, with the length of time determined by the student. The benefits for the student include having the opportunity to debrief with an independent person who is not involved in the final assessment. The students have indicated that this initiative is appreciated.

Project strategies

The fourth broad category is project strategies or programmes. These projects or programmes are completed or run by the students and help the department as well as meeting the specific learning objectives for students.

Quality assurance projects

The practice in both settings is to offer the students the opportunity to participate in quality activities. The students benefit from having the experience of working on quality assurance projects and understanding their relevance. This provides them with valuable knowledge for future job interviews and graduate employment.

Student-facilitated patient groups

In both settings, the students are given the opportunity to organise and run various regular patient groups. Learning how to facilitate these groups provides valuable experience and practical skills for students, which is also useful for future employment prospects. The supervisors also find that a fresh approach to such activities benefits patients and staff alike.

Conclusion

Student fieldwork placements are critical for the integration of theory into practice and a positive fieldwork experience benefits both the student and the supervisor. While it is an important and rewarding responsibility of the occupational therapy profession to take students, it is recognised that to do so can be very time consuming especially with limited resources (Tompson and Proctor 1990). By using some or all of the strategies discussed, student self-directed learning is encouraged, which relieves some direct supervision and allows various learning opportunities to be explored. It has been found that this allows supervisors valuable time and emotional space to attend to the myriad of other duties entailed in their jobs. This does not detract from the provision of a quality experience for students, who are seen as important members of the departments.

If supervisors perceive the experience of student supervision as positive and rewarding for them, then it is likely that student placements will continue to be offered. Ultimately, it is felt that this experience is reflected in the attitude and calibre of the occupational therapists entering the workforce and can have an impact on future employment preferences (Christie et al 1985b). Graduate therapists who experienced enriching placements and felt valued may be more willing to take on students themselves.

It is the authors' experience that the strategies described in this article, although not unique to their departments, are powerful tools when used as a whole. They have been extremely worthwhile in empowering supervisors in their roles and assist greatly in the alleviation of 'I would take more students but ...'

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