

## Feature Article

# Briefing and debriefing of student fieldwork experiences: Exploring concerns and reflecting on practice

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*This paper describes a briefing and debriefing process used with occupational therapy students. Without a briefing and debriefing component of fieldwork experiences, there is a potential for fieldwork not to be fully integrated into the curriculum. An example of one briefing activity and one debriefing activity are presented. The briefing activity was designed to explore the perceptions and concerns of students at each stage of the course about imminent fieldwork placements. The debriefing activity investigated second-year student perspectives about valued characteristics of supervisors and students. Written data generated during each activity were analysed using qualitative strategies. Specific concerns for students related to each year of the occupational therapy course were identified. Positive and negative student reflections about their fieldwork supervision were expressed. The value of the fieldwork briefing and debriefing process to enhance student learning is discussed.*

**KEY WORDS** *briefing, debriefing, fieldwork, learning, reflection.*

## INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork has long been recognised as a fundamental component of student learning in occupational therapy education (Cohn, 1989; Etcheverry & Baptiste, 1987). In order to optimise the fieldwork learning experience at all stages of the occupational therapy curriculum, it is important to explore the way that students process their practical learning and how they incorporate their experiences into their future attitudes and skills in practice. An organised briefing and debriefing programme has the potential to achieve this through a structured

review of clinical interactions and events during fieldwork. Using briefing and debriefing, any conflicts between theory and observed practice can be discussed (Horsfall, 1990).

This paper presents an example of one briefing and one debriefing activity. Its purpose was to explore and describe the issues that arose from these activities and their relationship to student perceptions of their fieldwork experience. Valuable information about how to prepare students and their supervisors for fieldwork in order to overcome potential barriers to optimal learning in the clinical environment may be generated.

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## Briefing and debriefing defined

Briefing and debriefing are terms which have been traditionally used in a military context, but the same process is applied in many business and educational settings (Raths, 1987; Stolovitch, 1990) and following a critical incident (Jimmerson, 1988; Rubin, 1990). Briefing can be defined as orientating a person to an experience, which includes the instructions, goals and rules within which participants in the activity can achieve their goals (Pearson & Smith, 1986). Debriefing can be defined as a purposeful reflection which can be undertaken by an individual or group (Pearson & Smith). It is a process where group members can discuss and work through ideas, issues, feelings or concerns which are generated by individuals within the group (Horsfall, 1990). Debriefing is not regarded as therapy or counselling, or as a vehicle for a 'gripe' session, or just having a chat. In order to be an effective educational activity, debriefing needs to be based upon specific learning intentions and be a regular activity that is closely linked to experiential learning. Debriefing is based on the premise that there is a positive connection between exposure to a practical experience and the process of learning from the experience after it has occurred (Lederman, 1984).

## The educational purpose of briefing and debriefing

The value of briefing and debriefing for the development and awareness of clinical reasoning and reflective practice with occupational therapy students has been identified (Alsop & Ryan, 1996). Briefing and debriefing are closely linked. The purpose of briefing is to optimise student learning by addressing student expectations and feelings about new and unfamiliar experiences they are about to undertake. Occupational therapy students may have concerns and anxieties about the unknown aspects of impending fieldwork, and at the briefing stage any confused or inaccurate beliefs can be clarified. The importance of peer group support and the acknowledgement of feelings amongst the group can also be emphasised (Horsfall, 1990). More pragmatic aspects of fieldwork can also be addressed through briefing, for instance, orientation to fieldwork, clarification of the specific objectives to be achieved, a broad overview of what might take place, prior practice of the skills required, and knowledge of available resources (Best & Rose, 1996). Briefing therefore has

value in reducing student stress and anxiety and increasing their confidence when faced with uncertain fieldwork demands (Alvani, 1995; White & Ewan, 1991).

The purpose of the debriefing stage is to optimise learning by reviewing the fieldwork experience and evaluating how successfully objectives have been achieved (White & Ewan, 1991). Fieldwork may have been a demanding experience; therefore, debriefing is an important tool to allow students to emotionally and practically disengage from their fieldwork experience and make the transition back to the academic setting (Horsfall, 1990). Debriefing is used: (i) to step back, critique and reflect on experiences; (ii) to ventilate feelings about experiences; (iii) to develop appropriate ways of communicating issues of personal importance; (iv) to assist students develop skills in peer support and acknowledge different viewpoints; (v) to develop new strategies as a result of experience; (vi) to review personal progress against objectives for the experience; (vii) to incorporate newly learned information into a personal conceptual system; and (viii) to evaluate experience and move on (Best & Rose, 1996; Horsfall, 1990; Pearson & Smith, 1986; Raths, 1987).

Briefing and debriefing are particularly significant for learning from fieldwork experiences, as fieldwork is believed to have an influence on the professional development of occupational therapy students (Christie, Joyce & Moeller, 1985; Cohn, 1989; Hummell, 1997; Mitchell & Kampfe, 1993). As fieldwork is a powerful form of experiential learning, subjective processes will also be impacting on student learning, such as anxiety, confidence or enjoyment of clinical settings. Students are also exposed to a variety of interpersonal challenges with clients, other health professionals and their supervisors, many of which are unpredictable and have the potential to affect fieldwork learning (Horsfall, 1990; Hummell). Given that these processes are highly individual and subjectively experienced, a debriefing process is essential in articulating how students are perceiving and interpreting their fieldwork experiences and what they are learning from them.

The sharing of fieldwork experiences among students can encourage students to appraise themselves and confront confusing clinical issues that can emerge in a complex health care context (Best & Rose, 1996). Nursing students have reported that participation in debriefing sessions was a positive experience resulting in their increased involvement in subsequent fieldwork placements, greater awareness of relevant issues, better understanding of clients'

conditions and practitioners' interventions, and a boost in their confidence to apply knowledge and skills (Davies, 1995; Shields, 1995).

## Briefing and debriefing in practice

At the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, specialised briefing and debriefing sessions are time-tabled for each stage of the course, to ensure that all student fieldwork experiences can be reflected upon and integrated fully into the curriculum. The curriculum has a problem-based learning design, where learning is presented in the context of case studies or scenarios, students select their own learning objectives to progress through their learning tasks, and co-operative learning takes place within small groups (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Jacobs & Lyons, 1992; Sadlo, Piper & Agnew, 1994). In keeping with this philosophy, fieldwork is integrated into the academic structure of the course (Jacobs, 1992). Therefore, students undertake an academic learning unit in a specified practice area that is followed immediately by a clinical placement in a matched practice area. The pattern of fieldwork placements consequently involves several 3–4 week placements, especially in the second and third years of the course. This fieldwork pattern makes it particularly important for students to reflect on their experiences in a way that best promotes their professional development. Briefing sessions are scheduled at the beginning of each defined group of fieldwork experiences for each year of students. Debriefing sessions for each year of students follow each fieldwork experience that students undertake.

As part of the problem-based learning strategy, briefing sessions allow students to set their learning objectives for fieldwork. Debriefing sessions are used for students to work through the implications of their personal fieldwork scenarios as a trigger to their learning in the same way that case scenarios are generally used during classroom teaching (Alvani, 1995). Types of debriefing activities range from conventional and highly structured to more unstructured sessions, and from those aimed simply at demonstrating that participants have met set objectives appropriately to those requiring interpretative reflection with a leader to clarify issues related to the experience (Lederman, 1984; McAllister, 1995; Rath, 1987). Debriefing activities used at the University of Newcastle have a range of formats from predominantly structured, large group activities used in the earlier years of the course, to a

more interpretative process with smaller groups of second, third and fourth year students. Generally, the content of debriefing sessions involves the following broad questions: (i) What happened? (ii) How did the participants feel during their experience? (iii) What does it mean? (Pearson & Smith, 1986).

The literature concerned with educational applications of briefing and debriefing is predominantly located in the fields of education and nursing. Little information exists about the reflections of Australian occupational therapy students on their preparations for fieldwork or their experiences of fieldwork, using briefing and debriefing in the university context. Therefore, by presenting the findings from one briefing activity and one debriefing activity, this paper aimed to explore how occupational therapy students approach their fieldwork placements and how they have perceived their fieldwork experiences.

## METHOD

Data relating to issues arising from one example of a briefing session activity and one example of a debriefing activity were collected and analysed. Key themes from each activity were identified that characterised the way that participants have experienced and attached meanings to either the anticipation of, or the reflection upon, their fieldwork placements.

### Data collection

#### *Briefing activity*

This activity was adapted for use by occupational therapy students from a problem-solving game developed by Sivan (1992). The game takes the form of a board game (available from the author), which aims to facilitate the process of solving problems and alleviating concerns through the use of critical thinking as a group. Subjects were first, second, third and fourth year students, who participated in this briefing activity within their year groups prior to the fieldwork placements undertaken during that year.

The game involved each year group of students raising perceived problems presented by the anticipation of a fieldwork placement, discussing them, suggesting solutions and evaluating their own judgement as well as the solutions suggested by their peers. Students participated in small groups of six to eight participants, followed by a

broader discussion within the whole year group. Each student was asked to anonymously write down a concern or question that they anticipated relating to their fieldwork placement. These questions were folded up and placed together. Each member of the group, in turn, took one of the questions at random, and attempted to provide a plausible answer or solution. The rest of the group then voted on whether they agreed or disagreed with the answer given. The number of people in the group who agreed with the suggestion offered determined individual moves on the board. If anyone voted to disagree with the solution, they had to offer an alternative, which was also voted upon, allowing that person a move on the board.

At the end of the session, each group fed back to the larger group a summary of their concerns. A discussion about the range of concerns expressed ensued and potential solutions were brainstormed within the whole group. For this study, anonymous copies of the questions and concerns posed were collected for analysis with the students' consent.

### *Debriefing activity*

The debriefing activity data emerged from a group discussion involving 31 second-year students following their third fieldwork placement of that year. The session was structured using the nominal group technique (Delbecq & Van de Van, 1971), and participants were divided into four groups of between seven and nine students, to facilitate discussion. The group used the nominal group technique to increase group creativity in problem solving, and to maximise the generation of ideas. As a research tool this technique allowed the participants to create their own categories about the topic of concern, rather than having the categories decided upon by an external researcher. Each group was given one of four questions to consider: 'What are the characteristics which are highly valued in a supervisor?', 'What are the characteristics that are least valued in a supervisor?', 'What are the characteristics of a student which are perceived to be most valued?', and 'What are the characteristics of a student which are perceived to be of least value?' Each group sat in a circle and the group members were asked to write down two responses to their group's question on a piece of paper, and pass it on to the person next to them in a clockwise direction. After receiving a list of answers from the participant on one side of them, they were asked to write down two more answers to the question that were not related to

those already on the paper or similar to the answers they had previously written. The paper was then passed to the person seated on the other side of them. This process was continued until each group had exhausted any further options. Each group was then asked to discuss their answers to the question posed using the answers generated on their lists, and come to a consensus by ranking the five most important answers that were generated by the group. The rankings from each group arising from each of the questions posed formed the data collected for this study.

### **Data analysis**

As the goal of this study was to describe and understand more about the students' perspective of anticipating or reflecting on their fieldwork experiences, a qualitative strategy was most appropriate in order to gather in depth, participant-generated data (Gliner, 1994; Krefting, 1991). Data generated from each year of students participating in the briefing game were grouped into beginning students (first years), mid-course students (second and third years) and final year students (fourth years) for analysis. Data from 35 first year, 30 second year, 28 third year and 33 fourth year student cohorts ( $n = 126$ ) were included in the analysis. Written questions and concerns were separated by student year and transcribed verbatim. Responses were analysed by the researcher and grouped by the categories and recurrent themes that emerged from the data using a method described by Sandelowski (1995). Themes were reviewed and refined by two academic staff and a clinician during the analysis.

Data collected from the debriefing activity were already synthesised by the students themselves through the nominal group technique. The results presented are the themes that the students ranked as most significant.

### **Trustworthiness**

The transferability of the findings has been enhanced by use of the entire student cohort for the briefing activity and the whole second year group for the debriefing activity, thus reducing any sampling errors that may affect the findings. Findings can therefore be viewed as typical of the group (Krefting, 1991). The use of written data generated by participants enhanced the descriptive validity of the findings, and the meanings of the data were provided by the participants during the process, thus ensuring a participant

perspective (Maxwell, 1992). The consistency of the data collection method for the briefing activity for a year-long period also reduces the possibility of bias related to isolated fieldwork experiences. Possible internal errors in the data where students may have given what they thought were desired responses rather than their true response were minimised by the classroom discussion that followed each briefing and debriefing exercise. Discussion was facilitated to confirm and explore the data provided by the student participants so that any inconsistencies indicative of a false response would be detected (Krefting, 1991).

The use of mixed methods in data collection, the open discussion process during sessions, the use of staff coleaders in the briefing and debriefing sessions, the peer discussion between staff that followed each session and consultation with the year co-ordinators during the analysis of the data, all assisted in enhancing the trustworthiness of the data (Abbott-Chapman, 1993; Krefting, 1991).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Briefing activity

#### *First year students*

The immediate concern for first year students was that they did not know what the expectations of them as students would be on fieldwork. Students expressed conflicts about their own perceptions of these expectations; for instance, whether they should have a passive role or be more active by asking: 'How do I overcome feeling silly about asking questions that may appear basic but are of interest to me?' They appeared to be very unsure of their role as a student during fieldwork. Many students expressed their doubts about their level of knowledge to undertake a fieldwork placement: 'Will I be expected to have a sound knowledge of OT [occupational therapy] with the ability to make decisions? ... I feel like I know absolutely nothing.' Students expressed feelings of powerlessness in planning for their first fieldwork placement as they had no way of measuring their level of competency prior to their placement.

First year students also had crises of confidence about relating to clients. Students anticipated many negative scenarios that they felt they might not be able to deal with appropriately: 'How do I hide my embarrassment about having to observe a shower assessment?' 'What do you do if a patient will not co-operate and you are having great

difficulties?' They also expressed a lack of confidence about their ability to cope with anticipated client behaviours. This reflected their lack of experience and their dependence on public perceptions and stereotypes about different client groups, especially in mental health practice: 'What if I can't really handle mentally ill patients and get upset by them?' Students were fearful about their own reactions to situations that they felt would overwhelm them, such as handling emotionally demanding interactions with clients. They also appeared anxious to like the work to which they would be exposed during fieldwork.

Students were concerned about their anticipated relationships with their supervisors. They were fully aware that they would be assessed by their supervisors and were reluctant to face the possibility of receiving any criticism from their supervisor. Many students did not foresee that any criticism would be constructive or positive, and many seemed to be unaware of the relationship between clinical supervisors and the university. Students also felt that they would not have the opportunity to develop a good relationship with their supervisor, because of the limited time available during the placement and the pressure for them to perform well: 'What will I do if I don't get on with my supervisor and I have to put up with him/her for two weeks?' Students were unsure of the level of supervision that they could expect and how independent they would need to be: 'Will I be expected to work with clients alone and un-introduced?'

Students were understandably concerned about the assessment process and what it would be like to be evaluated. Many of them expressed fears about getting a negative assessment and not being able to pass the placement. This was connected with fears about not being able to meet the expectations supervisors might have of them, or finding themselves overwhelmed by circumstances: 'Will I have to look at too many injuries such as amputations and will it give an unfavourable opinion if I withdraw from too many of these activities?'

Practical concerns ranged across the following items: travel to the placement, types of clients to be expected, the types of ancillary tasks that students would be asked to do, money concerns, what to wear, and accommodation needs: 'Will I work in different areas of OT or just one area?' 'Are we expected to clean up the mess made by clients?' 'Finding my way around a foreign place.' 'What will we actually do?'

Finally, students were concerned that their role as a student might limit the degree to which their placement experiences could be meaningful and purposeful to them.

They had high expectations of the placement in terms of a feeling of personal reward. This could be related to the amount of client contact they might experience; both too little and too much client contact was a concern for students: 'What if there aren't enough activities to occupy me during the placement — will staff get sick of students?'

### *Mid-course students*

The issue of anticipating supervisor expectations remained a key feature of the concerns which students have in approaching fieldwork at this stage of the course. However, the concerns were more specific about what type of knowledge was expected, for instance — theoretical frameworks and knowledge to underpin specific placement specialities. Students were aware that more was expected of them as they prepared for further placements in the course, but were unsure about how much more they needed to have extended their skills and ability to take on responsibility. There were some concerns about being able to meet their own goals, the objectives of their learning contracts and the expectations of their supervisors, and the degree to which they would need to be autonomous: 'Will I be able to complete all the tasks required of me to the standards set by my supervisor?' 'Will I be asked to do something that I'm not confident with?' Many concerns were expressed about how the placement would fit into the academic programme, and how assignment requirements would be met during placements.

Students still anticipated the potential impact of a negative relationship with their supervisor, or other members of staff, on their placement experience. Practical concerns about accommodation and travel also dominated the discussion, as well as having to adjust to a different lifestyle while away on placement. The need to plan what work to take with them during the placement and access to library facilities to continue working on assignments while they were away were also raised.

### *Final year students*

Students were very aware that they were expected to perform at a graduate level by the completion of their placement and were concerned about their capacity to develop the accompanying level of responsibility for client intervention, and to move away from the protection of a purely student role. 'I'm a little apprehensive that I'll soon be a real accountable OT, not just someone who can say, "oh, I'm only a student" ... I'm concerned that within

eight weeks I may have to be actually responsible for something.'

For University of Newcastle students, the final year placement was the longest placement of the course. Therefore, many students were unsure about their ability to adapt to a longer placement, and how this would be different to placements they had already experienced. As a final year placement, it was scheduled at the culmination of a great deal of academic activity with final assignments still to be completed, and some students were expressing concerns about feeling unmotivated about going on their placements: 'How can you stay and look interested for the whole of the eight weeks of practical?' As the final year placement is an elective choice, some students had selected a practice area that they had previously experienced at an earlier time of the course, and they expressed doubts about the quality of their previous learning and whether they knew enough to meet expectations during their final year placement: 'My placement will be all neuro and I can't remember neuro stuff.'

Final year students had their research project assignment tasks to attend to in addition to their fieldwork. The pressure of needing to perform well on placement and to continue working on their research interests was a concern for many students: 'How do you draw the line between prac and study?' 'How do I prevent last minute panic about work to be done for research work?' Practical issues, although common to all stages of the course, were particularly evident for final year students, because of the length of the placement. Students required greater financial resources to undertake a longer placement, yet were unable to maintain part-time employment in many cases because of the length of their time away, which was not a dominant concern for students at earlier stages of the course: 'How will I balance part-time work on placement, part-time work, boyfriend, gym and sleep?' 'Funds are low, but I need to travel by train every day to prac.'

Students had concerns based on their own high expectations of themselves for this placement. They were concerned about how confident they would be in a number of demanding clinical situations, such as communicating with people who are dying, and feeling positive about their own ability to be an occupational therapist. Self-assurance was a desirable quality for many students as they approached this placement: 'I am concerned about being expected to be as competent as a graduated therapist — knowing everything!' Supervisor expectation remained a nebulous issue for

final year students. Students expressed concerns that supervisors might expect too much of them, and there was an increased awareness of the crucial nature of the evaluation they would receive for this placement in relationship to their future career direction and graduation from the course: 'How do we approach, or what do we do, if our supervisor is unhelpful and you feel she is jeopardising your career?'

Unique to this group of students was a definite concern about the meaning of this placement for their future as an occupational therapy practitioner. Some students expressed doubts about whether they would like, or adequately cope with being in the position of taking responsibility as a practitioner during placement, and therefore whether or not they were suited to the profession. There were also general concerns about their ability to leave the security of a familiar university environment and their preparation to enter the workforce without the support of the university: 'How will I feel at the end of the prac — will I feel like I could be employed as an OT? 'How will I feel about finishing uni and going into the big wide world?' 'I don't know how I will cope with a proper/serious full time job.'

### Discussion

A summary of the findings is presented in Table 1. These findings illustrate specific student characteristics relating to different stages of the course. First year concerns appeared to be predominantly about facing an unknown situation and being unsure of their personal skills and what occupational therapy entails. Fleming, Gilbert, McKenna and Heath (1997) also found that while first year students generally looked forward to clinical work, a relatively large proportion felt uncertain about it. By the final year, students were not as concerned about the clinical realities of fieldwork, but expressed apprehension about meeting their own and the profession's expectations of them as neophyte practitioners. There is evidence that lack of confidence also remains an issue for new graduates (Hummell & Koelmeyer, 1999). However, common themes were repeated throughout the course, such as an underlying degree of self-doubt, the need for a good relationship with a supervisor, and an awareness of the importance of clear communication with supervisors. Students' perceived lack of confidence appears to feature strongly in their concerns when approaching fieldwork, at all levels. A degree of self-confidence is important in order to address other issues of concern such as maintaining a good relationship with the supervisor and communicating

**Table 1. Summary of student concerns expressed during briefing sessions**

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First year students
The unknown expectations of them as students (role, setting, knowledge)
Lack of knowledge of and confidence with clients
Concerns about their own ability to cope (reactions, powerlessness, fear, being evaluated, being overwhelmed)
Perceptions of the nature of occupational therapy work
Relationships with supervisor/s
Practical and logistic concerns
Need for meaningful activities as a student
Mid-course students (years 2 and 3)
Expectations of student knowledge
Extending levels of skills and responsibility
Specifics related to course organisation
Relationship with supervisor
Practical issues
Final year students
Achieving acceptable levels of responsibility
Maintaining enthusiasm for a long placement
Confidence about previous learning
Other academic demands
Practical issues
Meeting expectations of self and supervisor
Looming career concerns

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clearly. Conversely, over-confidence in the role of student is also inappropriate during fieldwork experience. This is an individual balance that cannot be easily defined for every fieldwork placement and every student-supervisor relationship. Facing an uncertain situation that involves an assessment of their performance is understandably of concern to most students. Christie *et al.* (1985) identified the need for supervisors to overcome a lack of confidence in students and to deal with it positively, to prevent negative consequences in the quality of student learning.

Relationships with supervisors were also of central concern to students, which underlines the views of Cohn (1989) about the importance of the student-supervisor relationship and its role in student learning. It can be anticipated that supervisors are also concerned about developing constructive relationships with their students (Jung & Tryssenaar, 1998). Student concerns about dealing with criticism from their supervisors (especially with

first year students) reflect a need for them to view the purpose of fieldwork supervision with a realistic and professional attitude. However, the ability of supervisors to give feedback constructively remains a pivotal issue in the development of student maturity in this area. Hummell (1997) found that students rated good interpersonal skills in communicating with students of highest importance in effective fieldwork supervision.

Concerns expressed by students relating to the constructive use of time during placements, high expectations by students of the placement in terms of personal reward and striking a satisfactory balance between challenge and autonomy in placement activities were important issues raised in the briefing sessions. By incorporating a similar briefing process into the clinical setting at the outset of a fieldwork placement, supervisors may ameliorate concerns that might remain unexpressed by students, and unappreciated by supervisors.

## Debriefing activity

Tables 2 and 3 show the results as the students presented them at the completion of their session. Second year

students were asked about their perceptions of the positive and negative qualities of students and supervisors during fieldwork placements. Valued qualities of supervisors included organisation, having understanding relationships with students, ability to communicate expectations effectively, encouragement of active participation by the student and being approachable. Valued qualities of students, as perceived by the students, were confidentiality, enthusiasm, responsibility, confidence and professionalism.

## Discussion

The most highly valued characteristics of supervisors identified by students in this study are consistent with the findings of Hummell (1997) and Christie *et al.* (1985). The responses from the participants were also remarkably consistent despite the groups having worked independently to identify student and supervisor qualities. For instance, the least valued characteristics of students and supervisors are virtually the antitheses of the most highly valued characteristics. The items which students valued most highly about their own performance are also of interest as all the items identified appear on student assessment instruments. Either there may be some consistency between what is

**Table 2. Summary of positive and negative ranked qualities of students perceived by second year students during debriefing sessions**

Ranking	Student qualities that are most valued ( $n = 8$ )	Student qualities that are least valued ( $n = 7$ )
1.	Practices confidentiality	Breaches confidentiality
2.	Enthusiasm	Poor communication
3.	Demonstrates responsibility	Unenthusiastic
4.	Confident to try new things	Difficulty relating to other professionals
5.	Behaves in a professional manner	Disinterest in placement activities

**Table 3. Summary of positive and negative ranked qualities of supervisors perceived by second year students during debriefing sessions**

Ranking	Supervisor qualities that are most valued ( $n = 9$ )	Supervisor qualities that are least valued ( $n = 7$ )
1.	Is well organised	Disorganised
2.	Has an understanding relationship with the student	Doesn't include student in therapy sessions only allows them to observe
3.	Identifies clear expectations of the student for the placement	No personal involvement with the student
4.	Allows the student to take an active role in placement activities	Doesn't introduce you to staff or clients
5.	Is able to communicate with the student e.g. is approachable, explains things adequately prior to doing them	Being pedantic/inflexible



valued by the curriculum objectives and what students value about themselves, or students may value these qualities simply because they are assessed.

There was no reference to specific occupational therapy skills or knowledge as valued qualities of either a student or supervisor. Interpersonal skills were a primary source of concern when anticipating fieldwork in the briefing sessions for students in all years of the course. The valued qualities of supervisors identified by students all required a level of interpersonal skill, and those least valued qualities indicated poor interpersonal skills. With respect to valued qualities student identified for themselves, interpersonal skills were still regarded very highly and students placed a great deal of value on their ability to present themselves well professionally. Unfortunately, the findings from this activity cannot confirm if the student values identified are truly their own values. It may be that the findings also indicate what students perceive their supervisors or the course curriculum value in students, or the assessment requirements of fieldwork.

The highly valued qualities of supervisors identified in the debriefing activity were also identified during the briefing activities as important for students when they were anticipating their placements. The least valued characteristics of supervisors paint a discouraging picture, especially as students during their fieldwork placement may have experienced these characteristics for them to be mentioned as part of the debriefing exercise. This demonstrates the need for debriefing in order to resolve any remaining negative experiences, which, as Christie *et al.* (1985) point out, may have negative consequences for students in their choice of future practice areas. Therefore, supervisors have an important role in creating a constructive fieldwork environment through good organisation, rapport with students, interpersonal skills, knowledge of the teaching learning process, articulating their expectations of students and understanding the individual needs of students for autonomy.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study was limited by the specific applications of the activities from which the data were collected and analysed. For instance, the focus on concerns intrinsic to the briefing game encouraged the expression of negative thoughts that may have precluded students reflecting on their

strengths, although the briefing game did require problem-solving strategies to be developed that would have included reflecting on positive qualities students had to bring to the situation. A broader research strategy is needed for a comprehensive evaluation of briefing and debriefing. The briefing activity was repeated over a period of a year with four cohorts of students, whereas the debriefing activity was undertaken at one point in time with only second year students. A more thorough analysis of the data collected from the briefing activity was possible, whereas the data from the debriefing activity had already been synthesised into broad categories by the participants, so further analysis and comparison with other data sources was limited. Therefore, the findings need to be interpreted given that a complete analysis of all debriefing activities applicable to different years of the course has not been presented.

The study also included only initial analyses as illustrations of the briefing and debriefing process; further in depth research is necessary to clarify many of the issues that emerged from these findings. For instance, the use of individual in-depth interviews to explore how a student anticipates fieldwork experiences and their reflections following fieldwork would provide more detailed insights. The use of written data for analysis has also precluded opportunities to use added information from probes, observations and non-verbal cues possible when using interviews (Maxwell, 1992). There may also have been an influence on the findings as the author was both the researcher and fieldwork supervisor; therefore, some preconceptions and bias may have been unduly included in the data analysis and interpretation.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the value of a briefing and debriefing process for exposing and ameliorating the concerns and anxieties that students have prior to fieldwork and for reflecting on student fieldwork experiences. The data generated by this study, especially in relationship to the debriefing activity, was also closely related to that generated in other studies, such as Hummell (1997). The value of the reflective process during briefing and debriefing has contributed to students being able to evaluate their own fieldwork performance and learning against the experiences of others in the group.

The findings are also of value to supervisors and fieldwork staff in universities. The need to make the roles of student and supervisor explicit in the early stages of a placement (and even prior to the placement) has been demonstrated. By presenting some of the findings of briefing and debriefing sessions, supervisors can re-live what it is like to face fieldwork as an inexperienced student. Empathy with students, and an understanding of the needs and fears of students, has been regarded as important by students (Hummell, 1997). Such an understanding can allow adaptations to be made to the way in which the expectations of the university fieldwork programme are communicated to supervisors and are subsequently communicated to students. Furthermore, an understanding of the student perspective can assist supervisors to make preparations for students from different stages of the course while recognising individual student needs.

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