

Creating a High-Quality Fieldwork Experience

What the Best Fieldwork Educators Do

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What makes a quality fieldwork learning experience? Generally, it's a combination of planning, attention to detail, mindfulness about the interaction of context and personalities, and the flexibility to change as needed along the way. Several studies have explored the markers of quality supervision, which include a well-planned orientation, a sequenced structure of learning experiences, flexibility in adapting structure to fit student learning needs, attention to developing clinical reasoning, time set aside for providing constructive and supportive feedback (Kirke, Layton, & Sim, 2007; Koski, Simon, & Dooley, 2013; Richard, 2008; Rodger, Fitzgerald, Davila, Millar, & Allison, 2011), and consistency in student assessment.

A Well-Planned Orientation

A complete orientation to the fieldwork site is essential to start the fieldwork

placement on a positive note (Koski et al., 2013). Specific expectations for student performance should be both written and discussed during the early weeks of the placement (Richard, 2008). Orientation should include not only an overview of the site and site-specific learning objectives, but also an orientation to the fieldwork educator's teaching style, and an opportunity for students to discuss their learning styles. Providing students with a clear schedule, especially during the early weeks of the placement, helps them feel secure in their setting. Besides specific assignment of clients and other therapies to be observed, specific meeting times for supervision should be established. The American Occupational Therapy Association (2006) Student Evaluation of the Fieldwork Experience provides several critical aspects of a comprehensive orientation, and it can serve as a guide to orientation planning.

A Sequenced Structure of Learning Experiences

According to the accreditation standards, "Initially, supervision should be direct and then decrease to less direct supervision as appropriate for the setting, the severity of the client's condition, and the ability of the student" (Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, 2012). Setting up a 12-week schedule of learning activities helps the fieldwork educator plan for increased levels of student independence throughout the experience. Such a schedule might detail the type and number of clients assigned, and time set aside for direct instruction, in-services, and structured observation of the clients or of the supervisor. In the early days of the fieldwork placement, direct instruction and structured observation of clients are often used as teaching methods. Students benefit



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from practicing writing treatment notes or observation records with the fieldwork educator or from observing the fieldwork educator modeling this skill on someone else (Richard, 2008). Experienced fieldwork educators are intentional in their efforts to help students feel secure in the learning environment by scheduling consistent times for supervision, conveying clear expectations that are both written and discussed, providing a daily schedule, and giving specific client assignments. Experienced fieldwork educators use direct instruction and structured observation of clients or of the supervisor as initial teaching methods but provide increased levels of independence once competency has been established (Richard, 2008).

Flexibility in Adapting Structure to Fit Student Learning Needs
Although the site-specific fieldwork objectives provide an overview of site expectations, it is also helpful for students to identify their own learning objectives (Koski et al., 2013). This can be accomplished through setting up a learning contract, in which the student and fieldwork educator mutually identify learning goals, strategies to accomplish goals, supports to be provided, and a date for goal achievement. Exceptional fieldwork educators maximize planned and unplanned learning opportunities, and demonstrate sensitivity to students' learning styles by adapting their teaching approaches accordingly. Students' learning opportunities are enhanced when they are provided with "hands-on" experience at their skill level; this also allows students to be active in the learning process (Kirke et al., 2007; Rodger et al., 2014). Also important is providing an optimal, or "just-right" challenge. In a qualitative research study analyzing written nomination documents for practice educator awards, Rodger et al. (2014) found the overarching theme that students identified providing the just-right challenge as symbolizing excellence in practice education (p. 161).

Attention to Clinical Reasoning Development

Exceptional fieldwork educators model reflective practice with their students by talking about their own work and demonstrating self-critique to portray

to students the importance of reflective practice. They use questioning strategies to help students engage in reflective practice by asking them to evaluate and reflect on their work prior to providing input (Richard, 2008). Reflective writing is often used to review the goals of a specific intervention, what happened during a treatment session, the factors contributing to the outcome, and plans for future revision (Hanson, Larsen, & Nielsen, 2011).

Constructive and Supportive Feedback

Effective feedback provided by fieldwork supervisors is not only clear, consistent, and timely, but it also needs to be delivered in a supportive and structured environment that is sensitive to the student's learning needs (Kirke et al., 2007; Koski et al., 2013; Richard, 2008). The manner in which the feedback is delivered is as important as the content of the feedback; students value working with fieldwork educators who are not only competent, but also whom they perceive as approachable, supportive, open-minded, honest, patient, empathetic, and enthusiastic (Rodger et al., 2014). Important fieldwork educator skills include clear communication in describing expectations as well as providing timely, consistent, constructive feedback relating to student performance. Active listening demonstrating acceptance, flexibility, commitment, and sensitivity to the student's needs is a key component to good communication (Kirke et al., 2007; Koski et al., 2013; Richard, 2008; Rodger et al., 2011).

Consistency in Student Assessment

Student assessment can be understood as formative and summative; formative assessment, in the form of written weekly feedback as well as verbal feedback, is used liberally by exceptional fieldwork educators. Students appreciate summative assessment that is provided according to performance standards based on objective information; they appreciate evaluation that identifies both their strengths and areas of need/opportunities for growth (Koski et al., 2013). Ideally, initial interaction between supervisor and student involves teaching key concepts and providing structured learning

opportunities, which evolve into feedback and reflection, creating a "feedback loop" between them. The feedback loop is an interactive and social process used to facilitate learning. It is characterized by clear, consistent, and timely feedback from supervisors, delivered in a supportive and structured environment, and followed by a period of reflection in which the student evaluates and critiques his or her own performance (Richard, 2008).

Whether you are a novice or experienced fieldwork educator, attention to these best practices of exceptional fieldwork educators can help you align your own education practices to best support students in the fieldwork education process. ☛

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