

# Reflective Writing in Level II Fieldwork

## A Tool To Promote Clinical Reasoning

Journaling compels fieldwork students to reflect on their knowledge and practice, dialogue with educators, and much more.

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Traditionally, Level II fieldwork has been approached from the perspective of the apprenticeship model, in which the supervisor's expertise is transferred to the student who learns to "do as I do." Students are viewed as passive recipients of known information, and outcomes are measured in regard to proficiency in technical skills.<sup>1</sup> This approach is helpful for developing procedural reasoning, to understand the diagnosis and treatment techniques from the perspective of known categories or methodologies.<sup>2</sup> It does not, however, promote interactive or conditional reasoning, in which therapists consider multiple variables affecting the intervention process and weigh the soundness of their decisions.<sup>3</sup>

The supervisor who views student learning from a constructivist perspective appreciates that learning happens when students "own" the experience for themselves. Within the constructivist approach, students are encouraged to take an active role in their learning and a critical, reflective attitude toward existing practice and procedures.<sup>4</sup> The development of conditional and interactive reasoning skills is enhanced as students develop and test hypotheses, compare and contrast options, and contemplate "what if" scenarios.<sup>2,5</sup>

As students discover and take responsibility for constructing their own knowledge, they are able to engage in self-authorship, or the ability to define their own beliefs, identity, and relationships.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to accepting the status quo, self-authorship involves objective consideration of the variables affecting each situation and changes that might be made to positively impact therapy outcomes. Indeed, the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education Accreditation Standards mandate that the Level II fieldwork experience be “designed to promote clinical reasoning and reflective practice, to transmit the values and beliefs that enable ethical practice, and to develop professionalism and competence in career responsibilities” (p. 661).<sup>7</sup>

### JOURNALING AS REFLECTION

The purpose of this article is to illustrate a constructivist learning approach in which clinical reasoning skills are developed through reflective writing paired with discussion. The education literature describes various methods used to promote reflective professional practice, including the use of journals, feedback, peer group discussion, free writing, and portfolios.<sup>8-10</sup> Journaling as a tool to promote reflective learning helps students bridge the gaps between theory, academic knowledge,

**Table 1: Mark's Clinical Reasoning Exercise—Week 1**

Intervention that was effective	Intervention that was not as effective
1. Briefly describe the intervention. Scoring the ACLS after administering assessment.	1. Briefly describe the intervention. Helping a client during a cooking activity.
2. What was effective? I was able to figure out the correct scoring and explain my rationale for the score I selected.	2. What was effective? The food was cooked and the client completed many of the tasks independently.
3. What was not as effective? I needed reminders to look at the next level and the previous level before selecting the score.	3. What was not as effective? I felt like I was in the way a lot of the time. I would normally just jump in and help, but I wasn't sure what to do or how much to help him.
4. What would you do differently next time? Take more time to thoroughly read the options and not get so anxious to come up with an answer.	4. What would you do differently next time? Before the group session, ask the group leader what I could do to help; ask the client what type of help he wants/needs.

and practice, allowing them to analyze a situation, gain insights, and dialogue with educators.<sup>11-16</sup>

Students value reflective practices that combine writing about day-to-day experiences with the opportunity for discussion and feedback, and they identify as “good supervisors” those individuals who ask questions that allow opportunities to challenge assumptions and analyze situations independently.<sup>17</sup> But students do express concerns about journaling,

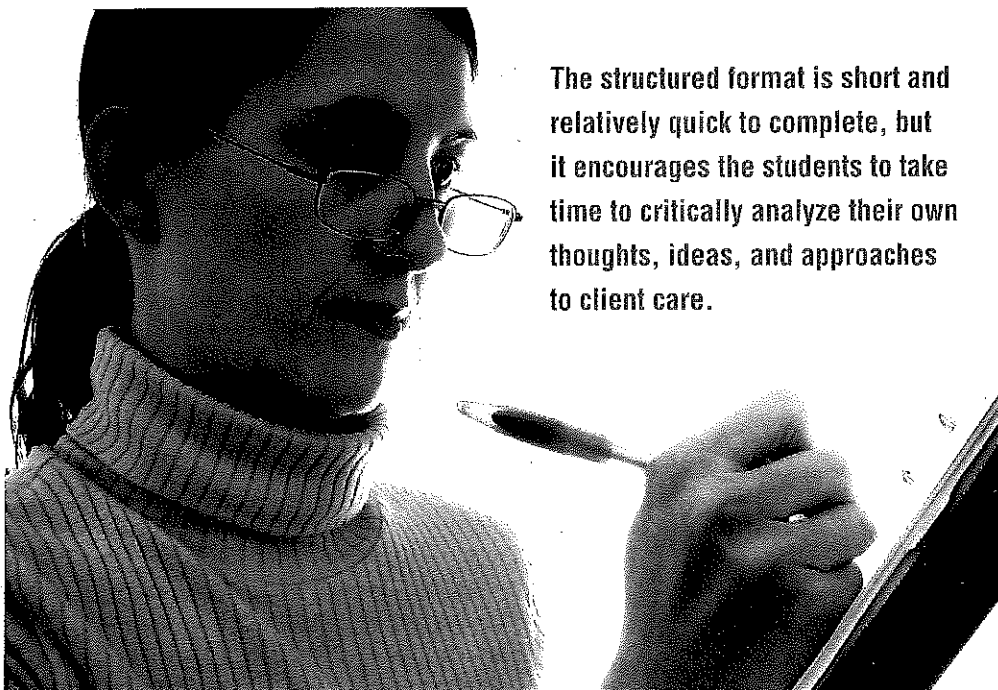
including the time commitment required and whether the purpose, goals, and objectives of journaling are clearly delineated.<sup>11,18</sup> Boud suggested that three elements be present in productive reflective journaling: (1) returning to the experience by describing what occurred, (2) attending to feelings about the incident that inhibit or enhance further reflection, and (3) re-evaluating the experience by relating new information and examining relationships between new and old ideas.<sup>8</sup>

Reflective learning through journaling may take several forms. Journaling may consist of free writing about experiences, selecting a critical incident each week to reflect upon, or selecting specific topics based on the student's needs.<sup>8,9</sup> Although some students prefer structured journaling, others feel restricted by stringent criteria.<sup>11</sup> This suggests the need to balance between free journaling and guided reflective writing. The following case examples illustrate different approaches to reflective journaling.

### CASE EXAMPLE: MARK

Throughout his Level II adult lifespan fieldwork experience, Mark completes a weekly written Clinical Reasoning Exercise (CRE). Prior to completing his first CRE, Mark's fieldwork educator explains to him that even when

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## Jane's Fieldwork Review Meeting

Jane and her fieldwork educator review her journal and together identify a pattern of frustration for Jane. Jane's journal details several intervention sessions with children who are difficult to motivate and engage. She tells her fieldwork educator she is unsure of what to do. Jane's fieldwork educator asks if she has considered theories or models that might help her look at motivational factors. Jane says she has thought about behavioral and cognitive-behavioral models, and the Model of Human Occupation, but she is not sure which to select. Together, Jane and her fieldwork educator agree that her weekly goal will be to select a different strategy to use in each intervention session, based on one of the identified models she reviews.

To facilitate this process, a journaling assignment that includes Boud's three elements<sup>8</sup> is developed. Jane is asked to describe what she did based on each model; attend to how she felt about it; and reevaluate the effectiveness, considering what she might use again or change in the future.

At her next weekly review meeting, Jane's journal describes the different theoretical approaches she used and how effective she found the strategies to be in the interventions. When asked by her fieldwork educator whether there are theoretical approaches she believed were most appropriate in certain situations, Jane is not as confident. This conversation leads to setting her next weekly objective to compare and contrast the three models and determine how effective they are with two children she is seeing. This prompts Jane to engage in more research about the models and to try additional strategies in her practice, followed by reflective journaling to assist in the process. ■

an intervention is effective, there are always alternate approaches to consider. She also states that when an intervention is not fully effective, there is always some aspect of the intervention that is effective. The purpose of this CRE is to reflect on the experience and learn from it.

To complete the CRE, Mark selects and reflects on two interventions that he has implemented over the previous week—one he thought was effective, the other not so much. Using Boud's three elements of reflection<sup>8</sup>—of returning to the experience, attending to feelings, and re-evaluating the experience—Mark mentally revisits the experiences after the pressure to perform has passed. He writes a brief description of the two interventions, identifies what was effective and what was not as effective in each intervention, and what he would do differently next time (see Table 1 on p. 12). By reflecting on both his positive and negative reactions to the interventions, Mark looks at his performance more objectively and identifies his own strengths as well as opportunities for growth related to the specific type of intervention. Through

this process, Mark increases his own sense of mastery. By identifying what he would do differently next time, Mark re-evaluates the intervention process, solves problems independently, and plans for future therapy sessions.

Mark submits his written CRE to his fieldwork educator 24 hours before the scheduled weekly supervisory meeting. The educator reviews Mark's reflections and prepares her feedback. During the meeting, Mark shares more specific information about the interventions he described in his CRE. For example, he had some concerns about his client's safety in the kitchen, in particular because the client will soon be discharged to his own apartment. The fieldwork educator provides Mark with ideas for further consideration and, as a result, Mark reports his concerns to a social worker, who in turn alerts the client's community service providers.

As his fieldwork progresses, Mark says that this type of journaling encourages him to stop and think more objectively about his experiences. He likes that the form is short and quick to complete. Given the option of using paper or a computer, he prefers to hand write

his reflections because he can jot down ideas while they are fresh in his mind. He believes that walking to a computer, logging on, typing his reflections, and printing a copy at the end of the week would take more time and effort. Mark says that the structured format of the CRE helps him focus on critical learning moments throughout the week. He says that, in his case, free journaling might lead to rambling thoughts and consume significantly more time. Mark identifies that at times the printed form does not allow enough room to write down all his thoughts, and he reminds his fieldwork educator to look for additional comments on the back of his weekly submission.

The fieldwork educator values Mark's reflections. Because Mark spends time with a number of occupational therapists, the fieldwork educator uses the CRE to help her understand what he has experienced throughout the week. Reading Mark's journal entries prior to the weekly meeting gives the educator time to prepare discussion questions. The educator finds it helpful to retain a copy of Mark's CREs and review them on a weekly basis as a reminder of topics discussed as well as to note Mark's areas of growth and needs.

### CASE EXAMPLE: JANE

On her early lifespan Level II fieldwork, Jane is asked to use weekly journaling as a means to improve critical reasoning skills and promote student-centered learning. Initially, Jane journals about each intervention session, identifying what were effective and ineffective strategies. She also logs questions for her fieldwork educator. As did Mark, Jane submits her journal to her fieldwork educator 24 hours prior to her weekly supervision meeting, with the educator then reviewing the journal to understand Jane's strengths and weaknesses. At each meeting, they review Jane's journal together, along with the facility's weekly fieldwork objectives. The journal helps Jane and the educator identify what facility fieldwork objectives are being met and where problem areas exist. Jane's progress is recorded on her weekly fieldwork review form and new weekly objectives are set.

Through the journaling process, Jane reflects critically on her work and forms new approaches to intervention from week to week. This record of critical reflection has the added benefit of charting the progression of Jane's critical reasoning. For an example of this growth, see "Jane's Fieldwork Review Meeting" on p. 13.

When asked at the close of her fieldwork how she felt about the journaling process, Jane says it improved her observation skills. "Now when I'm in a session, I find I can think through the critical reflection process and adapt on the go, which I couldn't do before," she says. The journaling facilitated open communication with her fieldwork educator about her learning, Jane says, and it gave Jane time to think and read before discussing complex issues with the educator. Jane cautions that journaling is time consuming and recommended students schedule time each day to journal. She says she at first worried about how long the journal should be, but that staying focused on her weekly objectives made her worry less about wasting time writing down unnecessary details.

Jane's fieldwork educator says journaling enables her to better understand students' learning and critical thinking processes. One of the biggest benefits is being able to identify when students are having difficulty applying what has been discussed throughout the week. Journaling also helps facilitate an open dialogue with her students, the educator says, and it contributes to a student-centered learning environment in which students take more responsibility for their own learning and for setting weekly objectives. That approach relates directly to what the educator says is the most important goal of fieldwork: to produce students who are reflective practitioners.

## SUMMARY

Both cases examples illustrate how reflective writing can improve critical reasoning over the course of the Level II fieldwork experience. The structured format is short and relatively quick to complete, but it encourages the students to take time to critically analyze their own thoughts, ideas, and approaches to client care. Initially,

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### **Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Survival Guide: A Student Planner, 2nd Edition**

By B. Napier, 2011. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press. (\$34 for members, \$49 for nonmembers. To order, call toll free 877-404-AOTA or shop online at <http://store.aota.org/view/?SKU=1253>. Order #1253. Promo code MI)

### **Clinical Supervision in Occupational Therapy: A Guide for Fieldwork and Practice (w/CD-ROM)**

By D. M. Costa, 2007. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press. (\$49 for members, \$69 for nonmembers. To order, call toll free 877-404-AOTA or shop online at <http://store.aota.org/view/?SKU=1238>. Order #1238. Promo Code MI)

### **The Essential Guide to Occupational Therapy Fieldwork Education: Resources for Today's Educators and Practitioners (w/CD-ROM)**

By D. M. Costa, 2004. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press. (\$59 for members, \$83 for nonmembers. To order, call toll free 877-404-AOTA or shop online at <http://store.aota.org/view/?SKU=1231>. Order #1231. Promo Code MI)

students who are novices in thinking reflectively about their experiences may report that a treatment session was "perfect" or "terrible" and leave it at that. But with practice and weekly conversations with the fieldwork educator, students learn to carefully consider the details that influence the therapeutic outcome. It is often easier for the student to reflect on another therapist's approach rather than his or her own approach. Although this may be helpful later in the learning experience, it is important for students to "own" their observations and construct treatment plans reflecting their own clinical reasoning process rather than mimicking the work of others. This is easily corrected after the first week, but it highlights the need for educators to define expectations. By using the same framework throughout the fieldwork, students become familiar with the process and learn to look for and reflect on meaningful experiences.

In both examples, the written reflection is a record of learning, demonstrating growth in the student's level of mastery over time. A written record of critical reflection substantiates that students are prepared for entry-level practice. When the students' attention is directed to focused areas of practice, they become aware of their own repertoire of knowledge and skills in com-

CE Article: **Transformative Learning: Facilitating Growth and Change Through Fieldwork**  
By S. Santalucia and C. R. Johnson, 2010. Bethesda, MD: American Occupational Therapy Association. (Earn .1 AOTA CEU [1 NBCOT PDU, 1 contact hour]. \$29.95 for members, \$41 for nonmembers. To order, call toll free 877-404-AOTA or shop online at <http://store.aota.org/view/?SKU=CEA1010>. Order #CEA1010. Promo Code MI)

### **Fieldwork Performance Evaluation for the Occupational Therapy Student**

By American Occupational Therapy Association, 2002. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press, (\$1.50 for members, \$1.90 for nonmembers. To order, call toll free 877-404-AOTA or shop online at <http://store.aota.org/view/?SKU=1170B>. Order #1170B. Promo code MI)

### **Fieldwork Performance Evaluation for the Occupational Therapy Assistant Student**

By American Occupational Therapy Association, 2002. Bethesda, MD: AOTA Press. (\$1.50 for members, \$1.90 for nonmembers. To order, call toll free 877-404-AOTA or shop online at <http://store.aota.org/view/?SKU=1160B>. Order #1160B. Promo code MI)

## CONNECTIONS

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bination with present circumstances.<sup>19</sup> This results in improved observation skills and the ability to apply theoretical concepts to practice situations. By practicing reflective skills under the mentorship of the fieldwork educator, occupational therapy students are prepared for the lifelong learning that will be foundational to their professional career. ■

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## Using Evidence in Practice

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a more experienced mentor who is as passionate about research as she is. Discussions with the whole team also give her the opportunity to learn about evidence from others and to share the research findings she has discovered.

Maglio and Wyrick report that it is crucial to have a toolkit of resources available to overcome the most frequently reported barriers to using evidence: lack of time and the lack of knowledge of available resources. Both mentioned using online resources such as PubMed ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed)); Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>); AOTA Evidence-Based Practice Resources ([www.aota.org/ebp](http://www.aota.org/ebp)), including the EBP Resource Directory; and OTseeker ([www.otseeker.com](http://www.otseeker.com)) as first steps when looking for evidence. They also noted the importance of turning to more knowledgeable and experienced clinicians as valuable guides for finding evidence, and said that *Evidence-Based Rehabilitation: A Guide to Practice*<sup>1</sup> is a great book for finding resources for EBP.

As evidence becomes increasingly available for occupational therapy, practitioners appreciate hearing about examples of others who are committed to incorporating the findings from research into practice. Wyrick and Maglio show that with some time, effort, practice, and help from peers, it is possible to provide evidence-based, client-centered, and up-to-date care for consumers. ■

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## Navigating Fieldwork's Ethical Challenges

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