# Thinking "Outside the Box" to Support Peer Learning During Fieldwork

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There is an increasing emphasis on the benefits of peer learning in higher education to facilitate knowledge development and provide students with the opportunity to develop skills needed for interprofessional, team-based practice (Interprofessional Education Collaborative Expert Panel, 2011). Occupational therapy students also agree on the importance of peer support during fieldwork. They feel less isolated and gain alternative perspectives as they talk through problems or concerns, and they report increased confidence as they compare their progress with one another. They value practical support, such as receiving feedback on their performances, discussing assignments, practicing skill development, and getting help in setting learning objectives (Daniels, 2010).

Peer learning is not typically emphasized in the traditional 1:1 apprenticeship model of supervision, but students get the benefits of peer collaboration when offered opportu-nities for consistent interaction with peers, within or outside the organi-zation (Daniels, 2010; Martin, Morris, Moore, Sadlo, & Crouch, 2004).

## Focus Areas for Peer Support

Although students value peer learning opportunities, they may or may not have the initiative or networking skills to support such ventures. It is helpful if the academic program or fieldwork educator provides a specific structure or assignments to encourage peer exchange as part of the learning pro-cess (Daniels, 2010). Drawing from the types of support valued by students, the following are some ideas for struc-turing peer exchange.

### Discussing Learning Experiences and Perceptions

Pairing students while providing reflective questions to guide the process can provide peers from diverse disciplines or differing professional levels, such as occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants, the opportunity to discuss the realities of the clinical environment from their respective levels of service delivery. For example, students can give and receive practical and emotional sup-port as they share their experiences in working with specific client groups, theoretical approaches, and site-specific procedures (Jung, Salvatori, & Adele, 2008). Weekly interdisciplin-ary seminars, led by representatives from multiple disciplines, provide another format for students to explore topics and learn about the boundaries of professional roles within a facility (Precin, 2007).

### Peer Teaching and Learning Related to Client-Care Activities

Whether co-leading a group, creating an intervention plan, or reviewing peer documentation, shared responsibility for client-care activities provides multi-ple opportunities for peer teaching and learning. Students can give and receive practical support as they provide feed-back to one another, discuss assign-ments, and make plans for client care. For example, students might practice skills required by the facility, such as administering assessments, with one another prior to interaction with clients (Jensen & Daniel, 2010). In addition to reinforcing skills by teaching others, this format provides students from dif-ferent disciplines with the opportunity to become familiar with the assessment and intervention procedures of another profession in a non-threatening format.
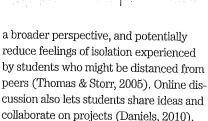
### Using Technology to Encourage Peer Exchange Outside of the Facility

Online discussion during fieldwork, which is a common expectation of most academic programs, lets students reflect on their practice, consider

## Benefits of Technology for Fieldwork Projects

| Technology | Value |
|---|---|
| Facebook (Private Group setting) | Structure is familiar; offers private sharing of resources and options for providing emotional support |
| Google Docs | Contributions of each member to working document are visible; opportunity for ongoing editing and sharing resources; capacity to edit document offline |
| FaceTime | 1:1 video discussions in real time; face-to-face interaction enables emotional support; easy access using email or smartphone apps |
| Skype | Audio or video features available; reciprocal "face-to-face" group interaction possible; presentations can be projected to audiences at remote locations through use of the shared screen feature |

a broader perspective, and potentially reduce feelings of isolation experienced by students who might be distanced from peers (Thomas & Storr, 2005). Online discussion also lets students share ideas and collaborate on projects (Daniels, 2010).

Among the various applications available, use of the secret "privacy" setting in Facebook (which is visible only to group members) can supplement online discussions through the posting of pictures and videos (without posting information about specific clients, which help peers appreciate the learning context and share documents). Skype, which offers a forum for "in person" group meetings, might be offered in the place of one or more blackboard discussion sessions. FaceTime could be used for one-on-one meetings. Google Docs could be used to collaborate on projects, which might then be presented through Skype.

As a case example, consider a group of students completing fieldwork in four different mental health settings who collaborated on one final project appropriate for all of the fieldwork sites. They initially met through Skype to identify common experiences and offer emotional support. Once they decided on a project, they used Google Docs to write up their plans and make revisions. For one-on-one meetings, they used FaceTime. Then the group used Skype to present the material to the fieldwork educators at all sites.

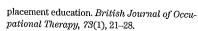As another case example, academic fieldwork coordinators (AFWCs) rep-resenting occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant programs assigned a group of six students to explore occupation-based interventions for clients recovering from cerebral vascular accidents. The group used the privacy setting in Facebook to exchange documents and hold online discussions, which were linked to the academic program's discussion board platform for ease of monitoring. The occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant students generated treatment ideas, integrated the ideas into their client interventions, and reported back to the group on their clients' outcomes and their insights relating to intraprofessional collaboration.

## Conclusion

Through technology, virtually any assignment that would be appropriate within a facility could be extended to include peer exchange with students at external locations, broadening the exchange options to include students at varying professional levels as well as students from other professions. Regardless of how it is accomplished, though, peer learning can play an important part in a student's learning experience, and this potential is increased when fieldwork educators and the academic program work cooperatively to support peer exchange. ▪

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