Developing a student centred approach to practice placement briefings and debriefings

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Abstract

This research developed from the recognition that work-based placement briefing and debriefing sessions need to encourage reflection and student self-directed learning. An action research methodology was used to obtain students views of the value of briefing and debriefing sessions. Changes to session format were introduced and then in response to student comments they were re-evaluated. Results demonstrated that students were unhappy with the original format. They preferred and became more fully engaged with the self-directed, student-centred sessions when reflection was an integral element.

Introduction

Work-based placements are central to occupational therapy (OT) course curricula as a means of linking theory to practice (Cohn and Crist, 1995) and achieving programme outcomes (COT, 2003). In view of this, it is a requirement of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that *'institutions ensure students are provided with appropriate guidance and support in preparation for, during and after their placements'* (QAA, 2001).

This study stems from a recognition that placement related teaching sessions need to become more interactive and student-centred (Light and Cox, 2001). Tutor reflections on session delivery indicated that they were primarily tutor led, focusing on issues important to the tutor rather than on student's needs. Session content determined a largely didactic teaching approach and did not appear to facilitate self-directed learning. Students were not encouraged to reflect on or link one placement experience to the next as highlighted by one placement educator *'students view each placement as if they are starting from afresh rather than it being a continuation of their learning…they need to remember that they have transferable skills'*, (Placement Educator, 2004).

The aim of the project was to evaluate students' views of current session format in order to develop a more student-centred approach to briefing and de-briefing sessions using reflection to plan students' learning for subsequent placements and to re-evaluate students' views of the revised format.

Previous studies

Horsfall (1990 p.5) recognised that placements are demanding and preparation and debriefing are important in enabling students to 'emotionally and practically prepare and disengage from their experience'. Mackenzie (2002), analysing OT students' needs, identified that briefing and debriefing sessions should be an expected part of course curricula where anxieties and expectations need to be addressed to reduce stress and increase confidence. The study also argued that factual and practical aspects of placements should be included in first year placement sessions as anxiety amongst this cohort is higher than in subsequent years. Endorsing this Gilbert and Strong's (1997) study of coping strategies employed by students suggested they felt less anxious having been adequately prepared. Shared learning and the role of the tutor being to guide, facilitate, motivate and support were identified as being vital.

Methodology
As this study sought to examine and alter real life practice utilising the views of key players (tutor and students) an action research methodology was adopted (Bowling 1997; McNiff 2002; Denscombe 1998). Data was collected using a qualitative methodology as students' individual perceptions and opinions were sought (Grbich, 1999). Questionnaires using reasonably 'open' questions were given to students to obtain their individual opinions.

Method
Questionnaires were given to 3rd year students and changes made to subsequent briefing and debriefing sessions taking account of the comments made. The revised session format was used with 2nd year students before and after a work-based placement. Following the placement, 2nd year students completed questionnaires to ascertain their views of the new session format. Questionnaire responses were collated by consensus opinion and alternate view, recognising that in evaluation both were valid to the project (Grbich 1999).

3rd year students were selected for the initial enquiry recognising the value of their opinions based on the entire three year programme. Second evaluation students were selected as a sample of convenience. Owing to restricted timescales only 2nd year students could complete both briefing and debriefing sessions related to one placement.

Students were asked verbally and in writing if they would consent to taking part. Voluntary participation was stressed and questionnaires were anonymous to protect confidentiality.

Findings
48 questionnaires given to 3rd year students; 32 were returned.

26 questionnaires given to 2nd year students; 26 were returned.

From analysis of the data the following themes emerged.
(Direct quotations from students are printed in *italics*).

Individual learning needs
3rd year students highlighted that sessions had not met their individual needs

> *Don't address my concerns…look at what the tutor thinks.*

This was again raised when asked for suggestions to improve the sessions; being able to

> *Discuss my own concerns*

and identifying strengths and areas needing work were highlighted.

By contrast, 2nd year students felt sessions had addressed personally important issues by clarifying expectations and enabling them to

> *look at my fears and anxieties* and *helping me to identify areas I need to work on*.

Students cited the chance to talk about those issues with each other and the in-depth discussion of competency levels as being particularly helpful.

The question and answer sections introduced to 2nd year sessions were highlighted with students identifying the value of others views and experiences as a means of learning. Using the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (Alsop and Ryan, 1996; COT, 2005) had enabled 2nd year students to identify areas to focus on during placements and was cited by the majority as a positive exercise which

> *enabled me to develop my learning needs early in the placement which I found helpful…my educator commented positively on my proactive attitude which boosted my confidence*.

Using this tool was identified as a good exercise to help with transferring learning needs from one placement to another

> *it has really made me think about what my educator told me in my report and I know what I need to work on next time*.

However, one student reported negative feelings about the use of the SWOT analysis and stated her educator had

> *made assumptions about me personally from the areas I had identified as needing work*.

Mindset change

3rd year students clearly highlighted dissatisfaction with the level at which the sessions helped them prepare and debrief. One student expressed the opinion that they were

> *uninteresting...largely a waste of time*.

Although some students felt the briefing sessions helped them

> *switch between academic and placement mindset*.

In direct contrast 2nd year students responses were more positive. They felt briefing sessions had helped them prepare, citing group discussion of expectations, meeting learning outcomes and identifying skill levels as being helpful. Discussing the placement during debriefing sessions was also valued. Listening to others experiences, group reflection and problem solving

> *finished off the placement for me...helped me think of college work again*.

Group work

Using group work within sessions to aid thinking and learning was cited by the majority of both 3rd year and 2nd year students as being of value

> *sharing ideas helps me*

although a small number of 3rd year students felt it had

> *raised my anxiety levels*

> *enhanced negative feelings towards the coming placement*

> *I am not helped by listening to other people's reflections*.

3rd year students however, felt the time allowed for group work was insufficient

> *reflections* (in a group) *can't be done in 10 minutes*.

This cohort also identified that they would have more time to work in pairs or small groups. On the whole, 2nd year students felt they had had sufficient time for discussion; they identified the need for

> *more time for indepth reflection…can't do it quickly*.

Repetition

3rd year students found the sessions repetitive

> *how many times is it necessary to revise reflection and supervision skills* and *I find what other students do on placement boring*.

The repetitive nature of the sessions was also highlighted by 2nd year students though this time it was acknowledged as a

> *good thing. You can see that you have progressed*, it *enables revision of theory* and
> *I know we keep doing it, but each time we look at reflection we go deeper and it is
> more meaningful*.

One student identified that covering some of the same ground in briefing and debriefing sessions

> *demonstrated how far I had progressed during the placement*.

Inclusion of factual information
3rd year students identified the factual element of the sessions in the first 18 months of the OT course as being "*the most helpful*" aspect of all the sessions. This was largely endorsed by the 2nd year students suggestions for improving future sessions which centred on the provision of factual information

> *more information on different models of supervision and what clinical reasoning involves would be good…we just seem to have to do it without knowing about it.*

Discussion
Results from the 3rd year questionnaires highlighted student's opinion that sessions were tutor-led and did not address individual concerns. Where concerns and anxieties were addressed this appeared to raise anxiety rather than alleviate it. This conflicts with Gilbert and Strong's (1997) research, suggesting sessions were not appropriately preparing students. However it must be acknowledged that some students will remain anxious and negative no matter the depth of preparation (Horsfall, 1990).

In agreement with the Mackenzie (2002), study, use of factual information was initially welcomed though students did not value the repetition or revision in later sessions preferring to be more self-directed. Sessions clearly needed to be changed in format and content to address students individual needs.

Changing to a more student-centred approach resulted in positive responses from the 2nd year questionnaire, clearly indicating the majority of students preferred the revised format. Enabling students to identify and discuss their concerns and anxieties encouraged them to problem solve together and learn from each others experiences, acknowledged by Gilbert and Strong (1997) as being central to the placement preparation and debriefing process.

Biggs (2003) highlights the use of reflection in the learning process acknowledging that continued reflection on performance is vital. Thus reflection has become an integral element of the revised sessions. Although students highlighted the repetition of reflection, they were able to identify the benefits of doing so, recognising that it aided progression and encouraged deeper learning and understanding. By reflecting on feedback from previous placements and using the SWOT analysis tool (Alsop and Ryan, 1996; COT, 2005), students were able to identify personal strengths and skill acquisition which MacKenzie (2002) recognised as confidence enhancing. Students were able to identify areas requiring work or of special interest which facilitated the development of possible learning contracts for future placements. This encouraged students to focus on educator comments rather than the pass/fail element of reports and to actively use feedback to enhance and inform future performance. As a result, students should be better prepared, more confident, less anxious and more likely to do well (Horsfall, 1990; MacKenzie, 2002; Gilbert and Strong 1997).

Students identified factual information as being of value though it was evident that some expected to be 'fed' information rather than acquiring it for themselves. In modern adult education it is recognised that students need to be self-directed in their learning, although it must also be acknowledged that at times 'students want straight answers to straight questions' and the art of the interactive tutor is to know when to do this (Light and Cox, 2001 p.141).

These results must be considered in relation to the evaluation process itself as the two are inevitably interlinked (Denscombe, 1998). It can be argued that the results are a product of the evaluation process, rather than what students truly felt. For example, 3rd year students having completed their last placement saw no inherent value in being debriefed and this may have translated into a negative view of the whole briefing/debriefing process. It could be argued that results reflect the present emotional state rather than true feelings and perhaps giving the questionnaires out at this time was counter productive. Balanced against this, students did not know the tutor well but knew she had not produced the sessions so hurt feelings would not be an issue and the answers given could therefore be expected to be honest. The 2nd year students however, know the tutor well, were aware that she had changed the style of the sessions in relation to feedback and may have been more positive and less honest to spare feelings. They also have a vested interest in getting what they want from the sessions and will directly benefit from changes made thus their answers are more likely to be honest and considered.

Conclusion
This action research has fulfilled its intended aim. Briefing and debriefing sessions have been evaluated and changed in light of comments made to become more student-centered in both approach and content with the tutor role being far more interactive (Light and Cox, 2001). The opportunity for valued reflection has been

included to help facilitate continued student learning and this revised format has been favourably evaluated by students. Thus the cyclical nature of action research has been demonstrated. Sessions continue to develop, be evaluated and revised and it is evident that each cohort has its own needs in relation to session format. In the future, a method of discovering the issues students wish to discuss prior to sessions is to be adopted to make sessions more proactive and this will also need to be evaluated.

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