

e3i Employability Case Study



Translating theory into practice: creating opportunities for authentic learning in occupational therapy

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Health and Wellbeing

Subject group:	Occupational therapy
Number of students involved:	65
Elements of the employability framework addressed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of autonomy • Key skills development • Real world activities • Work related learning • Reflection on use of knowledge and skills, transfer of these to the work environment • Preparation for specific professional areas

Description of learning and teaching approach adopted

Students learn most effectively when they are able to put theory into practice and apply learning gained in the classroom to real world situations. It is for this reason that students frequently see practice placement as a real high point of their university experience. This project sought to provide further authentic learning opportunities for students but rather than offering these in a clinical setting the project focused on enabling students to work with older people living in residential care settings in Sheffield.

Through an enquiry based learning approach students worked closely with residents in six care homes, seeking to understand their experiences and to apply newly developed skills to create opportunities for meaningful activity in order to promote well-being. This was not a practice placement per se as with permission from residents living in the care homes and from care home managers a small team of tutors worked alongside students in that setting, guiding and supporting students in their learning.

This project is closely linked to employability in a number of ways. Occupational therapy practice is rapidly changing. Whereas traditionally the National Health Service has been the main employer of graduates we are increasingly seeing our students gain employment in less traditional areas such as in the voluntary sector. As a profession we need to raise the profile of occupational therapy in these areas, creating employment opportunities for our students and allowing our students to feel confident in understanding the role that they may potentially play in these emerging areas of practice.

Employability objectives and intended learning outcomes

The project had two key aims:

- To provide an authentic learning experience where students could apply theory to practice at a very early stage in their studies;

This had a particular emphasis on enabling students to develop and apply complex communication skills.

The second aim focused on employability:

- To raise the profile of occupational therapy in a non-traditional area of practice in order to open up future opportunities for employment;
- To enable students to see the potential role of occupational therapist with older people living in residential care;

The assessment strategy was closely linked to this experience. For one assignment, students listened to a narrative shared by an older person and, anonymising the person's details completed a written piece exploring the relationship between ageing, health and meaningful activity. For a second assignment focusing on design they designed a bedroom for the person they had described in the narrative.

Description of and tips for good practice; lessons learned

The project was successful for a number of reasons:

- The learning experience was fully integrated into the module. The content of sessions directly fed into the visits and students were able to make links, try out new skills and in doing so to see the relevance of theory in a practice environment;
- The assessments were closely linked to and dependent on the learning experience in the care environment;
- This was the student's first experience of working with older people. Having a university tutor present gave the students the confidence and enabled them to gain the most from the visits;
- The project recognised the skills that students already possessed prior to coming to the university and simply sought to help individuals to tap into these;
- Strong links were established between care homes and the university building good relationships and the opportunity for ongoing work;

In terms of things we might have done differently: although a great deal of preparation had gone into organising this, the length of time it took to liaise with all the care homes meant that students were not as fully briefed as they might have been. Having now completed this work the first time we feel in a much stronger position to repeat this work next year.

Key points of any feedback gathered or evaluation undertaken with students or staff

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Students spoke about feeling like 'real Occupational therapists', they appreciated the opportunity to use their skills and enjoyed the assessment because it related to real people. One student said in their evaluation 'this has made the module come to life'.

From a tutor's perspective I found that the students were more fully engaged in the learning experience, they asked more questions and really raised the level of debate and discussion. For example part of the module addresses client centred practice and students were able to question some of the issues relating to how to implement this approach. As a tutor it was very useful to be able to see the students in a practice situation and to identify students who were struggling in terms of their verbal communication skills and ability to relate to residents.

The standard of the assignments was the highest it has been since beginning the module and I believe that this was in part as a result of this learning experience.

From an employability perspective, managers and staff fed back that they were very impressed by the standard of the student work and were surprised by the range of skills occupational therapists had. Seeing occupational therapy in practice had

challenged some of the pre-conceptions that they had about the role and had led one manager to consider how they might create opportunities for Occupational therapists in the future.

In terms of learner autonomy, so successful was the work that a group of 28 students have organised themselves into a care home team and are presently undertaking voluntary work with care homes across Sheffield.

Resources used

Staff time:

- Establishing partnerships
- Organisation of visits
- Attending sessions with students

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