

Students Coaching Students: An Odyssey in OT at McMaster University

Students' Voices

Imposter syndrome. A phenomenon that has emerged for many of us over the course of our occupational therapy clinical education, but never quite so prominently as during our first placement experiences. Whether rearing its head as a pseudo-confession in peer written reflections, surfacing during “bus-briefing” chats, or acting as that vexing voice precluding deep slumber, one’s first placement is a personal odyssey to discover professional identity. Each day, we are confronted with the challenge of reconciling the need to absorb tremendous amounts of new knowledge with our ardent anticipation to get out there and... do what? What does it mean to be a student occupational therapist (SOT), exactly? What does it look like? Two standalone pillars exist, one of thought and one of action, without a bridge in sight. It is at this stage that our professional identities are called into question and our perceived imposter syndrome can itself become a barrier to learning.

The other challenge facing SOTs on placement is navigating an entirely new form of evaluation. Occupational therapy programs share a common standard of scholarly excellence required for admission. This level of achievement is sustainable throughout the first university-based term, in which practices perfected in undergraduate study are widely transferrable across traditional didactic scenarios. However, years spent honing our skills to master conventional examination tactics render us vulnerable to any tweak in the evaluation process. The very nature of clinical education develops competency through novel, hands-on performance – uncharted territory for many students that leaves us doubting our academic merit. Attributes that shaped our earlier success now become our Achilles heel, with pride chief among them.

Yet, other key attributes shared by SOTs – motivation, perseverance and engagement, to name a few – can endure and eclipse this temporary identity crisis, all in the name of learning. Given the right cocktail of circumstances, students can approach their first clinical placement embracing that there are unknown unknowns. This is perhaps the concept most challenging to accept, to acknowledge and to admit when confronted *in situ*... compounded by the fact that we, the Confronted, are being evaluated throughout the encounter. With this in mind, we, the McMaster Occupational Therapy Class of 2016, were inspired to develop a student-to-student panel discussion entitled *What To Know When You're On Placement* and to host *Let's Lunch Together*, in collaboration with the Director of Clinical Education. The events quickly built steam with a groundswell of input and idea sharing from upper year students, imparting our “wisdom” from a highly relatable position, having pondered the same burning-but-too-afraid-to-ask questions only one short year prior.

We began having the conversations, both passionate and frantic, that led to these initiatives during our spring term, when we finally had time to reflect on our growth and change over the past year. Looking back on our first placements, we discussed feeling scared, overwhelmed and unprepared. We wanted to tell the year one class everything we wish someone had told us. We wanted them to know they could count on us to be a resource and a support. Fittingly, we brought these developing thoughts together in a meeting on our last day of term, at which point we were undergoing yet another transition: from first- to upper-year SOTs, mentors to those entering the program in the fall. While our classmates were saying goodbye, we came together in a small room to discuss our big ideas for our soon-to-be peers – a placement guide, a panel, and second-year buddies with experience. When we were apart it felt like we were reaching for the stars, as if musing about winning the lottery, but as a group these wishes turned into goals. When our Director of Clinical Education began talking potential

dates, we knew that our excited chatter had become something real.

The first question that arose in that meeting, and which we spent the summer answering, is exactly which topics do you explore with SOTs before beginning their clinical education to prepare them for the odyssey that is First Placement? Using our own experience as a framework, we developed an hour-long presentation and an accompanying pocket guide *What To Know When You're On Placement*. These provided a foundation to launch an inaugural student-to-student discussion, incorporating practical tips related to making evaluation run smoothly, strategies for handling conflict on placement, how and why to maintain work-placement balance, and tips for communicating with your preceptor. For each topic, the designated presenter shared a personal anecdote from placement – often this involved learning from a blunder – as well as the nuggets of wisdom that we added to our toolkit from these moments to be used *pro re nata*.

The second stage of our plan was the *Let's Lunch Together* event, which took place a few weeks preceding the start of placement for first-year students. At this time, students had been informed of their placement settings and had logged some time researching their settings to understand their practice area broadly. First year SOTs were invited to a lunch with volunteers from our year. Students were grouped into tables representing similar practice areas: first years based on their upcoming placement, and volunteers from our class assigned according to past placement experiences. An upper year mentor introduced the session, emphasizing both the conversational nature of the occasion and the opportunity to ask those “burning questions”. By having a student-guided session, a distinction was created between formal clinical preparation and the casual mentorship available at this event.

The shared placement contexts at each table acted as a springboard for conversation. It allowed our discussions to extend beyond the general placement expectations, to addressing specific concerns such as level of involvement, expected activities, and potential clients. First year SOTs were most interested in understanding what they could do to prepare for each practice context, which skills they would need to brush up on, and how to build positive working relationships with their preceptors. In addition to enabling students to prepare for their upcoming placements, our class offered our own empathetic ears to these students, an additional resource to reach out to should they have questions during their clinical experiences. In feedback collected following this event, the first year SOTs indicated this session helped ease their nerves about clinical placements through transparent and honest peer-focused advice.

The *Let's Lunch Together* session had unintended positive consequences for our class. During our coaching, we had the opportunity to reflect on how much we had learned in one year. It helped us understand our current level of knowledge and determine our own learning gaps in preparation for our final placements, building confidence in our developing skills, and in our own capacity for self-directed learning. This presented itself as yet another opportunity to engage in the reflective process associated with clinical education at McMaster, and helped us solidify our previous year of learning. In short, we took another leap in our own journey towards developing our professional identities, as we helped our first-year peers take their first steps towards being practicing student occupational therapists.

An Educator's Voice

To say that I was impressed with the energetic and evidence-informed approach of our second year SOTs in creating and delivering these sessions would be an understatement. The students brought a very important peer-to-peer relationship to their work with the first year SOTs that enhanced learning and understanding about what they could expect as students entering their first practica. It was very

gratifying to see our senior students applying *their* competencies to facilitate the competency development with the incoming class. This process had a strong impact on senior students' understanding of their own growth in order to successfully engage their student colleagues.

Year 1 & 2 Competency Development: A Win-Win Outcome

In devising this initiative, the senior class hoped to reduce the “unknown unknowns” by identifying “known unknowns”, which in turn would lessen the first year students' apprehension toward that first day of placement. *Knowing* there will come a time, when prompted with a question or scenario, that you have no immediate response and subsequently send yourself into a tailspin of self-doubt. The truth is, we've all been there... as have our preceptors. Normalizing the experience – accepting the inevitability of it – allows us to embrace it for what it is: a rite of passage. That instantaneous moment in time (frozen as it may feel) offers tremendous opportunity for personal learning and growth. This experience adds a layer of new meaning to the competencies being evaluated, a daunting process to navigate for a student entering his/her first clinical placement.

Without context, it is difficult to differentiate the seven competencies that guide development of our profession. By sharing our missteps and identifying our methods to resolve them, these events provided an anecdotal framework to begin distinguishing between practice knowledge, clinical reasoning, facilitating change in a practice process, professional interactions and responsibilities, communication, professional development, and performance management. Recurring themes emerged during the student-to-student panel discussion and *Let's Lunch Together*, specific to each of the seven competencies. These patterns helped further delineate the scope of these competencies for the first year class as well as the second year participants. Information was both shared and questioned, establishing expectations spanning foundational knowledge to professional conduct. In feedback tallied from the first year students, the session received a mean rating of 8.5/10 across 52 respondents. Students expressed an appreciation for transparency and honesty from their upper year peers in relaying their experiences. The panel discussion format was received as a successful open forum to ask *those* questions, lessen anxiety and prepare for placement, with content regarded as “reassuring and relevant”. First year SOTs described second year volunteers as approachable, passionate and energetic mentors. Following these events, many participants cited increased self-efficacy as well as clarified expectations for students' roles and capacity, with new perspective on how these evolve with experience.

There was strong support for the event to continue in the future, marking a natural transition concurrent with the CBE-OT stages of learning development. The first year students, having weathered their own experiences, will have an opportunity to contribute their own insights as upper year mentors. Suggestions provided following this inaugural event included promoting the event more widely beforehand and preparing a list of potential dialogue points to launch discussion. These amendments will provide first year students the opportunity to consider their preconceptions beforehand, focusing content delivery to reflect concerns unique to each year's cohort. Collectively, this initiative spurred bonding between first- and second-year student occupational therapists by sharing our vulnerabilities, and in turn nurturing individualized development of professional competencies. Imposter syndrome vanishes as we embrace what lies ahead: learning in acknowledging our lapses, comfort in knowing we are in good company, freedom in addressing our fears, and ultimately pride as we progress in our OT odyssey.

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