Multiple Mentoring Relationships Facilitate Learning During Fieldwork

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Fieldwork provides a means by which students are socialized into their profession and their careers. During Level I and Level II fieldwork, students acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to achieve entry-level competence. The experiences that students have during Level II fieldwork influence their subsequent career choices. To support these experiences, students form a variety of helping relationships with faculty members, clinicians, peers, family, and friends. This article examines the role and responsibilities of the student as protegé and of the clinical educator as information peer, collegial peer, special peer, and mentor. In light of the challenges faced by most clinicians secondary to health care reform, an alternative to the one-to-one supervision model is presented. The multiple mentoring model of fieldwork supervision has several advantages: (a) fieldwork educators work with students according to their strengths and interests; (b) the model promotes collegiality and clinical reasoning skills because students use each other as resources and observe different fieldwork educators approaching similar situations; and (c) the model allows a fieldwork site to accept more students at one time, while minimizing stress on any one fieldwork educator. A framework defining the functions of the mentor-protegé relationship is provided, with an emphasis on the effect that clinical educators have in their roles as mentors, guides, role models, and teachers who provide opportunities for the student to develop entry-level competency in a chosen profession.

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The collective fieldwork experience in occupational therapy provides a means by which students are socialized into the profession and into a career. Early work experiences are important to future career success; experiences students have during fieldwork influence subsequent career choices (Christie, Joyce, & Moeller, 1985; London & Stumpf, 1986).

Traditionally, one student is paired with one occupational therapy practitioner to work together for the duration of Level I or Level II fieldwork placement. However, due to health care reform, the shortage of occupational therapy practitioners, staffing and productivity issues, and the paucity of fieldwork sites, the one-to-one model of fieldwork supervision may no longer be realistic. There are simply not enough occupational therapy practitioners available to support the fieldwork education needs of students in academic programs.

Another model of supervision may make it easier for occupational therapy practitioners in various settings to supervise and provide fieldwork students with a successful learning experience. This article introduces two concepts—peer relationships and multiple mentoring—and compares them to the traditional concept of one-to-one mentoring. It also explores the role of fieldwork educator as mentor, the role of fieldwork student as protegé, and the functions inherent in the mentor-protegé relationship.

The Mentor-Protegé Relationship

For this article, the mentor-protegé relationship is defined as the “pairing [of] a more skilled or experienced person [mentor] with a lesser skilled or experienced one [protegé], with the agreed-upon goal of having the lesser skilled person grow and develop specific competencies, skills and attitudes” (Murray, 1991, p. xiv).

The fieldwork educator, or mentor, and the fieldwork student, or protegé, work together to foster the protegé’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Both mentor and protegé are concerned with applying academic theory and knowledge to practice situations. By design, fieldwork experience fosters entry-level competency in assessment, planning, intervention, problem solving, administration, and professionalism. How protegés perform in these areas is paramount to their future career success. The mentor at the fieldwork site plays a critical role in contributing to that success by shaping the protegé’s attitudes and behaviors. But how realistic is it to assume that one mentor can meet all the needs of the protegé?

Traditional One-to-One Mentoring Model

The traditional one-to-one mentoring relationship assumes that the mentor is an expert who has all the an-
swers. The literature suggests that the traditional mentor nurtures a person 8 to 15 years younger and with less experience. The mentor provides information, wisdom, and emotional support to the protégé in an interactive relationship that includes political and socialization experiences (Carden, 1990; Hunt & Michael, 1985; Merriam, 1985; Noe, 1988; Robertson, 1992). Mentoring is a nurturing, supportive process that includes information giving, role modeling, teaching, and counseling, to open doors that provide protégés with as many opportunities as possible (Rogers, 1986). The mentor takes a personal interest in the protégé and offers leadership, guidance, and advice on issues encountered during fieldwork.

To develop mutual admiration, trust, and respect, the one-to-one mentor–protégé relationship requires the time and effort of both parties. The relationship typically lasts a long time, and it is marked by emotional commitment from both sides. The Dictionary of Titles ranks mentoring as the highest and most complex level of functioning in the person-related hierarchy of skills (Alleman, 1982). The emotional intensity between mentor and protégé sets the relationship apart from role modeling, training, counseling, coaching, or sponsorship—functions subsumed under any type of helping relationship.

The literature also suggests problems with the one-to-one model of mentoring. First, it is unlikely that any one mentor can possibly be all things to the protégé (Horgan, 1992; Kram & Bragar, 1992). Second, due to the intense interaction between mentor and protégé, personality conflicts may arise. Third, the mentor may develop varying degrees of favoritism for the protégé that make the mentor biased and less effective as a fieldwork educator. Fourth, because the mentor has the authority and power of an expert, the pressure rests primarily on the mentor to ensure the protégé’s success. Fifth, some mentors give poor advice or incomplete information, or they exhibit a style that is idiosyncratic or inappropriate for a particular protégé (Horgan, 1992).

All mentors are not equal and do not provide consistent role modeling, training, and information to their protégés. The protégé’s needs may be better met through peer relationships or multiple mentoring relationships.

A Continuum of Peer Relationships

As students enter their roles at a fieldwork site, they strive to create a professional identity and gain a sense of who they can become. They struggle to reconcile concerns about themselves, their professional competence, their careers, their families, and their personal relationships. Students address these concerns by developing relationships with other students, friends, family members, supervisors, and professional and technical staff members, as well as academic and clinical faculty members. Developing these relationships allows students to work on their concerns while they gain confidence from having developed skills and competency during fieldwork (see Figure 1).

Members in this continuum of relationships may play one or more roles including information peer, collegial peer, special peer, and mentor (Kram, 1985). Information peers might include fellow students in the academic program, academic advisors, and faculty members who are primary sources of information. During fieldwork, information peers might include students from other schools as well as department staff members who provide information about the department’s operations, policies, and procedures. Collegial peers might include friends, family members, academic faculty members and advisors, academic and fieldwork educators, and occupational therapy practitioners at the fieldwork site. They offer emotional support and encouragement on personal and professional issues. Collegial peers may give advice about which fieldwork site to choose and how that experience might affect the student’s career plans. This advice continues, as collegial peers provide feedback to students regarding their performance, judgement, and attitudes on a variety of tasks and issues that arise throughout the fieldwork experience.

Special peers generally form enduring interpersonal bonds. Such relationships can develop between the student and an academic or research advisor, a special faculty member, or a fieldwork educator—anyone with whom the student establishes a special rapport, trust, or mutual admiration. They provide intimacy, honest feedback, and a personal confirmation of worth (Kram, 1985). Due to the rapport and emotional connection between the student and the special peer, feedback is often focused more on personal issues than on job-related performance and skills. It is at this level that the relationship between special peer and student may approach that of mentor and protégé—especially on a Level II placement, where experiences tend to be more intense than those on a Level I placement.

The Multiple Mentor Experience

Engagement in a mentor–protégé relationship often fol-

![Figure 1. Kram's Continuum of Peer Relationships supports development at every career stage. Reprinted with permission from Kram, K. E. (1985). Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.](http://ajot.aota.org/pdfaccess.ashx?url=/data/journals/ajot/930167/)
allows entry-level education as the next phase of professional socialization (Robertson, 1992). This relationship often begins while on Level II fieldwork. One fieldwork student paired with one fieldwork educator will learn one perspective and assume the risks previously described. However, a situation in which several mentors collaborate with several protégés stimulates learning from many perspectives, while minimizing the risks incurred in an exclusive relationship.

Multiple mentors can give a protégé access to several experienced, knowledgeable occupational therapy practitioners who will fulfill a variety of needs for the protégé during the fieldwork placement (Horgan, 1992). Multiple mentoring allows each mentor to contribute to the protégé on the basis of the mentor’s particular interests and strengths. Having multiple mentors as role models gives the protégé a chance to observe how different occupational therapy practitioners approach similar situations. Multiple mentoring decreases the likelihood that personality conflicts will occur because protégés divide their time between several mentors rather than spending an extended period of time with one. In addition, protégés are likely to find a role model among the multiple mentors who share their particular style. Multiple mentoring also creates an awareness of diversity and sensitivity between mentors, protégés, and consumers (Horgan, 1992). Multiple mentoring tends to balance the protégé’s overall fieldwork experience.

How might this multiple mentoring model work? Occupational therapy practitioners in any given setting may have a fieldwork educator who is the liaison with the fieldwork coordinator of the academic program. The fieldwork educator may be responsible for making reservations and, alone or with occupational therapy practitioners at that setting, supervising students at any given time. One mentor working in a setting that uses a model of multiple mentoring might supervise several protégés, or several mentors might supervise several protégés. Each occupational therapy practitioner may assume a particular role with or responsibility to fieldwork students. Some might share with students their developed expertise with a particular frame of reference or in orthotic fabrication. Other mentors might share tips for preparing lectures and methods of instruction to apply to either consumer education or inservices to other professionals. The practitioner as manager–mentor might share information on budgets, staffing, and productivity. The practitioner as researcher–mentor might show students how something they do every day can yield data that provide information on the efficacy of a particular intervention or support efforts in continuous quality improvement.

In the multiple mentoring model, no one occupational therapy practitioner has the sole responsibility for the education of any one fieldwork student, although one practitioner may coordinate the process. The overall responsibility is shared by practitioners working within that setting, unless there is only one occupational therapy practitioner within the setting. One mentor supervising several protégés may not necessarily require more of the mentor’s time and work, because protégés working together tend to support each other, share information, and answer each other’s questions.

Formal or informal supervision can take several forms. One-to-one meetings between mentor and protégé should be held as necessary. Ongoing group meetings of all protégés should also be held, guided by one or more mentors. Protégés bring their questions and concerns to this peer group for joint problem solving. They exercise clinical reasoning and critical thinking skills as they collaboratively analyze problems and provide feedback. In this way, protégés learn from their own experiences as well as each other’s. They also learn from the experiences of their mentor or multiple mentors. Protégés learn how occupational therapy practitioners think and come to realize that there are different approaches rather than one correct answer. With several protégés offering daily mutual support, they often answer questions for each other, thus saving the time of any one mentor. The multiple mentoring model encourages protégés to assume responsibility for their own learning and professional development by reaching out to their resource network.

Evaluation of student performance can be done in various ways, although any mentor who has interacted with a particular protege should contribute feedback on that protege’s fieldwork evaluation form. This feedback from multiple mentors might then be synthesized by a fieldwork educator who shares the feedback with each protege as part of a formal meeting.

The multiple mentor–protégé relationship uses the team approach and encourages active involvement to focus on what the protege learns from the mentor rather than from the relationship itself. The relationship between mentors and protégés addresses many functions, depending on the fieldwork setting and the protege’s needs.

Although the concept of one or more mentors supervising multiple protégés is one solution for easing the strain of time pressures on occupational therapy practitioners, it is not without risks. These risks can be minimized if appropriate measures are taken by both mentors and protégés. For example, fieldwork students supervised by and responsible to multiple mentors must be careful not to play one mentor against the other. If students have problems, they may tend to blame them on the inconsistency of supervision provided by multiple mentors rather than assuming responsibility for those problems themselves.

Occupational therapy practitioners who assume a multiple mentorship role must establish clear lines of communication with each other as well as with each fieldwork student. A mechanism for providing feedback to the
protégé must be established early on in the fieldwork experience. Expectations must be clearly defined and understood by all involved in the process to minimize mixed messages about performance. Practitioners must avoid putting the fieldwork student in the middle of their differing points of view. Occupational therapy practitioners as mentors need to be flexible, modifying their supervisory styles and approaches to intervention as appropriate. Differences between mentors do exist and may even be healthy, as long as the student is made aware of the reasons for some of these differences.

Roles of Mentor and Protégé During Fieldwork

As academic faculty members instruct and motivate students in the classroom, so fieldwork educators must instruct and motivate students in various practice arenas and encourage them to apply the techniques and skills learned in the classroom. Equally important, fieldwork educators as mentors must support student protégés as they struggle to further develop and apply skills in critical thinking and clinical reasoning (Cohn, 1989). It is the fieldwork educator who ultimately shows the student how successful practice depends more on the ability to reflect before taking action than on simply applying theory and factual knowledge (Schön, 1987).

Gray (1988) proposed a mentor–protégé relationship model for moving protégés from passive to active learning. Applying Gray’s model to clinical education, the fieldwork educator as mentor can move through the following continuum: (a) imparting information needed by the protégé, (b) coaching the protégé to learn new skills, (c) making decisions and solving problems together, (d) providing support while the protégé takes the lead, and (e) stepping back as the protégé achieves relative independence from the mentor (see Figure 2).

Occupational therapists at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke’s Medical Center in Chicago receive formal training in preparation for becoming fieldwork educators. They have found Gray’s model helpful for visualizing the degree of shared responsibility that should occur during the fieldwork experience, regardless of the length of the placement. In most cases, the protégé comes to the mentor knowing next to nothing about that setting and leaves with some degree of competence and expertise. As a therapist instructs and motivates the patient, and as in a fieldwork educator instructs and motivates the student, so the mentor encourages the protégé to learn and then apply higher level thinking skills to new situations.

Responsibilities of Mentor and Protégé During Fieldwork

The functions addressed in multiple mentor–protégé relationships may not be extremely different from the functions in a one-to-one relationship, because it is the mentoring process itself that fosters growth of both career and psychosocial functions. The mentoring process has the potential to facilitate career advancement and psychosocial development in early and middle adulthood (Kram, 1985). Career functions are enhanced through such functions as sponsorship, exposure-and-visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging work assignments. Sponsorship, the most often observed career function, involves the mentor’s actively nominating the protégé for opportunities. The fieldwork coordinator sponsors the protégé and creates opportunities for the protégé to work with other occupational therapy practitioners and gain a variety of experiences. Exposure-and-visibility allows the protégé to develop relationships with other practitioners and professionals in the immediate practice area in addition to meeting persons in other parts of the organization. This process begins during the fieldwork orientation, when the protégé is asked to meet with professionals from other disciplines to determine his or her role on the team, and continues as the protégé attends rounds, care conferences, or organizational inservices.

Coaching is used by the mentor to suggest specific strategies for achieving goals. It is an important function of the relationship throughout the fieldwork experience. The mentor protects the protégé at appropriate times from untimely or potentially damaging contact with others, yet does so judiciously, because so doing can both support and smother the protégé. Finally, challenging work assignments from the mentor provide opportunities for learning time management, responsibility, and professional and technical skills. Protégés may be responsible for such assignments as case studies, intervention plans, patient notes, in-services, and independent projects or study during the fieldwork placement. Career functions are important because they enhance the protégés’ visibility within the area of practice while contributing to their career growth and development.

Mentoring enhances fieldwork students’ psychosocial development through role modeling, acceptance,
and-confirmation, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1985). Role modeling is the most often used psychosocial function, because mentors model attitudes, values, behavior, and skills for protégés to emulate. Acceptance-and-confirmation aid in the development of mutual admiration, trust, and respect and provide an underlying support to help protégés learn to tolerate differences and ambiguity and to take risks. As any fieldwork educator knows, mastery of this function is critical to the success of the would-be occupational therapy practitioner in any health care delivery system. Mentors use counseling skills as they discuss such personal concerns as clarifying one’s relationship with self, with the organization, and with others. The protege shares doubts, concerns, and fears—trusting the mentor to maintain confidentiality. The mentor’s ability to communicate in an effective and timely manner is of utmost importance in fostering the protege’s trust. Finally, friendship is developed through social interaction between mentor and protege and results in informal exchanges about work and personal experiences. The more that the protege and the mentor can relate to each other as human beings, with personal dreams and concerns, the better understanding each will have of the other. Awareness and mastery of psychosocial functions can enhance the protege’s sense of confidence, competence, identity, and effectiveness in a work-related role.

Summary

Students form a variety of developmental relationships between entering an academic program and successfully completing Level I and Level II fieldwork placements. Whether these relationships are formed with information peers, collegial peers, special peers or mentors, these relationships have the potential to enhance the capabilities of the protege in functions related to career and psychosocial development.

Use of the multiple mentoring model in the supervision of fieldwork students has distinct advantages over the one-to-one model of supervision often used. The multiple mentoring model allows a fieldwork site to accept more students at a time while minimizing the stress on any one fieldwork educator. It encourages students to use each other as resources and thus minimizes time spent by a fieldwork educator. Multiple mentoring also spreads the responsibility for supervision and dissemination of information among several practitioners within an area of practice or across practice areas. It promotes collegiality as proteges meet with multiple mentors to discuss clinical reasoning related to professional issues. In addition, the process of multiple mentoring offers support and direction while placing the responsibility for learning on the protege.

The mentor-protégé relationship, whether matching one mentor with multiple protégés or multiple mentors with multiple protégés, offers benefits to all who are involved, including the mentor, the protégé and the organization itself (Nolinske, 1994). It is the relationship between the mentor, protege, and the organization that helps persons at all levels to manage, encourage, nurture, and teach organizational responsibility (Farren, Gray, & Kay, 1984).

References


