Fieldwork is an important aspect of occupational therapy education. It provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate their understanding of didactic classroom material by applying their knowledge in a controlled practice setting with supervision. Students must demonstrate an acceptable level of clinical skill by meeting preset behavioral objectives in order to complete their occupational therapy education and become eligible to take the certification examination. It would seem logical that students who do well in their academic studies would do well in their clinical performance. However, in numerous studies, no correlation between academic and clinical performance has been found (Anderson & Jantzen, 1965; Englehart, 1957; Ford, 1979; Katz & Mosey, 1980; Lind, 1970; Mann & Banasiak, 1985).

Our experience as educators has concurred with this research. Although most students who demonstrate good academic performance succeed in the clinical setting, the few who have had problems on their fieldwork experiences tended to stand out. To gain further insight into problems encountered by the students who experienced difficulty on fieldwork, we used a case study approach as suggested by Mann and Banasiak (1985) to examine several cases. One theme surfaced consistently: students who had difficulty engaging in the supervisory process encountered problems more frequently than other students during their fieldwork experiences. These students generally did not accept responsibility for their behavior and did not respond well to feedback. Supervision plays an important part in the continuing growth and development of all occupational therapists (American Occupational Therapy Association, 1994; Haiman, 1992). Hughes and Opacich (1990) reported that the ability to take responsibility for one's own behavior is an important aspect in developing appropriate professional behaviors.

In this article we present two case studies that illustrate the type of problems encountered by students on fieldwork and the intervention process used by academic and clinical supervisors to handle the problems. Each demonstrates a different outcome to intervention. As background information, our program requires three Level I experiences and two Level II experiences with an optional third Level II experience.

Case Study 1: Susan

Susan was identified by faculty members as a potentially difficult student during her first semester in the junior year of the occupational therapy program. She was argumentative with faculty members regarding tests, assignments, and grading. She frequently complained that test questions were unfair and ambiguous and that grading on assignments was subjective. Peer evaluations from class-room activities indicated that she had difficulty reaching consensus with the group and did not work well on team-oriented activities. These behaviors were evident during
the following semesters in the classroom. Her faculty advisor and course instructors discussed Susan's behaviors with her several times. Susan's response was that she had a right to her opinions and that she did not think that her behavior was inappropriate.

During her first Level I fieldwork experience, Susan's evaluation indicated that her performance was satisfactory but that her ideas and viewpoints were rigid. The Appendix includes excerpts from the fieldwork evaluation form that relate to self-awareness and participation in supervision, as well as the rating scale used.

Susan's supervisor suggested that she needed to become more flexible and to listen to other alternatives presented to her. This suggestion was echoed by her faculty advisors. She repeated that she thought her behavior was appropriate. It was pointed out by the faculty advisors that although she was entitled to her opinions, her supervisors were also entitled to their opinions and that it might be helpful for her to try to see another perspective. In essence, her responses validated the comments made about her behaviors on fieldwork. It was also suggested that increased flexibility might help her to better understand persons with values and life experiences that were different from her own.

Typically in our program, the faculty members met at the end of each semester to discuss students who have been identified as having problems with fieldwork. Initially, Susan's situation was viewed by the academic supervisors as an isolated incident, but as time progressed, it became apparent that this was not the case.

During the next semester, similar behaviors were noted both in and on her second Level I fieldwork evaluation. Two faculty members met with Susan, discussed the importance of engaging in the supervisory process, and pointed out that using feedback could promote her professional growth. The faculty members expressed their concerns to Susan that these recurring problems might interfere with her Level II fieldwork experience unless they were addressed.

During the midterm evaluation of Susan's first Level II fieldwork, her supervisor contacted the school to report problematic behaviors, including lateness, lack of preparation for the clinical activity, and lack of adequate participation in the supervisory process. Susan, her clinical supervisor, and the fieldwork coordinator met again to discuss the situation. Objective examples of her performance were given, with alternative behaviors suggested. Susan blamed her supervisor for the problems and claimed that the faculty members were being unfair to her. She did not accept any responsibility for the negative evaluation or for the specific behaviors ascribed to her.

In the next meeting of academic faculty members, Susan's fieldwork difficulties were placed on the agenda. First, areas of difficulty and behaviors cited by the clinical supervisor were identified. Then, her Level I fieldwork evaluations were reviewed and similarities were noted with her Level II performance. Because students who encounter problems on their fieldwork experiences often report a personality conflict with their supervisor, we believed that it was important to make certain that this was not the case. As there were clear similarities between Susan's Level I evaluations and behaviors reported during her Level II fieldwork, the faculty members determined that the evaluation probably was based on performance, not on an interpersonal conflict. Finally, the student's responses to the supervisor's feedback were examined.

After this review, the fieldwork coordinator and a faculty member met with Susan to develop an individual plan. They reviewed the clinical evaluations and the similar behaviors identified from all fieldwork experiences. In addition to the inability to be flexible and responsive to supervision, Susan's specific problems noted on both fieldwork experiences included being late, being unprepared, and not handling assignments on time. Behavioral objectives were established, with stated performance criteria and a time line for review.

Susan insisted that she had many responsibilities outside of her fieldwork that prevented her from meeting the necessary deadlines. She stated that her supervisors had not been sensitive to her needs, even though she had discussed them. The faculty members reminded her of the need for timeliness in clinical settings and the requirements of documenting treatment promptly for third-party payers. They also pointed out that although a supervisor should try to be sensitive to a student's educational needs, it is not necessarily appropriate for the supervisor to be sensitive to personal needs. The suggestion was made that Susan reexamine some of her priorities to see how she could adjust her schedule to meet the demands of a clinical setting. Susan was asked to develop her own plan for modifying her behavior. This request proved to be unsuccessful, because Susan insisted that both supervisors were rigid and inflexible with their suggestions for improving performance. She was asked to consider the validity of her supervisor's feedback and try to identify ways in which she could meet the stated expectations of the fieldwork center.

Similar behaviors continued during her final fieldwork placement. Although meetings and problem-solving sessions with Susan continued, she made little progress in changing her performance. She managed to complete all Level II fieldwork placements with a minimally passing grade. This was of great concern to the faculty members, because we thought that continual problems with supervision and failure to meet previously set objectives should not be rewarded with a passing grade.

Case Study 2: Sally

Sally did not encounter any academic problems until her first Level I fieldwork experience, when she received a marginally passing grade. Comments on her evaluation
indicated that she was frequently unprepared, did not raise questions during her observations of clinical interventions or during supervision, and appeared to lack a clear understanding of theory or treatment principles. During her meeting with the faculty representatives, she blamed her clinical supervisor for her own behaviors, claiming that the supervisor was not supportive and tended to put her down and that she therefore did not feel comfortable enough to ask questions or demonstrate her knowledge. She indicated that she and the supervisor had a personality conflict. Similar comments appeared on her second and third Level I fieldwork.

During the midterm evaluation of her first Level II fieldwork placement, similar comments were expressed again. The academic fieldwork coordinator met with Sally, pointed out the similarity between the comments on her three Level I evaluations and the comments being made by her current supervisor, and suggested ways that Sally could change her performance. Sally reluctantly agreed to try some of the strategies.

Three weeks later, at a follow-up meeting, Sally no longer blamed her problems on personality conflicts with supervisors. She was able to see the patterns of behavior that her supervisors had identified and to make use of their feedback. She found that some of the suggestions from the past meeting had worked well for her. Sally successfully completed the affiliation with significant improvements noted on her final evaluation. She subsequently wrote a letter to the faculty members thanking them for being so persistent and supporting her even when she had been hard to deal with. She stated that she had finally understood the feedback she had been receiving. Sally completed her next two Level II experiences without a problem.

Suggested Courses of Action for Academic Faculty Members and Fieldwork Coordinators

Our experience in analyzing several cases, including those presented here, has taught us several things. The primary concern of faculty members and fieldwork coordinators is to identify whether the student is able to apply theoretical material in practice and perform competently in the clinical environment. The coordinator must therefore determine whether the fieldwork problems are general or specific to the student’s performance in one clinical site. On the other hand, students need to develop a sense of personal responsibility for their actions and a willingness to accept feedback. If a student is unable to engage in supervision, he or she is likely to encounter problems in any setting.

The following is a suggested template for approaching problematic fieldwork issues. First, it is important to identify what really is the problem—not by placing blame, but by listening to both the student and the supervisor and hearing the stated concerns of each party. Often, it is difficult to tell whether a personality conflict exists, unless the coordinator has prior knowledge of the behavior of both the student and the supervisor. Second, trends and patterns of student behavior can help to identify whether the problem is specific to the fieldwork center, the chemistry between student and supervisor, or the student. Third, sometimes awareness can bring about change. Once students become aware that they have some control and can make a change in behavior that can result in a change in the outcome, they may be motivated to try other behaviors. Fourth, repeating the feedback can be helpful. As Sally pointed out to us, she finally understood the feedback, which indicated that repeating it to her several times, in different ways, was valuable. Finally, specific suggestions about changes in behavior can be useful to some students. If the student is receptive to the idea of change, this can be a collaborative process.

Suggested Courses of Action for Clinical Supervisors

When a student is identified as having a problem during the fieldwork experience, the clinical supervisor is concerned with the immediate problem and the student’s ability to function within the particular clinical experience. Certainly, this problem may have implications for the student’s overall performance and ability to work effectively as an occupational therapist, but the concern at first is more immediate. The following are some suggested steps for clinical supervisors to take when addressing student problems.

First, the supervisor should depersonalize the situation. It is important that the student understand that constructive feedback is not a personal attack, but an attempt to improve performance. If the supervisor can facilitate the student’s investment in the supervisory process, he or she will have made a major contribution to the student’s professional development. Second, the supervisor should identify specific objective behaviors that could be changed or modified. It might be helpful to make specific suggestions about change or identify resources that could be used or people who could serve as role models. Third, if the student remains unresponsive, the supervisor could involve the academic fieldwork coordinator. Together, the supervisor and coordinator can determine specific behavioral objectives, criteria for successful performance, and a time frame for evaluation of this plan.

Conclusion

Problems encountered during fieldwork experiences do not occur often; however, when they arise, these issues can be difficult and time consuming. It is important to attempt to identify potential problem areas during Level I fieldwork to avoid repeated difficulties during Level II
placements. By helping students to understand the need to openly engage in supervision, learn from their supervisors' feedback, and take responsibility for their own behavior, supervisors and faculty members can foster positive learning experiences. Assessing the problematic situation objectively and developing strategies for intervention is critical to successful outcomes. This will foster an ongoing collaborative relationship between the clinical supervisors and the academic faculty members. If we are able to facilitate a positive resolution together, the student will be able to grow and learn.

Appendix
Excerpt of Items From the Kean College of New Jersey Level I Fieldwork Evaluation Form

Self Awareness
1. The student is able to recognize his/her own feelings, attitudes and behavior.
2. The student is able to discuss his/her own feelings, attitudes and behavior.
3. The student is aware of his/her reactions in a clinical setting.

Participation in the Supervisory Process
1. The student is able to articulate learning needs and issues of concern.
2. The student is able to utilize feedback from supervisor and staff.
3. The student is able to give feedback to supervisor and staff.
4. The student shows a positive attitude towards and is actively engaged in problem-solving.
5. The student is actively involved in the supervisory process.
6. The student asks appropriate questions.
The following 5-point rating scale is used for each of the above questions:

- Rarely: The student displayed this behavior less than 40% of the time.
- About half the time: The student displayed this behavior 40% to 65% of the time.
- Frequently, with prompting: The student displayed this behavior 75% to 89% of the time.

Frequently: The student displayed this behavior 75% of the time.
Consistently: The student displayed this behavior 90% to 100% of the time.
Not applicable

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References


