Learning experiences on role emerging placements: an exploration from the student perspective

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Abstract

Background/Aim: Occupational therapy educators are challenged to provide students with practical experiences which prepare them for ever changing healthcare contexts on graduation. Role emerging placements have been widely used internationally to help meet this challenge, but research into the learning experiences of students during these innovative placements is limited. This research investigated the enablers and barriers to learning from the perspectives of students on such placements from two European universities.

Methods: Two separate qualitative studies tracked ten final year students. Interviews explored their learning experiences prior to, during and after an eight or ten week role emerging placement in a range of settings.

Results: Four themes emerged, which were (1) adapting to less doing, more thinking and planning; (2) understanding the complexity of collaboration and making it work; (3) emotional extremes; and (4) realising and using the occupational therapy perspective.

Conclusions: These placements presented a "roller coaster" of authentic learning experiences which created the opportunity for students to use occupation in practice and develop skills for collaborative working in an interprofessional environment. While students viewed their role emerging placement experiences positively, challenges included the emotional responses of students and placement pace.

Significance of the research: Findings suggest the need for supportive student placement experiences in both established and role emerging areas to prepare students for a range of opportunities in an uncertain future.

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Introduction

It is established that opportunities for occupational therapy students to put into practice the knowledge and skills they have learnt at university are a vital aspect of their professional education (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2002). Occupational therapy educators are challenged to provide students with learning experiences which will prepare them for the ever changing health and social care contexts when they graduate. To help meet this challenge, role emerging placements have been widely promoted internationally in occupational therapy programmes. These placements have been developed to meet a variety of needs including; (1) the provision of diverse learning experiences (Johnson, Koenig, Piersol, Santalucia & Wachter-Schutz, 2006; Rodger et al., 2007), (2) meeting placement shortages (Rodger et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2007), (3) responding to healthcare reforms (Bossers, Cook, Polatajko & Laine, 1997; Huddleston, 1999; Withers & Shann, 2008), (4) promoting role expansion for occupational therapy (Friedland, Polatajko & Gage, 2001; Thew, Hargreaves & Cronin-Davis, 2008); and (5) influencing career choices of students (Johnson et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2009).

Role emerging placements are designed to promote occupational therapy services in settings where the role of the occupational therapist has not yet been established (Wood, 2005). Within these settings students are provided with frequent (e.g. daily) on-site supervision by a professional who is not an occupational therapist, and less frequent (e.g. weekly) supervision by an occupational therapist who is either university or practice based (Overton, Clark & Thomas, 2009). The term for this supervisor is inconsistent, with fieldwork educator, long-arm supervisor and off-site occupational therapist supervisor used in the literature. Within this paper the term off-site supervisor will be used which is consistent with documentation in the United Kingdom (College of Occupational Therapists, 2006) and Ireland (Warren, 2011).

Research into the experiences of students on traditional placements is extensive; however, in-depth research into the learning experiences of students on role emerging placements is in its infancy (Overton et al., 2009). Many of the studies of role emerging placements offered limited depth of understanding of the student experiences due to small numbers of students (Fieldhouse & Fedden, 2009), experiences only in a specific area of practice, for example in mental health settings (Rodger et al., 2009), or schools (Dancza, Bates & Martin, 2011), or reporting only on students from within a single university programme (Totten & Pratt, 2001; Fieldhouse & Fedden, 2009). While a few studies have reported on larger numbers of students in more diverse settings (e.g. Thew et al., 2008; Friedland et al., 2001; Mulholland & Derdall, 2005), the majority only interviewed or surveyed students at the conclusion of the placement, which meant that students offered a reflective account of their learning experiences after the placement concluded rather than an on-going account.

Role emerging placements offer students an important opportunity to experience a wide range of client need and services which they would be unlikely to experience if their placements were limited to established occupational therapy services (Alsop & Donald, 1996; Bossers et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2006). The former placements have been reported to provide opportunities for the student to:

- develop confidence as autonomous practitioners (Thew et al., 2008);
- develop skills in communication, leadership and management (Fortune, Farnworth & McKinstry, 2006);
- consolidate professional identity and promote the uniqueness and value of occupational therapy (Totten & Pratt, 2001);
- integrate theory into practice and experience independent learning (Rodger et al., 2007); and
- develop the skills in reflection, problem solving, resourcefulness and self-management (Bartholomai & Fitzgerald, 2007).

While the benefits have been identified, there has also been resistance to role emerging placements. Some occupational therapists feel they do not offer the same quality of experience and necessary skills as the 1:1 or apprenticeship model (Fisher & Savin-Baden, 2002; Thomas et al., 2007). There are also some concerns that the students do not develop a strong sense of professional identity or the ability to adapt the occupational therapy philosophy to alternative settings if they do not have a close role model (Rodger et al., 2007). However, Rodger et al., (2009) states that traditional apprenticeship models are no longer realistic with changes in healthcare practice and proposed that role emerging placements should be explored by the profession as an alternative model.

While a number of studies have now identified consistent benefits and challenges of role emerging placements, few studies have explored in detail the student learning experience across the duration of the placement. Responding to placement shortages may have been an initial driver to explore role emerging placements, however Jepson, Wells and Biswas (2006) suggested that this has now shifted to focus on high quality and unique learning experiences which students may not experience in more traditional placements. Although there is a perception that role emerging placements may facilitate students to develop skills for future practise, the actual learning experiences of students undertaking these placements has not been thoroughly investigated. Research to date appears to be focused on individual accounts of the placement experience and evaluation of the benefits and challenges of undertaking the placement, rather than exploring the learning experiences of students. The small number of studies which do include student learning offer a variable account, and are often limited to labelling the learning strategies rather than undertaking a detailed examination of how students learn. Learning strategies include the use of adult learning principles (Bossers et al., 1997; Fieldhouse & Fedden, 2009); problem-based learning (Thew et al., 2008); self-directed learning (Bossers et al., 1997); experiential

learning (Boniface, Seymour, Polglase, Lawrie, & Clarke, 2012); and peer learning (Boniface et al., 2012). Only Fieldhouse and Fedden (2009) described the learning experiences of students as surface to deep learning.

Therefore, this paper examines the students' perspective of their learning experiences in a variety of role emerging placement settings, across two countries.

Methods

Research design

This research involved the collation of data from two separate yet similar studies, one in England and the other in Ireland, exploring the learning experience of students on role emerging placements. Both studies investigated the student experiences by collecting data prior to, during and after a role emerging placement.

Social constructionism influenced the design which aimed to understand the different perspectives of the students on the role emerging placements. The research did not attempt to define the *true* experience of students undertaking these placements; rather it attempted to understand the constructions with which the students interpreted their learning experiences. Thus both studies used qualitative interviews to explore and record the students' learning on an eight or ten week placement. The aim was to build a comprehensive picture of the complex phenomenon of student learning experiences in the context of the role emerging placements (Carpenter & Suto, 2008).

Interviews were conducted by the principal investigators, who in two instances were also the off-site supervisors. While it could be suggested that this would compromise the research through bias, this "insider knowledge" (Carpenter & Suto, 2008, p. 28) can add trustworthiness and authenticity to the process as it allows for an intimate understanding of the student experience (Patton, 2002). Indeed, without this insight it may not be possible to fully understand the students' learning experience. Patton (2002) summarised this as "closeness does not make bias and loss of perspective inevitable; distance is no guarantee of objectivity" (p. 49). However, it is important to promote "balance, fairness and completeness" (Patton, 2002, p. 51) within the research both during the interview process and analysis of the data. To do this a number of strategies were put into place such as a systematic data collection procedure, participant checking, keeping reflective field-notes and using the research team to monitor, clarify and challenge interpretations of the data (Patton, 2002). By using reflective writing the principal investigators aimed to be attentive to, and conscious of, personal perspectives, power relationships and orientations and considered how these interacted with the research (Trowler, 2011).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to identify the ten student participants involved in these studies. Ethical approval was received for each site from the relevant University Ethics Committees. Written consent was obtained from students and they were able to withdraw from the research at any time without impact on their placement.

England

Final year occupational therapy students from an English university undertaking a three year pre-registration Bachelor of Science Degree with Honours in Occupational Therapy, who were allocated to school- based role emerging placements, were invited to participate. This group was targeted due to the focus of this research being school-based occupational therapy.

Over the course of two placement blocks, three pairs of students participated in a ten week full time placement in either a specialist communication centre in a mainstream secondary school, a small village mainstream primary school or a special primary and secondary school for fostered children. Overall there were six female student participants with a mean age of 25 years (range 20-35 years). Students were placed in pairs at each placement site to promote peer learning as recommended by Rodger et al. (2007). None of the schools had an occupational therapist on staff and had previously only very limited contact with local occupational therapy services.

Prior to this placement, the students had undertaken three placements during their education, however none were within a paediatric setting. Students were allocated to the role emerging placement following normal procedure, based on their overall placement profile to ensure they would have a range of placement experiences on graduation. Once allocated, the students were then invited to participate in the research.

In preparation for this final placement, all students participated in a two week university-based module where they investigated relevant theory and policy contexts related to their placement. All students completed a placement briefing to assist them with placement learning objectives and a debriefing session which provided the opportunity to discuss any queries about the placement. They also met the onsite supervisor(s) prior to the placement. A workbook designed for the research which related to the occupational therapy process within a school setting was provided. This was then used as a resource for their placement.

Ireland

Final year occupational therapy students who were allocated a role emerging placement as part of their two year pre-registration Masters of Occupational Therapy programme were invited to participate. Students completed their role emerging placement as their third, or

final placement. Four female student participants with a mean age of 27 years (range 23-34 years) engaged in an eight week full time role emerging placement in either a community education organisation within a regeneration area or a homeless organisation. Both setting had no previous occupational therapy services. Again students were placed in pairs.

The allocation of role emerging placements followed the usual procedure whereby the students expressed a preference to complete this type of placement. Once allocated the students were invited to participate in the research.

As common preparation for placements, all students completed twelve induction sessions in year one at university. Placement briefings and de-briefings were also completed to assist with planning learning objectives. Students were also given the opportunity to discuss the placement model during individual sessions with the practice education staff. All students contacted the placement sites before placement and some completed pre-placement visits.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either individually or in pairs, depending on the availability of the students, to elicit their experiences of participating in the role emerging placement. Arksey and Knight (1999, p. 74) use the term "joint interviewing" to describe one interviewer and two interviewees. In addition to a pragmatic rationale, joint interviews were the preferred option as the students were on placement together so during the interviews they could comment and reflect on each other's perspectives. Arksey and Knight (1999) also suggested interviewing two students together may promote confidence in the interviewee and may potentially lessen the authoritative position of the interviewer. A disadvantage of joint interviews was the potential for one student to dominate discussions and this needed careful facilitation from the interviewer. It was also acknowledged that interviewing students together was likely to produce co-constructions of the experience when considering this from a social constructivist perspective (Carpenter & Suto, 2008).

The interviews were conducted on the respective University campus at three time points, prior to commencing placement, during the placement at the mid-point, and within two weeks of concluding the placement.

Topic areas for the interviews in England and Ireland were broadly similar and related to the enablers and challenges to student learning, the level of support required, and their use of occupation and occupational therapy theory. Example questions included: What have been the highlights/ challenges for you during this placement?; What have been the key things you have learnt from this experience?; What do you think has/hasn't helped you learn or progress on this placement?; What might you do differently in your future practice as a result of learning from this experience?

Interviews lasted for an average of 60 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were ascribed to participants in each interview transcript to protect their anonymity.

Data analysis

The data from England and Ireland were combined. Twenty three anonymised transcripts were analysed, coded and categorised, and through this process themes were generated as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two anonymised transcripts were coded in a joint communication via Skype® between the researchers to align thinking regarding the codes. The respective datasets were then systematically coded manually by the two researchers with regular communication via Skype® to add new codes as the data dictated. Through this process 85 codes were created. In a face-to-face meeting the two researchers refined these codes and combined them into 14 categories. From this analysis four themes were developed.

During the analysis, a peer debriefing process was completed where the interpretations from the data were discussed with the respective research supervisors to ensure rigour of the research. Trustworthiness was also established through member checking and a synthesis of the categories and themes with examples of key quotes to support the themes were emailed or discussed with the student participants for feedback (Carpenter & Suto, 2008).

Findings

Four themes emerged from the interviews; (1) adapting to less doing, more thinking and planning, (2) understanding the complexity of collaboration and making it work, (3) emotional extremes, and (4) realising and using the occupational therapy perspective. Each theme is detailed below with representative quotes from the data illustrating and evidencing the key features of the theme.

(1) Adapting to less doing, more thinking and planning

All students identified their experience as spending more time planning and reflecting with less actual time actively doing occupational therapy intervention. They described having to adapt to a different placement experience which involved more personal learning and reflection on the potential of occupational therapy in the setting than they had experienced in their previous placements.

> *"But I think it has really pushed me into thinking about myself as an OT student and tested me to really think about what I am doing." (Julia, during the placement)*

Students discussed supervision and peer support were vital to enabling them to use theory in their practice. This process was described as a *"steep learning curve"* and students needed to adapt their learning styles over the course of the placement. This involved approaching learning tasks in new ways within the placement context to promote learning.

> *"By being put in the situation and doing something and then going away and researching it and backing it up, I think it was those two processes together… So putting theory into practice and seeing how it works and then reflecting on that in your reflections or in supervision. I think that process helped me to learn a lot."* (Joanne, after the placement)

Students highlighted the development of several transferrable skills, such as independently organising their work and managing time and resources effectively.

> *"The skills like thinking on your feet, being creative and having to change things at the last minute, all of those aspects have really developed me. I wouldn't have wanted any other placement now."* (Michelle, after the placement)

Most students described feeling autonomous in their thinking and appreciated the freedom of not needing to conform to an established occupational therapy structure.

> *"The benefits were having the freedom to work as an OT, in almost a purer OT sense in that you are not adhering to strict procedures or policies that are already set in place."* (Emily, after the placement)

(2) Understanding the complexity of collaboration and making it work

All students gained insights into the value of collaboration when working with the staff at the placement sites and wider community members. Students could see the wider context of where they were working and the importance of learning to deal with interpersonal dynamics.

> *"Being able to look at other people's perspectives and to look at the bigger picture because there is a lot about compromising…to make things successful".* (Siobhan, after the placement)

Forming relationships with child or adult clients as well as staff members was viewed by all as essential, although not without its challenges. Communication was mentioned frequently with examples of the students adapting their communication style and being aware of their use of professional language. Communication with staff also involved adapting their language so that their suggestions were not viewed as being critical of current practice.

Some students had concerns regarding keeping on track with the purpose of their placement, especially when staff on-site had other expectations.

> *"What was mentally draining was trying to manage everyone's expectations as well as doing something for myself and my own learning …" (Ursla, after the placement)*

> *"I think they were expecting us to be constantly in their class with the answer as soon as we had observed something… and I think they did expect that a lot of the time, that instant answer, an answer to all their problems." (Joanne, after the placement)*

Supervision was used as a time to explore the intricacies of collaborative working. There were some challenges with the on-site supervisor when organisational dynamics impacted on the access to supervision due to availability of the supervisor and competing demands. However, most students accessed on and off-site supervision regularly.

> *"So I think it is very important to have that kind of support and have your supervisor in a senior capacity to just affirm what is right, (that you are) on the right track." (Emily, after the placement)*

All students were placed in pairs which enhanced the learning experience by working together, challenging each other's ideas and sharing successes.

> *"I talked a lot with the other OT student (and) we gave feedback to each other". (Emily, after the placement)*

Working together provided opportunities for the students to reflect on their experiences, adapt practice and support each other. When feeling under pressure in the changing placement environment, students used verbal and written reflective skills.

> *"How I coped was…speaking with my fellow student (and) reflecting back on (those conversations)." (Kathleen, during the placement)*

(3) Evokes emotional extremes

Students spoke of an array of emotional responses to the placement experience. All described initial apprehension which was linked to excitement for some.

> *"I think it will be a lot of development for both of us really, which is what I am looking forward to, as much as I'm quite nervous about how to do it!" (Michelle, before the placement)*

Students enjoyed the placement especially in the second half when the amount of direct client contact increased, although mixed emotions still persisted.

> *"It is been such a roller coaster between loving and hating the placement!" (Michelle, during the placement)*

The satisfaction students experienced was linked to the sense of achievement in their work and making a difference in the setting. They talked of growing in confidence by working

independently. Their perception of learning as a positive experience during the placement was evident where students felt they had developed personally as well as professionally.

> *"I just feel that I have developed as a person more, become stronger, become even more passionate about my OT role." (Michelle, after the placement)*

Some of the positive experiences reported by students about the placements were counteracted by the pace of the placement and the feelings of tiredness. The pace was described as slow to begin with as the students needed time to get to know the site and the clients. Thus the actual intervention did not occur until around midway through the placement, which worried many of the students as they felt unable to justify their work to the placement site.

> *"I suppose because we are students we need more time to evidence everything. So some of the time we weren't spending time in the lessons… I suppose we could have explained that a bit better and shown them what we were doing, but then that would have taken even more time!" (Joanne, after the placement)*

Tiredness was experienced by all students. This was explained by the time and effort associated with needing to think through and justify every decision.

> *"And you're very tired as well because you don't have your practice educator OT to do all the brain-work for you, everything is done by you!" (Ruth, after the placement)*

(4) Realising and using the occupational therapy perspective

The identification of a role for occupational therapy within each setting did emerge over the course of the placement.

> *"But I think us being there affirmed a role for occupational therapy and where it would benefit (the setting)" (Emily, after the placement)*

Students appreciated being given the opportunity to use the occupational therapy process to frame their practice, taking time to complete observations and using these to justify their interventions.

> *"Doing such in-depth observations on this placement has really helped ground my understanding of the benefits of observations." (Kylie, during the placement)*

Keeping the occupational therapy perspective presented challenges which required support from the off-site occupational therapy supervisor. Students valued completing occupation-based work, particularly as the majority of them reported that occupation was used only inconsistently on their previous placements.

> *"I think in all honesty, it's been much more occupationally focused this time than it has been in previous placements." (Julia, during the placement)*

> *"It has really helped me really understand what occupational therapy is and how it should be applied in practice. On previous placements it was more about a specific*

way they treat their clients and what process they follow." (Kylie, during the placement)

These placements gave opportunities for explaining potential of occupational therapy and relevant concepts to non-occupational therapists.

> *"…it tends to be a lot about explaining to people why you think this would be a good idea and how it could benefit (the clients)" (Siobhan, during the placement)*

Particularly toward the second half of placement, students highlighted many occasions where they felt they were *doing* occupational therapy with individual clients or groups and the majority of these interactions were viewed positively.

> *"That really made it for me, that I was doing something with the child and it really mattered." (Michelle, after the placement)*

Discussion

In this research the role emerging placements created a unique learning opportunity for students as they were required to think critically about the occupational therapy process and use occupational therapy theory to justify their practice. Generally the students viewed their experiences positively, however, this placement model posed several challenges. These included remaining focused on occupational therapy; working collaboratively and managing expectations of services unfamiliar with occupational therapy; dealing with the emotional extremes associated with learning; and remaining focused within an inconsistent placement pace.

For the majority of students, explicitly using occupation and occupational therapy theory within their practice was different from their previous placement experiences. It could be suggested that in areas of practice where there was a dominance of the biomedical paradigm, student experiences were narrowly focused at an impairment level (Molineux & Baptiste, 2011). Students may therefore have replicated the specific knowledge and clinical skills of an established occupational therapy service, with limited critique in relation to occupational therapy theory (Fieldhouse & Fedden, 2009). However, within their role emerging placement, as there were no established roles for an occupational therapist on which the students could model their behaviour, they relied on drawing from occupational theory, with off-site supervisor support, to guide their practice. This is in line with previous research, where students were able to develop the role of the occupational therapist and have occupation as their core domain of concern (Friedland et al., 2001; Mulholland & Derdall, 2005).

The learning experience for participants was not an individual, linear process of acquiring knowledge and skills which reflects current and future directions of healthcare practice

(Plsek & Greenhalgh, 2001). This model required students to navigate complex collaborative experiences and inconsistent placement pace without daily guidance from an occupational therapist. This was reflected in student comments at the three interview time points as students expressed apprehension in anticipation of an unknown experience before the placement; to being challenged by the level of thinking required and the slow pace during the placement; to reflecting on their achievements and relief that the effort was worthwhile at the conclusion of placement.

The learning which occurred throughout could be described as *situated learning* as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991). They propose that knowledge is co-constructed through a social process, which is consistent with the epistemology of social constructionism. The learning is situated or embedded in a certain environment, in this case the role emerging placement setting, where it stems from problem solving in authentic situations (Hung, 2002). They were required to contribute meaningfully to the setting, which provided them with the opportunity to embed their learning in an authentic activity and transform their theoretical understanding of the importance of occupation into a useable, useful and tangible outcome. While there were some similarities in the students' learning throughout the placement, the interpretation from a social constructionist perspective is that each student experienced this as an individual, although through joint interviewing it may be considered a co-construction. The occupational therapy students achieved this learning through a community of practice which was unfamiliar and often uncomfortable for them, which contributed to some of the "roller coaster" emotional extremes reported by the students.

The students perceived reflection on their activities as crucial. Reflection promoted independent thinking and deep learning (Fieldhouse & Fedden, 2009) as the students could not rely on a full time occupational therapy educator to provide the solutions to the issues. Between the weekly off-site occupational therapy supervision sessions, the students only had each other to make decisions, which encouraged self-reflection. Students also had to prepare thoroughly to optimise off-site supervision, which also prompted reflection before the session along with verbal reflection with the supervisor.

The support of having a student peer on placement, particularly during times of emotional extremes, was valued by all. The students in this research acknowledged similar benefits in peer learning that were reported by Boniface et al. (2012), such as the sharing of both challenging and rewarding experiences, reflecting together in order to problem solve situations and exchanging knowledge and ideas relating to their practice. Also similarly, some students reported that this promoted confidence as they could have immediate feedback on their performance, which was also viewed by some students as less threatening as it was coming from a peer. Students also gained experience in learning to manage close working relationships and developed skills in negotiation.

Areas for future research

From this research it is essential to investigate the longer term impact of role emerging placements on the future professional practice of occupational therapists and the development of the profession into emerging areas of practice. A comparison of experiences with students on established placements may also enhance understanding of situated learning which may influence future curriculum design in occupational therapy programmes. Further research is also required in this area for lone students on a role emerging placement. Other important perspectives requiring investigation are the views of the off-site and on-site supervisors. At present, the benefits and challenges of supervising students on role emerging placements is under investigation in England and Ireland. Through this it may be possible to tailor appropriate support for supervisors in the future.

Limitations

As addressed earlier, for the research conducted in England the researcher was also the off-site supervisor for four of the six students and this may have influenced the participants' comments. Within both studies the students knew the researchers through their respective roles. It might be anticipated that the students then provided a more positive view of their experiences, however the expression of the challenges faced were also evident in all interviews.
Completing some interviews in pairs may have influenced the responses of the students, as discussed earlier, although they were given the option of being interviewed individually.
The research involved two similar study sites, with some different focus points which may have influenced the questions asked within the interview, influencing the results.

Conclusion

Students in this research found that the role emerging placement experience provided unique learning opportunities which they perceived as valuable to their understanding of occupational therapy. The experience encouraged them to integrate theory with reflection in a complex learning environment. However, this learning experience presented a "roller coaster" of strong emotions which evoked tiredness in students. Yet, through collaboration and support from their peer, on-site and off-site supervisors, the students converted these challenges into successful learning experiences. This adds to the growing evidence for the importance of a balance of student placement experiences in established and role emerging areas for occupational therapy.

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