Bridging the Gap
Multigenerational Fieldwork Education
Karen Z. Kowalski

have all witnessed it. The student who has a lot of ideas but has a difficult time communicating them professionally. The fieldwork educator who does not know much about technology and as a result is not open to those who use technology like Blackberries as memory aides. The student who is consistently late. The fieldwork educator who perceives questions as a challenge. Generational differences are a common theme in all of these scenarios, but how do they affect the dynamics between occupational therapy fieldwork students and their fieldwork educators?

One hundred occupational therapists sought guidance on this issue at the Metropolitan Occupational Therapy Education Council of New York and New Jersey (MOTEC) Joint Clinical Council Day on Wednesday December 2, 2009. MOTEC is composed of staff from New York and New Jersey colleges and universities as well as representatives of those working in specialty areas such as pediatrics, physical disabilities, and psychosocial practice whose focus is on promoting excellence in occupational therapy fieldwork education. Each year, MOTEC hosts this conference to strengthen the connection between occupational therapy fieldwork educators and academic institutions. Critical links between fieldwork educators and faculty are essential for meeting the goals of the profession as well as for guiding fieldwork education and training the highest caliber of next-generation occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants.

The topic for the 2009 conference was “Generational Differences in Work Style: Impact on Fieldwork Supervision” led by guest speaker Ann Ward from Ward Certified Consulting. MOTEC co-chairs Kristina Vilonen, OTRL, and Marge Boyd, MPH, OTRL, both of Dominican College, emphasized the importance of fieldwork educators in the role of advancing the profession into the next generation of service providers. Attendees reported that the topic of generational differences was timely, and they voiced concern over how to most effectively understand and work within the learning style and needs of the millennial generation.

Ward praised the occupational therapy profession by saying she loves “that OTs are problem solvers” and was eager to educate therapists on “a new way to talk to people and to try to understand the friction occurring within this field.” Participants learned characteristics and learning styles of four generations. Traditionalists (1922–1945) are also referred to as the “silent generation” and the “greatest generation.” They grew up during the Great Depression and World War II, and were instrumental in transforming the U.S. into an economic and military power. They respect authority, tending to be more submissive, and feel privileged to have a job. They typically are extremely hardworking and loyal; they may maintain their same employer for their entire career, in contrast to members of younger generations. Because they were not raised with it, this generation tends to struggle with new technology and often needs more guidance in area.

Baby boomers (1946–1964) tend to be hard-working individuals who are motivated by moving up the career ladder and by increased prestige. They tend to be workaholics who define themselves through their professional accomplishments. Boomers are not afraid to question authority in order to do the best job that they can. This generation may criticize Generations X and Y for their perceived reduced work ethic and professional commitment.

Generation Xers (1965–1980) grew up with both parents working and therefore became “latch-key” children. As a result they tend to be quite independent and self-sufficient. They question authority and do not like micro-management within the workplace. This was the first generation to grow up with technology, and they are very comfortable with a variety of devices. Unlike previous generations, members of Generation X value their time away from the workplace and generally are not defined as workaholics.
Generation Y members (1981–2001), aka the millennial generation, are tech-savvy and are used to getting information 24/7 via cell-phone, texting, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and so forth. They can be research experts because they can access information quickly and easily. They value family over work and tend to want to work shorter hours or to telecommute from home. Millennials were highly nurtured by their parents and were taught to multitask while taking on many extracurricular activities. As a result they are achievement-oriented with parents who may still want to be involved as they enter affiliations or the workforce. They are team-oriented and are quite loyal to their workplace. Generation Y individuals seek the attention of their supervisors via feedback and guidance, value knowing what is going on in their job, and frequently seek praise and reassurance that they are doing the best job that they can.

All generations of therapists were in attendance and discussed the following concerns, and practical strategies for addressing them.

Timeliness: Lead by example, and encourage students to develop professional behaviors early on in their education.

Dress code: Instruct students to dress for the job they want, not the job they have.

Inappropriate versus appropriate communication (e.g., texting, e-mail): Embrace rather than discourage technology. Have students compile evidence-based resource libraries, train patients to use a Blackberry for memory aids. Teach professional written communication (e.g., no texting abbreviations for documentation or professional communications).

Feedback: Use the “sandwich technique” to deliver constructive feedback. For example: “You did a great job teaching Mr. Jones his hip precautions. I wonder if he actually understood all of the precautions? Perhaps you could have had him repeat them back to you to assure his understanding. He seems to really appreciate all of the work that you do with him.”

External and internal rewards and motivators: While providing motivators such as gift cards for good work is fine, this could lead to a sense of entitlement. Provide specific examples of what was done well on an ongoing basis—not only during performance reviews.

Ward also suggested that supervisors’ goals should be to help students succeed, and therefore they should consider whether their personal supervision style is the best approach for a particular individual, or whether a different style is needed to embrace generational differences. When pairing individuals from different generations for mentoring, for example, supervisors should first meet with each person to discuss how communication could be most effective and to determine the frequency of meetings. This will assist in understanding each person’s specific learning style, how each uses technology, and the type of communication that each feels most confident with; it will also help create a consensus of when feedback will need to occur.

BEYOND GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

In addition to discussing generational differences, Supervisor of the Year awards were presented to Stephanie Blodgett, MS, OTR/L, CBIS, from Rehabilitation Specialists; and Jennifer Kalina, MS, OTR/L, CGC, MSCS, director of rehabilitation at New York University Hospital for Joint Diseases, Multiple Sclerosis Care Center. The following are tips they shared for effectively supervising fieldwork students:

Stephanie Blodgett
1. Be a good listener and observer. Your student will send important messages about his or her comfort level and confidence through body language and what is not vocalized.
2. Communicate clearly and provide frequent, timely, and appropriate feedback to the student.
3. Be a good professional role model, and share mutual expectations for the fieldwork experience early on.
4. Recognize and embrace generational differences for understanding and guiding your students.
5. Help nurture sound clinical reasoning in your student through reflection, sharing of experiences, and mentorship.

Jennifer Kalina
1. The sooner you discover a student’s learning style, the more productive the fieldwork experience will be.

2. Most students are nervous before treating or evaluating their first patient, whether it is the third or tenth week of their fieldwork placement. Provide close supervision but encourage them to take that step earlier rather than later. The longer you can observe them treating, the more input you will be able to offer and the more they will learn.

3. Pay attention to the personal character traits that students develop in clinical settings. Sometimes these traits cannot be taught but prove to be the most valuable aspects of a good clinician. For example, some students are very adept in research and therefore may be able to assist with organizing the department to include more evidence-based research. Others may have a particular ability to empathize with clients.

4. Offer as broad an experience as possible. Expose students to many different case presentations and be exceptionally creative and resourceful in your treatment plans to show them the unique contributions of occupational therapy.

5. Actively listen to the student’s comments and questions, and provide clear and logical explanations and a significant amount of encouragement, especially at the beginning of the fieldwork placement.

CONCLUSION

By the end of the conference, attendees were able to take away a clearer understanding of the characteristics and learning styles of different generations. By reading this article, it is hoped that you also will be able to apply this knowledge to your role as a fieldwork educator.

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