Understanding occupation and recognizing the value of engagement in meaningful occupations are at the core of the occupational therapy profession. How do students actually learn to apply occupation-based ideals in practice? Furthermore, how can fieldwork educators support student efforts?

Copley, Rodger, Hamay, and Graham used focus groups and interviews to explore the specific challenges experienced by students in learning to use occupation-centered approaches. They gathered qualitative data from nine students who had completed Level I and II fieldwork in a pediatric practice setting and two fieldwork educators who had 5 to 10 years of experience in occupational therapy. Questions centered on student experiences in learning to use occupation as treatment and fieldwork educator experiences in teaching occupation-based evaluation and treatment. Three focus groups were conducted, with each group of students in the early, middle, or end stages of their clinical placement, and three interviews were completed with each clinical educator at similar intervals. Secondary sources of data used to interpret and confirm interview data included observations, review of therapy plans and progress notes, and review of the educators’ tutorial group e-mails.

Three main themes were identified that characterized the challenges encountered by students. The first theme, “capturing the big picture,” describes the difficulty students reported in directing their thinking toward occupation rather than focusing on underlying skills and performance components. Students reported that

**Student Challenges:**
- Capturing the “big picture”
- The “doing” of occupation
- Learning the “nitty gritty”

**Teaching Strategies:**
- Modeling occupation-centered practice
- Debriefing and performance-specific feedback
- Providing specific prompts and structures

Similarly, students struggled with guiding children who did not have good problem-solving abilities—specifically, the students lacked skill in challenging and redirecting inappropriate child-initiated goals or activities. Students reported it was difficult to identify performance breakdowns and test solutions while using a theoretical model or framework, particularly with tasks that were new or unfamiliar to them.

A follow-up article regarding the same study described strategies used by fieldwork educators to support student learning. Two distinct themes emerged that described the “turning points” in learning as students became more comfortable with using occupation-based assessments and intervention and factors that students found helpful in “piecing the puzzle together.” As students saw the effectiveness of incorporating occupation into evaluation and treatment, they became more confident in their work and realized they could directly affect a child’s motivation for therapy. Deciding when and how to be directive in therapy was another turning point in identifying and addressing performance deficits. Learning the value of attention to the environment, particularly of involving parents and caregivers in the therapy process and refining goals over time, further solidified the value of the occupation-based approach.

Five key teaching strategies and factors helpful to student learning were identified. First, early in the learning experience, students found it helpful to observe the fieldwork educator modeling occupation-centered practice and “thinking out loud” with them. Students appreciated
“Sometimes I would work with a teacher and they would ask for help and not implement the strategies, and it was just frustrating,” Ferguson recalls.

But in her 5 years on the job, Ferguson has learned to adjust her strategy by communicating her skills in a more productive way.

“I have learned how to approach teachers so that I am using a lot of positive words and letting them know they are in charge and that I am there to support them. I am changing my use of self so that I can best serve the client,” Ferguson says. “Because, ultimately, as an occupational therapist you want to see a child do his or her best. And the teacher wants the child to be able to do his or her best, too. So I try to feel the teachers out and see how I can support them in a way that also lets them understand my value.”

A PROFESSIONAL LOOKS LIKE...

As Peterson and Emerging Leaders discuss, if new practitioners are able to feel confident in the workplace, with their clinical skills, and in communicating those skills, they will be well on their way to a successful career. Gaining that confidence comes by not being afraid to ask questions, appropriately fitting personalities into the workplace, blending learned theory into real-life scenarios, and learning to talk about the services provided in a meaningful way. New practitioners who focus on these elements will resemble the professionals Peterson describes as ideal.

“A professional looks like someone who is open to feedback. Someone who is not afraid to let somebody know when they need help. Somebody who is willing to share a little bit of their own personal story if it is helpful in their sessions with their clients. Somebody who knows their own strengths and weaknesses relative to the professional skills that they need to have and is balancing the mentoring and professional development that they need to hone those skills with being confident about the skills they already have learned from school and fieldwork,” Peterson says. “They are life-long learners.”

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educators “jumping in” when they needed help to gain an objective perspective on the therapy session, but students and educators alike identified the value of students finding solutions on their own later on in the placement. A second strategy, debriefing and performance-specific feedback, included the use of guided discovery and prompting questions to elicit student problem solving and analysis, with the ultimate goal of helping students develop skills in evaluating their own performance. A third important factor in student learning was the students’ ability and willingness to be flexible and adaptable during the evaluation/intervention and comfortably share their thoughts and ideas about the sessions; this helped educators adapt their teaching to respond to students’ needs. A fourth strategy, providing specific prompts and structures to support occupation-centered observation and documentation, was very helpful in facilitating student analysis. Prompt sheets and templates helped students see how theoretical concepts translated to practice. Finally, students articulated the value of practice experience over time in an actual practice environment as helpful to their learning.

Conscious use of the above strategies by fieldwork educators can help students effectively translate the ideals of occupation into practice.

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