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# Creating Congruence Between Identities as a Fieldwork Educator and a Practitioner

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When we, the authors, first became fieldwork educators, we identified ourselves primarily as occupational therapy practitioners who, secondarily, "took" Level I and Level II fieldwork students. Identifying ourselves primarily as practitioners over educators shaped what we imagined we were supposed to do when we "took" students. We were supposed to share our expertise in our particular practice area; demonstrate how to perform certain procedures; and observe, assess, and give feedback as students applied the knowledge they received from their academic education. But the more students we took, the more we came to see that being practitioners did not fully prepare us for being educators. We found that we increasingly wanted to become as knowledgeable about how to design good learning experiences as we were about occupational therapy; thus, new professional identities as educators began to emerge. Assuming stronger identities as educators reshaped what we imagined we were supposed to do with students. We weren't necessarily supposed to make students competent in *our* skills, but rather create learning experiences that nurtured *their* skills, knowledge, and expertise.

Similar to our experience, Abreu (2006) described a portion of her career development as "a tale of two loves—clinician and educator" (p. 598). She created congruence between her two loves and discovered how each informed and changed how she performed the other. Peloquin (2006) also created congruence between her identities as an occupational therapy educator and a practitioner, stating "the best of my teaching has been like occupational therapy. And the best of occupational therapy [with clients] has felt like collaborative learning" (p. 239).

Most fieldwork educators wear at least two hats—the hat of being an practitioner and the hat of being a fieldwork educator. Sometimes, however, a fieldwork educator may naturally identify himself or herself more strongly as a practitioner than as an educator. Consequently, neither students nor fieldwork educators benefit as fully as they might from the student–educator relationship in the practice environment.

In this article, we propose that assuming a stronger identity as an educator can help fieldwork educators integrate multiple dimensions of the role and more fully engage students in deep personal and professional learning.

## "Supervising" the Fieldwork Student: How and Who

Fieldwork education has been described as "supervising students." *Supervising* is defined as "a critical watching and directing" (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d.). In occupational therapy, supervising students has involved directing them through increasingly more responsibility for clients over time. Fieldwork supervisors observe, assess, and give feedback based on the student's competence with clients and related duties, such as documentation, time management, and professional communication (Crist, 1986). Supervisors are also expected to understand and implement well-designed teaching and learning experiences (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1997; American Occupational Therapy Foundation, 2001; Costa, 2004, 2007). Yet the role of "supervisor" typically is not associated with applying instructional design principles to create powerful learning experiences. Thus, framing the role as "supervisor" can occlude from view the important dimension of intentional, systematic learning design.

In addition, the key questions we ask about the role can occlude from view the importance of instructional design principles in planning the fieldwork experience. The question most commonly asked in becoming a fieldwork educator is, "How?" (Palmer, 1998). How do we effectively supervise students? What methods, techniques, and skills are considered effective in clinical supervision? (e.g., AOTA, 1997; Christie, Joyce, & Moeller, 1985; Costa, 2007; Herkt, 2005; Ilott, 1995; Johnson, Haynes, & Oppermann, 2007; Kautzmann, 1990; Quilligan, 2007). Of course, how to effectively supervise students is a very important question. But if "how" is presented as the primary question, it can overshadow the equally important, "Who?" Who is the self that supervises students? If one's practitioner-self is the sole supervisor, then his or her knowledge and expertise in a particular practice area will be the central guiding force in the learning experience. If the educator-self and the practitioner-self are equally robust, then knowledge and expertise in instructional design will gain prominence.

Asking the "who" question (i.e., Who is the self that supervises students?) could help to address the disconnect that some supervisors experience between being a practitioner and being a fieldwork educator. Practitioners sometimes experience a disassociation between the roles, not because they lack skills in *how* to be a supervisor, but because they have not formed a sense of self as an educator who is fully integrated with a sense of self as a practitioner (Costa, 2007; Higgs & McAllister, 2005). Consequently, they may not have integrated strong instructional design into their role as much as they have integrated strong supervision skills.

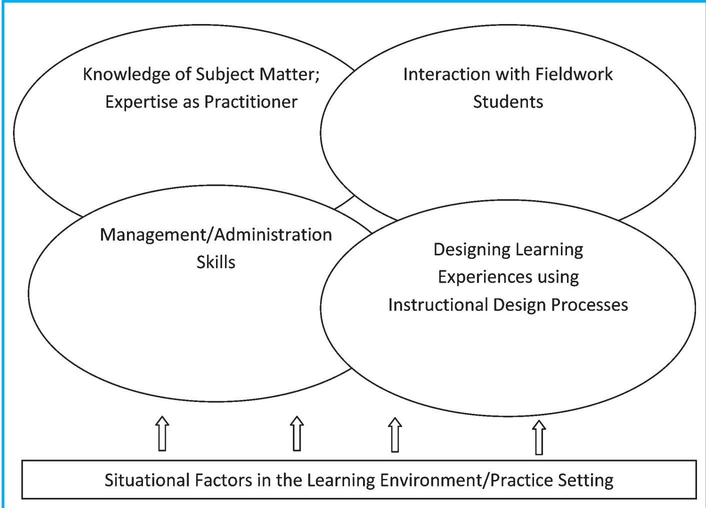


**Figure 1. Four elements of quality learning experiences.**
*Note.* Modified from Fink (2003).

## Identity and Instructional Design in Fieldwork Education

According to Fink (2003), instructional design involves a dynamic interaction among four elements: (a) knowledge of the subject matter, (b) interaction with students, (c) management and administration skills, and (d) skills in designing learning experiences (see Figure 1). The degree to which all four elements are done well determines the quality of the student's learning experience. However, the degree to which all four elements are done well can hinge on how a practitioner sees himself or herself—as practitioner, as educator, or as both (Fink, 2003). For example, therapists whose primary identity rests in being a practitioner may not have in view the element of designing intentional learning experiences. They may have in view knowledge of the subject matter (e.g. passing on knowledge and expertise, assessing student performance in light of that knowledge and expertise), interaction with students (e.g. communicating clearly, giving feedback, observing, supporting), and management/administration skills (e.g. completing the fieldwork performance evaluation). From this view, which is focused on three of Fink's four elements, a learning experience is considered positive if the practitioner has a high degree of competence and has been able to communicate that competence well to the student (Fink, 2003). In such a scenario, a focused identity as a practitioner can keep the supervisor from seeing and attending carefully to the fourth element of quality learning: designing learning experiences.

When an identity as educator emerges, it provides "an important central figure in a self-narrative or life story that provides coherence and meaning for everyday events" (Christiansen, 1999, p. 550). In addition to being a practitioner, an educator begins to see more clearly and adopts more consciously the previously underregarded element of designing learning experiences.

## Applying Instructional Design Principles to Fieldwork Education

As an identity as educator emerges, the supervisor may reinterpret the fieldwork placement as a "course" taught in the context of the practice setting and apply course design principles when anticipating a student. The steps of good course design include many components typically found in a fieldwork experience; however, one key difference is the upfront, intentional deliberation and design of the learning goals, the learning activities to meet the learning goals, and the plan for assessment and feedback.

Student learning goals go beyond the goals received from the academic program. The learning goals are site specific, building on the fieldwork educator's dreams for where this particular student will be at the end of this particular placement, given all the opportunities the setting offers, and the student's own dreams and learning styles. Table 1 on page 3 presents six areas of learning from which goals can be crafted. Deeper learning occurs when all six areas are covered (Fink, 2003). For example, a goal reflecting the human dimension in Table 1 might be as follows: "Student will demonstrate effective interview skills in order to establish the client's and family's occupational interests and priorities." A goal reflecting the Integration dimension in Table 1 might be as follows: "Student will demonstrate narrative, procedural, and pragmatic reasoning while performing assessment and interventions and concurrently interacting with clients and families."

The next step of selecting learning activities may seem redundant. Aren't the learning activities built into the everyday activities of the setting and based on the role of occupational therapy at the site? Yes, the setting provides opportunities for direct observation and real doing in an authentic practice context. A practitioner identity may lead one to focus on the current caseload and to assigning clients to the student that are believed to produce optimum learning. However, an educator identity expands that perspective somewhat. Educators intentionally will augment students' experiences with clients by asking them:

1. What information and data will you need to prepare for, or to process what happened in, experience X? The student decides and obtains the information through readings, talking to people, searching the Internet, and reviewing course materials.
2. What indirect experiences will help you to prepare for the real experience of X? The student decides what combination of indirect experiences, such as role plays, simulations, case studies, and observations, might help to prepare for a direct experience.
3. What do you anticipate will happen, or what do you think happened, during experience X? The student may verbally process anticipations or what happened. He or she also may write a 1-minute response on his or her anticipation or perception of the experience.
4. As a follow-up, what did you learn from experience X? How did having the experience change what the student knows, how the student feels, what the student cares about, and the student's self-perception as an emerging occupational therapy practitioner?

The selected learning activities should be sequenced carefully and plugged into a weekly schedule (Fink, 2003). With time, the plan is individualized to the student's needs.

Fieldwork assessment strategies often include observing the student's performance, having the student complete a weekly

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**Table 1. Taxonomy of Goal Areas To Promote Significant Learning**

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Application** | Clinical reasoning, assessment, intervention, communication, use of self, and management skills that need to be applied. |
| **Caring** | Developing new feelings, interests, and values that support client-centered, evidence-based, and occupation-centered practice. |
| **Foundational knowledge** | Information and ideas that need to be remembered and understood. |
| **Human dimension** | Learning about self and others that enable the student to be more effective (abilities, limits, potentials, assumptions, feelings, responses, etc.) |
| **Integration** | Ideas, perspectives, people, resources, and skills that need to be combined to do a task well. |
| **Learning to learn** | Insights and skills that will enable the student to keep learning over the course of his or her career |

*Note*. Modified from Fink (2003).

self-assessment on his or her progress, and conducting a weekly review of learning goals. The educator assesses learning by how the depth and breadth of the student's approach to clients grows with time. The educator's criteria for critical appraisal are based on how closely the student's performance resembles client-centered, evidenced-based, and occupation-centered practice rooted in current discourse in the profession.

## Strengthening an Educator Identity

Identity is not a fixed state. Rather, individuals possess multiple identities that change over time through experiences and by how we ascribe meaning to those experiences. Identities can be developed through social engagement, emotional awareness, and a process of "selfing" to actively tie together the roles of practitioner and educator (Christiansen, 1999; McAdams, 1996; Peloquin, 2006).

### *Get Involved With a Supportive Group*

According to Christiansen (1999), "identity is an overarching concept that shapes and is shaped by our relationship with others" (p. 548). Thus, we gain an identity through identification with others in a social group. However, Abreu (2006) noted that there are at least two modes by which our social engagements can shape our identities. One mode is through those whom we consider to be mentors, and the second is through those whom we consider to be our "symbolic others" (p. 596). Mentors are those groups and individuals who reflect to us who we hope to become. We all remember the exceptional educator to whom we listened with captivated attention to every word, and followed every therapeutic footstep awe-inspired by his or her magical way and eloquence. Symbolic others are groups or individuals with whom we do not identify (Abreu, 2006). They teach us through negative example how we do not want to be. We remember acutely the fieldwork educator intent on intimidation over collaboration. Mentors and symbolic others for fieldwork educators can be found among students, other fieldwork educators, past teachers, clients, and authors who write about fieldwork education and learning. Higgs and McAllister (2005) suggested that clinical educators regularly come together to share educational stories, including stories of mentors and symbolic others. Sharing educational stories and peer support can help to strengthen one's identity as educator.

### *Attend to Emotional Responses*

Emerging identities also can be detected by paying careful attention to our internal responses as we go through experiences with students and clients. Whyte (2001) proposed that "paying close attention to an astonishing world and the way each of us is made differently and uniquely for that world" results in self-knowledge that can create coherence between one's self and one's work (as cited in Peloquin, 2006, p. 236). We learn from our flashes of joy, anger, exasperation, and elation—all of which will be part of the fabric of feeling rightly related to educating students. Journals, meditation, and mindfulness can be tools to help with attending to emotional responses.

### *Tie the Roles Together*

"Selfing" is a process by which we unify, integrate, and synthesize the various strands of our lives, such as the strand of educator and the strand of practitioner (Peloquin, 2006). Peloquin recommended tracing each strand backward in time, exploring how it emerged, became expressed over time, and still calls today. Selfing is similar to what Higgs and McAlister (2005) described as the process of creating "dynamic self-congruence" (p. 164) or living out who we are through what we do. Self-congruence, or a sense of self as educator, can be created by shared discussions, role playing, journaling, and videotaping experiences with students.

## Opportunities To Develop a Stronger Identity as Educator

Academic programs, fieldwork education consortia, and fieldwork sites where there is a cluster of fieldwork educators can support the building of social networks. Also, for the first time in the history of occupational therapy, there is a voluntary, nationwide training program promoting the role of fieldwork educators. Regional trainers for the Fieldwork Educators Credentialing Program will offer workshops across the country and provide opportunities for educator communities to network and share their wisdom and experience. Watch for details about upcoming workshops in *OT Practice*. The new OT Connections Web site (www.otconnections.org) is another resource for networking,

## Summary

This article explored how an identity as educator can help fieldwork educators integrate multiple dimensions of their role and more fully engage students in deep personal and professional learning. Overall, an identity as educator expands the clinical supervisor role to include designing learning experiences through which the student learns to care deeply about clients, be more aware of self, use evidence, stay tightly honed on the occupational needs of clients, engage in lifelong learning, and become an active member of the larger professional society.

The 2007 AOTA Ad Hoc Committee to Explore and Develop Resources for OT Fieldwork Educators concluded that "fieldwork education is a primary driver in transforming our current practice into meeting the 2017 Centennial Vision" (Commission on Education, p. 14). The committee named 2007 to 2017 as the "Decade of Fieldwork." We will shape identities as fieldwork educators through the meaning we ascribe to nurturing future occupational therapy practitioners. ■

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