



Otago Medical School

Te Kura Hauora o Ōtākou

Do you know...

How to enhance the clinical setting as a learning environment?

DYK 11

I never teach my pupils; I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn – Albert Einstein (attrib)

The Advanced Learning in Medicine years (4- 6) are embedded in the clinical workplace, a busy environment whose primary focus is the patient.

Such settings may not always seem to be effective for learning, but the workplace provides authentic conditions for students to apply their training.

ASK YOURSELF:

If you were a student, what would make the area you work in an effective learning environment for you?

Attempts have been made to measure the learning environment, each with varying degrees of success. For example, *The Undergraduate Clinical Education Environment Measure (UCEEM)*¹ is specifically aimed at the clinical learning environment and its underpinning assumptions can be used to guide your development of a positive learning environment (Box 1).

BOX 1

The UCEEM underpinning assumptions

Invitational quality

- Opportunities to participate and learn from work experiences
- Interaction patterns and student inclusion
- Student agency and engagement

Organisational quality

- Preparedness of all parties for student entry
- Space and resources

Pedagogical quality

- Autonomy-supportive environment
- Enhancing student reflective capabilities

RESEARCH AND THE CLINICAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Part of a questionnaire in one international study² posed the question: 'If you could change **three** things about medical school, what would they be?'

The resulting responses (Box 2) resonate with the feedback from our own medical students and some have implications for clinical teachers.

BOX 2

1. Be aware of the sharp learning curve for learners.
2. It is important to bear in mind that students during their clinical training need more constructive, empowering and empathetic feedback.
3. Many students may be unsure of their role and what to do in the clinical environment, and hence an induction phase or access to mentors may be helpful.
4. Establishing uniformity across curricula through internal consistency and external benchmarking is essential.
5. Be aware that students are under personal, academic and financial stress, and are likely to have multiple goals, such as social, intimacy, financial and career aspirations.
6. Learning is promoted by engaging constructive feedback, promoting empowerment and trust, establishing rapport building and encouraging positive role modelling.
7. Students appreciate access to study materials, such as reading, written documentation and the computer interface.
8. Establish independent student and teacher support systems to support and ensure functional learning.

A project³ conducted by and among medical students identified the features students valued most in the clinical learning environment (Box 3).

BOX 3

- **Structural factors:** The organisation of the clinical placement
- **Interpersonal factors:** The 'Spectrum of Support' referring to support received on various levels from staff to peers
- **Intrapersonal factors:** The proactivity, preparedness and personality of each student
- **Vocational development opportunities:** Including practical experience or clinical exposure and teaching opportunities

HOW CAN YOUR APPROACH TO TEACHING INFLUENCE THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

Remember: content is only a part of teaching and learning

The behaviourist approaches of Pavlov and Skinner were very powerful in shaping 20th century education. However latterly in the context of vocational education concepts such as reflective practice, situated learning, communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation have altered the focus from the teacher as the centre of learning to a more student centred approach.

If learning is looked at from a social context, it becomes apparent that the actual learning environment will have a huge influence on learning. You can play a major role in helping to shape your learning environment.

SO, HOW DO YOU CREATE AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

The simple answer is, it depends...

The studies referred to above provide a 'rough guide' on what to focus on. Typically this will be at department level. However, you should keep in mind Daelman et al's observations on quality of supervision, feedback and assessment as key components of student learning ⁴.

They found greater variations of experience between individual students than between disciplines, so individual staff have an important influence.

At the other end of the scale is the organisation. Does the DHB (or relevant institution) support the concept of a learning culture in reality, not just rhetoric?

Taking into account the various ideas raised in this DYK, rethink your understanding of how students learn and your role as a teacher in your own area.

Think of these questions from a student centred perspective:

- How might you benchmark your own area against student experience and expectations?
- How well is the student experience organised?
- How well supported are students by staff and peers?
- Is the level of student supervision and observation sufficient?
- Are the students made to feel part of the team (sometimes called legitimate peripheral participation)?
- Do you have a functioning educational ethos that the students can relate to?
- What is the quality of conversations the students have amongst themselves?

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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2. Henning MA, Shulruf B, Hawken SJ & Pinnock R. *Changing the learning environment: the medical student voice*. *The Clinical Teacher* 2011; 8: 83–87
3. Gallagher P, Carr L, Weng SH & Fudakowski Z, *Simple truths from medical students: Perspectives on the quality of clinical learning Environments* *Medical Teacher* 2012; 34: e332–e337
4. Daelmans HEM, Hoogenboom RJJ, Donker AJM, Scherpier AJJA, Stenhouwer CDA & Van der Vleuten CPM. *Effectiveness of clinical rotations as a learning environment for achieving competences*, *Medical Teacher*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2004, pp. 305–312

For further information and assistance, contact your local Medical or Clinical Education Adviser: otago.ac.nz/medicine/mbchb

Early Learning in Medicine (ELM)

Medical Education Adviser, ELM: Tony Barrett tony.barrett@otago.ac.nz

Dunedin School of Medicine

Medical Education Adviser: David Tordoff david.tordoff@otago.ac.nz

Clinical Education Adviser: David Gerrard david.gerrard@otago.ac.nz

University of Otago, Christchurch

Medical Education Adviser: Anthony Ali anthony.ali@otago.ac.nz

Clinical Education Adviser: Maggie Meeks Maggie.Meeks@cdhb.health.nz

University of Otago, Wellington

Medical Education Adviser: Peter Gallagher peter.gallagher@otago.ac.nz

Kath Hoare kath.hoare@otago.ac.nz

Clinical Education Advisers: Sean Hanna (Wellington) sean.hanna@otago.ac.nz

Joy Percy (Palmerston North) joy.percy@midcentraldhb.govt.nz

Emma Merry (Hawke's Bay) emma.merry@hawkesbaydhb.govt.nz

Do you know ...

