

Do you know...

what to do when learners present challenges?

The term *learner* is used to include undergraduate and postgraduate students and staff undertaking training programmes

At some point in our careers we will no doubt find some learners present us with challenges. Fortunately, most of those challenges are positive and serve to enrich the learning experience.

In this DYK the focus is on four distinct challenges:

1. The learner who is not engaging constructively
2. The learner who is underperforming
3. The learner who has personal problems
4. The learner who apparently is not 'Fit to Practice'



These challenges are not mutually exclusive; any learner may present with more than one challenge.

Whatever the type of challenge, it's a good idea to consider the process for dealing with the issue rather than reacting in the moment.

A number of frameworks exist^{1,2}, for example: **Probe, Analyse, Action and Resolve.**

It is important not to take on too much of the 'Resolve' component as the learner must take ownership and in the case of university students there are people designated to help you with particular situations (see the end of this DYK).

1. The learner who is 'not engaging constructively'...

Challenging learner engagement can be seen in learners not engaging or engaging in inappropriate ways i.e. being disruptive or rude etc.

An important role of a teacher is to articulate the learning and behaviour expected of learners as well as themselves. What is their role in the learning and also what is your role? It is easier to be disengaged or disruptive when you don't know what is expected. Set expectations early on.

If necessary, set ground rules which can be revisited at a later date. These can be simple such as asking the learner to *'turn up on time', 'submit material in a timely manner', or be prepared to 'participate'*. Setting rules can be co-constructed with the learner. If the learner then fails to meet these expectations, you can approach the issue with the student to determine why they do not contribute or are disruptive.

The reason for your concerns needs to be explored. Some learners may not be aware that there is a problem, some may be unsure of expectations, some may have developed poor study habits; others may be suffering from debilitating personal or mental health problems. All these reasons will require different responses.

If a learner finds it hard to acknowledge that there is an issue, then refer the learner to a more senior member of University staff. If they are not contributing for a specific reason, for example de-motivation due to personal reasons, refer them to the Associate Dean for Student Affairs (ADSA; see end of DYK).

2. The 'underperforming learner'...

Underperforming learners often fall behind academically and behavioural indicators include:

- Being late with required work
- Lacking attentiveness
- Attendance issues
- Interpersonal problems in the groups including irritability
- Obvious distress (or quietness)

Sometimes learners also seem not to absorb aspects of practice that you keep reiterating. While this can be frustrating keep calm and positive and engage the learner in determining the problem (Probe) and move forward. Start with their perception and finish with 'what they can do'. Help with formulating an action plan. If they have poor study / learning habits refer them to the learning centre; for health issues refer to the Associate Dean for Student Affairs (ADSA).

You have a role in the feedback process. If a learner is struggling, you as their teacher should raise your concerns. Don't avoid the issue (see DYK 10 on feedback).

3. The learner with 'personal problems'...

Some learners will openly divulge that they have personal problems. As tempting as it may be don't try to rescue them. Instead, seek permission from the learner to inform a more senior member of the University or in the case of medical students the Student Affairs Office. The ADSA has a number of functions including meeting students and advising and coordinating learners with:

- Health concerns
- Academic progress concerns
- Repeating learners
- Difficulties in personal circumstances
- Behavioural issues inside and outside the programme
- Applications for leave
- Applications to withdraw from or suspend study

Support for medical students

Contact details:

tinyurl.com/OMSstudentsupport

4. Concerns about 'Fitness to Practice'...

All Otago students are expected to follow the University's Code of Conduct:

otago.ac.nz/proctor/otago085274.pdf

At Otago Medical School, a student whose behaviour brings into question their ability to practice in the future may be referred to the Fitness to Practice Committee. Concern about Fitness to Practice may include learners who 'bully' peers or staff, cheat or are dishonest.

otago.ac.nz/medicine/about/programme-structure/policies-and-guidelines/otago614509.pdf

References

- 1 Langlois, JP,& Thach, S. (2000) Managing the difficult learning situation. *Family Medicine*. 32(5):307-309.
- 2 Ryan, G., & Lake, F. (2005).Teaching on the run tips 11: the junior doctor in difficulty. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 183(9): 475-476.

For further information and assistance, contact your local education or clinical education adviser:

otago.ac.nz/medicine/staff/support

The DYK series is produced by the Otago Medical School Education Development and Staff Support Unit. Information contained is as up-to-date as possible; we post new information on the website:

otago.ac.nz/medicine/staff/resources

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