

# Learning styles and fieldwork education: Students' perspectives

Linda Robertson, Tania Smellie, Phillipa Wilson and Lisa Cox

## Abstract

Fieldwork placements are an exciting experience for students and provide a wealth of learning opportunities. The one to one relationship between student and fieldwork supervisor is an ideal opportunity for flexibility in learning approaches. This article describes the impact of knowing about personal learning styles as experienced by three occupational therapy students. Understanding the effect of learning styles on fieldwork learning assisted these students to modify their approaches to preparation for fieldwork. They reported that an important aspect of a fieldwork supervisor / student relationship is to discuss learning styles so that differences may be accommodated and learning opportunities maximised.

## Key words

Learning styles; fieldwork education; student; supervision

## Reference

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In fieldwork placements students are involved in an intense relationship with their fieldwork supervisors over a short period of time. Poor understanding of learning styles can lead to misunderstandings about the students' motivation and ability to take responsibility for their learning. To develop an awareness of the impact of learning styles on professional development, an assessment in the final year of an occupational therapy programme required students to analyze their learning preferences. This article will review the use of one learning style questionnaire with third year occupational therapy students. It will draw from the reflections of three students who identified links between the questionnaire results and their fieldwork experiences. Authenticity is provided by using the words of the three students with pseudonyms used to protect their identity.

Over a period of several years, lecturers in an occupational therapy course in Otago Polytechnic, have noticed the impact on students of the learning style component of a course. Students who knew one another quite well were often amazed when they heard about their peer's learning preferences. Others expressed with a sigh of relief that it was reassuring to know that they were 'different' not 'dumb' which was interestingly a title for work by Fleming (2010) who developed the VARK (Visual, Aural, Reader, Kinaesthetic) learning style questionnaire. An assignment focused students on the impact of learning styles in fieldwork environments and generated a depth of reflection on this topic. Research undertaken in the course of this assignment

quickly showed students that there was a dearth of literature to help them analyse their fieldwork learning. Most of the literature about learning styles is related to learning in academic environments, however, one third of the occupational therapy programme requires students to learn in a practice context. This can include hospitals, schools, community settings and private practice. Interaction with a clinical fieldwork supervisor is likely

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to be on a one to one basis which is a very different learning experience when compared to being one student in a large group. This overview of three students learning experiences while on fieldwork placements will go some way towards filling a gap in the literature about the impact of learning styles in fieldwork environments.

## Learning styles

Kolb (1984) described learning styles as the way students prefer to process new information including strategies that are consistently adopted to learn. Although there are many theories on thinking and learning, it is largely accepted that students learn in different ways (Fleming, 2001; Gaipman & Anthony, 1989; Howard & Howard, 1993; Schulz, 1993). While alternative approaches to learning can be used successfully, it is thought that students will learn more quickly and easily if they are able to utilise their preferred style (Brown, Cosgriff, & French, 2008; DiBartola, 2006; Forrest, 2004; Titiloye & Scott, 2001). The value of developing awareness of learning styles can help students to recognize their strengths, acknowledge weak areas, work more efficiently when self-directed and develop effective collaborative relationships with others (Provident, Leibold, Dolhi & Jeffcoat, 2009; Rogers, 2009).

The VARK questionnaire (Fleming, 2001) (see Table 1) was chosen for two reasons, scores can be reached quickly and the provision of help sheets assists students to use their knowledge of learning styles. Technically, VARK is not a learning style questionnaire, as it provides feedback only on preferred modes of communicating. Theorists would consider these modes to be only a part of what might be included in an exploration of learning styles (Fleming & Baume, 2006). However, the four aspects of learning preferences used in VARK can be readily identified by students, and are relatively stable. These features allow students to critically reflect on their fieldwork experiences to enhance future learning as explained below.

Table 1. The VARK learning styles

Learning style:	Characteristics
Visual	Preference for using visual resources such as diagrams, pictures and videos. Like to see people in action.
Auditory	Need to talk about situations and ideas with a range of people; enjoy hearing stories from others.
Reader/writer	Prolific note-taker; textbooks are important; extensive use of journals to write down the facts and stories.
Kinaesthetic	Preference for hands on experience within a 'real' setting and for global learning.

## Student's reflections

The following reports from three students who analysed their fieldwork experiences using results from the VARK questionnaire illustrates the value of knowing about learning styles. The students do not cover all possible variations of learning styles, rather they provide examples of how learning styles can impact on fieldwork experiences. Susan and Anita both have 'reader/writer' learning styles, Anita also identifies as being 'visual' while Ella's preference is 'kinaesthetic'. Three significant aspects of fieldwork have been considered in these examples: feedback, journaling and learning contracts.

### Feedback

According to Susan, an important aspect of learning is the support provided through feedback:

*During fieldwork I have valued structured and specific feedback received during supervision. A prolific note-taker, I always prefer taking notes to refer to later – although this is not always practical or appropriate. If a supervisor prefers to provide feedback verbally, I will record comments for later reference.*

Anita echoed these sentiments:

*When receiving feedback I need to write down the feedback as I hear it, this also enables me to reflect at a later date, and learn from the feedback. An optimal fieldwork environment would also be one where I am able to retreat to a quiet office or library, if available, to read and make notes.*

Ella offered a different perspective:

*I am a kinaesthetic learner and show preference for detailed and descriptive feedback. In past fieldwork situations I have sought immediate feedback from my supervisor following a learning situation. Within this feedback I request that my supervisor details two things that went well and one thing to improve on next time. This has proved useful in allowing me to identify specific areas of performance that need refining. During one fieldwork placement my supervisor found it challenging to provide specific, constructive feedback. To resolve this I asked specific questions regarding my performance following home visits to determine what areas to improve on next time.*

### Journaling

Journaling as a means of reflecting on practice has become a common expectation for occupational therapy students. While there are guidelines about how to do this the students indicate that there may be more than one way of demonstrating the skill of reflection. Susan explained:

*Journaling for me consists of writing down the facts and only recording how I feel about a situation if the feeling was a definitive one. It feels inconclusive writing about how I feel about a situation as different emotions wax and wane.*

In contrast Anita reported:

*According to Fleming (2001) I am a classic reader/writer as I have extensive journals, and find journaling a very useful process*

to develop my understanding. Generally my journaling uses the written word in narrative form (I love to tell practice stories) however I do sometimes use flow charts, illustrations and mind maps to help clarify my understanding which is another example of a visual strategy.

Ella has a different way of reflecting on experiences. She stated that:

*Fleming (2001) reports that kinaesthetic learners often reflect by 'walking' through their experiences in their mind. In past fieldwork placements I have adopted a method for reflection similar to this. Following a learning experience, I like to have time to think through the process I took and make sense of what happened and why. Subsequently, I am more prepared and comfortable to verbally reflect this information back to my supervisor.*

As a method of reflection, verbal discussion proves more beneficial than keeping a written journal. This preference is supported by Fleming (2001) who suggests that kinaesthetic learners find journaling challenging. Ella explained that during fieldwork five, a three week fieldwork experience based on learning contracts:

*I used a diary to record the home visits carried out. Information included the person's situation and a brief summary of occupational therapy intervention. This diary proved effective during supervision sessions as it provided basic information which I could expand on during verbal discussion with my supervisor. For example, by recording the outcome of occupational therapy intervention with a particular client, I would be prompted to discuss the problem solving process and the steps I took to arise at a clinical decision.*

### Learning contracts

On the subject of learning contracts, Susan indicated she felt they were somewhat restrictive during fieldwork:

*Although I enjoyed using knowledge based learning contracts surrounding stroke pathology. I attribute success with this particular learning contract to the fact it was based on concrete knowledge that could be sourced from textbooks. Academically, I rely heavily on literature and research when formulating ideas and this was reflected in my use of this specific learning contract. During fieldwork, I... endeavour to ensure that learning contracts are not overly specific so that they do not detract from the overall learning experience. In order to maximise my learning, I would prefer to write down evidence of my learning objectives for my supervisor to read.*

Anita had a similar opinion:

*According to Fleming (2001), reader/writer learning contracts are very specific. For example to meet my learning contracts I wrote up a wheelchair assessment that I had undertaken, wrote in my journal about my feelings regarding working with young clients with a neurological illness, and put together a resource on the 'Enable' process (a method of applying for resources).*

*Ideally I prefer to have an overall view of the whole placement before I write learning contracts, this according to Fleming is a strategy used by a visual learner. Learning contracts allow me to create environments that fit my learning and thinking styles but also give some structure as I process information in a random manner. In supervision they allow me to work out what I want to achieve and whether or not I have done so.*

### Fieldwork placements that do not meet learning styles

Invariably, students will find some fieldwork placements do not suit their learning style. Susan reported the first of two examples of such situations:

*In considering the match between my learning style and the learning environment available in a therapeutic community, I initially found the laissez faire approach of my supervisor quite daunting as I prefer a structured, organised approach. Her preference was for me to shadow her for the first few days, which I found disconcerting as I felt pressurized to begin working towards meeting my learning objectives and could not readily identify opportunities to do so. Student access to patient notes was discouraged in this environment and left me feeling dismayed as I feel I learn best through reading/writing. The occupational therapists in this setting do not make notes in patient files and neither do students. Initially this felt like a void in my learning opportunities in this environment.*

*My initial concern at the amount of observation in this setting dissipated by week two when I began to appreciate the value of observation in the therapeutic community meetings in order to grasp the therapeutic process. As much as a strict schedule is in place, meetings are largely abstract with patients and staff raising and responding to issues and articulating why they feel the way they do. The silent moments during these meetings, which I initially found daunting and potentially a waste of valuable time, were actually necessary so that staff and patients (and students) could consider and reflect upon what was being said.*

*A specific example of when my learning/thinking styles have contributed to difficulties in placement includes a situation where I consistently felt inundated by information. After I had seen a patient with my supervisor I was asked a series of questions usually relating to the patient's condition and what I considered to be the next step in treatment. The supervisor would then supplement my response with large tracts of detailed information in a monologue. I felt quite overawed and swamped by this flood of information and when I attempted to jot down notes my supervisor would say "You don't need to write this down". Past experience has shown that I tend to process information more efficiently if I am able to make notes as I hear it.*

Similarly Ella outlined her experience:

*The following example from a past fieldwork situation emphasises the negative effects that a mismatch between learning environment and personal learning and thinking styles can have*

on learning. This particular placement offered little opportunity to gain 'hands on learning'. In contrast, my role as a student was to become well-informed about textbook information. My supervisor and I discussed common occupational therapy interventions for the particular client group; however while we talked about 'doing' I had little opportunity to observe real-life examples and as a first year student my therapist did not feel I had enough skills to carry out any of the occupational therapy process myself. Simply reading textbooks did not result in effective learning for me; I failed to connect information to reality and meaning was not attached to information when processing it. This placement provided little opportunity for me to incorporate theory into practice - an essential learning requirement for kinaesthetic learners.

## Discussion

These stories clearly show that learning styles have a profound impact on learning. Personal awareness of learning styles and confidence in communicating this are first steps towards achieving an optimal learning environment (Alsop & Ryan, 1996). Supervising therapists need to be aware of the impact different learning styles may have on a student's fieldwork experience. The three students documenting their experience in this article stressed the need for a conversation about learning styles at the beginning of a placement. This would help to ensure that learning preferences are taken into consideration while opening the way for ongoing dialogue about learning outcomes. Using the VARK questionnaire as a starting place for a conversation between learner and teacher is consistent with the goals of VARK (Fleming & Baume, 2006).

There will often be differences in student and fieldwork supervisor learning styles. For instance, the therapist who learns by being thrown in at the deep end is likely to be in conflict with the student who needs to read and prepare for learning experiences (or vice versa). While it may be tempting to assume that similarity in learning styles is necessary to an effective learning experience, student's report that differences in style can be complementary and may also extend their learning strategies. Becoming multimodal has its advantages in that the learner is able to adapt to each learning situation. According to Susan:

*Possibly, the greatest shift in my approach to future learning has been that I am capable of utilising other learning styles/thinking styles effectively. This is evidenced in my ability to now combine observation (aural and visual) with effective reflective journaling (reader/writer) and has assisted me metacognitively in that I am now more able to monitor my state of learning as suggested by Moon (2006).*

Susan's observations support the contention that self awareness is an important first step in utilising learning styles effectively.

This account has focused on the stories of occupational therapy students and has conveyed their perspective of the value of knowing about learning styles. It suggests that taking time to consider learning styles will have an impact on learning. To

provide a balanced view it would be valuable to explore the experiences of fieldwork supervisors. For instance: Do they know their own learning style? Do they recognise the impact of learning preferences? How does an exchange of information about learning styles impact on supervisors' experiences of fieldwork placements?

## Conclusion

From the perspective of students, being able to recognise their predominant style of learning provides an understanding of strengths and weaknesses in relation to learning opportunities in fieldwork. Personal awareness can enhance management of self-directed learning in fieldwork situations resulting in a more effective student placement. During a fieldwork placement a collaborative approach to learning is essential. Setting up the learning environment by sharing information about learning styles is a constructive strategy that helps to clarify expectations. While only student's perspectives have been discussed in this article, therapists may also benefit from reflecting on their learning styles to consider how they impact on learning in a fieldwork environment. A fuller understanding of this fundamental aspect of learning has the potential to enhance educational experiences.

## Key messages

1. Personal awareness of learning styles and confidence in communicating this are first steps to achieving an optimal learning environment.
2. A conversation about learning styles between fieldwork supervisor and student enhances the fieldwork experience.

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