

# Evaluation of the Use of Action Learning Sets in Undergraduate Physiotherapy Education

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## Aim

To evaluate the impact of Action Learning Sets (ALS) in the practice education of 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy students.

## Background

The University of Worcester have successfully employed an innovative practice placement model with students attending placements on a part-time basis each week throughout the academic year. In tandem, students attend weekly ALS. These aim to encourage students to develop reflective, problem-solving and communication skills (Aird, 2011): key requirements of the HPCP and CSP. In addition they may assist students to relate theory to practice and provide them with a safe and confidential environment to discuss issues arising on placement.

## Method

ALS were evaluated using student questionnaires and staff and student focus groups. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Worcester Ethics and Research Governance Committee.

## Results

25 of 32 questionnaires were completed . >75% of students agreed that;

- They understood the purpose of ALS
- They trusted the other students in their ALS
- Tutors facilitated ALS well

Thematic analysis of focus group data revealed 4 main themes:

### Positive Aspects

- Group sharing/discussion
- Allows students to deal with problems in a confidential environment

### Purpose

- Professional development
- Learning reflective skills
- Cements learning from practice

### Negative Aspects

- Can feel like “flogging a dead horse” if nothing to discuss
- Irrelevant conversation
- Strict ALS structure can be difficult to adhere to

### Barriers

- Members giving ‘solutions’ rather than facilitating reflection
- Personality clashes
- Lack of training in ALS & coaching skills

## What are Action Learning Sets?

Small group forums where students reflect on and explore issues arising on placement. Group members help facilitate this reflective process enabling students to learn about themselves. Action plans are devised which are revisited and reflected on in future sessions (Beaty et al, 1997).

Action Learning is NOT; Supervision, teaching, counselling or giving advice/solutions.

## Conclusions

ALS are a useful addition to the undergraduate program, enabling students to share and discuss issues arising on placement. Adequate training needs to be provided to ensure staff and students are clear of the structure, and purpose of ALS and their roles (Dunphy 2010).

We propose that a hybrid approach combining aspects of both ALS and group problem solving may be more appropriate in a first year undergraduate population, when students are still developing the necessary skills for successful action learning.

## References

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