



A grounded theory of practice learning: What, and how, do students learn during practice placements and how can this learning be maximised?

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Abstract

Introduction: With ever increasing pressures on healthcare services and a rising demand for placement opportunities to enable the education and registration of greater numbers of healthcare professionals, it is vital that students gain maximum learning during placement opportunities. A grounded theory approach was used to explore what was learned and how the learning occurred during pre-registration occupational therapy programmes at one university in the UK's West Midlands. This article presents and discusses a theory of practice learning developed during research with pre-registration occupational therapy students.

Method: Eleven students and three practice educators participated in individual interviews following the first practice placement. Transcripts were analysed using constant comparison methods.

Findings: The relationships between learning in four different categories previously reported were found to be interdependent and were further abstracted to develop a theory of practice learning that is characterised by the student's availability for learning, which was impacted on and by each of the four categories and can be enhanced by actions taken by the student, the education establishment, and the practice educator.

Conclusion: The theory of practice learning can be used to help students, practice educators and academics better understand and support student learning on placement.

Keywords

education, placement, practice, theory, learning, fieldwork

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Introduction

This study presents a theory of practice learning developed from exploration of the learning experienced by pre-registration occupational therapy students at one university within the UK's West Midlands during their first practice placement experience and seeks to understand the depth and breadth of learning that students recognise following this placement. Details of the methods and findings of this study have previously been published (Grant et al., 2023); therefore, the focus of this article is to present the theory developed from these findings and the implications and use of this theory for occupational therapy students.

Occupational therapy students are required to undertake 1000 hours of fieldwork placements, also known as practice placements, clinical placements, and practice learning. The term 'placement' is used as an overarching term within this article. The required quantity of placement time varies across disciplines, with explicit numbers of hours for some professions, such as 1000 hours for occupational therapists and physiotherapists (Health Education England (HEE), 2020)

and 2300 hours for nurses and midwives (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2023), whilst other disciplines require a proportion of the education programme, such as approximately half of the programme for paramedics and operating department practitioners (HEE, 2020). However, placements are recognised as a vital part of education for all health and social care professionals.

Whilst some professions work to a competency-based framework (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018), meaning that students must demonstrate competence in carrying out specific skills, this is not the case for all professions, nor does it accurately reflect the nuances of practicing in health and social care. Occupational therapists' core skills are arguably inappropriate for assessment via competency

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development, as they refer largely to unseen skills such as reasoning, observation and discussion, supported by theoretical constructs to inform reasoning (Duncan, 2021; Turner and Alsop, 2015). Additional learning is gained during their placement by virtue of being in a learning environment that is unlikely to be captured solely by the assessed competencies. Little has been written about what and how such learning takes place. Early findings from this study identified student learning on placement to exist within four categories of learning about oneself, learning about the profession, learning about practices and learning about the people who use the service within which the student placement is situated (Grant et al., 2023). The aim of this article is to present the subsequent phase of the research, in which the early findings were further abstracted to develop a grounded theory of practice learning.

Methodology

Grounded theory produces knowledge through iterative, inductive and deductive processes to establish a theory that is generated from data (Gibson and Hartman, 2014) and valuable only so long as it has useful consequences (Wills and Lake, 2020). Situated within a pragmatist ontology, which aligns with the concepts of the art and science of occupational therapy (Grant, 2024; Wood, 1995), this study followed a type of evolved grounded theory methodology (Mills et al., 2006) most accurately described as pragmatist grounded theory (Morgan, 2020). Pragmatism, based primarily on the work of Dewey in the 1920s, recognises the inseparability of beliefs and actions and embraces positivist, interpretivist, and constructivist standpoints, suggesting that one's experiences are necessarily shaped by the nature of the world (positivism) whilst being limited to one's own interpretations of experiences (interpretivism) in order to build a new understanding through interaction with one's environment and previous knowledge (constructivism) (Morgan, 2014).

Following ethical approval by the host university, first-year BSc and MSc (pre-registration) occupational therapy students and their practice educators were recruited via a gatekeeper. Due consideration was given to the lead author's dual role as researcher and lecturer, and the inherent power relationship between participants and researcher. Written informed consent was collected from all participants prior to interview. Data were collected before students sat any subsequent placements so that early perceptions were not influenced by later experiences. In line with the theoretical sampling process unique to grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2015), data collection from students was favoured, and a total of eleven students and three practice educators participated in the study, by which point the researcher was confident that theoretical saturation had been achieved. Theoretical saturation is not only the point at which no new concepts emerge but also the point at which the development of the properties and variation of concepts is considered

complete (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The final interview was used to confirm this, in line with good practice in grounded theory (Saunders et al., 2018).

Data collection and analysis

Individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted with participants to explore their perceptions of what had been learned during the first placement. In alignment with grounded theory methodology (Chun Tie et al., 2019) constant comparative analysis led to the findings of four categories of learning reported in Grant et al. (2023) and are discussed here within the theory of practice learning (see Figure 1). Constant comparison was achieved by a process of interviewing, transcribing, coding and memoing with the intention and result that early data sets informed subsequent data collection.

A three-stage process of coding was employed to refine data into theory (Chun Tie et al., 2019). Initial coding, the process of assigning a conceptually descriptive code to a piece of data, was applied to each interview transcript in turn by the lead author, via the creation of *in vivo* and open codes. Intermediate coding refined and reduced the number of codes into conceptual categories and occurred alongside constant comparison and memoing. The final stage involved advanced coding, where the memos were reviewed alongside previously coded data. This process resulted in the development of theory by defining and elucidating the relationships between the four categories of learning, at which point the theoretical concept of 'availability for learning' was highlighted.

Classical grounded theory requires the identification of a core category as the final element in theory development (Glaser, 2007), although evolved forms of the methodology consider this to be optional (Birks and Mills, 2012). The core category, identified from the data, explains the underlying processes within the grounded theory (Birks and Mills, 2012). Advanced coding in this study elicited the identification of the core category as 'becoming a student occupational therapist'. The advanced coding stage proved crucial in abstracting the theory and led to the identification of 'becoming a student occupational therapist' as the core category, whilst recognising 'availability for learning' as a central concept to the theory. Each stage in the coding process was discussed with the supervisor (2nd author) and supervisory team members to support robust data analysis.

Findings

The research question asked during this grounded theory study was 'what do occupational therapy students learn during their first practice placement?' The early findings of this research study have previously been published in detail and are therefore not presented here (Grant, 2024; Grant et al., 2023). Four categories of learning were identified – learning about oneself, learning about the profession, learning about

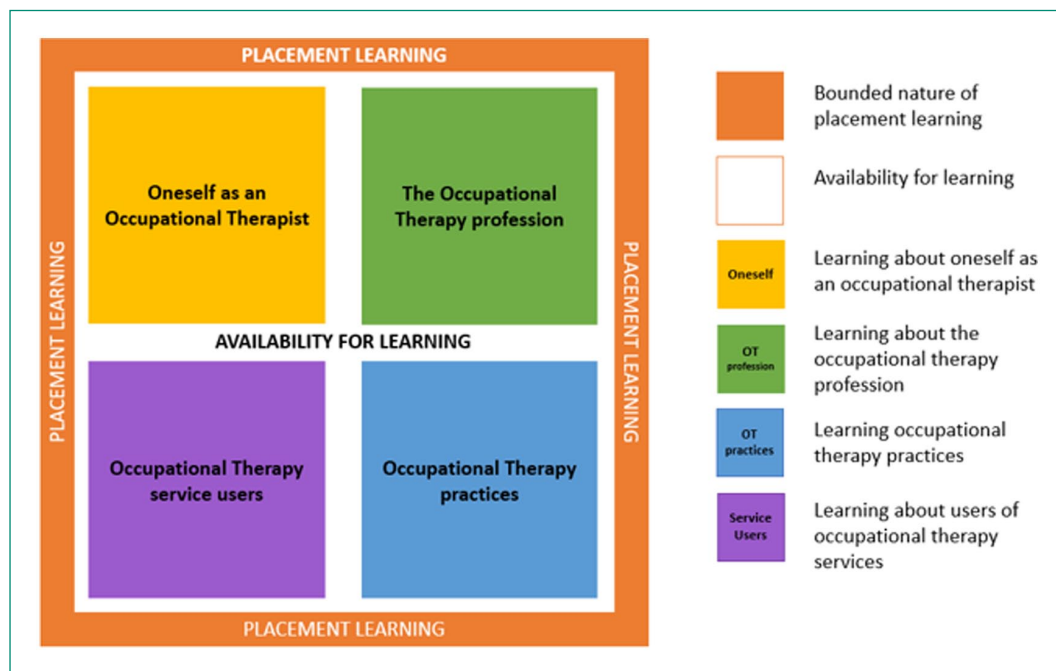


Figure 1. The theory of practice learning.

practices and learning about service users. The findings of the advanced analysis are presented in this article and grouped into three sections: identification of the grounded theory's core category (Glaser, 2007), examination of the theoretical abstraction process and finally, the presentation of the new theory.

Core category: *Becoming a student professional*

The core category 'becoming a student occupational therapist' clarifies the meaning and purpose of the study, resulting in an overarching understanding of what a student is learning on their first placement. The core category explains what is happening to students during the course of their first placement and encapsulates the four categories of learning. A shift was highlighted from the status of occupational therapy student to becoming a student occupational therapist. Whilst an occupational therapy student can be any person who attends lectures and classes, completes academic work and functions within the university setting, being a student occupational therapist encompasses a sense of professional identity, belonging within the profession, functioning in a professional capacity and impacting on the lives of other people who use occupational therapy services. Professional identity was identified by the Carnegie Foundation in the early 2000s (Benner, 2010; Cooke et al., 2010; Foster et al., 2006; Sheppard et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 2007) and, in health-care professions, has been associated with having a positive effect on patient care across all professions (Professional Standards Authority, 2016). It is reinforced by professional regulation (Health and Care Professions Council, 2013;

Royal College of Occupational Therapists, 2021) and has been linked with increased self-esteem amongst professionals (Shaw and Timmons, 2010).

Students discussed the process of identifying themselves as student professionals throughout the study:

I think I felt less of the student and more of an actual . . . member of, like, the team I think, as the [. . .] weeks went on. (P15)

Becoming a student occupational therapist was clearly demonstrated within the language choices of many participants as they discussed the moment that things began to take shape and make sense for them:

Going into placement was when it all clicked into place, and I was like. That's this, that's that. . . you know, my practice educator and the team like explaining these things for me majorly like really fit into place. And so, I could understand. (P5)

I can see that anybody going in whatever level, they are probably going to be a different person coming out. (P2)

I could definitely see how everything was all fitting together when I went to placement. (P4)

So now I think I started thinking like an OT. [. . .] yeah, I'm [an] OT now, so I feel that, that I'm an OT now. (P12)

The transformational process of becoming an occupational therapist can be explained by reference to Wilcock's (1999, 2007, Wilcock and Hocking, 2015) reflections on the processes of doing, being, becoming and belonging. By the process of doing, one's being is altered and different roles are inhabited. Consequently, one moves towards becoming,

through transformation and self-actualisation and an indication of future development and growth (Wilcock, 1999). Together, these concepts act as a mechanism for belonging within societies and cultures (Wilcock, 2007). The findings of this study highlighted the value of the first occupational therapy placement, where students participate in the practice of the placement, and are therefore ‘doing’ occupational therapy, rather than learning about it as they do in the classroom. As a result of this doing, they begin to inhabit and embody the role of ‘being’ a student occupational therapist. The difference between being a student occupational therapist and being an occupational therapy student and learning about the profession’s theory, values and practices without inhabiting them, is explained by participants sense that their actions influence the lives of service users:

that’s actually . . . real life made an impact to someone. (P15)

Therefore, the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the first placement experience not only permits students to learn about themselves, about their profession, about the practice and about service users, but in so doing, enables them to develop a sense of professional identity. The unique contribution of the first placement experience demonstrated by this study is that students move from being occupational therapy students to being student occupational therapists.

Theoretical abstraction: Availability for learning

Theoretical abstraction occurs in the advanced stages of grounded theory methodology when the main categories have achieved theoretical saturation and are integrated with analytical memos to produce the substantive theory (Birks and Mills, 2012). This non-linear process was applied through the study, resulting in the final theory of practice learning presented in Figure 1. Relationships between the categories are summarised in integrative relational diagrams, a visual device used to develop and demonstrate relationships between the data and enable the researcher to develop theory with confidence that it remains grounded in the data (Strauss, 1987), which convey the impact of each category of learning on the others.

Examination of the relationships between each of the four categories of learning identified the fluid, inter-related nature of placement learning, as discussed in detail in Grant (2024). In summary, learning in some categories supported learning in others whilst conversely, challenges perceived in learning within one category could inhibit learning within another. For example, learning about oneself, in the form of learning to manage emotions and identify feelings of safety were seen as enablers to learning about the other areas, whilst challenges in this area were perceived as barriers to learning. Learning about the profession enabled students to understand the context for their practices and interactions with service users and aided them to gain in confidence. Becoming familiar with practices not only provided a vehicle for

learning in each of the other areas and learning about service users gave context to professional and practical learning but also challenged students emotionally (Grant et al., 2023).

Through exploration of these relationships, the concept of ‘availability for learning’ was developed as the central concept of the theory of practice learning. Availability for learning describes the factors that participants explored when discussing the relationships between aspects of the learning that was undertaken on placement. The concept of being available for learning was alluded to by all participants – students discussed factors that made their learning easier or harder, whilst educators discussed the deliberate effort they made to help students to become more able to learn. A student’s availability for learning suggests that finding learning in some categories easy could be considered as beneficial to enabling learning in other categories. Conversely, finding learning in one category difficult or energy-consuming may create challenges in learning within other categories. This reciprocity reflects the dual nature of the relationships between the categories of learning, where learning in one category can benefit or impede the ability to learn in another.

Whilst the importance of availability for learning is highlighted, it also gives rise to the possibility of a student’s ‘unavailability’ for learning. Demonstration of a lack of learning suggests the concept of a finite amount of availability that the student has for learning, and that once this availability is occupied, either with learning within a different category or by the emotional or cognitive processes associated with such learning, progress in other areas will be limited. Such availability is considered as bounded in nature, not by students’ capacity for learning but by the finite nature of any placement experience, as discussed below.

The concept of availability for learning draws together the four categories of learning (learning about oneself, learning about the profession, learning about practices and learning about service users) into a learning capacity that is bounded in time and place – the learning that is achievable as a result of the specific placement opportunity itself. Such learning will be influenced by the duration of the placement and the opportunities provided by the particular placement setting. It should be recognised that this bounded availability for learning does not represent a student’s entire capacity for learning across their lifespan or even their course, but the learning that is possible within the duration of the placement, which is necessarily time limited.

Students identified the uniqueness of their own position, and the impact that their background and experience had on their learning. They not only recognised that individuals would be able to learn in different ways and at different rates but also linked this to being able to focus on one category of learning because of their existing skills and knowledge. One key quote explains the concept of availability for learning clearly:

I was able to do that because of all the stuff that I already knew and didn’t have to learn, so I can imagine that fellow students in the same situation might be spending more of

their time worrying about ‘Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, I’ve got to speak to a complete stranger who’s a patient who’s not very well, who can’t hear me very well. How am I going to deal with that?’ And their focus, and their attention and their energy and their anxiety is all focused on that, whereas because of my background, and knowledge and experience, I was able to park that as being not a problem, so therefore I had more ability to do this other learning. (P3)

Consequently, one student’s availability for learning may be greater or less than their peers. No attempt has been made, within this work, to measure this scope of availability – rather, the impact of learning in each of the four categories on a students’ overall availability is described.

Presentation of the theory of practice learning

In the theory of practice learning shown in Figure 1, the learning capacity is defined by the orange box, which can be interpreted as the boundaries of the placement itself. Inside the orange box is a white space, which represents a student’s learning within the placement. When each of the four categories of learning are added to the box, the white space appears to diminish, so that a student’s availability for learning is taken up by the four categories of learning during the placement (Grant, 2024).

Whilst a student’s availability for learning is bounded by the placement experience itself, the amount of availability taken up by the four categories of learning should be viewed as fluid. Throughout the placement learning journey, different students will, at different points in their learning, use

more or less of their availability for each different category. Therefore, the illustrations that follow should be viewed not as fixed entities but as representative of singular points in time, with the understanding that each category will be expected to grow or shrink as the placement progresses, but that availability for learning is fixed by the boundaries of the placement.

Application of the theory of practice learning

Applying the theory to three fictional student presentations can help to explain the interactive nature of this model and offer suggestions of the impact it may have on individual students. These three explanations are not considered to be exhaustive but provide examples of student presentations that may be familiar to those involved in practice education. The theory of practice learning is used to further explain how students may experience placement at one moment in time. Importantly this theory is dynamic, so the distribution of availability between each category of learning is expected to change over time. These student presentations are reproduced from *A Grounded Theory of Occupational Therapy Practice Learning to Inform Simulation-Based Education* Grant (2024).

Self-focused

This represents a student for whom learning about and managing themselves during placement dominates their availability for learning, as shown in Figure 2.

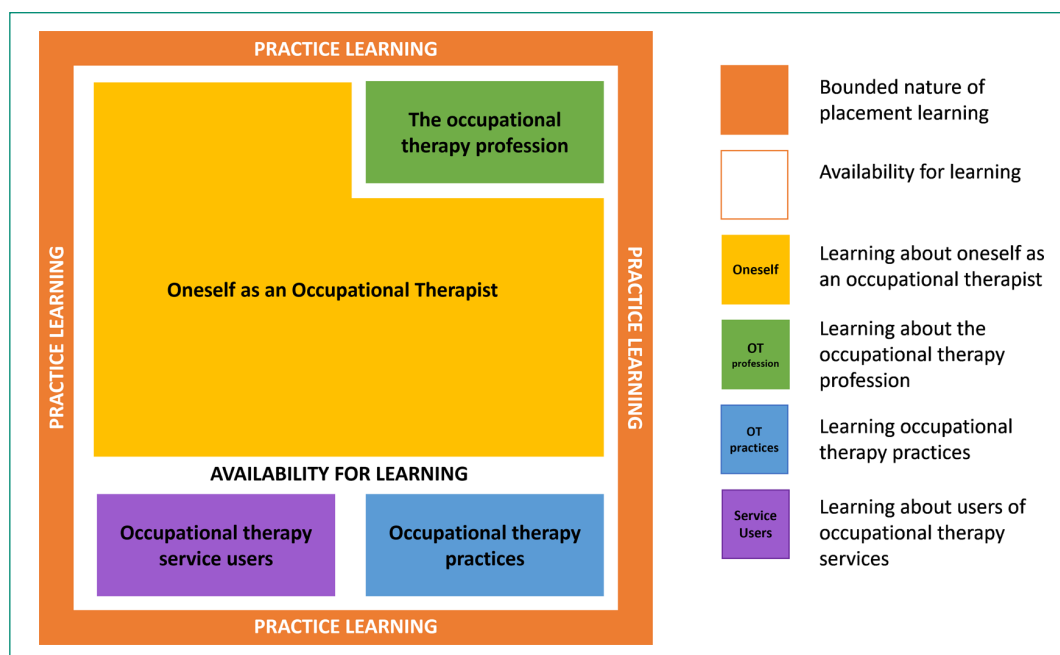


Figure 2. A self-focused student.

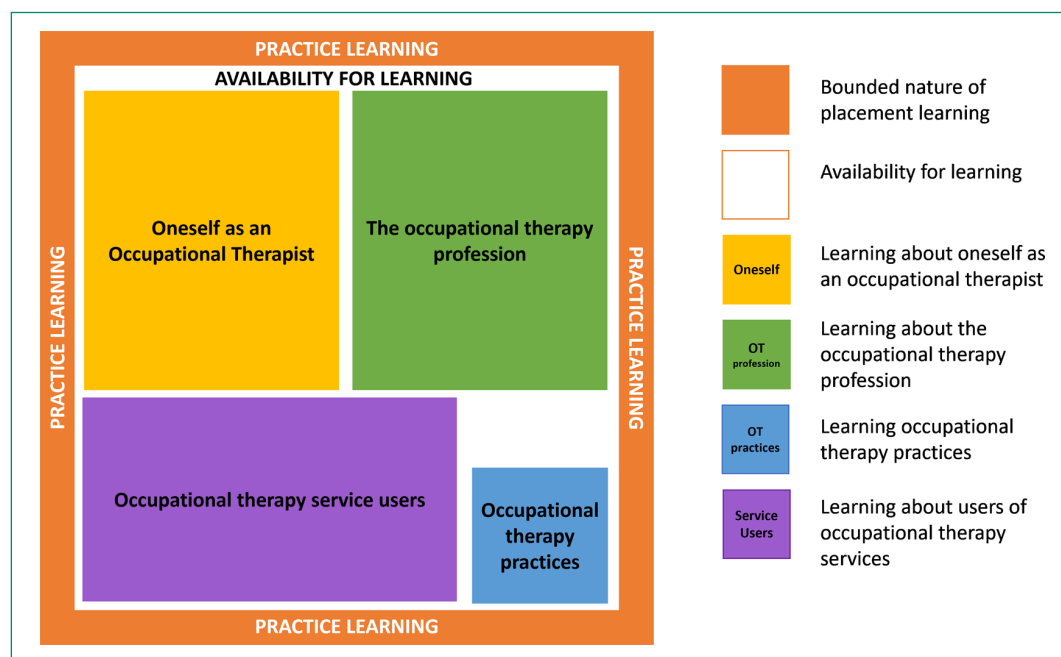


Figure 3. A practice-confident student.

The key feature of this presentation is the amount of cognitive effort, or energy, that the student must use in relation to learning about themselves on placement, represented by the yellow box. Reasons for this could be wide reaching however, understanding of these features by both student and practice educator might be a first step towards reducing the amount of availability that learning about oneself occupies. Some examples are that the student may have poor insight and self-awareness, they may have additional learning needs that are not being fully met during the placement, or they may be working to manage extreme anxiety or other health needs. They may discover that the way that they approached their placement was not what was required by their practice educator or may experience personality clashes with members of the team. They may struggle to keep focused on placement because of a bereavement, or a health issue. Whatever the reason, their availability for learning is largely given over to focusing on themselves.

This effectively reduces their capacity, or availability, to learn about the profession, service users and practices. In the illustrated example, learning about the profession (identified in green) takes up a similar amount of the availability for learning as service users and practices. This may not necessarily be the case, because learning is a dynamic process, and the configuration between the remaining three categories will not necessarily be evenly distributed. For example, a student who is focused on learning about themselves may still be able to learn about a new population of service users as attention is necessarily drawn towards service user need. However, when away from service users, it may be that this student reverts to concentrating on themselves and as such, they may find learning about the profession, which is less overt and therefore more challenging, is impeded.

Practice-confident

A student who is already familiar with the practices of their placement – for example, someone who may have previously worked in healthcare services – could be described as practice-confident and is represented in Figure 3.

Such a student may have previous experience of practices such as manual handling and NHS cultural practice, or may find that the practices of the setting are largely communicative, and they are familiar with interviewing people and making telephone calls due to their previous career. In either scenario, the practice-confident student is likely to have previous experience, so this archetype may be more prevalent in mature students. However, it is important to note that mature students may also have an increased need for learning about and managing themselves within this new environment, so it is important not to make assumptions based on age or experience alone.

The representation of the practice-confident student demonstrates that reducing the demands of learning practices can increase availability for learning in the other categories. How this learning takes place will depend on the student, the setting and the opportunities they are afforded.

Self-confident and practice-confident

If a student who has prior experience of practices also has a good command of their own needs, good self-awareness and fits in well to the team, they may present as both self-confident and practice-confident. In this circumstance, the small yellow 'oneself' box suggests that there are no competing factors such as health needs, family or other responsibilities that distract them from the work of learning during their placement, combined with a small blue 'practices' box suggesting familiarity with some practices, shown in Figure 4.

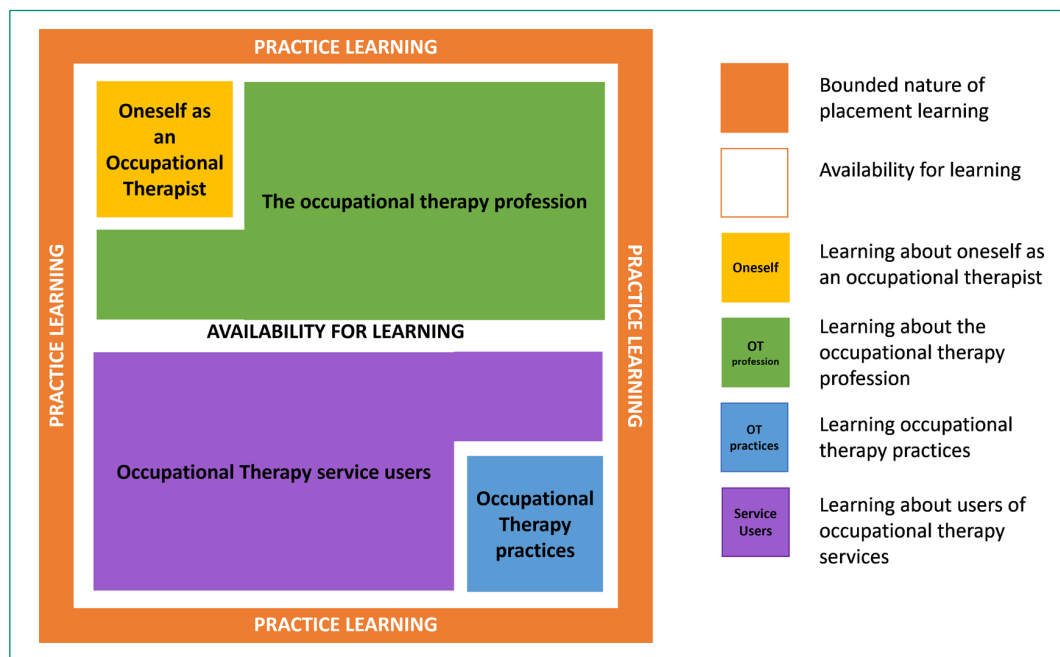


Figure 4. A self-confident and practice-confident student.

Such students are keen to fill their availability for learning and do not find it difficult to learn the practices that they encounter. As a result, they can dedicate a large amount of their availability for learning to learning about both the profession and the service users of this placement, signified by the larger green and purple boxes, respectively. A student reflecting this pattern of learning will typically pick up practices quickly, take opportunities to work with and learn about the service users, and is open to learning about the nuances of the profession. They are able to devote time and energy to some of the more theoretical constructs, whether profession-specific or scientific, such as disease progression, because they have plenty of availability for learning.

Implications to support student development

The aim of this article was to present the newly developed grounded theory of practice learning. Whilst this theory describes how students are learning on placement, it is important to recognise that each fictional student presentation may lead to assumptions on the part of the practice educator or supervisor which are developed subconsciously and may not always take into account student learning. It can be seen in the three example presentations that no students have any additional availability to learn remaining unfilled – all are doing the best that they can on placement. However, each student may be perceived differently and their commitment to placement learning interpreted differently by educators observing their behaviours. This may be influenced by the Practice Educator's own beliefs and expectations of students within their placement setting, or the educator's own experiences as a student.

The self-focused student may be perceived as a 'difficult' student, who does not appear fully engaged with their placement. They may be perceived as unable to understand theory-practice links, or the practice educator may surmise that the student is less self-aware or less able to self-manage than they 'should' be. This may be based on the practice educator's experience of previous students whose learning availability was differently used, and may also reflect practice educator preconceptions regarding the impact of life skills on placement learning.

The theory of practice learning suggests that this student is utilising all their resources to learn about and manage themselves, leaving them with limited availability for the other categories. Learning may be less overt as they grapple with learning about themselves, and practice educators could help students to find a greater balance between the three remaining categories by adjusting their expectations and / or the student workload. Such a student may be experiencing great challenges via the transformative model of learning, as their world view and sense of self are challenged (Mezirow, 1997).

A practice-confident student may be perceived to be a 'good' student as they are able to respond quickly and efficiently to tasks they are asked to carry out. However, it may be that despite a strong performance, very little actual learning is happening in these areas. The perceived level of ability may mask a lack of knowledge in other categories, and a student presenting in this manner risks assumptions being made about their learning that are not accurate. Practice educators can enhance learning by providing a balance of opportunities and taking care not to assume that because this student carries out a task well, they also have the knowledge to interpret the results of the task. Care should be taken to ensure that this student does not rely only on experiential

learning (Kolb, 1984), as this may reinforce existing knowledge rather than challenge them to develop new knowledge.

Similarly, a self-confident and practice-confident student may be perceived as an ‘excellent’ student. With this presentation, the student appears to just get on with the placement without any challenges and because they have the availability to learn about both the profession and service users, they can be seen to make good progress and develop their theory–practice learning further than students with other presentations of learning. Such students may actually end up being provided with a greater level of challenge from their educators, due in part to their ability to deliver a good task-based performance and to their ability to identify their own learning needs. The impact of not needing to focus on oneself can be seen in Brown et al.’s (2020) exploration of resilience, which concluded that student’s abilities to manage their stress levels, amongst other factors, supported success in placement. Such a student could benefit from understanding the concepts related to situated learning as they develop their new place within their community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991)

Discussion

This article presents and discusses a theory of practice learning, resulting from a grounded research study that focused on occupational therapy students learning during their first practice education placement. The article describes and explains the core category identified from advanced data analysis, ‘becoming a student occupational therapist’ and the theoretical concept of ‘availability for learning’. Together with the four categories of learning previously explained (Grant et al., 2023) the theory of practice learning has been described and applied to three possible student scenarios. The theory of practice learning is discussed in relation to the existing literature with implications for students, practice educators and academic educators suggested.

This study uniquely focuses on learning in the first placement and addresses a significant gap in the literature. It identifies that during the course of the first practice placement, students make a psychological and emotional shift from being an occupational therapy student to being a student occupational therapist. This reflects and progresses the importance of placements in developing professional identity that has previously been discussed within occupational therapy (Honey and Penman, 2020) and other health care professions (Benner, 2010; Cooke et al., 2010).

The concept of availability is supported by multiple psychological theories including cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2011) and information processing theory (Grabe, 1986), but extends further. The links between the four categories show that managing or organising knowledge more effectively in one category will influence others. Therefore, there are deliberate, active steps that a student or practice educator can

take to increase availability for learning. For example, the impact of emotion and anxiety reduces availability to learn, so creating a welcoming environment may reduce such anxiety. Whilst some aspects of learning about oneself may be directly related to the placement, there are others that may intrude on placement learning, such as poor sleep, poor nutrition, or a stressful journey to placement. Therefore, a student can exercise agency over their availability to learn by taking steps to ensure that their home life is as organised and as stress-free as possible during the placement period.

The theory of practice learning demonstrates that students undertaking their first practice placement learn within a bounded and finite capacity. For a specific student to increase their learning in any one category, increased awareness of their current learning and their ability to reduce learning in another category, will create greater availability to learn. There are multiple implications of the theory of practice learning for students, practice educators and academic educators. Identification of the theory recognises that the four categories of learning interact with and influence one another – however, if students and practice educators are primarily focused on learning within one category, this will impact on their ability to learn in another. Ideally, an appropriate balance between all four categories would enable students to develop their learning in a symbiotic way, in order to maximise benefit from the relationships between each of the categories.

As availability is a flexible concept, being permitted to focus on one aspect of learning at a time may be more effective than attempting to learn extensively in all categories at once. Competing psychological theories (Maslow, 1970; Sen, 1999) suggest either a hierarchical or concurrent approach to one’s own availability. A hierarchical approach would place concepts within the category of learning about oneself, such as safety, at the bottom and therefore suggest that this should be the first category of focus (Maslow, 1970). Conversely, a capability approach (Sen, 1999) suggests that humans are multifaceted and able to achieve things that they value, without hierarchy. The need or desire to focus on one category of learning at a time may vary between students, so practice educators may benefit from increased knowledge about the four categories of learning to enable them to adjust the placement demands to maximise student availability for learning

Implications for practice

Implications for students

It may help students to know that what faces them on their first placement is likely to be transformational, providing confidence to students grappling with new and complex ideas. Understanding that such a change is entirely normal and is both expected and desirable may help students to prepare adequately for the placement experience, making plans during it that will support their growth and development.

Implications for practice educators

For educators, it may be beneficial to recognise that overwhelming students with new tasks to learn may impede their ability to perform because they do not have the time they need to think about and assimilate their new learning. Understanding the transformative process of becoming an occupational therapist, along with recognising that students require space and time to process their learning provides practice educators with permission to reduce the placement content during the early placement experience. Equally, understanding that the sense of professional identity derives from making a difference to the lives of real people may help educators to provide students with appropriately selected opportunities to participate.

Practice educators can be mindful of the challenges facing the student of balancing availability between the four categories of learning and support availability by designing the placement experience to reflect this. Understanding that learning about practices works as a vehicle for students to learn in other areas may encourage educators to provide a managed number of hands-on practical experiences for students in the early days of the placement, rather than commencing the early weeks with observational tasks. Earlier participation in practices which provide an appropriate level of challenge may also have the effect of increasing student confidence in practice, thus releasing availability for learning in other categories as well. Whilst students can learn from failure as well as success, the standard expected must be achievable for the level of study. Practice educators may notice, before the student does, that learning about themselves at the beginning of the placement is consuming greater availability than other categories and subsequently adjust the demands of other learning to permit this to occur.

Implications for academic educators

Teaching staff at the university can also benefit from this knowledge by using the concept of becoming a student occupational therapist as a foundation to prepare students for placement. Alternatively, seeing the first placement as providing the platform for students to develop their professional identity may influence its timing within the academic year. Knowing that student engagement in learning may be affected by their availability for learning, part of which may be their perceived readiness for the placement, may help lecturers to consider which theoretical learning is essential before the placement commences and which concepts may be better introduced following placement experience. This knowledge can help to build a curriculum that is student-centred (Gover et al., 2019) and supports a high-quality student experience desired by educators and students alike (Office for Students, 2023).

Lecturers may also be able to support students to expand their availability for learning on placement by deliberately relay personal learning opportunities to students to enable them to prepare appropriately for their placement. Equally, exposure to service users and developing practices such as communication skills, taking a social history and completing an initial assessment interview may increase availability to learn about the service users who are specific to the placement area. Finally, including the theory of practice learning in practice educator preparation may empower educators to support students who are struggling on placement.

Recommendations for future research

As this theory has been developed using grounded theory methodology, testing of the theory to ensure its continued applicability across a wide range of placement types, durations and levels of study is indicated (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Application of the theory for other health and social care professionals, and potentially other professions who undertake fieldwork placements, such as teachers, would extend its scope. Finally, additional uses of the theory such as a reflective tool, as a supervision structure or to guide placement planning or simulation should be explored.

Conclusion

This study is wide ranging and gives rise to a variety of recommendations for best practice by academic and practice educators to support the development of student occupational therapists.

The theory of practice learning offers a new way to approach student learning on placement, by giving due consideration to the interplay between four key types of learning that students experience and recognising the impact that each of these categories have on one another. By understanding the learning that students are undertaking, educators can become more attuned to the changing needs of students during their placement experiences and adjust expectations to enhance the learning properties of the practice environment. By being aware of the concept of availability for learning, students and educators can work together to maximise of the students' availability and therefore ensure that students gain maximum benefit from the precious hours of placement experience.

Whilst this theory was developed from interviews with occupational therapy students, nothing in the findings suggests a barrier in transferring the knowledge into other professional placement environments. Further research is therefore indicated to establish the relevance of the theory into other healthcare professions.

Key findings

- The theory of practice learning suggests that students on placement have a finite availability for learning
- Students and educators can maximise learning by attending to availability
- Universities can better prepare students for placement by considering their availability for learning

What this study has added

This study presents the first theory of practice learning developed from student experience, which can help educators and learners to maximise their learning power.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical approval granted by University of Worcester College of Health, Life & Environment ethics committee, Reference CHLES20210003-R.

Consent to participate

Written consent to participate was obtained from participants which was verbally confirmed at the start of data collection, including consent for publication of anonymised data.

Author contributions

T.G. researched literature and conceived the study. Y.T. supervised the project and was involved in protocol development, gaining ethical approval and final analysis of generated concepts. T.G. wrote the first draft of the manuscript; Y.T. reviewed and edited the manuscript and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Patient and public involvement

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