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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The 'Gift Exchange': a metaphor for understanding the relationship between educator commitment and student effort on placement

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Abstract

'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye'

Antoine de Saint Exupery (1900–1944)

It is a truism that a sound working relationship between student and practice educator is a major contributory factor to positive placement experiences for health and social care students. However, there is limited research that goes any further in explaining how this relationship is established and might work. This paper utilizes the metaphor of the 'gift' to emphasize the importance of generosity and reciprocity within the student/practice educator relationship. Qualitative research findings, generated from interviews with practice educators, reveal that whilst the educator gives the student the benefit of their expertise and provides access to opportunities to learn from practice, the student is expected to return this 'investment' by demonstrating that they too are putting in effort, for instance, by showing keenness to learn, and developing subject knowledge and skills. Although educators demonstrate a sense of obligation or duty to support students in their endeavours this commitment is not necessarily unconditional; reciprocal student effort is an important motivator for some practice educators for whom a demonstrable response to their input confirms their own sense of identity as educators and clinicians.

Keywords: Gift exchange, metaphor, student effort, obligation, professional identity

Introduction

Time spent in practice placement is precious to student health and social care professionals. As placement time is limited, it is vital that students extract all possible value from their exposure to the realities of the workplace. Crucial to helping students to optimize

their experience are the clinicians who frequently not only carry a caseload but fulfill the role of being a practice educator. Increasingly this role is seen as being an obligatory aspect of practice rather than an optional extra. However, certainly in the United Kingdom, escalating pressure on clinicians' time as a result of increased caseloads and multiple responsibilities means the likelihood of conflicting obligations and 'legitimate compromises' (May 1996). In this context understanding how successful working relationships between students and their practice educators can be established and sustained could contribute to maintaining the quality of practice education.

Student–Educator Relationships

Despite research in the context of physiotherapy clinical education, in the late 1990s, which highlighted a shared responsibility for creating effective and successful relationships (Cross 1998), the literature in the area of student–educator relationships tends to focus largely on educator attributes and actions rather than the intricacies of interaction. Considering the factors that impact on effective clinical supervision, Kilminster *et al.* (2007) suggest that the supervisory relationship is more important than the methods used. This importance is emphasized in a review of published research on general practitioners as supervisors which proposes that the “educational alliance provides a platform for all other aspects of learning” (Wearne *et al.* 2012, p1170).

A small empirical study of social work students' perceptions of their relationships with practice educators and their impact on their learning and assessment, identified a “carer/recipient dynamic with many students valuing, but also even expecting to receive, a certain degree of nurture from their practice teacher” (Lefevre 2005, p575). From the students' perspective the most influential factors in developing a good relationship were feeling listened to, respected and valued. Acknowledging that the survey did not encourage students to explore these factors in greater depth these comments are uni-dimensional, broadly reflecting student satisfaction with 'what they received'; what they expected to have to contribute to earn respect and to be valued as part of the team is not mentioned.

Similarly, research on occupational therapy students' perceptions of the factors that are crucial to quality placements seems to omit any sense of students having a part to play in the developing relationship. Typically, emphasis is on the provision of feedback, knowledge and approachability of fieldwork educators, clear communication, and perceptions of interest, support and belief in the students and their abilities (Eagles *et al.* 2003). A later study by Kirke *et al.* (2007), which sought the perspectives of occupational therapy fieldwork educators on what makes a good fieldwork experience, identified similar factors. However, this study did question what makes a good student highlighting that as well as personal attributes, factors such as showing interest in what was being offered in terms of experience and actively seeking knowledge were important. Expressed approval of “the ones who can fill in 10 minutes by reading the emergency procedures manual ... who make the most of such opportunities” emphasizes an important message (Kirke *et al.* 2007, pS18). These findings are supported by those of a recent large online Delphi study, conducted in Australia, exploring clinical educators' perspectives on students' preparedness for practice-based learning in occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy. This research identified among other things, the importance of students' willingness to actively engage by being curious and asking questions, responding to requested tasks, being enthusiastic and taking responsibility for their own learning (Chipchase *et al.* 2012). Developing these ideas further, this paper aims to theorise and promote understanding of how such student engagement motivates practice educators and energizes the student–educator relationship.

The Gift Exchange

Given that metaphors can provide a useful means and a 'bridge' to increased insight and understanding (Cortazzi & Jin 1999), the 'gift exchange' metaphor is offered as a means of conceptualizing the dynamic underpinning the student/educator relationship. Although research on 'gift exchange' originated in anthropology, it has also been studied extensively by medical sociologists interested in blood and organ donation (Hyde 1983). Marcel Mauss's (1950/1990) classic work on the gift exchange identified three enduring and related obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept and the obligation to reciprocate.

In fact, research into gift exchange shows that the realization of the obligations is variable and there are certain dependencies. For example, in nursing, Titmus (1970) found no evidence of a demand for reciprocation in the nurse/patient relationship; similarly the professor/student relationship has been found to negate the expectation of a return gift (Martinez-Aleman 2007). Perhaps the important factor is that gifts in these relationships are not commodities; the exchange is about the satisfaction that each giver experiences in the context of the social bonds that allow the gift to move from one to the other (Martinez-Aleman 2007, p588). Although generally, recompense or reciprocity is not talked about, if it occurs it is not usually immediate or fixed (Martinez-Aleman 2007). Rather there is an expectation that it will live on and that ideas and knowledge will be taken into other relationships and continue their circulation (Levi-Strauss 1949/1957). In the context of the student-educator relationship, it is feasible that the gift might influence the students' management of their patients, be passed to other colleagues and eventually to future students when on graduation, students themselves become educators. As such, it is a powerful means of developing practice. However, there are three important factors that are worth further discussion: power dynamics, identity and duty and obligation.

Power dynamics

Observing that power plays a part in the gift exchange, Kerson (1978) suggests that equality is only achieved if all participants fulfill their obligations; if one participant fails to meet their obligation they will have lower status in comparison with the person who did meet their obligation. Kerson's focus on the social-worker-client relationship is not dissimilar to that of student-educator relationship in some ways. Both are characterized by power inequities at the outset. As giving is usually downwards; the giver has higher status in the relationship. The educator is usually a more senior clinician and the expert to whom students are entrusted by their universities. Not only does this person hold the key to unlocking opportunities for the student, they are also often responsible for assessing students' performance and therefore acting as gatekeepers to the professions. It is really no wonder that students stand in awe of most clinicians with whom they work. However, an increased sense of equality in the relationship can be gained where the exchange is positive and obligations are met on both sides (Kerson 1978). As Kirke *et al.*'s (2007) research found a keen student gains approval and respect.

Identity

If as discussed above, giving is not predicated on reciprocity what then encourages the giver to continue to give when it involves personal effort, is time consuming and complicated by other commitments? A possible explanation is provided by Mauss (1967, p11) who suggests that "to give something is to give part of oneself"; gift giving involves an imposition of identity from the giver on to the receiver such that the gift holds the identity of the giver and is therefore very personal (Mauss 1950/1990). Cooley's (1902) social psychological theory of the 'looking glass self' reinforces Mauss's thinking in suggesting that gifts reinforce how the giver perceives the receiver, but also how the giver perceives him or herself; we imagine how we appear to others, how others judge us and we

develop our identity through that judgment. This socially constructed notion of identity is further reinforced by Schwartz (1967, p2) who argued that people tend to confirm their own identity by presenting it to others in objectified form.

The interdependence of giver and receiver underpins the contemporary understanding of mentorship, apprenticeship and the teacher-learner dyad (Martinez-Aleman 2007). Applied in the context of the student–practice-educator relationship, ‘identity recognition work’ (Gee 1999, p20) is evident. The identity of the giver as expert practitioner and educator is constructed, reinforced and confirmed through the objective efforts that they make to carefully select relevant patients, find opportunities to expose students to the more advanced aspects of practice and induct students into the practice community. Notwithstanding the suggestion that the students’ reciprocity is not necessary, it is easy to see that a student’s failure to respond to the practice educator’s efforts might be taken fairly personally and perceived by others to be a reflection of lack of expertise as an educator.

Duty and obligation

The connection between gift giving and identity construction is persuasive where the gift is not seen as a commodity. However, the gift becomes more of a commodity when it is embedded in professional structures that emphasize professional and moral responsibilities, synonymous with ‘obligation’ and ‘duty’ (Blanchard Edwards 1969). The principle of supporting the profession by becoming a practice-educator–mentor is an example of an assumed professional obligation that is identified in occupational therapy (Tompson & Procter 1990), medicine (General Medical Council 2013), physiotherapy (Chartered Society of Physiotherapy 2011) and nursing (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2008). Martinez-Aleman’s (2007, p578) suggestion that “gift exchange might not be consonant with the spirit of obligation or contractual exchange” but rather that “gifts move because they are social bonds between self and other” is of concern in the current climate in health and social care. It raises questions about whether practitioners who feel obliged to educate students experience a different sense of themselves as practitioners and educators and equally a different sense of what they can and should offer their students. If the pressure of contemporary practice places even greater emphasis on their ‘services’, as practitioners, it is not unreasonable to assume that this might influence their obligation to students.

Research Methodology and Methods

The theoretical discussion of the gift exchange and its intricacies is illuminated by the findings from a research study conducted in the UK in 2012–13 that sought to explore practice educators’ decision-making processes in delegating responsibility for certain tasks to physiotherapy students on placement. The interviews with practice educators occurred in the second phase of the research which adopted a grounded theory approach. The first phase focused specifically on students’ experiences of being given, or denied, responsibility on placement and highlighted the importance of a range of practice educator characteristics that might influence the dynamic that occurs (Clouder 2009). The next phase sought to gain depth of understanding of practice educator perspectives. The participants were recruited via purposive sampling aided by the lead physiotherapists in participating institutions. Interviews occurred in the workplace at convenient times either at the beginning or end of the day. Written consent was gained prior to interview.

A total of twenty-six practice educators took part in face to face semi-structured interviews over a period of 6 months. At the end of each interview participants completed a ‘diamond ranking’ exercise. Diamond ranking is a visual method, which requires the participant to

organise their knowledge and make explicit the overarching relationships between concepts and ideas that they discussed during the interview. Using coloured cards, participants were asked to rank a range of features of interaction placing them in a diamond shape with the most important feature at the top and the least at the bottom (Rockett & Percival 2002). The activity allows the participants to clarify their positions whilst the researcher listens and observes how their thoughts are organised as they undertake the activity (Rockett & Percival 2002).

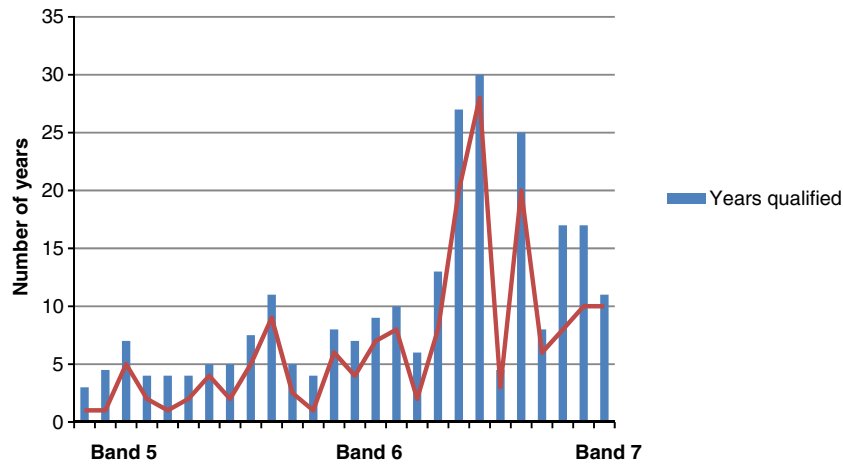


Figure 1 Band 5–7: Number of years qualified vs years as clinical educators.

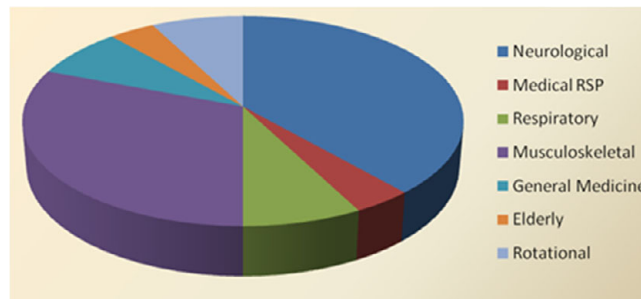


Figure 2 Participants by speciality.

Participants varied with respect to grade, years in practice and years as an educator (Figure 1). The ratio of female to male was 21:5 and the sample also varied according to specialty (Figure 2).

The interviews, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed, generally lasted approximately 60 minutes. Narratives of duty and obligation, evident in the majority of accounts of practice were strong. However, practice educators' reflections on how they worked with able, and less able students, highlighted the existence of an unspoken sense of a gift economy.

Findings

Using the notion of 'gift exchange' as a lens through which to view the data revealed a strong relationship between educator commitment and student effort, which occurred along a continuum. However, the narratives of two clinicians who stand out as polar

opposites are used to illustrate the extremes. Both are senior practitioners and experienced educators. The majority of the others adopted a pragmatic middle range position.

'I've put in as much as I can'

Louise (a pseudonym) works in elderly medicine in a large teaching hospital. This first conversation with her contradicts the assertion that reciprocity is an essential element of a gift relationship between the student and practice educator. In fact, reciprocity is disregarded in the context of perceived obligation and identity work of a very experienced clinician, and practice educator, and her adopted approach to practice education:

I think it helps you to understand that no matter what it is that you are doing, sometimes for that individual, it just doesn't quite work. There will always be differences in opinion, personalities, just people that can't quite get into the placement and struggle with the environment. But I think certainly the more experienced you become, the easier it is for you to yes, take ownership of what somebody does, you know, over that placement and say, 'Well I've put in as much as I can.'

If you've got somebody that isn't that strong, obviously then it requires a change in your strategy and approach and you do have to be flexible to then see. I do take it personally sometimes if a student isn't doing so well and I try and say, 'Well I'm going to put in a lot of effort here'. Try and get as much out of it as possible and be very open and honest about it.' You know, with every student I always have regular feedback, weekly if not more often than that just to say, 'Look, this is where we're at. I want to push you more,' if they're doing really well or, 'I think we need to work on this, just to concentrate on this to get this skill set or whatever it is that we're doing and establish, so that you're competent so that we can kind of crack on with something else in the future weeks of the placement.' Most people if they're enthusiastic and they're willing to learn, then they will improve. The ones that are perhaps less interested, or less willing to learn, I struggle with more. But I'd probably try and push them into doing simple things.

Louise's discussion of how she gets the best from her students suggests that she does not easily give up on them; duty and obligation are important features which define her commitment to being a practice educator. Much as she might talk about getting the most from the clients whom she treats, Louise makes no mention of the need for students to prove their commitment to maintain her own, although she acknowledges that she struggles more with those who are less interested. She operates a principle of providing an equitable experience for all students:

I think you also appreciate the fact that if you've got some uniformity of what you're doing to all students – it doesn't matter if they're a really good student, or a not so good student, you know that you're giving them all the same experience and whether they flourish or not, you can have some solace in the fact that you've tried because you've done the same things you would have done with any student.

Louise explained her generosity later in the interview by suggesting that her work setting may possibly be more conducive than others:

'I have more time to spend with the student, where we can work together [whereas] in outpatients, perhaps it's not quite so easy to do that'.

This perception, that certain areas of practice were more conducive to practice education than others based on flexibility of the caseload and time available, was common amongst participants.

'It's your placement'

This second conversation with John (a pseudonym), who is a Senior I physiotherapist working in critical care at a large teaching hospital, in contrast to Louise, portrays a business-like approach where energy certainly will not be 'wasted' on students unwilling to make maximum effort. Like Louise, John shows a tremendous sense of duty to expose students to his area of expertise but he does expect that they will share his passion. Reflecting on a student who had done well on his placement he identified several success factors:

She hit the ground running. Students like that, the minute they walk through the door, you can tell there's a confidence about them. There's an interest about them. They seem interested in what they're doing. They are asking relevant questions, which shows that when you tell them stuff they'll listen to what you say, thinking about it for a bit and then asking a question that leads on from that. [This] shows again, that they're interested in what they're doing and they're assimilating what you're saying and thinking it through.

They generally have good confident communication skills in dealing with you, in dealing with MDTs and with patients. They're the sort of people that when you do teaching with them, they seem to really appreciate that you've taken the time to do that out of your day, to try to develop them and educate them. And if you then say to them, 'So tonight could you look in a bit more detail about X, Y and Z,' again they'll do that without any rolling of the eyes and 'tutting' as if to say, 'But I finish at 4 o'clock.'

[Successful students] have that hunger, that desire and I think that's part of it. There's an appreciation of what you have to offer and how much they're going to get out of this experience and you can really tell they're grasping the placement to try to wring every single ounce of experience out of it. And then they reinforce that on a daily basis by their performance.

John went on to identify the characteristics and behaviours of students who did less well:

It can feel like there's a lot less carryover from day-to-day. You seem to think we're having the same conversation at the start of this week that we had at the start of last week. We don't seem to have moved forwards. Not all of them [students], but some of them may seem to be less than appreciative of your teaching. If you ask them to do something in their own time, prepare something, again sometimes you can get a feeling that that's not seen as an opportunity to develop themselves further, but rather a hindrance because it's impinging on their social life.

I think we offer a fantastic placement and I think any student should be snatching our arm off to experience it. So if I get someone who seems less than appreciative, I will give them every opportunity, but I'll let them know I think they're under-utilizing this opportunity and I say, 'I hope one day you don't look back on the opportunities you had here and regret that you took it so lightly.'

I will say to them, you know, that we will only introduce ITU when we're happy that you're managing the wards well enough. We'll give them lots of feedback

as to how they're getting on and if it appears by the third week or after halfway that ITU is maybe not looking like an option, I'll say that to them and I'd like to think they're bothered by that.

If it comes across they're not bothered and actually, they're thinking, 'Do you know what, I don't really want to do that. That's more work and more effort and whatever,' by all means I won't force that. I won't force that on them because I don't see any point in me expending my energies in that avenue when I know that most students – and it is most of them – really are appreciative of the opportunity we give them. You know, they've got to meet us halfway.

With the ones that aren't so good, it feels to me definitely that I and the other educator . . . seem to care more about their placement than they do. And that's not right. We shouldn't care more about their final mark and their performance than they do and if we go into week 4 and that attitude continues, I'll very often say to the other educator, 'Right, they're not going to fail. They're performing well. They don't seem to be willing to go that extra mile, so it's their placement. From now on, it's their placement. As long as they're working safely, they're working efficiently, it's their placement and if they only want to score this mark instead of that mark, it's their placement and it shouldn't matter to us more than it matters to them.

Although other educators spoke about *'teaching students so far'*, in the expectation that students have to take ultimate responsibility for their learning, identifying a cut-off point for their obligation was rare. The sense was that as placements are relatively short most educators would continue to at least try to support students in whatever way they could in part to avoid any reprisal if the placement outcome was less favourable.

Discussion

Louise's account supports other research findings that negate the necessity for reciprocation or a return gift in exchange for her commitment to students' learning (Titmus 1970, Martinez-Aleman 2007). Because she works in an area in which she feels she has more time to devote to her clinical education role she does not appear to regard her expertise as a commodity; this might change if she moved into a busier area. As such, she clearly does not necessarily expect any immediate payback from students, potentially seeing her investment as benefitting future service users and/or colleagues; in other words the gift is passed on (Levi-Strauss 1949/1957). However, her gift also reflects her identity as a hard working, kind and nurturing clinician and educator. She characterizes the benevolence associated with the therapeutic professions (Clouder 2005). Her educator role is an important facet of her identity; putting in maximum effort regardless of the student's commitment mitigates blame but it feels like she is working equally as hard, if not harder, than her students. As such, power dynamics are reversed and there is an impression of vulnerability that drives Louise's sense of duty. She admits, like a number of other participants interviewed, that she takes it personally if a student is not doing too well but she finds 'solace' in having done her best; if students do not succeed Louise will take a share of their failure. Her commitment based on the principle of providing an equitable experience for all students, might give her a clear conscience that she at least has fulfilled her obligation but this relationship could be quite one sided. By not discriminating between those students who work hard and those who are less committed, Louise could be said to be devaluing her input.

In contrast to Louise, John likes to see results. He sets himself up as a task master and someone who makes the running. In his words he “*throws down the gauntlet*”. His approach definitely emphasizes power differentials. He is the gatekeeper who holds the key to success. Like Louise, John has an unfaltering sense of duty, up to a point. Students who flourish validate John’s identity as an expert clinician and educator but effort is carefully monitored and students who fall below the expected threshold bear the responsibility of mediocrity or failure if John’s cut off point is reached. Their placement outcome is testimony to the effort they are prepared to put in and regardless of outcome, John maintains his image as an expert clinician and educator. The student grapevine will no doubt mean that John will have a reputation for being tough but for students prepared to put in the effort the rewards are no doubt career changing. Of course, it is interesting that John is male and although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the accounts of his and Louise’s ways of managing students on placement, they might be considered to be gendered. In fact, it can be argued that John cared equally, and was perhaps even more ambitious for his students, confirming that generalizations are dangerous but that this would be an interesting area for further research.

Conclusion

The ‘gift exchange’ metaphor provides a useful means of conceptualizing the interaction that builds successful student–educator relationships, as well as understanding identity and power dynamics which characterize the placement experience. Contrary to research suggesting that gifts move across relationships without the expectation of a return gift (Martinez-Aleman 2007) our findings suggest that whilst some practice educators observe a sense of duty to give their expertise tirelessly, others expect varying degrees of reciprocity. The continuing generosity of the practice educator is very likely to be influenced by the student’s receipt and acknowledgment of their gift by showing commitment to study, making an effort to learn, readiness to follow advice and guidance, and demonstrable progress in terms of taking on increasing levels of responsibility. The student whose progress is self evident is likely to be nurtured to achieve high standards; the gift has been repaid in kind, inspiring further giving. Conversely, the student who fails to reciprocate in the gift exchange risks disrupting learning.

Although data from an earlier phase of the study of responsibility on placement (Clouder 2009) confirms that some students do indeed recognize that meeting certain expectations and being appreciative of practice educators’ input helps to maintain relationships, such insight is by no means the norm; students can get very focused on their own needs and simply expect to be nurtured (Lefevre 2005). The most ambitious students, across all health and social care professions, would do well to recognize that they take a liberal share of the responsibility for making a placement work. Many of us have met students who, wherever they are placed, make a success of it; these are the students who are alert to the need for reciprocity through ‘invisible’ or at least less tangible factors that contribute to the dynamics of the student–educator relationship. What educators get from this relationship is validation (or not) of their skills and capabilities. Where work pressures increase, and validation through the practice educator role is absent, it seems likely that practice educators will seek other ways in which to gain it and increasingly ‘legitimate compromises’ (May 1996) may be made.

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