Evaluation of an On-Campus Program Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap in Occupational Therapy Education: Student Perspective

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Abstract

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Keywords

Occupational therapy education, practice placement

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ABSTRACT

The transfer of learning from an academic setting to fieldwork and vice versa is not straightforward and occupational therapy students often report this as challenging. In acknowledgement of this, the fieldwork placement learning structure within the Bachelor and Master occupational therapy entry-level programs at a higher education institute was redesigned to enhance links between taught content at university and fieldwork placement. The aim of this study was to explore occupational therapy students' perspectives of this new educational initiative. The students attended university for a set number of days over the course of their first and second fieldwork placements. The sessions were focused on assisting students to make connections between theory taught at university to the practice setting and allow time for reflection and consolidation of learning. One hundred and fifteen occupational therapy students completed an anonymized online questionnaire to evaluate their experiences consisting of open and closed questions. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis and Likert Scale data was analyzed descriptively. Three key themes were identified from the qualitative information: reflection, support, and understanding and knowledge. The students reported the sessions provided time for reflection, which enabled them to link theory to practice more clearly and peer support was highly regarded. The introduction of university days during fieldwork education was overall positively received by students. This educational approach helped students to better understand theory and promoted reflection on practice experiences. This may be a useful approach to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Introduction

Occupational therapy education not only seeks to develop students' theoretical knowledge, but also endeavors to equip students with the necessary competencies for contemporary practice. Fieldwork placements are recognized as a fundamental part of occupational therapy education (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2016) and enable students to develop practical skills and professional reasoning (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2016). This type of learning is essential to build the necessary competencies required to meet professional standards. Fieldwork placements also provide an opportunity for students to develop professional identity and apply knowledge and understanding of theory learned in university to the specific practice setting (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, 2019).

Experiential learning theory perceives learning as a process whereby ideas are formed and reformed through new experience of the learner (Kolb, 1984). Dewey (1916), a pioneer in the field of experiential learning, proposed four essential components for learning to take place: experience, data for reflection, ideas, and fixing what has been learned (Brockbank & McGill, 2000). Dewey (1916) suggested that ideas naturally follow experiences once the learner is provided with opportunities to reflect, but it is through further testing of the ideas back in practice that knowledge is "fixed." Situated learning theory also implies that learning is often context bound and although 'transfer' can occur, the issue is how this can be best facilitated to maximize learning (Greeno, 1997). Boyt Schell and Schell (2017) referred to situated cognition theory, suggesting that conceptual knowledge and theory is solidified in the practice placement setting.

Challenges for Students and Fieldwork Educators to Bridge Theory to Practice

Fieldwork placements are essential to enable students to relate theory learned at university to the practice setting. It is often not until students are in practice and see the direct application to a service user's care that they make the connection between theory and practice (Rodger et al., 2011). However, transfer of learning from an academic setting to the fieldwork environment and vice versa is not straightforward and students often report this as challenging (Le Maistre & Pare, 2004; Steward, 1996). This frequently results in students seeing the two modes of learning as separate entities and experiencing difficulties in applying theory to practice (Kielhofner, 2005; Toal-Sullivan, 2006). Challenges with connecting theory and practice in occupational therapy is well documented (Boniface & Seymour, 2012) and continues to be problematic. Models and approaches underpin occupational therapists' clinical reasoning and it is essential that students understand how to apply this to reality with practice examples (Boniface & Seymour, 2012). However, if there is a failure to see a relationship between coursework and practice, this will create a divide for the students (Domakin, 2014). Le Maistre and Pare´ (2004, p. 48) believed that specifically in the case of novice students "faced with the hurly-burly of initial practice," students struggle to transform their theoretical knowledge into the work environment. They recommended greater collaboration between universities and the workforce to facilitate the transformation of the learning from classroom to practice. In response to this well recognized and documented challenge, Schön (1987) advocated the use of a reflective practicum to bridge between learning at the university and practice.

Attempts to Bridge Theory to Practice in Occupational Therapy Programs

Educational attempts to reduce the theory to practice gap have been made through initiatives aimed at graduating students' involvement in research projects (Stern, 2005). Other approaches to facilitate students' understanding and application of theory in practice have been based on curricula design. For example, Ikiugu and Smallfield's (2015) study indicated an increase in students' perception of understanding of theory and perceived competence in using theory to guide clinical decision making in practice following completion of a program design which emphasized application of theoretical conceptual practice models within the curricula. Binyamin (2018) proposed another example of educational design to facilitate bridging the theory to practice gap. In this educational initiative, undergraduate occupational therapy students used collaborative reflective writing, sharing, and discussion to explore clinical dilemmas they had experienced on placement. Collaborative reflection was reported to have been helpful in developing students' professional identity and effective in bridging the theory to practice gaps for these students. A different approach has been the introduction of an on-campus clinic course at an occupational therapy master's program which is reported to have been beneficial on students' ability to adapt and have greater flexibility in their application of theory to practice (Erickson, 2018). Therefore, it can be postulated that to enable integration of theory and practice, explicit action is required to facilitate optimal learning (Thompson, 2000).

Occupational therapy educational programs in the United Kingdom (UK) are required to provide practice-based learning that is integral to the course. The accreditation body, Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2017) requires fieldwork placements to have clear learning outcomes linked to level of development; however, the structure, design, and length of the fieldwork placements are set by the educational programs. This led the higher academic institute to explore possible educational designs that can bridge theory to practice for novice occupational therapy students.

Program Redesign

An educational initiative was introduced to the occupational therapy programs at a higher education institute in the UK following a series of consultation events between academics, practice educators, clinicians, students, and service user representatives. In response to feedback from the above stakeholders, the placement learning structure within the occupational therapy Bachelor (BSc) and Master (MSc) programs was redesigned to facilitate further integration of academic and practice learning of novice students. One of the recommendations of this co-produced curriculum redesign was to consider approaches to bridge theory to practice and to further utilize placement learning experiences in developing novice students' knowledge. Buchanan and Cloete (2006) advised education providers to create structures to guide students through complexities of practice learning. These graded structures can facilitate student transitions from novice to more advanced, whereby students take more responsibility for their own learning.

In this institution the BSc program was a three-year (full time) or four-year (part time) duration and the MSc was a two-year accelerated program. All students completed four placements during their occupational therapy training to gain their required practice placement hours. Placement one occurred in the first year and placement two in the second year of the BSc course. Placement one and two were both completed in year one of the MSc course. Regular taught sessions at the university during placement one and two of the occupational therapy programs were introduced to support students with complexities of practice learning. These sessions were designed to reduce the abstract nature of theoretical learning while students were immersed in practice and maintain connections with the academic course content. The sessions were also constructed to enable students to remain connected with their peers and the university community. This initiative was focused particularly on students at earlier stages of their training, where it was felt more support was needed. The number of taught sessions at the university decreased as students progressed in the program and became more self-reliant. The teaching method and delivery of the sessions on these 'university days' were changed to facilitate greater discussions and opportunities for reflections on real life examples from the students' placements. Although the initiative went across the four placements, the 'university days' were more frequent during placements one and two. The aim of this initiative was to maximize learning during practice placement blocks by using the university days to assist students with linking theoretical concepts to practice examples.

The purpose of this study was to explore novice students' perspective of the initiative of attending university during the placement period to bridge the theory to practice gap.

Methods

Study Design
A concurrent triangulation mixed methods study design was utilized in this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Participants completed an anonymous online questionnaire including open and closed questions. The qualitative and quantitative questions were designed to explore the students' experience of the educational initiative. Triangulation of the findings from the two sets of data provided a more comprehensive understanding of the students' experience. Triangulation is considered to promote a more complete understanding of the phenomenon and to enhance the rigor (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

Participant Recruitment
Ethical approval for the project was granted by the university's Health and Social Care Ethics Board. Once ethical approval was obtained, the researchers informed the occupational therapy students about the research project within class and provided them with a participant information sheet. The students were given an opportunity to ask questions and were informed that participation in the project was voluntary. Students were reassured that the research design would maintain their confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

One hundred and two BSc and fifty MSc occupational therapy students who had completed their fieldwork placement one and two and taken part in this educational intervention were invited to participate in the study. Students that consented to participate in the study were provided with an online link to complete and submit the questionnaire. Students received one reminder to complete the questionnaire via the university's virtual learning platform. One hundred and fifteen responses were received to the online questionnaire (76%). The participants were from the first and second year of the BSc and first year of the MSc course. These students were considered 'novice' as they were beginners to practice learning. Students nearer to graduation were considered more advanced in their practice learning.

Fieldwork Structure and Sessions Attended
Table 1 shows the details of the fieldwork levels, duration, and number of days attended at university during fieldwork placement. Placement one and two were at introductory and novice level. Placements 3 and 4 were longer and at an advanced level.

Table 1

Length of Placement and Days Attended at University During Placement

Placement Level	Placement Length	Days Attended at University During Placement
Practice placement 1	6 weeks	6
Practice placement 2	7 weeks	4
Practice placement 3	10 weeks	1
Practice placement 4	10 weeks	1

On these special university days, students attended seminars and small group workshops on selected topics that would enable them to directly refer to their observations and experiences in practice. Each session was a half day (see Table 2). Students were encouraged to bring examples from practice and share these with each other.

Table 2

Example of Topics During University Days on Placement 1 and 2

Title of Sessions	Learning activity	Level of placement
Occupational therapy process	Interactive seminar – sharing experiences from placement with facilitated discussion exploring occupational therapy process models and their application in practice	Placement 1
Clinical reasoning in practice	Interactive seminar – sharing experiences from fieldwork with facilitated discussion exploring theory and models	Placement 1
Person centered practice and barriers to service user involvement	Interactive seminar – sharing experiences from placement with facilitated discussion	Placement 1
Equality and diversity – the London context	Interactive lecture with small group work and sharing of experiences	Placement 1
Observation and documentation skills	Video simulation of assessment with documentation practice	Placement 2
Co-production	Service user led workshop	Placement 2
Occupational therapy intervention planning	Small group work sharing and reflecting on service user examples from placement with facilitated discussion on factors informing clinical reasoning and intervention delivery	Placement 2
Occupational disruption, deprivation and justice	Interactive lecture with application to real practice examples from placement	Placement 2

Data Collection

Students were invited to complete an online anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions (see Table 3) and four Likert scale questions (see Table 5). Likert scales included a five-point scoring system (1 = Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree). The educational objectives of the university days were used to guide the creation of the questionnaire. The online questionnaire was developed by the authors and sent to the wider academic team to pilot the questions and software. Formal validity and reliability testing of the questionnaire were not conducted.

Table 3

Open-ended Questions Included in the Questionnaire

	Questions
1	How did attending the days at university during placement facilitate your overall learning?
2	How did the learning on the days attended at university during placement differ from other learning during the program?
3	What did you like about the university days during placement?
4	What could be improved about the days?
5	Were there any sessions you particularly found useful and why?
6	Anything else about the university days you would like to tell us?

Data Analysis

Likert scale data was reviewed and agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree categories were collapsed and reported using frequencies. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis and the six steps as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarization with the data, 2) generating initial codes from features of the data, 3) collating the codes into potential themes, 4) reviewing and checking the themes in relation to the coded data, 5) defining and naming the themes, and 6) selecting and analyzing the extracts for the final report. The researchers completed steps one, two, and three independently and then convened to review and compare their selected codes and themes. The combined codes were initially identified and were then reviewed again as there was some overlap, and the final set of codes were identified. The researchers then reviewed the data set again using the finalized codes and identified three themes within the data.

Results

Table 4 displays the characteristics of the participants. A mixture of BSc and MSc students completed the questionnaire. Most of the students were in their first year of their program and had completed practice placement one. A smaller proportion of the sample had completed practice placement two. The students had completed placements in a mixture of practice settings.

Table 4

Participant Characteristics (n=115)

Characteristic	*n* (%)
Gender	
Female	101 (88)
Male	14 (12)
Course	
BSc full time	37 (32)
BSc part time	18 (16)
MSc	60 (52)
Year of study	
Year 1	90 (78)
Year 2	25 (22)
Placement level	
Practice placement 1	78 (68)
Practice placement 2	37 (32)
Placement setting	
In-patient	48 (42)
Community	40 (35)
Mixed	27 (23)

Table 5 displays the Likert scale data results for the statements. A large proportion of the occupational therapy students reported that the university days enabled them to make links between occupational therapy theory and placement experience. Many students reported the days at university gave them an opportunity to reflect on their placement experiences and that the peer support on the university days was of benefit.

Table 5

*Likert Scale Statements and Results (n=115)*

Statement	Strongly agree/ Agree *n* (%)	Neither agree or Disagree *n* (%)	Strongly disagree/ Disagree *n* (%)
The university days enabled me to link theory taught in the classroom to fieldwork	101 (87.8)	10 (8.6)	4 (3.5)
I was able to relate something I learned at university to the fieldwork setting	111 (95.7)	2 (1.7)	2 (1.7)
I was able to reflect on fieldwork learning during the university taught sessions	105 (91.3)	7 (6.1)	3 (2.6)
Meeting with my peers on the university days during fieldwork was useful	114 (99.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.9)

Themes

Using thematic analysis, the following three themes were identified from the data: *reflection, support, and understanding and knowledge.* There was clearly some overlap between the codes leading to strong connections between the themes. The analysis of the overlapping codes indicated the interconnection of the three themes throughout the data set. *Reflection* surfaced as a theme in its own right but was also significant in connecting the other themes of *support* and *understanding and knowledge.* Figure 1 is an illustration of the interconnectivity of the themes and the central role of reflection to students' experience.

Figure 1

Key Themes from Thematic Analysis
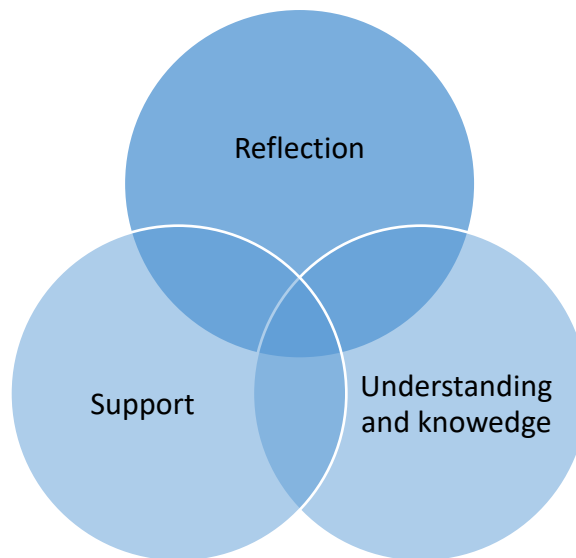
Reflection
For many students, the university days during placements provided time and space to stand back from their lived experience and reflect:

"Time to reflect and consolidate learning by having a day away from placement and the pressures of busy environment and being under constant assessment."

The students also reported they were able to reflect further on their experiences through reflecting while sharing their experiences with their peers and tutors. The dedicated time for reflection enabled the students to process and consolidate their learning from the fieldwork placement setting. Reflecting with their peers also facilitated learning in relation to different clinical areas and professional identity.

"It [the university days during placement period] was extremely helpful. I was able to reflect on my experiences on placement and compare my experiences with others. This helped in my understanding of how things were done on my placement in comparison with others as well as advantages and limitations."

The dedicated time for reflection during the university days enabled the students to recognize their learning and development between placements. The students appreciated the facilitated sessions to support them to reflect and identify learning needs for the future:

"It was helpful for facilitating our reflection on learning between Placement 1 and Placement 2, which is useful for my continuous professional development file."

The time that the university days gave the students to reflect was also emphasized in the Likert data collected, as 91% of the participants reported they were able to engage in reflection during this initiative.

Support
Support featured as a theme on its own right but with frequent reference to reflection. From the students' perspective, *support* from peers and academic staff was a crucial aspect of their experience. The highly positive response rate (99%) to the question: 'Meeting with my peers on the university days during placement was useful' endorses the qualitative feedback on this theme. The students' descriptive feedback identified two main topics within this theme: intellectual support to help with understanding and emotional support. Most students referred to peer support but support from tutors was also significant for some students. Many students referred to this as the ability to *"touch base with my peers and tutor"* or *"share and learn from peers."* Students also referred to how the support they received from peers and academic staff enabled them to reflect on their experiences. Many students referred to opportunities for "*sharing stories*" which helped them both with learning from each other and emotional support as this student indicates:

"Being able to come back and share placement experiences was extremely beneficial. It helped me to offload concerns and relate to other students. This also allowed me to consolidate my learning. When coming back, everyone has lots to talk about and it was nice to have this space to do so."

Peer support was a recurrent theme and was of benefit to the students during challenging times. The students appreciated maintaining links with the university during practice placement as reported below:

"To get a break from placement which for me was quite stressful emotionally."

Another student voiced how peer support was beneficial to them and others:

"[Attending university day] benefitted learning as good to chat to peers regarding their placements and discuss things that you might be struggling with and get others' opinions."

For some students, university days were motivating to get more of their practice learning opportunity. Role of practice educators in developing students' learning and making use of this initiative also was paramount as indicated by this student:

"It was really useful to hear what other students were doing on placement; this gave me ideas to try and get more out of my placement...… my practice educator also thought they [university days during placement] were useful. She noted that I would often come back from a university day and ask about some of the issues raised that might be relevant to the placement setting."

The following example also illustrates how the university days were useful to validate students' feelings in relation to their placement:

"I liked seeing my peers and sharing our experiences as it was really helpful to hear others' experiences and know everyone was feeling similar things!"

For some students the university days provided valued time and space away from the stresses of placements.

"The respite from placement, support, and contact with my cohort that I gained from uni days was invaluable."

Support from academic staff was also considered valuable for some students in addition to the peer support:

"A chance to interact with peers and share learning and experiences and gain advice and support from teaching staff, which is particularly important in your first placement experience."

"Having the opportunity to compare our different experiences on placement helped managing expectations and being able to ask direct questions to lecturers relative to the application of theory in the placement."

Understanding and Knowledge
The university days were recognized not only to offer opportunities for emotional support but also intellectual support which linked the two emerging themes of support and understanding and knowledge. The students reported that the university days during placement helped them with developing their understanding and knowledge of occupational therapy theory and practice. There were essentially opportunities to re-examine learning from practice and opportunities to contemplate how the previously learned theory at university was applied in practice; hence making sense of previous knowledge to develop understanding by linking theory to practice. Reflection was reported to be key in facilitating this learning, linking this theme closely to the theme of reflection. Further knowledge was gained by pooling of new information from real life practice experiences that students were able to share with their peers.

The comments below represent many of the students' views on how the university days during fieldwork placement provided students with opportunities to explore and think over their placement experiences to increase their understanding:

"It was useful to put the things I was learning on placement into context."

"It helped to clarify things about the placement and highlight areas that I needed to follow up on during placement."

A student below reported on how the teaching approach on the university days facilitated them with their learning:

".... they would provide us with activities to do during the university day that would facilitate deeper learning and understanding of the placement we were at. Then I was able to use that knowledge to meet my learning objectives and support my development and learning…. Other times would just be helpful to listen to how other services work and the difference the environmental factors or the approach/perspective of the educator and the student can vary and impact reasoning and outcome. Additionally, it contributed in forming questions and realizing what more I wanted to learn from my placement educator."

Application of Theory to Practice

Students referred to how the university days during placement facilitated their development of understanding of theory. Comments such as *"Good to ground knowledge..."* represented how students used the sessions to think more deeply about previously learned theory and its application to the practice setting they were working at as stated by this student:

"The uni days helped me to connect the dots between the theory of what we were learning on the course and the practice."

At the same time, students also expressed that the university days during placements helped them to make better connections between what they were being taught at university to real life practice.

"It [theory] is much more applicable, current, and you can apply it to what you are learning in practice"

Students reported that the university days during placements helped them with understanding of theory underpinning the practice they were embracing.

"The uni days helped me to identify and analyze the theory and approaches in my placement setting that weren't always immediately transparent e.g., models and the OT process."

The educational approach of using the intimacy of experience appeared to assist students with learning topics that may be sometimes distant to students. A student completing their first placement reported that university days during placement facilitated their learning by:

"Probed us to search and think about certain aspects of placement such as legislation and how this impacts the service. This was very helpful for analytical thinking whilst learning."

The above qualitative feedback was validated by the students' responses to the closed questions. Over 87% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the university days enabled them to link theory taught in the classroom to placement.

Some students identified areas of improvement for how the sessions could help them to bridge theory to practice. Timing of the sessions was reported as highly significant in students' experience and ability to make use of the sessions. A student indicated:

"Some sessions were useful but some sessions were delivered too late in the learning process."

Another student reported that the sessions could be improved by:

"Order of which they came, and some content was not needed or useful for certain placements which confused me."

Developing Understanding Through Reflection and Support
It was often through opportunities for reflection that students were able to develop their understanding and increase their knowledge of theory and its application in practice. Discussions during university days offered an opportunity for students to reflect on their live experiences from placement and students appreciated how they could help each other, illustrating how the three themes overlapped:

 "An opportunity for synthesis and critical analysis of what was happening on placement, to a far greater level than I would have been able to do alone."

Students frequently recognized the role of their peers and academic staff in facilitating their reflections as indicated above.

The teaching and content of the sessions helped many students with "*putting theory to practice*" but for some it was the "*sharing"* with other students that helped with facilitating theory to practice, representing how the themes of *support* and gaining *understanding and knowledge* were linked for students:

"*[The university days during placements] allowed us to discuss more practical elements of practice while they were fresh in our minds. Allowed us to discuss situations with our cohort colleagues*"

The sharing and learning from each other was further analyzed under the identified theme of '*support'*.

Discussion

This study explored occupational therapy students' experiences of the educational initiative of attending university during fieldwork placement one and two. The opportunity that the university days provided for students to reflect on their fieldwork experiences in a structured way was highly regarded by students. Time for reflection has been considered an essential element of a quality practice placement and invaluable for students to process their learning and identify their learning needs (Rodger et al., 2011). However, in reality, the opportunity for reflection within a placement setting is not always available, particularly within fast-paced settings (Knightbridge, 2019).

Fieldwork teaches practical skills but should also allow time for students to be able to think about experiences analytically and seek out relevant information (Rodger et al., 2011). The university days encouraged analytical discussions between students which facilitated their understanding and application of theory to recent clinical encounters. Brockbank and McGill (2000) emphasized the need for reflection to enable consolidation of learning from experiences. The university days provided structured and protected time to students to enable reflection on recent placement experiences. Knecht-Sabres (2013) highlighted that many occupational therapy students report feeling inadequately prepared for practice placement and suggested that academics should implement additional opportunities to support experiential learning for students. This new educational initiative gave the students facilitated protected time to analyze and reflect on activity they had completed on fieldwork to further develop their learning. Furthermore, a particular strength of the initiative was creating the opportunity to develop students' reflective skills. Students' ability to reflect is varied and often dependent on their level of training. Development of reflective skills needs nurturing and guidance. The program provided a supportive environment for reflection whereby the novice students were guided to focus on key elements to build reflective skills.

The occupational therapy profession has evolved in many settings; for example, in relation to dominance of the medical model or generic working, which can challenge students' perspectives on central concepts of occupational therapy theory and philosophy taught at university (Clouston & Whitcombe, 2008). The university days enabled students to explore the realities of practice and develop their understanding of the varied scope of the occupational therapy role in a range of settings. Students were able to share their experiences from a variety of clinical settings which provided rich learning opportunities for their peers in alternative clinical settings. The variations experienced in practice enabled the students to discuss and develop their understanding of current occupational therapy practice and its alignment with the true philosophy of occupation (Gustafsson et al., 2014). Critical discussions encouraged the students to understand some of the challenges of the application of theory and in maintaining occupation at the heart of practice within a current context.

The emotional aspects of the profession are less researched within occupational therapy than other health and social care professions. Placements can provoke intense emotions in relation to clinical encounters, but also in relation to succeeding in the placement and demonstrating competence in the necessary professional skills (Healey, 2017). It was apparent from the findings that support from peers and academic staff was highly regarded during placement in the early stages of the course. Students that were facing challenges during their placements valued the opportunity to share their feelings with others and were comforted by the realization that other students were experiencing similarities. Providing students with time to reflect on emotionally challenging experiences can assist students in identifying their emotional responses, which can help to identify personal strategies to manage their emotions (Perkins & Schmid, 2019).

This initiative provided students with additional peer contact and support as occupational therapy students typically experience practice placement in isolation from their peers. Daniels (2010) identified that peer support during placement was valuable for occupational therapy students in reducing isolation, providing reassurance, developing confidence and to allow time to share experiences. Peer support during placement can assist students in reflecting on their practice experiences, which can reinforce and contribute towards their learning (Daniels, 2010; Moore et al., 2003). Larkin and Hitch (2019) highlighted that peer assisted learning can provide a safe environment for students to talk openly and share their experiences, develop critical reflection skills, and validate existing skills. Peer collaboration can also assist students in developing reflexivity and critical thinking skills (Boud, 2001). The peer support this initiative provided was valuable in developing students' understanding of practice experiences through reflective peer discussions.

Longfellow et al. (2008) identified a challenge of peer assisted learning can be to ensure that the sessions remain on topic and relate to the focus of the academic program. The university days and student discussions were all facilitated by a member of academic staff to ensure the sessions were productive and relevant to practice learning. Larkin and Hitch (2019) identified that students that choose not to engage in peer assisted learning can negatively impact on the experience for others. Daniels (2010) also highlighted that peer support during placement could cause negative experiences for students that are not doing as much or performing as well as other students. It is important for academic staff to be aware of the potential negative emotional exchange or influence between peers during this initiative and to provide a tutor monitored environment. However, there can be limitations of staff presence when students are sharing personal experiences, as they may not feel as comfortable to talk openly or feel they can relate as well to academic staff as their peers (Larkin & Hitch, 2019).

The use of theory to guide practice can be challenging for occupational therapists (Melton et al., 2010). Students reported the university days enabled them to link theory they had learned in the classroom more explicitly to the practice observed on placement. The students found the facilitated discussions between peers beneficial in facilitating their learning around key theoretical concepts. A lack of understanding of

occupational therapy theory can present as a barrier to successful application in practice (Ikiugu, 2010). Elliott et al. (2002) suggested that inadequate educational preparation regarding the use of theory can contribute to lack of theory use in practice. The university days provided students with additional time to enable them to make connections between theory previously taught at university and their current experiences. Boniface et al. (2008) and Wimpenny et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of engaging in reflection throughout the process of implementing theory to practice. Leclair et al. (2013) also posited that reflecting critically on the use of theory can help to support and encourage the use of theory. The university days enabled the students to critically review the application of theory they had encountered in practice placement and discuss the barriers and benefits of its use. The results of this research also highlight the important intrinsic role that reflective practice has in developing understanding and knowledge of theory for students.

Limitations
A limitation of this study was that it was carried out in one academic institution. The two researchers were part of the fieldwork placement team and delivered some of the content on university days, which may have introduced an element of bias and influenced student responses. The online questionnaire was not formally tested for reliability and validity, which may have influenced the consistency and accuracy of the data collected.

While the study had a good response rate to the questionnaire, the authors cannot be sure of the views of those that did not participate in the study. Due to the subjective nature of the students' self-reports, the authors cannot be certain of transfer of knowledge into the practice setting and its impact on their performance at practice placement.

The varied topics and method of delivery on the university day may have influenced students' overall experience of this educational initiative. There was limited communication between the university and practice educators regarding the content of the sessions on university days during placement, which may have affected the transfer of knowledge from the classroom back to the placement setting.

Future Research
Further research to explore the practice educators' perspective of this educational initiative would be useful. It would also be of interest to explore the impact of the initiative on students' development and outcomes during practice placement.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education
Attending university during fieldwork placement at the earlier stages of occupational therapy training may be an effective means to assist students in making connections between practice and theory, however this does require further research.

A benefit of the university days during practice placement is that it can inform academic staff of current practice issues, which can help to ensure that curriculum content is applicable to real world issues. Kielhofner (2005) recognized the theory- practice gap in occupational therapy and urges for researchers and academics to have greater dialogue with clinicians so that research is aimed at addressing 'real-world problems' in practice. The university days could assist academics in identifying possible areas of focus for research and opportunities for collaboration.

It would be of benefit for fieldwork educators to be informed of the content of the university sessions in advance. This would enable practice educators to engage in reflective dialogue with the students on return to placement and further consolidate learning within the context of the placement setting.

Conclusion

This paper explored students' experiences and perspectives of a new educational initiative to assist students in bringing theory and practice together. The results suggest that the university days during fieldwork enabled students to further develop their knowledge and understanding of theory by linking it to current practice examples. Additional peer and academic support during fieldwork placement were highly regarded during what can be an emotionally challenging time for students. The university days provided time and space for the students to reflect on placement experiences. Academic staff facilitated reflective critical discussions, which enabled the students to consolidate their learning from placement and identify areas for development. This educational initiative may be an effective way of bridging the theory practice divide for occupational therapy students, however, would benefit from further research.

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