

## Supporting allied health students on clinical placements to begin to think, feel and act as a health professional – a health librarian's contribution

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Clinical placements provide student health professionals with critical and diverse learning opportunities. Engaging in clinical work and learning from role models and peers in the workplace are primary ways allied health students develop professional skills, behaviour and identities as a health professional. Whilst on placement students also have opportunities to become part of the workplace practice community. This study arose not as the result of a need to solve a problem, but from my curiosity and desire to continuously improve clinical placement learning experiences for allied health students. In my study, I explored the influences supporting allied health students undertaking clinical placements in a Queensland regional health service to think, feel and act like health professionals.

Professional identity is a commonly used term with a range of perceptions and definitions. The definition of Professional Identity I chose for this study was from the work of Merton, Reader and Kendall (1957) who argued that the purpose of medical education is:

'to shape the novice into the effective practitioner of medicine, to give him, the best available knowledge and skills and to provide him with a professional identity so that he comes to think, act and feel like a physician' (Merton et al, 1957, p7).

## Methods

A qualitative study comprising focus group discussions and a document review was conducted. Thematic analysis was used to analyse transcripts from the focus group discussions and of clinical education placement documents. Narrative data from focus groups were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A deductive framework based on Merton's definition of professional identity 'to *think, act and feel* like a health professional' (Merton, 1957, p. 5) was used to inform and frame the data analysis.

## Participants

Participants of the study included allied health staff whose roles support clinical placement education in the health service (n=17), allied health students on placement (n=12) and new graduates in their first two years of practice working in the regional health service (n=11). Separate focus groups were held for each group. A total of twenty clinical education documents were reviewed: thirteen orientation documents and seven documents used for evaluating the competency of allied health students on placement.

## Results

Three overall themes about the influence of clinical placements on the development of professional identity were identified. Using a framework of *think /feel /act*, the themes I identified were:

- 1) *Thinking* supported by quality learning
- 2) *Feeling* supported by socialisation into the workplace community of practice
- 3) *Acting* supported by workplace affordances and opportunities.

Project results and suggestions provided by students and new graduates to support development of professional identity during clinical placements have been reported in several publications (Furness, Tynan and Ostini, 2019; 2020a; 2020b).

### *Thinking supported by quality learning*

The *Thinking* theme described placement learning experiences supporting knowledge and the development of competence. Key elements supporting student learning on placement included: 'hands on' experience, Clinical Educator's support for learning and opportunities to work with patients. Clinical Educators play an essential role in supporting student learning through acting as a role model, setting expectations, providing feedback, adapting to students' preferred learning style, being knowledgeable about their own profession and their ability to reflect and communicate well. Students valued supervision sessions with their Clinical Educator because they supported students to develop their reasoning and receive feedback.

Clinical placements provide an opportunity for students to take theoretical knowledge gained at university and apply this theory to patient care.

### *Feeling supported by socialisation and connecting in the workplace*

The *feeling* theme describes socialisation and connectedness in the workplace. The connections can be both positive, supportive and welcoming or can be challenging for students where they feel like a '*burden*' in the workplace. My study identified the positive impacts of the workplace culture where clinical education is core business and underpinned by a commitment from the health service. Students and new graduates described the positive benefits of a workplace which valued clinical education, showed respect for students as '*part of the system rather than an add on*' and where they were welcomed and valued.

The active encouragement for students to be involved in case conferences and professional development sessions enabled connections. Students and new graduates explained how participating in team storytelling and discussions supported both their learning and connection to the team. Work shadowing with members of students' own profession and other professions was valued as a way to understand more about their own profession and the roles of other professions. The passion Clinical Educators have for their work was highlighted by a number of new graduates. One participant commented about their Clinical educator saying, '*when I grow up, I want to be like her*'.

Participants reported placements supported feeling like a member of the profession and relatedness through:

- Clinical Educators supporting a relationship of trust, respect and non-confrontational, reciprocal learning.
- Developing connections with their own profession, and other professions during placement
- Caring for patients and feeling affirmed by other professionals asking for the student's opinion.

Regardless of our role or profession we can all enable the socialisation and connection of students as they enter our workplace.

### *Acting – developing autonomy and independence in practice as health professional*

The *Acting* theme described students gaining skills and independence in providing services and care as a health professional. One Clinical Education Support Officer (responsible for the coordination of clinical education for their profession in the health service) explained:

*'I talk about this analogy of unzipping their student suit and at the end they step out of it. I want them to leave here feeling like a speech pathologist'* Participant 2.4.

Implicit references to acting like a member of the profession came from workplace documents referencing expected dress standards, wearing a student identification badge and the expectation for students to be introduced as part of the patient's care team. Clinical Educators described supporting independence through creating opportunities for contribution to care, grading learning experiences, increasing the complexity of cases, and working to build students' confidence. One student described how they benefited by their Clinical Educator nurturing them as an emerging clinician, not a '*mini-me*'. Students and new graduates described how when patients and their families sought their advice this supported their transition from identity as a student to that of a health professional.

Having other health professionals ask for a student's input and implement student advice for patient care '*makes me feel like I'm getting there*'. Participants reported placements supported acting and autonomy as a member of the profession through:

- Opportunities to develop autonomy and independence in client care
- Developing an understanding of one's own role and contribution to patient care
- Receiving referrals and requests for input in client care by other professions
- Taking time to reflect on placement learning and experiences

### How can librarians contribute to students *thinking, feeling and acting* as a health professional?

Whilst not specifically investigated as part of my research project, personal experience has shown me that health librarians can and do play a key role in supporting student health professionals to *think, feel and act* as a health professional.

The *thinking* theme links closely to the work of health librarians supporting students to access clinical learning resources to develop competence. Health librarians support the development of competence through:

- Supporting Clinical Educator preparation and upskilling for their role in student education
- Support for students and their Clinical Educators to access learning resources related to their profession such as: literature about professional theory and frameworks, evidence-based practice, and resources for reflection, and clinical reasoning
- Assisting students to access literature to support their placement learning e.g. information about different medical conditions and treatment approaches
- Assisting students who are completing quality improvement projects to access literature, critical appraisal tools, data bases, and Health Service intranet references.

The *Feeling* theme considers student connections with others in the workplace. During clinical placements a health library becomes a meeting place and provides

space for students to complete study and project work. A health library is therefore another point of connection in the workplace for students. These connections to the workplace can be enhanced by:

- Creating a supportive learning environment which encourages and facilitates student meeting
- Providing facilities to support connections eg phone charging facilities, break out spaces and relevant computer programs for client care and statistics
- Interest in a student's placement experience and locations which can help strengthen a student's professional identity
- Creating a positive workplace culture for education, acceptance by a team and other library users

The *acting* theme outlines supporting the application of knowledge in practice. Whilst health librarians are not in the clinic with students treating patients, they can encourage the recognition of students as student health professionals. This can be facilitated through how students are addressed and by noticing and valuing students' contribution to service delivery during their placement both in clinical and project/quality improvement work.

I trust these reflections affirm current practices and may provide some suggestions to assist health librarians as you continue to support clinicians and have contact with student health professionals during their clinical placement.

### Conclusion

Librarians play a valuable role in the development of professional identity for allied health and other student health professionals on placement through their vital role in linking students and staff with information and helping students to develop connections in the health workplace.

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