

CHAPTER 1

Getting Ready for Placement

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- understand the purpose and scope of work-integrated learning
- be aware of the practical steps to take in preparing for the fieldwork placement
- analyse aspects of workplace literacy with reference to oneself and the team
- raise self-awareness about being a student on placement.

KEY TERMS

Emotional intelligence (EI)
Experiential learning
Fieldwork educator

Fieldwork placement
Self-awareness
Self-regulation

Work-integrated learning
Workplace literacy

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines a range of factors to consider before embarking on a **fieldwork placement**. These considerations focus mainly on practical matters, and will be relevant to you, regardless of your health-related discipline. **Work-integrated learning (WIL)** has a long and strong tradition in most health-related disciplines. Many seasoned health professionals consider their past student fieldwork placement as the most significant and memorable learning experience in their early careers, which shaped and radically influenced their style of working, future career choices and identification with their chosen discipline. Engaging with real clients in the context of a bona fide workplace brings a critical edge to learning that cannot be captured in the classroom. Together, these factors create an exciting, dynamic

and challenging milieu. In order to make the most of the learning opportunities offered in the field it is important to build a sound foundation from which to begin your fieldwork placement. Understanding the scope and purpose of the fieldwork placement is the logical place to start.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

The scope of the profession

It may seem self-evident that the purpose of 'going out **on placement**' is to learn how to practise one's discipline. Learning to practise, however, involves more than demonstrating the technical skills associated with your discipline, such as conducting an intake assessment, constructing a splint or charting a patient's medication. It entails:

- › discovering and articulating the connections between the theory you have learnt in the classroom and the client situations you encounter on fieldwork placement
- › developing greater awareness and analysis of your own professional values *in situ*, where challenging ethical dilemmas can arise
- › learning how interdisciplinary teamwork operates, and about ways in which you and people from your discipline might contribute to the team in order to better serve the client population.

As such, the specific competencies you are likely to develop on placement include interdisciplinary teamwork skills, ethical decision-making skills and enhanced communication skills as well as learning various forms of client and agency documentation.

The scope of work-integrated learning is broad, and is influenced by the cultural norms of the workplace, and complex in terms of incorporating a range of stakeholders.

Much has been written about this type of **experiential learning**, leading to a plethora of terminology to describe the activities associated with work-integrated learning. Stints of structured learning in the field have been variously described as clinical rounds, placement, field education and the practicum. Similarly, the roles of those people primarily responsible for facilitating the learning of students in the field are referred to as 'preceptors' in nursing, 'field educators' in social work, 'fieldwork supervisors' in occupational therapy and 'clinical supervisors' in other disciplines. While the names for the fieldwork placement and the names given to your principal supervisor differ from discipline to discipline, the functions of the fieldwork placement and the key people in the process remain the same: to provide a milieu in which you can engage in authentic work-integrated learning, with structured professional guidance and supervision. In this context, the term '**fieldwork placement**' is used for placement or practicum, and '**fieldwork educator**' is used for the person who directly supervises you when you are at the placement.

There are a diverse range of agency settings in which you may be placed, including large hospital settings, community health and non-government organisations. The client group you work with will be determined by the setting of your fieldwork placement, and

might include, but will not be limited to, older persons, mothers with babies, people with mental health issues or those attending rehabilitation. Throughout your degree program you will have opportunities to learn about and experience work in a variety of settings.

The duration of a fieldwork placement can vary, and may include individual days in an agency, blocks of several weeks in full-time or part-time work, or year-long internships. Student fieldwork placement opportunities usually increase in length and intensity over the course of a degree program, with many prescribing regulations for the numbers of days and hours that must be completed. These guidelines are set down by professional accreditation bodies such as the Australian Association of Social Work, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council, the World Federation of Occupational Therapy and the World Confederation of Physical Therapists. In Chapter 11 you will be able to read more about the significant role of professional associations in providing governance and regulation influencing health education and practice.

THINK AND LINK

You are gaining the knowledge and learning the skills to become a member of your profession. Chapters 2 and 11 discuss your role and responsibilities and how professional associations, universities and government work together to enable you to take part in fieldwork education.

While you may have entered the program with the goal of working in a specific field such as disability or mental health, it is important to be open to the professional opportunities that can be generated in all settings. Frequently after having been on placement, students become passionate about working in fields they had not previously thought about. It is important not to hold tight to preconceived ideas about a specific place or client group you want to work with until you have finished your degree. If you are placed in an agency that differs from your preferred choice (which happens frequently), demonstrating annoyance or lack of interest will have a negative impact upon your engagement with the staff and clients in that agency. This standpoint can also lead to you becoming less open to exciting alternative learning and career possibilities.

Wherever you go on placement, paying attention to planning and organising is the key to successful completion. Research on problems experienced by students on fieldwork placement identifies common stressors that can be addressed with some forward planning. These include issues such as financial constraints, managing child care, travel arrangements and attending to personal safety (Maidment 2003).

GETTING READY

Planning for the placement begins well before your actual start date. Table 1.1 lists a series of factors to consider, and strategies that past students have utilised.

Table 1.1: Planning and organising for placement

Pre-placement planning and organisation	
Finances	Being out on placement incurs additional costs. Start budgeting early for travel to and from your placement, purchase of work-appropriate clothing, any required equipment or books, additional child care expenses, accommodation and depleted wages if you need to cut back on paid work hours. Some students apply for bank loans to cover extra costs during this time.
Program administration	All programs organising fieldwork placements require you to complete a set of paperwork beforehand. Ensure that you submit this material to the field coordinator by the dates required and that you attend any information sessions offered by the institution.
Police checks	Most institutions require students to produce a police check at the time of interview or on the start date. These can take several weeks to process. Make an application for a police check well in advance of beginning your placement. A police check must be completed for each current year of your course.
Working with children check	Most states now also require students to provide a working with children check before placement with minors. These checks also take some time to process, so begin the process at least two months before your placement begins.
Child care	Students with children frequently need to find additional child care while on placement. Discuss this need well in advance with your family members, local child care centre and other potential minders. You may need to use after-school care or employ a caregiver in your home.
Travel	Think about how you will get to your placement, whether by car, car pooling, public transport or bike. Plan your route from home to the placement agency if you are travelling to an unfamiliar location, and allow for extra time on the first day.
Dress code	Find out if there is a prescribed agency dress code or uniform you are expected to wear on placement. Standard of dress in an agency setting is likely to be more formal than the casual clothes you would wear to university.
Placement interviews	<p>Some fieldwork placement programs require students to attend an interview before beginning. Prepare a curriculum vitae to take with you. Ensure you also take your driver's licence, police check and working with children check. Before attending an interview make sure you know the location of the agency, and familiarise yourself with the work of the agency on the Internet or by requesting information to be sent by post. Have some ideas about what you are wanting to learn during the placement, and prepare some questions to ask at the interview.</p> <p>If you do not need to have an interview, but are simply given a start date, make contact with your fieldwork educator over the telephone to introduce yourself before you begin. Be informed about the purpose of the agency and the scope of the work before you start.</p>

Table 1.2 outlines matters you need to familiarise yourself with during your first week on placement.

Table 1.2: First week: Planning and organisation

Agency administration	During the first week on placement students frequently need to complete agency confidentiality contracts, provide personal ID to collect and sign for keys or building security cards, be supplied with a computer password or security code, learn the systems for car and room bookings, and become informed about office procedure for recording your whereabouts during the day.
Safety	Most agencies have policies and procedures to address personal and occupational safety in the workplace. Ask to read these and discuss safety processes associated with office appointments and home visits with your fieldwork educator during the first week.
Orientation	It is usual to have an orientation phase to the physical surroundings and the work of the agency, and to meet your new colleagues. By the end of the first few days in the agency you should know where you can leave your personal belongings, use desk space and who to approach when you have questions or issues to address. Ask what people normally do at lunchtime and how long you have for this break. As the placement progresses you will continue with your orientation to the field of practice and organisational policy, and learn agency information recording and storage procedures.
First client contact	It is usual at the beginning of a placement to spend some time observing your supervisor or other practitioners working with clients. In order to prepare for this observation it is helpful to have read the client file and spoken with the fieldwork educator about particular points to look out for during your observation. Debriefing with the fieldwork educator after these client sessions is the time to ask questions, and discuss ideas. Having observed a number of sessions, you may then often work with an experienced practitioner. Students in their final years of training can be expected to work relatively independently with clients, while continuing to receive professional supervision.

Once you arrive at the agency to begin your fieldwork placement, it is important from the outset to demonstrate your workplace literacy.

WORKPLACE LITERACY

Traditionally, the term **workplace literacy** has been adopted to describe 'the written and spoken language, math [maths] and thinking skills that workers and trainees use to perform job tasks or training' (Askov et al. 1989, cited in O'Conner 1993: 196). In this discussion the notion of workplace literacy is broadened, and defined as being the sets of skills, attitudes and behaviours required to practise competently in the field. This definition incorporates the spectrum of attributes that have been written about extensively under the umbrella

term of '**emotional intelligence**' (EI), including demonstrating **self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, social awareness and social skills** (Cherniss 2000: 434). It is now recognised that bringing these particular attributes to practice when working within teams and with clients can enhance service delivery outcomes in healthcare settings (Meyer et al. 2004).

Specific competencies that relate to demonstration of emotional intelligence include the capacity to negotiate and mediate as well as deal with conflict in a constructive manner. These competencies include demonstration of complex verbal skills and thoughtful awareness of the impact of non-verbal behaviour.

THINK AND LINK

Reflecting on your attributes is part of reflective practice and becoming a competent practitioner. Chapter 3 takes students through a process of how to develop being a reflective practitioner.

REFLECTION

DISCUSSING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Complete this reflection before you go out on placement. Listed below are sets of attributes associated with self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, social awareness and social skills. Identify the specific attributes you are confident you can demonstrate while you are on placement, and those you feel you need to develop. Discuss your self-assessment with a partner or group members. When doing this exercise, be mindful of the feedback you have already received from your peers, friends, family and lecturers about the way you communicate, behave and work with others.

During the early meetings you have with your fieldwork educator, it may be helpful to share the list of attributes below, and discuss your strengths and weaknesses in these areas.

Attributes of emotional intelligence

Self-awareness

- › Being aware of own bias, assumptions, and prejudices
- › Setting appropriate professional boundaries
- › Having self-respect
- › Striking the balance between working independently and interdependently when required.

Self-regulation

- › Demonstrating skills in time management
- › Applying conflict management strategies when needed
- › Exercising impulse control
- › Managing stressful situations and strong emotions without becoming overwhelmed
- › Being free from emotional dependence.

Self-motivation

- › Initiating your own learning and practice responses in the workplace
- › Being positively responsive to feedback
- › Being proactive in addressing injustice at micro, meso and macro levels.

Social awareness

- › Recognising the social norms of the workplace setting and responding appropriately to them
- › Demonstrating personal temperament conducive to working in an agency and teamwork setting
- › Applying moral courage and demonstrating social responsibility.

Social skills

- › Showing respect, and responding with empathy
- › Demonstrating a genuine interest in the lives of others
- › Understanding and using a range of nonverbal behaviours to put clients and colleagues at ease.

Source: Beddoe & Maidment 2009: 27–8. Reprinted with permission,
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REFLECTION

Clinical reasoning includes using all the skills and knowledge you have to help you interpret a client's situation and the course of action (or not) you should take. Reflect on which skills you think would be involved in clinical reasoning.

Emotional intelligence

Clearly, factors associated with EI include aspects of behaviour that are quite personal and sometimes difficult to discuss, but have significant bearing on how student performance is assessed. Simple things like being on time for work and meetings, being open to constructive feedback, attending to personal hygiene, having sound communication skills and respecting established lines of authority are all part of demonstrating workplace literacy. Familiarising yourself with the guidelines and attendant expectations set out by your educational institution and placement agency will enable you to 'know the rules' and requirements for successful completion of your placement. However, in most workplaces there are some unwritten rules. As a student your role during the early days on placement is to become aware of these unwritten rules. Use your supervision time to discuss your observations in private before commenting in a team meeting or the tearoom about what you see. In this way you respect the established workplace culture and give yourself the time and opportunity to become informed. At first, however, remain silently curious.

It can be challenging negotiating your student role at the beginning of fieldwork placement in an unfamiliar context, while you are also feeling the pressures of being

assessed and needing to demonstrate competence. These conditions frequently result in students feeling stressed during the first placement (Zupiria Gorostidi et al. 2007).

MANAGING THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Going out on placement can be exciting, scary and challenging, all at the same time. Often you are juggling multiple responsibilities with working in paid employment, continuing sporting commitments, providing child care as well as being on placement. It is important therefore to give some thought and preparation to how you might manage the levels of stress that students commonly associate with this experience. Past studies in this field (Maidment 2003; Zupiria Gorostidi et al. 2007; Moscaritolo 2009) suggest using the following techniques to manage stress:

- › taking care of the practical arrangements such as organising travel, child care and other work commitments before fieldwork placement
- › framing the placement as a *time to learn* rather than viewing the experience as primarily a time to demonstrate proficiency and competence
- › being prepared and organised to meet workplace commitments and deadlines (using a diary to record meetings and assignment commitments)
- › focusing on developing supportive collegial relationships with other team members in the agency, including developing peer instruction and mentoring relationships
- › using problem-solving techniques such as consultation, sourcing new information, prioritising and asking for help
- › giving time to maintaining personal interests (such as sport and hobbies) and friendships outside of the placement
- › learning relaxation techniques, including breathing and meditation exercises, looking for ways to appropriately increase humour in the workplace and at home.

Proper self-management of thoughts and feelings in the workplace relates to demonstrating professional behaviour competencies in the realm of emotional intelligence. These competencies relate to having realistic expectations of yourself and others, being socially aware of team and individual dynamics, communicating with sensitivity, and cultivating strong teamwork skills by making constructive professional contributions to client care.

CASE STUDY

Grier's situation

Read the following case study and identify strategies you might use if you found yourself in Grier's situation.

Grier, 21 years old, has just started out in her first fieldwork placement in a community health centre. She has been looking forward to having some hands-on experience with real clients, but is also feeling nervous. She has read all of the materials about what she is supposed to do on placement, and has been told that the agency is a very busy place. However, she had not quite realised how busy everyone would be, and now feels she

is in the way. At the team meetings where client situations are discussed, each team member gives a brief summary of who she or he has seen and provides a progress report. These contributions are snappy and to the point. Everyone seems very organised and efficient, confident and outspoken. The staff talk about how 'stretched' they are and how they do not have enough time or resources to do everything required. Grier is feeling nervous about taking up people's time, not making a useful contribution and being in the way, and is worried about eventually needing to speak up in the team meeting.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What other words could you use to describe Grier's emotional state?
- 2 Refer back to the emotional intelligence list. What emotional intelligence attributes do you think Grier should call upon?
- 3 What action should Grier take to feel more at ease in the setting?

SUMMARY

This chapter outlines the factors to consider when getting ready for your fieldwork placement, while identifying key features for working with others and managing well during the fieldwork placement. Planning, organisation and time management are key skills that will contribute to success in the field, along with having effective interpersonal skills such as those identified under workplace literacy. These interpersonal skills contribute to professional behaviour competencies. Being on placement is frequently a time of considerable personal and professional challenge and change.

In closing I am reminded of an observation made by a professor of engineering some years ago, when he observed that students returned from field placement 'six months older but two years wiser'.

Discussion questions

- 1 Note how you feel about going out on your first placement. Identify what you think might be your major challenges. Think about ways you might address these challenges.
- 2 Being organised is critical to successfully completing your placement. Identify strategies you might use both on placement and at home to ensure you have effective time management systems during fieldwork.
- 3 On placement you are likely to encounter clients from diverse backgrounds. What strategies do you think you could use to communicate effectively with people who are quite different from yourself?
- 4 When you first start working in the field it is sometimes hard to stop thinking about client situations when you go home. How do you think you might manage this issue?

Portfolio development exercise: Problem solving

This exercise is designed to be completed for your portfolio several weeks prior to going out on placement.

Take a sheet of paper and, down the left-hand side of the page, list all of the real and potential problems you may encounter while doing your placement. These issues might entail practical considerations such as arranging and paying for additional child care, or emotional needs such as not feeling particularly confident. On the other side of the sheet list all of the resources you have access to that could help address the potential problem areas. These resources might be located within your family and friendship network, such as people you can ask for help; personal strengths you can apply, such as determination and organisational skills; or external resources such as scouting around local op shops to buy some 'professional' clothing to wear on placement. Try to be creative and lateral in the way you think about overcoming potential obstacles to achieving success on your placement. Once you have completed these lists identify three key areas you will address before starting placement, and write a plan including action steps for what you will do to address these areas. Remember to include timeframes for when each step will be completed. The key to a successful placement is being prepared and organised.

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