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Occupational Therapy

On its website The College of Occupational Therapists defines occupational therapy as a therapy that 'enables people to achieve as much as they can for themselves and get the most out of life'

The focus of pre-registration education in occupational therapy is on preparing newly qualified occupational therapists (OTs) to work with people in a way that facilitates their engagement as independently as possible in the activities which enhance their health and wellbeing. The broad range of occupations from self care through to paid employment that occupational therapists find themselves working with requires them to perform professionally in a wide range of clinical and non-clinical environments on appointment to their first posts. They have to be able to balance the challenges arising from functioning simultaneously as an autonomous professional and a member of multiple health and social care teams.

Competence and confidence on graduation is therefore a key issue for occupational therapy education. There is an unambiguous requirement for students to be able to self assess and monitor their developing competence so that their confidence can be built on a firm foundation of evidence. ALPS offered a unique opportunity for OT educators from York St John University to work with colleagues from other professions to develop a tool that facilitates students self evaluation and enables them to measure the students' preparedness to operate in a very demanding environment.

By its very nature the profession demands that practitioners have excellent communication skills, work well in teams and are able to uphold the highest standards of ethical practice with minimal supervision. Working as a minority profession, in large health and social care teams OTs have always valued the input given by other professions to the education and training of their students.

Like all professions OT has developed a wealth of specific technical language relating to theory and practice that often hinders rather than helps communication. The development of the ALPS Common Competency Maps has given occupational therapy educators, for the first time, a common language to facilitate communication with other professions around students' development and achievement in relation to communication skills, team working and ethical practice.

The language of the Common Competency Maps has proved particularly useful in addressing deficits in student performance. Although experience has shown that OT placement educators usually have little difficulty in identifying whether students are performing at an acceptable level in relation to their communication and team working skills, identifying specific performance criteria that need addressing is much more difficult. The Maps have been used by OT educators at York St John University to engage students and placement educators in detailed analysis of where the students' performance was not meeting the required standards.

The Maps have also been used to structure graded interventions leading to improvement and meeting of learning outcomes for students who were in danger of failing a placement. This remedial approach has been well received by students who previously experienced only vague, sometimes conflicting, advice as to how to improve their communication and interpersonal skills.

In addition, the multimedia capabilities of the ALPS mobile devices made a real difference to Occupational Therapy students on community based placements.

The second year students from York St John University reported that they found the internet access useful, as well as the built-in camera and video player. Google Maps and online bus time-tables proved to be practical resources, while students also found it helpful being able to search the internet at service users' homes: *'If you're looking for lunch groups or things like that in certain areas for people then it's really useful just to, when you're there just say "don't worry, I'll just check" because they were older so they didn't have internet a lot of the time and so you could just do that, which was good.'*

The mobile devices also enhanced the students' work-based learning as they received informative videos (e.g. correct way to use a hoist) and were able to capture evidence of their acquired skills, *'I did use it (the device) for photos…so the splints I made, I took photos of the practice ones I did on my educator, so that was useful (to have a record).'*

Students also saw the benefit of using their mobile device on the wards: *'It can be tricky logging on to PCs in the hospital because you aren't always given a login and password – so being able to look something up, like what piece of equipment to use, on your mobile device is really useful and time-saving.'*