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## Student Perceptions of Non-traditional Level I Fieldwork

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## **Abstract**

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## **Keywords**

Non-traditional level I fieldwork, occupational therapy education, cultural competence, qualitative focus group

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### ABSTRACT

Academic programs commonly face challenges in developing Level I fieldwork where students have ample opportunity to practice and understand occupation. In response to this challenge, our academic program developed a non-traditional Level I fieldwork. The purpose of this study was to understand the student perceptions of this learning experience. Focus group methodology was employed. Fifty-nine students participated in one of six focus groups. Six themes were identified through the data analysis process. These included challenges and rewards of effective communication, learning to think like an OT, a greater understanding and focus on occupations, developing skills in cultural understanding and advocacy, gaining confidence through doing, and the logistical challenges of getting everyone on the same page. These themes supported that students viewed non-traditional Level I fieldwork paired with structured classroom learning activities positively. A pattern across all themes was that students learned because they were able to make mistakes, reflect on them, and change their action. Limitations include that student perceptions are only one aspect of understanding the impact of learning experiences; therefore further study is needed.

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### INTRODUCTION

Level I fieldwork provides opportunities for students to be introduced to practice and apply skills learned in the classroom (ACOTE, 2011; AOTA, 2009). However, learning opportunities during traditional Level I fieldwork are often restricted to observation and may provide limited opportunity to understand occupation-based practice (Hanson,

2012; Haynes, 2011; Johnson, Koenig, Piersol, Santalucia, & Wachter-Schutz, 2006). Academic programs use a variety of approaches to improve Level I fieldwork experiences, including non-traditional placements which could provide students with an experience that allows deeper development of professional identity and understanding of occupation (Clarke, de Visser, Martin, & Sadlo, 2014). The purpose of this study was to understand, from the student perspective, the value of a pilot non-traditional Level I fieldwork coupled with intentional classroom experiences.

### **NON-TRADITIONAL LEVEL I FIELDWORK**

In traditional Level I fieldwork, students are typically supervised by occupational therapy practitioners and participate in programming that is already established (Mulholland & Derald, 2005). Non-traditional Level I fieldwork placements occur in settings that do not offer occupational therapy services (Mulholland & Derald, 2005) and often the experience is described as experiential or service learning (AOTA, 2016; Chabot, 2016). The student's learning context and relationship between in-class learning activities during non-traditional Level I fieldwork is inadequately described. Therefore, it is difficult to compare Level I traditional and nontraditional fieldwork and to date no studies exist comparing the two.

Benefits of non-traditional Level I fieldwork, experiential, and service learning experiences include the following: (a) improvements in personal and professional development (Benson & Witchger Hansen, 2007; Knecht-Sabres, 2010); (b) understanding the value of occupation and application to practice (Bazyk, Glorioso, Gordon, Haines, & Percaciante, 2010; Vroman, Simmons, & Knight, 2010); (c) development of professional reasoning (Bazyk et al., 2010; Benson & Witchger Hansen, 2007; Coker, 2010; Knecht-Sabres, 2010; Vroman et al., 2010); (d) application of theory and course content to practice (Coker, 2010; Knecht-Sabres, 2010; Vroman et al., 2010); and (e) cultural competency (Bazyk et al., 2010). Challenges of Level I non-traditional placements are infrequently identified; however, Knecht-Sabres (2010) discussed logistical issues as a challenge for non-traditional placements. Challenges cited in literature pertaining to Level II non-traditional fieldwork may provide insight as to types of challenges that may occur in Level I non-traditional fieldwork including: (a) the amount of supervision, (b) whether or not the supervision is provided by occupational therapists, (c) the implications for professional identity development in the absence of an occupational therapy supervisor (Dancza et al., 2013; Mulholland & Derald, 2005; Overton, Clark, & Thomas, 2009), (d) students' perceptions of missing key clinical skills that would have been obtained in a traditional setting (Overton et al., 2009), and (e) managing stress (Dancza et al., 2013).

In summary, limited research regarding Level I non-traditional fieldwork exists along with a lack of description of how classroom activities are used to facilitate learning in non-traditional Level I fieldwork experiences. This study examines students' perceptions of the value of a pilot non-traditional Level I fieldwork and co-occurring classroom learning activities developed using experiential learning theory (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

## **METHODS**

Qualitative phenomenological methodology was used to provide a context for describing student perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Data collection included semi-structured questioning within focus groups in order to provide a non-threatening context. Institutional review board approval was received and written informed consent obtained from each participant.

### **Learning Experience**

The goal of the non-traditional Level I fieldwork was for students to address occupational issues of individuals in the community by applying the occupational therapy process. The course was taught by two of the researchers. The academic program collaborated with a local non-profit organization, Global Friends Coalition, who facilitated New American refugee community integration. New American refugee needs included dealing with challenges of a new culture, developing language skills, and establishing skills for self-sufficiency. The structure of the placement included two students collaborating with either a single refugee or a family. Students referred to their assigned refugees as participants. Students worked with participants for three hours per week for 16 weeks. Students met with a supervisor from the non-profit organization initially to meet their participant and one other time during the semester. Students communicated with agency supervisors throughout the experience via email and phone contact. Faculty provided indirect supervision through in-class discussion and review of student reflections about the experience. The class associated with the Level I fieldwork met four hours per week, two of which were dedicated toward student processing of the Level I fieldwork.

Since the Level I fieldwork took place in a setting that did not employ an occupational therapist and supervision from occupational therapy faculty was indirect, careful consideration was given to the development of classroom learning activities to ensure connection of the experience to the domain of occupational therapy (AOTA, 2009; Dancza et al., 2013; Hanson & Nielsen, 2015; Overton et al., 2009). Strategies utilized included reflection both through discussion and writing (Bazyk et al., 2010; Benson & Witchger Hansen, 2007; Coker, 2010; Knecht-Sabres, 2010; Vroman et al., 2010) and peer support (Knecht-Sabres, 2010; Vroman et al., 2010).

To facilitate the connection to professional identity (Dancza et al., 2013; Mulholland & Derald, 2005; Overton et al., 2009), in-class activities initially emphasized discussing the students' experience in the context of occupational therapy literature including working with refugees, public mental health models, and occupational justice. The emphasis then shifted to students engaging in each step of the occupational therapy process (AOTA, 2014; Bazyk et al., 2010; Coker, 2010; Knecht-Sabres, 2010) guided theoretically by the Person Environment Occupation Model (Law, Cooper, & Strong, 1996). Student pairs completed an evaluation report, progress note, and discharge note. During each stage of the occupational therapy process students completed individual reflective journaling targeting critical thinking skills (Facione & Facione, 2008) and in-class reflection-on-action activities (Merriam et al., 2007). Appendix A provides a week-by-week overview and the critical thinking questions. During the evaluation

process, students discussed pros and cons of potential assessments and the benefits and challenges experienced with administering and interpreting assessments. The intervention phase of the occupational therapy process included student pairs presenting proposed interventions in class with opportunity to refine prior to implementing. Throughout the experience, students applied the Intentional Relationship Model, a tool for navigating therapeutic relationships (IRM, Taylor, 2008); students evaluated evidence, ethical issues, and the value and meaning of occupation. Education for working with English language learners was provided. Students sought feedback from their refugee, peer, agency staff, and faculty at various points throughout the experience.

### **Student Participants**

All students who participated in the non-traditional Level I fieldwork were invited to participate in the study through email and verbal announcement. Focus groups were formed with students from two different student cohorts during the second academic year of the occupational therapy program. A total of six focus groups occurred over three semesters (two per semester) with each group having approximately 10 students. Fifty-nine of the sixty students (6 males, 53 females) enrolled over the three semesters elected to participate. Students were in their second year of a three-year master's of occupational therapy educational program.

### **Data Collection and Procedure**

Focus groups occurred the last week of each semester in an occupational therapy classroom. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes and was moderated by two researchers, both faculty members, who had not been involved in any aspect of course instruction or grading. Both researchers had background experience in academic teaching, clinical occupational therapy practice, and qualitative research methods.

Please see Appendix B for a full description of the focus group process. Following an icebreaker activity, researchers proceeded to the seven focus group questions adapted from Smith, Cornella, and Williams (2014). Questions were designed to understand the student's perspective of the value of Level I non-traditional fieldwork. All focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by an outside third-party and reviewed by the researchers for accuracy and subject anonymity.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from all seven core focus group questions were included in thematic analysis. The data analysis was completed by three of the researchers not involved in the classroom experience. Verbatim transcripts were compared with notes taken during each focus group. Where differences were noted, findings were compared and consensus was formed on data meanings. After reading the transcribed focus groups individually, the researchers developed a framework for inductively coding the data. Researchers separately coded the data using a content analysis approach noting contrasts, comparisons, and emerging themes (Patton, 2015). Appendix C provides a sample of the analysis process. Categories were refined by the three researchers who noted a structure for categorization, leading to development of themes (Patton, 2015). Analysis

occurred across focus groups. Once agreement was reached on the final themes, an overarching description of themes was developed representative of the collective student perspective. A theme was only included in the results if it was supported by five out of the six focus groups. The most salient quotes are included in the final description of the findings.

Issues of trustworthiness were addressed throughout the process to ensure that emerging themes were rooted in the research data. At the conclusion of each focus group, facilitators verbally summarized the key points described by the students and each group was invited to correct any misconceptions in the summary. Peer debriefing took place following each focus group. Notes taken during the process of each focus group and audiotaped focus group interviews transcribed by an external party contributed to the validity of study findings. Triangulation of the findings occurred through inclusion of data from six different focus groups with two researchers involved in data collection and three researchers in analysis (Creswell, 2014). Students had the opportunity to verify study findings by member checking at the conclusion of each group to ensure the accuracy of data obtained and clarify any portion of the data that was unclear (Creswell, 2014). During the data analysis, researchers collaboratively and separately returned to the data on several occasions to confirm emerging categories and themes to ensure authenticity and accuracy and to minimize bias (Patton, 2015).

## **RESULTS**

Six themes emerged: (a) The challenges and rewards of effective communication, (b) learning to think like an OT, (c) focus and use of occupations, (d) the journey toward cultural understanding and advocacy, (e) gaining confidence through doing and (f) logistics: getting everyone on the same page.

### **The Challenges and Rewards of Effective Communication**

The initial challenge of communication for students was getting past language barriers since many refugees were not conversant in English. Students reported it made a difference to spend extensive time with their refugee, because it became easier to understand broken English and read non-verbal communication for subtle nuances.

We struggled so much to communicate verbally with the language barrier that it really required us to rely heavily on how they were, or how their body posture was, where they were looking, to tell if they were paying attention or if they were interested, which is something I think is really important when we're working with participants in the future too. (Focus Group 1)

Over time, both students and their participant were able to relax and enjoy one another's company. Students were surprised that humor came through regardless of the language barrier. A common method used to bridge language differences was to learn words from the participant's language. The need for patience, slowing down, use of pauses, sign language, and word substitution were effective strategies.

...when she wasn't understanding things, to know that repeating ourselves, isn't helpful. If she doesn't understand it the first time, she's not going to get it the second time when we're doing, the exact same thing. ...so kind of like pausing, and then I would add in a little sign language to break it up and then you could see that she would understand more what we were saying...[or] find a different word to use. (Focus Group 4)

It was a good experience learning how to get over the language barrier because in future practice we will probably be with people who can't speak English as their first language...the one individual who didn't speak English. She was the funniest one out of all of them. And it amazed me that humor could, was the same across either language. (Focus Group 2)

Students learned to verify communications by asking questions of their participants rather than assuming that they had been understood. Students felt more confident asking questions of their participants to understand their story. They found these fundamental communication skills helpful in the advocacy role.

Metaphors were really confusing and my Global Friend family didn't understand what they were. We were able to say it in more simple terms, it got across what we were trying to say. [it's important to] know what you're saying and not use all these medical terms when we are talking to participants because they probably won't understand what you're saying. (Focus Group 1)

Learning that it isn't just one phone call; its lots of communication over time and even then it might not resolve the situation. Just how extensive communication has to get. And learning to simplify communication...to be direct, to make sure that your point is understood. (Focus Group 6)

### **Learning How to Think Like an OT**

Learning how to think like an OT was a strong theme across groups. Students valued the experience because it helped them develop their thinking about evaluation, problem-solving, choosing a focus for intervention, and planning and adapting activities.

Most students reported the language barrier made it difficult to ascertain which occupations were valued by or challenging for their assigned participant. Although they used interview-based assessment tools, such as the Canadian Occupational Performance Measure (Law et al., 2014) or the Adolescent and Young Adult Activity Participation Sort (Berg, 2014) to help them learn more about the participants' interests, this information was not easy to get and sometimes not reliable. A student pair mentioned that after working with their participant on reading with little progress, they found out the participant did not read or write in his native language. As a result, they learned the importance of understanding the occupational profile. Through successive visits, students became more adept at finding out what motivated participants and how to use this information in the skill building process.



Our participant was from the high school and he didn't identify a lot of things he wanted to work on and so I kind of made goals for him and that was a mistake. They weren't his goals, so we had to kind of go back and really figure out what he wanted to do...we really had to build more rapport with him to really get an idea of what his goals were to be client centered. (Focus Group 4)

We would come with a plan and then she would be like "Oh, we need to go to the store...and we found that to be more important for her at that time because that's what she needed and we were taught to be flexible and client centered...so then we'd just say "Well, we're not doing our intervention plan, we're doing what you want to do." And that went well, because it helped to build a better relationship. (Focus Group 1)

Throughout interactions, students identified the importance of questioning initial impressions and assumptions. They found that things are not always what they seem, which was particularly exacerbated with the language barrier. One participant spoke of bathing her children in toilet water which caused students to assume there was an issue with child safety, but later they found the participant meant she was using water from the sink in the bathroom.

Students' thinking processes were challenged when determining which therapeutic mode was best for a given situation. They indicated journaling about experiences and discussing in small group classes helped them recognize signals for shifting modes and plan more effectively for future situations.

...learning how to effectively mode shift. I don't think I cared about the Intentional Relationship Model before this, but it really helped to stop and think about the situation, um, with the group and with the professor there to walk through "Now, how did I respond? How could I have responded better?" So maybe you didn't have the clinical reasoning for that time, but through class discussions, you gained it. (Focus Group 3)

Students were surprised at the complexity involved with planning and adapting activities. They learned to appreciate the detail needed to build an effective activity, the specific sub-skills required and the explicit knowledge of the activity. When teaching a participant how to use the city bus, students made a list of skills required and a cue card for their participant. Again, they spoke to the value of reflective journaling to recognize what was needed in the process and how to sequence learning.

It helped me learn what an ongoing intervention plan looks like. How to break down one thing, one goal that they want to do, and take it into...like an activity for one hour and then consider how that one activity can build into an overall goal achieving process. (Focus Group 3)

Students reported the need for activity adaptation for various situations, whether it be the progress of the participant or adjusting the activity to fit the social context. They

learned to observe the reactions of the participants as well as the larger context of the activity.

Sometimes we would show up and she...wouldn't be interested in doing what we had planned specifically or she also had two young kids and sometimes they wanted more attention than...so we would be like "Alright, well now the activity is going to have to include the kids so that mom can also learn something." (Focus Group 3)

A few students also mentioned that the better rapport they had with their participant, the easier it was to take risks: "I think it (gaining participant's trust) more influenced my confidence to use my clinical reasoning, that if this doesn't go the way I anticipate, it's okay because she'll understand." (Focus Group 6) Several students learned that it is ok to make mistakes, and spoke to the value of making mistakes as part of the process of learning.

I was so nervous like, I don't want my interventions to be bad..., even our professor said, like you failed, now you know what to do instead. It's not horrible, you didn't harm them in any way....Global Friends has helped me realize, that we do have our skills and we can adapt and we will learn, but failing with an intervention isn't the worst possible thing that could happen. (Focus Group 1)

There's a lot of activity analysis in breaking things down and also just trial and error I felt like, because some activities we did, um, they were unable to do portions of it so then we used that knowledge for the next activity that we did and then were able to kind of generalize the abilities too. (Focus Group 5)

Students reflected that situations were "messier" than they looked in case studies. Choosing who and what to focus on was identified as a challenge.

Even though there were two of us, with the age gap it was hard to tend to the needs of each individual within the family. And over the course of this semester our attention leaned more towards one individual because...their needs were more...so then we kind of worked with them more. ...So we did go where the needs were and we took turns, teaching the grandmother and watching the baby and like helping her grow in her development. (Focus Group 6)

### **Focus and Use of Occupation**

Students gained appreciation for the value of observing occupational participation in an authentic environment as a means to understand what their participants could and could not do.

...our participant, she didn't have her own home right away. She was living with friends...So that was kind of a challenge just because we felt we...were limited with what we could address with her. And then once she got her own apartment, there were just so many more areas that we could address...I think it was more beneficial for her being in her own environment too. (Focus Group 5)

...with the New Americans like I was able to take them to the doctors' appointments, and see how they interacted with the receptionist and how they call for maintenance to fix their stove, how to practice cooking. (Focus Group 6)

Many students encountered challenges to focusing on occupation, not always recognizing opportunities to use occupation in intervention, especially if the occupations were not part of their original "planned intervention." It was not uncommon for participants themselves to initiate the occupational focus bringing requests for assistance with everyday activities such as managing bills, computer problems or GED classes. Students did not immediately recognize tasks as occupations and indicated tasks were getting in the way of their own "intervention." Needs of the participant often drove the intent of the session. The need for a new winter coat led to a discussion of various venues where a coat could be purchased. This simple conversation might naturally lead to another occupational area, such as the need to find public transportation to the shopping options. Through experiences such as these, students came to understand that "occupations are everywhere," and can easily be incorporated into any intervention process.

...every time we would go there it would be...like some letter one of the students got back from high school about immunizations, understanding what he needed for his job application, understanding the cell phone bill, where to go with GED classes, how to get the computer hooked up...So we generally would come and they would have a bunch of questions they wanted help with right away and we'd have to address those tasks. (Focus Group 1)

It's like communicating with them just one on one like about medication management. Or like shopping. Our lady, she needed a winter coat and finding a way for her to do that on her own involved facilitating other things like community mobility. I think it broadened my horizons of understanding how OT can be applicable everywhere. (Focus Group 1)

Occupations were used as a means to teach participants the skills they needed to live in their new communities, which encompassed self-care, instrumental activities of daily living, social participation, education, work, and play/leisure. Games were used to establish rapport with participants and to help them learn a specific skill. Food preparation or sharing food with the participant was a favorite way to both learn about the culture and help the participant learn skills to participate in their New American community. Music was often used to gain rapport with adolescent participants.

I also had a high school student and that was my main way to get through to my participant...Like, he really liked music, so we figured out how to bring in music, or his favorite musicians to motivate him to do well in school and then also to just participate in our sessions. (Focus Group 4)

Students also came away from the experience with a stronger understanding of occupational deprivation: "We saw from the articles we read, and first hand working with

them the impact that we can have. Their occupational deprivation really does need to be addressed.” (Focus Group 5)

### **Journey Toward Cultural Understanding and Advocacy**

Students spoke about their progressive journey toward cultural understanding and advocating for their participants which began by exploring and experiencing commonality with individuals with different cultures. The students reported appreciating the experiences of the participant and feeling accepted by them. Next, students progressed to awareness of cultural injustice and taking initiative for cultural advocacy.

Students spoke about initial discomfort interacting with people from another culture and trying to maintain an open mind throughout the process. Students started by researching the culture of the participant they were matched with and testing the information to see if it was true for their participant. Being patient and taking time to learn about the experiences, values, and cultural norms of their participants was reported as invaluable in building trust and establishing rapport. Students recognized the unintended benefit of learning more about themselves and their own culture in the process.

I think for most of us, meeting the families that we’re meeting, it’s an entirely new challenge to relate to them just because of that communication barrier and it feels as though you don’t have any of the same hobbies or culture to share. But to understand and get to know each other and learn the points on which your culture comes together and your culture’s different. All of a sudden you build that rapport and you build that friendship and you start to see, like what they think is funny, and then you start to build those inside jokes and ...then build ways in which you can relate to them. (Focus Group 1)

Students felt greater empathy and viewed their participant and the situation from a more humanistic perspective after hearing stories told by their New Americans.

Yeah, it definitely was interesting to learn about how life was when they were in the refugee camps and life previously like in Somalia. It just kind of made you have a different perspective on where they come from, and how they are looking at our culture through their eyes. (Focus Group 2)

Especially with the refugee crisis going on in the world right now, I have such a different perspective and outlook on it. Because it’s just, where some people are quick to judge and say “Well these refugees are just coming over because they can,” or “it isn’t actually that bad there,”... And I just have such a more in-depth and personal appreciation for that kind of global perspective, and it hurts my heart to see that people don’t want refugees in this country. (Focus Group 3)

As students spent more time with their participants, they also had opportunities to join them and to share life experiences, leading to a mutual acceptance and comfort with one another. Being invited to share a meal together was symbolic of this new friendship:

...that was really rewarding to finally get to eat with them and eat some of the food that they made. I felt like that was the real reward, not just the food, but also that I got to share their experience and for me that was the stage that we're now friends. (Focus Group 1)

With increased knowledge and comfort in interacting with their participants, students indicated that they would be more comfortable approaching someone from a different culture, or someone who did not speak the same language they speak. With increased awareness, knowledge, and understanding came a desire for more cultural experiences.

The students' increased comfort led to their desire to advocate for others. Their experience gave them confidence to educate others regarding culturally insensitive behaviors. A student stated, "I think it's the biggest takeaway from the whole Global Friends experiences is the fact that I am more comfortable in advocating and educating other people." (Focus Group 3)

### **Gaining Confidence Through Doing**

Students spoke to the value of hands-on learning over observation as they compared their traditional one week block placements in a medical setting to their experience working in the community. Although the majority agreed that this was very stressful initially, once the experience was over they recounted numerous benefits, including the ability to think creatively in ambiguous situations, and to assertively manage stressful situations. The ability to problem-solve and deal with the unexpected was a strong theme throughout focus groups.

I think my problem solving skills have increased quite a bit...because nobody was there to do it for me so I had to do it with my partner, I guess. There was a lot of things we had to problem solve through to help our participants, so I think in future fieldworks I'll be able to do that without going straight to my supervisor. (Focus Group 3)

When asked about the value of the experience, students identified the value of learning to take initiative and be self-directed. While some students spoke to the need for more structure or mentoring during the initial weeks of their placement, others disagreed and pointed to the value of practicing clinical reasoning skills without someone "looking over their shoulder," or providing affirmation for each step of their work. Students agreed that learning need not always be comfortable and that an important aspect of learning to take more initiative involved learning about personal strengths and weaknesses and moving out of their comfort zones.

I personally think that part of learning is being uncomfortable and taking a risk and I don't want someone there to just be giving me the information...we need to go and learn how to develop relationships on our own. I just think we've learned so much about ourselves and where our strengths and where our weaknesses are, that to have like the constant supervision may not be the best for learning

like forcing us to learn and figure it out and it's like you don't know what to do then you have to find out what to do. It was like, do it. You have to. You don't have a choice. Like, and build that rapport and relationship. I've never experienced anything like this before, so it was good in that way. (Focus Group 2)

Being independent and writing, or collaborating with your participant to write goals and finding interventions and just not having somebody right there always supervising you, even though you're still going to have, like maybe daily contact with your supervisor, but not having somebody right there with you. So it kind of...helped with my confidence and that I have the skills that I need even though I might not think I do...it was nice to actually be using my skills independently. (Focus Group 4)

Students appreciated having the opportunity to work with a peer rather than working alone. This was helpful in regard to gaining feedback about their own performance and for developing skills for each unfolding situation. There was a strong consensus that working with a partner helped in the development of personal confidence or problem-solving.

Having a partner with the Global Friends was cool, and whereas you don't have a partner in a traditional Level I. With that advantage and everything you can like, give each other feedback and work together...and just kind of learn from each other. (Focus Group 4)

### **Logistics: Getting Everyone on the Same Page**

Students struggled with organizational elements, such as setting up initial contacts, balancing time commitments, other class assignments, and understanding the purpose and expectations of the experience. Students also perceived friction with students not enrolled in community-based fieldwork who did not understand the demands.

The organization behind it all was the most frustrating part, we switched people because they couldn't connect and find our original participant ....It was pretty frustrating at the beginning. Our participant, we had expectations of him and we said "We need to meet with you. We have assignments to do, we need to meet you." At times he would blow us off, but as it went along he understood more of what we were doing and it got better. (Focus Group 5)

The hardest thing for me was to cope with the flexibility and scheduling, we were working with two different families, plus our school schedule, plus individual work schedules. I had to give up one of my jobs to do this. It was frustrating. (Focus Group 2)

Students commonly reported the need to be more flexible and self-directed in coordinating schedules. One student stated, "We had trouble with our participant, she didn't have her own home and we needed to think of other things to do with her...but

flexibility [was critical] definitely I think.” (Focus Group 3) Another student reported “Some weeks we had difficulty coordinating schedules and being motivated to plan something that is really meaningful. I had to be self-motivated and really put effort into planning.” (Focus Group 4)

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Overall, students were positive about their non-traditional Level I fieldwork, but did offer recommendations for change. As is evident in the themes of “learning to think like an OT,” “focus and use of occupation,” and “gaining confidence through doing,” students viewed the classroom learning activities and connection to actual doing as helpful in understanding how to translate the occupational therapy process into practice.

Students noted that through classroom learning activities related to assessment, they learned to question initial findings and impressions of assessment instruments which was a focus of classroom learning around assessment. They valued activity planning developed as part of journal assignments and discussed during the intervention phase. Students appreciated seeing how each intervention complemented the next intervention and facilitated participants’ goals. For example, by actually engaging in the IRM (Taylor, 2008) process with participants, reasoning was more meaningful to the students because it influenced their participant interactions. They identified reflective journaling and in-class discussion as helpful in teaching them how to reason through each situation, supporting the work of Facione and Facione (2008) and Merriam et al. (2007). Overall, the value of “out of class” learning experiences involving real interactions with real people (as opposed to simulated learning experiences associated with classroom learning) was supported.

Through the experience of working with their participant in a genuine learning context, students developed the ability to see opportunities for occupational intervention. For example, they initially struggled to identify occupations not stated in participant goals and instead viewed these occupations as interfering with planned intervention. As is supported in the literature, students came to understand what client-centered practice looks and feels like as they learned to understand the difference between their values and those of their participants, choosing to meet their participant’s current needs instead of sticking to their original therapy plan (Maloney & Griffith, 2013; Ripat, Wener & Dobinson, 2013). Actual “doing” seemed to help students appreciate the intervention plan as a flexible tool rather than a template. Through successive encounters with their participants, students could see the need to revise and update their plans, something often not visible in one week Level I fieldwork or in paper cases. Students were able to experience the conditional nature of ‘action in practice’ (Fleming & Mattingly, 2008) as the results of each participant encounter were then incorporated into the student perspective and future plans for action.

Overall, these examples illustrate that students valued the classroom activities and assignments paired with actual doing or ‘learning in practice’ as critical to developing reasoning skills for the occupational therapy process. Higgs and Jones (2008) explained that the task of deciding on action is complex, as health professionals make decisions under conditions of uncertainty involving processing of multiple variables, prioritizing

and negotiating among differing interests and perspectives. Students in this study recognized feeling “uncomfortable” and experiencing uncertainty as key to developing self-direction and initiative to address uncertain situations. Further, they valued the opportunity to process their experiences, through individual journaling and discussion with their peers and instructor, as a means to establish new ways of thinking about problematic situations.

Consistent with earlier findings, students valued non-traditional Level I fieldwork within a community context as helpful for developing professional reasoning skills (Bazyk et al., 2010; Benson & Witchger Hansen, 2007; Coker, 2010; Knecht-Sabres, 2010; Vroman et al., 2010). Students appreciated reflective journaling and in-class problem solving activities as helpful to their development of critical thinking (Facione & Facione, 2008). Findings support the need for further study regarding the impact of targeted classroom activities and assignment activities on critical thinking during non-traditional Level I fieldwork.

With regard to challenges and rewards of effective communication, students did not explicitly identify classroom lectures and activities focused on communication skills used with English language learners as helpful. However, the communication skills that they identified as valuable, such as learning to read nonverbal communication, verify understandings, and ask clarifying questions, were all skills that were emphasized in the classroom. Occupational therapy students completing service learning activities have also identified trying out and experiencing the effects of various therapeutic communication strategies as helpful to their self-awareness and confidence, but did not identify specific communication skills learned (Maloney & Griffith, 2013). Would students in this study have recognized specific communication skills developed if they were not also taught and reinforced in classroom learning activities? This may be a point for further research.

Students recognized in themselves a process of personal growth in cultural competency as they described their relationships with participants, moving beyond self-awareness, knowledge, and skill (Wells, Black, & Gupta, 2016) toward engagement in advocacy. This theme parallels the content discussed in classroom activities related to the participant’s culture, occupational justice, and occupational deprivation and is similar to earlier findings by Bazyk et al. (2010). Again, this skill emerged over many encounters as students described their journey from discomfort to active advocacy and fits the trajectory for the development of cultural competency skills that has been identified by Maloney and Griffith (2013). It is interesting to note that the experience that students describe is deeply embedded in the context of a specific situation, again demonstrating the value of experiential learning.

Students felt balancing demands of the non-traditional fieldwork with other course demands and time commitments of community placements was a challenge as was identified in previous studies (Dancza et al., 2013; Fortune & McKinstry, 2012; Knecht-Sabres, 2010, Smith et al., 2014). These findings support the need for academic



programs to attend to overall curriculum structure, such as class schedules and grouping of students, when developing a non-traditional Level I fieldwork.

The findings of this study provide a clearer understanding of student perceptions of the value of non-traditional Level I fieldwork coupled with classroom learning activities. Across the six themes, the students appreciated hands-on learning, many encounters with the same participant, and opportunity to process their learning experience as they came to understand the occupational therapy process. Given students' positive perceptions, non-traditional Level I fieldwork appears to be a viable option to addressing the challenges of limited hands-on learning and opportunities for occupation-based practice in traditional settings (Haynes, 2011; Johnson et al., 2006).

### **LIMITATIONS**

This study has several limitations including that student perceptions of non-traditional Level I fieldwork coupled with intentional classroom experiences is only one aspect of understanding the impact of such experiences. Additionally, this study does not compare traditional to non-traditional Level I fieldwork. Qualitative methodology was useful in initially understanding the value and impact of a non-traditional Level I fieldwork on student learning; next steps should include more formal study of pedagogies employed in structuring the learning experience.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY EDUCATION**

Occupational therapy education should consider non-traditional Level I fieldwork opportunities as a viable option because students viewed the hands-on learning opportunity as facilitating their learning; specifically, opportunities to see the occupational therapy process from start to finish, employ therapeutic relationship strategies, and develop communication skills were valued by students. Academic programs should carefully consider in-class activities and assignments that assist the students in the process, especially when direct supervision is not present.

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## Appendix A

Time Frame	Community-Based Level I Weekly Overview
<b>Week 1-2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory meeting with New American participant(s)</li> <li>• English Language Learning Presentation</li> <li>• Assigned Reading Preparation for Class Discussion (week 2)</li> </ul>
<b>Weeks 3-5</b> Assessment of Client needs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal Interview</li> <li>• Use of formal assessment tool</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objective Evaluation Critical thinking journal #1</li> <li>• Objective Evaluation Critical thinking journal #2</li> <li>• Submit initial evaluation completed by Agency</li> <li>• Assigned Reading Preparation for Class Discussion (week 3)</li> <li>• Assigned Reading Preparation for Class Discussion (week 4)</li> <li>• Assigned Reading Preparation for Class Discussion (week 5)</li> <li>• Evaluation Report</li> <li>• Individual Site Time Log Form</li> </ul>
<b>Weeks 6-9</b> Intervention: Plan-do-reflect-plan-do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student pairs present interventions and peers critique in-class each week</li> <li>• Intervention Critical thinking journal #1               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site Time Log Form</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Intervention Critical thinking journal #2               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site Time Log Form</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Intervention Critical thinking journal #3               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site Time Log Form</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Week 10</b> Intervention: Progress update	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Complete and submit progress note</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OT student summary of progress</li> <li>• Client evaluation of goal progress</li> <li>• Individual Site Time Log Form</li> <li>• Class discussion on modification of plan</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Week 11</b> Intervention: Plan-do-reflect-plan-do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intervention Critical thinking journal #4</li> <li>• Assigned Reading Preparation for Class Discussion</li> </ul>
<b>Week 12</b> Intervention: Plan-do-reflect-plan-do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assigned Reading Preparation for Class Discussion</li> </ul>
<b>Week 13</b>	Students gone on block Level I experience so no visits with their client(s) at the agency this week
<b>Week 14-15</b> Prepare for Termination and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assigned Reading Preparation for Class Discussion</li> <li>• Plan for closure to the experience with their client(s)</li> </ul>

Assess Occupational Therapy Outcomes	
<b>Week 16</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Last week to see their participant and wrap up the Level I experience</li> <li>• Final Evaluation by agency due</li> <li>• Termination or Recommended Transition of Services Summary Due <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual Site Time Log Form</li> <li>• Thank you note to Global Friends and New American participant(s)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Portfolio Due <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final Self-Assessment</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assigned readings selected based upon the OT process students are navigating and literature related to the needs of the population</li> </ul>	

### Critical Thinking Journal Questions

1. Describe the process you used to develop rapport with your family. Identify what worked and what didn't. What will you change? Describe your application of Taylor's Six Steps of Interpersonal Reasoning (Taylor, 2008). Each step must be identified.
2. Describe your participant this week and how you make sense of them in their environment? Discuss rules/norms.
3. Based on your understanding of your participant, what do you think his or her needs are? Propose one possible way you could learn more about your participant's needs and provide evidence to support your choice. Explain the process you used to come to this conclusion. What additional questions do you have about your participant and how might you answer them?
4. What have you learned in your prior or current educational experiences that you can apply to understanding your participant more fully?
5. Considering the sources you drew evidence from, what was the most valid and useful? What was least valid and useful?
6. Open journal section: Are there other questions or concerns you have at this time regarding this fieldwork experience or course in general? What have you learned about yourself?

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Protocol

Ice Breaker: Hand out notecards and ask students to write 3 key things they learned through the process of working with a New American and 3 things they would do differently if they were to do this experience again.

Move to semi-structured interview:

1. Describe your overall experience working with New Americans as a Level I fieldwork student.

- What did you find most rewarding?
- What did you find most challenging?
- How did you respond to these challenges?

2. What foundational occupational therapy skills did you learn during this fieldwork?

- Describe a pivotal learning experience that occurred in the placement.
- How did this experience prepare you for later fieldwork placements?

3. One of the goals of this fieldwork experience was to develop clinical reasoning and apply this to working with your New American.

- How do you define clinical reasoning?
- Tell me how you saw this play out with the OT process (evaluation, intervention, and discharge) while you were working with your New American.
- What changes (if any) occurred as you worked with your New American? How did the relationship evolve?

4. As you reflect on your Level I fieldwork experiences this semester, compare and contrast your experience with working with New Americans to your experience in working with clients in a more traditional mental health setting.

- What do you see as the positive aspects?
- What do you see as the drawbacks?

5. How has this fieldwork experience impacted the development of your cultural awareness and competence?

6. In what ways has this fieldwork experience prepared you for your later fieldwork experiences and future occupational therapy practice?

7. What specific advice would you give to future students regarding connecting with and serving their New American?

8. What recommendations do you have for faculty regarding the community-based Level I fieldwork experience?

## Appendix C

## Audit Trail for Themes 1

Theme	Categories	Representative Quotations
Challenges and Rewards of Effective Communication	Language Barriers	My family did not speak very much English at all, but throughout the process you kind of develop your own language in a way, so by the end, you could see just how much you impacted them and how much they truly appreciate your time and effort. (Focus Group 2)
	Verbal and Non/Verbal Communication	Being aware of the subtle nuances, or the non-verbal aspects of communication, because we struggled so much to communicate verbally with the language barrier that it really required us to rely on how they were, or how their body posture was, where they were looking, to tell if they were paying attention or if they were interested. (Focus Group 1)
	Strategies for Communication	I think it helped with communication skills and like simplifying if they didn't understand the language...and that's not even for people who don't speak English, like somebody who might not have a high Level of education might not know what we're trying to talk to them about when we talk about interventions and treatment and occupations...I think that really, this fieldwork helped to simplify it to "This is exactly what I'm telling you, and this is the basics". (Focus Group 3)
	Humor	...the one individual who didn't speak English. She was the funniest one out of all of them. And it amazed me that humor could, was the same across either language. (Focus Group 2)
	Asking questions	After working with them I felt a lot more confident, yeah, to ask, to just ask "So tell me more about like what you do" or why you came to America, or just learning more about their story. (Focus Group 5)



	Simplifying and verifying communication	Learning that it isn't just one phone call; it's lots of communication over time and even then it might not resolve the situation. Just how extensive communication has to get. And learning to simplify communication...to be direct, to make sure that your point is understood. (Focus Group 6)
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