

Integrating Service Learning and EBP for Pre-Practicum Students

Introduction

Along with most other human service disciplines, speech-language pathology has adopted the paradigm of evidence-based practice (EBP), in which clinicians consider the best available evidence when making clinical management decisions. EBP involves, in addition to other steps, finding and assessing evidence (ASHA, 2006), applying the appraisal results in clinical practice and evaluating one's performance (Sackett, et al., 2000). In addition to educating future clinicians about the EBP concepts, engaging students in practical experiences that allow them to practice EBP may increase their ability to uphold the principles of EBP once they enter the profession. Clinical practicum provides such an opportunity for advanced students, but similar experiences are not as common for pre-practicum students.

The current project employed service-learning (SL), a pedagogy with a long history in higher education, to provide EBP experience. In essence, SL affords students an opportunity to apply concepts introduced in the classroom while providing a service to the community. SL is unique from supervised clinical practicum, in that professional SLP services are not provided. Instead, students provide nonprofessional services to a community agency as a means of achieving stated learning outcomes for an academic course.

The current project targeted two primary learning outcomes: 1) Students will demonstrate knowledge of basic human communication and aerodigestive functions, including their biological, neurological, acoustic, psychological, developmental, and cultural bases (ASHA Standard IIIB) and 2) Students will demonstrate knowledge of processes used in research and the integration of research principles into evidence-based practice in the management of neurogenic communication and swallowing disorders (ASHA IIIF). To achieve these outcomes, students served as conversation partners for individuals residing in a long-term care facility.

Method

The project description included here will be limited to the pedagogical components. A number of procedures related to developing the SL relationship with the community agency were critical to the success of the program, but these issues are beyond the scope of the current paper. The SL component of the project will be described first, followed by an explanation of the EBP component.

Students enrolled in a graduate neurogenic communication disorders course, but who were not yet enrolled in clinical practicum, were the primary subjects of this project. Additional participants were the individuals for whom the students served as conversation partners. These adults ranged in age from early 40's to late 80's. Many were experiencing conditions that quite obviously impacted the effectiveness of their communication, including hearing loss, blindness, dementia, dysarthria, and/or aphasia. A smaller number had more subtle cognitive deficits or simply were limited in their opportunities for communication.

Prior to beginning the SL visits, students were provided training in conversation facilitation strategies. Training included an initial orientation to concepts from the FOCUSED program (Ripich, 2005) with supplemental peer-mentoring support by advanced students enrolled in a separate course focusing on acquired cognitive-

communicative disorders. Peer mentoring took place over the course of the entire semester, and involved at least one opportunity for the mentor to observe the student as he/she conversed with the assigned partner.

Students serving as conversation partners were required to commit a minimum of 20 hours of actual conversation time. Additionally, students participated in in-class and electronic discussions related to their experiences. Finally, students conducted an EBP case study.

The EBP case studies in the current project were conducted in two phases. In the first phase, each student submitted a draft of his/her paper that included an introduction providing an overview of the project, a literature review related to conversation partner training and its applications for adults with communication limitations, a methods section describing the training the student received, a plan for implementing the strategies, and the outcome measures to be used to assess the effectiveness of the project, along with a complete reference list. This draft was submitted within the first five weeks of the project.

At the completion of the project, students submitted a final draft of the case study that additionally included a results section detailing the outcomes for the student, the conversation partner, and any other stakeholders, along with a discussion section relating the current results to the literature reviewed and suggesting directions for future research. The final submission was required to be in APA (2005) format, incorporating professional language appropriate for publication in a clinical publication such as the *ASHA Leader*.

Results and Discussion

To date, 18 students have completed the EBP/SL project, and an additional 20 students will have completed the project by the time this work will be presented. At this time, it is possible to report only the stated outcomes described subjectively by the students who completed the project as well as the perceptions of the course instructor.

With respect to the first targeted learning outcome (knowledge of basic human communication processes), students consistently reported that the project enhanced their understanding of age-, culture-, and situation-related variations in communication. For example, one student noted that her conversation partner preferred to limit the conversation to topics of religion. Another student recounted that she and her partner utilized formal addresses (e.g., "Miss Smith, Mr. Jones) throughout the entire semester. Nearly every student noted that their partner's communication style, regardless of the presence of a communication disorder, was distinct from that used by college-aged individuals.

Students also reported a greater appreciation for how the context influences the nature of the communication elicited. Several students noted that the communication skills demonstrated by their partners during the initial visits caused them to underestimate those individuals' communicative competence. Often the partner's competence was not apparent until the partners had established a more natural relationship. An insightful student suggested that initial interactions between SLPs and patients may also lack the naturalness necessary to reveal competence.

With respect to EBP outcomes, the quality of case studies was mixed. The majority of students were able to summarize the findings of previous work and describe their own outcomes. A smaller number demonstrated higher level learning by

synthesizing information in the literature review, thoughtfully considering their own outcomes within the context of previous work, and proposing ways in which outcomes might be enhanced. We predict that this latter group will have little difficulty incorporating EBP principles into their practicum, and eventually independent professional, activities.

At the time this work is presented, learning outcomes from these students' first practicum experiences will be available. We will present any findings suggesting a relationship between success in completing the EBP project and achievement of advanced learning outcomes in practicum.

References

- American Psychological Association (2005). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (5th Ed)*. New York: Author.
- Ripich, D.N. (2005). *Revised FOCUSED caregiver's guide. Communicating with persons with Alzheimer's disease*. New York: Insight Media.
- Sackett, D. L., Strauss, S. E., Richardson, W. S., Rosenberg, W., & Haynes, R. B. (2000). *Evidence-Based Medicine: How to practice and teach EBM (2nd ed.)*. London: Churchill Livingstone.