

A practice educator's perspective of a virtual placement

I recently hosted six 1st year students from the University of Manchester on a virtual placement for three weeks. The placement was based with Elysium Health Care and included sessions with my community interest company Total Communication Services CIC. Two of the students were based internationally which involved some time differences and challenges. We focused the placement on the provision of accessible information. I provided a day's training and gave them projects to work on in pairs.

The students produced some high-quality information which would have been time consuming for me to create. Their interest and passion was a real tonic at times given the challenges of lockdown. They had time to read around topics, research the area and consider available resources.

I facilitated opportunities for the students to connect with service users virtually. I asked one patient at the hospital to teach them his speech and language therapy programme we have been working on for dysarthria. The students had just had lectures on this topic, and they were delighted to interact with him and ask questions. I did not want him to feel like he was in a virtual goldfish bowl with six people peering at him from the screen, so shifting the power and making him the teacher was a positive experience all round. By the end of the session, he had adopted the style of a talk show host and asked if they wanted to ask any further questions before he left.

Although there were challenges with time keeping and managing a group of people virtually, we set up a WhatsApp group so we could maintain prompt communication.

My advice to students embarking on a placement:

- Treat the placement as 9am–5pm every day unless you are told differently.
- Treat it as if you are in paid employment – if you need to be absent ask permission, don't just assume you can make up the time later.
- Try to remain focused and engaged in online sessions. These are hard for everyone and practice educators need to know that they are making sense!
- Check whether you can send in drafts of work for comments, and if so, when. You can use this for feedback.
- Use the online reflection system – it's a much easier way of the practice educator understanding how you are thinking and the stage of your clinical development.

- Read around subjects while you have the time.
- Offer feedback when asked.
- Work as a group and support each other.

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