



Short Communication

Say what? A Guided Virtual Level I Fieldwork for Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) Students

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Life experience is what makes us who we are. I started my career in academia as a fieldwork coordinator in fall 2013, so I learned quickly that securing traditional fieldwork sites can be difficult. I am certainly a fan of faculty led fieldwork and have used this approach. In spring 2017, I was excited to find out that I was expecting my first baby however in the summer of 2017, at the 20-week anatomy ultrasound, my excitement turned to tears as we found out our baby had a Neural Tube Defect (NTD) and the most severe type of spina bifida (myelomeningocele). I was then introduced as to what I call the “spina bifida underworld” private pages for moms who were considering fetal surgery, moms who had fetal surgery, moms who had post-natal repair, pages called united by spina bifida, blogs from various individuals with spina bifida etc., I have personally found these pages to be a wealth of knowledge and have made many friends in unexpected places.

I decided to take a few things that I am passionate about, OT education, telehealth and spina bifida awareness. In turn I began working with an Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) program at the University Of Charleston in Beckley WV, we together established a Level I experience that would allow a student to view spina bifida through the lifespan. However, this Level I had a unique element, we would all participate virtually.

I reached out to many of my newfound friends in my spina bifida underworld and ask for volunteers to participate in weekly virtual

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Citation: Wix AM (2019) Say what? A Guided Virtual Level I Fieldwork for Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) Students. J Altern Complement Integr Med 5: 79.

Received: October 25, 2019; Accepted: October 31, 2019; Published: November 07, 2019

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sessions. I was quite shocked by the favorable responses. Many occupational therapy practitioners who like myself found themselves in the spina bifida world, responded on how they thought this was a great fieldwork experience.

After we worked through all the respondents, we were able to start in the NICU, go up to toddlers, and then school age children, next middle and high school and we finished with adults. We broke this into 6 weekly sessions. Sessions were completed on blackboard collaborate. Prior to virtual sessions all students participated in a Spina Bifida overview lecture.

Sessions lasted anywhere from one to two hours, depending on how many participants. At the end of each session, the Level I fieldwork educator and students discussed various topics that were brought out in the sessions.

Each week a few families attended the sessions and told their story. At the beginning we viewed a mom home just from the NICU, she shared her story, we viewed twins, one with (SB) and without. The family showed us their homemade parallel bars. We met families who had fetal surgery and families who had post-natal. They shared their heartaches and triumphs of raising a child with a disability. Much to my surprise we had a good mix of interdisciplinary education, we had a mom and dad PT to attend a session, who did an awesome brain and spinal cord anatomy review, a mom who was an OT and shared a changed philosophy to treating patients after her experience, a mom who was a speech therapist, and mom who was a teacher.

We saw toddlers in bumbo wheelchairs, walkers, learned about a variety of AFO's, teenagers who walked independently, people who spoke about bowel and bladder management. We talked to an adult mom of two who is wheelchair bound and living her best life, who had recently undergone a shunt revision after a car accident.

Each week was exciting, it brought up talking points at the end of each session, students learned about shunts vs EVTs, learned about latex allergies, saw firsthand some of the benefits of fetal surgery, learned that having a diagnosis doesn't have to make life different, and why spina bifida is called the snowflake condition. One teenager loved the theater and talked about her many leading roles. We had great discussion on resources available or not available to families. We discussed a variety of modes of therapy, hippotherapy, aquatics, effectiveness of therapy as well as and some nontraditional approaches. We crossed time zones, met people on the West Coast, as well as Middle America.

Oh, and I forget to mention we met the ACOTE goal for a Level I experience. “The goal of Level I fieldwork is to introduce students to the fieldwork experience, to apply knowledge to practice, and to develop understanding of the needs of clients” [1]. Level I Fieldwork is not intended to develop independent performance, but to “include experiences designed to enrich didactic coursework through directed observation and participation in selected aspects of the occupational therapy process” [1].

We finalized this spina bifida experience with a service project. Organizing a 5k walk, run, or roll to where all proceeds would go to a local camp in West Virginia for children/young adults with spina bifida. Our service project raised almost \$5000.00 for this camp. Oh and guess who were some of the walkers, runners, and wheelers, children and adults with spina bifida.

Overall, we found this to be a worthwhile and meaningful fieldwork experience, student feedback was positive, they liked that this fieldwork was led by an occupational therapist. They found the families to be open and kind. The adults and teenagers to be inspirational. Students enjoyed the adult population so much they asked their instructors to invite one of them to speak to future students.

This type of experience could certainly go in many directions, address specific populations/diagnosis, develop virtually programming and give a telehealth view, service project programming and much more. As we continue this virtual level I fieldwork experiences, we certainly plan to make tweaks and improvements for future students. Have more formalized assignments to go along with sessions, work out some of the bugs that occur with technology.

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