Student-led Tutorial Groups in Speech and Language Therapy (SLT): Promoting Employability

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Background situation
- An action research project
- Three weekly, hour-long small group tutorial slots allocated to supplement lectures
- Clinical tutorials count towards clinical hours for the degree; attendance is obligatory
- Tutorials are supervised by other members of staff with different clinical specialisms.

Plan
- To design new tutorials within practical constraints
- To develop learning and understanding from lectures
- To make links to learning from clinical placements
- To enhance employability skills
- To minimise impact on staff team

Rationale
Developing employability skills and graduate attributes, is a key objective for Higher Education (Cole and Tibby, 2013) and for SLT (Tucker, 2015). Relevant employability skills for SLT include effective communication, independent learning, team working, taking responsibility and workload management.

Self-directed learning can promote deep learning (Marton and Säljö, 1984) which clinical students need in order to apply their knowledge to clinical situations (Baxter and Gray, 2001). Student-led discussion groups can increase student engagement (GAA, 2016) by developing their sense of control, choice and ownership and hence empowerment (Kremer and McGuinness, 1998). According to social learning theory, students can learn from their peers through engaging in discourse within a community and hence empowerment (Wenger, 1998). Peer-led discussions can provide a meaningful and authentic learning context as they can mimic workplace situations.

Method
- Tutorials were designed to be student-led.
- Each tutorial was pre-allocated a different topic to support lecture topics.
- Tutorials were organised and run by the students.
- Each student was required to do a five-minute presentation in one tutorial.
- Each tutorial had an allocated minute taker noting attendance, summarising content and key learning points. This was intended to mimic the workplace and consolidate learning. They were given to the tutor.

Evaluation method
A ‘Best Hopes’ questionnaire, based on Solution Focused Brief Therapy principles (Burns, 2005) was given pre- and post-tutorials. This required the students to reflect on their ‘best hopes’ for the tutorials; consider what they need to do in order to achieve these; and what impact it would have on them in future. Following the tutorials an additional evaluative questionnaire required the students to rate and comment on the tutorials as a learning experience.

Potential barriers to success
- Student willingness to contribute and participate
- Adequate preparation and effort from each student
- Year 4 workload pressures
- Lack of tutor control over quality of information and learning points

Results: Rating the learning experience
- 24 out of a possible 30 completed the evaluative questionnaire.
- Individual learning experiences did vary depending on tutor group allocation.
- Overall ratings were positive:
  - 86% gained knowledge and skills
  - 84% useful preparation for future employment as SLT
- How would you rate this experience overall? (1 = poor; 5 = excellent): The mode response was 5 and the mean response was 4.5.
  - How would you rate this as a learning experience? The mode response was 4 and the mean response was 4.4.

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Results: Best Hopes
Best hopes mainly related to an increase in knowledge and an improvement in presentation skills. Did you achieve your best hopes for these tutorials? The mean response was 7.8 when 10 = best hopes achieved. What difference will this make to your life?

Common themes identified were:
- Improved skills / confidence in presenting
- Improved confidence in a specific aspect of clinical practice
- Increased knowledge base for clinical practice
- Increased confidence for clinical practice
- Increased knowledge for use in clinical placements

Conclusion
Student-led tutor groups can be a motivating and engaging learning experience for students. It helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice. It can serve to develop knowledge and understanding, as well as enhance employability skills such as presenting and organising. Ensuring consistency of quality across the tutorial groups needs further consideration.

Future developments
- Staff team has agreed tutorial format to continue in future academic years
- Student feedback indicates that the following needs consideration:
  - Timing of tutorials in relation to student workload
  - Ensuring consistency of handout provision across tutorial groups
  - Rolling out format to other year groups

References

Available from: