

# Module 4 – Supporting Students’ Learning Needs

Are your students facing learning challenges?

What strategies may be helpful to assist students?

This module will assist you to:

1. Discover the types of learning needs that students face
2. Identify students who may be facing learning challenges
3. Gain an understanding of some of the factors that might precipitate a challenging learning situation
4. Identify appropriate strategies for challenging learning situations
5. Plan next steps when interventions have failed

## Video Introduction

Social workers Pamela Hartling and John O’Keefe from Northwood in Halifax talk about their experience as preceptors supporting students’ learning needs.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u52z2-i3g2E&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u52z2-i3g2E&feature=player_embedded)

## 4.1 Discover the types of learning needs that students face

What are learning needs and why do I need to know about them?

Learning needs can be categorized as either perceived or real. Students and instructors may have perceived needs about attitudes and skills that a student is expected to learn. Real learning needs are those that have been determined by the course syllabus, school, or licensing organization.

There can be a mismatch in learning needs between students and instructors or schools/institutions. Understanding that learning needs can be interpreted differently by various individuals and organizations can assist instructors to understand some of the challenges that may interfere with students’ learning. Learning supports and strategies contained in this module can facilitate students to fulfill their learning needs. [1]

[1] UBC, Faculty of Medicine. Teaching skills for community based preceptors. Available online: <http://fhs.mcmaster.ca/facdev/documents/TeachingSkillsCommunityBasedPreceptors.pdf>



Imagine some basic learning needs of a new student that you take on as a preceptor.

## 4.2 Identify students who may be facing learning challenges

Generally speaking, students want to hone their clinical skills, get along with their colleagues, supervisors and clients, and succeed in their placements. While many students experience difficulty of some sort during the placement process, it is generally not because they don't care or lack interest in doing well. It is up to us as educators to help students identify challenges and address them to facilitate student success.

Students enter into learning environments at various performance levels. While one student may proceed through a placement with ease and confidence other students are challenged by the learning environments for many reasons. Students who are facing challenges in the context of a clinical placement may exhibit both learning problems and attitudinal issues.

Learning challenges can be categorized by:

- Inadequate knowledge and skills;
- Poor communication with patients, peers, and instructors; or
- Unprofessional behaviour [1] [2] [3]

Students with learning challenges may:

- Have difficulty learning or performing up to expectations
- Be distracted and do not devote full attention to academic responsibilities
- Be difficult or unpleasant to work with and
- Not appear to be motivated to learn. [4]

[1] Hayes, K.W., Huber, G., Rogers, J., & Sanders, B. (1999). Behaviours That Cause Clinical Instructors to Question the Clinical Competence of Physical Therapy Students. *Physical Therapy*, 79(7): 653-667. Available online at: <http://physther.net/content/79/7/653.full.pdf+html>

[2] Luhanga, F., Yonge, O., & Myrick, F. (2008). Hallmarks of Unsafe Practice: What Preceptors Know. *Journal for Nurses in Staff Development*, 24(6): 257-264. [doi:10.1097/01.NND.0000342233.74753.ad](https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NND.0000342233.74753.ad)

[3] Luhanga, F., Yonge, O., & Myrick, F. (2008). Strategies for Precepting the Unsafe Student. *Journal for Nurses in Staff Development*, 24(5): 214-219. [doi:10.1097/01.NND.0000320693.08888.30](https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NND.0000320693.08888.30)

[4] Hendricson, W.D. & Kleffner, J.H. (2002). Assessing and Helping Challenging Students: Part One, Why Do Some Students Have Difficulty Learning? *Journal of Dental Education*, 66(1): 43-61. Available online at: <http://www.jdentaled.org/content/66/1/43.full.pdf>

## Think about it

Think about this scenario:

Andrew is a pharmacy student placed with you at the busy drugstore you own. He is quite shy, quiet, and a little awkward; you often have to ask him to repeat himself when he speaks. You have caught several mistakes he has made in preparing prescriptions, but when you have spoken to him about this he apologizes profusely, appearing very anxious and agitated and looking at the floor. He seems very eager to do well but has been consistently been performing below the level you would expect for a student in his year. What would your approach be to dealing with Andrew?

### **4.3 Gain an understanding of the factors that may precipitate a challenging learning situation**

Watch the video example below to view a scenario where the student has encountered a challenging learning situation.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=NeUE-y-HC44](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=NeUE-y-HC44)

## **Mismatched Expectations**

Instructors and students can sometimes have mismatched expectations. Here are some examples:

- Your expectations may not be at a level where the student is in his/her education
- Your expectations may not be the same as the school/institution [1]
- The student may not have reached the level appropriate for this placement
- Misunderstanding about what the expectations are for clinical placement by either the student or the preceptor [2]

[1] [Langlois, J. P., & Thach, S. \(2000\). Preventing the Difficult Learning Situation. Family Medicine, 32\(4\), 232-234.](#)

[2] [Brown, T., Williams, B., Mckenna, L., Palermo, C., McCall, L., Roller, L., Hewitt, L., Molloy, L., Baird, M., & Aldabah, L. \(2011\). Practice education learning environments: The mismatch between perceived and preferred expectations of undergraduate health science students. Nurse Education Today 31, e22–e28.](#)

## **Learning Challenges (Cognitive Issues)**

For this module, learning challenges are referred to as a group of learning difficulties that may be the result of undiagnosed or diagnosed learning disabilities (LD). In Canada, as high 10% of post-secondary students may be affected with some type of a learning disability that can cause

anxiety for them in their academic careers (Cox and Klas, 1996) [1]. This number is not reflective of the growing number of students with LDs, but the availability of improved screening tools and the growing movement in many post-secondary institutions to provide access for all potential students. However, because there are no visible signs from these students it is therefore extremely challenging to respond to their learning needs. Consequently, it is crucial that faculty and instructors are provided with the knowledge to understand, recognize, and respond to these learners so they feel “safe” to self-identify.

### **What is a Learning Disability (LD)?**

“Learning Disabilities refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.” [2]

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- Oral language (e.g. listening, speaking, understanding);
- Reading (e.g. decoding, phonetic knowledge, word recognition, comprehension);
- Written language (e.g. spelling and written expression); and
- Mathematics (e.g. computation, problem solving).

Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with:

- Organizational skills;
- Social perception and interaction;
- Perspective taking; and
- Difficulties with socio-emotional skills and behaviours.

### **What Do I Do If I Think a Student Has a Learning Disability?**

- Assistance for students with learning difficulties may depend on the type of learning disability and its severity.
- Important to document and collect observations. Note if there are patterns in a student’s learning not just an isolated case.
- Consult the Dalhousie Office of Student Accessibility and Accommodation or another learning specialist to determine if the possibly of a learning disability exists.
- The Dalhousie Office of Student Accessibility and Accommodation can assist the student and you to develop the most appropriate learning plan for a student facing learning challenges. [3]

### **Remember!**

LDs should not hinder a person from attaining goals. Understanding the specific challenges and learning strategies to deal with LDs can alleviate a lot of frustration and contribute to a successful learning experience for instructor and student.

[1] [Cox, D., & Klas, L. \(1996\). Students with learning disabilities in Canadian colleges and universities: a primer for service provision. Journal Of Learning Disabilities, 29\(1\), 93-97. doi:10.1177/002221949602900111](#)

[2] [Learning Disabilities Association of Canada](#)

[3] [Dalhousie Office of Student Accessibility and Accommodation](#)

## Students' Behaviours and Values

The literature indicates that values are sometimes generation dependent. That is, how and when we were raised strongly informs our views on acceptable behaviour, and this permeates the workplace [1]. For example, preceptors may have problems understanding and/or accepting younger students' attitudes towards:

- Technology (eg. cell phone use)
- Work ethics
- Commitment/loyalty to the agency with whom they are placed
- Choice of dress
- Understanding of formality/professionalism acceptable in work situations
- Personal boundaries

The key to navigating generational issues, similar to how cultural issues are best addressed, is to try to achieve a good understanding of the motivation behind a behaviour that is being experienced as problematic.

[1] [Sherman, R., \(2006\). Leading a Multigenerational Nursing Workforce: Issues, Challenges and Strategies. The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, 11\(2\), Manuscript 2. doi:10.3912/OJIN.Vol11No02Man02](#)

## Health Issues

Robertson (2002: 30) in his article on dental education, states that “our memories can be influenced by stress, drugs, and aging.” Hence, any one of these factors can affect the ability of students to learn new material and concepts. [1]

Research suggests that students with learning difficulties or health issues experience a high level of stress during their academic career. This higher level of stress can lead to increasing vulnerability to new or pre-existing health conditions. [2][3][4]

Recognizing that students learning difficulties may be a reflection of an underlying health situation may be the first step to assisting a student towards completing a successful clinical experience.

[1] Robertson, L.T. (2002). Memory and the Brain. Journal of Dental Education, 66(1): 30-42. Available online at: <http://www.jdentaled.org/content/66/1/30.full.pdf+html>

[2] Carroll, J.M. & Iles, J.E. (2006). An assessment of anxiety levels in dyslexic students in

higher education. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76: 651-662. Available online at: [http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/385/1/WRAP\\_Carroll\\_anxietyJMC\\_140305.pdf](http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/385/1/WRAP_Carroll_anxietyJMC_140305.pdf)

[3] Coles, C.R. (1990). Helping students with learning difficulties in medical and health-care education. *Medical Education*, 24: 300-312. Available online at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2923.1990.tb00015.x/pdf>

[4] Yonge, O., Myrick, F., & Haase, M. (2002). Student Nurse Stress in the Preceptorship Experience. *Nurse Educator*, 27(2): 84-88. Available online: [http://journals.lww.com/nurseeducatoronline/Abstract/2002/03000/Student\\_Nurse\\_Stress\\_in\\_the\\_Preceptorship.12.aspx](http://journals.lww.com/nurseeducatoronline/Abstract/2002/03000/Student_Nurse_Stress_in_the_Preceptorship.12.aspx)

## Quality Learning Experience

Are you providing a quality learning experience?

There is a plethora of research about learning environments and their effect on student success. In addition, there are ingredients that are time-proven to enhance students' learning in higher education that includes learning in clinical care environments. Hendrickson and Kleffner (2002) provide a checklist for methods and activities that teachers can use to enhance learning. See the Educational Quality Assessment on page 54 of Hendrickson and Kleffner (2002). [1]

[1] Hendricson, W.D. & Kleffner, J.H. (2002). Assessing and Helping Challenging Students: Part One, Why Do Some Students Have Difficulty Learning? *Journal of Dental Education*, 66(1): 43-61. Available online at: <http://www.jdentaled.org/content/66/1/43.full.pdf>



### Think about it

Think about this scenario.

An instructor and student have the following interpretations and expectations about the same situation:

**Instructor's Interpretation** – Students leave early and do not finish their work.

**Student's Expectation** – I expect to leave when my hours are done; I'm not going to work overtime for free.

**Instructor's Expectation** – Part of learning to be a professional is finishing your cases at the end of the day; I expect you to stay late when it's needed.

What are some of the actions that you might explore to address the issue?

## 4.4 Identify appropriate strategies for challenging learning situations

Preceptors can apply different strategies to facilitate student success in challenging learning situations. For example, they can get support from the education institution.

### Support from the Educational Institution

Clinical placements involve partnerships between agencies in the community and educational institutions. When a student experiences difficulty under your supervision, the educational institution shares responsibility in providing support and creating a solution for difficulties that arise [1]. Educational institutions can provide you with:

- Access to a greater number of resources to help support you and the student
- Provide parameters around realistic plans and outcomes
- Insight into individual students
- Support you in your role as a preceptor

The next four pages will explore different strategies for dealing with challenging learning situations.

[1] [Hicks, P. J., Cox, S. M., Espey, E. L., Goepfert, A.R., Bienstock, J. L., Erickson, S. S., Hammond, M. M., Katz, N. T., Krueger, P. M., Neutens, J. J., Peskin, E., & Puscheck, E. E. \(2005\). To the point: Medical education reviews – Dealing with student difficulties in the clinical setting. American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, 193\(6\), 1915–1922. doi:10.1016/j.ajog.2005.08.012](#)

## Strategy: Formula for success

Teeter (2005) writes about a formula for addressing unsatisfactory clinical performance. The formula has seven steps.

1. **See it early.** Look for ‘red flags’ that may include:

- Lateness on 1st or 2nd day
- Disappears from clinic/office
- Hesitates when asked questions
- Frequently asking for help
- Unprofessional behaviour
- Frequently unprepared
- Is distant
- Is distracted/unengaged
- Fumbles with skills
- Uses the words “I did not know YOU wanted...”

**2. Understand the student's perspective.** Be sensitive to the student's perspective in this situation. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How would you feel?
- What would your fears be?
- How would you see your role?
- Would you feel abandoned?
- Would you have felt prepared?
- Would you have been aware that there was a problem?
- What would be important to you at this time?

**3. Clarify the situation with the student.** See Figure 1, page 92 of the Teeter article for examples of questions to ask students.

- Meet with the student privately
- Be kind yet objective towards the student
- Explore the student's perception of the situation
- Bring some reality in an objective way (using behavioural not personality issues)

**4. Contract with the student for success.** The contract should be written by the student using the outline on page 92 of the Teeter article. Make sure you keep a copy of the contract for yourself.

**5. Evaluate the student's progress regularly.**

- Check with the student early so you can make adjustments if necessary
- Refer to the contract
- Update the contract when necessary and give the student a copy

**6. Summarize the student's performance.** At the end of the contract and/or the semester

- Be objective use and behavioural actions
- Include student's perspectives
- Determine whether the student has:
  - Changed his/her behaviour and met the clinical objectives
  - Not changed his/her behaviour and is below clinical standards
  - Changed behaviour but is still performing inconsistently

**7. Sign the summary.** The summary should include a plan for continuing student success.

[1] Teeter, M.M. (2005). Formula for Success: Addressing Unsatisfactory Clinical Performance. *Nurse Educator*, 30(3): 91-92.

# Strategy: The P-E-T model

Hendricson and Kleffner (2002) give us the P-E-T Model to help facilitate student success. The P-E-T Model can be summed up by the following:

- **Prime** – prepare students for the task with reminders and key elements
- **Partition** – divide the task into manageable components
- **Praise** – praise and encouragement are essential
- **Empathy** – share your stories from when you were a student and provide hints about how you improved your performance
- **Expectations** – explore what students can and cannot do at this level of training
- **Teach** – actively provide demonstrations, rehearsals, and helpful feedback
- **Help** – focus on helping the student rather than evaluating performance
- **Model** – ask for self-critique through feedback from your peers in front of students

[1] Hendricson, W.D. & Kleffner, J.H. (2002). Assessing and Helping Challenging Students: Part One, Why Do Some Students Have Difficulty Learning? Journal of Dental Education, 66(1): 43-61. Available online at: <http://www.jdentaled.org/content/66/1/43.full.pdf>

# Strategy: Effective Communication

Watch the following video about effective communication between preceptors and students.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHSnm9s6AcU&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHSnm9s6AcU&feature=player_embedded)

## Tips on Communication Skills

**Listen first:** Begin by asking for the student's perception of the situation.

**Be respectful:** You should be offering constructive criticism of a behaviour, not of the person as a whole. Keep your tone gentle; your goal is to help this person in their learning process.

**Be specific:** Offer concrete examples of what you are concerned about, and include the consequences of the problematic behaviour. (ie. 'when you don't chart things properly the rest of the team won't know what you did with a patient and that could impact her/his care')

**End with clear strategies:** Identifying a problem behaviour is not helpful unless an alternative can be provided. This may include getting information or assistance from another source; if so, end with that. Help students to formulate a plan for success.

# Strategy – Taking Action

Here are some tips for taking action to improve a situation:

- Address the issue early
- Reflect on the situation, and your role in it
- Involve the institution
- Focus on the situation, not the person
- Keep careful documentation
- Involve the student
- Create a plan

[1] Teeter, M.M. (2005). Formula for Success: Addressing Unsatisfactory Clinical Performance. *Nurse Educator*, 30(3): 91-92.

## 4.5 Plan next steps when interventions have failed

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, intervention plans fail to produce an adequate improvement, leaving the instructor/preceptor in the difficult situation of being unable to provide a passing grade to a student in placement. Research on the subject reflects instructors preceptors often struggle with this decision when it arises, and sometimes ‘fail to fail’ students despite having serious concerns about their ability to safely practice as professionals after graduation. Preceptors cited not having kept adequate documentation as a barrier to failing students, as well as not wanting to have to go through all the necessary steps involved, worrying about damaging a career trajectory or simply not wanting to deal with the difficult nature of the problem.

Keeping detailed documentation and involving the school are essential to the process of navigating an unsuccessful placement; the school may be able to negotiate alternate arrangements such as providing the opportunity to later re-do the placement, extending it, or having the student take a leave to address issues that have been impeding the process. It is important to keep in mind that we all have a responsibility to both our students and to the integrity of the professions to which we belong; failure to address serious practice issues is a disservice to the student, the public, and the profession as a whole.

Knowing the academic policies and procedures of the program your student is taking is important in this situation.

See Dudek, Marks and Regehr, 2005 [PDF] for relevant information on this topic.

[1] Dudek, N.L., Marks, M.B., & Regehr, G. (2005). Failure to Fail: The Perspectives of Clinical Supervisors. *Academic Medicine*, 80(10): S84-S87. Available online at: [http://www.gme.umn.edu/prod/groups/med/@pub/@med/documents/asset/med\\_96686.pdf](http://www.gme.umn.edu/prod/groups/med/@pub/@med/documents/asset/med_96686.pdf)

# Exercise 1 – Both Sides of the Story

In this activity you will find three small scenarios each with an instructor's interpretation of a situation plus the student's side.

Are these misinterpreted or unacceptable behaviours?

Read the scenarios and then click on the links below each scenario to see the student's perceptions and situations.

**Scenario 1:** The instructor believes that a particular student's excessive use of cell phones is rude and intrusive.

*Student's perception:* I had no idea that you find cell phones rude and intrusive.

*Student's situation:* My mother is in the hospital and I check in with her several times throughout the day.

**Scenario 2:** The instructor notices that certain students do not arrive until the time of a meeting.

*Student's perception:* I didn't realize that you want me to be at meetings 5 minutes before they start.

*Student's situation:* I have to drop my children off at two different daycares before I get here.

**Scenario 3:** The instructor notices that a student is not engaged in learning; she disappears in the middle of things.

*Student's perception:* I did not know that I was needed for something.

*Student's situation:* I'm Muslim, and I have to pray several times daily.

# Exercise 2 – Matching

Test your comprehension of some of the important terms from this module. In this matching review exercise, match the words from the module with their appropriate sentences. All words come from Module 4 – Support Students' Learning Needs.

To open the matching exercise, click on this link ([Module 4 – Matching Review Exercise](#)) or the image below. **Note that the exercise will open in a new window/tab and you will have to return here to continue the module.**

# Exercise 3 – Final Thoughts

In this review exercise, enter your answers to the four questions below. Once you are done and hit SEND, an email will be sent to the eLearning course supervisor with your answers.

1. As a preceptor, how would you distinguish between a student's perceived and real learning needs?

2. Have you ever had a student with a learning challenge? Describe it here in a paragraph or two. If not, please think of an example and describe it here.

3. What do you think were the factors that precipitated the student's learning challenge you describe above?

4. What strategy would you employ today with the student's learning challenge you describe above?

Please enter your (1) name, (2) email address, and (3) profession below before you SEND. Your information will not be shared with anyone other than the eLearning course supervisor.

## References – Module 4

Please note that a Dalhousie NetID may be required to view some of the following articles.

[Brown, T., Williams, B., Mckenna, L., Palermo, C., McCall, L., Roller, L., Hewitt, L., Molloy, L., Baird, M., & Aldabah, L. \(2011\). Practice education learning environments: The mismatch between perceived and preferred expectations of undergraduate health science students. Nurse Education Today 31, e22–e28. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2010.11.013](#)

[Carroll, J.M. & Iles, J.E. \(2006\). An assessment of anxiety levels in dyslexic students in higher education. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 76, 651-662. doi:10.1348/000709905X66233](#)

[Coles, C.R. \(1990\). Helping students with learning difficulties in medical and health-care education. Medical Education, 24, 300-312. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2923.1990.tb00015.x](#)

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(2005). To the point: Medical education reviews – Dealing with student difficulties in the clinical setting. American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, 193(6), 1915-1922. doi:10.1016/j.ajog.2005.08.012

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