

## Research as a vehicle for learning

Candiss Argent, [candiss.warder@gmail.com](mailto:candiss.warder@gmail.com)

### **INSTEP: Why did I get involved?**

During my second year of a Physiotherapy Degree, I was invited to participate in a research project called Internationalising Student Education in Physiotherapy (INSTEP). Following a professional encounter between Physiotherapy university lecturers from Manchester Metropolitan University and Turku University of Applied Science in Finland, this international collaborative project was conceived. The aim was to create an innovative learning experience between international students, utilising technology. Students shared an online learning space in order to access video case studies on Parkinson's Disease. Over several joint meetings through the virtual classroom, we reviewed case studies and worked on specific tasks in order to learn from each other about assessments, treatments and cultural differences to approaches. We watched videos of patients talking about their experiences and then discussed the clinical implications and evaluated different assessments, treatments and outcome measures. The involvement of the staff during these sessions varied depending on their teaching style; some directed the discussions very structurally, whereas others facilitated the discussions by asking questions to guide us to consider more in-depth critiques.

My role within this project was to complete study tasks related to case studies so that I could contribute to group discussions. At each session a student team leader was nominated to raise the set topics that we were directed to discuss by the lesson plan. The team leader would also distribute additional reading to team members in order to cover any further learning outcomes that arose during the sessions.

My initial and primary reason for participating in INSTEP was simply that it would be a new experience. It was an exciting opportunity to be involved with and I felt I would be able to make a positive contribution to the academic world. I had no concept of just how much I would gain from it.

The most obvious skill I thought I would develop from this project was building and strengthening communication skills. As a physiotherapy student, I was always looking for new ways to gain new communication skills as I feel they are one of the most important skills for any clinician to refine. This belief has been strengthened now that I have qualified as a physiotherapist and working with children with complex needs and their families.

We were told that a large part of our contribution to this project would be regular reflection on our performance, our peers' contributions and the academic's role. Again, this meant an opportunity to further develop reflection skills and self-awareness, a key component necessary to progress and learn in the world of physiotherapy.

The learning content of this project ran alongside the university's curriculum. Therefore, I felt participating would enhance my curriculum learning by spending more time to study and gain a greater understanding of the pathology. I developed my learning skills further, and worked out how I learn, which is sometimes half the battle.

This project provided us with an opportunity to share our clinical experience through discussion amongst English and Finnish students. Our Finnish colleagues were already out on practice placement; we had not yet been out on placement and were three quarters of the way through two academic years. Having the opinion of colleagues with clinical experiences is a valuable way to enhance my knowledge gained by reading literature.

### **What did I learn from the experience?**

My communication skills were indeed challenged and, through reflection and feedback, were improved. Using video conference calling to Finland, we found we had to adapt our communication to effectively discuss physiotherapy topics with colleagues whose first language is not English. This was further complicated by the challenges posed by technology issues and sometimes, failure. Even when technology was on our side, despite being able to see our colleagues through video call, it still does not compare to conversing with a person in the same room as you.

Possibly the most valuable tool this project gave me at the time was extrinsic motivation to learn as my colleagues were relying on me to complete work to achieve comprehensive discussions for learning. Being a mature student, I find that my study is usually intrinsically motivated as I left a full time, paid job to start studying for a new career. However, around the time of this piece of research, I had completed a 2 year access course whilst working full time and was 18 months into a full time degree. Despite being extremely passionate about physiotherapy, I, like most of my peers, was desperate to move away from the classroom and experience the clinical world in my practice placement. Therefore, I was tired and demotivated to learn. This research gave me a reason to study other than for my own gains, I felt like I was part of something bigger than my own career. We motivated each other to do the work required for the sessions. Sometimes you need a bit of extrinsic motivation to regain focus and perspective.

Learning from others' experiences is invaluable as it increases your awareness of potential problems that can occur in new situations. Participating in this research positively impacted my clinical practice as a direct result of international students sharing their experiences with me. This, in turn, gave me an insightful start to my career as a qualified physiotherapist.

My learning during this project contributed to the realisation of what type of physiotherapist I want to become in terms of consideration of holistic factors. I had developed my learning style and so during university I was able to use the structure of the set study tasks as a template for studying further pathologies, this is

something I have carried with me to postgraduate study. It directed me to more in-depth aspects to consider than I would normally look at, such as exploring psychosocial aspects of health care and cultural differences. I gained an appreciation into the way the disease affects individuals in all aspects of life by watching patient testimonies and simultaneously increased my awareness of cultural differences and similarities in health care and physiotherapy practice. As a consequence, my holistic awareness also improved, meaning the patient is always at the centre of my care. We watched many patient testimonials that were emotive in terms of how their illness impacts on their daily lives. Their priorities may be different from physiotherapy priorities, which further highlights the importance of patient centered goals to encompass all aspects of a patient's life when considering patient care.

My self-reflection skills did indeed improve, and I found I was more consistently able to formalise these reflections whilst on practice placements. This is now embedded in my weekly, if not daily, clinical practice.

Team work skills were also developed through weekly election of team leaders, acting as team leader and delegating to colleagues. We all motivated each other when we were struggling to enthusiastically engage after a long day of learning.

The main lesson I took from the academic content of this project was careful consideration of outcome measures. The outcome measures we researched and discussed in the project, I used later in my course, whilst on a stroke rehabilitation placement. As a result, I had an awareness of the psychometric properties and knew that my clinical educator was using an outcome measure with poor reliability and validity. However, I still used it as this was departmental practice. I was able to reflect on this at the end of my placement and consider why I did not feel comfortable to challenge this practice at the time.

### **Why should students engage in research?**

It could be argued that everything I learnt from this project are skills that I would have gained and developed in other environments throughout my academic career. However, I feel there are other reasons that students should engage in research.

Firstly, it gives you an awareness of research. Although physiotherapy practice is evidence based and we all read published papers on a regular basis, sometimes it can feel quite detached from us as clinicians. Participating in research and then being informed of the processes and outcomes makes it very tangible and real. Research is a big part of the physiotherapy world, however as a student I found this a hard concept to realise until I experienced it firsthand.

The way each academic facilitated our sessions varied; some would ask questions to assist discussion, whereas others would direct and lead the session. For me, facilitation was more effective to aid my learning, and this is a style I am familiar with during tutorials and practical sessions at university. That said it might have been useful to have a more structured agenda for the session to guide our discussions to cover all relevant topics. What I have learnt from this is whenever I have a student,

or I am delivering peer education, I must ensure that I ascertain the students' optimum learning style to be able to deliver teaching effectively. I can achieve this by observing their behaviours and asking them to complete learning style questionnaires. Or if I am delivering a group presentation, ensure that I have different resources to teach the same topic so that I can cater for all learning styles.

Finally, and probably the most important for any student who is feeling weary and tired of learning, this project gave me a sense of empowerment. Knowing that you have made a small positive contribution to the academic world that you have gained so much from in such a short space of time is very gratifying. I gained so much from participating in a piece of research that only required me to continue to learn a curriculum already set and then discuss my experience with the researchers. From start to finish, it has presented amazing opportunities to me that have been very positive experiences. For example, presenting my reflections alongside the researchers at an Excellence in Learning and Teaching conference. More recently I presented further reflections alongside an abstract submitted by one of the researchers at a conference for Student Engagement in Research. All of these experiences have provided an increase in confidence and they are achievements that I will continue to reflect on throughout my career. I would urge any student who is presented with a similar opportunity to take it and allow it to present further opportunities and learning experiences to you as it unfolds. I hope to have opportunities to be involved in research as a qualified physiotherapist either as a participant or a researcher throughout my career in order to continue my professional development.