



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

## Clinical Educator Development Program

### Module 1: Setting up the learning environment.

- Psychological Safety
- The Educational Alliance
- Starting Placement Learning Contract

## Building psychological safety

This first module is all about setting up your learning environment so that placements run as smooth as possible. In the past it was believed that a student's 'learning style' should dictate how we approach their learning- setting up the placement meant working out how your student best learned.

But thinking has changed quite a bit. Learning style theories have been discarded, and instead, we talk about psychological safety, getting to know your student, and preparing for learning.

*'Psychological safety may be defined as a shared belief that the educator- learner relationship is safe for interpersonal risk taking which creates a sense of confidence that the educator will not embarrass, reject or punish the learner... due to mutual respect and trust.'* (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 560)

*'The key question for any learner contemplating what to volunteer during a feedback conversation is "what is the likelihood that I will be respected, accepted and assisted, or the opposite, that I will be humiliated, reprimanded or judged as inept".'* (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 560)

*'When people feel safe enough they are also prepared to reveal their less polished selves and accompanying 'unvarnished' thought processes and actions.'* (Molloy & Bearmann, 2018, p. 37)



('Toe in the water' painting by Gordon Hunt; Saatchi Art)

From the moment students make contact with you they will be testing the waters... dipping their toe in to see how you react, and then formulating an impression of how 'safe' the placement will be. And this will continue until the day they leave; a non-stop process of evaluating and re-evaluating how safe it is to take intellectual risks (Bowen et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2019).

Maximum learning occurs when students display positive and productive learning behaviours such as asking for help and feedback or asking questions, showing engagement, being open about their difficulties and knowledge/ skill gaps and trialling new and creative ideas. But this will only happen if the student feels safe enough to do so (Johnson et al., 2019; Kolbe et al., 2020).

Let's consider what might happen when students are not open about their difficulties, or if students don't ask questions or feel confident to speak up about their ideas, but rather take on the persona of 'the quiet student'. Most likely they will not learn, and it is very probable that your feedback will be misdirected (Johnson et al., 2019). So how can we make the learning environment as safe as possible? How can we help our students to challenge themselves to take risks and learn? Or as Kolbe et al. (2020, p. 164) suggests, how can we use psychological safety to 'encourage learners to try and err at the edge of expertise where knowledge and skills may or may not be sufficient to avoid mistakes'... because this is where all the learning occurs!



## Practical Placement Applications: Safety Signals

Below are some practical ways that you can create a psychologically safe environment for your students:

- **Welcome:** Welcome your students into your department/ practice. This doesn't have to mean parties and cakes (although everyone loves cake!) but it might be as simple as a sign at the front desk saying welcome, or an allocated workspace or inclusion in lunch time conversations. Anything which makes a student feel like a 'hassle' or a 'job to be done' can negatively affect their psychological safety and therefore ability to learn on placement.
- **Make a statement:** Clearly stating your respect for your students as learners can go a long way (Rudolph et al., 2008) e.g. 'I believe that you are intelligent and that you care about doing your best and improving, and I care about helping you to improve' or 'I want you to ask me questions... no questions are silly'. Always use respectful and inclusive language and show appreciation for participation and engagement (Kolbe et al., 2020).
- **Body language counts:** Use active listening- sometimes students need time to process their thoughts and formulate their answers. Missing the opportunity to give answers, because someone speaks before they get the chance to, can damage self-esteem (Johnson et al., 2019). Use eye contact (as culturally appropriate) and open body language; avoid demonstrations of annoyance or disappointment e.g. eye-rolling, arms folded, or patronising and sarcastic behaviour- these behaviours can crush confidence and cause significant and long term stress (Kolbe et al., 2020).
- **Privacy and confidentiality:** All conversations should be private, and students should know that what they say is confidential (Kolbe et al., 2020).
- **Reduce the power gap:** Whether you like it or not, you hold all the power because you are the gateway to passing or failing! While you won't be able to take all of this away, you can reduce the power imbalance by letting students know you are still learning too. Show your own vulnerabilities by sharing your own experiences of mistakes and learning (Johnson et al., 2019; Kolbe et al., 2020).
- **Focus on what the student can change:** Avoid personalised comments which can embarrass and trigger defensive responses. Commit to only providing feedback on the actions of the student and the things that they can change (Johnson et al., 2016).
- **Embrace the mistake:** We don't mean that it is ok for students to be unsafe or throw any responsibility for quality work out the window! We just encourage you to develop a culture of learning which embraces gaps and mistakes as normal, and as beneficial parts of the learning process to be reflected on rather than punished, critiqued or covered up. Be active in reinforcing that learning is a lifelong skill- focus on what learning looks like rather than aiming for perfectionism (Cheng et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2019). Normalise the fact that clinicians of all levels of practice have strengths to celebrate and weaknesses to target (Ramani et al., 2019).

## Module 1: Setting up the learning environment.

- **‘Learning focus’ rather than ‘performance focus’:** Ensure students have plenty of ‘formative’ opportunities to practice and improve- opportunities which they will not be directly judged on. Placements constructed as one continual assessment, or regularly interspersed with ‘summative’ checklists and assessments, mean students never feel safe to be vulnerable, divulge gaps in practice or make mistakes. Students will work to please their teacher at the cost of learning. Be very clear when it is ok to be vulnerable, ask questions and make mistakes... and honour your word (Huffman et al. 2021; Ramani et al., 2019).
- **Be clear about the rules:** Anxiety decreases when students understand what is expected of them. Aim for transparent and predictable processes e.g. plan and timetable feedback sessions and clarify their purposes and any preparation needed, and be clear about which learning objectives or assessment criteria you are targeting at each learning conversation (Johnson et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2019; Kolbe et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2008). Never be afraid to regularly refer to learning objectives and assessment tools... carry them around with you and highlight which criteria their work for the day relates/ related to. You might feel silly continually repeating this, but it will help your student to understand the criteria... and understanding will bring safety.

Also plan what the student’s weeks will look like so they know right from the start what is expected of them. Don’t be afraid to schedule ‘processing’ time for students e.g. time to complete clinical reasoning tools and reflective practice tasks. Students at this stage of their learning will need plenty of time to understand what it is they have done and seen.

Also think about your student’s orientation. Try to avoid surprises along the way by helping them to understand your workplace, both the practicalities and the culture. Students will need to know how to move around the site and negotiate various policies/ procedures, but they will also need to understand how they are expected to ‘fit-in’ and function. Students are required to move through multiple different workplaces across their course, informing them from the word go how you want them to behave, and function will help to avoid any unintended mistakes on their behalf.

- **Other options:** Reminding students of other ‘safe’ places will bring reassurance. Please remember to refer them back to the placements team for private and confidential support (you are welcome to contact us at any time!). The University of Sydney also offers a free and confidential counselling service. Students can book appointments to talk to a psychologist and they can also access a 24-hour crisis line if their needs are more urgent:  
<https://www.sydney.edu.au/students/counselling-and-mental-health-support.html>

The University of Sydney also has a variety of other wellbeing services e.g. financial support. Please contact us so that we can make the appropriate referrals for students:

[Student life, wellbeing and support - The University of Sydney](#)

## Educational alliance

*'...if an educator takes the time to discuss and negotiate goals and an agreement about how to work towards the goals, this demonstrates that the supervisor is invested in the learner...trainees report they are more likely to act on constructive feedback (even if it is worded very negatively) in the context of a strong educational alliance.'* (Molloy et al., 2018, p. 36)

*'...poor alliances may lead to trainees actively avoiding situations in which feedback might be provided.'* (Telio et al., 2016, p. 940)

*'Participants tended to have negative emotional reactions in the setting of weak educational alliances.'* (Telio et al., 2016, p. 938)

*'Trust (is) essential if learners (are) to take risks and fully engage in challenging learning activities that may reveal their weaknesses.'* (Johnson et al., 2019)

There are a number of similarities and overlapping parts to psychological safety and the educational alliance- and one can't really exist without the other. But what the 'Educational Alliance' focuses on is the educational bond between the student and educator. As with psychological safety, students will test the educator's commitment to their learning from day 1, asking themselves whether the educator genuinely and authentically cares about them and their learning successes and further, which educator they will choose to seek feedback from (Bowen et al., 2017; Telio et al., 2015).

The educational alliance encompasses 3 main factors:

1. The student believes there is a shared understanding that the purpose of the relationship is to help them learn and improve;
2. The student believes that there is a shared understanding about how to achieve their goals;
3. The student trusts and values the educator and believes that these feelings are mutual (Telio et al., 2016).

It is well established that the student- educator relationship can powerfully influence student learning. Strong educational alliances are associated with positive learner behaviours including asking questions, feedback seeking and better engagement with feedback *even* when it is constructive (Bowen et al., 2017; Molloy et al., 2018).

Now psychological safety and the educational alliance does not mean that you have to be 'nice' all of the time, but rather it means the development of a learning environment and a learning relationship where constructive feedback can be provided and is well received, because it is safe to do so and understood to be in the best interests of the learner.



## Practical Placement Applications: Educational Alliance

So, what might this look like in practice?

- **Getting to know you:** The educational alliance is strengthened when students feel understood on a personal level. Get to know the identity of your student so that they are valued as a person and not just as 'the next student coming through' (Bowen et al., 2017; Telio et al., 2016). There is no expectation to become friends, or to cross professional boundaries, but understanding their lives outside of the placement, what helps and hinders their learning and what their own personal goals are, can go a long way towards building a trusting and successful partnership.

Unfortunately, we (the University) are unable to provide clinical educators with information about student's previous placements/ assessments due to privacy of information laws. But... this doesn't mean that you can't access this information. You just need to get it straight from the student! Spending time at the start of the placement 'setting the scene' and getting to know your student will go a long way in establishing an environment in which students feel comfortable enough to share their strengths along with their areas for improvement.

- **Goal setting:** Gain a deep understanding of your student's goals and dedicate time to collaboratively developing and reviewing them. Develop a culture of continued improvement and learning (Telio et al., 2016). Start from day 1!
- **Be willing to be vulnerable:** As above, when we discussed embracing the mistake, it is important to role-model life-long learning behaviours and to be honest about your own limitations. Being vulnerable shows authenticity and develops trust (Huffman et al., 2021).
- **Careful how you present:** The alliance needs to be built on trust and empathy. Demonstrating frustrations and disappointment can immediately reduce psychological safety and diminish the alliance... *'And then what I did was I zipped it after that'* (Telio et al., 2016, p. 938).

Please find the 'Starting Placement Learning Contract' over the page. This is a practical way of getting to know your students that you can do on day 1 of placement.

**University of Sydney Physiotherapy Placement Program  
Starting Placement Learning Contract**



<b>Student name:</b>
<b>Placement site:</b>

**About me (e.g. commitments outside of University, interests, culture, why I want to be a physiotherapist):**

**How have my previous placements/ simulation experiences been? Discuss any challenges and successes you had on placement/ in simulation, and what you enjoyed:**

**How I best learn:**

**What I identify as having a negative impact on my learning:**

**How I will look after my own well-being on placement:**

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<b>Main areas of feedback I received in my previous simulation/ placement experience that I need to work on in this placement?</b>	<b>What does this feedback apply to?</b> *Provide examples to explain this feedback	<b>Expected level of practice for me in this area- What am I working towards and how will I show I have improved?</b> *Refer to assessment expectations	<b>What is my SMART Goal for this area of practice?</b>	<b>What is my plan for improvement?</b> *List <u>specific</u> strategies.
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				