Perceptions of Effective Professional Behavior Feedback: Occupational Therapy Student Voices

Carol R. Scheerer

The purpose of this study was to gather formative evaluation data to determine students’ perceptions of effective aspects of professional behavior feedback for use in program development. A qualitative design was used to gather data from baccalaureate-level occupational therapy students. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews, data were gathered about the students’ beliefs, feelings, and recommendations for policy changes. Four themes emerged: Not Just “Contact With a Piece of Paper”; Fieldwork Needs To Be Taken Into Account; Faculty Fairness and Support Need To Be Present; “This Is Like Therapy for Me.” Aspects of these themes have implications for classroom and fieldwork settings. The type of feedback these students found helpful and the desire to have fieldwork performance considered along with their classroom behavior were salient perceptions. As educators, it is important to listen to the voices of students to gain insights into their perceptions of the effective aspects of the feedback process for professional behaviors.


Strong skills in professional behavior are crucial to fulfilling one’s role as an effective and dynamic occupational therapist in today’s service delivery environment (Cohn & Crist, 1995; Fidler, 1996). Specific professional behaviors identified as important in the field of occupational therapy include positive self-regard, self-awareness, interpersonal competence, and commitment to learning (Fidler). Babola and Peloquin (1999) identified additional skills needed including respect for others, responsibility, problem solving, flexibility, confidence, cooperation, constructive handling of frustration, modification of behavior in response to feedback, giving constructive feedback, and balancing obligations. Lyons (1997) reported occupational therapy students’ interpretation of professional behaviors valued in a mental health setting revolved around issues of defining roles, establishing boundaries, ensuring authenticity, and maintaining control of authority in therapeutic relationships.

Tryssenaar (1997), nonetheless, believed that too much professional control or distance might interfere in the therapeutic relationship, as clients need to feel supported. Similarly, the importance of caring for clients was brought out as Peloquin (1990) reviewed therapeutic relationships considered most healing. King (1980) emphasized the need to care not only professionally but also on a personal and societal level as we interact with our clients, advocate for their needs, and fulfill our responsibility as a health care provider.

In preparing occupational therapy students for their future roles as effective health care providers, it is crucial educators include development of professional behavior as part of the academic and fieldwork education. As students develop professional behaviors, provision of feedback regarding their skills, attitudes, and performance in this area is intended to promote further growth. Feedback can be pro-
vided to students in a variety of ways (Babola & Peloquin, 1999; Gutman, McCreedy, & Heisler, 1998; Kramer & Stern, 1995; Peloquin & Babola, 1996; Sands, 1995), however, it is not always known how effective the feedback method is nor if students’ learning needs are being met in the process.

One way to find out if students’ learning needs are being met is to conduct a formative evaluation that can provide program development data (Patton, 2002) as part of a system of program effectiveness that is required by all accredited occupational therapy programs (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1999). Gathering students’ perspectives of the feedback process may provide insights regarding aspects that are most likely to facilitate learning. Furthermore, Gutman et al. (1998) acknowledged the presence of occupational therapy students’ initial resentment toward documentation of their problematic behaviors. Yet, educators are responsible for providing students with timely indications of their progress through a course of study (AOTA, 1999). It is reasoned that having students define the process themselves makes it more likely they will accept ownership and participate. Obtaining students’ perceptions further their involvement (Astin, 1993) and enhances learning (Kozloff, 1987). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to conduct a formative evaluation to support program development for one occupational therapy department. Specifically, the research question addressed was: What are occupational therapy students’ perceptions of the process of professional behavior feedback they experienced in one academic program?

Linking Classroom and Fieldwork Behavior

The presence of positive professional behavior in academic settings seems related to fieldwork success. A positive link between occupational therapy assistant students’ behavior in a classroom setting and their ability to modify behavior based on feedback was associated with successful performance on Level II fieldwork (Sands, 1995). Tickle-Degnen (1998) looked at the predictability of early assessment of students’ personal and interpersonal attributes during their course of study to success on Level II fieldwork several years later. Early scores (through multivariate measurement, correlation and logistic regression analysis) were shown to be highly predictive of 47 students’ performances on Level II fieldwork across three practice settings: rehabilitation, pediatrics, and mental health. Students who were identified early as conscientious tended to be more successful in their fieldwork settings. Tickle-Degnen and Puccinelli (1999) reported behaviors exhibited by students during an interview early in their course of study were reflective of later performance on Level II fieldwork as measured by the

Fieldwork Evaluation for the Occupational Therapist (AOTA, 1987). Students who were initially more expressive and exhibited less negative emotions were later rated higher by fieldwork supervisors. Although these studies did not gather data regarding effectiveness of instructional methods; they noted that positive professional behavior in the classroom was associated with positive professional behavior on fieldwork.

Similarly, behaviors interfering with fieldwork performance have been discussed in the literature. Gutman et al. (1998) identified specific communicative and behavioral characteristics as contributing factors to occupational therapy students’ failing their fieldwork at midterm, final, or both as measured by the Fieldwork Evaluation for the Occupational Therapist (AOTA, 1987). They described the characteristics of rigidity of thinking, discomfort with the ambiguity that accompanies clinical reasoning, lack of psychological insight, difficulty interpreting feedback, externalization of responsibility, difficulty learning from mistakes, discomfort with the physical handling of clients, and dependence on external measures for self-esteem as interfering with students’ successful performance. Tickle-Degnen and Puccinelli (1999) also used the same fieldwork measure and found that students who were initially not as expressive and showed more negative emotions were later rated lower by fieldwork supervisors. Although it is not known to what degree instruction in professional behavior influenced the outcomes, a connection was documented between students having difficulty in the classroom and having difficulty on fieldwork.

Additionally, Kramer and Stern (1995) documented two case study examples where occupational therapy students had difficulty modifying their behaviors in response to feedback from others, specifically feedback from faculty and fieldwork supervisors. After receiving repeated feedback regarding problematic behavior, one student made minimal changes, however, the other took responsibility and modified her behavior accordingly. Although in this case, we don’t know how professional behavior instruction was provided, we see that feedback regarding problematic behavior facilitated a change in one student’s behavior. Formation of professional behaviors may be related not only to feedback but also to instructional methods.

Instruction in Professional Behavior

Educators use a variety of instructional methods and techniques to facilitate the development of professional behavior skills and attitudes in their students. These have included specific courses focused on developing professionalism (Bossers, Kernaghan, Hodgins, Merla, O’Connor, & Van Kessel, 1999) and an intensive 12-hour workshop focused...
on interpersonal and communication skills (Delworth, 1972). Fidler (1996) described a curriculum that included developing personal and interpersonal skills by means of cooperative learning, seminar, small group work, and independent study. A specific elective course to enhance student preparation for the art of practice has been offered (Peloquin & Davidson, 1993). Making the classroom more like a clinical setting by including the use of strategies salient to a clinic (e.g., timing in-class assignments, requiring spontaneous role-plays) has been described (Peloquin & Babola, 1996). Donohue (1995) described a course of study that indirectly rather than directly focused on professional behavior development suggesting that as academic excellence is emphasized, students simultaneously assimilate occupational therapy values and professional norms.

Remedial instruction for professional behavior development has also been documented. For 10 select occupational therapy students in one class cohort who exhibited characteristics and behaviors indicative of potential fieldwork failure, Gutman et al. (1998) described specific intervention strategies. Their strategies included seminars on professional behavior, faculty feedback regarding problem behavior, counseling, community volunteer work, and the use of student learning contracts. With this intervention, students had a higher rate of fieldwork success than previous cohorts of classes who did not receive instructional intervention. Three of these students, however, needed additional intervention over time to achieve the same level of success.

Although we know professional behavior can be taught in a variety of ways, we don’t know which instructional methods are the most effective. Similarly, when additional instruction does not immediately change problematic behavior we do not know definitively why nor what students perceive as barriers to making change. Nonetheless, assessment of student performance is considered an important part of the process to promote professional behavior growth.

Assessment of Professional Behavior

Literature supports the assessment of professional behavior as part of classroom and fieldwork performance (Kasar & Clark, 2000; Palladino & Jeffries, 2000). Specific methods used to assess students’ professional behaviors have included the use of a four-point numerical scale of instructor and student self-rating on degree of personal or interpersonal skills present (Babola & Peloquin, 1999). Babola and Peloquin used this method of assessment to identify at-risk students in each of two class cohorts who subsequently developed midterm strategies that facilitated their meeting of professional development requirements at course end.

Assessment has also occurred via student journaling to self-assess interaction style, active listening experiences, and difficult interpersonal situations (Peloquin & Davidson, 1993). Students responded positively to a course in which this self-assessment method was used, but it is not known more specifically how students felt about this aspect. Use of student self-rating regarding personality and emotional expressiveness, video viewing and performance rating of others regarding emotional sensitivity, and outside observer rating of students’ videotaped behavior has also been documented (Tickle-Degnen, 1998). Although students had a significant role in this process, their preference for one method over another was not solicited. Donohue (1995) measured changes in professional behavior by students’ increase in scores on personality measures. In this case, a standardized measure was used that did not allow for students’ perception of the process to influence the processes. Furthermore, personal and behavioral performances using narrative summaries have been assessed via individual faculty—occupational therapy assistant student conferencing (Sands, 1995). A noted benefit of this process was the opportunity to identify and reinforce positive behaviors.

The conferencing described by Sands (1995) included faculty feedback and student input regarding perceptions of student performance that were not included as part of students’ course grades. Conversely, evaluation of students’ professional behavior has comprised as much as 10% of occupational therapy students’ grades in a specific course (Babola & Peloquin, 1999) or 20% of course grades across several courses (Kasar & Clark, 2000). Linking problematic behaviors with course grades may give faculty more power to address specific concerns (Gutman et al., 1998), however, whether or not course grades motivate students to change their behavior was not part of the data collected in these studies.

We know professional behavior can be measured using a variety of scales and measurements, including course grades, although, it has not yet been determined which assessment methods are most effective in obtaining comprehensive representation of students’ professional behaviors nor what students’ perceptions are when comparing the processes. No research has been found that focused on the perceptions of the students themselves as contributors to the process whereby assessment methods were developed and revised; this study, therefore, elicited these students’ voices.

Methods

This research study utilized a formative evaluation method to gather qualitative data in a case study format. When such
process studies are conducted, perceptions of the participants in the process are an important consideration (Patton, 2002). To obtain participants’ perceptions, focus groups may be used to promote meaningful understanding of the phenomenon of study and individual interviews may provide inner perspectives (Patton, 2002). Similarly, Abbott, Wulff, Nyquist, Ropp, and Hess (1990) supported the practice of interviewing students to obtain data on relevant instructional issues.

Sample
The participants for the study consisted of a purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of occupational therapy students from a graduating class at a small, private, Midwestern university. Of the 32 students, 28 volunteered to participate. Twenty-six of the participants were female and all were Caucasian. Their ages ranged from early twenties to late forties with the twenties being the modal age. This cohort students’ course of study included 1 year of preprofessional course work followed by admittance to the occupational therapy program. The occupational therapy program included 3 years of coursework and 6 months of fieldwork to obtain a baccalaureate degree or a post-baccalaureate certification in occupational therapy.

Procedures
During each of the 3 years of coursework, instructors gave students feedback for seven specific components of professional behavior: dependability; organization; verbal skills; nonverbal skills; written communication skills; interpersonal skills; and personal conduct. For the first 2 years, no standard written feedback mechanism was used as faculty provided verbal or written feedback or both at their discretion. The final year included standard ratings of students by all faculty using a Professional Behavior Form with a dichotomous scale indicating whether or not a student exhibited the aforementioned behaviors. The student also self-identified his or her strengths and areas of concern regarding professional behavior and wrote a semester goal that focused on an area of professional behavior selected for improvement.

Each instructor for each student in his or her course completed the Professional Behavior Form ratings and provided feedback on goal attainment at beginning of term, midterm, and course end. Furthermore, for the first year that this cohort experienced the above described professional behavior policy and procedures, up to seven percentage points of students’ course grades (one percentage point for each professional behavior area) were included as part of the 100% total (coursework constituted 93%, professional behavior 7% of the total). In the second and third years, the points were not included but rather could be deducted at the faculty’s discretion if the student was observed to lack competency in an area(s). This procedural change occurred as some faculty were concerned that the initial policy inflated some course grades.

Upon approval of this study from the institutional review board of the university and the signing of consent forms, 27 of the 28 student participants participated in one of four, 2-hour focus groups. To enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings, triangulation of data collection methods (Krefting, 1991) occurred by additionally conducting one-half hour individual interviews with six of the students. Their classmates voted these six participants as individuals perceived to most represent their class as voices to speak about professional behavior feedback and, as such, were considered a nominated sample (Field & Morse, 1985). Five of the six students participated in a focus group and individual interview; the sixth participated in an individual interview only. Field notes were recorded throughout.

The author conducted the focus groups and individual interviews during nonscheduled class time during the last semester of the students’ senior year; semester professional behavior grades linked to the author’s role as instructor were waived. For uniformity, a script was used to introduce the standard open-ended interview format for both data collection methods. The aim of the presuppositional questions (Patton, 2002) for the focus groups and individual interviews, combined with one simulation question (Patton) for the individual interviews, was to gather information about students’ perceptions of the professional behavior feedback processes they had experienced over the course of their 3 years in the program. Content focused on students’ beliefs and feelings about what they perceived as effective versus ineffective aspects of the feedback methods experienced as well as their recommendations for change in the feedback process. See Appendix A for focus group and Appendix B for individual interview questions. Refreshments and small token gifts were offered to each student for their participation in the focus groups and individual interviews, respectively.

Analysis
Each focus group and individual interview was audiotaped and transcribed. Three coexisting activities were used to analyze the data: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To reduce the data, the author coded the transcription of the audiotapes and field notes by descriptively identifying specific phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that had meaning. The codes were compared, contrasted, and clustered into similar patterns. The clustered patterns were organized into
a coding tree (Hemmings, 1999) that displayed the data corresponding to the interview questions in textual outline form. The outline was reviewed for accuracy by a volunteer segment of 12 of the 28 subjects as a method of member checking (Krefting, 1991). From the outline, themes were generated as commonalities among the salient data.

Results

From the onset students agreed that professional behavior was important and the department’s definition included well-defined parameters. One student suggested it would be difficult to look at the expectations and argue they were not necessary for future success. “As far as the seven areas that are listed out, I think they’re very appropriate. Those are areas we definitely should have as students or as occupational therapists or just people in society.” This initial concurrence led to the emergence of four themes as the students continued to voice their beliefs and feelings.

Not Just “Contact With a Piece of Paper”

Repeatedly, students voiced that they wanted feedback, they valued feedback, and they appreciated feedback. “I think that professor feedback is key.” Another student stated, “I think you need feedback from professors, both positive and negative in some type of form.”

Students voiced a preference for positive feedback with one student observing that when positive feedback was given, it was valued and appreciated:

Several instructors put a lot of time into the form [Professional Behavior Form] and giving affirmations and that really meant a lot to me. I read through it three or four times. So, I think when someone takes that extra effort and also points out positive things, it changes your whole attitude about the experience and I really appreciate that.

Similarly, a student stated, “You need that positive reinforcement.” Another student added, “I think there should be an area on the form that says strengths that the faculty see, too.”

Students also voiced opinions about what constituted positive feedback and concern that simply a check mark in a designated column was not strong enough affirmative feedback. When talking to an instructor, one student relayed the content of that conversation, “The comment was that when they make the checks that you have done fine for that section of professional behavior, that should be considered as positive reinforcement, but I don’t consider that positive reinforcement at all.” Students concurred that they wanted elaboration beyond just a check mark.

Several students felt it was helpful and meaningful to meet face to face with instructors when receiving feedback. A student said, “Last year we met with some of the professors at midterm and I liked that one-on-one where you can give me feedback and tell me what I was doing wrong, what I was doing right.” Yet another student echoed similar sentiments:

When somebody comes to me directly and says, “Look, I have a problem with this and this and this,” or they just tell me, “I am seeing this in you,” it comes off so much better that I am actually having a one-to-one contact with somebody instead of having one-to-one contact with a piece of paper.

Some students suggested that receiving face-to-face feedback more adequately mirrors a job situation where a supervisor sits down and tells you about your job performance:

It would also be good practice for out in the real world. Because it seems like almost every organization has some kind of a review process that you go through where they bring you in every year or every 6 months and sit you down and say, “I think you’re doing great in this and I think you are doing negative in this.”…And I think we are going to need that when we get out.

Students, not surprisingly, especially seemed to value positive feedback. They appreciated receiving feedback face-to-face and seemed to think this form of feedback would be rather commonplace in the working world.

Fieldwork Needs To Be Taken into Account

This cohort of students had participated in Level I fieldwork experiences during their course of study and felt that input from that experience should not only be obtained separately as was the case but rather it should influence the professional behavior feedback grade received in their classroom work as well. In this way they felt that a better-rounded view of their performance could be seen. “I think that fieldwork needs to be tied in some way or another [to the feedback received about professional behavior in the classroom].” They recognized that at times their behavior in fieldwork was similar to that which they displayed in class, yet some students voiced that their behavior was different while on fieldwork. One student said:

In one respect you are very similar, you know, the class experience and your fieldwork experience are similar. But in other respects, I don’t think that is always the case. I think that needs to be taken into account. I know I am an entirely different person at fieldwork. I’ve never had a fieldwork supervisor say you need to talk more. They’ve said the opposite to me. You speak really well and you communicate really well.

This sentiment was echoed by an individual interview participant, “It [fieldwork and classroom] is really different for some people...I’m always seen as kinda quiet [in the class-
room]. But at fieldwork, I am so interested in what they are doing, I am asking questions, I’m wanting to get involved.”

When referring to studies that have shown a correlation between classroom and fieldwork behavior, one student pointed out that they were not part of those studies. “I wasn’t part of that study. Just because generally that is the case does not mean that it is always going to be the case.” Students seemed to think that inclusion of their own supervisor’s point of view would provide a more accurate, complete, and thorough testimony of their professional behavior:

We are always taught in school how the environment affects every single thing you do. Well, I know when I am in one class as compared to another, I act really completely different sometimes as far as participation-wise. If there was some way that the professional behavior sheets could be combined with the fieldwork professional behavior, that would be perfect because that would give you two views of okay, this is how he or she is in class, this is how he or she is at fieldwork.

Students appeared to resist the idea that their behavior tended to be the same across settings. It seemed they saw their situation as being unique. Furthermore, when students did not agree with a faculty member’s feedback, they seemed to believe that an outsider’s opinion (fieldwork supervisor) would more closely align, and consequently validate, the students’ own perceptions.

Faculty Fairness and Support Need To Be Present

Students perceived faculty as playing a significant role in providing feedback by completing the Professional Behavior Form, however, they voiced concern that all faculty who used the form should do so in a consistent manner. “Some professors write a lot on the sheet where others just write okay and give it back to you.” Furthermore, concern about one faculty members’ subjectivity was voiced; “I think she sees me as a quiet person anyway, so I have to work doubly hard, you know, to prove that I’m not but that I can speak up and show that. It’s still very subjective, I think.”

Students also suggested that faculty members should be held to the same high standards of accountability to which they were held. “I think if the professors in this program are going to require professional behavior for the students the professors should be very aware of those seven areas and follow them also.” A specific example was given by another student, “There are certain professors that start class habitually late…if they’re expecting us to do that [be on time] then they should be held accountable for the same standards, too.” Remediation for such a concern was suggested, “Maybe in those instances they just need to stress, ‘I’m sorry that was very unprofessional.’ Because I understand everybody makes mistakes and we do, too.”

Students suggested that even more class time be allotted to teach and emphasize professional behavior. “It would make sense to spend [more] class time on professional behavior….There are so many exercises and seminars and things out there to do that help people do this.” A specific suggestion was given, “Maybe if we had specific examples, [b]ecause whenever I hear from faculty that professional behavior is the single most factor in determining people who are or not successful on fieldwork, I just kinda question that.” Another student suggested having peers help each other out. “Writing goals wasn’t one of my strengths but giving presentations was. I could help those that have difficulty with presentations and we could draw on each other’s skills.”

Several students expressed appreciation for a workshop conducted by a faculty member to assist those who had difficulty with written communication. “When we had that workshop, I felt like that was so helpful…That was saying, “We’ve been noticing that in written communication there have been problems, and here’s something to help you guys out.” When referring to this same workshop another person agreed, “I thought that was really fabulous.”

Students desired equal treatment from the faculty and they were concerned about perceived inconsistent expectations. Students appreciated faculty assistance when it was provided in addition to scheduled class times.

“This Is Like Therapy for Me”

Students expressed feelings of being valued when their voices were sought as data were collected for this study. “I think that is really important to get that student feedback. Whether it facilitates a change or not, at least our voices are being heard. I think that is really important.” Additional benefits of being heard were shared. A student participating in a focus group said, “This is like therapy for me. [B]ecause there are frustrations that you have over the years and I’m just like, all right, I feel better now.” Similarly, this feeling was again evidenced in the field notes from the fourth focus group, “One student at the end commented that this was like “therapy” and that it felt good to talk about it.”

Students expressed how listening to their voices reduced resentment that at times accompanied their perceptions of the professional behavior process. The resentment seemed to occur because the feedback was part of their course grade since it was not necessarily considered in the course grade of students enrolled in other programs across campus. Another source of resentment seemed to be the occasion of a mismatch between the students’ and the faculty’s perceptions of professional behavior. When talking
about such an inconsistency, a student stated:
You know, there have been times when I have been angry about it and thought it was kind of a stupid thing [the policy] and I’ve voiced that. But at the same time, thinking about it and looking back on it and using my professional behavior, I realize it is important. I mean it is an important thing. I just think it needs to be brought about in a different way.

Several suggestions were given for revising the policy including not having the feedback count so much toward the students’ grade or not having it included in grade calculation at all.

The reduction in resentment was further discussed, “Once we were able to give input, I think that we started seeing that things aren’t as bad as we thought…. If they just let us talk, regardless of whether they took our suggestions or not, it makes us feel better.” Another student mentioned the improved attitudes, “I think that our whole class, in general, has felt so much more positive about it [the professional behavior policy] having the ability to have this experience. It has increased our morale and the whole program, the professional behavior program itself.”

It appeared the students had feelings regarding the professional behavior policy that had not been dealt with during their course of study. The relief expressed talking about their frustration seemed to be cathartic; it seemed important to them that their voices were heard.

**Discussion**

Listening to the voices of these students has implications for developing professional behavior in both classroom and fieldwork settings. Donohue (1995) has suggested that academic excellence in the classroom alone results in the simultaneous transmission of occupational therapy values and professional norms. Contrary to this belief, students in this study expressed need for a more direct focus on professional behavior. They wanted more specific instruction to promote professional behavior development and pointed out that professional behavior skills can be taught in a variety of ways.

Students discussed aspects of the feedback process that helped them best learn. They desired positive feedback and they wanted face-to-face feedback. Although the inclusion of positive feedback can be assumed by indicating the student met the criteria, students in this study commented that a check mark in the designated category of the ranking form was insufficient positive feedback. On the Professional Behavior Form used at the time of this study, the check mark designated the student either **did or did not** meet the criteria for a specific category. Babola and Peloquin (1999) and Kasar and Clark (2000) support indicating the degree to which behaviors occur through their use of a four-point numerical rating system; as well, Kasar and Clark designated space for additional comments. As the students in this study suggested, words may be better able to identify strengths than a check mark designation and additional comments were appreciated. Providing positive feedback has been identified as an advantage of using individualized student or faculty face-to-face conferencing (Sands, 1995). Students in the current study voiced a preference for this approach.

Students differed in their opinions about whether or not the faculty feedback should be part of their course grades and evidence of this difference of opinion is present in occupational therapy education practice. Babola and Peloquin (1999), and Kasar and Clark (2000) have included feedback on professional behavior as part of a course grade while Sands (1995) has not. Fidler (1996) questioned to what degree students can be held accountable for their personal and interpersonal skills. Fidler further questioned the objectivity of assessing personal and interpersonal behavioral skills traditionally perceived as subjective phenomena. Students in this study questioned the same, especially as one student specifically pointed out, there is subjectivity involved in the feedback process. At the same time, Gutman et al. (1998) observed that if behaviors are not associated with an academic grade, instructors may feel powerless to act on problematic behaviors exhibited by students.

Seeking student perceptions about the feedback process they experienced appeared to give them some sense of ownership of the feedback process. The students felt good when their voices were heard. The work of Abbott et al. (1990) suggested that students who were interviewed at midterm regarding instructional effectiveness were more satisfied than when data were collected only at term end. Cooper (2000) reported there were more positive reactions than negative when students provided their perceptions of the assessment process via the use of narratives. Formative evaluation suggests that the participants themselves are the best source of information (Patton, 2002) to determine that which is most helpful in the learning process. As Bogdan and Biklen (1998) stated:

People who try to change education, be it in particular for a whole classroom or for the whole system seldom understand how people involved in the change think. Since it is the people in the setting who must live with the change, it is their definitions of the situation that are crucial if change is to work. (p. 211)

Furthermore, student contributions to the formation of an assessment process are believed to be crucial to student
learning (Astin, 1993). In this case, students felt less resentment when their opinions and beliefs were sought in order to improve the process. Listening to students’ voices presented an opportunity for the faculty to further develop the professional behavior policy by incorporating some of students’ voiced needs. For example, revisions included increasing the range in the ratings given to each area of professional behavior, adding a specific area on the Professional Behavior Form for faculty identification of students’ strengths, and additional space for narrative comments. Furthermore, increased explicit focus on professional behavior content was added to several of the courses in the occupational therapy course of study.

Further support for the importance of their voices being heard was evident in student comments regarding the caring that was felt when faculty met their needs. King (1980) aptly reminded us “…caring can be measured by what is done, not by what is said” (p. 528). Fisher (1999) described student–teacher trust and interpersonal connectedness as the base of the occupational therapy learning pyramid. Peloquin (1990) included caring as one of the ingredients necessary in an effective therapeutic relationship. It seems obvious that identifying and meeting student needs includes a component of caring that promotes student development. In this case, students’ needs were met as their voices were heard and the professional behavior policy and form were revised accordingly.

The perceptions of these students contribute to our understanding not only about the relationship of professional behavior observed in the classroom but in fieldwork settings as well. Clearly, some students perceived their behavior as being the same in both settings. Consistency across settings has been documented in both the cases of weak professional behaviors that interfere with fieldwork success (Kramer & Stern, 1995) and strong professional behaviors that seem to support fieldwork success (Tickle-Degnen, 1998; Tickle-Degnen and Puccinelli, 1999). At least initially, though, students perceiving differences in behaviors across settings have also been reported in the literature (Gutman et al., 1998; Kramer & Stern, 1995). Kramer and Stern recommended the observation of trends and patterns of behavior to help identify whether the problematic behavior is specific to the student, the fieldwork site or the relationship between the two. Tickle-Degnen (1998) suggested further research focus on the degree to which supervisors rate students higher when student behaviors are more similar to the supervisors themselves.

Students perceiving differences across settings may be accurate as behaviors can be context specific. The “doing” aspect of fieldwork may encourage greater student involvement thus promoting a greater degree of professional behavior. Bringing the clinic to the classroom (Peloquin & Babola, 1996) may help students better see the connection between the two and how their behavior in one setting relates to the other. It appears students have a strong preference for learning to be more authentic. Authentic experiences may promote a greater degree of involvement and professional behavior development.

Limitations and Strengths

It is not known how information from the four students in the class who did not participate in this study would have affected the final analysis. The data collected represents one program of study prohibiting generalization but inviting discussion of comparison to other programs. The author who conducted this study was also teaching in the department making the data collected subject to a bias of social desirability.

Strengths of the study include that the voices representing the majority of the class, the intended population, were heard, which added credibility to the gathered data. Obtaining student perceptions using multiple formats elicited rich data; findings were confirmed by multiple sources. The constructive suggestions given by the participants provided valuable program development information upon which the said department made revisions to enhance their system of feedback to better meet student learning needs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Important program development information was gained by means of formative data gathering for the occupational therapy department in this case study. Furthermore, students felt pleased and supported to be included as a part of the evaluation process, demonstrating the importance of involving them in the process of best meeting their learning needs.

It is recommended that the voices of students continue to be heard in order to determine their perceptions of the feedback process. As a student said, “I would suggest that each year you do this, talk to students…just to get their feedback, because ultimately it affects us the most.” In the future, gathering additional perspectives may provide further insight into professional behavior development. For example, employing the students may provide a wealth of information, as may the fieldwork supervisors. Future employers of the students may also provide testimony and greater validity to the value of including effective professional behavior feedback as part of students’ preparation for the role of competent and dynamic entry-level occupational therapy practitioners.
Acknowledgements

Appreciation is extended to Annette Hemmings, PhD, and Glenn Markle, EdD, from the University of Cincinnati for their support, encouragement, and guidance in completing this study. This study was completed in partial fulfillment of the author’s coursework for a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Cincinnati. Thanks also goes to Joanne Estes, MEd, OTR/L, for her careful review and critique of this manuscript. The contents of this manuscript were presented at the Ohio Occupational Therapy Association Conference 2000 in Toledo, Ohio, and the 2001 American Occupational Therapy Association Annual Conference and Expo in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Appendix A

Questions for Focus Group

1. What are your perceptions of “ideal” professional behavior?
2. What do you think our program’s definitions are? Are they “ideal” in your opinion?
3. As members of this class, you have experienced three different approaches to holding students accountable for their professional behavior. (Review approaches.) What are your thoughts about these approaches? Which did you like best (or find the most helpful)? Which did you like the least (or find the least helpful)?
4. Should we keep the current approach? What changes, if any, should we make?
5. What additional thought do you have about professional behavior?

Appendix B

Questions for Individual Interviews

1. Suppose you were talking to a first-year student, what would you tell that person is important to know about how this university’s program holds students accountable for their professional behavior?
2. Based on your experiences with our professional behavior policy over the past 3 years, what would you say are the strengths of these policies?
3. What about the weaknesses?
4. What are your recommendations for this occupational therapy department’s professional behavior policy?
5. What else do you want me to know about our discussions and my querying about professional behavior?