To Fail or Not to Fail? A Course for Fieldwork Educators

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Objective. Assigning a failing grade to a student is one of the most important yet problematic responsibilities of a fieldwork educator, for it challenges both personal and professional values. This article describes and evaluates a 1-day course designed to prepare educators for this responsibility.

Method. The course was offered five times in 1989 and 1990 by the Derby School of Occupational Therapy, Derby, England, and was attended by 101 fieldwork educators. Surveys were administered to these educators immediately after the course and again 4 and 12 months later.

Results. Respondents reported increases in confidence and in their ability to differentiate between students' competence and incompetence. These changes were related to three factors: an understanding of the affective responses associated with a fail scenario, the reinforcement of effective methods of supervision, and the maintenance of professional standards.

Conclusion. It is recommended that the topic of failure be included in all fieldwork educator training courses.

Fieldwork educators are pivotal to the assessment of students' competence to practice. Their role as gatekeepers of the future quality of the occupational therapy profession is challenging under ordinary circumstances, but the demands that they face are exacerbated when a student's performance falls at the margins of competence. The process of judging that a student has not attained the required standard and should be assigned a failing grade is a costly, time consuming, and emotionally taxing responsibility (Meisenhelder, 1982, p. 348) that requires personal courage, professional integrity, and faculty member support. This article describes and evaluates a 1-day training course designed to prepare fieldwork educators for this responsibility.

Failure is a natural part of life, learning, and assessment—an expected outcome, albeit for a minority of students. It is inherent in the process of assessment, for the main function of the "teacher-as-judge" is differentiation of students' abilities to fulfill occupational roles (Geary, 1988, p. 242). Such assessments are particularly vital when they underpin licensure or registration that is intended to protect the public from incompetent, unsafe, or unscrupulous practitioners.

The difficulties associated with fail scenarios are well established in the literature. Retaining failing students and failing clinically unsatisfactory students were identified as the second and third highest stressors in a study of coping strategies among female baccalaureate nursing faculty members in Canada (Goldenberg & Waddall, 1990). Failing a student was ranked as the most problematic responsibility by two thirds of trained, experienced fieldwork educators in two surveys conducted at the Derby School of Occupational Therapy in 1988 and 1993 (Ilott, 1993). It is a responsibility that "presents an emotional struggle... and awareness of one's own fallibility" (Meisenhelder, 1982, p. 348) that can "debilitate those involved" (Carpenito, 1983, p. 32), as both student and educator feel "insufficient and powerless... like failures" (Turkett, 1987, p. 246). The fieldwork educator may also be "plagued with doubts" (Moeller, 1984, p. 208) if students are allowed to pass regardless of performance or if they secure passes through an inordinate amount of pastoral and academic support. Regardless of the outcome, an educator's decision-making process in regard to students who are at the margins of competence is characterized by "soul-searching" and self-interrogation (Ilott, 1990, p. 4). However, the process of assigning a failing grade has received scant attention. It seems to be a subject that is both taken for granted and taboo.

In response to these problems, the Derby School of Occupational Therapy planned a training course to prepare educators for this responsibility. The course aimed to challenge educators' negative assumptions about failure, to optimize the quality of their decision making during a difficult time, to reduce the incidence of their "failure to fail" students (Lankshear, 1990, p. 35), and to...
provide them with support during a “debilitating, emotionally draining experience” (Symanski, 1991, p. 18). The course supplemented existing supervisor training courses accredited by the College of Occupational Therapists. Its content was influenced by similar courses reported by Brozenec, Marshall, Thomas, and Walsh (1987) and Bradley (1990), and by additional suggestions from fieldwork educators and academic fieldwork coordinators.

The Derby School of Occupational Therapy offered the 1-day course five times in 1989–1990; a total of 101 fieldwork educators attended. After the course, these participants completed one immediate and two follow-up surveys that were designed to assess their opinions on the value of the course and on their incorporation of course material into their supervisory roles.

Course Aim, Objectives, and Program

The aim of the course was to explore the challenges and consequences—both personally and professionally—of failing an occupational therapy student on fieldwork practice. This aim was supported by four objectives:

1. To identify criteria for student failure that educators could use in the assessment process.
2. To help educators appreciate a range of coping strategies.
3. To improve educators’ understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the Derby School, the students, and themselves.
4. To provide educators with an opportunity to share experiences and exchange ideas.

The course simulated the natural sequence of an educator’s decision making and action with a student whose performance falls at the margin of competence. It was divided into three sessions: morning and afternoon, in which participants were divided into small groups, and plenary.

The morning session began by placing the topic of failure within a personal, research context. The participants were then invited to react to a fieldwork educator’s feelings about a fail scenario:

“It’s been like a shadow hanging over me. It was 3 years ago and I still feel guilty. I felt awful—what had I ruined in just one afternoon, exhausted and put off having other students. All that effort, explaining to someone who was disinterested and making no effort to learn. I didn’t gain anything.”

Identifying the criteria for failure was the next part of the course. Participants were divided into groups that included participants both with and without experience in assigning a failing grade. Their tasks were to (a) introduce themselves and outline their experiences, and (b) compile a baseline—a minimum standard or checklist of behaviors, skills, and attitudes—that would constitute student failure and differentiate between borderline and unsatisfactory performance.

After a 1-hr discussion, each group reported its criteria to the other participants. The opinions expressed in these presentations provided a springboard for the consideration of educational principles. These principles included the problems and benefits of subjective and objective aspects of assessment (Blomquist, 1985); the limitations of a causal theory of teaching, in which an educator accepts sole responsibility for learning outcomes (Ericson & Ellett, 1987); the contradictions in the dual role of counselor and assessor; the aspects of attribution theory related to the interplay between effort expenditure and ability level that influence feedback strategies and affective responses (Graham, 1984); and the conflicting values between the roles of educator and therapist. The morning session concluded with a comparison between the groups’ criteria and the definition of unsafe practices in nursing, as defined by Darragh, Jacobsen, Sloan, and Sandquist (1986).

The afternoon session focused on strategies for coping with student failure. Participants returned to their groups to watch a video that was made by course organizers at the Derby School of three final evaluation meetings between educators and failing students. Each group was joined by an academic fieldwork coordinator and a lecturer who was skilled in group dynamics. The video illustrated three different students’ reactions to receiving a failing grade: distress and regression, which was depicted through nonverbal behavior such as avoidance of eye contact, posture, and gestures: an angry confrontation between a female educator and a male student; and a student’s attempt to manipulate the supervisor (who needed “to make everything better”) into changing the grade from a fail to a pass. The emotional effects of each scenario were acknowledged by the participants before the situation was analyzed in order to identify alternative strategies. These strategies were considered along a continuum, from prevention to development of appropriate ways of dealing with the student’s reaction and suggestions for follow-up support for the student and fieldwork educator. Suggestions ranged from simple, practical points (e.g., educators should provide tissues in anticipation of a tearful response from the student), to nonverbal methods of reinforcing the reality of a failing grade (e.g., educators should make eye contact and gestures for emphasis), to awareness of gender or generational issues between the supervisor and the student (e.g., definitions of professional behavior). Strategies that ensure due process and help maintain the dignity of both students and educators were highlighted (Wood & Campbell, 1985). Special emphasis was given to the importance for educators to document and provide students with unambiguous, honest formative and summative feedback on the basis of clear learning objectives.

In the plenary session, which followed the afternoon...
session, participants were invited to pose questions related to student assessment, examination regulations, and appeal procedures to a panel composed of the Derby School's principal, assessment officer, and academic fieldwork coordinators. Professional responsibility and due process were reemphasized—in particular that "the failure to instruct properly (which includes passing a failing student or failing a passing student) may be a negligent act" (Gocłowski, 1985, p. 108).

The fieldwork educators' right to make subjective judgments when appraising clinical behavior (if based on professionally accepted standards) was noted. This right was confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the landmark case of Board of Curators, University of Missouri v. Horowitz (1977), in which an academically able, 4th-year medical student was expelled from the university (cited in Poteet & Pollok, 1981). The criteria for her dismissal included unacceptable personal hygiene, inappropriate bedside manner, and tardiness.

The plenary session concluded with a review of the positive consequences of failure for the student, the fieldwork educator, the Derby School, and the occupational therapy profession. This review reinforced both the educator's role as a gatekeeper of future practice and the value of a failing grade as a motivator for learning and change.

Each of the three sessions stimulated lively debate, and the whole course was well received. In recognition that such positive feedback might have been influenced by initial excitement and conformity effects that are unlikely to be sustained or transferred into practice, participants were surveyed at three points after the course.

Method: Data Collection and Analysis
Participants completed three single-page surveys: an initial survey that was given to all participants immediately after the course and two follow-up surveys that were mailed to 62 volunteers 4 and 12 months after the course. The first survey contained 9-point semantic differential scales to elicit their reactions regarding the helpfulness of each of the three sessions; a nominal format to evaluate the effectiveness of the course in meeting their expectations, needs, and objectives; and open-ended questions to probe for their reasons for attending the course and to ascertain whether the course had influenced their thoughts or feelings about assigning a failing grade.

The follow-up surveys focused on longer term appraisals and applications of the course. Both of these follow-up surveys began with a closed-ended, biographical question (about whether they had experience with borderline or unsatisfactory students) to arouse interest (Youngman, 1978) and refocus attention on the topic of student failure. Open-ended questions requested samples of the influence of the course on their thoughts, behavior, and feelings when working with marginal students. Participants were also asked to provide information about their practices as educators and to state the three most important points they learned in the course. The answers to the open-ended questions were subjected to a content analysis with coding categories based on the participants' language. On the 4-month follow-up survey, respondents were asked to rank statements on the basis of the aim, objectives, and elements of the course. On the 12-month follow-up survey, to aid retrieval of course information, more structured formats were used, including 4-point Likert scales about the value of the topics covered in the sessions, changes in confidence about the subject of failure, and the overall worth of the course.

All 101 participants who attended the course completed the initial survey. (Respondents were kept anonymous.) The follow-up surveys were circulated to the 62 participants who volunteered to complete them. Twenty-six participants (42%) returned the 4-month evaluation surveys and 37 participants (60%) returned the 12-month evaluation surveys.

Results
Initial Evaluation
In the survey administered immediately after the course, the majority of respondents reported that the course had met their needs (94%), their expectations (96%), and the course's objectives (91%). Table 1 contains the responses to session I (criteria for failure), session II (strategies for coping with failure), and session III (plenary).

Criteria for failure was rated extremely helpful by 90% of participants. Some added comments relating to the following three factors:

1. The reassurance and support gained from sharing experiences (n = 47)
2. The aspects of assessment including the complexity of criteria for student failure and increased awareness of the subjectivity or objectivity involved (n = 27)
3. The small group format that provided an appropriate introductory forum (n = 16).

Table 1
Semantic Differential Results Related to Perceived Helpfulness of Three Sessions (Initial Survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Frequency of Rating on 9-point Scale</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Criteria for failing a student</td>
<td>1 1 1 8 47 53 10 7.56 0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Coping with failing a student</td>
<td>1 1 3 12 53 44 7 7.33 1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Consequences of failing a student</td>
<td>6 24 52 55 20 7 6.49 1.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 101.
*1 = extremely unhelpful, 9 = extremely helpful.
No ratings below 3 were reported.
One participant wrote, "It was very helpful. It was good to pool ideas, see that people are feeling the same way about failing students and are using the same criteria." This statement reflects the assurance gained from a sense of universality (Yalom, 1985) and recognition of their expert role (Friedman & Mennin, 1991) in defining incompetence.

The session on strategies for coping with failure was rated extremely helpful by 84% of participants. The video was commended by 72 respondents. Their comments about the video included praise about its usefulness and performance (n = 30), its value for stimulating discussion (n = 17) and sharing experiences (n = 9), and its use as an enjoyable teaching tool (n = 13), which included specific examples illustrating the perspective of the student and fieldwork educator.

The plenary session on the consequences of failure, which elicited only 31 comments, was rated between neutral and extremely helpful. Responses noted the value of information about school procedures and the appeals policy (n = 9), reassurance gained from confirmation of the support networks available to students and educators (n = 7), and opportunities to ask questions and clarify points of personal interest (n = 6).

**Follow-Up Evaluations**

The positive perceptions of the course were sustained on both the 4- and 12-month follow-up surveys. On the 12-month surveys, all sessions were rated as valuable or highly valuable (see Table 2). Strategies for coping with student failure was most frequently rated as highly valuable on the Likert scale. This was followed by roles and responsibilities, criteria for failure, consequences of failure, and the objective and subjective aspects of assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session and Topic</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria for failure</td>
<td>10 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective and subjective aspects of assessment</td>
<td>7 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for coping with failing a student</td>
<td>14 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles and responsibilities of school, supervisor, student, and academic fieldwork coordinator</td>
<td>11 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences of failure in fieldwork practice</td>
<td>8 (26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Likert Scale Results Related to Perceived Value of Topics Covered in Three Sessions (12-Month Survey)

Note. N = 33.

There is an interesting difference between these results and those of the 4-month surveys. The participants’ 4-month surveys rated criteria for failure (which incorporated subjective and objective aspects of assessment) as the most helpful, followed by strategies for coping, and the plenary session. This difference may have resulted from the increase in the number of borderline students seen by the respondents (from 1 on the 4-month surveys to 11 on the 12-month surveys), which necessitated the use of coping strategies and clarity of roles.

**Multifaceted Themes**

The content analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions revealed three multifaceted themes that appeared in all of the surveys. These themes were affective responses; reinforcement of supervisory roles, responsibilities, and strategies; and obligation to maintain future standards of practice. These themes are considered along a temporal dimension to highlight continuities and variations in emphasis from the reasons given in the 12-month survey for attending the course.

The percentages given refer to the number of responses, which was greater than the number of respondents.

**Affective Responses**

Respondents' affective responses confirmed the emotionally debilitating aspects of assigning a student a failing grade. They consisted of four elements:

1. Recognition of the feelings associated with assigning a failing grade, including guilt, isolation, personal failure, fear, and anxiety.
2. Support gained through sharing experiences (either through expression or through listening) that was related to the realization that such feelings are common responses.
3. Increases in confidence and conviction that accompanied confronting the prospect and process of assigning a failing grade.
4. Understanding of the widespread distribution of stress among those not involved in the assessment process and sources of support available for supervisors and students.

The affective responses theme accounted for two of the four reasons that participants cited for attending the course. These reasons were the opportunity to share or listen to others' experiences of failing a student (20%) and the opportunity to increase confidence and learn ways of supporting colleagues (16%).

On the initial survey, 90% acknowledged that the course had influenced their views about student failure in a positive direction. The most frequently mentioned reason for this change in view (30%) was the recognition of
the shared feelings of isolation, guilt, and fear that dealing with the fail scenario evokes. Increased confidence in dealing with borderline or unsatisfactory students was cited by 16% of the responses as the reason for this change in view.

On the 4-month survey, an understanding of the feelings associated with the fail scenario, which incorporated feelings of guilt, fear of failure, and personal feelings of failure, was the most frequently mentioned point learned (23%). Eight of the 26 respondents reported increased confidence in their ability and judgment related to their supervisory practices.

On the 12-month survey, 11 respondents who had had experience with marginal students noted an increase in confidence. These changes in affective responses were repeated on the likert scale (see Table 3).

The course aim was sustained in the affective responses theme. Increased confidence provided educators with pragmatic, proactive supervision techniques and appropriate judgments that reduced the failure to fail students.

Reinforcement of Supervisory Roles, Responsibilities, and Strategies

The second multifaceted theme, reinforcement of supervisory roles, responsibilities, and strategies, was an unexpected spin-off from the course. It consisted of the following seven aspects:

1. The desire to learn about and therefore be prepared for dealing with students' failure
2. Recognition of the positive aspects of the process and outcome
3. Clarification of the criteria for students' incompetence
4. Increased awareness of objective and subjective aspects of assessment

Table 3
Perceived Changes in Awareness and Confidence (12-Month Survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Change</th>
<th>Decrease</th>
<th>No Change</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Large Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of personal consequences of failing a student</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 (8%)</td>
<td>22 (59%)</td>
<td>12 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in identifying borderline and unsatisfactory students</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
<td>23 (62%)</td>
<td>10 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in own ability to take appropriate action</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>5 (11%)</td>
<td>16 (43%)</td>
<td>16 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of positive aspects of student failure</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>21 (57%)</td>
<td>13 (35%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 37

5. Recognition of the importance of honest, regular, and documented feedback
6. Understanding that the students' responsibility to learn is underpinned but not determined by appropriate supervisory strategies

Predictably, the two most frequently cited reasons for attending the course were to learn about the responsibility of failing students (35%) and to prepare for this responsibility (24%). Supervisory strategies accounted for one half the areas of change reported on the initial evaluation. These changes included an acknowledgment of the potential for positive outcomes from a fail scenario (15%); increased understanding of the complexity of failing students that would be shared with colleagues (13%); and reinforcement of supervisory strategies, including program planning, the student's responsibility to learn, and the need for objective assessment (9%).

The supervisory theme accounted for some of the most important points learned on the 4-month survey. These points included the need to give honest, objective, and timely feedback (15%); the recognition of positive outcomes (8%); the value of the criteria for students' failure (7%); the reinforcement of the student's responsibility to learn (7%); and the worth of subjective assessment (4%).

All of these points were also identified on the 12-month survey, in addition to two new points: coping strategies used by and for the supervisor, student, and department (15%) and an increased understanding of the Derby School's procedures (3%).

The difficulties associated with a fail scenario, including the possibility of a student's appeal, highlighted the importance of effective supervision (Christie, Joyce, & Moeller, 1985; Morgan & Knox, 1987; Nehring, 1990; Ogier & Barrett, 1985). The documentation of objective feedback on students' performance with guidelines for improvement is evidence that the fieldwork educators have fulfilled their responsibility and have made a fair, "expert evaluation of cumulative information" (Poteet & Pollok, 1981, p. 1890).

Obligation to Maintain Future Standards of Practice

The final theme is the most important because it makes explicit the purpose of assessment and licensure. The ability to place the immediate, personal trauma of the fail scenario within a longer term, professional perspective is a key mediating factor.

This underpinning theme provided the second most frequently cited reason on the initial evaluation for changed perceptions about failure. It included the reinforcement and reassurance at a personal and professional level of the obligation to assign a fail grade (17%). On the
In completion surveys, particularly those completed 1 year after provide illuminative rather than generalizable results. 

Study Limitations

In small-scale studies, qualitative and quantitative data provide illuminative rather than generalizable results (Goulding, 1984). The lack of biographical details about the self-selected sample of fieldwork educators precludes comment about the applicability of the findings. Self-completion surveys, particularly those completed 1 year after attending a course, are subject to the vagaries of memory, recall bias, socially desirable responses, and spontaneous rather than salient answers. In addition, the failure to pursue those volunteers who did not return the surveys may have introduced a systematic bias, particularly with such a small sample.

Conclusion

The initial and follow-up surveys of a course designed to prepare fieldwork educators for the responsibility of assigning students a failing grade supported the course’s value for developing confidence, reinforcing supervisory skills, and maintaining professional standards. The success of the course seemed to be based on a simple formula: the opportunity to discuss this aspect of an educators’ role increased awareness and acceptance and gave permission to take appropriate action. The subject of failure, presented by and for fieldwork and faculty staff members, has the potential to bridge the gap between these twin towers of academia and practice to obtain the shared goal of competency.

Acknowledgment

I thank my colleagues and the fieldwork educators at the Derby School for sharing their experiences.

References


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255