



Remote Learning: A Student's Perspective

by Nicholas L Adler

Abstract

Student pharmacists completing their Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experiences (APPEs) remotely are in a unique position of managing their experiential learning offsite. Work environment, time management, and professional development are key areas of focus for a successful remote APPE. Remote learners are encouraged to adapt and prepare alongside their preceptors to achieve a successful remote rotation.

Remote learning is nothing new; it first appeared more than a quarter of a century ago. The COVID-19 pandemic exponentially increased the demand for remote learning experiences for pharmacy students. The transition from traditional classes to online

classes and then to online Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experiences (APPEs) has required adaptation by pharmacy students. Since the beginning of my fourth-year experiential training, I have had two remote APPEs: medication use strategy and innovation, and pharmacy informatics, in addition to one 4-week semi-remote administrative APPE. I have found that focusing on three key areas—work environment, time management, and professional development—can lead to a successful remote experience.

Work Environment

New physical environments for APPE students can create distinct location-based responsibilities that are not present while remote. For example, traveling to a hospital daily for an APPE creates physical distance between professional and personal lives, while the commute for remote experiences is nonexistent. In the first days of my remote APPEs, I took the time to organize and revitalize my workspace as a critical step to maintain focus and energy for learning throughout the day.

Setting up a productive work environment can relieve stress and provide a sense of accomplishment. Learners should take care to maintain a clean work environment that is void of clutter and distractions. This not only helps to organize the space but also decreases time to find resources.

Using online file storage systems like Google Drive or Microsoft OneDrive can further improve remote experiences. Storing journal articles and documents in a shared Google Drive has been invaluable for maintaining organization among my preceptors and I. Additionally, as a form of open communication, I have used a shared Google document with my preceptor to record my priorities and end-of-day accomplishments. Using my computer for entire workdays meant I constantly had access to storing notes and other information digitally. OneNote has served as the bedrock of my remote learning by serving as a hub for all the projects, information, articles, and notes that I accumulate from day to day.

Developing the skills to use technology efficiently while working remotely is

invaluable for future pharmacists, and managing a good work environment is a significant step to a more effective remote learning experience. However, technical setbacks, such as restricted electronic health record access, the inability to access data stored on an internal network, and decreased frequency of spontaneous learning opportunities, continue to pose challenges to remote learning APPEs.

Time Management

Strong time management skills are required for successful remote APPEs. I use multiple strategies to effectively structure my time. In my past experiences, preceptors have directed me to LinkedIn Learning courses on time management, such as Time Management Fundamentals.¹ These courses have been useful in developing a base to structure my days. “Blocking” time uses pre-defined sections of the day in an online calendar, with each section devoted to a specific project.

Working with preceptors to find frequent times to touch base and discuss the day is a critical component of a successful remote learning experience. In my experience, I found that having more frequent opportunities to directly communicate with preceptors has greatly benefited me during my remote rotations. For example, I have used weekly debriefs with additional one-on-one instruction, and morning meetings, which incorporated didactic teaching and instruction, followed by brief touch-base meetings with preceptors. Communication tools such as online video call software (e.g., WebEx, Zoom, or Teams) as well as email and phone communication are essential for successful remote experiences. Individual schedules are ultimately up to the learner and preceptor to decide.

Consistent scheduling can also help with the organization of a remote learning experience. Time management is a skill that, like a muscle, can be exercised and pushed to improve.

Professional Development

Lastly, allotting time for professional development can make a student’s downtime during their remote experience more productive. During my remote APPEs, I have spent time developing my

CV; researching residency opportunities; volunteering at the UW Health pharmacy department’s drive-through flu clinic; listening to pharmacy informatics podcasts such as *PharmacyIT and Me*;² reviewing various other online informatics resources (including Pharmacy Informatics Academy³ and the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists’ resources for students related to informatics⁴); and networking.

As future pharmacists, we commit to constantly developing and improving our skills. Remote learning experiences provide students the opportunity to work on their written communication skills through email and written drug information questions; verbal skills by presenting virtually and communicating via video conference; and organizational and time management skills by reading, researching health literature, reviewing school materials, and exploring new developments in healthcare.

Networking poses another challenge during remote experiential learning. Normally, most professional interaction and networking occur through ad hoc interactions in person. Some things I have done to bridge the gap include using video calls, following up on email communication, engaging in casual conversation before and after meetings, sharing information resources, and keeping up with professional organization news. Other recommendations for networking while remote include participating in virtual recess, using professional social media, using existing connections, reaching out to alumni, and creating professional learning opportunities.^{5,6} Some might consider these tasks best for “off” hours, but with proper time management, there will inevitably be a time when you have ten minutes before an online meeting, are stuck on a project, or need a change of pace.

Remote experiential learning will play a key role in pharmacy experiential education for the foreseeable future. We need to be able to effectively learn on rotation whether working in person or remotely. Work environment, time management, and professional development are areas to focus on when presented with the opportunity to complete a remote experience.

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