

PRECEPTOR SERIES:

Techniques to Transform Challenging Learners

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Each precepting experience comes with a new set of challenges. Perhaps it is staffing issues at your practice site, juggling multiple learners at a time, or a heavy patient load. But what if the challenge is the learner themselves? The learner may be uninterested in the rotation, focused on their new job post-graduation, or not have a strong clinical foundation. This article will explore techniques to transform a challenging learner into a productive member of the pharmacy team.

Setting Expectations

Setting clear expectations between the preceptor and the learner is crucial and provides the best opportunity for the desired outcome. Expectations should be clearly stated and as specific as possible to diminish the chance of misinterpretation by the learner. Having the learner verbally summarize the expectations of an assignment is a technique that not only assesses the learner's understanding but can also provide the preceptor self-assessment on how the expectations were conveyed. If expectations are unmet, preceptors should address them immediately and determine a corrective plan of action. For more information on setting expectations, refer

to "Great Expectations: Making Sure You and Your Learner are on the Same Page" from the PSW May/June 2016 Preceptor Series.¹

Weekly Check-Ins

A weekly check-in between learner and preceptor is helpful to provide feedback and identify goals for the remainder of rotation. It is also a time for the learner to self-reflect on the week. This weekly touch base can be used to identify new rotation experiences in which the learner would like to participate. For the learner who is not meeting expectations, a weekly discussion can be used to measure progress from week to week and discuss potential barriers that the learner may be experiencing.

Setting Goals for the Learner

At the start of the rotation, a simple survey for the learner to fill out can help identify strengths, weaknesses, and goals (Table 1). This survey can help set attainable goals for the learner and can be shared amongst preceptors. For learners that may be struggling, this survey can be a good reference point to evaluate if the self-identified strengths and weaknesses match the preceptor's perceived attributes. It can also help preceptors determine objectives to help the learner obtain their overall

rotation goals. Besides the learner's personal rotation goals, it is important for the preceptor to be familiar with the school or residency rotation goals and requirements.² Keeping the institution's goals in mind will be critical for providing feedback and in assessing the learner on an objective basis. Additionally, these requirements may alter the preceptor's plans for rotation projects or daily activities.

Identifying Unmotivated Students

Sometimes a difficult student may present as one who is simply unmotivated. Whether the lack of motivation is due to accepting a job offer, it being the learner's last rotation, a lack of confidence, personal struggles, or not being interested in the areas the rotation covers, this can lead to difficult situations if not identified and resolved quickly. It is important to first identify, if possible, the reason for the student's lack of motivation. This can be done by ensuring the lines of communication are kept open between teacher and learner. Providing honest and timely communication regarding goals and expectations for the rotation along with constructive feedback can positively affect a student's motivation.³ For more information on providing feedback, see "Taking the Fear Out of Feedback: Models

for Success” from the PSW March/April 2016 Preceptor Series.⁴

Using a student survey during orientation may also help by identifying areas of interest for the student, future career goals, and getting to know them as a person (Table 1). When possible, incorporating the student’s areas of interest or future career goals into the rotation may help motivate them by demonstrating how each rotation can help them in their future endeavors. Explain to students the importance of collaboration between pharmacists and the value of each area of pharmacy, all of which are critical in ensuring smooth transitions of care.⁵ For example, a student pursuing retail pharmacy may not feel an oncology rotation aligns with his or her career path. The preceptor can tie in supportive care medications such as anti-emetics that the learner will encounter in their desired field. It is also important to ensure students have tasks that allow them to feel as though they are a valued part of the team and making a difference.³ Students should be instructed to look back on each situation and consider “what they did, what they need to do next time, and how their actions impact patient care.”³ Reflection with participation can help students understand their role in healthcare while on rotation and may help them expand their interests in the ever-growing field of pharmacy.³

Documenting Feedback

How often has the primary preceptor of a learner sent an email to colleagues requesting feedback for a final evaluation only to receive just one or two examples? This not only leads to minimal or generic feedback for the learner, but may also delay preceptor intervention for any underlying problems. It is critical for preceptors to communicate amongst each other regarding both positive and constructive feedback for the learner. One technique that is easily implemented is a preceptor feedback chain with the primary preceptor and all other preceptors routinely working with the learner. This may be paper or electronic depending on the preceptors’ preferences. By adding feedback daily, not only is everyone up to date on the learner’s progress, but it also provides a plethora of examples for written evaluations.

TABLE 1. Example Learner Survey used at Aurora Good Hope Oncology Clinic

Learner Survey	
1.	List three of your strengths: I. _____ II. _____ III. _____
2.	List three of your weaknesses or list what skills you would like to work on this rotation: I. _____ II. _____ III. _____
3.	What is your learning style?
4.	List three goals that you have for this rotation. I. _____ II. _____ III. _____
5.	What are your areas of interest? (Ex: Cardiology, Oncology, Critical Care, Specialty, etc)
6.	What are your plans after graduation?
7.	Tell us a fun fact about yourself!

Another documentation technique is utilizing a 3” x 5” index card which can be kept in the preceptor’s white coat or at a workstation. This index card contains reminders about “key elements of effective evaluation and feedback” along with space for the preceptor to record their notes.⁶ Prior to providing feedback to the learner, the preceptor should ensure the learner understands the reason for feedback, in that it is intended to encourage their strengths and to help improve areas that may need improvement, all so that they may become effective pharmacy practitioners. Documentation of feedback provided and the learner’s growth is especially important if the learner is struggling and can provide the experiential office with concrete examples.

Elevating Concerns about Learners

When there is a lack of improvement despite feedback and further guidance, it is imperative to alert the pharmacy school’s experiential office or residency program director as soon as possible. Oftentimes, preceptors may choose to adopt a “wait and see” approach, but this may lead to the situation becoming more difficult or complicated. Contacting the director, even when there are just “red flags” versus the presence of a specific issue, may resolve the issue or mitigate future issues, thus helping the learner succeed.² When contacting the residency program director or experiential

office, it is important to provide the staff with as much information as possible, including documentation regarding specific incidents and issues, the feedback that was provided, and any interventions or improvements that were noted. The director can then offer “guidance on appropriate documentation; help determine the depth of deficiencies, the trainee’s needs, and options for remediation; and determine whether or not a proposed remediation plan is compliant with the program’s procedures.”⁷ The director may also be able to provide insight on how the learner has performed during previous rotations.⁷ Finally, the staff can provide support to the preceptor who may be feeling “the burden of the added workload that comes with addressing a challenging trainee.”⁷

Developing a Plan for Improvement

Regardless of who is involved, a remediation plan needs to be developed in order to help the learner have a successful rotation. As previously stated, communication is key when dealing with a challenging student. As such, the preceptor, learner, and director should all be involved in developing a corrective plan. Each performance concern should have an improvement plan, detailing the necessary criteria the learner needs to achieve in order to be successful in demonstrating improvement. One suggestion that may

be used to develop a plan is using specific, measurable, attainable, result-focused, and time-bound (SMART) goals. Specifically, “the what, why, and how” of each goal should be listed.⁸ The plan must also “list specific objective measures that will be assessed to identify successful remediation” as well as clearly state the consequences should these goals not be met.⁷ The goals created and agreed upon by the preceptor, learner, and potentially the director should also be attainable. This does not necessarily mean the goal should be a simple task, but one that requires the learner to stretch himself or herself and feel challenged while clearly understanding the goal in order to achieve it.⁸ Finally, each goal listed in the remediation plan should be focused on the end-result and include a timeframe for execution.⁸ It is important, as the plan is created and implemented, that the preceptor communicate with the learner on a regular basis and continue to provide any positive or constructive feedback to inform the student of any progress or further work that needs to be made.² If adequate progress is not made and the

goals developed by both the preceptor and learner are not reached, it is important that the consequences outlined during the development of the remediation plan be enforced.

Despite the challenges that difficult learners may present, preceptors can use these as opportunities to further develop their skills in helping to shape the practice of future pharmacists. These experiences, while challenging, can be extremely rewarding to the preceptor as they reflect back on the learner’s growth. If one looks at it as a learning experience for both the preceptor and learner, it can make a difficult situation worthwhile when reminded that precepting is a way to pay the profession forward.

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