

# Supporting the Struggling OT/OTA Student: Building effective remediation plans and Plans for Success

NEOTEC Breakout Room

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# Objectives



RECOGNIZE THE EARLY SIGNS OF A  
STRUGGLING STUDENT



LEARN HOW TO CREATE A  
LEARNING CONTRACT FOR THE  
STUDENT



HOW TO ESTABLISH A SUCCESS  
PLAN FOR STUDENTS IN THE EARLY  
WEEKS OF FIELDWORK

# Common Indicators of Struggles

- Clinical reasoning deficits
- Professional behaviors (communication, time management)
- Documentation issues
- Safety Concerns

***What behaviors/signs have you noticed with your students when they are struggling on a fieldwork placement?***

# Skill Deficits vs. Anxiety vs. Learning Style Mismatch



The key question: Is the gap/struggle about *can't*, *won't* or *doesn't know how*?



The most important thing to recognize is that **these three commonly co-occur and reinforce each other:**

A skill deficit can *cause* anxiety

Anxiety can *produce* what looks like a skill deficit

A style mismatch can *generate* anxiety and create apparent skill gaps



*So how do you manage these potential student deficits areas?*

# Recognizing the Struggling Student: Skill Deficits

## Skill deficit

- Performance is consistently poor *regardless* of context, stakes, or setting
- Errors are procedural or knowledge-based
- Direct instruction or demonstration produces improvement

## How can you help this student?

- Ask them to talk you through the procedure/reasoning **before** doing it. Can they articulate it correctly?
- Give low-stakes deliberate practice. Do they improve with repetition?
- Check for foundational gaps (ask student, review school's courses/syllabi)

# Recognizing the Struggling Student: Anxiety

## Anxiety

- Performance is variable; worse when observed or stakes are high
- They demonstrate understanding when discussing/debrief that they didn't show in the moment
- Rushed, over-apologetic, freezing, excessive checking with you
- They often know what to do but can't access it under pressure
- Performance improves with normalization, pacing, or supportive observation

## How can you help this student?

- Observe them in low-stakes and high-stakes situations. Is there a gap?
- Close vs. indirect observation where appropriate
- Low-pressure simulation tasks for practice
- Visual cues for reference (e.g., evaluation checklist, precaution signs)
- Try a "do it again, but go slower." Does quality improve?

# Recognizing the Struggling Student: Learning Style

## Learning Style Mismatch

- Student performs well in one modality but not another (e.g. great in simulation but struggles with clients)
- Student struggles with implicit expectations that haven't been made explicit
- They seem lost but engaged

## How can you help this student?

- Ask how they best learn and retain information
- What feels different here vs. past fieldwork
- Have expectations been communicated clearly (e.g., weekly objectives)
- Try different instructional approaches (e.g., show-then-do, read first, talk through)

# Skill Deficits vs. Anxiety vs. Learning Style Mismatch

- A useful sequence is to **treat for anxiety first**; if you reduce pressure and the performance improves dramatically, anxiety was masking existing competence. If performance is still poor in a low-stakes environment, then you're looking at a true skill deficit or unmet learning need.

***Can these appear in combination as well?***



# One on One Conversation Starters

“How do you feel this rotation is going for you?”

“Walk me through what you were thinking during that encounter.”

“What does a good version of this look like to you?”

“Is there anything about the environment here that feels different from where you have previously been successful at learning ?”

*Any other questions or conversation starters you have used to facilitate these introspective discussions with student?*

# Case Study: Priya

**Setting:** outpatient peds, Week 6 of 12

Priya is bright, thorough in her preparation, and clearly cares about her patients. Her FW Ed has noticed, however, that her observed sessions are noticeably worse than her unobserved ones. During formal check-ins, Priya speaks quickly, over-explains her rationale, and freezes when a child doesn't respond as expected, abandoning a planned activity entirely rather than adapting. After a tough session, she tells her supervisor, "I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I just couldn't make myself do it." Her written documentation is excellent. Two weeks earlier, the FW Ed watched through a one-way mirror without Priya knowing, and the session was fluid, warm, and well-paced.


***What is going on: skill deficit, anxiety, learning style mismatch? What key signs are you noting?***

# Case Study: Priya....*Anxiety*

## **Key signs**

- Variable performance (observed vs. unobserved), self-awareness (accurately describes what went wrong), physical/behavioral signs (rushed speech, freezing)

## **How can you help?**

- Have Priya redo parts of the session, but go slowly
  - Normalize uncertainty
  - What else could you do?
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# Case Study: Marcus

**Setting:** inpatient rehab/acute care, Week 4 of 12

Marcus is a generally motivated student who participates well in discussions and seems engaged with patients. However, his FW Ed notices that he consistently struggles to structure his treatment sessions. He starts activities without clear goals, loses track of time, and frequently runs over or ends sessions abruptly. When asked to write up a short-term goal after a session, his goals are non-measurable ("patient will improve ADL function"). His documentation across all patients shows the same pattern regardless of diagnosis. When the FW Ed reduces observation pressure or offers encouragement, nothing changes — the sessions still lack structure and his goals remain vague.


***What is going on: skill deficit, anxiety, learning style mismatch?  
What key signs are you noting?***

# Case Study: Marcus.....*Skill Deficits*

## Key Signs

- Performance is consistently poor across all contexts, can't self-identify the gap, foundational knowledge gap

## How can you help?

- Ask student the plan sessions out loud to you before starting session or day....what will they do, in what order, and have them indicate how they know if it went well.
  - Use of timing devices
  - What else could you do?
- 

# What can be done to help the struggling student?



Connect with AFWC



Discovering student's communication style, learning preferences



Set up more structured check ins



Generational differences.....work/life balance, expectations



Learning more about student's previous work experience



Get to know your student more

What if the  
questions and  
practice aren't  
helping?  
Now what?

**Fieldwork Learning Contract**: A fieldwork learning contract is a ***structured, written document developed collaboratively*** by the FW Ed, the student, and the academic fieldwork coordinator (AFWC) when ***performance concerns*** have been identified, which place successful completion of the placement at risk. It defines specific areas of concern, establishes measurable performance expectations, and outlines the supports and timelines required for the student to demonstrate competency, thus continuing in the fieldwork experience.



# Learning Contracts

A well-constructed learning contract is grounded in the principle that the **student deserves explicit, transparent feedback and a genuine opportunity to improve**, not simply a record of deficiency. It distinguishes between the nature of the performance gap (skill deficit, professional behavior, clinical reasoning, etc.) and tailors the support accordingly.

# Learning Contracts

## Key Components

1. Specific performance concerns
2. Measurable goals
3. Targeted strategies/interventions
4. Clear expectations and timelines
5. FW Ed and Student both sign

## Best Practice

1. Use Objective language
2. Align with FW Level II evaluation items
3. Set realistic goals and timelines
4. Collaborate with AFWC from the OT/OTA program

# Learning Contract: Starting Point Examples

**Student Name:**

**Fieldwork Educator(s):**

**Fieldwork Site:**

**Date:**

**Week of rotation that contract was implemented:**

**Areas in which the student is doing well/strengths:**

**Areas in which problems have been identified:**

<b>Objective #1</b>		
<b>Area of Concern</b>		
<b>Learning Goal</b>		
<b>Strategies to achieve goal</b>	<b>Student Action Steps:</b>	<b>FW Educator Action Steps:</b>
<b>Target Date (if all dates the same, go to end of document)</b>		

# Learning Contract: Objective Examples

<b>Objective #1</b>		
<b>Area of Concern</b>	<b>Engagement and Professional Presence</b>	
<b>Learning Goal</b>	[REDACTED] will demonstrate alertness and active participation while working with students, collaborating with staff and attending meetings. This includes asking relevant questions, observing students during interventions, maintaining student safety, and maintaining professionalism (e.g., staying engaged and not appearing fatigued).	
<b>Strategies to achieve goal</b>	<b>Student Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arrive prepared for each session and demonstrate active participation.</li> <li>- Remain attentive during sessions (e.g., observe students, provide feedback).</li> <li>- Sit at the table in meetings and when observing OTR sessions (e.g., not a few feet away).</li> </ul>	<b>FW Educator Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide structured opportunities for [REDACTED] to ask questions by pausing during sessions or meetings to invite input.</li> <li>- Continue to offer feedback on participation by discussing strengths and areas for improvement in regular check-ins.</li> </ul>
<b>Target Date</b>	See page 3 of document	

<b>Objective #1</b>		
<b>Area of Concern</b>	<b>Patient Safety</b>	
<b>Learning Goal</b>	[REDACTED] will demonstrate independence in managing patient safety by effectively selecting and utilizing assistive devices, ensuring patient safety during ambulation, responding appropriately to changes in patient conditions.	
<b>Strategies to achieve goal</b>	<b>Student Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Independently assess patient mobility needs and select appropriate assistive devices.</li> <li>- Monitor patient safety at all times (e.g. not leaving patients unattended when unsafe, checking vitals)</li> <li>- Proactively seek out patient safety information through chart reviews and by consulting with PT, nursing, and other relevant disciplines.</li> </ul>	<b>FW Educator Action Steps:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide direct observation and verbal feedback on Samantha's patient safety practices.</li> <li>- Provide designated time for Samantha to review patient charts before sessions and encourage her to gather relevant safety information.</li> <li>- Check in daily or at key points to discuss any questions or concerns about patient safety and provide guidance.</li> </ul>
<b>Target Date (if all dates the same, go to end of document)</b>	See below	



# Learning Contract: Ending Point Examples

**Date when student learning goals will be met (if all dates are the same)** [REDACTED]

**Consequence/s if learning goals not achieved by date:** The fieldwork educator reserves the right to terminate the placement earlier if insufficient progress is made

**Date when student learning goals will be met (if all dates are the same)** [REDACTED]

**Consequence/s if learning goals not achieved by date:**

Termination of the fieldwork experience resulting in a failed grade for the associated course.

**Date when student learning goals will be met (if all dates are the same):**

The student is expected to achieve the outlined goals by [REDACTED]. However, the fieldwork educator reserves the right to terminate the placement earlier if insufficient progress is made or if a serious professional infraction occurs, such as falling asleep during a meeting or engaging in other unprofessional behaviors.

- A learning contract is a fluid document, and the final outcome/plan can have flexibility.

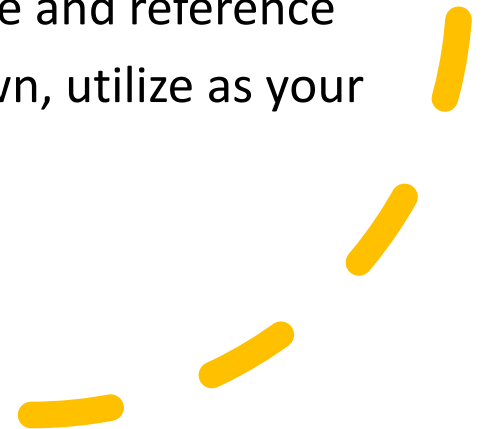


# Creating a Success Plan from Day 1

Laying the Foundation

# Creating a Plan for Success

- Increase frequency of feedback
- Catch them doing right and name it
- Are we agreeing upon the end-goal, is your communication direct
- Views around learning preferences
- Focus instead on how a skill should best be taught
- Will it need to be practiced kinesthetically and repeatedly
- Does the student need to refer back to the information frequently
- Is it a skill that is infrequently utilized and needs to be refreshed
- Fieldwork Manual can be helpful as a resource and reference
- 12-week/8-week objectives (break them down, utilize as your guide)



# Remediation-Summary of Concept

- Remediation (remedy the problem) of one or more specific and critical skill within a timely manner
- Structured study processes with fading support and guidance
- Daily wrap-up of diagnosis or intervention plans to review
- Weekly discussion of areas for further review
- May ebb and flow through levels of support
  - Factors which may impact this: outside variables, client complexity, “7<sup>th</sup> week slump,” increase in caseload
- Progression has to continue toward competency
- Agreed upon goal of increasing independence
- Sense of urgency
- Consider if compensation would compromise competency



# Compensatory Strategy

- Compensate-alternate manner in which to complete the required task effectively, efficiently, and consistently
- Utilize gait belt for transfers even if not company policy
- Script/Checklist for evaluations
- Enlist embedded features such as “smart phrases” for documentation
- Balance workload/caseload to maximize strengths and maintain integrity of skills
- Site-Specific Accommodations (FERPA)

# Empathetic concepts

- Think back to when you started your current job or moved into a new leadership position within your long-standing position
- Think about when you transitioned to a new electronic medical record process or a physician changed their surgical protocols
  - How did you feel physically?
  - How did you feel emotionally?
  - Did you feel confident? If you did or did not, what made you feel this way?
- What strategies did you utilize to support your new learning?
- Did you tie it to anchor skills you already had? If so, what are anchor skills our students have and how can we utilize these to support learning?



## When success is not possible

- Are their skills that you feel cannot be remediated?
- What skills may fall into consideration for you and your specific setting?
- Have you considered prior opportunities to learn and practice?
- Would you consider level of preparedness?
- What professional behaviors might be at play?
- How does the student's insight or lack thereof impacting their ability to be successful?

# Conversations Starters for the Difficult Talk

Look for an opportunity to provide the student with the utmost privacy

Consider time of day for the discussion (e.g., does it have to be in the morning due to safety concerns or can it wait until the afternoon so the student isn't impacted all day)

You will ensue panic if you state that you need to "talk later in the day" and panic lead to anxiety which we discussed will likely impact performance

"I'm concerned about XXX and want to make sure you have the support you need. What's your perspective on how things are going?"

"I've noticed [specific behavior, e.g., you've been quiet/missed some key deadlines] lately and wanted to check in. How are things going?"

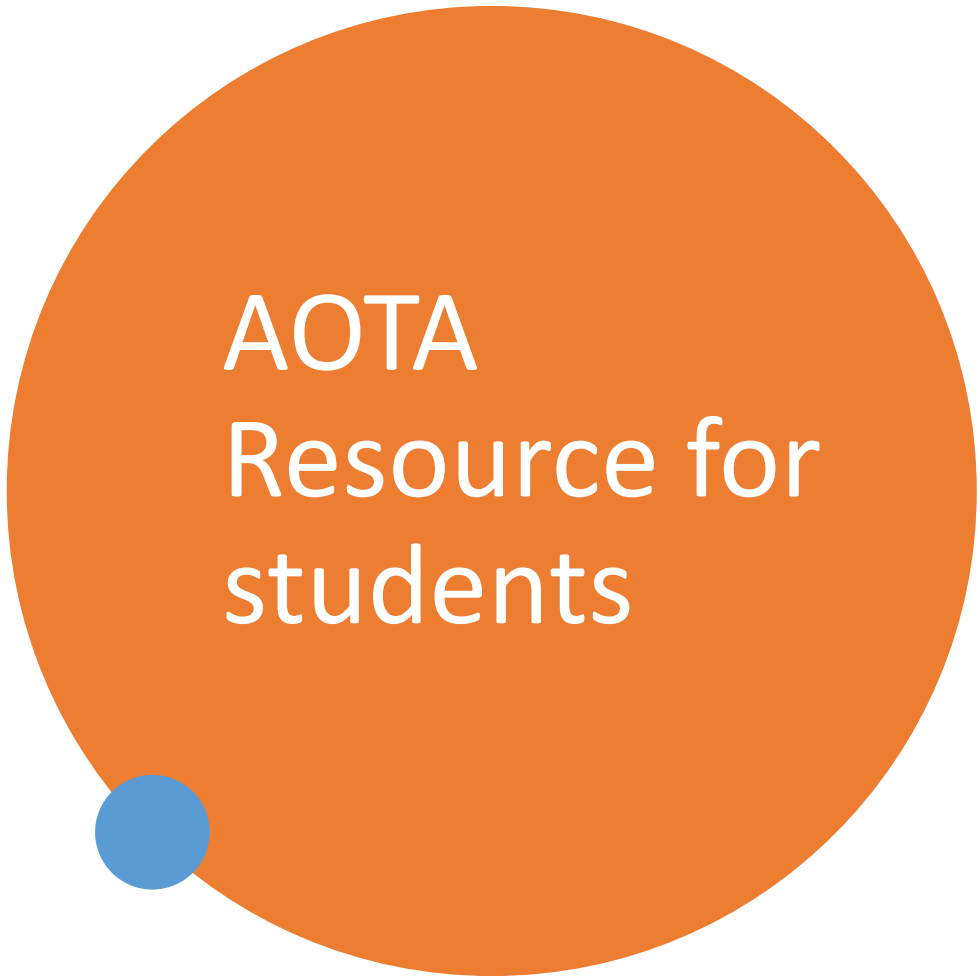
"I want to help you succeed. What do you think are some roadblocks to your current success?"

# Building resiliency

- [Intentional Relationship Model](#): Linked article explores a pilot study utilizing the Intentional Relationship Model during Level II fieldwork
- Opportunities to develop self-awareness/insight
- Do we need to develop or refine emotional regulation?
- Reviewing and practicing the use of coping strategies
- Stress management and reflective journaling practice
- Collaboration with AFWC to support you with this process

***What other strategies have you employed to build resiliency in your students?***





# AOTA Resource for students

- [Receiving Feedback](#) : YouTube video of TED Talk by Shelia Hein
- <https://www.aota.org/education/fieldwork> : Weekly Student/Supervisor Meeting Template

## Topics on Form

Week of:

What went well this week:

What are areas for growth:

Goals for next week.

Supervisor feedback:

What did the FW educator do this week that helped you learn?

What experience or feedback left you feeling confused?

# Take Away Tips



Start Strong on Day 1-  
build a plan for success  
from the beginning



Increase feedback  
frequency- affirm the  
positive as well as pointing  
out areas for improvement



Use of a Learning Contract  
is a collaborative  
document, not punitive



Empathy- remember what  
it felt like to be a student  
and new to the setting



Thank you!

Questions?