

The Effective Preceptor

In order to be an effective preceptor, you must be able to create an atmosphere which allows the student learning opportunities that are plentiful, appropriate, and build upon the current knowledge of the student. Developing an honest and trusting relationship with the student is vital in helping them gain the most out of their experiences and in helping them develop as student pharmacists. The following are several effective means of developing a strong and positive relationship with your students. A closer examination of each follows.

- 1) Communication
- 2) Effective teaching
- 3) Effective role-modeling
- 4) Motivation
- 5) Balancing precepting with other duties

Communication

Communication is perhaps the single most important aspect in the student/preceptor relationship just as it is in the pharmacist/patient relationship. Clear, effective communication avoids misunderstandings and establishes a level of trust and respect which is vital to learning and teaching. Students are encouraged to communicate openly and honestly with their preceptors regarding issues related to rotations and/or sites. We strongly encourage preceptors to do the same. Preceptors have many opportunities to demonstrate effective communication and interpersonal skills through daily interactions with students, colleagues, and/or patients. Students may not consciously recognize these opportunities, but can absorb and learn from these interactions. Effective communication can also influence other aspects of student learning, such as motivation and initiative.

Once students are assigned to their sites, they must contact their preceptors at least *two full weeks prior* to the start of each site visit. This initial contact is the ideal time for preceptors to inform students of any special instructions they must be aware of before the first site visit or of special circumstances regarding the site. In the event that a situation arises in which you will not be available on the first day of the site visit, and the student must begin at a later date or must report to a substitute preceptor, please inform NEOUCOP as soon as possible. Similarly, the College will notify you of any specific rotation or calendar changes.

During the first day of the rotation, you should acquaint your students with your facility, including the location of drug products and equipment, and introduce them to staff. It is important that you outline your site's policies and procedures, including, but not limited to:

- Confidentiality
- Lines of authority (as related to students)
- Absence and tardiness procedures (as related to students)
- Safety and emergency procedures

Preceptors should clearly outline expectations, activities, and the duties and responsibilities for students during their site visits. Any expectations or assignments identified in addition to the standard goals and objectives should be discussed within the initial day of the site visit. Students are expected to take all site visits as seriously as they would any other course within the College and are expected to maintain professionalism in all interactions.

Preceptors should keep in mind that some students will have difficulty adjusting from a classroom setting to a hands-on situation. There may be a certain level of anxiety at the prospect of participating in a working pharmacy or working alongside professional pharmacists. Some students may simply lack confidence in their abilities. Other students will have had previous working knowledge and/or experience in a pharmacy environment, and will adopt a “been there, done that” attitude. Most students are likely to experience some level of anxiety at the beginning of their site visits. We hope that as a preceptor, you will exhibit patience and compassion with students as they adjust to experiential education. There are instances, however, when conflicts will arise that negatively affect the experience. Such difficulties can lead to minor misunderstandings with little or no consequence or they can lead to serious conflicts with considerable consequences for you, your site, the student, or the College. These issues may involve students with unrealistic expectations, students who lack interest or motivation, students with negative attitudes, students with little or no work ethic, students who cannot apply what they have learned, or personality conflicts, among others.

If you begin to sense that a problem is arising, it is best to approach the student as soon as possible. The most common problems stem from students who 1) arrive at the site late, 2) do not arrive at all, 3) are unable to complete tasks to a satisfactory level, 4) demonstrate inappropriate behavior, and/or 5) do not have an adequate knowledge base. If you find that these problems are not sufficiently solved after an initial discussion with the student, or if the problem appears serious, you are encouraged to contact NEOUCOP to discuss what further steps are necessary to resolve the issue.

Maintaining clear and open communication at all times regarding expectations, roles, and responsibilities will help to lessen the opportunity for problems to arise. Students are encouraged to participate in open and direct communication with preceptors as well. Good communication is essential in building a trusting and respectful relationship which provides rewards and benefits for both students and preceptors.

Effective Teaching

While teaching is a central focus of precepting, not all preceptors are natural teachers. Effective teaching takes time and effort and a genuine concern for student learning. It is ultimately up to the student to take responsibility for their own learning, but preceptors can provide effective, creative learning activities that encourage further learning and enthusiasm for the profession. Preceptors should strive to impart their knowledge in a way that guides the student toward effective decision-making based on sound judgment and a strong knowledge base, while also fostering independent critical thinking and autonomy.

You may find it easy to assume that your students are aware of how and why you arrive at particular decisions. This can be an easy assumption because many students are silent learners. They refrain from asking for explanations or help in understanding because they lack confidence or are afraid of appearing incompetent. This will be especially true of students on PPCE site visits. An effective preceptor should help build the knowledge base of the student and the student’s confidence in his or her own abilities. Actively engaging the student to learn the relevant and most critical aspects of your rotation will help the student develop critical thinking skills necessary for the practice of pharmacy while also increasing confidence in their ability to solve problems. One way of actively engaging the student might be to conduct a de-briefing session either at the end of one visit or first thing the next visit to review the previous session’s activities. These discussions should allow the student an opportunity to reflect and think about how their knowledge learned in the classroom is applied in practice. Another means to actively engage the student might be to have the student look up the answer to their own questions, rather than providing the answers. This creates active learners who will not require that everything be “spoon-fed” to them. It also fosters independent learning and is a good way to familiarize students with information retrieval.

Having meaningful tasks and activities planned and developed before the site visit even begins will help to engage the student as well. This kind of forethought and organization helps the student feel valued and important, and respond in a positive manner. Having clear expectations of the student and a planned set of activities and tasks makes for a structured site visit and one in which the student knows exactly what is expected of them and what they can expect to learn from the rotation. It also ensures that the student walks away with the major learning points and meets the required competencies for that site visit.

Effective teaching takes time, effort and practice to find what works and what doesn't for your particular site. The key is to actively engage your students, have an organized plan for their activities, and challenge them in the learning process. But effective teaching does not end at any information you may impart to your student or encourage them to learn on their own. Effective teaching also comes from your ability to demonstrate the attributes of a good and ethical pharmacist on a daily basis. To be an effective teacher, you must also be an effective role-model.

Effective Role-modeling

The behavior and attitudes you exhibit on a daily basis will often times make more of a lasting impression than any knowledge you may impart directly to your students. Serving as an effective role-model is integral to developing a positive relationship with your students and to foster their growth and development. Role modeling is exhibiting in behavior and demeanor those characteristics which make for an excellent practitioner. Not only should you exhibit professionalism in all interactions and apply high moral and ethical standards to all activities, but also practice with a sense of duty, respect, and responsibility toward the profession. These are the qualities which you should strive to instill in your students. Lastly, none of these qualities are effective without genuine enthusiasm for what you do. Your choice to teach students shows that you possess these qualities.

The pharmacist's primary duty is to provide optimal patient care as related to drug use. You can emphasize this by constantly letting your students know the importance of putting patients first. You might emphasize the importance of checking and re-checking a drug order or questioning something on the slightest suspicion, even if it means questioning someone of higher authority. You might also emphasize the need for pharmacists to constantly develop and improve their knowledge base. Life-long learning is a necessary part of being a competent professional particularly with the fast pace of changes in health care.

In addition to having the knowledge base to fulfill the duty to provide optimal patient care, students also need to know the importance of compassion and respect when treating those patients. When you treat patients and other members of the healthcare team with respect and kindness, this demonstrates to the student your commitment to being an excellent practitioner, not just a pharmacist. If you go out of your way to overcome a cultural barrier, it demonstrates to your students that you value your patient enough to want to achieve understanding or communicate with him or her appropriately. Treating others with kindness and respect may also allow the student to see how that treatment can have an impact on the patient's well-being and health outcomes.

Finally, an effective role-model demonstrates responsibility to the profession. An excellent practitioner gives back to the profession and wants to improve it. You are already modeling this by serving as a preceptor, but going above and beyond to show real commitment to student learning is what will stand out most to your students. Being organized from the very beginning of the rotation is important for students to see that you take them seriously and have respect for them. Allowing students to learn on their own when appropriate or sharing your own past experiences to help them alleviate any anxiety also demonstrate real commitment to their growth and development.

Responsibility to the profession might also be participating in professional organizations and encouraging your students to participate. Professional organizations allow pharmacists to keep up-to-date on the latest developments in pharmacy and assist with life-long learning. Encouraging your students to get involved in organizations can help impress upon them the importance of these organizations. Other ways to demonstrate professional responsibility might be serving on committees at your particular institution, or volunteering to participate in health screenings. These all indicate to your students that you care about what you do and are dedicated to furthering the profession.

Overall, students need to know that you yourself are willing to practice those characteristics you are trying to instill in them. Poor role modeling takes the form of being disorganized, treating students as though they are in the way, engaging in gossip, and displaying an overall lack of interest in patients, students, and the profession. Students will recognize inconsistencies between what you tell them to do and what you do, and these inconsistencies will tell the student they need not take you or the rotation seriously. True learning occurs when the student has an effective teacher and role model, along with motivation for independent learning.

Motivation

The outcome of effective teaching and role modeling is that you are able to infuse your students with a passion for the profession, appreciation for learning, compassion for patients, respect for colleagues and an overall sense of motivation to continue learning and growing. Being an enthusiastic, motivated preceptor helps to foster motivation in learners. Having a genuine joy for what you do and for teaching can have an enormous impact on how students react to both you and the rotation. You will find, however, as you precept students for any significant amount of time, some students are more enthusiastic and motivated than others, no matter how enthusiastic you are. Students with high levels of motivation will have often already made the transition to adult learning with a sense of internal motivation, not for some external reward. However, not all students will have made this transition, and their motivation levels may be significantly lower. Other students may have a lack of confidence in their abilities or they may have low expectations of themselves, which also result in lower levels of motivation. Even with effective teaching and positive role modeling on your part, these students will require extra attention to improve their motivation. Three factors which can positively influence students' motivation are making them feel valued, establishing and maintaining communication, and encouraging reflection with participation.

Students want to feel valued while they are at your site. They want to feel that you serve as a preceptor because you have something relevant and interesting to offer and that you have a genuine concern for their education. Being sensitive to who they are and where they are in their development can help them to feel valued. By assessing your students' knowledge base and skill level at the beginning of the site visit, you can identify weaknesses and then find ways to turn them into strengths. This tells the student that you care enough to find out the areas that need improvement. Taking a little extra time and effort to guide them shows that you care about them as individuals and that you want to see them progress.

The importance of communication has already been discussed, but it should be noted that honest and timely communication impacts student motivation. This does not mean providing your student with constant, positive reinforcement as a means to motivate them. Communication can positively affect motivation when you clearly delineate expectations, including deadlines for assignments or tasks, and when you provide constructive feedback on how the student is doing. By designing challenging yet achievable and realistic goals to be met during the rotation, you set high expectations for your students. When you have high expectations for your students, they are motivated to meet those expectations and to do well.

Communication also involves the effort to provide meaningful and constructive feedback on how they are progressing with the rotation. It could mean praising them for doing something right, or providing encouragement even when something is done incorrectly.

Along with active participation, students should be encouraged to reflect on what they did, what they need to do next time, and how their actions impact patient care. Reflection requires the student to think differently about a given situation, to examine it from all aspects and perhaps different points of view. Reflection can be encouraged by incorporating it into teaching. Asking questions such as “Was there anything else we could have done for this patient? Why or why not?” or “What lies ahead for this patient if this medication does or does not work?” or “Ethically, we could not fill that patient’s prescription. Do you know why?” Asking thought-provoking questions will help guide the student to begin thinking in broader terms. They will begin to understand the role of the pharmacist in the patient’s overall health. Equally important, reflection can foster a student’s interest in possible career choices such as residencies, pharmacist clinician, research, etc.

Students believe that you have something relevant and interesting to offer. They are eager to learn from you. Effectively communicating with them, encouraging them to consciously reflect on cases or issues, and placing value on teaching them are just as important as imparting pharmaceutical information to them. It is building not only on knowledge and skill, but also confidence. Building confidence is a careful balance of being able to teach them outright at times and letting them learn on their own at others. Confident learners are motivated learners. If they are motivated, they take equal responsibility for their own learning and make your job as a preceptor a little easier.

Balancing Precepting with Other Duties

Balancing preceptor duties with your own job responsibilities can be very difficult, particularly if you are a new preceptor. You will find that you will often be pressed for time to convey to your student the appropriate pharmaceutical knowledge base and necessary skills during a brief rotation. A busy retail setting, a hospital pharmacy in need of more staff, or the need to attend to your patients may all create time constraints which do not allow for spending quality time with your student.

You want to be able to spend quality time with your students, but patient care and safety must remain primary concerns. How do you construct a relevant, interesting site visit experience which teaches your students to problem-solve, motivates them to want to learn more, and hopefully begins to mold them into excellent practitioners, all while maintaining your regular job duties? The effort will come from carefully structuring the rotation well before students arrive. You will likely have to do this on your own time, but it will be well worth the effort later. Some points to consider when structuring the rotation:

1) Devise meaningful activities in line with goals and objectives for the rotation.

This is an area where creativity can assist with learner motivation and retention. For example, you might have them complete an assignment on a difficult compliance issue in pharmaceutical compounding, explaining significant issues or conduct a presentation to the immediate staff.

2) Assess what the student already knows.

Students may know very little, never having set foot in a pharmacy or they may know a great deal from being a pharmacy technician for several years. Assessing what their strengths and weaknesses are can help you plan accordingly.

3) Set goals and expectations for the student.

Let students know you expect them to check X number of medications for dating during the rotation, or that they must complete X number of required readings and report back to you on them. It is also important to let them know what they will need to do to successfully complete the rotation.

4) Introduce the student to anyone with whom they might have contact.

Doing this early on in the rotation will avoid surprises later and will make the students feel welcomed; students want to feel like they are part of a team.

5) Have a set schedule for the student.

Specify the days and hours you expect the student to be there. Explain policies regarding tardiness, absences, and lines of authority. Organization on your part can dictate much of how the experience will unfold for both you and the student. Students appreciate structure and organization. It is an indication to them of your interest and your concern.

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This guide has been partially adapted from the University of New Mexico Office of Experiential Programs Preceptor Manual.

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