Enhancing clinical learning in the workplace: a qualitative study

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Context
Workplace learning (WPL) is seen as an essential component of clinical veterinary education by the veterinary profession. It is a core part of the curricula of the UK veterinary schools, and includes preclinical extramural placements, clinical extramural placements (EMS) and clinical intramural rotations (IMR) within the veterinary schools. The Enhancing Clinical Learning in the Workplace (ECLW) project was a collaborative study between the School of Education and the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science at the University of Nottingham (SVMS) and the Royal Veterinary College, University of London (RVC).

Main conclusion
The RVC and SVMS have different approaches to the delivery of IMR work placements. Despite this, there were substantial similarities in the perceptions of their students and clinical staff, which suggest that the principles and concepts of WPL are transferable throughout veterinary workplaces. All participants acknowledged the significant value of the workplace as a safe, authentic environment where students develop their clinical and professional skills.

Approach
This study used a qualitative approach and employed ethnographic methods of data collection. This approach allowed the researchers to embed themselves within the learning environment to capture and interpret the very personal experiences of students and clinical staff. Semi-structured interviews before and after the IMR work placements were used as the main method of data collection, with observations used as an additional method to compile a wider view of the experiences of the student groups and clinical staff. Observations were opportunistic and designed to cover as many different aspects of IMR work placements as possible, including hospitalised patient ward rounds, surgical procedures, and outpatient and admissions-related client consultations. The participants included veterinary students in their fourth year of a five-year programme and staff in various IMR settings at both institutions. A total of 23 students and 12 clinical staff were observed across three representative IMR work placements at each institution: equine, small and farm animal.

Results
Thematic analysis was used to identify themes emerging from the data. Interview transcripts and observations were manually and independently coded by the researchers from each institution and verified by a third researcher. Five major themes emerged from the thematic analysis: the clinical workplace as a learning environment, student and staff expectations of WPL, student perceptions of readiness and preparation for the workplace, learning and teaching strategies in the workplace, and factors affecting WPL. The clinical workplace was viewed by staff and students as an authentic learning and teaching environment. Staff acknowledged work placements as essential for students to be able to apply previously acquired theoretical knowledge from years 1 to 4 of the professional veterinary course in the workplace. Expectations of the workplace for the majority of students were similar: they wanted to learn new clinical and professional skills to a level that enabled them to work effectively in the clinical environment. Students’ perceptions of their readiness and preparation for the workplace varied; some viewed it as exciting, while others perceived it as daunting. This led to students sometimes feeling anxious, stressed and underprepared for their transition into full-time work placements. Students learned through working and collaborating with staff, clients/patients and peers. They valued this experience as it highlighted the importance of learning through interaction and cooperation. Factors that were perceived as affecting learning in the workplace by staff and students related to opportunities for practical hands-on experience such as varying caseloads. Another difficulty that potentially limited hands-on opportunities was the prioritisation of the clinical requirements of the case; if the case was an emergency, then the welfare of the animal took precedence over teaching.

Interpretation
Across both institutions, students valued the clinical workplace as an authentic, safe learning environment where they could actively develop and contextualise their clinical and professional knowledge and skills. With opportunities within the learning environment being unpredictable, students acknowledged the important complementary role played by EMS as part of their WPL experience. Challenges associated with WPL relate to the preparation of students for the workplace in order to maximise their ability to take advantage of this rich source of opportunistic learning. In accordance with recent RCVS guidelines, both institutions involved in the study support students in identifying specific learning objectives, which they share with their EMS providers to help identify what they would like to gain from their experience. Further preparing the students may reduce the anxiety and unpreparedness experienced by some learners.

Significance of findings
The qualitative approach chosen for the project was novel within the context of UK veterinary education and has produced rich data, which have enabled the researchers to develop a fuller understanding of WPL in this context. WPL provides an authentic, valuable learning experience that is transferable between different models of delivery. Work is needed to better prepare students for the clinical workplace to optimise their learning experience and reduce anxiety.
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