

Bridge Program: An Alternative Curricular Model

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PURPOSE

With the motivation for career advancement, many adult learners have chosen to return to graduate education. The bridge program is one relatively new alternative curricular model available for adult learners, who wish to build on their education. Evidence on the effectiveness of such programs is minimal. Thus, clinical performance outcomes between a bridge and a traditional physical therapy (PT) program were described and compared.

BACKGROUND

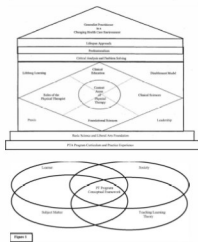
The pathway of entry into the physical therapy profession has significantly evolved from the early 1900s to present. Out of the 221 PT programs, only one is currently designated as a PTA to PT bridge program.¹ This program is specifically designed for the adult learner, who is a PT Assistant, by building upon their past life experiences.

Whether the effect of past experience on learning is positive, negative, or non-existent depends upon several factors, which vary according to different learning theorists. In general, the more closely related the past experiences are with the new information or situation, then the greater the learning that may occur.

The adult learners in the bridge program attend the university on weekends in an accelerated fashion. The weekend format was chosen to accommodate the work schedule of the employed PTA. During the week, the adult learners are expected to work a minimum of number of hours to directly apply their coursework, as appropriate.

A second feature of the studied bridge program involves the scheduling of the clinical internships. Typically internships have been interspersed throughout the curriculum. However, the clinical internships are purposefully clustered at the end of the academic portion of the program to accommodate the needs of the students' employers.

MODEL DESCRIPTION



Besides the structure of the program, the main difference is the applicant pool. The bridge program exclusively admits adult learners with a greater amount of life experiences, including a minimum of one year's work, as PT Assistants. See figure 1 for a visual representation of the model.

PARTICIPANTS

Twenty-nine clinical instructors (CIs) were identified as having supervised the final clinical internships of both traditional and nontraditional students. Of the twenty-nine CIs, 17 (58.6%) completed and returned the questionnaire.

The 17 CIs had supervised students for an average of 9 years, with a range of 2 to 20 years. Forty-one percent of the CIs were male and the average age was 36 years, with a range of 29 to 52 years.

METHODS & MATERIALS

A questionnaire was mailed to the identified CIs, who supervised both types of students. The questionnaire included seven demographic items (fill-in-the-blank) and three open-ended questions. The open-ended questions concerned group differences, similarities, and possible explanations for the differences and similarities.

Questions were:

- ◆ Tell me about any differences that you have observed between the traditional and nontraditional learners
- ◆ Tell me about any similarities that you have observed between the traditional and the nontraditional learners.
- ◆ Do you have any thoughts as to why the learners have differences or similarities?

Responses to the three open-ended questions were analyzed for common themes utilizing frequencies and percentages.

RESULTS

Majority of the CIs reported that the nontraditional learners had higher abilities than traditional learners, pertaining to interpersonal skills (23.5%), communication (17.6%), professional behavior (41.2%), documentation (29.4%), and intervention skills (47.1%). For example, a CI reported, "the PTA to PT [nontraditional] students do demonstrate more confidence; are more eager to start treating and getting hands on experience; and are more adaptable."

The second question investigated the observed similarities and the responses were categorized into five themes, including evaluation skills (47.1%), problem solving (17.6%), motivation (11.8%), confidence (17.6%), and supervision level (29.4%).

The last question addressed the reasons for the differences or similarities between the two groups. Three themes were identified, including personal maturity, life experience, and work experience. However, 58.8% of the CIs agreed that past work experiences made the greatest difference. One CI summed it up well, commenting, "I think the nontraditional student has the advantage from their previous experience. Their knowledge base is not just classroom or textbook based, but real-life experience based."

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The andragogy literature has been supportive of the positive effects of past experience on learning². Some studies have specified that nontraditional older learners are better able to critically think or solve problems^{3,4}. Halpern (1996) specified that critical thinking skills typically develop in time through an accumulation of life experiences⁵. The CI's responses also endorsed the importance of past experience with learning.

There is some evidence that the more similar the past experience is to the new learning experience, then the more successful the final outcomes^{4,5,6}. The majority of the participating CIs indicated that the student's knowledge was more "real-life experience based", which allowed "a better feel for the flow of the clinical skills."

The CIs also found that the two groups were different in five main areas. According to the CIs, the adult learners had a higher level of clinical performance than the traditional students. They specified that this difference was largely due to their previous work experience in PT settings.

These results support the use of the bridge program as an alternate curricular model for PT, which may be applied to other disciplines that have a large population of nontraditional, adult learners who are seeking advancement in their professions.

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