

Learning together: how a peer-assisted approach can transform practice-based learning

AHP principles in practice: real-world approaches to placements

What you'll learn from this blog

Peer-assisted placements are increasingly being used to expand placement capacity while providing rich learning experiences for learners. It can feel daunting, but when thoughtfully planned, peer-assisted placements can create powerful opportunities for learning, collaboration, and professional growth for learner. This case study also challenges a common assumption that supervising multiple learners inevitably increases workload without benefit. Instead, it demonstrates how learners can become active contributors to the learning environment, supporting one another, enhancing service delivery, and bringing new perspectives to practice.

In this 10-minute read, you'll discover how:

structured preparation, welcome resources, and clear expectations can reduce uncertainty and support learner success from the outset.

a blended supervision model can balance individual support, peer learning, and learner autonomy. Peer supervision and learner-led activities, combined with opportunities for both independent and collaborative learning, can foster autonomy, leadership, reflective practice, confidence, and clinical reasoning while supporting professional development.

peer-assisted placements can benefit learners, educators, and services alike by supporting sustainable placement capacity, fostering fresh perspectives, curiosity and new ideas and enriching both the learning environment and placement experience.

inclusive approaches, personalised adjustments, and scaffolding strategies can help learners feel psychologically safe, support diverse learning needs, and enable learners to thrive in practice-based learning.

In this blog **Samuel Cockerton**, a Clinical Specialist Occupational Therapist working in a community children's service reflects on how working with two learners at the same time can create a more collaborative, reflective, and dynamic learning environment while also bringing new challenges and insights for practice educators.



Shifting perceptions: from challenge to opportunity

Samuel has extensive experience supporting learners across different settings and stages of study. Earlier in his career, like many educators, he shared a common concern that students create more work.

However, experience of supervising pairs of learners gradually shifted this perspective.

"What initially felt like an additional pressure became an opportunity to rethink how learning and supervision could be structured in practice."

Planning for success from the start

Delivering a peer-assisted approach within placement requires careful preparation, particularly in community-based services where learning is dispersed across different environments.

Samuel focused on creating structure, clarity, and consistency from the outset. This included:

- developing a detailed welcome pack to reduce uncertainty and administrative burden
- planning the first two weeks of the placement in detail
- gradually increasing learner independence over time

This approach helped create a clear foundation while supporting learners to take ownership of their experience.

Practical considerations were also important. Streamlining processes such as IT access, timetabling, and placement documentation helped reduce the additional workload associated with supervising two learners.

Interestingly, pairing learners with different circumstances could also enhance learning:

“Pairing a non-driver with a driver created natural variety in learning experiences.”

A blended approach to supervision

Rather than relying on a single model, Samuel used a blended supervision approach, combining individual, joint, and peer-led elements.

Individual supervision

Students valued protected one-to-one time in weekly sessions which provided space for:

- reviewing learning outcomes
- reflecting on experiences and students learning needs
- discussing feedback and sensitive issues

Peer supervision

Learners were encouraged to take ownership of their own peer sessions. They booked the room, set the agenda and used the time for reflection and problem solving. This autonomy supported the development of leadership, communication, and self-management skills.

Joint supervision

Shared sessions took place at key points such as during induction week, midpoint of the placement and before joint presentations, creating opportunities for collaborative reflection, debrief and feedback.

This layered approach supported both individual progression and shared learning, reflecting a flexible and responsive model of supervision

Learning through shared experience

One of the most significant benefits of the peer-assisted approach was the way learners supported each other.

“When one learner struggled, the peer often provided a grounding influence.”

Samuel found this peer dynamic:

- reduced emotional pressure
- encouraged honest discussion and reflection
- helped learners process feedback more effectively

And in some cases, peers even helped reframe challenging feedback:

“The student peer gave a bit of realism and balance... so it didn’t feel personal.”

Having students working in pairs also encouraged deeper reflection and shared problem-solving by allowing them to:

- observe each other's strengths
- compare clinical reasoning
- build confidence through shared practice

Benefits beyond the learner

The positive impact of this model extended beyond individual learning.

For the service

Learners contributed meaningfully, bringing:

- increased capacity
- fresh ideas
- energy and curiosity

For the practice educator

The experience was also reciprocal.

“I learned as much from them as they did from me.”

Supervising two learners encouraged Samuel to reflect more deeply on his own practice and approach to teaching.

Recognising the challenges

While the model offers many benefits, it is not without its challenges.

Interpersonal dynamics

Not all learner pairings work equally well. Differences in personality, confidence, or experience can affect balance:

- one learner dominating another
- differences in confidence or communication style
- emotional pressures within the pair

Samual reflected that “personality match is unpredictable” and educators must build flexibility into placement design.

Assessment complexity

Assessing individual performance within shared work can be challenging, requiring careful consideration to ensure fairness.

Time and workload

Supporting two learners particularly at an early stage of their occupational therapy degree can increase demands on practice educators time and Samuel found these challenges highlight the importance of planning, flexibility, and ongoing reflection.

Creating an inclusive and supportive environment

A key part of Samuel's approach was ensuring that learners felt supported, valued, and able to succeed. He emphasised that these personalised adjustments are normal professional strategies and "just how I work".

This included:

- assistive technology (screen filters, dictation, step-by-step email systems)
- structured observation worksheets using PEO model
- modelling his own organisational approaches and time-management tools
- scaffolding tasks and learning to reduce feeling overwhelmed

Samuel found these adjustments helped learners feel safe, valued and capable. He also noted that support for himself and the learners was also shared across the wider system, including colleagues, clinical leads, and university tutors, reinforcing that supervision does not sit with one individual alone.

What has Sam learnt from peer assisted approach

Samuel found adopting a peer-assisted approach for placement prompted significant reflection, which included

- greater awareness of different learning styles
- clearer boundaries between support and independence for learners
- increased openness and adaptability as an educator

Samuel reflected on missing some aspects of one-to-one supervision. However, the peer-assisted model ultimately offered something different: a richer, more collaborative learning experience and instilled the value students bring to placements

"research knowledge, energy and curiosity."

Final reflection

Peer-assisted supervision offers a powerful way to rethink practice-based learning. While it requires careful planning, flexibility, and reflection, the benefits are clear. This model not only supports learner development and placement capacity it creates a more collaborative, engaging, and dynamic learning environment.

Ultimately, it reinforces a key principle, effective supervision is not defined by a single approach, but by how well it supports learning, relationships, and growth in practice.