

From Uncertainty to Confidence: Flexible Support in a Non-Traditional Placement

AHP principles in practice: real-world approaches to placements.

What you'll learn from this blog

Effective supervision doesn't have to follow a traditional model to be successful. In this blog, final-year occupational therapy student Rhys shares how a non-traditional placement helped him develop confidence, professional identity, and practical skills through flexible, well-structured support.

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

- Early communication and clear expectations can reduce anxiety and support learner success.
- Flexible approaches to supervision can create psychologically safe and effective learning environments.
- Interprofessional learning can strengthen professional identity and broaden perspectives.
- Structured reflection and responsive support help learners build confidence and manage challenges.
- Non-traditional placements can offer rich opportunities for professional growth and development.

The quality of a placement experience is shaped less by **where** learning happens and more by **how** learners are supported. Rhys's story demonstrates how clear communication, flexible supervision, opportunities for reflection, and a strong support network can help learners thrive in any setting.

Placements continue to evolve to meet the needs of learners, educators, and services. The AHP Principles of practice-based Learning highlight the importance of flexible, inclusive, and innovative approaches.

Getting off to a strong start

John Rhys Davies (known as Rhys), a final year Master's student studying at Nottingham Trent University. Rhys shares his placement supervision experiences at Brierley Forest Golf Club, Nottinghamshire.



Rhys took the initiative to get in touch with the placement team three to four weeks before starting. That early contact made a real difference.

Receiving a full seven-week timetable ahead of time was particularly helpful, especially managing his ADHD. Being able to visualise the placement in advance supported planning, organisation, and

"Having that timetable was so beneficial because I could visualise and plan my time."

reduced uncertainty.

Preparation didn't stop there. Rhys also thought carefully about where learning would take place - setting up a home workspace, while also identifying alternative environments like university spaces and coffee shops

A different approach to supervision

Supervision didn't follow a single, traditional model. Instead, Rhys experienced a flexible, layered approach:

- weekly group supervision sessions with both OT and physiotherapy learners
- research-focused sessions, sharing and discussing literature explored during the week
- reflective sessions, supporting goal setting, self-assessment, and professional development
- daily informal support via MS Teams
- optional 1:1 supervision on request

Importantly, expectations were made clear during induction. Knowing how supervision would work helped Rhys feel more grounded and able to engage from the outset.

At first, group supervision felt challenging.

"I felt pressure to perform...
and it's harder online because you don't know when to interject."

But over time, this shifted.

"Everyone had a unique perspective... it strengthened my occupational identity."

What began as uncertainty became one of the most valuable aspects of the placement highlighting the power of shared learning and interprofessional insight. Equally important was the responsiveness of support from the practice educator. This timely communication helped reinforce a sense of psychological safety and support throughout the placement.

Learning that connects theory and practice

The placement offered a wide range of structured learning opportunities:

- individual and group projects
- weekly research tasks
- reflective writing
- case studies and SOAP notes

For the individual project, Rhys explored hypermobility and golf, looking at function, adaptive equipment, proprioceptive support, and understanding the lived experiences of disabled golfers, bringing everything together in a final poster.

"It gave me time to think occupationally... to think outside the box."

The learning opportunity to think deeply and creatively stood out, alongside the benefits of working interprofessionally with physiotherapy students, sharing knowledge and learning from different perspectives.

Developing skills - personally and professionally

Rhys felt the placement supported his development of a wide range of skills:

- communication (especially online)
- teamwork
- time management
- research and clinical reasoning

One particularly powerful learning moment came from a miscommunication via text.

“I misjudged someone’s tone... that became a reflective experience.”

It became an opportunity to better understand communication and team dynamics in a digital space, an increasingly important area of practice.

Time management was another key area of development.

“I realised I was approaching burnout and needed new strategies.”

At one point, Rhys recognised the early signs of burnout and this prompted a shift towards pacing his work more effectively, setting boundaries, and creating a more sustainable routine.

Support that goes beyond supervision

Support didn’t just come from formal structures. Having another learner alongside him made a big difference alongside strong communication with his educator.

“If I did this placement by myself, it would have been a very different experience.”

Rhys also emphasised the importance of staying connected outside of placement:

“Rely on your support networks... it makes such a difference.”

The combination of peer support, responsive educators, and external networks created a strong foundation for his learning and wellbeing.

What changed?

By the end of the placement, the impact was clear. Rhys told us he had:

- greater confidence in applying theory to practice,
- improved academic writing,
- stronger communication and teamwork skills,
- better time management strategies and importantly
- a clearer sense of professional identity.

There was also a shift in perspective: Perhaps most importantly, Rhys left feeling more prepared for future placements and professional practice.

What can others learn?

Rhys’s experience highlights a number of practical takeaways for learners and educators:

- make early contact with placement providers to clarify expectations and reduce uncertainty
- engage with supervision openly, particularly in interprofessional settings
- use support networks, including peers, educators, and personal connections
- prioritise wellbeing, pacing work and setting boundaries to avoid burnout
- build in time for reflection, even brief daily planning can make a significant difference
- embrace non-traditional placements as opportunities for creativity and professional growth

“It’s your chance to make occupational therapy shine”

Final reflection

Rhys’s experience demonstrates that effective practice-based learning is not defined by setting alone, but by the quality of supervision, structure, and support.

Flexible, responsive, and well-communicated supervision combined with opportunities for reflection, interprofessional learning, and self-directed development can create powerful and meaningful learning experiences in any context.

This example highlights how the AHP principles for practice-based learning can be applied in real-world settings to support both learners and educators. Across the series, these case studies show that there is no single model for effective practice-based learning. Instead, success comes from:

Whether through peer-assisted models, leadership placements, or interprofessional learning, these approaches demonstrate how practice education can be both innovative and sustainable.

*“It changed my perspective on sport...
and my confidence to talk about and do exercise.”*