

Leading differently: how a project placement created meaningful learning for everyone

AHP Principles in Practice: real-world approaches to practice-based learning



What you'll learn from this blog

Leadership and project-based placements can provide rich learning experiences while supporting placement capacity. In this blog, Jannine Hall, a Band 8A Occupational Therapist at Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust, reflects on her experience of designing and delivering a leadership-focused placement that combined clinical practice, project work, and peer-assisted supervision. Her experience demonstrates how innovative placement models can benefit learners, educators, and services alike.

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

- project-based placements can support learner development while contributing to meaningful service improvement.
- peer-assisted supervision can encourage independence, collaboration, and reflective learning.
- meaningful project work can help learners develop leadership skills alongside clinical experience.
- flexible supervision models can create supportive and responsive learning environments.
- innovative placement approaches can help address placement capacity challenges without compromising learning quality.

Stepping into the unknown

For many practice educators, the idea of supervising learners alongside a senior leadership role can feel daunting. For Jannine Hall, returning to practice education after a significant break felt exactly that.

“It felt really brave... having not had a student for such a long time.”

Balancing leadership responsibilities with supervision brought uncertainty. However, observing a colleague successfully supervise two learners challenged her assumptions about practice-based learning and encouraged her to think differently about placement design.

At the same time, increasing pressure on placement capacity highlighted the need for innovative approaches that could support learner development while meeting service needs. Rather than offering a traditional placement model, Jannine designed a placement that combined clinical learning, leadership exposure, and meaningful project work.

Designing a placement with purpose

The placement was carefully structured to provide a balance of different learning experiences throughout the week:

- clinical practice (2.5 to 3 days per week)
- dedicated project work
- exposure to leadership meetings
- protected supervision and study time.

A detailed 10-week timetable was developed before the placement started, helping learners understand expectations, plan their time, and take ownership of their learning from the outset.

At the heart of the placement was a meaningful service improvement project.

“It was a project we'd wanted to do for a long time.”

Rather than completing a simulated task, learners worked on a real project linked to service need. The project addressed an area of work the service had wanted to progress but had lacked capacity to take forward. This created an opportunity for learners to make a genuine contribution while developing leadership, communication, and project-management skills.

Before the placement began, learners attended a joint virtual meeting to discuss expectations, followed by individual conversations that enabled support to be tailored to their needs. This early engagement helped establish trust, clarity, and learner autonomy from the outset.

Learning together through peer-assisted supervision

Supervision was delivered using a peer-assisted 2:1 model that combined both structure and flexibility.

Learners benefited from:

- joint supervision sessions to discuss project work and shared learning

- individual supervision focused on personal learning needs and goals
- informal daily check-ins
- ongoing access to support when needed.

“Joint supervision worked well... they benefitted from hearing each other's thinking.”

Because both learners were working on the same project, opportunities for collaboration emerged naturally. Shared discussions encouraged reflection, challenged assumptions, and helped learners learn from different perspectives.

At the same time, individual supervision remained an important part of the model. It provided space to discuss personal learning goals, review progress, and explore sensitive issues that might not be appropriate in a group setting.

Jannine also worked closely with colleagues involved in day-to-day supervision, reinforcing the idea that supervision is a shared responsibility rather than something delivered by one individual alone.

Creating the conditions for success

Alongside formal supervision, considerable emphasis was placed on creating a supportive learning environment.

Jannine prioritised:

- clear communication
- regular check-ins
- visible availability
- opportunities for learners to engage with the wider multidisciplinary team.

“They could grab me whenever they wanted.”

Learners worked alongside occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and support staff, broadening their understanding of collaborative practice. They were also given flexibility over how they completed project work, whether working independently, together, from home, or in the library.

This balance of support and autonomy encouraged independence, initiative, collaborative problem-solving, and the development of real-world working practices.

The impact

The impact of the placement extended beyond individual learning and was evident across the learners, the service, and the practice educator.

For learners

The placement provided exposure to leadership, service improvement, and project work alongside clinical learning opportunities.

Learners developed:

- leadership skills
- problem-solving abilities
- confidence
- collaboration and communication skills
- greater independence.

Working alongside another learner was particularly valuable.

“Having two students meant they didn’t feel alone.”

The peer-assisted model reduced feelings of isolation, encouraged collaborative problem-solving, and provided opportunities for learners to challenge and support one another throughout the placement.

For the service

The learners completed a substantial project that is now contributing to service development and ongoing quality improvement work.

Their work is helping to inform future change within the service and demonstrates the value learners can bring when given opportunities to engage in meaningful projects.

For the practice educator

Although the placement required additional planning and time, it proved highly rewarding.

“It filled my bucket up... even though it was extra time.”

Alongside supporting learner development, the experience provided fresh perspectives and insights into contemporary approaches to practice. It also reinforced the value of investing in future occupational therapists and renewed Jannine's enthusiasm for practice education.

Challenges and lessons learned

Like any innovative placement model, this approach was not without its challenges.

The biggest challenge was finding time to balance supervision with leadership responsibilities.

“The biggest challenge was making time... I should have planned ahead more.”

This highlighted the importance of:

- planning ahead

- protecting supervision time
- delegating responsibilities where possible.

Jannine also recognised potential challenges associated with peer-assisted learning, including differences in confidence, performance, and learning styles. However, when managed effectively, these challenges created valuable opportunities for professional growth and learning.

One of her most significant reflections was that supervising two learners did not necessarily increase workload.

“Two students can actually mean less work because they’ve got each other.”

The learners provided support, feedback, and challenge to one another, reducing dependency on the educator while encouraging greater independence and self-directed learning. This challenged Jannine's assumptions about supervision and reinforced the value of peer-assisted learning.

What can others learn from this?

For practice educators considering a similar approach, Jannine offers several practical reflections:

- plan ahead and provide clear structure
- use real, meaningful projects to drive engagement
- protect supervision time
- draw on the wider team for supervision and support
- create a safe and open learning environment
- support collaboration through peer-assisted approaches
- provide honest and constructive feedback
- remember that you do not need to have all the answers.

“You don’t need to know it all.”

Final reflection

Jannine's experience demonstrates how leadership-focused and project-based placements can broaden what practice-based learning looks like. Through a combination of meaningful project work, peer-assisted supervision, structured support, and learner autonomy, the placement created benefits for learners, educators, and the service alike.

For learners, it provided opportunities to develop leadership, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills while contributing to a real service improvement project. For the service, it generated valuable work that contributed to quality improvement and future development. For the practice educator, it offered fresh perspectives and renewed enthusiasm for supporting the next

generation of occupational therapists.

Perhaps most importantly, this case study challenges the assumption that innovative placement models are more difficult to deliver. With careful planning, meaningful projects, flexible supervision, and a supportive learning environment, leadership placements can expand placement capacity while maintaining high-quality learning experiences.

Ultimately, it reinforces an important message, effective practice-based learning is not defined by setting alone, but by the quality of supervision, the authenticity of the learning experience, and the support provided throughout.