Using group work in teaching, learning and assessment:

The use of peer assisted learning groups in the Virtual Environment for Radiotherapy Training at the University of Suffolk

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The education of students enrolled on the BSc (Hons) Radiotherapy and Oncology is split between academic teaching at the University and practice placements in a radiotherapy department in a partner NHS Trust, where they gain clinical competence.

Following induction in September, students attend eight weeks of academic teaching during which they are supported to develop a range of foundational knowledge and skills to prepare them for their first practice placements in November. The transition from the academic environment to practice placements is a well-documented source of stress and the academic team works closely with practice partners to facilitate a smooth transition and ongoing support.

A number of strategies are in place to prepare students for practice placements, one of which is the use of the Virtual Environment for Radiotherapy Training (VERT™). VERT™ provides a three-dimensional immersive simulation of a radiotherapy treatment machine that is manipulated in real time using a control pendant. This blend of real and virtual objects provides a safe environment in which to develop practical skills and is used extensively by the course team to enable the development of deeper understanding of radiotherapy concepts.

There is a period of three weeks immediately before first year students enter practice placements when third year students are also on campus for lectures, presenting an excellent opportunity for peer assisted group work in VERT™. The following aims were established:

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<th>Year One (Mentees)</th>
<th>Year Three (Mentors)</th>
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<td>Enhance preparation for first practice placements through consolidation of learning / teaching provided by the course team</td>
<td>Consolidation of learning</td>
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<td>Reduce anxiety ahead of first placements</td>
<td>Develop basic skills of mentorship and supervision</td>
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The first trial began in October 2013 with volunteers from the third year providing peer mentorship for small groups of first year students. The membership of each group was organised to enable students to work with peers and a mentor placed at the same NHS Trust to enable the development of skills and knowledge specific to that placement.

A detailed briefing was provided for mentors and mentees and ‘ground rules’ for the sessions established. A work book with suggested, rather than prescriptive VERT™ activities was created to allow the development of student-led goals. The group sessions were peer-directed as it was felt that the presence of a lecturer might inhibit participation in activities and asking of questions. At the end of each session, a lecturer met with mentors and mentees for a ‘debrief’ to answer any remaining questions and provide guidance if needed.

Lessons learnt

The sessions were well evaluated by both groups of students. First year students really valued the opportunity to practice skills and to ask questions of a fellow student that they might not feel comfortable asking a lecturer. Third year students found that the experience made them question their knowledge of key concepts when they were answering questions or providing clarification. Both groups requested further opportunities to continue with the VERT™ group work as they felt that more skills and concepts could have been revised in this format.

Although anticipated, the value of informal interactions outside of the guided VERT™ activities between the mentor and mentees had been underestimated. First year students really valued the opportunity to pick up ‘top tips’ from their third year mentors and found this to be really valuable in reducing anxiety ahead of practice placements. The timetabling of these sessions in 2014 reflected this feedback and additional time was scheduled for group familiarisation and informal discussion.

What next?

Opportunities exist for peer-assisted group work to be extended into practice placements as first years and third years are in placements together during the first six weeks of Semester 2. This provides potential to create group work opportunities beyond the university environment to build upon semester one experiences, further enhancing consolidation of learning for both cohorts. Third year students are close to completion of their degree at this stage and the development of skills of mentorship and supervision are essential as they will take on responsibility for the supervision of students almost as soon as they take up their first posts in the NHS.

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