8 Ways to Make the Most of Your Clinical Education Experience

APTA asked several recent DPT school graduates what they learned while serving clinical rotations, and what they wish they’d known going in. Although they worked in vastly different settings—from large hospital systems to small private practices—in cities large and small, treating patients and clients of all ages, distinct themes emerged. Here are their tips for making the most of clinical rotations:

1. Focus on what you’re doing, not where you’re doing it.

"I often hear students complaining about the location of their clinical. I wasn’t excited about going to Tupelo, Mississippi, but it was the best of all my rotations. Don’t get caught up on the location. You are there to learn." - BM

"Do not use your clinical rotation as a vacation. Also, don’t pick a clinic just because of a convenient location. Your job is to learn as much as you can from your CI [clinical instructor] and fully embrace the experience of treating patients in that setting. You made a commitment of 3 years of your life so that you can help other people improve their function. So do it!" - MS

2. Seek out settings and experiences that challenge you.

"Clinical rotations are a time to broaden and refine your skill set, and each CI will offer you a unique learning experience often very different from your PT school education." - TJ
"Challenge yourself by tackling at least 1 task each day that you haven't ever done before."
- MD

"I thought my CI was going to fall out of her chair when I asked to go shadow a surgery, wound care, and the hand therapy clinic. She was more than happy to set that up for me. You have to remember you will only get out what you put in during your time on rotation. Use those 8-12 weeks to your advantage!" - BM

3. Be prepared.

"Always investigate your clinical locations ahead of time to learn the organization's mission, vision, and treatment techniques." - MS

"Go in with goals! It might be that you want to learn the business side of the practice. Or maybe you want to learn a technique that your CI knows well. Don't just show up." - BM

4. Strive to improve yourself, not prove yourself.

"You're going to feel like you don't know what you are doing, and that's okay. Go in with a good attitude and absorb as much as you can. Ask questions. Take the time to look up answers." - FG

"When I started my clinical rotations I was always striving to impress, and it sometimes prevented me from asking critical questions. It is important to realize no one is expecting you to be a master clinician right out of the gate. As a student you should prepare for the many mistakes you will make and be humble enough to learn and grow from them." - TJ

"Be comfortable with asking lots of questions, even if you feel like you should know something. Have patience with yourself and practice what you find difficult." - MD

"You will never, and should never, be able to master your setting in the 6-12 weeks that you are placed there." - KR

5. Take responsibility for learning from your CI.

"When you are struggling, talk to your CI about it. Ask for time to study in the clinic if you need it. Ask for 1-on-1 time. They became a CI because they want to teach, but you have to let them know how. And ask as many questions as possible." - FG

"My CIs had no problem staying 10-15 minutes late with me or using our lunch time to discuss an article I found, a technique I was interested in, or a certain patient on our schedule. If your CI sees that you are trying, they will more than likely be happy to help." - BM


"Each clinical instructor offers a unique take on physical therapy, and checking all potential biases at the door is a must." - TJ
"If your clinic or instructor operates in a way that you find to be difficult, try to make the best of it by focusing on the positive, rather than the negative, aspects of the situation." - MD

7. Learn to communicate with the people you treat.

"One of the most valuable skills you can take away is the ability to interact and connect with your patients. If your patients don’t trust that you have listened and understand their needs, it doesn’t matter how many ‘tools’ are in your toolbox." - KR

"The best things you can do for your patient are to listen and explain. Often you will be the first person to explain their diagnosis to them in a way they can understand." - FG

"You’re not treating a patient. You’re treating a person." - MD

8. Don’t stop learning.

"The temptation when you finish 3 long years of school is to take a huge break. The problem is most people take years to get back to learning. Dedicate the first 5 years of your professional life to soaking up knowledge." - FG

"Don’t let your discomfort as a clinician scare you. Embrace it, because it will facilitate new learning opportunities. A good friend and physical therapist once told me, ‘If you are feeling comfortable in your day-to-day practice, you are probably doing something wrong.’" - TJ

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