



# Teaching

## – A career that complements day to day practice

### Author information

<sup>1</sup>Rachel Jackson entered the dental world as a dental nurse after qualifying as a medical illustrator. Rachel then became a dental therapist and tutor on the BSc Oral Health Science course at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) along with Linda Gunn and the team. Now entering education once again to become a dentist at the Institute of Dentistry Aberdeen, Rachel is currently bringing the arts to dentistry too, producing the Volume 229 *British Dental Journal* cover series.



DCP turned dental student **Rachel Jackson<sup>1</sup>**

discusses the benefits her teaching experience have had on her clinical practice and career development.

I have always thought that when you enter the dental profession in whatever role, you are deciding to become a perpetual student. I agree with Linda Gunn [in her article *Training to be an educator at UHI*, also in this issue of *BDJ Team*] when she suggests that we have (or should have) an ‘inquisitive nature’, though it is the dental landscape that can dictate where your educational needs may lie.

A focus on reflective practice and personal development creates a golden opportunity to achieve goals that ensure you meet the needs of your patients and team, but also achieve self-fulfilment. This will contribute to self-worth, a sense of value and maintain a positive mind in what is a pressured environment. This is important as we look to improve the mental health of the dental workforce today.

Standards of healthcare are of fundamental importance. To achieve effective clinical practice requires an evidence-based approach, excellent communication skills, reflective practice, audit and peer review. These are all qualities mentioned by Linda in her programme introduction. So, how might understanding the theory of education improve and/or help your own clinical practice?

### Carving a career path

I was working in the Public Dental Health Service, Highlands of Scotland and independent practice as a dental hygiene therapist. I was working to my full remit but still looking for a challenge. The potential benefits of exploring an academic teaching post locally were highlighted to me by my manager during my personal development review. I had graduated through the University of the Highlands and Islands and the reputation of the school of Oral Health Science was steadily growing. I had confidence that their teaching programme would be

comprehensive and potentially provide me with a diverse mix of skills to create a lovely balance to my working week.

I was right, because after my time working within the teaching environment, I regard this experience as one of the most creative, fundamental and rewarding avenues in my career development to date. The theory of education is a vast discipline but at its roots is a commitment to collective meaning, making and creating innovative ways to reach the educational needs of our developing workforce. Consequently, the skills acquired during that time serve me well within my practising and personal life today. So, on that note I hope to give you some insight into that experience.

### Staying up to date

Working within a teaching team, just as in practice, every move you make should originate from a sound evidence-base. To teach dental theory regularly means that you are constantly at the forefront of research within the dental field. Therefore, you soon begin to apply that within your own working world which improves patient care and brings about a sense of achievement and clinical competence and thus confidence. We would facilitate a weekly journal club and have students learn how to properly analyse data, statistics and quality of evidence. Through this process so did I.

### Leadership and management

Operating with a strong evidence-base creates a strong safety culture which boosts productivity, employee morale and employee retention. Participation in peer review of my own teaching, self-analysis and mentorship experience brought about an ability to become a model for others. I gained experience as a module leader, finals examiner and clinical supervisor and there was the week the General Dental Council came to visit! To take on this level of responsibility shapes your professional self. Modelled by your team, our healthcare and registrant standards can be maintained.

### Communication skills

Communication skills is a huge area but I will focus on human factors. Teaching experience brings about opportunities for you to understand people and develop non-technical skills that can complement technical competency. This is important in providing a holistic approach to the transfer of the theory to each and every student ... or patient.

In practice, these skills enhance teamwork, situational awareness and decision making, which improves workload and fatigue management. If we can understand people, we are more in tune with how we function and the

impact of that on others around us too. Human error is inevitable but having collaborative teams are the greatest asset to achieving safety and high reliability to our operations. Thus, a focus on cognitive and interpersonal skills allows us to effectively manage team-based, risk prone activity.

On a more personal note, if we consider these skills in aiding the professional-patient relationship, we begin to be able to address the learning and care needs of the person. The qualities of a dental professional can seem inevitably carved by sharp edges of science and technology. Coupled with the bindings of regulation, it would appear at times that we have lost focus of the personal side of illness. Yet, the ethos of dentistry has never changed and should continue to reflect devotion to the patients we treat.

Teaching knowledge allows us to create environments, activities and methods that focus on individual learner needs, developing a deeper understanding and habits of mind that aid future learning. This is particularly important today as we move further towards a

able to assess the quality of your own material and the successful understanding of your learners.

### Personal reflection and development

Today, the professional we are seen to be, and who we are as a person can be in conflict with one another. To balance the stress caused requires us to de-emphasise our role: not to devalue or lose dedication but to balance who we are as a person with who we are as a professional. Teaching experience has given me so many transferable skills and was a very rewarding, humble experience. This now allows me to create a role that fits the person I am and this ensures my profession gets the best of me.

### Steering the journey

Consider the effect of the recent pandemic on clinical practice and dental undergraduate education. Innovation has been accelerated by the COVID pandemic and should be seen as a gift and a chance to reinvent it. It is a time of great uncertainty, but also of great opportunity.

*‘Experiencing the role of tutor allows a degree of self-determination that enhances clinical judgement...’*

preventative approach to the provision of dental care. Consider periodontology, a dental disease that is firmly influenced by the turbulent bi-directional nature of systemic health and disease and greatly managed through patient education that aims to bring about behaviour change. Or paediatrics and special care dentistry, where barriers to care such as learning difficulties can impact on the outcome of treatment. Yet as all patients require a personalised care plan, the delivery of that plan requires proficient, effective communication. Experiencing the role of tutor allows a degree of autonomy and self-determination that enhances clinical judgement through situational awareness and heightened intuition that in turn supports adaptability of that care plan too.

### Team development

To understand learning styles, have an appreciation of an aims and learning outcome framework, applied to both small and larger group teaching. That also embraces a modern approach to blended learning and will complement your ability to deliver in house training for your team. You will gain confidence in developing your own teaching courses and be

Teaching experience is a vehicle by which you can move your own clinical practice forward.

Never underestimate the lasting impression education has upon you. Sometimes it can't be seen until you're left to find it and in those moments, you will discover a new, stronger you. The very point of education is precisely not to repeat what is already there but to bring something new to the scene.

Sometimes we focus on the end of a journey, the goal, the five-year plan etc, so much so that we forget to enjoy, embrace and value all of the things we experience along the way. If I had felt that any one element of my career to date was to be what would define me as a professional, I wouldn't have been lucky enough to have gained so much thus far. All of which continuously provides me with tools to place in that toolbox of life.

Having great managers, trustworthy people and a supportive family helps get you to where you want to go. So, on that note, I give thanks to the many professionals and students that have helped carve my career path. The one that continues to be steered by me.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-020-0465-z>