Skills for Teaching: A Problem-Based Learning Faculty Development Workshop

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Key Words: curriculum • teaching methods

Several converging issues within occupational therapy education highlight the importance of faculty development projects. First, there has been a proliferation of occupational therapy education programs. Schools are striving to prepare an adequate supply of practitioners to meet the demands for employment. One issue that has resulted from program expansion is a paucity of faculty members who are available to teach in either new or established educational programs. We need more faculty members.

Second, as a result of program proliferation, schools are often left with few options but to employ occupational therapy practitioners who are inadequately prepared as educators and, hence, are poorly prepared to meet the teaching demands of academia. Although many practitioners express interest in expanding their teaching activities from the clinic to the classroom, few have had specific training in teaching and classroom methods. The outcome is often problematic as practitioners with good intentions end up performing a role for which they are ill prepared. As a result, practitioners may experience frustration and difficulty with teaching, become discouraged, and decide on the basis of an unsatisfying experience not to continue teaching. Even more important is that students may suffer from an instructor’s lack of education for education and subsequent disillusionment. We need more competent faculty members.

Third, the literature reflecting opportunities for occupational therapy practitioners to develop specific teaching skills is sparse. There are overviews of careers in academia (Brayley, 1996) and descriptions of curricula (Royeen, 1995), specific courses (Peloquin & Davidson, 1993; Stern, 1997), and various teaching strategies that promote advanced skills (Neistadt, 1996; Peloquin & Babola, 1996; VanLeit, 1995). However, a common feature of these reports is that it appears that the faculty member receives information and practices skills in isolation. There is little, if any, opportunity to validate skill, compare and contrast technique with others, or have questions about specific teaching methods answered. It is interesting to note that these same principles applied to clinical practice are routine. Opportunities for instructors to experience some collegiality, validate their efforts, and translate the written description(s) into practice would enhance faculty development. Faculty members need more formal and informal learning opportunities.

Fourth, the occupational therapy literature related to educational methods reflects an increasing attention to problem-based learning (PBL) and case-based learning (CBL). Specific courses (Stern, 1997; VanLeit, 1995) and comprehensive curricula (Royeen, 1995; Sadlo, 1994;
A four-session PBL workshop was developed in response to discussions, student-directed learning, teacher as facilitator, and learning in context, are now emerging as relevant and exciting alternatives for educating future practitioners. *We need to explore innovative methods for teaching and learning.*

The purpose of this article is to describe a faculty development project that was developed for academic and fieldwork educators at the Duquesne University Occupational Therapy Department in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A four-session PBL workshop was developed in response to the aforementioned issues. Specific goals of the workshop were to (a) provide academic and fieldwork educators with continuing education regarding skills for teaching in classroom or clinical settings; (b) provide academic and fieldwork educators with an in-depth orientation to PBL; (c) enlist fieldwork educators’ participation in course design and classroom instruction; (d) recruit potential “tutors” for a planned PBL segment of an existing course; and (e) orient fieldwork educators to the occupational therapy program’s overall mission and philosophy, curriculum design, and course sequence, thus further enhancing the potential for classroom–clinic partnership.

**Program Participants**

In January 1997, the chairperson of the Duquesne University Occupational Therapy Department sent letters of invitation announcing a faculty development workshop to approximately 30 fieldwork educators who supervised Duquesne occupational therapy students. Before this mailing, discussions had taken place between the chairperson and myself regarding a consultation and faculty development project to introduce PBL into the occupational therapy curriculum. Fieldwork educators representing diverse areas of practice, including school systems, home health, physical rehabilitation, and mental health settings, were invited. In addition, all occupational therapy department faculty members were invited to attend the workshop. Twenty-one fieldwork educators, one faculty member, and the university’s director of the Center for Teaching Excellence responded to the invitation and attended a 2-hour workshop orientation session.

**Session I (Orientation)**

The purposes of this session were to introduce the participants to the faculty development project, present basic PBL principles, reorient the participants to the mission and philosophy of the occupational therapy program, and outline the subsequent sessions that would constitute the heart of the project. Several articles on PBL and CBL provided introductory content and background information to participants for their preparation for subsequent sessions. At the end of the session, participants completed an informal questionnaire that elicited their motivation for attending the workshop and their interest in and experience with PBL.

Most of the participants described having a range of teaching experiences, for example, supervising fieldwork students, delivering conference presentations, or giving guest lectures in courses. Responses to the questionnaire reflected a variety of reasons that had contributed to their interest in PBL. For example, some participants indicated interest in receiving more formal training in specific teaching methods to strengthen their skills as classroom and fieldwork educators:

In considering my part-time role in clinical training, I became interested in understanding methods that would help new clinicians to be “up and running” more quickly and confidently since our OT [occupational therapy] environments seem to be requiring them to be more prepared. Therefore, I did a significant amount of reading about clinical reasoning and started hearing more and more about PBL that caught my interest. When this opportunity arose, I thought of it as a chance to learn more and to be involved in PBL at an earlier stage in a person’s career development.

Others described the importance of the classroom–clinic relationship:

I became interested in participating in this course because of my strong interest in becoming an educator. Working with students or new therapists, I have noticed that problem solving and/or knowing what to do with new patients is a skill that is lacking in most of them. I feel this is a great way to initiate the thinking process and begin tying academics with the clinical setting.

Some expressed interest in developing skills that would enhance their ability to train students in sophisticated and efficient means of clinical reasoning and problem solving:

I am interested in exploring and applying this type of instruction in the classroom and in the clinic with the students at our facility. Have always encouraged the fieldwork students to use independent thinking and problem solving.

To be honest, I never heard of PBL prior to this invitation; however, I have recently had an increased concern and interest in clinical reasoning and the need to improve our skills as a profession. Lack of global problem solving, especially in nontraditional treatment areas, may be detrimental to the future of our practice.

Still another theme related to the desire to explore options for teaching:

Interested in entering academia—seemed like a good ‘entry-level’ approach. Increased interest in clinical reasoning process and desire to explore more.

In reviewing the participants’ reasons for attending the workshop, it was interesting to note that they virtually mirrored several of the reasons for conducting the workshop (i.e., recruiting new faculty members, providing continuing education opportunities for faculty members,
Session II

A 3-hour session was held 2 weeks after the orientation to provide participants with more details about PBL. Topics included characteristics of cases and problems, typical class session formats, PBL tutor characteristics, PBL tutor role, PBL student role, and an introduction to problem–case construction. Methods used to evaluate student and tutor performance were briefly described. Sample cases that had been developed for other PBL courses were provided for participants to review.

Because one of the goals of this project was to involve fieldwork educators in the design of a PBL segment for an existing course, at the end of this session, participants were asked to develop two sample cases or problems for this purpose. Cases and problems were forwarded to me for review.

Session III

A full-day training session was held 2 weeks later to immerse the group in the PBL process by having them participate in a PBL tutorial session. Although the primary focus of this workshop was not problem–case development, most of the participants had expressed interest in incorporating some aspect of PBL into their own practice. During the first part of the morning, the process of writing and editing cases was briefly explained, and several cases were distributed for the participants to review. The information regarding the development of course materials was included to enhance participants’ comprehensive understanding of the method and enable them to develop materials for their own use in clinical practice.

The remainder of the morning was devoted to factors that might influence a tutorial session. Participants expressed interest in anticipating difficulties that could arise during tutorial sessions. Their concerns included managing students who dominated discussions, encouraging all students to contribute to discussions, negotiating their own perceived tendency to supply answers rather than ask questions, and brainstorming questions to facilitate the discussion.

The afternoon segment was devoted to simulating a PBL tutorial experience. Participants were divided into two groups to participate in a 1 1/2-hour sample PBL tutorial. One participant in each group volunteered to facilitate the session, and each group was given a sample case to pursue according to a classroom format typical of PBL, which had already been described during the second session. After the practice sessions, the two groups rejoined to debrief the experience.

Session IV

The final 3-hour session was held 4 weeks later. Participants discussed their thoughts for implementing aspects of PBL in their day-to-day practice. Methods of evaluating student performance and the planned incorporation of PBL into the occupational therapy department’s curriculum were described. Also during this session, the chairperson of the occupational therapy department identified four workshop participants who had agreed to serve as tutors for a PBL component that was being integrated into an existing course. All participants were invited to observe the PBL tutorial sessions or other classroom activities and to assist in the evaluation of student performance in these sessions. Finally, participants completed an evaluation regarding the workshop and continued application of PBL.

Participants were asked to identify the potential for problem-based or case-based methods at their clinical site. Several opportunities were cited, including in-service training sessions to encourage staff members and students to reflect on current practice and brainstorm new approaches, to encourage staff members to “get out of a narrow focus,” and to “enhance OTR-COTA [occupational therapist–occupational therapy assistant] collaboration.” Participants also discussed the potential for using problem-based methods to resolve staff member conflicts and employee dilemmas, for example: “By brainstorming and problem solving other avenues and by talking through issues and coming up with different solutions.”

Participants also discussed how they had begun to apply content from this workshop to their clinical work. Many described having become aware of their own thought processes related to clinical practice. Others described having modified their style of interacting with staff members and students to foster their thinking and problem-solving skills. For example:

- Changing the way I answer/ask questions of students and staff. In discussing student supervision techniques with my staff therapists, I have tried to apply it to some patients who I am comfortable with treating that I just may be missing or omitting something I just worked today.
- I have become more aware of the thought process that I use to get from point A to point B. I have also incorporated parts of the process into student supervision.
- Increased my awareness of the learning process/evaluating my own skills as I work with children as well as assisting staff to do their own problem solving.

Participants also suggested improvements for subsequent PBL faculty development workshops. Most seemed satisfied with the workshop, with the most frequent suggestions involving opportunity to work through additional cases, applying the process to a tutorial session, and the potential for video presentation of a tutorial session.
Follow-up sessions are planned for consultation in clinical settings as well as a follow-up workshop for participants to return to the classroom and discuss implementation of PBL since the original workshop.

Conclusion

This faculty development project addressed several important issues within occupational therapy education and practice. First, it represented one occupational therapy department's commitment to providing continuing education and professional development to academic and fieldwork educators. This workshop provided department faculty members and fieldwork educators with continuing education in an innovative method of teaching that could be used in a variety of settings. Second, the workshop addressed the faculty recruitment dilemma by providing clinicians with a positive experience in education for occupational therapy. Faculty development projects that are directed toward a spectrum of academic and fieldwork faculties are important because many occupational therapy faculty members begin their teaching career as clinical supervisors and fieldwork educators. Third, it introduced and trained potential faculty "tutors" in PBL and CBL methods. Participants now have sufficient knowledge and practical skill to be able to facilitate PBL tutorials. Finally, the fieldwork educators were oriented, or reoriented, to the occupational therapy program's overall mission and philosophy, curriculum design, and course sequence and to reinforcing the importance of classroom-clinic partnerships.

References


