How Can the Academic Culture Move Toward Occupation-Centered Education?

A key factor in the development of occupation-centered practice is the transition within academia to occupation-centered education. Educational programs must be able to prepare clinicians who value and understand occupation and who have the ability to readily and articulately translate occupation to meaningful therapy programs at the individual and group levels of intervention. In order for educational programs to make this transition, academicians face two levels of challenge. They must value and understand occupation themselves if they are to translate that knowledge to courses, learning objectives, evaluative activities, and educational outcomes. Educational programs must also initiate a voluntary curriculum change. The faculty members must see the need for change, initiate changes, and be motivated to engage in the demanding internal debate, study, and development that underlie substantive curriculum change. The occupational therapy faculty members at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC—CH) have completed a 3-year process of curriculum revision that establishes occupational science as the foundation of the curriculum. The faculty members revamped the entire curriculum from mission statement to educational outcomes. The experience of the UNC—CH faculty members is an example of faculty members voluntarily meeting the challenges of developing an occupation-centered curriculum and successfully working through the change process as a team.

Although both challenges are important, it is the second level of challenge that must be addressed first in making the transition to occupation-centered education. The heart of the second challenge is change—how we respond, when we respond, and why we respond to change. Like others, occupational therapists can respond to change as either change recipients or change resisters. We face change by accommodating and adapting to the demands and requests of our organizations and environments or by being quietly noncompliant and holding on to the comfort of the status quo. I believe that we in occupational therapy education cannot afford to be anything other than change initiators. However, the role is demanding. In order to initiate change, faculty members must function as a team, and the cultural surround of the occupational therapy program must provide the resources and incentives for functioning as a team of change initiators.

What does it mean for occupational therapy faculty members to function as a team? Katzenbach and Smith (1993) described teams as groups who are deeply committed to their purpose, goals, approaches, and to one another. Teams are energized by performance challenges and disciplined in terms of expecting mutual accountability from all members. Teams are able to develop complementary skills among individual members, to balance individual and group performance, and to value personal growth and collective work products as equal outcomes. An occupational therapy faculty team cannot function as an aggregate of individual scholars, teachers, and researchers. If academic programs are to initiate change, the talents of individuals must be collectively focused on a clear agenda with a common purpose. Individuals must see the outcomes of change as positive in terms of personal benefit and greater good. A leader who is energized by change and can convey that energy and vision to the group is key to the culture of the team. The history of curriculum development at the UNC—CH occupational therapy program reflects the belief that an effective curriculum in a practice profession must be constantly evolving to address and lead changes in the profession. As a result, the faculty members viewed the initiation of substantial curriculum revision as a natural occurrence. Curriculum change is an integral component of the program’s culture.

The cultural surround of the occupational therapy program must provide the resources, opportunities, and rewards to foster change (Bruner, 1996). Leadership is certainly a central requirement of that cultural setting. A change leader provides the faculty team with just the right blend of vision, motivation, and structure. The change leader must have autonomy and freedom to act within the larger institutional culture. At the
same time the institutional environment must provide clarity of mission and purpose as a guide for change.

Another critical resource of a supportive culture is time. Time creates opportunity. The faculty needs time to develop as a team, time for study and thoughtful conversation and debate, and time for integrated thought and action. The institutional culture must also impose time constraints so that change is implemented and results achieved. A culture that values change understands the tension between urgency and carefulness that typifies change. At UNC-CH the university mission encourages innovation in education and curriculum development. Educational programs share the responsibility and authority to make decisions regarding curriculum design and content. Within occupational therapy, both the program director and a senior faculty member led the curriculum development work. The director provided financial resources for consultants and operating expenses, scheduled weekly meeting times for curriculum work, and participated as a working member of the team. The senior faculty member led the development work by providing a planning model to structure and guide the group, coordinating and synthesizing work in progress, and facilitating the group work sessions. The two leaders met regularly to review and refine the work process and outcomes. This leadership model provided the necessary combination of experience, direction, authority, and financial and emotional support.

Finally, the cultural surround must reward change initiators. Planning and implementing change is intrinsically motivating initially. As the project matures there are both individual and team rewards. Ultimately, the institutional environment outside the occupational therapy program must provide recognition if the energy and commitment of the team are to be sustained. There must be a cultural fit between the occupational therapy faculty members and their aspirations in terms of change and development and the institutional attitude toward growth and innovation. It is not impossible to initiate change in a nonresponsive environment. Change initiation in a stagnant culture requires additional action on the environment to build acceptance of changes generating out of occupational therapy. Recognition for the curriculum development work at UNC—CH has occurred at several levels. Faculty members have presented the new curriculum to occupational therapy colleagues in academic and clinical practice. Positive collegial response has strengthened the faculty team’s commitment to the study and development of occupational science and occupation-centered education and practice. Within the university two specific actions exemplify the level of respect given the faculty team’s work. The UNC—CH Graduate School quickly granted approval of the curriculum revision and complimented the faculty team on their thorough and scholarly approach. The dean of the UNC—CH School of Medicine approved a name change for the program to the Division of Occupational Science, an indication of his support of and confidence in the newly revised curriculum.

Our individual attitudes about change, the skill of the change leader, and the change atmosphere of our immediate environment all converge to create an academic culture that can advance the profession. The issue facing occupational therapy academicians is how to create a culture in which change is celebrated and reinforced so that occupation-centered education will flourish. With a cultural background of change, occupation-centered curriculum development becomes an ongoing intellectual challenge that weaves together individual and group accomplishments and builds a potent academic base for practice. Occupational therapy academicians can make the transition to an occupation-centered culture first by embracing the change process and then by focusing their scholarly activities on understanding and advancing occupation as the center of occupational therapy research, education, and practice.

References


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