The Competent Scholar

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Scholars in occupational therapy are responsible for ensuring that the profession's body of knowledge is so formulated that it provides the foundation for carrying out the work of the profession effectively, compassionately, and ethically. This article delineates the knowledge, skills, and typical personal attributes of competent scholars. Some suggestions are offered about how the occupational therapy profession might increase its number of competent scholars.

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ed toward many different kinds of phenomena—historical, supernatural, physical, or insubstantial (i.e., values, beliefs, ideas). Scholars are often identified by the phenomena they study. Thus, following this list of phenomena, a scholar may be a historian, theologian, scientist, or philosopher.

Third, the end-product of scholarly inquiry, that which scholars work toward creating, is an integrated body of abstract information. An integrated body of abstract information is information that is organized into a complete, interrelated whole. The whole to be created is well-defined and held paramount, with inquiry clearly directed toward the completion of that whole. In contrast, nonscholars may engage in some aspect of scholarly inquiry but do so with minimal sense of the whole that is to be created or how such a whole is created. What is set forth by the nonscholar is unconnected, often unrelated bits and pieces of information. For example, whereas a scholar is concerned about developing a theory that accurately describes a given set of phenomena, the nonscholar may be concerned about testing a hypothesis with no larger goal in sight.

Although not always attained, the integrated body of abstract information that a scholar seeks to create is one of high quality, one that is accurate, efficacious in its use, or heuristic. The term used to designate the quality of an integrated body of abstract information depends somewhat on the type of information created. For example, a theory is considered to be accurate when it correctly describes the set of phenomena it purports to describe; a frame of reference is considered to be efficacious when its use results in accurate problem identification and successful problem remediation; a philosophical argument is considered to be heuristic when it leads to greater understanding or more fruitful investigation of the issue being examined. The quality of an integrated body of abstract information is determined by appropriate and adequate evaluation. Evaluation usually takes place initially in the process of creating the integrated body of abstract information and shortly thereafter. However, it is also evaluated through the test of time. What initially seemed to be of high quality and generated considerable excitement may, on later evaluation and reflection, continue to be so regarded, or it may be found to be wanting in some way.

Finally, a competent scholar may participate in other professional roles, such as the role of educator, clinician, or consumer of the end-product of scholarly inquiry. But these roles are considered to be separate and different from the role of a scholar.

Scholars in Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy’s body of knowledge is here described as consisting of scientific information and philosophical information. Thus, most scholars in occupational therapy are scientists or philosophers who are engaged in examining, further developing, refining, and evaluating the profession’s body of knowledge.

Scientists

Scientists are persons who use the methods of scholarly inquiry and, when appropriate, research designs or theoretical information in order to accurately describe the physical world or to address specific practical problems and issues. Scientists in occupational therapy focus their attention primarily on enhancing the scientific portion of the profession’s body of knowledge by

- Formulating and refining the frames of reference used by the profession to guide evaluation and intervention relative to the multiple elements of human experience (in performance areas and performance components) that constitute the profession’s domain of concern
- Evaluating frames of reference relative to (a) the safety, reliability, and validity of their guidelines for problem identification and (b) the interpractitioner reliability of their guidelines for problem remediation; the safety, effectiveness, and efficiency of their use relative to various populations; when, how, and under what circumstances they are best used; and the optimal duration and frequency of use
- Developing and refining screening tools, including establishing their reliability, validity; and, when appropriate, normative values
- Designing, conducting, and interpreting outcomes studies of occupational therapy programs involving the combined use of a variety of frames of reference in relation to persons with various diagnosed conditions
- Identifying and developing theoretical information needed by the profession either as an independent scientist or through directing the inquiry of scientists within whatever discipline is responsible for studying the phenomena of concern

Philosophers

Philosophers are persons who use the methods of scholarly inquiry and the various analytic techniques of philosophy to address the ideas, beliefs, values, assumptions, and arguments that are pivotal to a society’s (or a segment of a society’s) thinking and actions and about which it has questions. The analytic techniques of philosophy are specialized procedures used to gain greater understanding. Some examples of analytic techniques are comparative analysis, consideration in broader contexts, examination of ethical components, formulation or critical evaluation of arguments, and exploration of implications. Philosophers in occupational therapy focus their attention primarily on enhancing the philosophical portion of the profession’s body of knowledge by

- Identifying questions about, examining, clarifying, and, when deemed appropriate, making changes in statements regarding the profession’s code of ethics, philosophical assumptions, and core values and
attitudes.
- Considering epistemological questions regarding the profession's body of knowledge, including what it is or should be, and how it is or should be, developed, organized, evaluated, and used.
- Identifying, examining, clarifying, and taking positions on philosophical issues of concern to the profession for the ultimate purpose of enabling involved parties to make well-considered, wise decisions in resolving the issues. Philosophical issues are commonly related to practice; professional and postprofessional education; the nature, goals, and future direction of the profession; and the interactions of the profession with society.

General Knowledge and Skills

The general knowledge and skills of a competent scholar in occupational therapy, first, are an in-depth understanding of the profession's current body of knowledge. This understanding includes an appreciation of the needs of the persons to whom we offer assistance, how the profession's body of knowledge is used in practice, the requirements and constraints of the profession and of society, and the nature of the information required by the profession.

Second, a competent scholar has general knowledge and skills particular to the kind of inquiry in which he or she is engaging, whether it be scientific inquiry or philosophical inquiry. Depending on the kind of inquiry, the competent scholar understands
- What science (basic and applied) or philosophy is and is not
- The nature of the integrated bodies of abstract information that are developed through scientific inquiry or philosophical inquiry
- How to read scientific or philosophical literature;
- How the methods of scholarly inquiry are used in scientific inquiry or philosophical inquiry
- The processes involved in scientific inquiry (basic and applied) or philosophical inquiry and how to engage in the these processes

Third, in terms of general knowledge and skills, a competent scholar is able to communicate the results of his or her inquiry to others. Scholarly information that is not shared will not enhance the profession's body of knowledge. The competent scholar is able to communicate the results of inquiry in verbal and written forms in a manner that is clear, concise, and easily understood by all interested parties.

Knowledge and Skills Related to Use of the Methods of Scholarly Inquiry

The competent scholar in occupational therapy has mastered the knowledge underlying the methods of scholarly inquiry and is skilled in their use. These methods are used throughout the process of scholarly inquiry and in both scientific inquiry and philosophical inquiry. They may be used singly or in combination. Although usually described as discrete entities, as in this article, there is usually some overlap among the methods of scholarly inquiry. The various methods of scholarly inquiry are listed and defined in Table 1.

Observation and sound reasoning are considered to be fundamental to other methods because, in many ways, the other methods are either components of, or entail the use of, observation or sound reasoning. The next seven methods of scholarly inquiry, from formulating questions to seeking relationships, are primarily concerned with gathering and processing information. Although all of these methods are important, the most essential is formulating questions. Questions give direction to the process of scholarly inquiry and influence all that follows, for example, what is observed, how phenomena are analyzed, what interpretations are made. Formulating questions is more than developing a "good" question; it is a way of thinking that permeates all scholarly inquiry.

The methods of drawing conclusions, making interpretations, and making judgments are usually used in the final phase of an inquiry. They are end activities, or culminating steps, that give substance to the information that has been gathered and processed. The methods of trial and error, reflection, and speculation are facilitating operations because they enhance the use of the other methods of scholarly inquiry. They are often used immediately before, or in conjunction with, other methods of scholarly inquiry. One factor that differentiates these three methods is the extent to which they are goal directed. In trial and error, a goal is kept clearly in mind. Reflection may or may not be goal directed. When there is a goal, it tends to be far less precise than in trial and error. Speculation is far less goal directed than trial and error or reflection.

Personal Attributes

In addition to mastery of the knowledge and skills, competent scholars seem to have some common personal attributes. The majority of these attributes are learned behaviors and, thus, can be acquired. A few, however, may be an inherent part of a person's personality. Although personality attributes may not be learned, when present, they can be further developed by oneself and can be fostered in others.

The most typical personal attribute shared by competent scholars is a love of learning and knowledge. They are curious about many things, particularly about what is not known. They find pleasure in reading widely, thinking, and playing with ideas.

Scholars are self-motivated and self-directed. Although many scholars collaborate with others regularly, they are comfortable working alone, finding pleasure in the solitary work that is often a necessary part of scholarly inquiry.

Scholars are skeptical, ever questioning, and iconoclastic: nothing is accepted as "true" or at face value. Scholars often view the world from a somewhat atypical perspective,
allowing them to see what others, who may have a more conventional perspective, may not see. They often have the courage to take a different course, to march to their own drummer.

Scholars are critical and judgmental regarding their work and seek out and consider the opinions of those whom they respect. Most scholars accept, and often enjoy, challenges to their work and ideas. They are relatively accepting of objections, criticism, and conflicts; some even relish an occasional good intellectual scrimmage.

Scholars are disciplined, careful thinkers and give meticulous attention to detail; the desire for excellence, even perfection, is always there. In addition, they tend to have considerable tenacity, perseverance in the face of obstacles, and tolerance for lack of progress when work proceeds slowly.

Developing Competent Scholars

Occupational therapy, like other professions, can continue to prosper and grow only when it has a sufficient number of competent scholars who are dedicated to enhancing the profession’s body of knowledge. Occupational therapy lacks sufficient numbers of such persons, and this deficit must be addressed. More so than some other professions, occupational therapy recognizes and honors its scholars. However, sufficient attention is not given to the development of competent scholars. Following are some suggestions to facilitate this process:

- Place more emphasis on the scholarly component of occupational therapy in the materials used to recruit new members to the profession. The present focus on occupational therapy as “a helping profession” is not likely to attract persons who are interested in becoming scholars.
- Introduce professional students to the role of the scholar in occupational therapy. Students should learn about scholars’ work, perspective, and how they do their work and why. The importance of scholars to the profession should be emphasized.
- Dedicate some postprofessional education programs primarily to the development of scholars to assist students in acquiring the knowledge and skills requisite to becoming a competent scholar. The goal of such programs would not be diluted by giving attention to the knowledge and skills required for other professional roles.
- Emphasize repeatedly in the professional literature how important a sufficient and adequate body of knowledge is to the profession and the need for therapists to become competent scholars.

Summary

Competent scholars in occupational therapy are those scientists and philosophers who are dedicated to the continuous development of the profession’s body of knowledge. Such scholars have particular knowledge, skills, and person-
al attributes that they use to ensure that the profession has adequate information to meet the needs of the individual and society. To foster the development of competent scholars, perhaps we should first view the role as that which it truly is—challenging, fun, interesting, rewarding, and, given proper instruction and practice, fairly easy to learn. ▲

Selected Readings


