Pragmatism as a Foundation for Occupational Therapy Curricula

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This paper shows that the founders of occupational therapy adhered to the philosophy of pragmatism. A structure for curriculum design based on this philosophy is presented. It is proposed that clarifying our foundational philosophy to students by means of this structure would enhance their synthesis of occupational therapy concepts.

Curriculum design is an ongoing concern for even the long-established occupational therapy program. Curricula are under constant review. As a result, educational programs have exhibited considerable change over the years (Colman, 1984). In particular, two changes in occupational therapy curricula are of significance. Early occupational therapy education emphasized activities; a shift occurred during the 1960s when a greater emphasis was placed on scientific content. The inclusion of sensory integration (Ayres, 1975) and neurodevelopmental content material (Bobath, 1979; Rood, 1962; Voss, Ionta, & Myers, 1985) are such examples. The second change occurred toward the late 1970s, when additional emphasis was placed on issues of theory development and philosophic content (Kielhofner, 1982; Mosey, 1970; Yerxa, 1979).

One reason for these two major changes may have been feelings of professional inadequacy. The more “scientific” and “professional” a discipline becomes, the more status and recognition it receives and the more easily it can obtain reimbursement for its services. As professionalization became the goal (Yerxa, 1967; Fidler, 1979), occupational therapy, as well as other professions, placed greater emphasis on scientific theoretical content to gain recognition and status.

As curriculum changes took place, the original values were not always retained in modern education, except in the form of assumptions. The themes which early occupational therapists held dear were no longer understood and therefore undervalued. Early precepts were considered inadequate for delivering practice. Scientific rationales were sought; new theories were developed and debated. Disparities between the old assumptions and the new theories created a conflict and caused anxiety for the profession, akin to the Kuhnian crises Kielhofner (1982) describes. The profession’s foundational philosophy and the new emphasis on science were not synthesized. The stress caused by this lack of a synthesis is reflected in the various and sometimes conflicting definitions and models used to describe the profession.

One reason that occupational therapy has suffered from the lack of a strong, professional identity is that its foundational principles were never clearly defined, not even by the founders of the profession. The foundational beliefs of the profession were not clearly stated in the early literature. The only exception is the paper published by Meyer in 1922, but even Meyer’s paper offers no citations and therefore no support for his position.

The story of the history of occupational therapy is usually told as though it began in 1917 at a curative...
workshop in New York State. However, occupational therapy as a profession was influenced by the intellectual and social ideas of the times and by national and worldwide events such as immigration, war, and the industrial revolution (Breines, 1986a, 1986b).

These influences led to the development of the first school for the instruction of occupation as a therapeutic modality (Dunton, 1915). The Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy (CSCP), in 1908. Associated with the CSCP were Emil G. Hirsch, Julia Lathrop, Eleanor Clarke Slagle, and Mary Potter Brooks Meyer, the wife of Adolf Meyer. These leaders were influenced by ideas from the philosophy of pragmatism.

Adherents to pragmatism included Charles Peirce, the philosopher; William James, the psychologist and philosopher; George Herbert Mead, the sociologist and philosopher; and John Dewey, the educator, philosopher, and social activist. Mead and Dewey were faculty members at the University of Chicago.

Pragmatism as a philosophy is based on development and relational theories of Darwin and Hegel (Ayer, 1968). It describes the growth of knowledge through change and adaptation. It is a concept of holism, where the parts and the whole and the relationship between them are substantiated. It is a philosophy of mind/body integration and time/space unity. Pragmatism is considered a philosophy of time, history, or evolution because of its concern with the relationship or continuity between aspects of change. These concepts of time and evolution are addressed by Meyer (1922) and by Emil G. Hirsch (1892). The latter was a founder of the University of Chicago (D. E. Hirsch, 1968) and of CSCP (Dunton, 1915). Pragmatism assumes that change is adaptive, that human development and function recapitulate phylogenetic and historical sequences, and that active participation contributes to the development of the individual and society as a whole. Pragmatism describes the development of knowledge of the world for the individual and for society. This knowledge development progresses through egocentric, exocentric, and consensual orientations (Breines, 1986a, 1986b).

The University of Chicago was a center for study and practice based on pragmatic principles. Formal and informal relationships were developed with the community. Dewey's Laboratory School (Mayhew and Edwards, 1936) and Jane Addams' (1925) Hull House were two examples of community outreach efforts based on pragmatic principles ("Tribute to Eleanor Clarke Slagle," 1938, p. 13). In addition, the Arts and Crafts Society, housed at Hull House, was founded in Chicago by Professor Oscar Triggs (1902), another University colleague.

Hull House was a center where philosophy and practicality met. Julia Lathrop and Dewey conducted a club there devoted to the study of philosophy (Addams, 1935), and the center was used to meet the social and health needs of the community. The University and the Hull House community formed a tight network of scholars and practitioners devoted to pragmatism and its demonstration. Their focus was on meeting the needs of the individual and the needs of society in mutual benefit, an idea inherent in the philosophy of pragmatism. Hull House was a center where the themes of pragmatism were tried in the community in many forms. One such experiment was the CSCP (Addams, 1935).

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with the profession's original thinking. We must make
the following clear:

1. Time and space, mind and body are unified in
active occupation.
2. Active occupation structures development for
the individual and for society.
3. Human development progresses from orienta-
tions of egocentricity to exocentricity and
consensuality, replicating evolution.
4. All elements of performance influence one
another because of the interactive nature of all
systems.
5. The subjective nature of human beings is ref-
lected in their performance and must be res-
pected.
6. The uniqueness of individuals is counter-
balanced by their relationship with their com-

munity.
7. Science and philosophy must be united to un-
derstand and enhance human occupation.
8. Grading activity along evolitional and de-
velopmental sequences enhances learning and
performance, and therefore health.

These ideas which formed the basis for the
founders' beliefs about occupational therapy are
themes inherent in the philosophy of pragmatism. If
these themes are made explicit, students learning to
be occupational therapists can recognize the purpose
and relationships of the material they must study, de-
spite the diversity of the topics. Neglecting to make
explicit the relationship between our foundational
philosophy and our educational system inhibits the
synthesis for the student, for only some students are
capable of creating this synthesis on their own. This
fragmenting effect is antithetical to the principles of
occupational therapy and the precepts of pragmatism.

In my recent book (Breines, 1986b) I developed
a schematic for the structure of educational programs,
which takes into account the overall concept of the
profession, as well as the component aspects of indi-
cidual curricula and institutions. The schematic re-

presents an approximation of the topics that ordinar-
ily compose the education of occupational therapists,
organized according to a developmental systems ap-

proach. It is meant to expose the varied focus of oc-

cupational therapy education. However, it should be
noted that this fractioning is artificial; no experience
can separate the egocentric, exocentric, and consen-
sual aspects of life's activities. Table 1 represents this
model for curriculum design. If occupational therapy
curricula are built on this model, faculty members and
students will be able to recognize the relationship
and relevance of the diverse course content to the
conceptual whole of the curriculum.

It is acknowledged that, for many reasons,
courses at different schools differ in content, se-
quence, and emphasis. Additionally, students come to
occupational therapy education with greatly varying
skills and preparation. Despite this diversity of educa-
tion and preparation, I propose that the model pre-
sented here can provide a common structure on
which communication can be built and a synthesis
can be effected. The model is designed to serve as an
example for the analysis of specific educational cur-
ricula. It can provide the wherewithal for assessing
the content of individual curricula and can serve as an

| Table 1 |

A Conceptual Organization of Occupational Therapy Curricula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Topics</th>
<th>Subsubconcepts</th>
<th>Subconcepts</th>
<th>Egocentricity</th>
<th>Exocentricity</th>
<th>Consensuality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Kinesiology</td>
<td>Crafts</td>
<td>Group Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Neurology</td>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>Group Therapy</td>
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<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
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<td>Theory</td>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
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<td>Anatomy</td>
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<td>Psychology</td>
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<td>Parenting</td>
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<td>Communications</td>
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<td>Graded Activities</td>
<td>NDT</td>
<td>SI</td>
<td>Play/Leisure</td>
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<td>Activity Analysis</td>
<td>PNF</td>
<td>Stereognosis</td>
<td>Augmentative</td>
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<td>Activity Synthesis</td>
<td>Sensory</td>
<td>ADL</td>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Stimulation</td>
<td>Adaptive</td>
<td>Task Groups</td>
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<td>Body Image,</td>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td>Prevocational</td>
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<td>Scheme</td>
<td>Splinting</td>
<td>Training</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Gnosis</td>
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<td>Vocational roles</td>
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</table>

example for particularizing models of individual curricula so that they can be used as teaching tools for integrated learning. With such a structure, change can continue, permitting a constant upgrading of course content, while retaining and making explicit the conceptual framework to which the profession's founders adhered.

References


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