Back to the Future: New Approaches to Fieldwork Education

Historically, occupational therapy has relied on the fieldwork component of our professional preparation to acculturate occupational therapy students to the profession. In 1923, the first standards requiring fieldwork experiences were approved by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). Today, fieldwork continues to function as the critical link between the academic and service delivery worlds. Although the content and timing of fieldwork have been debated over the years, the value of this educational endeavor has never been questioned (Presseller, 1983). In completing an alumni survey for the University of New Hampshire, a graduate from the 1960s reminded us that her role as fieldwork educator is intimately linked to her identity as an occupational therapist.

My life as an occupational therapist has been a rewarding one. The profession is challenging and has afforded me many opportunities: to practice, to make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities, to affect the professional lives of people whom I have supervised, to help students acquire clinical skills, to teach aspiring occupational therapists, and to work with and befriend other committed professionals (E. B. Crepeau, personal communication, July 10, 1994).

As this therapist reflects on her career, she illustrates to us that we strive to help our consumers find meaning in their lives while simultaneously helping students to find meaning in their new careers. Preparing future occupational therapists is a professional responsibility that is shared among all practitioners whether they work in practice or educational settings. Thus, although trends in health care and education have shifted dramatically, our commitment to fieldwork has remained constant.

Within the past decade, interest in the fieldwork component of the professional preparation of occupational therapists has increased. Christie, Joyce, and Mueller (1981, 1985) identified fieldwork as a neglected yet essential component of professional preparation. Since 1985 many noteworthy efforts have been made to remove fieldwork from its neglected status. Examples of these efforts include establishment of a Fieldwork Education Program Manager at the AOTA National Office, establishment of regional fieldwork consultants, more fieldwork content in annual conferences, publication of the self-study curricula Self-Paced Instruction for Clinical Educators and Supervisors (SPICES), (Crepeau & LeGuar, 1991), establishment of the AOTA Education Special Interest Section, numerous committees appointed to study our fieldwork systems, and more publications related to fieldwork in our professional journals. Moreover, occupational therapists providing fieldwork experiences are now called fieldwork educators in recognition that they facilitate fieldwork students' learning (AOTA, 1991).

About This Issue

This special issue of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy (AJOT) devoted to fieldwork is yet another step toward moving fieldwork from the neglected status to the forefront of our professional concerns. We view this issue as a scaffolding for further development and research of our approaches to fieldwork education. By articulating the various approaches that are used in both Level I and Level II fieldwork and explicating our underlying assumptions, we can work toward testing the value and efficacy of the various approaches.

This issue is organized around several recurrent themes in both health care and education. The trends in occupational therapy fieldwork education are reflected in the ever-changing, complex society in which we live. In the
1971 Eleanor Clarke Slagle Lecture. Geraldine L. Finn stated that "in order for a profession to maintain its relevance, it must be aware of the times, interpreting its contribution to mankind in accordance with the needs of the times" (p. 59). With current health care reform, our profession's contributions are changing; likewise, fieldwork educators are challenged to ensure that students have relevant entry-level competencies as practitioners. As Americans moved from an industrial society to a knowledge- and service-oriented society, our expectations for health care shifted. What we now live in is a health care environment that emphasizes cost containment and realistic functional outcomes. As health care delivery programs struggle to maintain their competitive edge, many programs have dissolved, merged, or dramatically altered their staffing patterns. As a result, fieldwork educators need to support new practitioners so they can engage successfully in emerging health care processes.

The structural changes of the health care delivery system and the changing needs of the population have led to a reexamination of health care practitioners' competencies and related educational mandates. These competencies and mandates have been delineated in two reports that are receiving significant attention within government, health care, and educational agencies. In Healthy America: Practitioner for 2005: An Agenda for Action for U.S. Health Professional Schools (Shugars, O'Neill, & Bader, 1991), future practitioner competencies are proposed. In response to these suggested competencies, occupational therapists must be ready to (a) engage in multicultural, community-based care; (b) ensure cost-effective and appropriate care; (c) collaborate with team members and families in coordinated care programs; (d) provide validation for clinical practice focusing on functional outcomes; (e) present information regarding health promotion and disease prevention; and (f) be excellent communicators with all audiences. The second report, Health Professions Education for the Future: Schools in Service to the Nation (O'Neil, 1993), charged health care profession schools to (a) redefine their educational core, (b) develop curricular flexibility, (c) provide clinical education programs in emerging settings, (d) foster environments that promote innovation and leadership, (e) promote interdisciplinary activity, (f) recruit and mentor students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and (g) conduct research validating outcomes and studying emerging health care issues. Clearly, fieldwork educators in collaboration with their academic colleagues will need to provide practical experiences addressing emerging issues such as quality of life, client self-determination, advocacy, health promotion, disease prevention, cross-cultural effectiveness, consumer education, consultation, cost containment strategies, validation of services, cooperation, use of personnel other than occupational therapy practitioners who assist in the delivery of occupational therapy services, and community-based health care alternatives.

Fieldwork educators can be role models who prepare students to address these emerging issues and provide the foundation for ongoing professional development after fieldwork is completed.

Regardless of the final outcomes for a national health care policy, the health care system will be reorganized. Fieldwork educators must prepare future practitioners to work in a new health care system and to work effectively as collaborative team members. Educational strategies on campuses as well as in fieldwork settings need to accommodate to these new directions. It is no serendipity that educators are embracing different educational approaches such as cooperative group learning, problem-based learning, case study methodology, clinical reasoning seminars, and collaborative education (Albanese & Mitchell, 1993; Cohn, 1993; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Loichhead & Whimbey, 1987; Zenni, First, & Haifer, 1994). These educational approaches, which are viable for both academic and fieldwork education, prepare entry-level practitioners to be responsive to the needs of health care systems rather than teaching a limited set of skill competencies.

Hence we are concerned with the effect that health care reform will have on our fieldwork placement options and how fieldwork educators will facilitate entry-level practitioners' transition to these new roles for occupational therapy. Many of the articles in this issue provide us with a variety of fieldwork education methodologies to guide us through this rapid transformation. These articles may provide fieldwork educators with a framework to review their current fieldwork program objectives regarding their ability to truly prepare the practitioner for the years ahead and may entice some readers to become fieldwork educators.

Our fieldwork programs need to reflect the current trends in health care and education. Accordingly, several of the articles in this issue address these trends. For example, the article by Meyers (1995) highlights the importance of monetary and nonmonetary considerations in establishing and operating fieldwork programs. Reflecting yet another trend, Griswold and Strassler's (1995) description of fieldwork programs in the public schools offers an innovative example of how to implement fieldwork in nontraditional health care settings where consultation is a critical role of the occupational therapist. Rydeen, Kautzmann, Cowan and Benzinger (1995) use Level I fieldwork as a springboard for exposing community programs in rural settings to the value of occupational therapy to address the trend toward community-based health care.

Continuing to look at the need for novel approaches to fieldwork, two recent graduates, Phillips and Legaspi (1995), share their experience in a 12-month internship; their article illustrates how the length and type of work spend at a facility can greatly influence their educational experience. Opacich (1995), in her "The Issue Is" column, invites us to explore our history to understand how our current fieldwork system has developed. She argues that we need to move away from describing our fieldwork experiences in medical model terms and return to the core values and beliefs embedded in the writings of the founders of our profession. She proposes a variety of frameworks for describing our fieldwork programs. Hamlin, MacRae, and DeBrakeleer (1995) have attempted to operationalize the biopsychosocial framework proposed by Opacich and share their findings with us. They provide the link between Opacich's theoretical ideas and the application of alternative fieldwork models to service delivery settings.

The shortage of fieldwork placements available to meet the increasing demand has created a national crisis for...
fieldwork education. Historically, occupational therapists have used a one-to-one approach to fieldwork supervision in which the supervisors model the expected behaviors and competencies and gradually transfer consumer care responsibilities to their students. Although this approach to fieldwork has functioned adequately in the past, it is no longer viable, because we have more students who need fieldwork experiences than the one-to-one approach can accommodate. A growing interest in occupational therapy, which has been predicted to be a viable career well into the year 2010 (Silvergleit, 1994), has resulted in a tremendous increase in the number of qualified applicants to academic programs. Within the past 2 years many existing academic programs have increased their enrollments, and 48 schools in the United States are currently developing occupational therapy programs (Silvergleit, 1994). This infusion of students coupled with adherence to a one-to-one model of supervision creates a severe logjam, because there are not enough fieldwork opportunities to meet the demands of increased numbers of students.

This crisis has forced our profession to explore creative alternatives to the one-to-one model of supervision. Interest in collaborative learning, a form of indirect teaching in which the instructor states the problem and organizes the students to work it out in peer groups, has blossomed (Bruffe, 1987; Crist, 1993; DeGlute & Ladowsky, 1993; Hogger, 1994; Ladowsky, 1993; Ladowsky & Healey, 1990; Stern, 1994; Tiberius & Gaitman, 1985). This interest in collaborative learning is also motivated by recent challenges to our understanding of what knowledge is socially constructed through interactions with people, we can see the value of learning occurring among peers. Some occupational therapy fieldwork educators are beginning to experiment with supervising more than one student at a time and encouraging the students to collaborate with each other to puzzle out the dilemmas inherent in practice. Avi-Izhak and Kellner (1995) provide us with an empirical study of their Fieldwork Centers Approach, in which numbers of students are supervised in the same setting at one time. Their findings may assist fieldwork educators to consider ways to incorporate collaborative approaches into their fieldwork programs and stimulate others to conduct additional research to further assess the impact of the collaborative approach.

In addition to the factors within the profession and the pressures of the health care environment, occupational therapy educators must be aware of another major influence on the fieldwork system: the personal concerns and challenges that students bring to the setting. Most students in our entry-level programs are 20 to 30 years of age. Students in this age cohort have heavy demands on their time, energy, emotions, and financial resources. Zimmerman (1995) describes an imaginative and practical fieldwork approach that addresses the financial demands while providing students with exposure to occupational therapy through a cooperative learning program. The Americans With Disabilities Act has expanded opportunities to students with disabilities to explore occupational therapy as a viable career. Kornblau (1995), an occupational therapist and a lawyer, interprets this recent legislation and highlights the significant concerns for fieldwork education. She presents us with an instrumental framework to successfully prepare students with disabilities for the fieldwork experience.

The responsibility to prepare future practitioners is a very serious one. We must ensure that occupational therapy students are well prepared to reason through the complex and changing demands of today's health care environment. Three articles grapple with one of the most challenging aspects of the fieldwork role: determining whether fieldwork students are ready to enter the profession. Kramer and Stern (1995) present two case studies to illustrate that students who have difficulty engaging in the supervisory process encounter problems more frequently during fieldwork. Garrett and Schakado's (1995) article echoes the theme of evaluating student performance through their application of occupational adaptation principles, to help us understand students' developmental processes during the transition from classroom to practice settings. This notion of student readiness for practice is further addressed in Sand's (1995) article, which describes how her program helps students develop professional behavior and attitudes. All three articles offer exciting approaches to helping us make careful decisions when we agree that students are ready to enter the profession.

In The Association department, Christine Rogers, AOTA's Fieldwork Education Program Manager, provides an overview of the fieldwork resources available to our profession. The importance of preparing fieldwork educators for their critical role is also addressed in this issue (AOTA, 1995). Because of the number of excellent articles selected for this special issue, space limitations prevented all of them from appearing here. Therefore, "Applied Research During Fieldwork: Collaboration Between University and Clients," by Judith S. Bloomer, and "To Fail or Not to Fail? A Course for Fieldwork Educators," by Irene Ilott, will appear in the March 1995 issue.

The Future of Fieldwork

Fieldwork education is the essential bridge from classroom to service delivery settings; it is a common thread uniting all practitioners. We first encounter fieldwork as a requirement for becoming an occupational therapist, then revisit it as a professional responsibility. Serving as a fieldwork educator and sharing with students our affirmation for the profession is a primary way to contribute to the profession. As the essential bridge between academic and service delivery settings, fieldwork educators take a leading role in shaping the future of our profession by guiding new generations of occupational therapists through these changing times.

We have entered a period of change and of opportunity. The health care reform movement, the unbalanced supply-demand ratio for fieldwork sites, the continued evolution of theory and application in our profession, and market demand may be seen as threats or as opportunities for growth and movement. Recognizing that fieldwork education is a key component in our profession's future, the authors in this special issue have shared their experiences and visions so that we may move forward in fieldwork education. It is essential that fieldwork continue to be given considerable attention, discussion, and study.
within our profession. As fieldwork educators, our job is not simply to share what is, but to open the door to what can be.

Acknowledgments

This issue is dedicated to every occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant who has ever supervised a fieldwork student. We received a much larger number of manuscripts than could be placed in one issue. This response illustrates the interest and enthusiasm for fieldwork education. Although we were overwhelmed, it was extremely gratifying to receive such a response. We are honored to serve as the guest editors of this special issue and extend our appreciation to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and recommendations.

References


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