Media Education Based on the Philosophy of Pragmatism

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The responsibility for crafts instruction at New York University was transferred recently from the Art Department to the Department of Occupational Therapy, where a new model of media education has been developed. This change resulted from the difficulties students and faculty experienced in integrating craft activities with occupational therapy's conceptual foundations and the realities of practice. These problems are not unique to this university but are common throughout our profession. This paper will discuss these problems and an attempt at their solution by outlining a model for media education based on historical and philosophical concepts pertinent to the profession. This model demonstrates the academic justification for the development and presentation of media education courses by occupational therapy faculty.

When the profession of occupational therapy originated, crafts were used to a greater extent than they customarily are used today. Modern occupational therapy education reflects this de-emphasis on crafts. The number of hours educators spend teaching crafts today is markedly reduced. Yet, because practice continues to use such activities, occupational therapy educators remain concerned with selecting appropriate methods for crafts instruction.

Until recently at New York University, occupational therapy students were taught crafts under the aegis of the Art Department. The influence of the art teachers on students, along with the small number of hours spent studying crafts, tended to separate the concepts underlying the use of crafts as a therapeutic tool from the mastery of crafts techniques. As a result, crafts instruction proved problematic, necessitating repeated faculty intervention over an 8-year period to refine course content so that it might better meet the needs of occupational therapy students (Donahue, personal communication, October 1987). Because faculty members who were not occupational therapists taught these courses, the foundational principles of the profession were not well integrated with the material presented in the crafts courses. In addition, it was extremely difficult to establish the relevance of craft activities in relation to other activities such as activities of daily living or computer fluency. Consequently, crafts became trivialized and students experienced some feelings of fragmentation; many had difficulty understanding how crafts related to other aspects of the profession, particularly because some clinical sites used crafts very little or not at all. Although the theoretical aspects of activity and occupation were addressed elsewhere in the curriculum, the relevance of crafts was not well understood by students.

Contributing to these feelings of fragmentation was the fact that crafts courses were taught within a department whose philosophy was built on aesthetics, a philosophy that differs from and is inconsistent with occupational therapy's philosophy of active occupation. Measures taken to synthesize concepts of activity with their instruction were unsuccessful because faculty members did not sufficiently identify and emphasize the philosophical differences of the two departments.

Historically, crafts at New York University had been taught within the Industrial Arts Department. When the Occupational Therapy Department was established in 1942, the concepts underlying study within that department were consistent with those of the Industrial Arts Department, stemming from the belief that active occupation contributes to learning in all human beings. Eventually, due to internal organi-
rational changes, the responsibility for the crafts courses was transferred from the Industrial Arts Department to the Art Department, where principles of aesthetics are premier. However valuable they may be, these principles are not characteristic of occupational therapy. Rather, performance itself and its implications for learning and development are the predominant principles of occupational therapy. This inconsistency in focus was one of the reasons that occupational therapy students repeatedly questioned the need to study crafts in general and to take the courses offered through the Art Department in particular. Due to this discrepancy, implications for occupational therapy media education began to emerge.

Despite the occupational therapy faculty's desire and prolonged efforts to rectify the educational problem, no arguments had proven successful in convincing university officials that these courses could best be taught by the Department of Occupational Therapy. Yet the inconsistencies between departmental philosophies had implications for education; therefore, if articulated clearly, they could serve as the basis for an argument that would be recognized by the academic community. If inconsistent philosophical messages contributed to the problems in the crafts courses, perhaps the courses needed to be totally restructured so that they clearly reflected the appropriate educational philosophy. This would necessitate shifting the responsibility for the courses to a department that believes that the concepts of active occupation are foremost.

The questions that students expressed are not exclusive to them. Many therapists are also uncertain about why crafts were traditionally used in practice, and why they continue to be taught. On the other hand, many therapists retain a strong commitment to the use of crafts in education and practice. However, some are inadequately prepared to articulate their reasons for this commitment, partly because they were never taught many of the concepts that contributed to our profession's adoption of active occupation as a therapeutic tool.

Several people (Diasio, 1968; Dunning, 1973; Laurencelle, 1968; Owen, 1968; Yerxa, 1967) have discussed the need for our profession to identify its philosophy in an attempt to answer questions the profession has about itself. In response, the Representative Assembly of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) adopted Resolution C, which articulates the Philosophical Base of Occupational Therapy (AOTA, 1979, p. 785). Further research identified other philosophical sources than those investigated at that time (Breines, 1986).

Occupational therapy's history contains two related philosophical themes that were concurrently advanced by many of the same people. One was pragmatism, the American philosophy that emphasized activity and adaptation; the other was the arts and crafts movement, a philosophy of British origin that emphasized the amelioration of the unhealthy influences of industrialization (Breines, 1986; Levine, 1987). Both philosophies were concerned with creating a healthy society by addressing the meaning of activity in human lives.

The problem with terms such as health and activity is that their significance is apt to be lost. That is what occurred with crafts. Crafts remained a tool of practice, but without a comprehensive rationale it was difficult to justify their use. Consequently, crafts were retained in the educational curriculum but were unconnected to their philosophical underpinnings. To rectify this, the faculty at New York University examined occupational therapy's philosophy and its implications for the instruction of students in the value of activity in health and development; they then developed courses integrating the study of crafts with these philosophical foundations.

Philosophy of Pragmatism for Occupation and Education

John Dewey (1916), the educational philosopher, applied the principles of pragmatism to education. He concluded that learning recapitulates humanity's past experience and is best synthesized through active experience. To demonstrate these concepts, he designed a laboratory school at the University of Chicago that was based on these principles (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936). His students learned by engaging in tasks performed by increasingly complex cultures. As the students advanced in grade, these tasks, and the knowledge required to perform them, became more complex. For example, in early grades students studied a hunter–gatherer society; in later grades they studied an agrarian society; and still later they studied more complex societies. Students learned the tasks of living, or occupations, that permitted each society and its individuals to survive, thereby gaining the knowledge inherent in those tasks. Instruction focused on the interdependence of the members of a society working together in tasks of mutual benefit.

Jane Addams (1910), Dewey's neighbor at Hull House, the famous settlement house, and his colleague at the University of Chicago, was a friend and co-worker of Julia Lathrop (Addams, 1935), a founder of the first school of occupational therapy (Dunton, 1915). At Hull House, Addams and Lathrop used these same concepts to help immigrants understand the relationship between their heritage and their roles in their new society. Addams demonstrated that the hand-spindles their ancestors used for spinning made the same contribution to society as spinning wheels.
and the spinning machines used in the industrialized world. This analysis of activity and its grading led to the concepts of grading activity that became a part of occupational therapy. These ideas were based on a comprehensive view of heritage that was expressed in terms of activity.

Cultures develop active occupations to meet their needs. Members of society meet their needs for food, clothing, shelter, and spirituality both individually and collaboratively. Methods of communication develop that enhance this process. As children develop into adults, they acquire skills that contribute to their own needs and to those of their society, first through play (Reilly, 1974) and then through work. As societies evolve, they retain the skills of earlier cultures, adapting them in ways that permit new concepts, inventions, and environmental constraints to be synthesized with the old. Thus, tasks and skills that originally met certain needs become incorporated with new developments in unique and original ways that often benefit society in new ways.

Primitive hunter-gatherers, such as aborigines and American Indians, used media and activities such as pottery, leather crafts, basketry, and totem making to meet their needs. By adapting these skills, nomadic people, such as the bedouins and the Masai, learned to herd their food supply and create specialized clothing, shelter, and objects that could be carried from place to place. More complex cultures refined these skills. The weaving of reeds and grasses developed into the spinning of flax, fleece, and silk into thread, then into the weaving of fabric. This led to further developments in cloth construction. Drop spindles and weaving frames were developed into spinning wheels and harness looms, which brought spinning and weaving to new levels. Similar developments occurred in other media, fostered by the needs of particular societies congruent with various environmental constraints. As societies became agrarian and began to harvest food, their mobility became limited. This necessitated the creation of permanent residences, along with the development of associated knowledge and skills. With the advent of trade, refinements in mathematics and written language evolved. Technology advanced throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages and beyond. With wheels, gears, fulcrums, and levers, a science of engineering emerged. These developments led to the Industrial Revolution, with its characteristic specialization and mechanization, first with water and wind, then with steam, and then with electricity. Electricity led to electronics and the modern technologies of energy waves, chemistry, and plastics; eventually it led to the nuclear age and the space age. Over time, religious figures lost their animistic forms and were altered to human form; this led to further abstractions of god concepts and to godless societies. All of these religious beliefs are represented in the modern world.

Tools, skills, and beliefs all develop in accordance with people's needs, as enabled or restricted by their environments (Piaget, 1979). The inventions of earlier civilizations are retained through all of these changes, altered in form and purpose, but still meaningful to society, both in their original and in their adapted dimensions. These concepts of development, evolution, and active occupation were adopted as pedagogical principles by Dewey (1916).

Teaching Active Occupation

Occupational therapy theory and practice advocates the use of skills, tools, and the environment in active occupation to meet humankind's needs. Therapists must be knowledgeable about these concepts and the performance of related tasks. To instruct patients in relevant activities, a therapist must (a) be skilled in the activities used in practice, (b) know the reasons they are used, and (c) use them in a culturally appropriate fashion. Because the uses of activity are broad, a comprehensive understanding of the principles that underlie the use of activity as a therapeutic tool is essential.

To address this need at New York University, a set of courses was proposed that included a spectrum of activities reflecting the developmental aspects of humankind's adaptation to the world. These courses illustrate the nature of phylogenetic and ontogenetic development. They demonstrate humans' involvement in adaptive tasks throughout their individual development and their history into the modern era. These courses demonstrate that activity is a part of every society, that pertinent, contributing activity is healthful for individuals and for society; and that crafts are part of our profession's heritage but must be understood in terms of the skills they offer in evolution and development. This approach reveals the relationships between crafts and technology, individual tasks and group tasks, and the development of knowledge and the maturation of the individual and society.

Media courses dealing with development, evolution, and the grading of active occupations must include instruction in techniques. Consequently, New York University faculty determined that such courses should (a) provide opportunities for students to explore all sorts of activities and (b) reveal the evolution of active occupation. The courses that were developed include the following selected tasks. During the first-semester course, emphasis is placed on the crafts that are commonly used in hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies. Pottery making, leather crafts, and basketry are studied, followed by yarn crafts and fabric crafts. During the second-semester
course, crafts of industrial and technological societies are emphasized. Printing and paper crafts, wood crafts, and metal crafts are taught, along with the use of mechanical and electrical equipment, electronics, and computers.

The relationships between these content areas are demonstrated by an emphasis on the concepts of evolution, development, grading of activities, activity analysis, activity synthesis, and implications for therapy. The learning objectives for these courses stipulate that students will come to understand the role of occupational therapy's foundational philosophy of pragmatism in the profession's theme of active occupation. Students are expected to comprehend the nature of cultural evolution and its significance in relation to active occupation in all societies. They are required to demonstrate skill in selected crafts and activities and to understand how crafts and skills have evolved and been adapted to meet environmental and sociocultural demands as well as the specialized needs of individuals in evolving societies. In addition, students must demonstrate skill in teaching selected crafts and activities and must collaborate in problemsolving tasks using media to meet selected physical and psychosocial demands. The courses are designed to help students understand that activities that range from clay to computers meet life's needs in various civilizations. This approach to media education prepares students not only to use traditional crafts as therapeutic tools but also to use modern and future technologies that will be developed as humanity continues to evolve.

Conclusion

When instructed by art teachers, occupational therapy students had difficulty understanding the value of crafts as tools of practice. Once the issue was identified as a difference in philosophical orientation rather than a deficiency in educational technique, artistic expertise, or application of therapeutic principles by instructors who were artists, it was clear to the Occupational Therapy and Art Departments and to the academic administration that the curriculum needed to be altered. Changes in instructors or content, as had been attempted in the past, could not ameliorate the differences in philosophy. Rather, the courses needed to be taught as part of an integrated conceptual view of occupational therapy by qualified instructors who held those beliefs. With the approval of the university, the Art Department willingly and generously withdrew the courses it had formerly taught, and the courses described above replaced them. These new courses are now in place; they are taught within the Department of Occupational Therapy by occupational therapists. It remains only to evaluate the effects of this approach on the students' learning and satisfaction and on their ability to practice occupational therapy using purposeful activities in an integrated way.

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References


