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.

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).

Pragmatism as a philosophy is based on developmental 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).

Therefore, reality is seen as ever changing, and it is evaluated through the relationships between the self and the concrete world of structure and society. The development of the individual proceeds throughout life, through active experience in that world, and from feedback provided by that experience. Pragmatism was adopted as a model for learning by Dewey, and as a model for health and social welfare by the mental hygienists, including Lathrop, Addams, Slagle, Meyer, and Hirsch (Cohen, 1983; Slagle, circa 1917).

The mental hygienists believed that these concepts of development and flux could be used to build health (Cohen, 1983). Health through active occupation, a principle of the mental hygiene movement, was the principle that guided the founders of the first school and early practitioners of occupational therapy in their applications in many areas of health care. However, of the founders of the profession, only Susan Tracy (1918) made Dewey's premises explicit for occupational therapy, and only she (Barrows, 1917 and George Baron (1914) verbalized active occupation's social themes and implications for health. The others demonstrated them.

Active occupation as a modifer of learning and health, a theme of great social relevance in the early part of the century (Dewey, 1916), received less emphasis as time went by. Instead, occupational therapists focused on their tools (Mosey, 1981).

The principles underlying occupation as they were defined by the founders of the profession, must be taught to students. The profession needs to become aware that newer theories can be compatible
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 orientations 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 reflected in their performance and must be respected.
6. The uniqueness of individuals is counterbalanced by their relationship with their community.
7. Science and philosophy must be united to understand and enhance human occupation.

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, despite 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. Seeing the wholes and the parts and their relationships to one another is vital if one is to understand human performance.

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 individual curricula and institutions. The schematic represents an approximation of the topics that ordinarily compose the education of occupational therapists, organized according to a developmental systems approach. It is meant to expose the varied focus of occupational therapy education. However, it should be noted that this fractioning is artificial; no experience can separate the egocentric, exocentric, and consensual 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, sequence, and emphasis. Additionally, students come to occupational therapy education with greatly varying skills and preparation. Despite this diversity of education and preparation, I propose that the model presented 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 curricula. It can provide the wherewithal for assessing the content of individual curricula and can serve as an

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<td>A Conceptual Organization of Occupational Therapy Curricula</td>
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<tr>
<th>Subsubconcepts</th>
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<th>Egocentricity</th>
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<td>Occupational Therapy Topics</td>
<td>Graded Activities Activity Analysis Activity Synthesis</td>
<td>NDT PNF Sensory Stimulation Body Image Scheme Gnosis</td>
<td>SI Stereognosis ADL Adaptive Equipment Splinting</td>
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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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