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Global Perspectives on Occupational Therapy Practice and Education

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Global Perspectives on Occupational Therapy Practice and Education

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This special issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) highlights research on global occupational therapy practices and education and its implications for clients across the life span. Guest editors Dr. Amy Wagenfeld and Professor Suzanne Martin propose that while the foundation of the occupational therapy profession is shared throughout the world, it is also uniquely influenced by cultural and environmental contexts, including the process or means through which therapeutic services are provided (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Occupational therapy reaches into the essence of who we are, our humanity, and the spirit of the self. As therapists, we aim to enable participation and engagement, generally in the face of our service user's personal adversity, be that physical disability, mental health issues, or cognitive and/or emotional challenges. We aim to meet people where they are. During this process of enabling those for whom we feel compassion, I suggest there is a second process enabled by occupational therapy for each of us (the practitioners) as we also grow as individuals through the experiences of our therapeutic connectedness with others. Occupational therapy enables us to reach our potential as we grow and flourish as therapists.

As an experienced clinician and academic who is reflective in practice, I see my evolution through my personal journey as I have transitioned from the achievement of a professional qualification as a new graduate with skills and knowledge on which to base my clinical practice. The nature of what influences this development changes over our life span. I propose that we not only apply our knowledge to enrich others, but also assimilate the worldview of occupational therapy into our own lives. For example, I suggest that the professional mandates of our global professional associations play a significant role in helping establish and align our moral and ethical boundaries with our professional ethical code of practice. It is reasonable to suggest that we do not leave these in the work space, but rather that they permeate our everyday values and behaviors.

There are many constructs that comprise these ethical codes of practice (what is right and wrong) that are set down from the foundational years of academic study in occupational therapy in the many institutions around the world. In this issue of OJOT, Brown et al. (2019) build on their previous work to explore the similarities and differences in academic integrity between undergraduate and graduate-entry master's occupational therapy students in the Australian context. As a benchmark, academic integrity, such as using, generating, and communicating information in a responsible and ethical manner, is useful to establish and explore. Brown et al. provide evidence that a lack of academic integrity has been demonstrated to map over into episodes of unethical professional practice. The use of technology in education and the maturing of online learning environments allows instructors to routinely integrate software that identifies similarities in student work.

There is no doubt that cultural and environmental contexts either press heavily on our opportunity to optimize participation and engagement or create the landscape for people to flourish and thrive. Hynes and McAuliffe (2019) highlight that, globally, 2 million people worldwide are living with multiple sclerosis, a disease that impairs the neurological pathways and uniquely affects the individual's ability across a spectrum of domains, such as speech, mobility, and vision. In their paper, Hynes and McAuliffe focus on the impact of changes in cognitive functioning on daily occupations and draw out the detrimental impact these changes have on employment, education, parenting, and hobbies. All of these outward activities give meaning to life. John Mark Comer (2015) states that unemployment is gut-wrenching and depressing for people because we "live to work;" when we stop working, we lose a part of who we are. Thus, timely occupational therapy assessments and interventions specifically focused on cognitive functioning could make a significant difference to the lived experiences of those with multiple

sclerosis. Lavorgna and colleagues (2018) review the use of new and emerging technologies with eHealth to support people living with multiple sclerosis. This review focuses on how technologies can be used to support both information flow and data in addition to applying the technology to support clinical management and everyday activity. It is appropriate to consider that the contemporary cultural and environmental context is one of embedded ubiquitous and pervasive technologies that are now part of the everyday technologies. With this backdrop, occupational therapists should be active in considering how our classical therapies, like cognitive rehabilitation, can migrate to new digital platforms (Cogollor, 2018). Moving beyond multiple sclerosis, we know that, globally, the population is aging and that the challenge is to maintain overall well-being, cognitive functional capability, and prolonged independence. Using digital platforms gives us the potential to expand opportunities to connect with people who require interventions to support cognitive functioning.

And now it seems (more than ever before) that our services and treatment modalities are provided alongside services that are in constant and dynamic flux, with innovation and quality improvement, and often financial constraints, determining provision. Complex information systems are being embedded in services, and consumers have the expectation that new technology will be used in health care. The emergence of technology in our everyday lives has taken us personally and professionally into uncharted waters. Very quickly, the innovative devices of smart phones and tablets supporting global connectivity have enabled the transfer of data, ideas, and information, which has had a massive impact on our everyday life experiences; for example, blurring the boundaries between home and work. Many of our younger occupational therapists in the developed world are digital natives, having grown up in a technology saturated world. The reality is, however, that globally, mental health conditions account for 16% of the global burden of disease for people between the ages of 10 and 19 years, with depression a leading cause of illness and disability and suicide the third leading cause of death in people aged 15 to 19 years (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). How do we, as part of the global occupational therapy community, respond to this? There are many benefits to sharing our learning, from the local to the global and vice versa. We know that one person dies by suicide every 40 s (WHO, 2019). Can technology enable us to reach out to the digital natives providing interventions that mitigate against such self-harm behaviors? We know that college students have a high prevalence of mental disorders and suicidal thoughts and behaviors and low rates of treatment uptake; can we reach them via technology?

While death and bereavement are universal life experiences, there are specific issues pertinent to the loss of a child. In this issue of OJOT, Weis, Kugel, Javaherian-Dysinger, and De Brun (2019) take us further on this journey of understanding as they draw us into their exploration of how parents cope with the loss of an adult child to a drug overdose. The authors propose that by having the participants work through the KAWA model and drawings, they can process thoughts, feelings, and experiences when forming and transcribing words that may be overwhelming.

Also in this issue, Mahoney and Kiraly-Alvarez (2019) highlight the value of nonWestern understandings and influences that may enrich both the curriculum and delivery of occupational therapy practice by shifting the practitioners' worldviews. Through their challenging (and sometimes unsettling) paper, they pushed me to reflect on why I had an emotional reaction to some of what I was reading. Many of us are blessed to live in democracies that provide the freedom and privilege to engage in the art of debate. I recommend Mahoney and Kiraly-Alvarez's paper to you as part of that debate.

I started this letter by affirming that occupational therapy reaches into the essence of who we are, our humanity, and the spirit of the self. If we are to achieve a broader worldview, then we must ensure we have understandings beyond our own borders and Western views of the world. Mahoney and Kiraly-Alvarez (2019) discuss the concept of Ubuntu, a South African philosophy that recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals and collectives or communities and that attempts to remove the forced dichotomy between them. In the spirit of this philosophy, it is essential that the drive to promote the understanding of philosophies be mutual, a two-way exchange, and in balance. Neither is better, they just are. And they are unique to the cultural and environmental contexts in which they evolved.

The open and honest paper from Mahoney and Kiraly-Alvarez (2019) reads like a testament to the growth of two practitioners following their attendance at the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) conference in South Africa in 2018. Through their own experiences, they articulate a clear example of how occupational therapy enabled personal growth. In this instance, they seem to have flourished and been awakened to things they may have known previously but did not feel to the extent they articulated in their paper. Growth and change may not always be a comfortable process, personally or professionally, either for individuals or for the profession as a whole; norms and boundaries are pushed. We are not perfect; neither is our profession. We have changed and adapted over time. As poet and musician Leonard Cohen said, “forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in”

(https://www.last.fm/music/Leonard+Cohen/_/Anthem/+lyrics).

Let us try not to be fearful or blameful, or to feel shame or regret; rather, let us collectively explore and debate and move toward consensus about how we respond to the many issues raised at the 2018 WFOT conference and explored in this issue of OJOT. There is no doubt that there are global health and social challenges that we all face locally. We have a global consensus on what we do as occupational therapists (WFOT, 2019), but not about how are we responding to the pace of technology change.

Our profession is reflective of its constituency, so how are we embracing the new technologies in our traditional services? What are emerging contemporary services and practices? How are each one of us embedding the new technologies into our practice? Are we growing and changing? In this changing landscape, it is timely for us to embrace innovative and informative technologies. Our similarities and differences are touched on in our “They Said” (Wagenfeld, 2019) article in this issue, a discussion between a panel of three occupational therapy students from Western Michigan University and three occupational therapists who are graduates of Ulster University Northern Ireland about their views of the application of technology in clinical practice. We hope you enjoy their contribution.

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