



2023

Synergizing Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy: Designing an Integrated Foundations Course for Health Education

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Recommended Citation

Perkins, Natalie A.; McCormack, Guy; and Dunlea, Anne (2023) "Synergizing Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy: Designing an Integrated Foundations Course for Health Education," *Pacific Journal of Health*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56031/2576-215X.1018>

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/pjh/vol6/iss1/8>

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Abstract

The Occupational Therapy Department at University of the Pacific embarked on a tailored initiative to reshape the occupational therapy foundations course for entry-level Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) students. Collaboratively designed and co-taught by the first and second authors, experienced occupational therapists in both clinical and academic realms, alongside the third author, a seasoned occupational scientist with a rich background in instructing graduate and undergraduate professionals, this innovative course aligns with the program's biopsychosocial philosophy.

The primary objective of this course was to provide students with an expansive perspective on the fundamental role of occupation in human life. Various assessment methods were employed to gauge students' grasp of the course content, culminating in a summative course evaluation survey supplemented with comments at the conclusion of the term.

This paper elucidates the course design model, its integration within the curriculum, the implementation process, and insights gleaned from student feedback. The outlined approach for crafting a novel course that incorporates diverse professional viewpoints will prove invaluable to OTD programs preparing entry-level occupational therapists for the multifaceted challenges of contemporary healthcare. By sharing this course design, the authors aspire to contribute to the evolution of OT education and address the dynamic demands of healthcare through the utilization of integrated professional perspectives.

Keywords

occupational science, occupational therapy, education, course design

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the field of occupational therapy has witnessed a surge in entry-level doctorate programs. These programs, in line with the 2018 standards set by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) [1], have expanded the educational requirements beyond the traditional Master of Occupational Therapy. Within these programs, foundational courses often offer a singular perspective on occupational therapy. However, the incorporation of occupational science can provide a broader understanding of the profession, its historical roots, and the scientific aspects of human engagement. This article discusses the development and significance of a unique foundation course designed for Occupational Therapy Doctorate (OTD) students, aiming to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of occupation through an intra/interprofessional lens. It also explores the integration of occupational science, the history of occupational therapy, therapeutic relationships, and assessment methods in this course.

Content on Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science

Occupational science (OS), at its core, delves into the study of humans as occupational beings, encompassing a wide array of topics, such as the evolutionary aspects of occupation, the meaning of occupations in human lives, and the promotion of well-being through engagement in occupations [2,3]. Unlike many academic disciplines, occupational science emerged from and directly supports clinical practice, bridging the gap between theory and application. For instance, research in occupational science has shown that engaging in personally meaningful occupations enhances life satisfaction and health, particularly in older adults.

In the 1990s, scholars worldwide began to recognize the profound significance of occupations in human existence, leading to increased research in non-clinical settings. Pioneers like Ann Wilcock explored the evolution of humans as occupational beings and emphasized the need for occupational therapists to engage in political advocacy for their clients. Wilcock's work inspired interest in occupations at socio-cultural levels, especially regarding occupational justice [4].

Research in occupational science has continued to evolve, addressing contemporary social issues, as exemplified by the special issue of *The Journal of Occupational Science* in 2020, which explored occupations at the core of modern life, including topics like racism, childhood poverty, and occupations in migrant and refugee communities.

In the foundation course at University of the Pacific, students were exposed to a wide-ranging perspective of occupation. They encountered various scholars and themes, gaining an appreciation for the far-reaching implications of occupation. This approach emphasized the positive power of occupation, such as the ideas of Csikszentmihalyi regarding activity and happiness, while also highlighting the importance of considering occupation in social justice and policy change [5].

History of Occupational Therapy Content

Human history is replete with occupations that have shaped our present and future. While prominent historical figures often receive attention for their contributions to the field of occupational therapy, it is equally vital to explore the daily lives and values of ordinary individuals, especially marginalized and disabled populations, as this represents the true essence of client-centered practice.

Key Historical Content

In the course historical exploration, the following table encapsulates key themes, from the profound impact of historical events on daily life to the multifaceted roles of occupational therapy across migration, gender inequality, subjugation, war, life expectancy, disability, infant mortality, and malnutrition.

Table 1
Historical Topics and Key Points

Topic	Key Points
The Environment	Recognizing the influence of the environment on daily life, from nomadic lifestyles in the ice age to the contemporary shift towards a virtual environment due to technology and telehealth.
Migration	Acknowledging the inevitability of migration and the role of occupational therapists in helping immigrants assimilate and improve their quality of life.
Gender Inequality	Examining historical and ongoing issues of gender inequality, particularly within the predominantly female occupational therapy profession [6].
Subjugation and Slavery	Addressing the historical prevalence of subjugation and slavery and the modern-day concerns related to human trafficking and occupational injustice.
War and Military Conflicts	Recognizing the impact of wars on physical and emotional health, as well as the role of occupational therapy in rehabilitation.
Life Expectancy	Discussing the impact of modern medicine and better living conditions on increasing life expectancy.

Disability and Disfigurement	Investigating historical and contemporary challenges posed by limb amputations and injuries, with a focus on military veterans [7].
Infant Mortality	Exploring the reduction in infant mortality rates due to advances in medicine and the corresponding need for occupational therapy in child development [8].
Malnutrition	Recognizing the historical and present-day significance of nutrition in health and daily life, particularly in underdeveloped countries.
Spiritual Wellness	Understanding the role of religion and spirituality in providing strength and support during times of crisis, while also considering their relevance in contemporary occupational therapy practice [9].

Therapeutic Relationship Content

The therapeutic relationship between occupational therapists and clients is a complex and collaborative endeavor. It is imperative that healthcare providers be self-aware in order to prevent a breakdown in trust. Providers need to be cognizant of how their own personal emotions can impact a treatment session [10]. It hinges on honesty, trust, and self-awareness. This relationship, while unequal in terms of specialized knowledge, is entirely equal in terms of human worth. In the course, students were introduced to the following concepts and learning was assessed through small group discussions, written assignments, and video projects.

- **Therapeutic Relationship as a Co-Occupation:** The therapeutic relationship is a shared narrative where both therapist and client collaboratively construct and enact an occupational narrative.

- Emotional Intelligence: Therapists must be emotionally intelligent, aware of their own emotions, and attuned to those of their clients to maintain trust and prevent breakdowns in communication.
- Positivity: Positive psychology principles were introduced to promote well-being and positivity, although students were cautioned about the potential for excessive positivity to be maladaptive.

Empathy is also a central part of emotional intelligence, which we identify as another key to creating a good therapeutic relationship. Building skills in both managing one's own emotions and recognizing the emotions of others helps create therapeutic rapport. When working with clients and families occupational therapy practitioners carefully balance therapeutic hands-on treatment with therapeutic rapport. As therapists, occupational therapy practitioners have an almost equal impact on the emotional and physical wellbeing of clients and their families, as the relationship between therapists and clients are more like partnerships. Self-awareness gives healthcare providers the ability to emotionally connect with clients which in turn will increase the therapeutic rapport important for successful therapist-client partnerships [11].

Another element that fosters effective therapy is promoting positivity. Here, the authors drew on the growing body of knowledge from positive psychology, a new domain of psychology that emerged a little over two decades ago and examines how people thrive rather than how they wither or languish. Throughout most of its history, psychology has focused on typical behavior and development or on psychopathology. Curiously, it never really considered why some people are "atypical" in highly effective ways, ways that enable them to be resilient, happy, and positive.

Ultimately one of the goals of occupational therapy is to help clients not merely adapt to challenges, but to flourish, to create life meaning through occupation and to be able to participate in the roles and occupations they value. This emphasis on thriving through occupation aligns well with ideas of positive psychology.

Assessment

The course's assessment methods aimed to move students beyond simple recall of content to practical application in real-world scenarios. This approach aimed to foster a deeper understanding of the material and its relevance to clinical practice.

Figure 1
Assignments in Relation to Content Areas

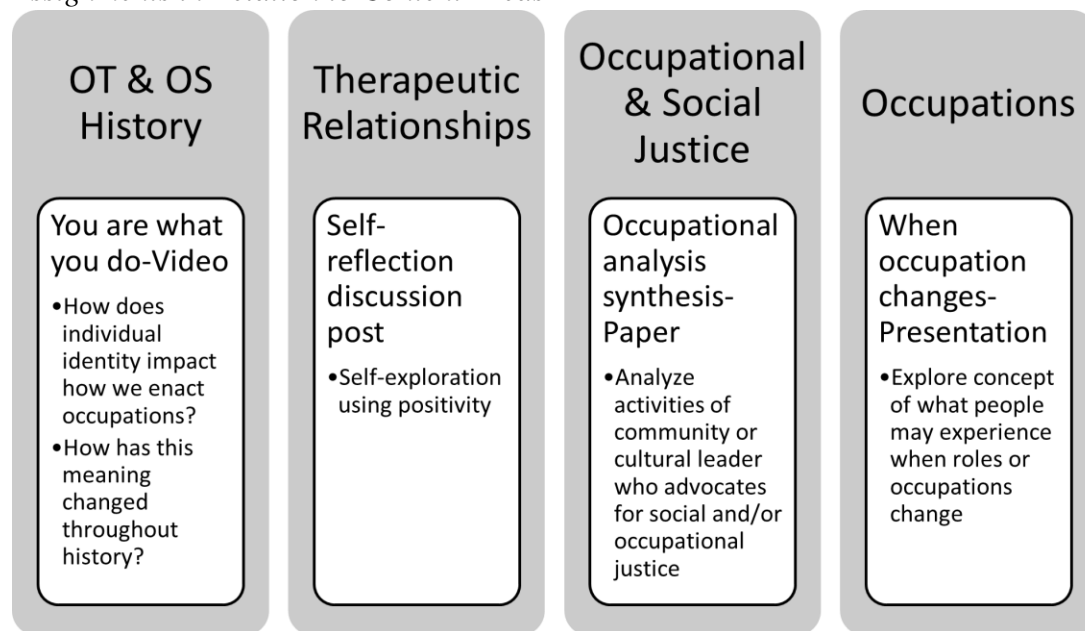


Figure 1 illustrates the assignments corresponding to different content areas, ensuring a comprehensive assessment strategy.

Summative Course Evaluation

Continuous feedback was solicited from students through various means, including small group discussions, background knowledge questions, and large group interactions. All feedback was collected anonymously. Additionally, a post-course evaluation survey was administered to all students.

Table 2
Course Evaluation at End of Course

Survey Question	Weighted Average
The assigned readings contributed to my understanding of the material	4.64
There was a clear connection between the learning activities and the course objectives	4.16
The learning activities contributed to my understanding of the material	4.10
The instructors demonstrated knowledge of the subject material	4.88
The instructors made use of relevant examples	4.50

Table 3
Common Themes from Course Evaluation Comments

Comment Category Themes	# of Respondents
Appreciated 3 unique perspectives	28
Develop better understanding of OS & OT	27
Self-reflections were helpful	16
Appreciated small group discussions	20
Q&A session was helpful	19

Table 4

Summary of Comments from Student Surveys

Question	Comments
<p>What knowledge or skills have you gained from taking this course?</p>	<p>“From this course, I have learned the importance of being a well-rounded therapist. Not only emphasizing the scientific knowledge, but the importance of emotional intelligence genuine interactions with others. I also learned the importance of being mindful and taking the time to engage in self-reflection.”</p> <p>“I have learned about the history of Occupational Therapy. I learned about the ethics of OT. I learned how to tell the difference between an activity and an occupation and how this applies to the field of OT. I also rediscovered the importance of these daily activities and how the OT plays a critical role in the lives of others.”</p> <p>“I feel like this course helped to expand my knowledge of occupational science and other areas of occupational therapy that I may not have considered in the past.”</p> <p>“I learned about why the OT field emerged and how the evolution of the field was heavily tied to cultural context at the period of times. I also learned more about emotional intelligence and how my feelings are actually real and affect others and how it can be utilized in assessment, intervention, and education interactions with the client and their families.”</p>
<p>What do you feel was the most helpful to your learning in this course and why?</p>	<p>“I enjoyed the different perspectives that each professor had in this this course because each professor has their own experiences in the scope of occupational therapy and occupational science.”</p> <p>“Having three different professors was very unique and allowed me to gain more insight on topics.”</p> <p>“Having both OT and OS perspectives was probably my favorite component of the course because it gave me an even deeper understand of OT topics.”</p>

Table 2 presents an overview of student perceptions of the course content and structure. Table 3 summarizes common themes derived from qualitative feedback, while Table 4 provides selected student comments.

Discussion

The overwhelmingly positive student response rate, coupled with the qualitative feedback, indicates that the course content and structure significantly enhanced students' understanding of the foundation of occupational therapy. The approach employed in this foundation course serves as a valuable framework for educators designing or refining similar programs.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

This course not only provides OTD students with a strong foundation but also highlights the potential of occupational therapy to address broader societal issues. The field is uniquely positioned to contribute to areas such as work-life balance, stress management, and well-being, offering valuable insights into promoting healthier and more meaningful lives.

In an era marked by increasing demands on individuals, both personally and professionally, occupational therapy can play a pivotal role in fostering well-being. By recognizing the value of occupations and their impact on daily life, occupational therapists can empower individuals to live purposeful, fulfilling lives, making a meaningful impact on society.

As occupational therapy continues to evolve, it is crucial to adapt to changes in healthcare and society while staying true to its core principles of client-centered care and holistic well-being.

The expansion of occupational counseling services to the broader population represents an exciting opportunity to positively influence the lives of many.

Demands of work and work-life balance are also highly connected with stress, a growing problem in the US. Drawing together research from various studies, the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimated in 2017 that 32% of adolescents (those 13-18 years old) have a stress or anxiety disorder [12]. In any given year, it's estimated that 19% of adults, persons 18

years and older, experience stress related disorders. These do not include non-clinical levels of stress. Not surprisingly there is growing interest in the general population for ways to reduce feelings of stress and increase feelings of over-all wellbeing. Mindfulness, meditation, and various approaches from positive psychology are increasingly popular.

The solution to work-life balance and greater wellbeing is of course not merely managing time so that there is more time for non-work activity. Rather, it involves recognizing the many roles everyone has and how these bring meaning to them, as well as identifying the kinds of occupations that bring personal satisfaction and opportunities to experience personal growth, connections, and life well lived. These are core insights of occupational therapy theory and practice and are at the heart of what we uniquely do. Yet, there are virtually no ways for people to learn about this.

In conclusion, this foundation course exemplifies the potential of occupational therapy education to prepare socially conscious clinicians equipped with a deep understanding of occupation, the therapeutic relationship, and the capacity to address the complex challenges of modern society. As the field continues to evolve, its practitioners must remain committed to promoting wellbeing, advocating for social justice, and facilitating the meaningful engagement of individuals in their daily lives.

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