Using the Arts To Enhance Confluent Learning

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An approach named "confluent education" two decades ago by Brown (1971) can enhance the efforts of educators and students to (a) develop understanding of human occupation and human experiences, (b) generate an ease and familiarity with the process of interactive reasoning, and (c) cultivate an empathic attitude. Brown described the approach as follows:

Confluent education is the term for the integration of flowing together of the affective and cognitive elements in individual or group learning. It describes a philosophy and a process of teaching and learning in which the affective domain and the cognitive domain flow together, like two streams merging into one river. (p. 1)

Occupational therapy educators can use the arts as part of confluent education, thereby awakening the affective element of learning that can occur through the mediacy of sensory experiences, metaphors, and imaginative excursions into the lives of others.

The aims of this article are to (a) illustrate the manner in which the visual and literary arts have been successfully integrated, over the past 5 years, into select courses in one undergraduate program and (b) provide a list of resources for interested educators (see Suggested Readings at end of article). Although the academic arena is the specific focus of this discussion, the principle of confluent education generalizes readily to educational efforts during fieldwork or professional development among more seasoned practitioners.

A Rationale for Confluent Education

Confluent education has strong resonance with occupational therapy practice, which is traditionally characterized as a science and an art (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 1972). A fundamental reason for confluent learning in occupational therapy derives from the belief that the best of practice builds on competence and caring, two excellences that have been identified in the occupational therapy literature (Peloquin, 1990). The image of a competent and caring therapist is that of a thinking-feeling person who engages in both the art and the science of helping others through occupation.

The argument for educational approaches that promote confluence builds on the character of occupational therapy as both cognitive and affective and on the guidelines for educating professionals (AOTA, 1991). Students who ready themselves for any humanistic practice must learn to understand—that is, to think about and feel themselves into—the experiences of others. Education that leads students to think and feel promises such understanding.

The arts are a suitable resource for confluent education because they convey both the cognitive and affective...
meanings that people attach to their lives, their occupations, and their worlds (Peloquin, 1989). Combs, Avila, and Purkey (1971) described the powerful learning that derives from the literary arts:

Through drama, poetry, autobiography, and novels, it is possible to expand our experience vicariously. We can enter the world of seeing, feeling, believing, hoping, trusting, caring, loving, and hating in more or less degrees as those experienced by other people. As we give ourselves up to the spell woven by these kinds of writers, we can be for a time what we are not, ever have been, or perhaps never could be. (p. 199)

A similar enriching process, says Gilmour (1986), is true of visual works: “We learn from the pictures we have encountered, and they remind us of the richness of the world” (p. 22). Students can learn much from the human truths and emotions that inspire poems, paintings, plays, or films.

One last practical reason for embracing confluent education is that students respond positively to the approach. Use of the arts has consistently produced comments such as this one: “This instructor’s method of teaching is unique and more effective than traditional methods. You can feel the person behind the disorder, the person behind the therapist” (Anonymous, personal communication, 1993).

Applications of the Confluent Approach

The confluent approach makes sense for occupational therapy education. Academic courses can include objectives for emotional, reflective, and sensitive learning alongside more cognitive goals. Brown (1971) supported the implementation of confluent education by minimizing its difficulty:

What is proposed here is common sense, is something we’ve known about for some time, is possible within the present educational establishment. ... The change would simply be to be aware that thinking is accompanied by feeling and vice versa and to begin to take advantage of the fact. (p. 3)

Brown’s (1971) assertion seems valid; art has integrated well into courses as varied as Basic Concepts in Occupational Therapy, an introductory lecture and laboratory course; Interpersonal Practice, an elective laboratory course; and Applied Neurosciences in Occupational Therapy, an intermediate lecture course.

Most classroom sessions that structure these three courses allow several engagements with art as participants move from cognitive to affective considerations. The following activities flow nicely into more traditional lectures and laboratory experiences: reading literary works aloud, showing visual works, and assigning drawing tasks. Although these choices have reflected the personal preference of one instructor and a goodness of fit with course objectives, other artful engagements, such as listening to music or performing segments of plays, seem equally apt.

The examples that follow aim to illustrate confluent education: (a) reading a poem to enhance a discussion of human occupation, (b) engaging students in drawing tasks to elicit reflection about the process of helping, (c) showing a visual work of art to exemplify active listening, and (d) reading from fiction and autobiography to increase understanding of neurological conditions and empathy for those who experience them.

Reading a Poem

Within the course entitled Basic Concepts in Occupational Therapy, much discussion targets the constructs of purposefulness and occupation. The following poem, an excerpt from the work of Petersen (1976), adds to this discussion:

There is a shaming SPIRIT
deep inside me:
TAKE CLAY, it cries,
TAKE PEN AND INK,
TAKE FLOUR AND WATER,
TAKE A SCRUB BRUSH,
TAKE A YELLOW CRAYON,
TAKE ANOTHER’S HAND—
AND WITH ALL THESE
SAY YOU,
SAY LOVING.
So much of who I am
is subtly spoken
in my making. (p. 61)

Although it takes less than a minute to read, the poem moves conversation toward increased personal reflection and expression of feelings—about what constitutes meaningful occupation, about individual differences, about personal identification with various forms of doing, and about self-expression. The poem’s artistry evokes an awareness of the power and the humanizing potential of occupation that rational discourse does not.

Drawing

Drawing is also used in Basic Concepts of Occupational Therapy to teach about helping, collaboration, and the therapeutic use of self—all aspects of interactive reasoning. A drawing task clarifies the thoughts of students as they summarize their grasp of the assigned readings. The instructor draws two circles on the blackboard, naming one therapist and the other patient/client while asking, “What should I do to this drawing to illustrate a collabo-
rative relationship?" The ensuing discussion is generally a lively mix of suggestions and countersuggestions. Often a student tells the instructor to move the circles closer to one another. Acknowledging this directive, the instructor seeks feedback about how much closer the circles should be. Some students argue for touching circles, others do not. The task uncovers controversial aspects of helping (such as proximity, self-disclosure, and touching) magnified through the drawn image.

Another activity is the instructor's request that students draw constructs and then compare one another's productions. During the Interpersonal Practice course and within a discussion on limit setting and negotiation, students are given the following situation, partly written and partly drawn on the blackboard: Person A wants an equilateral triangle, and Person B wants a circle. Students are asked to draw as many compromises as they can imagine and in so doing to think about their understanding of the term compromise. Time spent comparing individual drawings yields various meanings of and feelings about compromise made more specific by this question: "How might the compromise you drew occur with patients or colleagues in the clinic?"

Viewing Visual Art

The painting Burned Face by Appel (Janson, 1986) adds feeling to a discussion of active listening during the Interpersonal Practice course. Completed in 1961 in a form of abstract expressionism, the picture is marked by bold colors and vigorous brush strokes. Added to these are daubs and squiggles of orange and flesh. The pigments look thick in places and often crawl and zigzag into one another. Because the work is so abstract it is an apt object lesson in listening past the surface of things.

Students look at either a slide or a reproduction of Burned Face as they listen to a 4-minute reflective commentary reproduced in part here:

If one has such a burn, does looking in the mirror or glancing in a store-window cause real doubt about whether one has a face at all? Ugly seams and lumpy blotches replace the once-familiar freckle, the curve and color of lip, the chicken-pox scar, all landmarks that spoke quietly but reassuringly of a once-familiar self. Gone forever are the old ways of pursing the lips, of wrinkling the brow, of closing the eyes.

I am forced to ask whether a face is something I have, or an essential component of who I am. Surely my face is who I am. Without a face to reflect my feelings, could I make my meanings known to others? Without a face, could I ask others to meet and return my gaze? Might I wonder if somewhere under all of this burned flesh my face and I lived on the same as before only trapped behind this hideous mask? Or might I understand that I had in some awful moment turned into ropey flesh? I would lose a large measure of what I know to be me if I were to lose my face tomorrow. And so it must be for a patient so burned. (Peloquin, 1991, pp. 281–282)

After this experience, when students are asked, "What are the risks of really listening?" and, "What are the risks of not listening?" they share both their thoughts and feelings.

Reading Literary Works

A final example of using the arts as part of confluent education is the reading of excerpts from fiction or autobiography during each of the 15 lectures of a course entitled Applied Neurosciences in Occupational Therapy. Whether the topic is homonymous hemianopsia or coma, Parkinsonism or schizophrenia, some personal story about what the condition or the treatment feels like finds equal footing alongside relevant neurological considerations. The inclusion is easy; it seems natural to share the meaning of these disorders, and students attend to the stories with palpable interest.

Conclusion

Confluent education is consonant with the nature of persons and congruent with the character of occupational therapy. Integrating the visual and literary arts within a variety of courses is one viable application of the construct. Confluent learning, with its integration of thought and feeling, offers the hope of developing competent practitioners who also care. Such learning also holds promise for developing the kind of understanding described by Stevens and Rogers (1976):

There are two ways to ride a horse (or drive a car, or clean a house, or take care of a garden, or teach, or build, or anything else). One rider demands that the horse be obedient to him, he makes the horse a "thing," if he has any feeling for the horse it is the feeling of possession, of "mastery." The other kind of rider is, with his horse, more like a centaur—horse and rider more together, responding to each other in a way that makes them move as one; they understand each other. (pp. 130-131)

References


Suggested Readings

The Visual Arts


Literary Arts