Integrating Disability Studies Concepts Into Occupational Therapy Education Using Service Learning

Lynn Gitlow, Kathleen Flecky

This article describes an occupational therapy educational program’s experience with service-learning courses that has fostered student learning about service to the community and disability as a multidimensional construct. Faculty-reflexive perspectives about disability and ways to enhance learning about disability as a human experience are presented as an important consideration for health care education curriculum design and course development.

Through review of educational evaluation described in research on service learning, the authors used a multi-method assessment matrix to capture students’ perspectives on their service learning. The community project investigated accessibility issues that persons with disabilities encountered in social participation at community arts venues. Results from student surveys, interviews, focus groups, and journal entries indicated that service learning contributed to occupational therapy students’ appreciation and understanding about disability as an individual, environmental, and societal construct.


The discipline of disability studies seeks to investigate perspectives and theories that describe the experience of disability and the personal, cultural, political, and socioeconomic factors that underlie its construction (Society for Disability Studies, 2004). An interdisciplinary disability studies orientation promotes a paradigm of disability that “focuses on the dynamic interplay of the person and environment rather than the individual or environment alone” (Thaper et al., 2004, p. 280).

As occupational therapy educators, we have a responsibility to offer learning experiences that provide professionals with the knowledge and skills to be able to enrich life participation and to understand the complexity of disability in the lives of clients and families (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2003a; Moyers & Hinojosa, 2003). Additionally as educators, we have a responsibility to participate in educational assessment that helps us understand the impact of curriculum design and teaching strategies on student learning. This article will describe an occupational therapy educational program’s experience over 5 years with service-learning courses that have fostered student learning about service to the community and disability as a multilevel construct.

First, we will provide an overview of the relationship between the profession of occupational therapy and the field of disability studies. Second, we will describe how important it is for faculty to critically examine their own perspectives regarding disability and service to others in order to develop learning experiences designed to help students learn about disability and occupational therapy’s role in the community. This is particularly important at a time when a paradigm shift from a deficit or impairment model to a social model of disability presents an opportunity to change our service approach to health care (AOTA, 2003a; Donoghue, 2003; World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). Finally, we will review the results of ongoing program evaluation that assesses the impact of service-learning experiences on student learning in an occupational therapy program.

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Overview

Occupational therapy originally viewed disability from a holistic perspective based on the philosophy of humanism and moral treatment perspectives that regarded persons as influenced by their environment through occupation. However, the profession was pressed to adopt a more mechanistic paradigm focused on impairment in the 1950s and 1960s with the growth of the field of rehabilitation (Kielhofner, 2004; Quiroga, 1995). This mechanistic perspective of disability places the cause of disability within the person, which was in contrast to our profession’s philosophic origins.

Leaders in our profession in the late 1960s called for a return to the holistic paradigm upon which occupational therapy was founded (Reilly, 1962; Yerxa, 1967). This call coincided with the emergence of the disability rights movement. Persons with disabilities and advocacy groups began to challenge the notion of an impairment-focused definition of disability (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001). As with other marginalized groups at that time, persons with disabilities defined themselves as a minority group oppressed by societal and environmental barriers and consequently demanded equal rights (Albrecht et al., 2001).

Disability scholars advanced sociopolitical definitions of disability and called for change in thinking about disability not as an individual’s problem, but as a function of social barriers (Oliver, 1990). The social constructionist or minority model of disability has been advanced in public policy, for example, in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the Olmstead Act (1999), for health care in the World Health Organization International Classification of Disability (WHO, 2002), and for occupational therapy in the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process (AOTA, 2003a). Despite the adoption of this model of disability, the deficit or impairment model continues to influence health care practitioners’ notions of disability (French & Swain, 2001).

These notions, “perpetuated by the media, culture and popular literature . . . are sources of misconceptions and stigmatization” (Donoghue, 2003, p. 206).

How to counter these culturally imbedded perspectives is a continual challenge in development of curricula that promote student engagement in client-centered practice for the 21st century (O’Neil & Pew Health Professions Commission, 1998). Faculty can begin to meet this challenge by examining their own beliefs and attitudes toward persons with disabilities. A first step in this process is to critically examine faculty perspectives. The following includes the reflective perspectives of the two authors during the design of our service-learning course work.

Critical Perspectives

Lynn

Often I reflect on my attitudes toward an occupational therapy student who I assumed just didn’t have what it took to make it in our educational program. I questioned the accommodation plan that I got for this student from the disability office. After all, I was an occupational therapist who specialized in understanding disability and its impact on performance, and I questioned these recommendations—the student was just too slow to be an occupational therapy assistant.

To make a long story short, the student with accommodations went on to graduate, work in an emerging practice area, and flourish as an occupational therapy assistant. This experience was a wake up call to me in several areas: (1) as a teacher, I realized the power that I had over a student’s career aspirations, and (2) I realized that my attitudes and assumptions about personal characteristics of difference influenced my perceptions of the student’s potential (Alport, 1954; Longmore, 2003). I felt I needed to learn more about how people’s attitudes and beliefs influence their treatment and expectations of occupational performance.

During my graduate studies, I began to question my assumption that disability is a personal deficit rather than an interaction between a person and his or her environment (Steinfield & Danford, 1999). I learned that as a health professional steeped in the mechanistic model that I might be part of the problem of creating disability (Giangreco, 1995; Longmore, 2003). Certainly I held attitudes about what persons with disabilities should and should not do and what I could do for them (French & Swain, 2001; Gitlow, 2001; Tsang, Chan, & Chan, 2004).

During this reflective period, a community-based opportunity project that started in Very Special Arts (VSA) of Massachusetts, spearheaded actually by an occupational therapist, Meida Abrams, came to my attention. I collaborated with the executive director of VSA of Maine and an architect who worked at the Maine’s Independent Living Services to develop a service-learning course proposal for the disability studies curriculum I was teaching at the time. The course was not accepted by the disability studies curriculum committee at that time, but the need for the
Project continued and I brought it with me to a developing occupational therapy program.

**Kathy**

I became part of the faculty about the same time that Lynn joined the occupational therapy department. I specifically was looking for the opportunity to partner with faculty committed to using a service-learning approach in designing an occupational therapy curriculum. I felt service-learning philosophies, educational strategies, and emerging research on effectiveness for meeting student and community outcomes was a good match with the philosophy of occupational therapy education (AOTA, 2003b; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Howard, 1998).

My involvement in service learning began at another institution where students participated in community projects as a way to experience the strengths and challenges of providing competent and ethical service to the community. Through our discussions with professionals serving persons with disabilities, I began to reflect with co-instructors, students, and community partners that by taking risks and sharing fears and failures in service to others, we are given an opportunity to enter into a shared power relationship with those we serve (Noddings, 1984). This sharing of power can encourage students to serve as a catalyst and witness for positive changes in community perspectives on persons with disabilities.

In addition, as a person with a disability, I was uncomfortable with disability-awareness student exercises in which students simulated a disability for a day or a few hours. I reasoned that students, who were mentored by persons with disabilities, would experience an appreciation and understanding of disability as a human experience unique to the person and the disability.

**Description of Service-Learning Courses**

A paradigm shift from a deficit or impairment model to a social model of disability is changing our service approach to health care delivery (AOTA, 2003a; WHO, 2002). New approaches to health care education, including community-based learning, are recommended to prepare students for a dynamic health care system with a continuum of available services (O’Neil & Pew Health Professions Commission, 1998). A growing body of research literature on service learning indicates that students benefit from this pedagogy (Knapp, Bennett, Plumb, & Robinson, 2000; Lohman & Aitken, 2002; Seifer, 1998).

“Service learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Service learning is based on an educational philosophy of experiential learning whereby education is an active process that involves content reorganization and reconstruction of past experiences in order to make meaning of present experiences (Dewey, 1916; Giles & Eyler, 1994).

Similar to the philosophy that underlies occupational therapy educational practice, service learning promotes learning by doing whereby students actively apply theory learned in the classroom to community social issues (AOTA, 2003b). Students who participate in service learning gain skills in organizational problem solving and decision making while taking responsibility for community needs (Burdach & Baldwin, 1992).

In addition, Eyler (2000) states that service learning has a powerful impact on students’ professional development by improving self-efficacy, self-esteem, and confidence in interpersonal skills in social and political arenas. Finally, while participating in service-learning experiences, students are likely to view themselves as more connected to their communities and more effective as change agents in their communities (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Service learning may be well-suited to disability studies if the experience provides students with the opportunity to partner with persons with disabilities and the disability community to challenge notions of disablement (Gent & Gurecka, 2001). In addition, it provides structured opportunities for students to reflect on their attitudes and assumption about the communities with which they partner (Jacoby, 2003). In a study by Greene (1997) that describes the use of service learning as the use of pedagogy to teach occupational therapy students moral reasoning skills, findings reveal that service learning “increased awareness of diversity and a diminishing of formerly held stereotypes” (p. 848). Another later study by Greene (1998) investigated the extent to which service learning helped occupational therapy students develop empathy and decrease their stereotypic notions of elders. The results of this study support service learning as an effective educational approach (Greene, 1998).

In our occupational therapy program, there are three semester-long service-learning courses. The service-learning courses start in the 1st year of the preprofessional and foundational college program and continue through the 2nd year. The professional occupational therapy courses begin in the 3rd year of our program; therefore, the service-learning courses are foundational for student progression.

In these courses, students collaborate with Accessible Maine staff and persons with disabilities to complete ADA access assessments of arts venues. Accessible Maine is a...
program of VSA arts (formerly Very Special Arts) of Maine, Alpha One (Maine’s Independent Living Services), and our institution’s occupational therapy program that focuses on enabling persons with disabilities to identify accessible cultural programs and venues in their communities.

The students are trained by artists with disabilities and Accessible Maine staff regarding the importance and techniques of making arts venues accessible to all persons and the barriers that must be overcome in both the physical and social environment to accomplish this goal. The final products of the course work and access reviews are (a) an online and printed catalog providing access information regarding arts venues to persons with disabilities and their families and friends and (b) a culmination workshop where students and their mentors present solutions to make communities welcoming to all people.

The objectives of the courses include exploring the meaning of occupation in one’s own life and the lives of persons with disabilities, and investigating and experiencing how the physical and social environment can promote or interfere with occupational performance. The process through which these objectives are achieved is by completing the access review project. Course readings include information about the ADA, narratives of authors with disabilities, service-learning literature, and occupational therapy readings that highlight emerging practice areas and the ADA.

These readings along with the mentors with disabilities, who participate in the course, begin to introduce the students to the notion of disability as a unique human experience different for everyone. Additionally students begin to learn that disability is more than the use of a wheelchair (French & Swain, 2001). By carrying out and completing the access review project, not only do students learn how to complete accessibility surveys but they also experience social attitudes of persons in the community that may promote or interfere with occupational performance.

Learning From Course and Program Evaluation

Our beginning investigation into service learning as an educational approach for occupational therapy students was guided by questions from service-learning literature. Specifically, Eyler and Giles (1999) identified a number of directions for research in service learning, including answering the following questions: How can service learning enhance subject matter learning? How can we define the learning and skill outcomes that are expected in service learning? What are the processes of effective service learning? And finally, how do they relate to learning in general and what value does service learning bring to the communities in which the service takes place?

Purpose

The aim of our pilot assessment study was to describe the students’ perspectives on their experience in service-learning courses. We began our investigation with the following questions: What is happening to occupational therapy students who participate in service-learning courses in an occupational therapy curriculum? To what extent are they achieving the outcomes of the courses? Does service learning provide students with the knowledge and skills to act as change agents in their communities?

Sample

A convenience sample of 40 students who participated in service-learning course work over a 5-year period within our occupational therapy program was recruited for this study. Institutional Review Board approval and individual student consent forms were obtained prior to study inception. An administrative protocol for student surveys, interviews, and focus groups based on Driscoll and colleagues (1997) was used.

Method

A qualitative and quantitative methodology based on a service-learning assessment matrix developed by Driscoll and colleagues (1997) provided the framework for this study. Gelmon and colleagues recommend assessing service learning with a combined methods strategy in order to triangulate data and include a variety of information that captures the student experience in service learning (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001).

Data were collected through student preservice and postservice surveys, individual student interviews, student focus groups, and student journals. Survey data were collected in a pre–post format in the first class and in the last class of the service-learning course. Data analysis of surveys was conducted through use of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software, version 10.0. These findings are briefly mentioned at the beginning of the results section of this paper. They were reported in detail elsewhere (Flecky & Gitlow, 2001). Additionally, 1-hour student interviews and focus-group and journal-review data collection occurred at the end of the service-learning courses.

Content of the semistructured individual interviews was focused on explication and confirmation of focus-group data themes. In addition, analysis of student course
journals was used to enhance triangulation, confirmability, and trustworthiness of data collection. Data from these multiple sources were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic categories. Both authors individually reviewed initial data and codes from the students and these were sorted and compared (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Through subsequent focus groups, interviews, and interviewer field notes, the two authors’ coding analyses were integrated into a conceptual representation using concept mapping of seven themes grounded in the data collection. The thematic representation was reviewed by the student participants for member checking and verification (Creswell, 1994).

From this qualitative evaluation process, the authors discovered seven themes: (1) the social construction of disability, (2) the occupational therapy student’s role as an advocate for persons with disabilities, (3) awareness of personal meanings of accessibility to persons with disabilities, (4) looking at the environment in a new way, (5) connecting experiences with service learning, (6) definitions of partnership, and (7) community tensions. Three of the seven themes emerging from this program evaluation in particular related to student-learning experiences regarding disability awareness and issues. The themes included: (1) the social construction of disability, (2) the occupational therapy student’s role as an advocate for persons with disabilities, and (3) awareness of personal meanings of accessibility to persons with disabilities. Elective coding and data collection continued in a constant comparative manner until recurrent themes from data emerged routinely and additional themes did not occur. Journal reviews were conducted by both authors to confirm conceptual themes revealed in the interviews.

Results

Through our review of quantitative data, as part of this study, we found that over 90% of the students who participated in the courses feel “more comfortable with dealing with persons from diverse cultures” and that students begin to understand the importance of “adapting the physical and social environment to persons with disabilities” (Flecky & Gitlow, 2001). Additionally, the students agreed that their participation in service learning helped them apply course content to occupational therapy practice and helped define possible roles and directions for their futures in occupational therapy. Based on our research questions, we were not surprised by these findings. What we did not expect was the information we gained from the focus groups, interviews, and reflective journals where we began to discover themes that related to disability awareness and issues. The themes included: (1) learning about and defining disability, (2) awareness of environment in terms of accessibility to persons with disabilities, and (3) the occupational therapy student’s role as an advocate for persons with disabilities.

Learning About Disability

Students voiced that they began to understand that the definition of disability goes beyond the person who uses a wheelchair. Students stated, “I like how the readings mentioned mental as well as physical. Some people seem to think that occupational therapy is only for physical disabilities.”

Additionally they stated, “There is a lot of stigma attached to disabilities . . . people categorize and generalize . . . people fear when they don’t understand . . . overall, we as occupational therapy students have to think about how everyone perceives disabilities.” “Before this class, I didn’t know much about people with disabilities, what their lives were like. I look at people with disabilities in a different way . . . People with disabilities just want to do the same things that everyone else does.”

Furthermore, the students began to understand that disability is not defined by solely personal and physical attributes, and are a complex construct involving persons, occupations, environments, and attitudes. Students wrote: “I am beginning to understand the theory now about the match between the person, her occupations, and the environment. This course really helped me see theory in action.” “Before major nationwide changes can be made, tremendous adaptations must occur in the attitudes around the issues of disabilities.” “One aspect that definitely surprised me was the negative attitude of a teacher through this particular confrontation. I was able to see how people with handicaps must feel when they are unable to participate in occupations.”

The readings and active learning through completion of access surveys gave students opportunities to expand their notion of disability. In addition, they were challenged to examine their beliefs and perceptions of disability and identify social as well as physical aspects of disability. Students stated: “I was able to see how people with handicaps must feel when they are unable to participate in occupations.” “Transportation is definitely a barrier for people with disabilities.” “I have learned how to consider all parts of the person when looking at a site . . . how would they feel eating here?”

Awareness of Environment in Terms of Accessibility

A second theme that emerged was the awareness of the environment in terms of accessibility to persons with disabilities.
The students were able to connect with community partners to use hands-on experiences to develop the knowledge and skills to assess accessibility. Students commented that they become more aware of accessibility issues through their mentoring partnerships with artists with disabilities, community accessibility advocates, and other fellow students.

The support and guidance from mentorship resulted in the students stating that they have a greater appreciation of what access means to persons with disabilities. They asserted that they will never look at their physical and social environments and occupations in the same way due to their learning experiences. Students said: “I feel different about persons with disabilities, like, everyday life, I wonder how they get access to buildings and things that I take for granted.” “I didn’t realize how such little things can affect access. It really opened my eyes to what people with disabilities face. Now, I am like, how is the person in that wheelchair going to get into that door?” “This activity helped me a lot . . . it opened my eyes . . . I never realized that this building was not that great in accessibility. I guess when you are not disabled, it is not that easy to tell.” “I guess I had developed a stereotype of handicapped-accessible facilities. I presumed that all handicap facilities are obvious to individuals; however, I realized that this is not always the case.” “Since the first part of this SL class, I find myself constantly thinking about accessibility.”

**Student Role As Advocate**

Many students voiced that they have a better understanding and a confidence in the role of occupational therapy in working in partnership with persons with disabilities to enhance accessibility. Students described this as opening their eyes to opportunities for occupational therapy to positively impact the world around them. They also stated that they felt they have a responsibility to promote accessibility services and the confidence to speak up to advocate for these services so that all persons can enjoy better accessibility to community venues. Students wrote: “[This class] really opened my eyes to the world around me, and the potential obstacles that it contains. However, with these potential obstacles, it is our responsibility to find underlying solutions” “I think this knowledge about disability will stay with me and I can keep on applying it . . . it is rewarding to relay information to benefit people . . . we can take the lead in contact in the community.” “It is great to be able to go out in the community and actively participate in helping people with disabilities get more access. It is great to have a voice and be able to make changes I had never thought of before.”

**Summary and Future Directions**

Through ongoing evaluation of our service-learning courses, we have discovered that by engaging in active learning, students begin to understand that disability is a multifaceted construct. They report expanding their notion of disability beyond the common stereotypical image of persons with disabilities as wheelchair users (Hughes, 2004). Students said that they value experiences that give them opportunities for mentorship by persons with disabilities and community organizations that advocate for disability awareness and accessibility. We also learned that students were beginning to identify the roles that occupational therapy could have in their communities for promoting accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Our expectations from program evaluation of service-learning outcomes were that students would begin to understand the importance of doing and active learning by working with community partners in the occupational therapy educational process as reported elsewhere (Flecky & Gitlow, 2001). Just as reflection activities for students can create surprises in thinking and learning (Eyler, Giles, & Gitlow, 1996), so were we, as faculty learners, surprised when we discovered what students were learning about the construct of disability. They were informing us that they are beginning to understand how physical and social (attitudes) aspects of the environments are determinants of disability. Additionally, we learned that the students reported that learning in partnership with persons with disabilities was valuable to them. Finally, the students told us that they were able to describe a role for occupational therapists as community advocates early in their preprofessional education.

By combining concepts from disability studies and occupational therapy within the context of service learning, students have reported learning about disability as a social rather than impairment-based concept. In addition, partnership with persons with disabilities and the community has enriched student learning about disability and the role of occupational therapy in the community. This learning will create the foundation for the development of skills and competencies identified as necessary for occupational therapy professionals in the 21st century (Scaffa, 2001).

Our next step is to construct an educational framework based on data that emerge from ongoing program evaluation in order to better understand how to continue to foster student learning about disability for future practice. We expect to use this framework to refine our current program development, implementation, and evaluation using student, faculty, and community voices to strengthen our
program and integrate disability studies into occupational therapy education.

References


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