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S. Margaret Maloney a & Kristen Griffith b

a Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri
b School of Health Sciences, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio


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Occupational Therapy Students’ Development of Therapeutic Communication Skills During a Service-Learning Experience

S. MARGARET MALONEY
Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri

KRISTEN GRIFFITH
School of Health Sciences, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio

This qualitative study examined the effect community-based service-learning experiences had upon occupational therapy students’ therapeutic communication skills and their application of theoretical concepts. After their semester-long course was completed, six students de-identified and voluntarily submitted their weekly reflective journals for retrospective analysis in accordance with Giorgi’s strategies (1985, 1997). Two analysts identified eight themes: developing trust, establishing boundaries, communication, client-centered care, breakdown of preconceptions, increased self-awareness, power of pride, and power of occupation. Educators are urged to use service-learning experiences to facilitate student interpersonal skill development and integration of theoretical knowledge.

KEYWORDS therapeutic use of self, communication, education, occupational therapy, service-learning
INTRODUCTION

In order to provide the most beneficial treatment, it is essential for occupational therapists to establish genuine therapeutic relationships with their clients. Mosey (1986) used the term conscious use of self to describe how therapists actively manipulate their own responses to clients in order to alleviate client fears and provide them with reassurance. In order to effectively utilize “self,” a therapist must possess such skills as empathy, humility, unconditional personal regard, honesty, a relaxed manner, compassion, an open communication style, and self-awareness (Taylor, 2008). Another definition reveals a therapeutic relationship to be “a trusting connection and rapport established between therapist and client through collaboration, communication, therapist empathy and mutual respect” (Cole & McLean, 2003, p. 49). Such a valued relationship develops when both the therapist and the client experience an intimate interpersonal relationship. Thus, the therapeutic use of self has been described as the therapist’s “planned use of his or her personality, insights, perceptions, and judgment” during the on-going and dynamic process of intervention with a client (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2008, p. 653).

Therapists equate effective communication skills with better interactions with their clients and an increased ability to address the clients’ needs and concerns (Allison & Strong, 1994). A national survey of 568 occupational therapists in the United States found that 90% of the respondents indicated that the quality of therapist-client relationships directly affected the level of occupational engagement by the client (Taylor, Lee, Kielhofner, & Ketkar, 2009). Cole and McLean (2003) found similar results from a survey of 129 occupational therapists in Connecticut: 83% of respondents strongly agreed that the therapeutic relationship is related to treatment outcomes.

Occupational therapists also indicate there is insufficient knowledge about the use of self in the field of occupational therapy (Taylor et al., 2009). Educators acknowledge the importance of teaching occupational therapy students the intricacies of therapeutic use of self and effective communication strategies, yet they have grappled with enacting effective teaching strategies related to this topic. Davidson (2011) conducted a mixed-method study to ascertain both the scope of the educational content related to therapeutic use of self and the instructional methods employed by occupational therapy curricula in the United States. Surveys and an invitation to participate in a telephone interview were mailed to 306 faculty members from a nonproportional stratified random sample of 149 occupational therapy educational programs. Seventy-one completed surveys from 39 of the sample programs were returned, and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with faculty from six randomly selected programs. Survey results indicted a range of 61–129 hours were spent in addressing topics related to therapeutic use of self in the curricula of these responding programs. The educators most
commonly used discussions, class lectures, and behavior modeling (75% of the time) to present the concepts related to therapeutic use of self. Instructors also commonly incorporated the use of role-playing, readings, written assignments, and interactions with clients (50–61% of the time) and, in fewer cases, used videotapes and films (approximately 30% of the time). The educators also indicted (via a Likert scale evaluation) that they were moderately satisfied with the attention provided within their curricula to the topic of therapeutic use of self.

Davidson’s (2011) findings regarding the perceptions of the faculty members, however, markedly contrast with findings from studies of practicing occupational therapists about their perceived level of training during their occupational therapy educational programs. The practicing therapists concur with the faculty viewpoint about the perceived importance of the topic of the therapeutic relationship, but the evidence suggests that graduates perceive they are not adequately prepared in this arena prior to entering practice. Taylor et al. (2009) found only 51% of the surveyed practicing occupational therapists strongly agreed that they had received sufficient training in therapeutic use of self while a student, and most indicated they did not develop their skills related to therapeutic use of self until their fieldwork experiences or as a practicing therapist. Cole and McLean (2003) also found among clinician respondents that they stated they learned the components of the therapeutic relationship more fully while “on the job” rather than during their occupational therapy coursework. The challenge, then, is for occupational therapy faculty to find educational strategies to create more meaningful and effective learning opportunities to promote students’ ability to develop, practice, and fine-tune the required therapeutic communication skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Haertl (2008) asserts that occupational therapy faculty need to assist students to develop and incorporate higher level therapeutic skills and may do so through direct modeling of these skills during interactions both within the classroom and during interpersonal relationships outside of the classroom. She suggests faculty will be more effective if they go beyond simply employing classroom role-playing scenarios as a way to challenge and develop a student’s communication skills. Instead, she argues that faculty must incorporate the basic concepts of therapeutic use of self into the student-faculty relationships and model these concepts daily to the students. Davidson (2011) concurs and notes that there is a key difference between discussion of the topic and “actually practicing new behaviors” (p. 97).

Other strategies may be found within the nursing literature. Nursing educators have identified innovative strategies for students to learn and
practice their communication skills, including the use of an interactive video-disc (Walker & Ross, 1995), a video interactive computer program (Kluge & Glick, 2006), and an algorithm-driven simulated patient (Sleeper & Thompson, 2008). McCarthy, O’Donovan, and Twomey (2008) provided the outline of a carefully constructed course curriculum which includes the use of video recordings for self- and peer-led critiques and the use of a reflective diary.

Another emergent pedagogical strategy for increasing student interpersonal and therapeutic communication skill may be found through the incorporation of structured and reflective service-learning experiences early in the occupational therapy curricula (Flecky & Gitlow, 2011). The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2011) defines service-learning as a teaching strategy which integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection. The components of successful service-learning include: (a) links to academic content and standards, (b) real and defined community needs, (c) reciprocity and benefit for both the community and the service providers, and (d) an appropriate link between the subject area and learning goals. Cashel, Goodman, & Swanson (2003) offer four additional characteristics which must be present in an effective service-learning situation: (a) active participation, (b) integration with the curriculum with structured time for reflection, (c) opportunities to apply skills and knowledge in real-life situations, and (d) the extension of student learning beyond the classroom. The immediacy and authenticity of direct human interactions during service-learning is one of the most valuable aspects of the experience and promotes problem-solving skill development (Eyler & Giles, 1999). According to Stevens (2008), service-learning provides structured opportunities for students to not only altruistically provide service to underserved populations, but it also allows them to integrate profession-based theory and knowledge acquired during didactic learning in the classroom. Thus, a well-designed service-learning experience aims for students to engage in direct human interaction during structured projects and to promote self-reflection, self-discovery, the acquisition and actualization of values, and the development of skills and wisdom.

Service-learning experiences differ from Level I fieldwork experiences in several aspects. The two learning experiences are similar in that both do not require an occupational therapy professional to mentor the student, and both may occur in a variety of settings. However, inherent to a Level I fieldwork placement is the understanding that the focus is upon enhancing a student’s knowledge of selected aspects of the occupational therapy process (AOTA, 2009). A retrospective analysis of questionnaires completed by 498 occupational therapy students and 49 occupational therapy assistant students from five schools about their Level I fieldwork experiences verified that students did have guided opportunities to practice occupational therapy specific clinical skills and additionally found that the students perceived the
Level I experience to be a valuable opportunity to observe theory in practice (Johnson, Koenig, Pierson, Santalucia, & Wachter-Schutz, 2006). Haynes (2011) also found students were engaged in active application of clinical skills during Level I fieldwork, although supervisors perceived there was a greater incidence of active participation than did the students. Ultimately, the primary difference between a service-learning experience and a Level I fieldwork experience is that the former experience is not designed to focus upon the development of occupational therapy specific clinical skills.

The inclusion of service-learning experiences within occupational therapy curricula is a growing trend, and the literature provides strategies for developing service-learning courses along with analyses of the pedagogical benefits of doing so (Alsop, 2007; Beck & Barnes, 2007; Flecky & Gitlow, 2011; Gitlow & Flecky, 2005; Hansen et al., 2007; Hoppes, Bender & DeGrace, 2005; O’Brien & D’Amico, 2004). As early as 1997, Greene found students had an increased awareness of diversity and insight into the perspectives of persons with disabilities after engaging in service-learning. Other benefits from utilizing service-learning as a teaching methodology for occupational therapy students include increased understanding of other health care disciplines (Flinn, Kloos, Teaford, Clark, & Szucs, 2009; Gupta, 2006), as well as increased knowledge and understanding of the challenges of developing therapeutic relationships with diverse populations (Flinn et al., 2009; Schindler, 2011). Students have also demonstrated an increased awareness of the community needs and increased likelihood of community involvement (Lohman & Aitken, 2002). Bazyk, Glorioso, Gordon, Haines, and Percaciante (2010) found students learned more about the complexities of leading therapeutic groups, their ability to employ use of self, and were able to put into practice the technical and reasoning skills they had learned at a theoretical level. Students have also developed an unwavering appreciation of the value of therapeutic occupations (Bazyk et al., 2010; Vroman, Simmons, & Knight, 2010). Maloney, Myers, and Bazyk (2011) also found that, when students engaged in service-learning, they developed greater self-awareness and awareness of homeless individuals as persons, awareness of social issues, professional self-efficacy, and embraced opportunities to demonstrate professional leadership. Others have documented students’ positive changes in clinical reasoning, confidence, and technical skills (Atler & Gavin, 2010; Raiz, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects a service-learning experience might have upon the development and implementation of therapeutic communication skills for graduate students in an occupational therapy program. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate how the graduate students were able to incorporate theoretical concepts from their prior psychosocial course into direct application with individuals at the community-based sites where they were assigned for their service-learning course.
METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research project employed a phenomenological approach to examine the effects of service-learning upon the development of therapeutic communication skills for graduate students. Phenomenological research aims to study events from a first-person point of view and to describe, rather than explain, a phenomenon in order to understand the individual’s life experiences (Giorgi, 1985, 1997). The journals were carefully reviewed in accordance with Giorgi’s (1985, 1997) strategies for analyzing qualitative data.

Human subject research approval was secured from the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board. The 20 students who were enrolled in the service-learning course in spring 2010 were invited to participate in the study. All of the students had been placed at one of three community-based mental health facilities. If they elected to participate in this study, they were instructed to de-identify their journals, make a photocopy, and anonymously place the documents in an unmonitored collection box placed in a public area. Six of the 20 students voluntarily submitted their reflective journals which contained their personal thoughts, feelings, and emotions over the course of the eight-week-long service-learning experience.

The first author, an experienced qualitative researcher, was an assistant professor for the Master of Occupational Therapy Program through which the students were invited to participate in the study. She was not, however, the instructor for the service-learning course. The second author was an undergraduate McNair Scholars Program student in health sciences and completed the research project as part of her course work. She was a novice qualitative researcher.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants for this study were first year Masters of Occupational Therapy students at Cleveland State University. The students were entering their second semester of their first year in spring 2010. They had not yet completed an occupational therapy Level I fieldwork experience prior to taking the service-learning course. They had, however, completed one psychosocial course during their first semester of the program. A portion of that course had guided the students to undertake a self-assessment to determine their core values and beliefs, and the course had included sessions to discuss communication styles and assertiveness techniques. The students had not yet had a specific course related to occupational therapy interventions in a mental health setting. Thus, for many of the students, the service-learning experience was their first direct encounter with people who had specific mental health diagnoses and their first exposure within the mental health
care system. Biographical data were not collected from the participants in order to help assure their anonymity.

**DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES**

Once the de-identified reflective journals were submitted, duplicate copies were made of the documents. Both analysts received a copy of each journal, and a master copy of each was placed in a locked cabinet in a locked office. The documents will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

Giorgi (1997) describes the methods of phenomenological research as a minimum of five basic steps: (1) collection of data, (2) reading of the data, (3) breaking of the data into meaning units or parts, (4) organization and expression of the data from a disciplinary perspective, and (5) synthesis or summary of the data. Analysis of the reflective journals was conducted by the first and second authors following Giorgi’s (1985, 1997) strategies. Initially, each analyst maintained her own reflective journal in order to “bracket” past knowledge about and emotional responses to such phenomena as service-learning, occupational therapy education, mental health clients, therapeutic communication, and empathy. This encouraged the researchers to encounter and consider the data with a fresh perspective and to be aware of any personal biases toward the topics.

The participants’ journals were initially read separately but as a whole entity in order to gain an overview description by the participant about his or her experience during the service-learning course. Subsequent readings were conducted at a slower pace and with greater attention to detail in order for the analysts to consider each portrayed experience, emotion, or thought found within the words of the participants. The analysts used color-coding strategies to categorize phrases in order to create a visual depiction of the events, emotions, and thoughts portrayed by the participants. During each reading, the analysts recorded notes in the right-hand margin of the journals as they attempted to express the meaning found within the participants’ own everyday language. The analysts shared their notes during three two-hour long meetings, during which the emergent meanings were discussed and distilled or expanded upon jointly. Once the meanings were established, they were examined, probed, and re-described to make the ideas more explicit and to reach a consensus about the emergent themes.

**FINDINGS**

Eight essential themes emerged from the data. The themes found within the journal data were: developing trust, establishing boundaries, communication, client-centered care, breakdown of preconceptions, increased self-awareness, the power of pride, and the power of occupation.
Developing Trust

The theme of trust emerged in the reflective journals as the students began to recognize the importance of establishing a genuine client-therapist relationship, particularly with clients who had specific mental health conditions. The students noted almost immediately how the clients expressed various negative emotions and demonstrated symptoms, such as paranoia or anxiety, which interfered with their ability to engage fully in typical daily occupations. Throughout the service-learning experience, the students mentioned how they began to understand that establishing proper rapport enhanced the development of trust between the client and the student.

For example, one student journaled about his experience with Carl (a pseudonym) who had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Carl was open to talking with the student about his personal life but initially refused to participate in any activities, such as board games. Over the next seven weeks, Carl offered numerous excuses about why he could not participate. The student wrote “I didn’t push him to participate, but I did make it clear that he could join at any time.” As the weeks went by, the student continued to try to developing rapport with Carl by discussing topics such as college and occupational therapy. In the seventh week of the service-learning experience, the student brought ingredients to make brownies with the clients. When Carl was once more asked if he wanted to participate in the baking, Carl mentioned that he was interested, but said, “Wednesdays are very, very busy”. Suddenly though, he changed his mind and, for the first time, entered into the group situation and began to help make brownies. The student wrote:

This week was a success because we made progress with Carl. He even told me that he was afraid of me at first. He didn’t know what my intentions were, even though I clearly stated them to him every time I saw him. This was a good trust building experience for me.

Thus, while trust and a therapeutic relationship were not immediately evident, this important step was eventually experienced.

Establishing Boundaries

The students experienced numerous stressful situations while negotiating their service-learning experience. Through the use of direct communication and attention to their own intuition, the students found they were able to properly manage the situations while still respecting the boundaries of the clients. In one situation, a female consumer of the day program was found slumped over in a chair sweating profusely. A staff member quickly called 911. The student recognized her own limitations in this situation and found an appropriate way to help. She wrote “I tried to help keep people
away in order to give the member space. I went and grabbed a wet towel with cold water in order to wipe her down.” The student expressed feelings of helplessness in this situation because “I know there was really nothing I could do besides attempt to make [the woman] feel as comfortable as possible.”

Another student was the recipient of inappropriate sexual remarks made by a client while they were engaged in making a collage at the center. The client cut out a picture of a female celebrity from a magazine and remarked how he liked the black silk shorts the celebrity was wearing. The student and the client began discussing fashion and how black clothing is a staple material which could be worn to any function. The student wrote, “At the end of the day, I told him it was nice to meet him and that [I] looked forward to seeing him next week. He said, ‘It was nice meeting you too—oh, and make sure you wear black silk next week.’” The student reported feeling embarrassed and shocked, but was proud of her ability to remain calm and not appear startled. She felt she had set personal limits with him by simply replying, “I won’t be doing that, but I’ll see you later.” Careful boundaries between the students and clients were established in these situations.

Communication

Almost immediately upon initiating their service-learning experience, the students began to write in their journals about their impressions concerning the employees of the facility. The students all remarked about what they recognized as the employees’ remarkable abilities to differentiate the proper communication skills which were needed to enhance their interactions with the clients. The students observed the role model employees at the sites and realized they were witnessing many of the communication techniques discussed during the psychosocial class in the prior semester. They described being impressed by the employees’ ability to read clients’ emotions, and this led them to attempt to emulate the employees’ behaviors. They wrote about the behaviors which were modeled to them by the employees:

[his] voice becomes softer when talking to members who are not functioning on a high level.

[he] painstakingly, task by task, helped each client partake in the entire project [they were] working on according to their abilities, and showed them and explained to them every move they needed in order to perform [the task]. If the client got it wrong, he would patiently show them two times more. [He] was careful to break everything into the smallest detail. For example instead of saying “add two plus two on the calculator” he said “push two, the plus sign, the two, and then the equal sign.” In a nutshell, he broke things down that we otherwise take for granted as automatic behavior.
Eventually, some of the students began to feel more comfortable in taking control of situations and directing sessions with clients. They also felt their communication skills were being enhanced through direct interaction with the clients.

I am also finding it easier to get information from the residents by asking open-ended questions and prying further when I want to know more, but knowing when to back off and not push the issue further.

We tried to make the activity as easy to understand as possible because the residents have varying degrees of cognitive functioning. The [visual] list was a good idea because as expected, the residents had a hard time understanding the instructions. The visual aid was a huge help.

There were various situations that were described throughout the journals which showcased the power of role models for the students. The employee role models demonstrated great emotional strength, patience, communication, and flexibility with the clients. They demonstrated valuable techniques and gave the students immediate and appropriate feedback. The segments below highlight the benefits of having effective role models for the students. In one situation, the student witnessed a client become angry about not being allowed to smoke cigarettes in the community center. An employee stepped in to take control of the situation, but it quickly escalated and the students just stood to the side and observed. Following the outburst the student wrote:

She told us how we have to handle the residents. You can’t show weakness or intimidation or [the clients] will manipulate you. This is a skill that took she said took years to develop … she was an excellent role model; we learned a lot through just one interaction. We know that moods can escalate in a few short seconds and that it is best to keep your cool, make the residents aware of how he is behaving and never show intimidation.

The students felt that, through their opportunities to have direct one-to-one communications with the client, they had achieved more self-confidence and self-awareness of how they were perceived by others. For instance, they wrote:

I also learned that communicating with these residents is not difficult. I had a wonderful time and will be more than happy to work with this population in the future.

I observed a lot about my communication with the members. I became aware about how I worded things and jumped to do things and the speed of my conversation.
In other words, the students came to understand how assertiveness could be effective in openly addressing and deflecting a client's anger. This sense of achievement is difficult to create in a classroom, lecture, or role play, and more easily understood through a hands-on experience.

Client-Centered Care

The students expressed an understanding throughout their journals about the importance and difficulty of providing client-centered care. The students developed an increased sensitivity to the rigidity of the clients' daily routines and realized they needed to accommodate the needs of the client. As one participant wrote:

In order to overcome the obstacles facing us at the clubhouse (lack of time and space) we decided to try to move our exercise program to a different floor in order to make it more accessible to clients. We also asked the supervisor if it would be alright to post flyers advertising an early morning exercise program that would not disrupt the work routines of the [clients].

They also realized that each client was unique and might respond differently to the occupations being presented. This required the students to adjust their therapeutic use of self in order to meet the needs of the client.

Something else that has been reinforced by [interactions with the clients] is that for each client there are no cookie cutter methods [that work on every single person] and the therapists and/or social workers must change to meet the needs of the client.

Breakdown of Preconceptions

The students learned that they held preconceived notions about mental health consumers as a whole. They tried to be aware of the stereotypical preconceptions they held, and during their service learning placements, they began to recognize the diversity which can be found among a spectrum of clients with mental health issues. They came to understand that mental health clients do not all function, communicate, or appear as the popular media and society often portray them. This was validated by the following quotations:

One thing I learned from the visit was that you cannot judge a person's capabilities based on their current situation or outside appearance or demeanor. I thought Carl was trying to impress us with his background when he may have been telling us the truth all along.
I was really amazed at how normal [the client] seemed. I hate to sound so judgmental. I would have never known in 15 years [that he suffered from a mental illness.] This is someone I would interact within everyday life and never know. What I learned from this is that you never really know who is mentally ill and who is not.

Aside from a few people it was difficult to differentiate [between the] staff and clients. So far I am learning that there are a lot of mentally ill that don’t fit into my one “stereotype”—meaning it is not obvious.

But my overall [learning] experience from this visit to [the day center] is that many [mentally ill] people are highly functional, extremely intelligent and very pleasant to have interesting normal conversations with. This further emphasizes what I’ve learned in classes about the mentally ill—they function and communicate across a diverse spectrum.

Thus, concerns about stigma and judgment of persons with mental illness were reduced through the students’ service-learning experience.

Increased Self-Awareness

During their experiences, the students began to reflect upon and discuss their increased self-awareness. They recognized their development of self-confidence and better communication skills. They also became more aware of when they were engaging their therapeutic use of self and about the possible challenges that arise when working with different clients in a novel environment. For example, they wrote:

I will say that my confidence with the clients with mental illness has improved greatly …. I realized simply that you can just talk to these folks as you would anyone else. What an epiphany! I can only describe my initial reluctance as a form of fear and I think I have been educated by exposure.

This was a really great experience. I am already more comfortable with the population.

I had to remind myself that this behavior was the disability we were working on, it’s not easy and I have to be mindful of my frustrations and keep them in check. If what I am doing is not working I need to find another way and try it out.

I can’t pick and choose which clients I have as an OT so this will be a good experience.

Thus, the students came to better understand their therapeutic role within a client-therapist relationship.
The Power of Pride

All of the students developed a sense of pride about their accomplishments at the service-learning sites. The students also witnessed the development of self-confidence in the clients as the clients undertook and mastered various occupations, as seen in the following quotes:

He hung both projects on his wall. You can tell that he feels a sense of accomplishment when he finishes his projects and is proud to show them to other residents. It felt good to give him something he enjoyed.

We left excited and relieved at how good [the activity went].

[The client] taught me everything I needed to know about cutting and preparing the salads. He seemed to take great pride in teaching someone how to do something.

Not only did the participants experience their own pleasure and pride in successfully completing their occupations within their role of a student, but they noted how the clients felt a similar sense of accomplishment and pride when they successfully engaged in the occupations presented to them by the students.

Power of Occupation

The students also began to notice how effective therapy could be when the client was presented with the opportunity to engage in a meaningful and purposeful occupation. They were able to see the positive effects generated within the clients when they engaged in therapeutic activities such as painting, cooking, and cleaning. The following passages illustrate how the students noticed when the clients were fully engaged in occupations:

He was unsure of many things (how to chop) and we encouraged him and taught him. He really seemed into the task and happy about his work. This is probably the first time I’ve seen someone transformed (really into and happy about their task) when learning something new. It was really nice to see!

Though it was hard work, one of the members had a smile on her face the whole time. I think she actually enjoyed this work and she proudly proclaimed that she has already completed the same task in many other rooms on the floor.

The following week he showed no anxiety … and was able to maintain a better level of attention to the instructor without as much verbal cuing.
The next fellow to complete the [vocational readiness] test really took his time and did his own scoring . . . . He seemed pleased that he was able to generate some new ideas for a career from the test . . . . That was nice to see!

The students noticed that the clients exhibited less compulsive behavior and could attend to activities longer, which in turn allowed the clients to develop greater self-confidence and enhanced a more positive mood. Students also recognized when they had chosen the most appropriate occupation and were successful in implementing therapeutic techniques.

**DISCUSSION**

As the participants reflected on their service-learning experiences in their journals, they expressed feelings of personal growth or change in their understanding of their own pre-conceptions and fears about interacting with clients with mental health issues. They experienced increased self-awareness about their strengths as effective and therapeutic communicators and determined that they were able to assertively set boundaries with the clients. The data also revealed that the participants became more acutely aware of the intricacies of the communication process. In particular, the opportunity to observe and emulate “role model” employees at the sites was helpful for them.

Additionally, participants expressed a greater understanding of the uniqueness and individual characteristics of each client they encountered. This further led them to understand the importance of selecting therapeutic occupations which would be more likely to elicit a fully engaged performance from the client. They wrote about how proud the clients appeared when they would master an occupation. In turn, the students themselves experienced strong feelings of accomplishment when they realized they, too, had been successful in their own occupational performance as an emerging occupational therapy professional. A similar development of professional self-efficacy would be difficult to duplicate through learning experiences in a typical lab or lecture course. Finally, the students were particularly struck by the opportunity to see the “power of occupation” in action. They were able to directly observe the changes in the affect of clients who became actively engaged in the occupations which the students presented to them.

Opportunity for further study exists in the area of service-learning and the benefits such experiences might have for assisting students to enact and practice abstract concepts from their coursework. Longitudinal research examining the long-term effects of service learning on therapeutic use of self and the development of empathy might be conducted by following students across the continuum of a service-learning course through Level I fieldwork and eventually through the completion of Level II fieldwork. Further research might also compare the ease of transition to Level II fieldwork for students
who had engaged in service-learning experiences versus students who had not had such an opportunity embedded within their academic coursework.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the data were limited to the written reflective journals, which meant that the researchers did not have any opportunity to interview the participants in order to ask further probing questions. The additional use of a focus group as a data collection strategy would have strengthened this study by providing a supplementary data source. Second, the convenience sample was limited to only occupational therapy students from only one educational program, thereby limiting transferability. Third, the analysis process might have been hindered, because one of the two team members was a novice researcher and an undergraduate student. However, the first researcher had not been the instructor of any of the novice researcher's courses and, therefore, the relationship was not defined by traditional professor-student roles. Every effort was made to promote the novice researcher to act as an equal partner in the research project and to encourage her to voice her opinions and views about the data during the analysis process. Fourth, as is found in most qualitative methodology studies, there was a potential for researcher bias resulting from the analysts' personal lived-experiences. In order to minimize this threat, however, the researchers had frank and open discussions to identify, acknowledge, and minimize the potential biases. Finally, member checking would have also strengthened the study by ensuring congruence between the analysts' interpretation and the ideas of the participants. This was, however, difficult to enact, due to the logistics of the participants having left campus for their Level II Fieldwork placements.

**SUMMARY**

Service-learning is a means of linking academic learning with practical experiences and is a part of the curricula of a growing number of occupational therapy programs. Through direct experiences in mental health community sites, the students in this study were given the opportunity to practice concepts they learned in a classroom and to achieve further competency with their skills and knowledge. The service-learning experience offered an opportunity to interact directly with clients who had mental health diagnoses in a meaningful and purposeful manner. The student participants also noted a decrease in their anxiety about their ability to engage in an appropriate and professional manner with the clients.

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Service-Learning and Communication Skills


