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OT-PEP: Development of a Professional Education Paradigm for Occupational Therapy

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OT-PEP: Development of a Professional Education Paradigm for Occupational Therapy

Abstract

This study aims to determine the fundamental tenets that define the occupational therapy education process, and to develop a professional education paradigm that corresponds to those principles. Interpretive phenomenology with Heideggerian hermeneutic philosophy was used to explicate the paradigmatic themes embedded in the occupational therapy body of knowledge. The results yielded the *Occupational Therapy Professional Education Paradigm* (OT-PEP), which is organized around three core concepts: Adaptive thinking, reflection, and creation of meaning. The OT-PEP is important to occupational therapy because it addresses the elements of the education process that are reflective of the philosophical underpinnings of the profession and brings together these understandings as a unified whole. Interpretive phenomenology asserts that analysis of data is influenced by the phenomenologist's repertoire of experience. Therefore, the OT-PEP presented in the article can be considered a single offering from the author that has the potential to morph with additional analyses. The author is hopeful that occupational therapy education programs will discuss and debate the OT-PEP constructs and determine which elements are most valuable. In addition, novice educators could use the OT-PEP as a faculty development tool to assist with transitioning from clinical practice to academia.

Keywords

paradigm, professional education, qualitative, theory

Credentials Display

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The complexity of modern healthcare has created a fervent voice from within the occupational therapy profession demanding better ways to prepare therapists. However, unlike other health professions, occupational therapy lacks a centralized forum (i.e., an education journal) in which to explore our professional education. Kielhofner, in his book *Conceptual Foundations of Occupational Therapy*, suggests that developing a body of knowledge requires three areas: “an innermost core or paradigm, a surrounding band of conceptual practice models, and an outer sphere of related knowledge” (p. 10). Although Kielhofner is addressing the occupational therapy practice body of knowledge, his ideas help structure the discussion of occupational therapy education.

The development of occupational therapy education has not been the same as the development of occupational therapy practice. In fact, occupational therapy education publications show an inverted development pattern. The first published articles examine related knowledge, such as problem-based learning (Hammel, Royeen, Bagatell, Chandler, & Jensen, 1999), learning through discussion (Royeen, Zardetto-Smith, & Duncan, 1999), effective thinking (Hooper, 2000), understanding process (Ruppert, 2000), and reflection (Harris, 1999). Then, in 2010, The American Occupational Therapy Association published the *Blueprint for Future Education*, which states, “the purpose of the *Blueprint for Entry-Level Education* is to identify the content knowledge that occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants should receive in their educational programs.” The blueprint further explains that “the conceptual framework used to frame the *Blueprint* was occupational performance.” Finally, in April 2012, at The American Occupational Therapy Association’s Annual Conference, the Future of Education Ad Hoc Committee articulated a research agenda for the scholarship of teaching and learning in occupational therapy. The categories of the research agenda included

conceptual frameworks for occupational therapy education, pedagogy, and instructional methods (Bilics, et al., 2012). However, occupational therapy has yet to answer the question, “What are the fundamental tenets of occupational therapy education?” In other words, what core paradigm links all of the above? Kielhofner writes that a paradigm “allows therapists to understand, in a very broad way, what they are doing when they practice” (p. 10). Therefore, without such a guide, one can argue that the current state of occupational therapy education is a set of splinter skills held together by accreditation standards and a board exam that fails to address the internal development process of educator and student.

The Occupational Therapy Professional Education Paradigm (OT-PEP) is a response to a vital, yet missing, part of the occupational therapy education body of knowledge. Several assumptions framed the OT-PEP development: (1) the question, “What are the fundamental tenets of the occupational therapy education process?” still needs to be answered; (2) the occupational therapy body of knowledge contains the paradigmatic concepts needed to explain what occupational therapy academicians are doing when they teach; (3) development of pedagogy, curriculum design, and teaching methods, etc., must come after development of a paradigm; and (4) both the educator and student are learners and require training in the occupational therapy education body of knowledge. The following article aims to identify the fundamental tenets of the occupational therapy education process embedded in the occupational therapy body of knowledge and transform the principles into a paradigm for occupational therapy education.

Method

The genesis of the OT-PEP began with an in-depth exploration of the occupational therapy body of knowledge. The author interpreted, transformed, and extended the

understandings from the exploration. The category of inquiry was phenomenology, specifically interpretive phenomenology using Heideggerian hermeneutic philosophy. Two fundamental Heideggerian principles framed the inquiry and assured methodological accuracy. The first principle was allowing the text to speak until the interpretive “turn” (understanding) came to the researcher (Heidegger, 1950/1971). Therefore, the author developed the coding strategies before the study. In order to ensure rigor, the author used member checks and peer reviewers to authenticate the data interpretations.

The second principle is that human beings are always grounded in their own history and language and cannot set aside biases (Heidegger, 1935/1959). As such, the author reflected on and acknowledged relevant personal history and bias as part of the lens of interpretation. Two primary biases were relevant. The first bias is that of the author’s country of birth, education, and practice. The lens of interpretation is as an American occupational therapist with the understanding of American occupational therapy education and American occupational therapy practice. Although the face value of the OT-PEP appears to have universal application, the author acknowledges the possibility that some of the concepts and elements in the OT-PEP may not translate to other countries or cultures. The second bias is that of the author’s preferred theoretical foundation. The author uses the theory of Occupational Adaptation as a guide for education and intervention. The OT-PEP excludes specific constructs of Occupational Adaptation; however, acknowledging that the author’s preference for Occupational Adaptation might potentially bias the lens of interpretation is appropriate.

Although the method of phenomenological data analysis is ultimately idiosyncratic, the author used a series of analysis steps that are common to phenomenology (Creswell, 1998). First, the original transcriptions were divided into statements through a process called

horizontalization. Next, the statements were grouped to form clusters of meanings that are expressed in phenomenological concepts interpreted by the researcher. The core concepts of the OT-PEP describe the phenomenological concepts interpreted from the literature. Finally, the phenomenological concepts are grouped together to create a description of the experience with the texture of what was experienced and the structure of how it was experienced. The elements embedded within the core concepts of the OT-PEP provide the texture and structure of the phenomenon.

Results

The OT-PEP is important to occupational therapy because it addresses the elements of the education process that are reflective of the philosophical underpinnings of the profession and brings together these understandings as a unified whole. Two ideas are important to keep in mind when reading the OT-PEP. The first is that both faculty and students are learners and each proceeds through the paradigm simultaneously. Therefore, the learners are at the center of the paradigm with the three core concepts and their respective elements interlaced to form a framework for occupational therapy education. The second is that all of the core concepts and corresponding elements can and do occur simultaneously. Therefore, the OT-PEP is circular and circuitous by nature, even though it is presented here in a linear fashion. Figure 1 represents the OT-PEP in its entirety. The following discussion will highlight each core concept separately in order to provide an in-depth understanding.

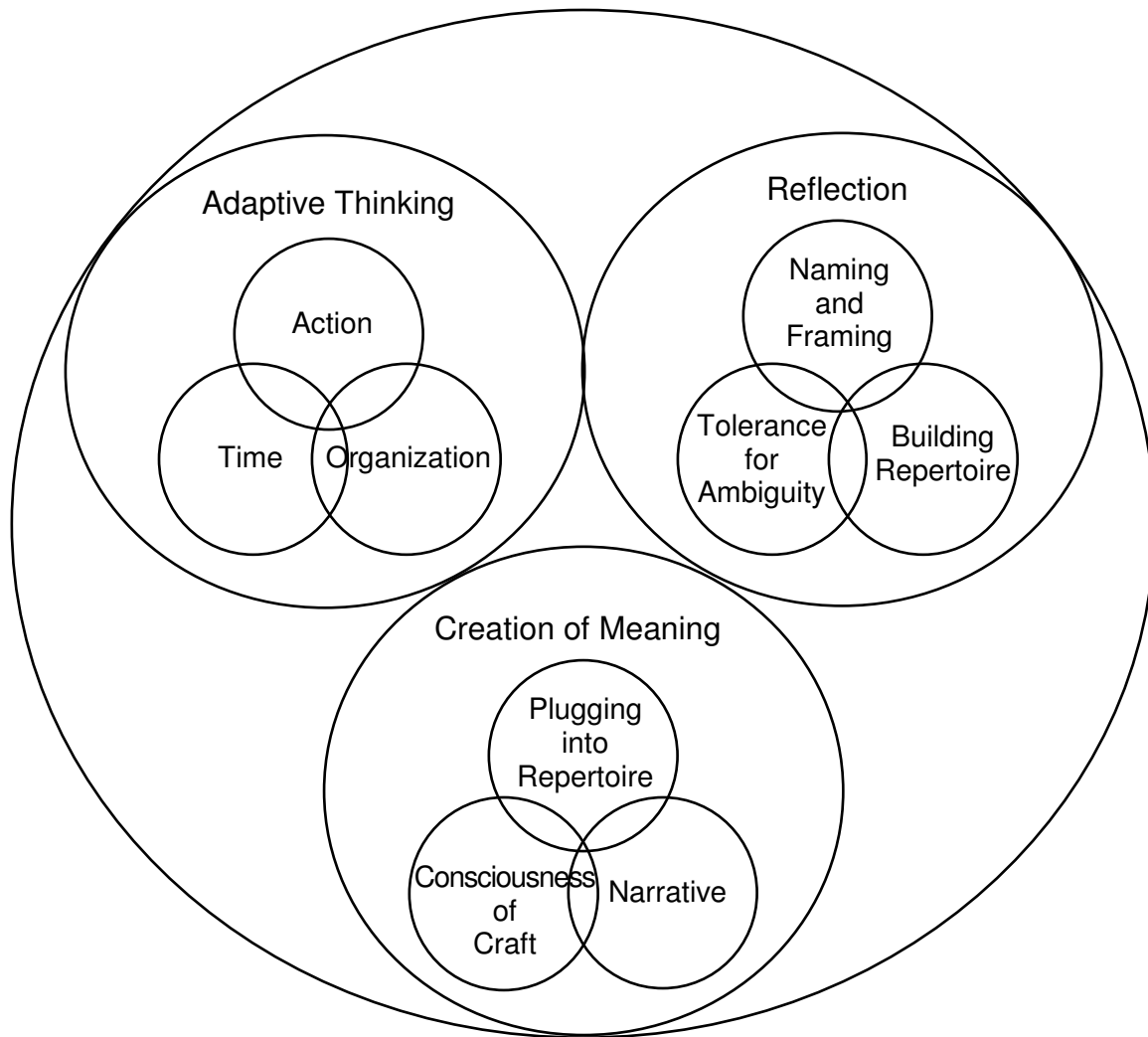


Figure 1. OT-PEP: Occupational Therapy Professional Education Paradigm

Discussion

Adaptive Thinking

The first core concept of the OT-PEP is adaptive thinking. Occupational therapists do not work with clients in a predetermined prescriptive atmosphere. The clinic environment is made up of a continuous stream of subtle and ambiguous situations that require a clinician to

constantly adjust treatment to meet the client’s needs. Therefore, adaptive thinking is an essential process for competent clinical practice.

The three elements that emerged from the synthesis of the occupational therapy body of knowledge on adaptive thinking as a process are *action*, *time*, and *organization*. Action is conceptualized as the process of doing; time is conceptualized as the evolution of acquired experiences; and organization is conceptualized as modes of thought or types of reasoning. Figure 2 represents the concept of adaptive thinking and the corresponding elements that describe the adaptive thinking process.

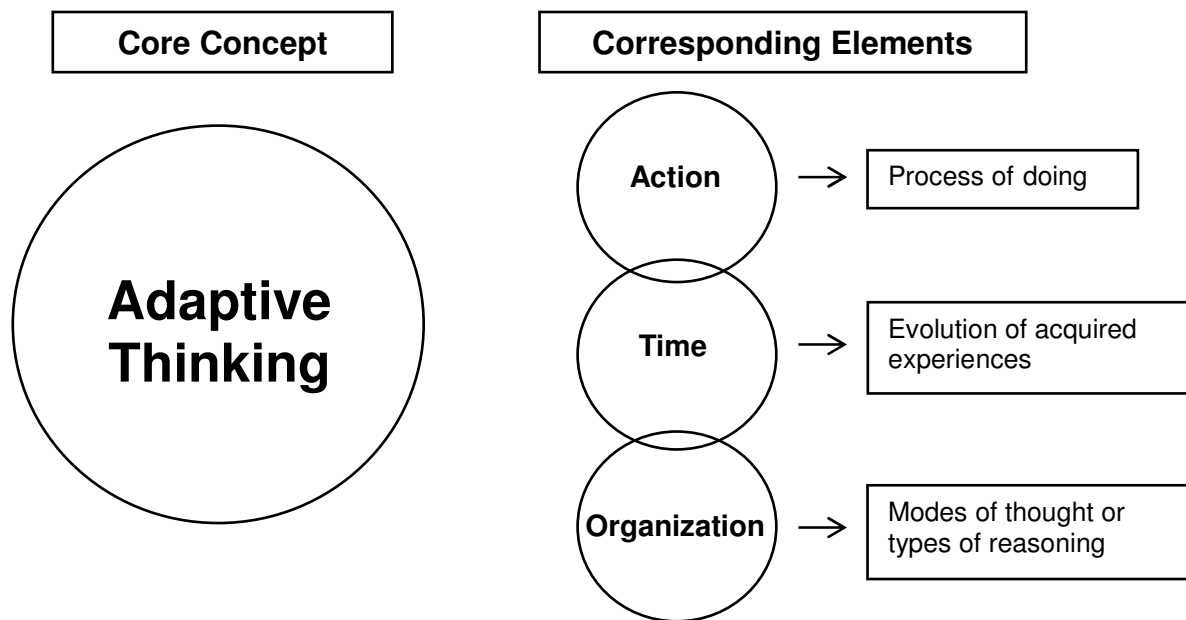


Figure 2. Adaptive Thinking Process

Action. The first element of adaptive thinking is action. Action has been an element of occupational therapy since the profession’s inception. Meyer (1922/1977), in his seminal statement of the philosophy of occupational therapy, articulates occupational therapy’s understanding of a person as “an organism that maintains and balances itself in the world of

reality and actuality by being in active life and active use” (p. 641). Therefore, adaptation cannot take place without movement. King (1978) reminds us that the first characteristic of adaptation is action. The adapting person “is acting, not being acted upon” (p. 256). Action is indispensable. Professional education pedagogy is incomplete without action as an element. Griffiths and Ursick (2003) discuss the outcome when active learning is a pedagogical reality. “Students engaged in active learning become more responsible for understanding and constructing meaning by relating new information to familiar concepts” (p. 12). Finally, action is not merely a paradigmatic element used to improve student development. Indeed, the exclusion of action is detrimental to student development. Dubos (1965) provides an eloquent summary of life without action:

Paradoxically, however, the very avoidance of stresses may in itself constitute a new kind of threat to health if it is carried too far, because the body and mind are geared for responding to challenges; they lose many of their essential qualities in an environment that is so bland as to make life effortless. (p. 270)

Time. The second element of adaptive thinking is time. Two perspectives of time need to be considered. The first perspective is a vertical element or slice of time. These immediate moments in time represent specific points of acquisition and opportunity to integrate past experience into the present learning environment. The second perspective is a horizontal element or continuum that uses acquired experiences for present and future events. The horizontal perspective of time acknowledges the life span of the person and the evolution of a learner’s thinking process as their cache of experiences increases.

The occupational therapy literature has acknowledged the essential element of time. Meyer (1922/1977) describes man as a temporal being:

Our body is not merely so many pounds of flesh and bone figuring as a machine, with an abstract mind or soul added to it. It is throughout a live organism pulsating with its rhythm of rest and activity, beating time (as we might say) in ever so many ways, most readily intelligible and in full bloom of its nature when it feels itself as one of those great self-guiding energy transformers which constitute the real world of living beings. (p. 641)

Kielhofner (1977) coupled the elements of action and time in his proposed temporal adaptation framework. He states, “action and time are concomitant components of the human experience linked to purpose through hindsight and foresight” (p. 237).

Organization. The third element of the adaptive thinking process is organization. Organization refers to how the learner incorporates information into his/her repertoire. Bruner (1986) proposes two modes of thought that humans use to organize information. He names them “logico-scientific” and “narrative” (p. 12). The logico-scientific mode is steeped in cause and effect. The narrative mode creates a story. Bruner argues that each mode of thought is neither superior nor inferior to one another and that neither one should be relied on exclusively. Upshur (2001) supports Bruner’s position:

Evidence in health care is neither exclusively abstract, mathematical, and general nor narrative and particular, but is a mediation and interaction of both types of knowledge. Clearly, in the complex world of medical care, it is unlikely that one criterion or form of reasoning will be effective in all instances. (p. 11)

Although Upshur refers to healthcare in general, similar inferences have been made in the occupational therapy literature. Schwartz (1991) proposes that all forms of reasoning should be

taught and that personal experiences and other illustrations provide the means by which knowing is connected.

Reflection

The second core concept of the OT-PEP is reflection. Atkins and Murphy (1995) define the concept of reflection: “In the context of professional education, however, the concept of reflection has a specific meaning, relating to a complex and deliberate process of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn from it” (p. 32). *Naming and framing*, *tolerance for ambiguity*, and *building repertoire* are the three elements that comprise the concept of reflection. Naming and framing is conceptualized as the identification of what to attend to within a specific context; tolerance for ambiguity is conceptualized as the ability to accept that every situation will have some degree of uncertainty and that decisions have to be made with the best information available at the time; and building repertoire is conceptualized as supplying experiences that challenge old patterns of behavior and provide the opportunity to build new patterns that are appropriate for occupational therapy professionals. Figure 3 represents the reflection process.

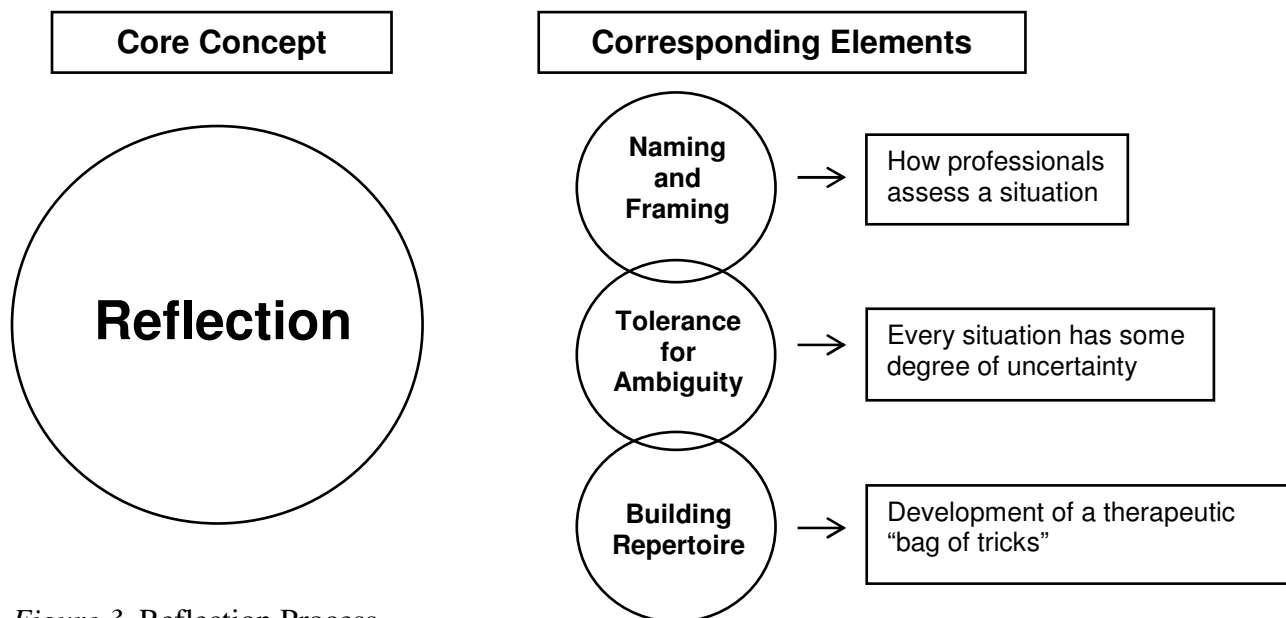


Figure 3. Reflection Process

Naming and framing. The first element of reflection is naming and framing. Schon (1983) developed this concept as a way to describe how professionals assess a situation. “Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we ‘name’ the things to which we will attend and ‘frame’ the context in which we will attend to them” (p. 40). Naming and framing allows the learner to predicate reflections on their understanding of an event or activity and its context. The ability to analyze and articulate a situation is at the core of the occupational therapy process. Parham (1987) proposes that we develop naming and framing through the understanding and articulation of occupational therapy theories. The benefits of understanding theory are a willingness to seek alternative solutions and the ability to develop clear communication with others about occupational therapy.

Tolerance for ambiguity. The second element of reflection is tolerance for ambiguity. Tolerance for ambiguity is the ability to accept that every situation will have some degree of uncertainty and that decisions have to be made with the best information available at the time. Schon (1987) spoke to the nebulous nature of professional practice: “The problems of real-world practice do not present themselves to practitioners as well-formed structures. Indeed, they tend not to present themselves as problems at all, but as messy, indeterminate situations” (p. 4). Schon’s insights demonstrate why healthcare education primarily focused on skill development is inherently detrimental to the developing practitioner. Cohn (1991) explicates the normative nature of ambiguity in occupational therapy: “Because no one can truly understand another person’s life experience, clinical reasoning always involves a degree of uncertainty” (p. 970). Therefore, if the teaching and learning process is based on responding rather than on reflection, then the learner’s adaptive repertoire will be insufficient for occupational therapy practice.

Building repertoire. The third element of reflection is building repertoire. Inferences gleaned from the Atkins and Murphy definition suggest that engagement in the reflection process aids in the development of a storehouse or repertoire of experiences in which the learner can challenge old patterns of behavior and develop new patterns of behavior. Spencer, Davidson, and White (1996) offer two possibilities for building repertoire. One possibility is through exposure to new “local worlds” or contexts (p. 528). Exposure to new local worlds requires the learner to reflect on appropriate social and cultural expectations of the context. Within occupational therapy education we build students’ repertoires by exposing them to the “local worlds” of different practice areas such as school systems, rehabilitation clinics, mental health treatment centers, and clients’ homes.

The second possibility for expanding repertoire is through “new circumstances” within the local world (Spencer, et al., 1996). For example, a student who is shadowing a home health therapist will see clients with different diagnoses or living conditions and has to learn how to adjust treatment intervention based on each new circumstance within the local world of home health. Although entry-level education cannot possibly prepare students for every possible practice scenario, educators are called upon to develop a repertoire that is sufficient for entry-level practice.

Creation of Meaning

The third and final core concept of the OT-PEP is *creation of meaning*. Creation of meaning is a vital, yet often overlooked, link in the education process. Spence (2001) identifies the need for a return to the creation of meaning: “This burgeoning student body does not need to learn more facts, but how to think, decide, judge, create, and learn” (p. 12). The three elements within creation of meaning are *plugging into repertoire*, *consciousness of craft*, and *narrative*.

Plugging into repertoire is conceptualized as consciously using one's repertoire of experience to respond to an event or situation; consciousness of craft is conceptualized as understanding what it means to be an occupational therapist; and narrative is conceptualized as individuals telling stories, listening to other's stories, and using stories to create meaning. Figure 4 represents the creation of meaning process.

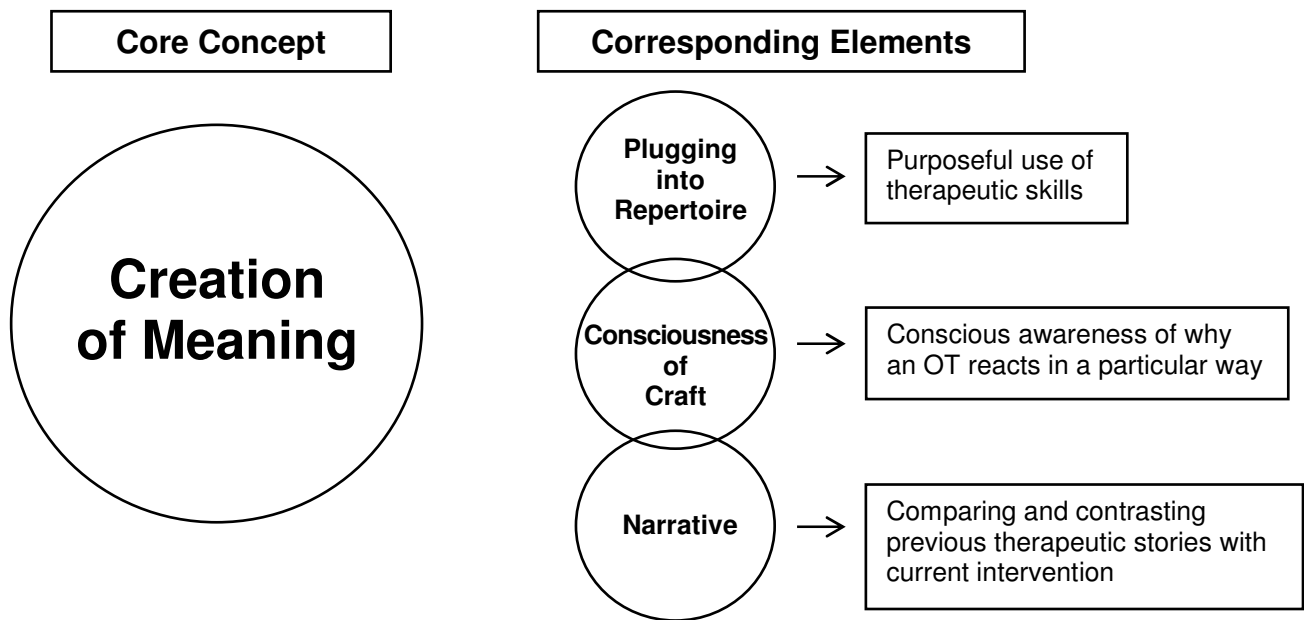


Figure 4. Creation of Meaning

Plugging into repertoire. The first element in creation of meaning is plugging into repertoire. Persons build their repertoire from birth. However, plugging into one's repertoire and deciding what knowledge will create an appropriate response requires conscious awareness. According to King (1978) "an adaptive response cannot be imposed, it must actively be created" (p. 257). Engagement in the education process must call forth an active response by the learner to determine if their existing repertoire is sufficient, if existing responses need modification, or if

new responses are necessary. This conscious, active decision by the learner to determine an appropriate mode of response bridges the gap between building repertoire and plugging into repertoire.

Consciousness of craft. The second element of creation of meaning is consciousness of craft. Consciousness of craft is discipline specific and requires a student/practitioner to understand what it means to be a member of one's profession. Yerxa (1967) identifies the importance of consciousness of craft in occupational therapy: "professional authenticity in occupational therapy means that the occupational therapist in every professional act defines the profession" (p. 8). For occupational therapy, consciousness of craft is occupation-based practice. Our core belief is that the engagement in occupations brings about healing. Therefore, when we make occupation-based practice a central theme of a program's curriculum, we perpetuate our core philosophies and demonstrate to the students an unwavering confidence in our profession.

Narrative. The third element of creation of meaning is narrative. McKay and Ryan (1995) assert, "students build a repertoire of therapeutic stories, like a mental library, against which they can compare and contrast their own experiences" (p. 235). Consequently, the occupational therapy education process facilitates creation of meaning by providing opportunities for learners to hear others' stories and incorporate the information into their repertoire. Although most classes in an occupational therapy program provide some of the narrative element, clinical reasoning courses often use narrative as the central focus. Using the narrative element is essential in helping students move from concrete, linear thinking to abstract, global thinking.

Implications

The OT-PEP is based on the foundational beliefs of occupational therapy education collected from the occupational therapy body of knowledge. Presented as a global process model, the OT-PEP can serve as a foundation for the development of pedagogy, curriculum design, and treatment methods. As acknowledged previously, the OT-PEP has an American bias. However, the OT-PEP is fluid and can function as a platform for paradigmatic discussion in other countries and cultures. The author is hopeful that occupational therapy education researchers will discuss and debate the OT-PEP constructs and determine which elements are most valuable.

The OT-PEP takes strides to answer the question: What is occupational therapy education? Just as we determine our clinical interventions based on a theoretical framework, occupational therapy education programs should articulate a paradigmatic foundation from which all other parts of the curriculum design emerge. Such an articulation allows for occupational therapy education programs to move away from skill acquisition to occupational therapy personified. The current era of global economic uncertainty makes this issue even more relevant. Healthcare and education often demonstrate growth trends when economies decline, which can bring in prospective students potentially motivated by other needs, such as financial security. Using an occupational therapy education paradigm that is symbiotic with occupational therapy practice, education programs better prepare the profession to develop practitioners who are invested in more than getting a job.

Finally, the OT-PEP may serve as a professional development tool for novice educators. In the United States, an occupational therapy education crisis is afoot. The gap between the number of qualified faculty and open faculty positions is growing. In turn, some practitioners

are looking for more expedient ways to transition into academia, a transition which may or may not include courses that explain the nature of occupational therapy education. The need to keep occupational therapy programs open in order to maintain professional viability is not lost on the author. However, the concern is when an occupational therapist transitions into academia without paradigmatic training. Without new or different information, individuals tend to use old patterns of behavior first to address new challenges, which, in this instance, can lead new academics to teach the way they were taught. Therefore, the OT-PEP could be used as a faculty development tool to help the novice academician gain a solid footing from which to launch an academic career.

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