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## She Said, She Said: A Conversation about Growing Education Research in Occupational Therapy

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## She Said, She Said: A Conversation about Growing Education Research in Occupational Therapy

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### Credentials Display

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Some occupational therapy scholars and educators claim that they have detected advancements in education research in recent years, and the American Occupational Therapy Association education research agenda encourages such advancements. What are the indicators that education research is evolving? What research perspectives and practices can scholars adopt to spur research development expeditiously? Drs. Sylvia Rodger and Barb Hooper address these questions in the discussion that follows. *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* welcomes your contributions to this conversation through letters to the editor or opinion pieces.



**Dr. Sylvia Rodger** is Professor Emeritus of Occupational Therapy in the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Queensland, Australia, and Director of Research and Education at the Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC). Dr. Rodger has more than 30 years' experience as an occupational therapist, educator, and researcher, with a focus mainly on children with developmental, motor, and learning difficulties and children on the autistic spectrum. Her research interests are primarily in the areas of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), top down interventions, Cognitive Orientation for daily Occupational Performance (CO-OP), early intervention, family centered practice, and parent education. Dr. Rodger's education research and scholarship have focused on practice placements, professional education, interprofessional education, teaching and learning in occupational therapy, and allied health education. She completed an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) Fellowship (2010-2011) and is an Australian OLT Fellow. She has an interest in curriculum reform, quality in practice education in occupational therapy, capacity building, and curriculum leadership. Dr. Rodger has received over \$3 million in competitive research grant funding and cochaired the bid to set up the Autism CRC (\$31 million). She has over 200 national and international refereed journal publications, four edited books, 30 book chapters, and has given over 250 conference presentations and honorary lectureships. In recognition of her distinguished contributions as a researcher, Dr. Rodger was inducted in 2013 into the American Occupational Therapy Foundation's Academy of Research. In 2015 she was awarded an Order of Australia for her service to occupational therapy education and research and services in autism. For more information about Dr. Rodger's research, click [here](#) or [here](#).



**Dr. Barb Hooper** is Associate Professor and Academic Program Director in the Department of Occupational Therapy and founding Director of the Center for Occupational Therapy Education (COTE) at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, CO. The mission of the COTE is to promote excellence in teaching effectiveness, curriculum design, and educational research. Toward those ends, Dr. Hooper has published in national, international, and interdisciplinary journals; consulted with faculty groups on designing curricula, courses, and teaching/learning activities; and designed a 4-day institute that she runs with colleagues on *Designing Graduate Courses for Integrative Learning: Theory, Research, Implementation, & Assessment*, which approximately 175 faculty have attended.

Dr. Hooper's research and scholarship explores how educators embed education concepts, such as subject-centered learning, transformative learning, and integrative learning, in their teaching practices. She was principle investigator of a large national study exploring how programs address the field's core subject: the relationship between health and human occupation. She completed an international mapping review to establish the features of and needs in education research in occupational therapy.

Dr. Hooper has provided leadership on a national level related to education research and practices, which has been acknowledged through distinguished teaching and scholars awards and admission to the American Occupational Therapy Association's Roster of Fellows in 2008.

**Barb:** Sylvia, let me first say it is a pleasure to dialogue with you about growing research in occupational therapy education. I see you as one of the “elite researchers” in our profession and as one I admire. I admire the scope of your work, from children and families living with neurodevelopmental challenges, assessment instruments, and family-centered and top-down interventions, to curriculum, pedagogy, and fieldwork education. Your research bridges practice and education on several levels: family and parent education, student education, and education of academic and practice-based instructors. I am thrilled to have your insight as part of this special issue on occupational therapy education.

As I shared with you, I led a mapping review of education scholarship because I was curious about the overall topography of education research—what we have studied, how we have studied it, from what theoretical perspectives, and using what rationales (Hooper, King, Wood, Bilics, & Gupta, 2013). Findings from that study suggested that education scholarship reflected an early stage of research development, meaning that we have predominantly studied “local learning situations” through descriptions and qualitative work, and measured educational outcomes largely through student perceptions. However, there were also hints in the more recent papers reviewed in that study that new methods and outcomes were emerging, suggesting growth in the science, as noted in the editor’s preface to this issue. Do you see signs of that growth?

**Sylvia:** I do, Barb. The key change I have noted is from descriptive/exploratory to theoretically driven and then from theoretically driven to the use of more sophisticated evaluation methodologies (although there are few of these as yet) and the recognition of multiple stakeholder perspectives—students’ experiences, academics, fieldwork clinicians, and clients as recipients of our services. The other feature that heralds maturity, I think, is

the use of more longitudinal studies where cohorts are followed up over time, such as over the duration of a degree or over several years, and then followed up to postgraduation work.

**Barb:** Yes, and how do we spur that development even more? I think it could be helpful for education researchers to keep in mind how a body of research matures in any topic or field. Having that process in mind could prompt us to be intentional about designing and implementing individual studies that fuel the growth of research overall.

**Sylvia:** I think that as you alluded to the in the *BJOT* paper, research in new areas—and scholarship in teaching and learning in occupational therapy is relatively new—typically starts with descriptive pieces, opinion pieces, scholars describing what they are doing and how, and the outcomes from students’ perspectives and their own reflections. So it starts with descriptive and exploratory pieces and often also with case studies of individual courses or learning innovations and how they were done.

**Barb:** Yes. And here is where I think that awareness of the research development process I mentioned comes into play. Descriptive/exploratory work can be undertaken in order to disseminate a teaching innovation so that others may adopt the innovation. In this case, there is an awareness of how useful the innovation can be for educators in similar contexts. And descriptive work can be undertaken to disseminate a teaching innovation because the innovation illumines learning dynamics or constructs for research. In this case, there is an awareness of how useful the innovation can be for forming a new, or contributing conceptually to an existing, line of research. Entering into a descriptive project aware of how that descriptive work serves both educational practice and research could strengthen how the innovation is reported and bolster the

work's capacity to spur additional related inquiry. An awareness of descriptive work *as* research *for* research could strengthen scholarship at this level.

It reminds me of a distinction that Anne Mosey (1998) once described. Some inquiry, she said, focuses on details of specific situations with no broader aim. In our case, a course or learning situation, for example. There is not a sense of a whole “integrated body of abstract information” to which the inquiry relates. Other inquiry, the type she advocated, focuses on the creation of abstract, categorical information about a phenomenon. In our case, learning occupational therapy. This inquiry aims to contribute to a larger organized, inter-related body of abstract information. I know it may seem like a semantic difference, but having a larger aim to create abstract information from a learning situation impacts how scholars design and communicate descriptive inquiry.

**Sylvia:** And linking to that whole is a step in how research develops. Typically, still at the descriptive/exploratory level, more theoretical models begin to come into play and people start basing their research on these theories and linking what they study with the theory. Yes, still descriptive, but at least theoretically grounded. From there, more quasi and experimental methods come into play. There is a lot of debate about the ethics of using random control trials in daily teaching research due to the equity issues in providing students who are being assessed and whose progress is dependent on semester marks with an experimental versus treatment as usual condition and impact of learning/grades. This is an important step, though, to work out.

**Barb:** I am glad you mentioned the importance of theoretically grounded studies. I think the notion of having a conceptual or theoretical framework for research, whether the method is descriptive or a random control trial, could itself use some

elaboration in occupational therapy. Especially since, as you note, the theoretical grounding is one way that individual studies connect and contribute to the overall science in occupational therapy education.

**Sylvia:** Yes, when designing projects or programs of education research, scholars can contribute to an overall educational science for the field by considering educational theory carefully and basing studies on a sound educational theory. And, also by clearly explaining their teaching methods and approaches, as not everyone has the same meaning or definition, especially internationally. There are many approaches banded about and poorly defined; take, for example, problem-based, case-based, and scenario-based learning, or authentic, workplace, in-vivo, and adult learning. We need to do with education theories what we do with occupational theories, positioning some as overarching and then drill down to frames of reference and application as appropriate. In my view, the overarching theories will be ones stemming from higher education and the scholarship of teaching and learning literature. For example, in a paper we published, we used threshold concept theory to underpin our curriculum reform and new curriculum, and then identified other educational theories, such as authentic learning, and others, that sat under that (Rodger, Turpin, & O'Brien, 2015). I have often found that people in the past have talked about adult learning theory as their main theory for OT education for accreditation purposes, without having any idea about how contested this is in the educational literature. Yet [they] confidently sprouted off that was the basis to their educational approach and you could not have an educated conversation with them about it.

**Barb:** I think the same could be said about the terms “self-directed” and “student-centered” learning. So, what I hear you saying is we need to adopt theoretical frameworks from the field of

education where scholars' primary job has long been to create knowledge about teaching and learning. But you also referred to a process that we need to interrogate those educational theories and approaches when considering adopting them; for example, define them, organize them, and "drill down" to form and shape a coherent, carefully integrated theoretical foundation for learning in occupational therapy, which can then become a focus of education research in the field.

**Sylvia:** Do not get me wrong, though. I do not think that OT needs to develop its "own" teaching and learning theories. My experience over 30 years in academia has been that, historically, most people became academics after time in clinical practice and then moved to university and slowly undertook research masters and Ph.D. studies (typically in a clinical area of interest rather than in education). As such, many OTs are intuitive teachers and have developed their own ways of knowing and doing with limited reading of the educational literature. In more recent times, universities have started expecting new staff to undertake graduate certificates in higher education alongside their Ph.D. studies or in their first few years of academic life, using their own teaching as project material for their assessment. This has started to increase the number of academics who now have higher education teaching qualifications. I frequently am concerned about how we reinvent the wheel on things, which is time consuming and often insular. My feeling is we have more to learn from the mainstream higher education literature and research, including models and theories, than creating our "own". From my perspective and reading the issues facing OT, PT, SLP, SW, psychology, nursing, paramedic, and medical educators, the issues are not all that different. They are all professions teaching students to develop a set of professional skills around communication, empathy, reasoning (pattern recognition), and are based on evidence-based practice. I am not sure that profession-specific

education theory has much to offer—there is much more similarity than difference (the latter being related to the profession's knowledge base/unique domain of concern). I have personally learned more about education and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) from outside of OT than internally, especially when it comes to higher education scholars from a range of disciplines. Our work in threshold concepts is a case in point, transformational for us and yet would not have been possible by sticking with the SoTL in OT. Attending, defending, presenting at higher education conferences and being stimulated by issues faced by other disciplines and considering the implications for us, has been such a stimulating part of my development as a scholar in this area.

**Barb:** Yes, mine as well. I agree that most health science professions teach a somewhat common set of professional skills and therefore might rely on similar theoretical foundations for research, curriculum development, and teaching. I also agree that, as you noted earlier, it is important that we not adopt theories directly from education into occupational therapy without careful translation work for our professional context. And, perhaps going one step further, I have argued that it is the professional context—what you referred to as the profession's knowledge base and unique domain of concern—that makes all the difference in how we incorporate learning theories from education. For example, because of the professional context, the problems we teach students to address through problem-based learning are problems of occupation, requiring cases, prompts, and assessment methods be adapted to convey a problem-posing and solving process shaped by an OT professional context. Similarly, the professional context shapes and modifies the nature of such skills as communication, evidence-based practice, clinical reasoning, and client-centered practice. Consider clinical reasoning. The patterns that occupational therapy students learn to recognize through clinical reasoning are patterns of barriers and supports for

engaging in occupation. Or, to learn to be client-centered in occupational therapy is to learn how to center on the client's past, present, and hoped for configurations of occupations and time use. The professional context, therefore, paints these generic professional skills in a particular color, impacting how we teach and design research.

I see the integration of educational theories into OT as a professional culture issue. Much like discussions about exporting terminology and theories from developed western countries to developing or non-western education programs, educational theories were developed in particular professional cultures with their own assumptions, philosophies, and educational aims. I believe careful work is needed to merge teaching and learning theories with occupational therapy assumptions, philosophies, and educational aims. So, in effect, I have argued for "occupation therapy specific learning theories" but not in the sense of reinventing the wheel, but in the sense of careful translations from education. Or, at least, bringing this back to research, I have promoted theory-building research through which educational concepts and their presumed interactions are examined in and for an occupational therapy context. Also related to research, I think when scholars study teaching methods and approaches that it is important to study how those approaches convey the profession's unique domains of concern. As is, I think a lot of research on, say problem-based learning or community-based learning, for example, remains a bit generic, not connected to how the approach furthered students' understanding of core or threshold concepts and associated skills as specified by the professional context.

**Sylvia:** I agree, so long as we do not go about creating our own educational theories for the sake of it (so that it is OT), although there may be some good work in this area that I am not up on, I think we should be drawing on the education research in

higher education and the SoTL (there are so many more educational scholars out there than we will ever have in OT) and adapting this as required or justifying why and where it is useful and where differences might be, rather than reinventing the wheel. The field moves quickly and OTs have so much to read and absorb from higher education and the SoTL generally.

**Barb:** Okay, I know I am starting to sound a bit redundant, but I want to emphasize again that the adapting and justifying why and where educational theories are useful is an overlooked form of scholarship and research that, if made explicit and strengthened, could aid the growth of a body of education research overall.

**Sylvia:** Absolutely, and there are other issues that need strengthening as well. Recognition by the profession (mostly clinicians) and the universities that education research and scholarship is worthwhile, needed, recognized as equally important as other competitive research funding, and of interest more broadly than just to academics/faculty. Much can be learned for all OTs when engaging in educational theory, especially with the transition to the workplace and field practice. I would like to see dedicated streams at OT conferences as now occur in Australia about occupational therapy education; sometimes, there are several streams these days so that educators can immerse themselves in the SoTL. Perhaps that is the same at AOTA, but I have only ever been able to attend one of these conferences!

I think there is also a need for mature debate, letters to editors, commentary on papers that is thought provoking and contributes to our thinking versus people viewing critique and commentary as negative (OTs like to be so nice)! You just need to step into education conferences and the debate is encouraging and helpful, albeit critical at times, but this is not seen as problematic.

While the scholarship in teaching and learning/SoTL in OT is growing, it is slow, with still only a small number of scholars. This is reinforced by our trying 15 years ago to set up a journal called *Journal of OT Education (JOTE)* with really no support from publishers of Australian and other journals, as the number of academics was considered too small a readership to warrant a separate journal.

**Barb:** The growth is reflected in the number of submissions we had for this issue; in fact, that demand for publication venues was the basis for doing this special edition. Fortunately, *OJOT* features Topics in Education in each issue, with almost half of their publications overall being education related.

And, of course, a big issue is funding and growing research capacity among occupational therapy educators.

**Sylvia:** In Australia there has really only been funding for teaching and learning/SoTL research in the past two decades, which has become very competitive and highly sought after. We have been recipients of quite a bit of this funding. I think, too, that it has taken time for universities to recognize this funding as equivalent to and as competitive as NIH, NHMRC, ARC funding, which tends to be more clinically/theoretically related. This shift in recognition has made it more “acceptable” for academics to apply for this funding and not be considered “second class research citizens.”

As scholarship by academics and interest in SoTL has advanced, academic leaders have started to acquire Ph.D. scholars working in this area. This is also a sign of maturity of research in the area. It also enhances the work further and establishes an acceptable route that Ph.D.s do not have to be

clinical but can be in education/SoTL. This helps to build research capacity in teaching and learning in the profession.

**Barb:** And let’s not forget international collaborations! Thanks for sharing this dialogue, Sylvia. Let’s keep it going. Best to you and our Australian education developers and researchers.

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