Finding Harmony in Academic Life: Blending the Teacher-Scholar Model

Shirley P. O'Brien
Eastern Kentucky University - USA, shirley.obrien@eku.edu

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Recommended Citation

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Finding Harmony in Academic Life: Blending the Teacher-Scholar Model

Abstract
Occupational therapy affords many role options. Academic faculty is one example of a role. Faculty are expected to participate in teaching, service, and research/scholarship activities within their roles, as shaped by institutional type. This article highlights the academic journey and considerations for embracing leadership as teacher-scholars in occupational therapy.

Keywords
teacher-scholar, higher education, roles, mentoring, professional development, leadership

Credentials Display
Shirley P. O’Brien, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA

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DOI: 10.15453/2168-6408.2378

This letter from the editor is available in The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot/vol12/iss3/1
As a seasoned faculty member, I often reflect about life as an occupational therapy academic. Over the last four decades, I have chosen this work setting as my primary occupation. Faculty work encompasses a dedication to the future alongside an appreciation of the past, advancing evidence-based practice in occupational therapy. Understanding and appreciating the variations in primary occupations centered in academic work requires reframing perspectives of the how and why we organize our time. Teaching, research/scholarship, and service traditionally form the foundational aspects of academic work, interwoven like a tapestry depending on our career age and institutional type (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Crepeau et al., 1999; Thelin, 2004). In addition, professional development connects us to our discipline, supporting our faculty responsibilities and occupational tasks in each of these three areas. Context impacts our understanding of focus as we explore the culture, attitudes, and norms of the various institutional types. As occupational therapy educators, we frame our work in terms of our understanding of occupation, occupational performance, and the routines that support these endeavors (AOTA, 2020). Situating the discussion of academic work within higher educational policy, in addition to disciplinary knowledge, provides the context for understanding occupational therapy academic roles.

**Finding Work-Life Balance**

Retirements and turnover in jobs are a natural occurrence in academic roles, as in most practice settings. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the “great resignation” alerts were sounded in higher education, health care, and other industries. However, they may be shaped by changes in worker values about work-life balance, burnout, and other personal reasons (Bichsel et al., 2022; Fuller & Kerr, 2022; Koster & McHenry, 2023; Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). Remote work and online learning were viewed as having both positive and negative impacts. Many faculty experienced exhaustion because of inadequate work-life balance, changing priorities, and increasing workload and responsibilities (Koster & McHenry, 2023; Schmiedehaus et al., 2023). This phenomenon was also true in occupational therapy, as we moved courses online and created alternative learning options and simulations to best convey knowledge to prepare students. The online movement, often without training and support, contributed to a stressful work-life balance.

The concept of harmony best addresses the work-life balance. Harmony is defined as a pleasing arrangement of parts (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). If faculty can blend their work responsibilities of teaching, research/scholarship, and service by exploring overlapping ideas, then they may find harmony and joy in a faculty role. Faculty commitment to professional leadership guides the development of both occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistants across the nation. As we “pass the torch” to novice educators, I would like to take this opportunity to share advice related to academic occupational performance and considerations for building harmony in a faculty role.

**The Teacher-Scholar Role**

Occupational therapy programs have been in existence for many years, first as training programs and the evolving into formalized settings, such as colleges and universities (Mahoney et al., 2017). In her 1973 Slagle lecture, Alice Jantzen referred to an academic position as a specialty area, with more established curricula focusing on teaching content and student learning. The placement of occupational therapy programs in higher educational settings brought varied role expectations by institutional type. These role expectations, such as creating and producing knowledge and products, are further evaluated by rank and tenure expectations for job performance and sustainability. Levan (2020) offers a sound review of the journey toward tenure and/or promotion. My intent is to help new academicians consider the habits
and routines that impact our efficient occupational engagement in the academic role to find work harmony moving forward in the twenty-first century.

Efficiency is needed in our academic work lives to maintain harmony. The teacher-scholar role was first introduced by Boyer (1990), encompassing four distinct elements of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Each type of scholarship can support faculty work and behaviors, depending on institutional type, support, and career age. Each type of scholarship has an embedded part supporting teaching practices.

The scholarship of discovery implies original research advancing disciplinary knowledge. The scholarship of integration is best represented by a synthesis of information across disciplines or fitting one’s research into more complex patterns. The scholarship of application refers to the application of disciplinary expertise typically with other partners outside of the university. Finally, the scholarship of teaching and learning refers to the systematic study of teaching and learning processes, also known as pedagogy (Boyer, 1990). All forms of scholarship should be evaluated by peers, thus demonstrating the commitment to evidence-based practice. When one engages in true scholarship, they publicly share their work and encourage peer review, which is then documented on curriculum vitae and professional development plan goals.

Gettings (2017) reiterated the importance of hyphenating of the two major roles: One is not a teacher and a scholar; one is a teacher-scholar. Separating academic role functions as distinct entities can add to burnout and other discontent in academic positions. By combining Boyer’s work with the seminal work about understanding faculty behavior in higher education by Blackburn and Lawrence (1995), occupational therapy educators can better synergize and integrate the role functions of teaching, research/scholarship, and service. Appreciating the academic context and its vernacular helps us to reinforce interprofessional collaboration and our value in higher education settings.

Teacher-scholars possess a love for disciplinary content while using critical inquiry to infuse evidence-based knowledge to stakeholders. Teaching and scholarship are united through faculty professional activities, such as service learning, community partnerships, leadership opportunities, and clinical placements. Best practices for teaching and scholarship imply professional engagement opportunities that infuse vitality into work roles. Through engagement in scholarship, faculty model and mentor professional development and lifelong learning, apply evidence and promote currency in teaching content.

Thus, in occupational therapy education, we possess disciplinary content knowledge, engage in creating and establishing courses that reflect ACOTE Standards, and possess pedagogical expertise in best practice delivery methods. By disseminating knowledge creation, acquisition, and integration, we role model our commitment to evidence-based practice. Through intentional professional development, faculty seek opportunities to best address teaching content in a curriculum. Scholarship is the foundation for evidence-based teaching. Boyer’s scholarship delineations are avenues for faculty scholarship.

As faculty approach establishing professional development plans for teaching, research, and service, consideration should be given for how the secondary activity (e.g., service or research) enhances the teaching process. Occupational therapy educators can conduct service-learning programs with community partners, such as homeless shelters, preschools, and civic groups, to name a few. Through program development and evaluation, students can participate in various roles as data collectors and intervention agents, along with learning scientific inquiry with a population. Faculty can demonstrate interprofessional collaboration, mentoring students for success in future evidence-based practice. They
can also demonstrate the inquiry process of data collection, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation to then close the loop through professional presentations and publication. These scholarly activities can reinvigorate the teaching practice, along with promoting engagement and providing community service. Through integration of role activities, faculty can be better prepared to respond to academic expectations for measurable occupational outcomes in the tenure and promotion process. Thus, one can see how the teacher-scholar model integrates faculty productivity, and student learning, to reinforce harmony and joy in work-life.

My best advice to new faculty: Adopt the teacher-scholar model and seek “two-fer”s in all you do. Blend teaching and research/scholarship, or service and scholarship to infuse back into your teaching practices. Clearly delineate how all activities are integrated within annual reviews and show intentionality in your occupational choice(s). This type of transparency allows for authenticity in demonstrating leadership in occupational therapy education. Thus, as teacher-scholars, we find harmony in our academic practice settings.

Conclusion

We must embrace leadership opportunities shaped by the context of our service delivery, the academy. That entails learning the unique academic setting (the institutional type and resource supports), blending our knowledge of occupational therapy for success in teaching, research/scholarship and service activities. Adopting the teacher-scholar model as a way of organizing our occupational performance allows us to create, promote, and establish best practice in teaching and learning. Finding harmony requires self-reflection and commitment to replenishing our energy, creativity and motivation in our role to work “smarter, not harder.” We need to acknowledge the university rhythms, the ebbs and flows, to allow our creative juices to shape our work lives and roles, and modifying our habits and routines to fulfill our successful occupational performance. The Topics in Education category in the Open Journal of Occupational Therapy (OJOT) is an exemplary way to promote teacher-scholars. OJOT offers a place for publicly sharing ideas about education in a scholarly manner. Please join me in promoting critical topics that impact harmony in our academic work-life as teacher-scholars through your submissions.

Dr. Shirley Peganoff O’Brien, Assistant Editor of OJOT, is a University Foundation Professor at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) in occupational science and occupational therapy and recognized as a Fellow of the American Occupational Therapy Association. She received a BS in occupational therapy from Temple University Philadelphia, PA; a MS in occupational therapy from Rush University, Chicago, IL; and a PhD from the University of Kentucky in educational policy analysis and evaluation. Dr. O’Brien has teaching and research expertise in policy development and leadership, sensory modulation and autism, online learning, and student mentoring. She is recognized for her application of interprofessional practice in community settings. Dr. O’Brien has received numerous awards for her work in pediatric occupational therapy practice, leadership, and teaching. She serves as coordinator of the Faculty Innovators at EKU and coordinator of the post professional doctoral program in occupational therapy. She has presented and published on the topics of effective technology use in the classroom, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and designing learning environments, along with other disciplinary applications in pediatrics, autism, and transition programming for students with disabilities into college environments.

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