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## An Elective Course Exploring Occupational Justice Through Occupational Storytelling and Story Making

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# An Elective Course Exploring Occupational Justice Through Occupational Storytelling and Story Making

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine whether second-year Master of Occupational Therapy (MOT) students who enroll in the elective course “Occupation in Long-Term Care (LTC)” would be able to apply concepts of occupational justice in the nursing home environment through engaging residents in occupational storytelling and story making in order to facilitate resident self-advocacy for participation in a valued occupation. The occupational therapy elective course was developed and implemented with students alternating between the classroom and the nursing home environments. Outcome evaluation measurements included analysis of student reflective journaling to obtain qualitative data. The researcher found that students are able to understand the concepts and issues of occupational justice in the nursing home population and apply knowledge to facilitate the resident’s participation in meaningful occupations.

## **Keywords**

Occupational Justice, Nursing Home, Occupational Storytelling

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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As the population grows older and more adults are admitted to nursing homes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004), the need for occupational therapy students to understand the unique nursing home environment and how best to meet the occupational needs of the nursing home population becomes more urgent. French (2002) provided evidence that nursing home environments are restricted environments that promote dependency. Magasi and Hammel (2009) found that people living in nursing homes have reported a loss of opportunities to participate in meaningful activities. Occupational therapy students must understand the nursing home environment if they are to demonstrate the skills needed to create an improved occupational environment for residents.

This paper discusses the development of an elective course in a Master's of Occupational Therapy (MOT) program. The course facilitated the MOT students' understanding of concepts of occupational justice and injustice for residents living in the nursing home environment by having the students (a) engage the residents in occupational storytelling and (b) use occupational story making to facilitate resident self-advocacy for participation in a valued occupation. The instructor developed the course through evidence from the literature in the areas of occupational justice, occupational storytelling and story making, self-advocacy, and student learning.

### **Occupational Justice**

Occupational therapists address issues of occupational justice as an outcome of the occupational therapy process (American

Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). "All people need to be able or enabled to engage in the occupations of their need and choice; to grow through what they do; and to experience independence or interdependence, equality, participation, security, health, and well-being" (Wilcock & Townsend, 2008, p. 198). An occupational therapist should base his or her practice on a thorough understanding of occupation and an understanding of the role occupation has in the well-being of an individual (Dickie, 2009).

Townsend and Wilcock (2004) described occupational justice as the individual's right to the choice and experience of meaningful occupations and the right to develop health and well-being through these occupations. Stadnyk, Townsend, and Wilcock (2010) described occupational injustices as when a person is deprived of occupational justice, which may happen to those living in nursing home facilities. Residents of nursing homes often are initially admitted because of a disease process or injury. They may find themselves lacking the environmental support, family support, or economic resources to return to their prior living situation. Therefore, external factors may influence a person's ability to return home, thus requiring their placement in a nursing home facility. Nursing home placement can cause a decrease in the residents' opportunities to develop through occupations and limit their choices for participation in valued occupations, which can lead to occupational deprivation (Whiteford, 2010). Occupational deprivation is a term that describes the inability to develop health and wellness because of a lack of participation in meaningful occupations

(Whiteford, 2010).

Another occupational injustice described in the literature is occupational alienation. It is not uncommon for a person residing in a nursing home to be living with a chronic disease. However, the resources required for this person's participation in occupations may not be available, and thus the person may start experiencing occupational alienation. Stadnyk et al. (2010) described occupational alienation as "the outcome when people experience daily life as meaningless or purposeless" (p. 339). Hammell (2008) stated "occupational therapists could consider using the term occupational rights to assert the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities" (p. 61).

In a 16-month ethnographic study, Magasi and Hammel (2009) explored the experiences of six women transitioning from a nursing home to the community and found that while the women were in the nursing home, they experienced the loss of valued occupations and life roles. External restrictions cause occupational deprivation (Whiteford, 2010), and Magasi and Hammel (2009) found the participants' decisions to enter the nursing home were forced and influenced by the interaction of disability and health as well as social and economic factors. The reported loss of valued occupation because of external restrictions (Magasi & Hammel, 2009) demonstrates that occupational deprivation may be observed in persons living in nursing homes.

If occupation has the potential to be an agent of health (Wilcock, 2004), then as occupational

therapists we need to understand that all people deserve the right to occupational opportunities, and the seeds of this understanding need to be planted in the student. To facilitate this understanding, it will be important for the students to develop a depth of knowledge in occupational justice. Learning these concepts must begin and develop in the educational learning environment (Wilcock, 2004). Law (2004) recommended applying the characteristics of depth, innovation, and courage to the occupational therapy profession in attempts to meet the profession's emerging challenges. The goal of the MOT elective course was to provide in-depth understanding of the concepts of occupational justice, provide opportunities for innovative interventions focused on occupation, and empower the students to have the courage to create changes in the occupational lives of nursing home residents.

### **Occupational Storytelling**

In order for instructors to plant these educational seeds, students first need to understand issues of occupational justice in the nursing home environment and the important role occupation has in the well-being of the residents. Occupational storytelling is a narrative reasoning process (Clark, 1993). Clark (1993) described occupational storytelling as "a means by which therapists better understand the spirit of the survivors with whom they work" (p. 1074). Storytelling assisted the students' understanding of the importance of occupation-based care in nursing homes. Clark (1993) stated that occupational therapists "can make occupational storytelling and occupational story making the core of their clinical reasoning as a way to nurture the human spirit to act" (p. 1076). If

occupational therapists are using occupational storytelling and occupational story making as a part of their clinical reasoning, then it is important for students to have these skills when they enter practice. Persson, Eklund, and Isacson (1999) studied the relationship between occupation and health. Occupational storytelling was used as one method to better understand the participants' occupational lives through their engagement in intentional reflections. Using occupational storytelling enabled the researchers to capture the reflections of the clients' meaning of their everyday occupations (Persson et al., 1999).

Providing opportunities for students to engage in occupational storytelling with nursing home residents and allowing residents to tell stories of childhood occupations, adult occupations, and occupations that are a part of their lives in the nursing home is important. By doing this, the student can begin to understand the spirit of the resident, what the resident values, and the environment in which he or she lives. Vroman, Simmons, and Knight (2010) found that as educators, it is important to assist the student in making connections between occupation and health and his or her occupational practice behaviors through integration of knowledge and clinical reasoning. Through occupational storytelling, a therapist can more fully understand a client's lived experience. Therefore, it is important for students to understand and apply concepts of occupational storytelling (Clark, 1993; Persson et al., 1999).

## **Occupational Story Making and Self-Advocacy**

Story making is a form of clinical reasoning in which the occupational therapist creates stories for the future with the client to assist in solving engagement in occupational problems the client may be experiencing (Clark, 1993). This supports the need to provide students with an opportunity to assist residents in developing a plan for engagement in a valued occupation through story making. Participation in story making may then enable the student to assist the resident to self-advocate for his or her occupational performance needs.

Dale, Saevareid, Kirkevold, and Söderhamn (2010) found a relationship between reduced social participation and an increase in the amount of nursing care required in the home. Also seen with lower social participation were decreased physical functioning and a decline in mental functioning (Dale et al., 2010). Therefore, it may be important for those living in the nursing home environment to learn to self-advocate for their occupational needs.

To promote self-advocacy leading to empowerment, Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) worked with women and children in homeless shelters. Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) supervised occupational therapy students and faculty who met with women and children in a homeless shelter for weekly empowerment groups. Faculty and students assisted the women in choosing an empowerment project and then followed up weekly on their progress. Researchers found that occupational therapists working with this marginalized population need to facilitate the client's

involvement in self-chosen occupations that are meaningful to the person (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008). Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) developed the Model of Occupational Empowerment (MOE) as a conceptual model to empower marginalized people who they described as those who are unable to “take advantage of many of the social and economic opportunities that surround them” (p. 57). Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) developed the MOE to guide clinicians in addressing occupational justice for those marginalized populations. This model provided the conceptual framework that served as the foundation for the students to learn about the nursing home residents’ experiences with occupations.

### **Student Learning**

Zoghi et al. (2010) researched the learning styles of allied health students and found that a majority of occupational therapy students demonstrated a preference toward converger learning style. This style of learner prefers engagement in practical application and problem-based learning in order to best use deductive reasoning skills to solve problems (Zoghi et al., 2010). The MOT elective course was therefore designed to include opportunities for practical application of concepts learned in the classroom.

By partnering with a local nursing home, the students had the opportunity to engage with the residents and apply classroom knowledge to the clinical setting. Kielhofner (2007) discussed the need to provide a link between theory and practice. When students are partnering with local and global community sites, they are afforded the opportunity to understand the link from theory to practice

(Kielhofner, 2007). Through the partnership with a local facility, the students were better able to understand the concepts taught in class and to connect the learning of occupation to practice as they begin their careers.

### **Course Design**

The instructor developed the student objectives that guided the course through a review and critical appraisal of the literature. The student objectives of the MOT elective course are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Course Objectives*

- 
1. Students will define and evaluate concepts of occupational justice as related to the nursing home environment.
  2. Students will use storytelling to determine if occupational injustices are present in the nursing home environment.
  3. Students will use story making to facilitate the residents’ self-advocacy for occupation.
- 

In order for the students to reach the above objectives, they alternated weekly sessions at a local nursing home with sessions in the classroom (see Appendix A). Classroom learning activities included discussions, lectures, and self-directed learning activities. Prior to the classroom sessions, the students were expected to read assigned articles. During class, the students were required to build on knowledge gained from the articles. At the end of each class session, the students were given writing prompts to facilitate writing reflections in their journals. Nursing home activities included the students working with the residents to facilitate storytelling followed by story

making to assist the residents to develop a plan for participation in an occupation of value.

The MOE (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008) was used as a model to assist the students through the process of (a) understanding potential occupational injustices in the nursing home setting, (b) the importance of empowering residents, and (c) how empowerment can lead to increased positive occupational performance. Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) discussed that living in a disempowering environment can cause occupational deprivation and learned helplessness. Residents living in the nursing home environment can be considered living in a disempowering environment and may experience occupational deprivation, thus promoting poor occupational performance patterns. The students engaged the residents in storytelling in order to understand these potential issues of occupational deprivation.

Through participation in empowering occupational therapy programming (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2007), residents living in nursing homes may develop a positive occupational identity that can promote positive occupational change. The empowering occupational therapy programming was the facilitation of occupational story making. Each student assisted a resident in creating goals for participation in meaningful occupations. Through creating an image of the future, the student assisted the resident in identifying meaningful occupations, as well as a plan to participate in occupations to reduce the occupational deprivation.

For optimum scheduling of the resident and student sessions, the course was scheduled on

Monday afternoons. The course was designed to facilitate self-directed learning through experiential learning and investigation of knowledge in a supportive environment (Stern, 1997; Thompson & MacNeil, 2006). The instructor had a desire to measure student outcomes and disseminate findings, and therefore submitted the study to the University's Institutional Review Board. The study was approved as exempt.

### **Students**

All second-year MOT students were given the opportunity to register for one elective course, including the elective course "Occupation in Long-Term Care (LTC)". Eight second-year MOT students enrolled in "Occupation in Long-Term Care (LTC)". Six of the students were female and two of the students were male. The students ranged in age from 21 to 26 years.

### **Student Outcomes**

The instructor measured the students' ability to meet objectives through journal reflections and a pre/post Knowledge Survey (see Appendix B). The course instructor established weekly lesson plans as the course was being established. Student journals were analyzed as related to the MOE (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008).

### **Student Understanding of Occupational Justice**

The nursing home environment can be a disempowering environment leading to occupational injustice for the residents. The students in the MOT course were able to understand occupational injustices through storytelling with residents of the nursing home environment. Student 1 stated:

Concerns related to occupational

injustice involve those activities that the resident is no longer able to do in the long term care facility. Going to church, driving, and going to the movie theatre are three things that [my resident] identified that caught my attention. There is definitely some discrepancy between the resident's current occupations and desired occupations.

Student 6 identified occupational injustices as follows: "[My resident] expressed occupational injustices when she shared that she does not have the opportunity to participate in scrabble games or have access to participating in the community, such as going to church." Student 7 identified occupational injustices experienced by a resident as follows: "I feel that my resident is experiencing occupational injustice being in the SNF [skilled nursing facility] because she is less independent and autonomous in her actions and decisions." This suggests that the students developed a basic understanding of the importance of participation in occupations a person finds meaningful versus participating in those activities that are readily available in the nursing home environment. Nursing homes provide activities for the residents living there; however, if these are not meaningful to the residents, occupational deprivation occurs. Posttesting data using the Knowledge Survey indicated that seven out of the eight students strongly agreed that occupational injustices occurred in nursing homes, and that one out of the

eight students agreed that occupational injustices may occur in nursing homes. The instructor also found at posttesting that 50% of the students strongly agreed that they understood the concept of occupational justice while 50% of the students agreed.

Empowering residents to self-advocate for opportunities to participate in meaningful occupations is important (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008). Participating in empowering occupational therapy programming leads to empowerment through occupation and positive occupational change (Fisher & Hotchkiss, 2008). The students used story making to follow this model and facilitated empowerment in the residents to promote engagement in occupation. Student 2 stated, "[My resident] has talked to the activities coordinator to [find] a person to play scrabble with." Student 1 demonstrated an understanding of the importance of participation in valued occupations with reflections about the resident:

Going to the theatre and church can be arranged if [the resident] is proactive and persistent. I hope to motivate the resident to self-advocate so that she can take part in more community-based activities (e.g., going to church or the movies).

Participation in these valued activities will increase [the residents] quality of life and facilitate the story making process. I was pleased to hear the resident took part in two recent community outings that the facility planned.

The students, through this elective course, began to understand the importance of participation in



occupation for well-being. Student 4 stated, “Every resident, including mine, deserves and has the right to engage in meaningful occupations and have a good quality of life.” Student 1 stated, “The most valuable thing I learned was the importance of empowerment through occupations and closing the gap between current and desired occupations.”

Student 8 stated,

One big positive was my resident told me she went to church the other day. She now has a church member who is going to come pick her up 3x/month to go to church and she told me they just don’t go to church they go out to eat and hang out after.

### **Student Engagement of Residents in Occupational Storytelling**

Clark (1993) supported the use of occupational storytelling as a narrative reasoning process to understand the spirit of the client. In the MOT elective course, each student was able to use the storytelling process to understand his or her resident as an occupational being and to understand the resident’s spirit. The students had positive experiences with storytelling. They stated that through having the resident tell his or her story, they were able to understand what occupations were meaningful to the resident. This was a major theme throughout discussions and during classroom activities. Student 4 stated, “I feel like I learned a lot about her past and present occupations and was able to see some areas where she could be given more opportunities to participate in desired/meaningful occupations.” Storytelling as a way to be client-

centered was a theme that developed as the students participated in storytelling with the residents, which was supported in the literature by Townsend and Wilcock (2004). Student 3 stated, “It [storytelling and story making] is a great way to be client-centered and a good motivator and trust builder.” The students were asked at posttesting to determine if occupational storytelling lead them to feel that their resident was experiencing occupational deprivation. Six of the students agreed that his or her resident was experiencing occupational injustices, one student was neutral, and one student disagreed.

Miller and Nelson (2004) supported the educational benefit of occupational therapy student participation in community settings in order to link classroom theory to practice. The MOT students taking the elective course stated that having the ability to go to the nursing home and facilitate storytelling with the residents enabled an application of classroom theory to practice. Student 8 reported, “Storytelling is helping me look at each client as more than just a resident at a SNF. We all have a past and a story and those experiences make us who we are today. I hope to use these skills in my FWII (Fieldwork Level II) at a SNF.” Student 3 reported, “The time I had to story tell with my resident was very beneficial to my learning and a good clinical experience because we got to apply what we have learned with real life people.”

## **Student Engagement of Residents in Occupational Story Making to Facilitate Self-Advocacy**

Clark (1993) used story making as a way to ensure the collaboration of therapist and client in goal development to create a picture of the future. In the MOT elective course, the students were able to have the residents participate in story making to assist in creating a picture of occupational participation. The students, through the use of clinical reasoning skills, used story making as a process to assist the residents in identification of meaningful occupations. Student 5 wrote:

It was an awesome experience using storytelling and story making as a way to help the client realize what's important to them and encourage them to advocate for themselves about activities that give them a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Student 1 wrote, "I have been able to practice using clinical reasoning skills by gathering appropriate information and using it to facilitate the story making process." The students used storytelling and story making and were able to facilitate self-advocacy with the residents. Fisher and Hotchkiss (2008) supported the MOE through facilitation of participation in meaningful occupations for those who are experiencing occupational injustices. The students were able to facilitate self-advocacy with the residents. Six out of the eight students felt his or her resident was

experiencing some type of occupational injustice in the nursing home. Four of these six students identified his or her resident was able to create a plan for participation in a valued occupation.

### **Implications for Education**

The MOT students who participated in the elective course demonstrated improvement in their understanding of and ability to define concepts of occupational justice. This is knowledge that the students will take with them as they transition into practice. Understanding these concepts may lead to a more occupation-based and client-centered practice for the students who took the elective course. It will be necessary to follow-up with these eight students to determine if the concepts carry over as they transition into practice. Townsend and Wilcock (2004) discussed the importance of understanding the concept of occupational justice in order to facilitate a client-centered occupational therapy practice. The student outcomes of the elective course indicated that the students improved their understanding of issues of occupational justice with the nursing home resident population through occupational storytelling and story making. The students benefited from incorporation of an elective course in an occupational therapy curriculum that enables student engagement with a marginalized population to facilitate an understanding of the concepts of occupational justice.

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## Appendix A

### Course Outline

#### Week One: In the classroom

- Introduction to course
- Students, in pairs, will write their definition of occupational justice; students may use their articles posted on the learning management system
- Compare and contrast their definitions and then discuss the nursing home environment and apply issues of occupational justice to this setting
- Discussions on how occupational storytelling can facilitate client-centered practice and occupation-based interventions
- Role-playing practice on facilitation of occupational storytelling

#### *Work assigned outside of class for the week to include:*

- Writing initial questions to ask the resident to facilitate the resident in telling his or her story
- Complete required readings
- Students will be given sentence stems to assist in formulating journal entries. The following sentence stems will be given:
  - My feelings on this class project are:
  - My feelings toward occupational justice are:
  - My feelings toward the upcoming occupational storytelling session with my resident are:
  - Other thoughts I would like to share:

#### Week Two: In the nursing home

- The instructor will introduce each student to his or her resident
- Students will work with their assigned resident of the nursing home to facilitate occupational storytelling with the resident

*Work assigned outside of class for the week to include:*

- Students to complete reading assignments
- Students will be given sentence stems to assist in formulating journal entries. The following sentence stems will be given:
  - After completing the occupational storytelling session with my resident I was able to gain the following important occupational information:
  - I was able to identify issues of occupational justice/injustices as follows:
  - My thoughts on how the session went overall:
  - Thinking back on the session I wish I would have:

Week Three: In the classroom

- Students will reflect on their experiences with occupational storytelling as a whole through facilitated discussions
  - What information related to concepts of occupational justice was noted?
  - Was occupational deprivation seen? If so, discuss examples
  - Were other occupational injustices noted? If so, discuss examples
- Students will evaluate concepts of occupational justice as it applies to his or her resident working with a peer. Similarities and differences will then be discussed as a whole group
- Discussions of facilitating occupational story making and how the student might assist his or her resident to engage in occupation and questions/issues related to upcoming session with the resident

*Work assigned outside of class for the week to include:*

- Complete assigned readings
- Students will be given sentence stems to assist in formulating journal entries. The following sentence stems will be given:
  - As far as issues of occupational justice/injustices related to my resident I feel:
  - My thoughts on the nursing home setting are:
  - The most valuable thing that I learned from class discussions today was:

Week Four: In the nursing home

- Students will again work with their assigned resident and focus on facilitating occupational story making. They will facilitate the resident in imagining and planning how they can better engage in a valued occupation in the nursing home

*Work assigned outside of class for the week to include:*

- Students will be given sentence stems to assist in formulating journal entries. The following sentence stems will be given:
  - My thoughts on story making and my ability to facilitate this with my resident are:
  - My thoughts overall on the process of story making are:
  - My thoughts on how the session went overall:
  - Thinking back on the session I wish I would have:

Week Five: In the classroom

- Students will reflect on their experiences with occupational story making
- Students will discuss as a group how they can assist their resident in facilitating one of their valued occupations in the nursing home

- Students will generate a plan with their partner to discuss with their residents next week to promote self-advocacy for inclusion of a valued occupation in the nursing home and share with their peers

*Work assigned outside of class for the week to include:*

- Students will be given sentence stems to assist in formulating journal entries. The following sentence stems will be given:
  - My thoughts on the process of story making as it relates to the OT Process are:
  - The most valuable thing that I learned from class discussions today was:
  - I plan to assist my resident in self-advocating for participation in a valued occupation by:

Week Six: In the nursing home

- Students will again work with their assigned resident to complete the occupational story making process and implement plan for self-advocacy for inclusion in a valued occupation in the nursing home. The students will also need to provide closure with their resident

*Work assigned outside of class for the week to include:*

- Students will be given sentence stems to assist in formulating journal entries. The following sentence stems will be given:
  - My overall thoughts on the process of using storytelling and story making to facilitate my resident to be able to self-advocate for participation in a valued occupation are:
  - The most valuable thing I learned from the session today was:
  - The experience of interacting 1:1 with a nursing home resident was:

Week Seven: In the classroom

- Discussions of how client-centered and occupation-based focused occupational therapy in the nursing home can improve outcomes of occupational justice and self-advocacy
- Plan for integration into their future practice

*Work assigned outside of class for the week to include:*

- Students will be given sentence stems to assist in formulating journal entries. The following sentence stems will be given:
  - The most important concept that I am taking away from this experience is:
  - My views of how occupational justice relates to the nursing home environment are:



## *Appendix B*

### Knowledge Survey Pretest and Posttest

Questions 1-11 were Likert Scale questions using the scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree

1. I feel I understand the concept of occupational justice
2. I feel occupational justice is an important outcome of occupational therapy
3. I feel I can clearly state the definition of occupational justice
4. I feel I can clearly state the definition of occupational deprivation
5. I feel I can clearly state the definition of occupational marginalization
6. I feel I can clearly state the definition of occupational alienation
7. I feel that occupational injustices (occupational deprivation, occupational marginalization, and occupational alienation) may occur with residents residing in the long-term care environment
8. I believe an occupational therapist has a role in promotion of occupational justice in long-term care environment
9. I believe self-advocacy is an important outcome of occupational therapy
10. I believe an occupational therapist has a role in assisting a person residing in the long-term care environment to advocate for their occupational needs
11. I believe when I become an occupational therapist I will take an active role in promotion of occupational justice in the long-term environment

Open-ended questions:

1. I would define the term occupational justice as...
2. As an occupational therapist I would use storytelling with my long-term care clients in order to...
3. As an occupational therapist I would use story making with my long-term care clients in order to...