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## Reclaiming and Proclaiming the Use of Crafts in Occupational Therapy

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# Reclaiming and Proclaiming the Use of Crafts in Occupational Therapy

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## **Complete Author List**

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The use of crafts in occupational therapy exemplifies the use of occupation as a means and an end for individuals who experience challenges to participation in everyday life. Crafts are used to practice skills that are applied to other functional activities of daily living, and crafts become meaningful tasks that satisfy occupational needs.

### **Crafts and Occupational Therapy**

From the start of occupational therapy's early history in the late 19th century, the use of crafts was frequently part of "curative" occupational interventions among the U.S. adult population (Bathje, 2012). After World War II, as new discoveries in science and medicine were made, a reductionist view of health care became prominent. This reductionist movement shifted occupational therapy interventions based on crafts toward new rehabilitation interventions meant to help returning veterans recover from wartime injuries and resume productive roles in their communities (Christiansen & Haertle, 2014).

In recent years, a moderate amount of evidence has been collected that supports the use of crafts for occupational therapy interventions. The greatest applications for the therapeutic use of crafts have been with people who have mental illness or chronic conditions; the aging population; and clients with neurocognitive, psychosocial, or sensory-motor deficits.

### **Recent Studies of Successful Interventions**

Therapists have used craft interventions to address clients' cognitive, neurological, and sensory-motor needs by targeting performance skills. Craft activities have been shown to help promote the use of right and left brain functioning,

to relax and reward the brain, and to help maintain cognitive functioning. For example, crafts or games that require problem solving often stimulate left hemispheric structures (Gutman & Schindler, 2007). Stroke survivors receiving art interventions improved their spatial processing, attention, planning, and sequencing; increased the use of their affected arm; and increased social expression and interaction (Reynolds, 2012). Participants with neurological conditions in an arts-based program showed similar benefits, improving their ability to concentrate and give attention to a task for extended periods of time (Symons, Clark, Williams, Hansen, & Orpin, 2011).

A number of recently conducted studies have explored the potential effects of crafts in addressing the psychosocial needs of individuals in challenging circumstances. A group of veterans making leatherwork, woodwork, and paintings at a VA Medical Center reported that the crafts group gave them a greater sense of pride and purpose, as well as an opportunity to develop relationships with other men that created a sense of camaraderie (Hasio, 2011). Participants receiving mental health services in a community-based creative arts program reported a renewed sense of identity and hope; they stated that their new roles as craft makers provided them with a feeling of productivity, which helped to ease their state of occupational deprivation (Stickley, 2010).

Women with cancer have used crafts to explore concepts related to gender identity, boundary violations, and changes in body concept while, conversely, indulging in the pleasurable experience of color and texture to represent a

positive continuation of their non-cancer identity (Öster, Åström, Lindh, & Magnusson, 2009; Reynolds, Lim, & Prior, 2008). Likewise, simple occupations like the leisure pursuits of knitting or sewing have been found to foster meaning and joy, helping individuals to cope with chronic pain (Kelly, Cudney, & Weinert, 2012). Creative activities also have been shown to relieve stress and smooth the transition of lost roles or activities in the later stages of life. They may even come to hold particular cultural meanings that represent a unique legacy or a contribution an elder has made to his or her community (Adams-Price & Steinman, 2007; Tzanidaki & Reynolds, 2011).

These studies illustrate the most recent evidence of successful craft interventions that meet goal-related performance skills and psychosocial needs, helping clients to achieve meaningful and functional outcomes. By using crafts as therapy, therapists are sure to provide holistic interventions that address skill development while also providing opportunities for psychosocial benefits.

As the need for coordination and collaboration among health care disciplines increases, it is important for occupational therapy to stay relevant and retain its unique characteristics to ensure proper reimbursement, quality care, and successful client outcomes (Moyers & Metzler, 2014). There is an opportunity for more occupational therapy practitioners to return to the original occupation-based interventions first introduced more than a century ago, with meaningful crafts as an integral part of treatment sessions with clients (Tubbs & Drake, 2012).

Practitioners who have limited experience using

crafts, or practitioners who have had past success and are looking for new ideas, need access to modern resources for craft-based interventions. Fortunately, with the expansion of the Internet and various types of social media sites for sharing information, finding those resources is easier than ever.

### **Influence of Social Media**

Recently, a renewed interest in crafts has come about in the general adult population, perhaps due, in part, to new social media websites that facilitate the sharing of crafts and do-it-yourself projects. To establish some context, it is worth a brief look at data regarding social media and its use in the United States. The Health Information National Trends Study found that, in 2007, approximately 69% of adults had access to the Internet; of that population, 5% participated in an online support group, 7% blogged, and 23% used social media for networking (Chou, Hunt, Beckjord, Moser, & Hesse, 2009). Of interest is that social media sites were equally used across different demographics of education, race, and ethnicity. However, people of a younger age reported a higher use of social media (Chou et al., 2009). Regular use of social media increased in 2014, as 74% of adult Americans had online access (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). These findings demonstrate the growing use of online resources, such as social media, for information and social exchanges.

Therapists appear to be using these same social media and online resources to access work-related information. Specific to the field of occupational therapy, Karen Jacobs, the 2012

Eleanor Clarke Slagle lecturer, explored the promotion of occupational therapy through social media. According to Jacobs (2012), social media websites are so widely used, they have become part of most occupational therapy practitioners' and clients' virtual contexts. She described multiple social media research techniques and how they can be incorporated into the promotion of occupational therapy in the everyday treatment of clients. One of the social media sites Jacobs discussed is Pinterest.

Pinterest is a social media website that allows users to share ideas from online sources, post images and descriptions from personally created projects, and collect images posted by other Pinterest users for future use and adaptation. Pinterest facilitates social interaction among users, allowing the exchange of comments and questions. Pinterest was created in the spring of 2010 and quickly gained popularity by the end of 2011. According to SemioCast, a company that provides social media research, there were 70 million Pinterest users around the world in 2013 (<http://semioCast.com/>). Approximately 49 million users were located in the United States and four million in Canada (Ahalogy, 2014). In the United States, 28% of adults who use the Internet reported they used Pinterest regularly in 2014 (Duggan et al., 2015). Of the dozens of topics offered on Pinterest, food and crafts are the most popular among users (Cario, 2013).

There are no specific data currently available on how many occupational therapy practitioners use Pinterest for their practice. But with so many people in the general adult population using this social media tool, it should be no surprise

that when searching the term "occupational therapy" in the search bar of Pinterest, hundreds of pictures, ideas, and inspirations pop up. One might conclude that practitioners are posting or searching for occupational therapy intervention ideas on Pinterest. The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) even has its own Pinterest page, with 1,800 Pins on its 19 boards and 11,800 followers at the time this paper was written.

### **A Descriptive Study of Crafts Posted on Pinterest**

It appears that Pinterest has proven to be popular as a site to share ideas, post personal successes with projects, and promote social exchanges between users. Because of its popularity among social media users and people interested in crafts, Pinterest was selected as the subject for a recent descriptive study we conducted. The purpose of the study was to gather data from Pinterest to explore and describe the qualitative characteristics of crafts that are currently popular. Exploration of these characteristics allowed us to reflect on the use of crafts as meaningful therapeutic interventions for various occupational therapy client populations. In addition, we informally explored Pinterest as an online resource for occupational therapy practitioners planning crafts-based interventions. Of course, the selection of crafts from sites such as Pinterest must be done with careful attention to the activity analysis and imaginative synthesis that are necessary to produce therapeutic outcomes (Evetts & Peloquin, in press).

For 4 hours per week for 6 consecutive weeks, the primary author collected data through a Pinterest account used exclusively for the study.

We pinned crafts to one of our three Pinterest boards that met predefined criteria: crafts that could be completed (a) within one hour, (b) in a workspace no larger than three square feet, (c) with non-toxic and non-perishable materials, and (d) with common art or hand tools (excluding power tools). Our Pinterest boards were used to categorize the crafts according to key materials: recycled materials, common materials, and materials that can be purchased for less than one dollar per project.

After 24 hr of data collection, we identified 160 craft projects that fully met the criteria. We then categorized these crafts according to their qualitative characteristics. Those characteristics included whether they were best suited for female or male clients or were gender-neutral, and if they were most appropriate for younger clients, more mature clients, or good for all ages. We also categorized them according to skill (as easy or complex), as clean or messy, and as holiday themed or not. During our analysis, it became clear that all 160 projects were adaptable and diverse in characteristics and could potentially meet clients' therapeutic needs. In addition, most of the craft projects were considered gender-neutral and appropriate for a vast age range.

### **Further Reflections and Clinical Implications**

During our analysis, we discovered the craft projects collected during this study incorporated elements of culture, holidays, memory, expressions of personal experience, playfulness and joy, and emotional and spiritual well-being. We noted that several of the projects could be used in a therapeutic setting to address low vision, low endurance, sequencing, fine motor coordination, making

choices and exercising control, sensory components, building self-efficacy, and a multitude of other psychosocial and emotional needs. The crafts appeared to present opportunities for clients to explore meaningful roles, especially when facing challenges that required adaptation to a new living situation or disability.

We believe the therapeutic opportunities represented by the crafts collected in our, admittedly limited, Pinterest study can be generalized for use as therapeutic interventions by current practitioners. The recent studies described earlier in this article demonstrate additional evidence of success when using crafts among many types of patient populations. Crafts appear to have the potential to bring meaning to an occupational therapy session and can be used to restore performance skills, learn compensatory techniques, and add to a client's sense of well-being.

Occupational therapy practitioners can use their unique abilities to select a craft, perhaps found from a social media site such as Pinterest, and quickly adapt and grade that activity to meet each client's skills or interests during therapy sessions. When working with a client who is hesitant about doing a craft, practitioners can help motivate him or her by collaborating to select a personal, engaging craft for the client to create. Depending on a client's cognitive function, the practitioner can describe the skills that client is using to create the craft, and how those skills transfer to other meaningful occupations.

A craft can bring meaning and joy to a client's session, and through the end product reinforce memories and personal expression. Crafts

can help clients fulfill roles, even when they are living in a new facility or experiencing a sudden deficit in their daily function. The thought process behind how each occupational therapy practitioner can successfully implement craft projects with clients can be considered a therapeutic skilled service.

It is realistic to suggest that occupational therapists can successfully use crafts that are meaningful to their clients, budget-friendly, and incorporate easily accessible materials. As our study illustrates, occupational therapists can easily and quickly access online resources, such as Pinterest, to incorporate and promote the use of therapeutic craft interventions in practice.

Pinterest provides an online space for users to share ideas and inspire each other through an array of crafts. Pinterest proved to be an easy website to navigate and was an equally easy place to find innovative, inexpensive, and realistic craft projects during our study. We believe that occupational therapy practitioners who are trying crafts as an intervention for the first time, or who have already used crafts as interventions in the past, might find Pinterest to be a beneficial online resource.

Occupational therapy has a long history pointing to the clinical efficacy of using craft interventions to improve client well-being. Recent research has provided evidence that supports creative interventions, such as crafts, as effective in addressing goals for a wide range of patient populations and diagnoses. Today, therapists have increased access to online resources, including social media, to inform their practices and share

ideas in the health care community and among social media users. It is our hope that occupational therapy practitioners will consider using crafts as interventions, supported by social media such as Pinterest or other resources, to provide meaningful evidence-based interventions and continue to build evidence for the use of crafts in occupational therapy.

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**Cynthia Evetts** is Director of the School of Occupational Therapy at Texas Woman's University. A lifelong fascination with art and craft led to an earlier career as an industrial arts teacher. Challenges in the education of inner city youth then led her to the field of occupational therapy where her belief in art and craft as therapeutic tools evolved and remains strong to this day.

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