



7-1-2016

Creating Environments Through the Art of Occupational Therapy

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DOI: 10.15453/2168-6408.1300

Recommended Citation

Royeen, Lydia (2016) "Creating Environments Through the Art of Occupational Therapy," *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 13.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1300>

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Creating Environments Through the Art of Occupational Therapy

Abstract

Dr. Lori Reynolds has an interest in therapeutic gardens and the creation of living spaces that promote well-being for older adults. Dr. Reynolds educates various stakeholders on the benefits of occupational therapy, including landscape architects and senior living administrators. Her advocacy to expand occupational therapy beyond its mainstream roles is infectious. She speaks passionately about her work in helping to create therapeutic gardens and how her role as an occupational therapist offers great perspective in this process. She appreciates the environmental impact on an individual's health and well-being and practices from a person-environment-occupation theory.

Keywords

occupational therapy, therapeutic gardening, occupation, person-environment-occupation, doing-being-becoming

“Other professions are open to hearing what occupational therapists do,” Dr. Lori Reynolds stated during our interview. With an interest in therapeutic gardens and the creation of living spaces that promote well-being for older adults, Lori educates various stakeholders, such as landscape architects and senior living administrators, on the benefits of occupational therapy. Her advocacy for occupational therapy to expand beyond its mainstream roles is infectious. She speaks passionately about her work in helping to create therapeutic gardens and how her role as an occupational therapist has offered great perspective in this process. Lori appreciates the environment’s impact on an individual’s health and well-being.

Background

Lori grew up in a creative household and was influenced by her father. Her father was a millwright and created custom stairways, doors, and cabinetry. Since creativity was a major aspect of her childhood, Lori pursued a degree in art from McNeese State University in Lake Charles, LA. After she graduated, she worked in interior design and art galleries for 13 years. Lori realized, however, that she wanted to pursue another avenue that would provide more meaningful work.

Lori’s path to becoming an occupational therapist was not paved overnight. She shadowed various professionals, including occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, speech pathologists, and art therapists. While shadowing an occupational therapist, Lori connected with the profession’s philosophical foundation, and she was drawn to the perspective of focusing on the whole person and how individuals

function in their respective environments (Law et al., 1996). Lori’s passion for the field of occupational therapy grew so strong that she moved her husband and 6-year old daughter to Houston, TX, even before she was accepted into an occupational therapy school.

After receiving a Master of Occupational Therapy degree in 1997 from the Texas Women’s University, Lori worked in acute rehab and home health. In 2003, she moved to Spaulding University in Louisville, KY, where she assumed the position of fieldwork director and community program coordinator. She worked with students at a local vocational rehab office to help determine an individual’s physical and cognitive job readiness. Lori and the students also worked with the Louisville Area Agency on Aging, which fosters healthy aging in place by offering home health assessments. At the same time, Lori received a certificate in Healthcare Garden Design from the Chicago Botanical Garden. This experience was a pivotal point in her career, as it informed her dissertation and ignited her passion for helping to create therapeutic gardens for senior living.

While working at Spaulding University, Lori’s interest in academia grew stronger, and she enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. She completed her Ph.D. in Gerontology, working with well-known gerontologist Graham Rowles. In August 2014, Lori joined a new developing program as a faculty member at Northern Arizona University.

Lori’s current passion is to improve senior living environments with the inclusion of therapeutic gardens as an integral part of the facility

design. Lori is also interested in the design of the interior spaces of and programming for senior living to promote health and well-being among older adults.

Artistic Practice

While Lori's creativity has informed her non-traditional view of the role of occupational therapy, she has always been drawn to the visual arts and the creative process. Of interest is that her husband is also an artist who works with pottery, photography, and sculpture. With an interest in the visual arts, Lori makes collages, and when she collaborates with her husband they make assemblages, which are a collection of objects. She forms images with unique and aesthetically pleasing objects that she has collected over the past 25 years. Before she begins, Lori develops a rough idea for a design, size, and shape. When inspired, she will sit, with undivided attention, and begin to create a collage. Being present in the moment while creating the art is therapeutic in itself for Lori.

The cover art for the summer issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* is entitled *Earthen Assembly* (Figure 1). It is a small, unframed piece, 4" x 5" in size. It is made of paper, River Birch tree bark, seeds, and embossed cardboard. Also in the piece is a marine plant fossil, which is the round object in the top left. She arranged the pieces on the base of a mat board with a focus on the different textures and shapes. The process usually takes 4 to 5 hours. While the process of creating provides meaning for Lori, the meaning in the final piece is open to the viewer's interpretation.

Lori's engagement in art allows her the opportunity to express herself and to demonstrate her identity through visual communication. Communication through the visual senses is a great form of self-expression. The emphasis on the visual aspects of her artwork shows the importance of the visual aspects of an environment for Lori.

Common Themes for Art and Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy and Lori's art practices share overlapping themes: Her artistic endeavors and her experiences as a clinician have enhanced the quality and enjoyment of both occupations. Lori's participation in art has led her to value important concepts in occupational therapy. The overlapping themes will now be discussed, along with the importance the environment has on individuals and the meaning of occupation.

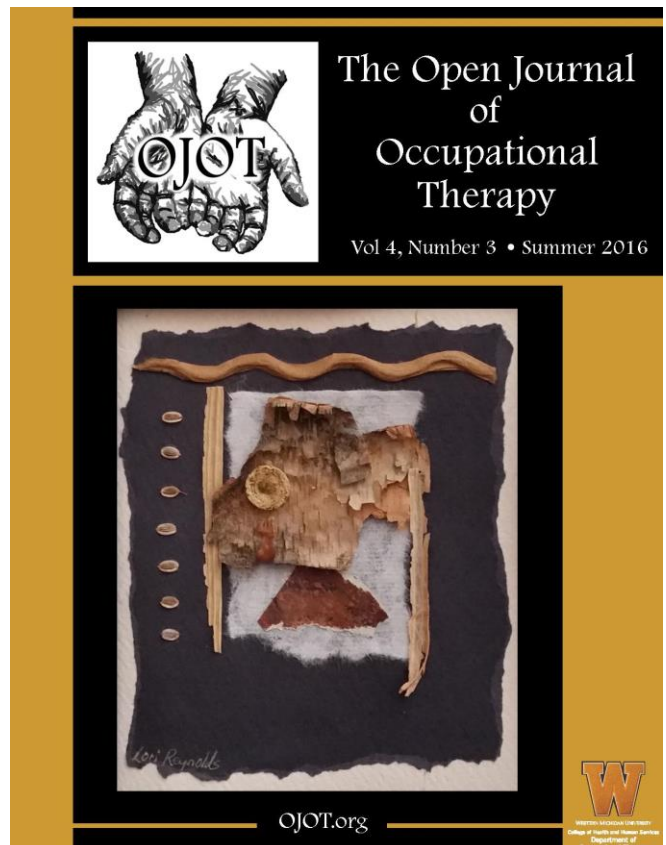


Figure 1. Cover of OJOT Vol 4, No 3

Importance of an environment. It is Lori's passion to identify the potential impact an environment has on individuals. With the industrialization of society, it is easy for people to lose their connection with nature, specifically while they are in institutions. Lori's dissertation and current work exemplify her passion for this area.

A therapeutic garden, according to the American Horticultural Therapy Association, is "a plant-dominated environment purposefully designed to facilitate interaction with the healing elements of nature" (n.d.). Lori's dissertation focused on her passion for the therapeutic value of nature and outdoor garden spaces in senior living. Lori's artistic background is beneficial, as she greatly appreciates the importance of an environment's visual sense. Her dissertation focused on examining the value of outdoor garden spaces to identify if older adults "have a propensity toward living things that is actualized through the use and appreciation of garden environments" (Reynolds, 2011, p. 9).

Lori's dissertation was a qualitative study, taking a grounded theory approach to "explore and understand older adult's perceptions in relation to gardens" (Reynolds, 2011, p. 39). An assisted living facility and continuing care facility were sites for data collection. Data collection took place in a variety of ways, including interviews, observations, focus groups, and photography, with 32 participants. She found that all of the participants interviewed placed a high value on having access to and views of nature, regardless of the individual's preference for an active or passive relationship with nature. Some of the individuals reported a more passive relationship with nature that involved

simply viewing it from indoors, and others reported an active relationship of "doing" activities while outdoors (Reynolds, 2011, p. 9). Through her dissertation, Lori identified the positive impact a simple intervention of providing access to nature had on the geriatric population in these settings.

The effect of the environment on individuals has been the subject of research and discussion by Roger Ulrich and others. Ulrich (1991) identified that when individuals have the autonomy to shape their environments, it enhances their well-being. For example, allowing an individual to select wall art contributes to the reduction of stress (Ulrich, 1991). Another study conducted by Ulrich (1984) sought to identify the positive effects a view of nature had on individuals after recovering from a cholecystectomy. A match analysis was performed with individuals who had a view of a brick wall and others who had a view of deciduous trees between 1972 and 1981 with 46 subjects. The study identified that there were less negative notes in the documentation from the patients recovering in a room with a view of nature (1.13 per patient), as opposed to the patients with a view of the wall (3.96 per patient). The patients with a view of nature spent less time in the hospital (7.96 days), as opposed to the patients with a view of the wall (8.70 days). In addition, the patients who had a view of nature used less pain medication days 2 through 5 after surgery. These results indicate that there are positive associations with a view of nature and recovery postoperatively. Natural views may decrease stress and anxiety (Ulrich, 1984). Having a lack of windows produced higher instance of anxiety and depression in intensive care unit

patients (Ulrich, 1991). Malenbaum, Keefe, Williams, Ulrich, and Somers (2008) identified that light, nature, and video can improve pain control, which has the long-term effect of decreasing medication costs and improving quality of care and outcomes.

Lori is now focusing on creating new environments, not just modifying them. She believes that working as part of an interprofessional team is the best way to create a space that addresses multi-dimensional aspects; specifically, creating therapeutic gardens and living environments to promote well-being. Lori's research is currently focused on examining the value of outdoor garden spaces and indoor nature spaces for residents in senior living and in memory care.

Meaning of occupation. Occupation is an important concept for Lori, and the environment has a great effect on an individual's participation in a valued occupation. The meaning and definition of occupation has been explored by many authors, as there is no simple definition (Hasselkus, 2011). Crepeau, Cohn, and Schell (2003) identified an occupation as "daily activities that reflect cultural values, provide structure to living, and meaning to individuals; these activities meet human needs for self-care, enjoyment, and participation in society" (p. 1031). It is important that the cultural aspect is included in the definition since a purposeful environment may differ from one person to another depending on the context.

Wilcock (1998) states that the definition of occupation is complex and involves "doing, being and becoming" (p. 248). "Doing" involves the daily acts an individual performs regardless of

importance, "being" entails engagement and satisfaction about participation in that occupation, and "becoming" addresses a strive to find meaning and self actualization in an occupation to promote well being. Doing and becoming are particularly important, as this relationship contributes to overall health and well-being (Wilcock, 1998). There is meaning behind an occupation (Hasselkus, 2011), and the environment can play an integral role in promoting this meaning. Specifically for Lori, this is providing individuals in a residential living facility with the opportunities to engage in meaningful occupations through the enrichment of their environments.

The meaning of occupation and its relationship to the environment is an important concept for Lori, who has a great appreciation for the person-environment-occupation model. It is a guiding theory for her as an occupational therapist and as an artist. An occupation and its relationship to the environment is part of meaning making for an individual (Law et al., 1996). According to Law et al. (1996), the environment has an impact on influencing behavior. The environment is broad and includes "cultural, socio-economic, institutional, physical and social considerations of the environment" (Law et al., 1996, p. 16). Overall, the environment in which an individual participates in an occupation has a great effect on that individual and can promote or hinder an individual's engagement in a valued occupation.

Our environment reflects our cultural milieu, which includes values, beliefs, customs, meanings, and rituals for individuals. Therefore, an enriched environment can have a great impact on an

individual; it will have a tremendous impact on an individual's well-being and his or her engagement in valued occupations. Lori exemplifies this with her emphasis on enhancing the environment by using therapeutic gardens as an intervention. In addition, her advocacy by educating others ensures all related professions understand this crucial message.

Visit the Occupation and the Artist Gallery to view a video and see more of Lori's work:

http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/

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