

An Exploration of a Service-Learning Environment for Occupational Therapy Students and Their Community Partners: Outcomes and Perceptions

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Introduction

Service-learning is a pedagogy based on the philosophies of social justice, reciprocity and social inclusion (Flecky & Gitlow, 2011).

Service-learning aims to link academic learning with real world experiences through engaging students in volunteering work and exploring their experiences, perceptions and learning about disability.

In addition, service-learning should be mutually beneficial; both the students and the community partners work together to engage in occupations of their choice.

This qualitative research project examined the outcomes of a service-learning module at one university for first and second year occupational therapy students and their community partners (for the purposes of this study this refers to people with intellectual disabilities).

Objectives

- To explore the nature of the relationships between the occupational therapy students and their community partners
- To explore the personal and professional development outcomes for both parties
- To explore the potential for occupational engagement and participation as a result of the service-learning environment

Methods

Focus groups were completed post service-learning module.

Participants

1. First and second year occupational therapy students
2. Two cohorts of students with intellectual disability engaging with certificate courses within the university.

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

Results/Themes

Community Partners

Partnership/
Relationship

Self-
Development

Inclusion and
Support

Developing
New Skills

Occupational
Therapy Students

Partnership/
Relationship

Self-
Development

Attitude
Change

Developing
New Skills

“You saw them
as people...just
as people, like.”
(OT Student)

“They learned
communication with
us...and teamwork—
definitely teamwork.”
(Community Partner)

“We all met as strangers
and left as friends.”
(Community Partner)

“I actually learned a lot about myself. I
put my name down for more things now.
I go to work and go to the gym now.”
(Community Partner)

“Just being comfortable in yourself is a huge
deal...I learned to have a laugh at myself and that's
the thing; just to throw yourself in there. If you're
uncomfortable that's good because that means
you're learning.”
(OT Student)

“For me it helped
develop empathy and
looking at someone
else as a person, as an
occupational being.”
(OT Student)

Conclusion

Both cohorts experienced personal and professional growth by achieving their course goals, developing skills, engaging in new occupations, increasing their occupational competence in existing occupations, changing attitudes and being in an environment that was supportive and inclusive.

A key theme that emerged was the nature of the service-learning partnership. The relationship was collaborative which led to mutual self-development. Both groups reported they helped each other to develop in addition to receiving help.

The themes of ‘inclusion and support’ and ‘attitude change’ were linked in the results. Many community partners noticed the change in their service-learning partnership and felt more comfortable over time, coinciding with the students’ change in attitudes.

The results suggest this service-learning module offers opportunities for occupational enrichment through the development of skills, attitudes, personal growth, feelings of competence and feelings of inclusion and support for occupational therapy students and their community partners (Molineux & Whitford, 1999).

References

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