

Fostering skills development of undergraduate occupational therapy students through experiential group work

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Experiential learning is increasingly recognised as an effective teaching approach in health sciences, promoting active engagement and translation of theory into practice. This article describes the implementation of an experiential group work week for third-year occupational therapy students at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Students participated in small groups, facilitated by clinician-educators, engaging in diverse therapeutic modalities including life skills, role play, projective art and activity-based assessment. These sessions provided hands-on opportunities to explore group dynamics, develop interpersonal and therapeutic skills and enhance clinical reasoning. Reflection sessions enabled students to integrate experiential insights into their professional development and future practice. By combining theory with practical experience, this teaching approach bridges gaps between academic learning and clinical application, fostering self-awareness and preparedness for practice. Recommendations include the continued integration of structured experiential learning and guided reflection throughout the curriculum to strengthen student competence and readiness for clinical environments.

Keywords: experiential learning, occupational therapy, group work

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Previous studies suggest that health science students favour interactive experiential learning approaches over the traditional style of didactic teaching.^[1,2] Classroom-based experiential learning is integral to the curriculum at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. An example of this teaching method – the experiential group work week – is designed to align to this preferred learning approach. The interactive week aims to provide third-year occupational therapy students with practical hands-on experience in group dynamics, while fostering self-awareness of their future clinical reasoning as developing occupational therapists.^[1] Research suggests that occupational therapy students learn more efficiently when experiencing group membership, as it heightens their awareness of theory in practice.^[1,2] By engaging in different therapeutic modalities such as life skills, role play, projective art and activity as a means of assessment, students explore a range of therapeutic interventions and examine the impact of group processes on personal and professional growth in a contained environment.^[2-4]

Despite the recognised value of experiential learning in health sciences education, many occupational therapy students struggle to translate group theory into practical application within therapeutic settings and lack technical skills.^[1] Traditional teaching approaches often have too few opportunities for students to experience group dynamics first-hand, limiting their ability to develop clinical reasoning and therapeutic skills essential for practice.

This article aims to describe a novel experiential teaching approach, i.e. the group work week, implemented at the University of Cape Town. The author outlines an experiential group framework that integrates a range of therapeutic modalities. This experiential method of teaching fosters self-awareness and clinical reasoning in students' learning, bridging the gap between theory and practice in occupational therapy education.

Small-group structure and educator's role

Students are divided into small groups of varying sizes, typically between 8 and 10 per group, depending on the size of the cohort each year. The students are the group participants for the duration of the week. Each group is led by an educator, who is also a registered occupational therapy clinician.^[5] This dual role allows the educator to facilitate experiential and theoretical learning, while also providing clinical insight into the therapeutic process. Each educator's expertise helps to ensure that the group work aligns with professional practices and group theory principles. A carefully crafted schedule ensures that all students are exposed to various leadership styles of facilitators and all modalities.

Students are provided with thorough orientation in a session that is run at the beginning of the group work week to contextualise them to the purpose of the experiential method being implemented. This introductory session also aims to provide a clear understanding of the schedule. In this way, anxiety around expectations is reduced and students are encouraged to simply be present as participants in the group process, rather than students who need to provide academic input.

Throughout the week, students rotate through the various modalities, allowing them to experience each group session as participants. The duration of a session is typically one hour and follows the traditional group process of warm-up, main activity and termination in relation to the modalities being implemented. This 'real life' experience of group work gives students a comprehensive understanding of group dynamics and the variety of interventions that occupational therapists can employ. Being participants in these groups also provides students with the opportunity to experience what clients might experience in terms of activity choice and facilitation styles. The use of this interactive teaching method to display

practical skills to students in health sciences such as occupational therapy is beneficial in translation theory to practise application.^[1,2]

By weaving together theory and hands-on experience, this experiential teaching approach provides a rich, immersive learning environment where students not only refine their clinical reasoning but also develop their interpersonal and therapeutic skills through observation of their educators in facilitation roles. Facilitators bring awareness to students regarding group theory application within the experiential climate.^[3-5] Aspects such as group cohesion, interpersonal dynamics and therapeutic factors are highlighted and provide a framework for understanding of how group work can be used to foster growth in participants.^[3,4,6]

The educator facilitates reflective discussions after each session, encouraging students to share their experiences and consider how each session and the activities implemented could inform their future practice. Students are guided to reflect on their clinical reasoning during group work, particularly on how different therapeutic modalities influence outcomes, group dynamics and their approach to client care. Tuckman's^[6] model of group development is highly relevant to understanding how groups evolve over time. Students experience the flow of development within the week and allow for experiential understanding of the dynamics at play within their small groups.

Modalities

Each modality serves a specific educational purpose, designed to help students to understand the different ways occupational therapy can be applied within a group setting. The group work week also allows students to reflect on the therapeutic process from the perspective of the therapist and the client. Students engage in hands-on activities that highlight the importance of using meaningful activities in group interventions. The following modalities help students to practise their observational skills through the role modelling provided by clinician educators and understand how activities can serve as therapeutic tools for engagement and intervention.

- **Activity as a means of assessment.** Students often struggle with the use of activities in group sessions as a means of assessment.^[7] With this in mind, these sessions are crafted to display how careful activity choice and analysis can unearth a host of assessment findings that have the potential to lead to more streamlined intervention sessions.^[4] In this way, participants' cognitive, social, emotional and functional strengths and limitations are revealed through activity use as the assessment in a group setting.
- **Life skills.** In these sessions, students engage in activities that focus on practical life skills. The design of these sessions helps students to develop an understanding of the importance that practical, task-based activities can foster, and support occupational functioning.^[4] This modality emphasises real-world applications and highlights the therapist's role in supporting individuals to develop the life skills necessary for efficient functioning in various occupations, such as basic and instrumental activities of daily living, social participation work and education pursuits.
- **Role play.** This technique is associated with the enhancement of interpersonal skills and promotion of emotional insight.^[4] In this modality, students enact scenarios as themselves or assigned roles to understand challenges associated with communication skills. Empathetic listening

and problem-solving are encouraged in a safe, controlled environment. Students are encouraged to consider handling principles, body language and voice modulation as important aspects of this modality when used in practice.

- **Projective art.** Drawing on Finlay's^[4] classification of this type of group, projective art functions as a psychotherapeutic group modality that promotes emotional expression, insight and symbolic communication among group members, thereby enriching experiential learning through creative, non-verbal processes. Through creative activities students explore their emotional responses as group participants and understand how interventions can be used to support clients in occupational therapy groups. This modality fosters awareness of how non-verbal methods of expression can be used to assess and support clients' emotional well-being.

Reflection and integration

In addition to the daily debrief with their small-group facilitators, students engage in a large-group session at the end of the experiential week, which is a reflective session facilitated by the various educators. Here, they synthesise their learning from the week, discuss challenges and receive feedback from and provide feedback to their educators. Reflection is an integral part of student learning and helps students integrate their experience into their developing clinical reasoning, preparing them for their future roles as occupational therapy practitioners.^[2]

Recommendations

Ongoing research is needed to explore the impact of experiential learning methods on student competence and preparedness for occupational therapy practice. From a curriculum development perspective, occupational therapy programmes should integrate more structured experiential learning activities across the curriculum to support the application of theory to practice. Guided reflection should be included as an essential component of experiential learning to enhance self-awareness and clinical reasoning.

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