

Occupation-Focused Learning and Personal Development through Service-Learning

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Recommended Citation

Quinn, S., & Cremin, K. (2021). Occupation-Focused Learning and Personal Development through Service-Learning. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 5 (3). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2021.050304>

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Abstract

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Keywords

Service-learning, occupation, perceived-learning, concerns, civic-responsibility

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Volume 5, Issue 3

**Occupation-Focused Learning and Personal Development
Through Service-Learning**

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is not without its challenges. Following a pilot examination of student feedback on practical and learning difficulties they encountered, students' experiences of their occupation-focused, service-learning module was systematically explored using a case study design. Concurrent mixed methods were employed to collect data with emphasis on qualitative data gathered through weekly, guided reflective journals and online forums. Students were also surveyed pre and post module to validate data on their experiences regarding their concerns, perceived learning, and evaluation of the module. Four themes were identified. These related to students' increased understanding of the use and value of occupation; their identification of their own skills development primarily in relation to interacting with service-learning partners; their consciousness of power differentials between services, students, and their service-learning partners; and the importance of their contribution being considered worthwhile and valued. Despite wanting to contribute to the lives of others, students perceived they developed least in relation to civic responsibility. Their greatest gains were perceived to be on a personal and attitudinal level. They realized that commitment, reliability, and affording partners time was as important as employing their college-learned skills. Similarly, where students' concerns had been self-focused, they were replaced with concerns for their partners' well-being as time passed. Contributing to online forums was overwhelmingly disliked by students. However, it is recommended that the use of virtual platforms is explored further to potentially enhance the establishment of collaborative relationships with services and to create a 'just right' challenge that optimizes opportunities for occupation-focused learning.

Introduction

Service-learning embodies a collaborative reciprocal relationship between community partners, students, and their faculty (Flecky, 2011), entailing real life learning experiences, civic engagement, and both community and educational objectives (Flecky, 2011; McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). It necessitates a synergy between addressing the community's needs with structured opportunities for student learning and experience (Jacoby, 1996) and aspires to enrich students' connections between their knowledge base, doing, and reflecting (Kalles & Ryan, 2015).

Research demonstrates service-learning is an effective tool for learning and greater understanding (Flinders et al., 2013; Stenhouse & Jarrett, 2012). Service-learning has been found to reduce stereotyping (Astin & Sax, 1998), develop political tolerance (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and breed a lifelong commitment to civic engagement (Metz & Youniss, 2003). It can nurture the attitudes and skills necessary in a healthy democracy (Knecht & Martinez, 2012), challenging students to embrace the ideals of social justice (Flecky, 2011). In many ways, the goals of service-learning parallel the beliefs of occupational therapy (Gitlow, 2011).

For students of occupational therapy, service-learning can provide contextually relevant environments where they can apply occupation-based knowledge to real-life and community-identified occupational needs (Flecky, 2011). Lorenzo et al. (2006) concluded that service-learning provided students with the opportunity to work with communities in a way that helped them understand the scope and potential impact of occupational therapy. Flecky (2011) found that service-learning enhanced occupational therapy students' understanding of themselves as agents of change and as catalysts in enabling others to serve themselves. Students achieved this through an increased appreciation of their and others' shared vulnerability, interdependence, and strengths and limitations. Service-learning can promote the development of core professional skills and competencies required for occupation-based practice (Gitlow & Flecky, 2002) and the abilities needed by the healthcare practitioners of tomorrow (Flecky & Gitlow, 2011).

The Study Context and Purpose: Service-learning on the Study of Occupation Practice Module

In Irish third-level institutions there is a drive to encourage outward mobility of staff and students and for the engagement with the wider community to become more firmly embedded in the institution's mission (Higher Education Authority, 2011). The need for civically engaged students has been highlighted with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI, 2003) recommending that students' internalized view of the world reflect engagement with others. Service-learning provides a teaching and learning methodology that meets these needs. Service-learning requires that students engage in meaningful community service as part of a credit-bearing module. Academic material should be integrated with reflection on service experiences to achieve development on personal, academic and civic levels (Bringle & Clayton, 2012).

This study's focal module – the Study of Occupation Practice (SOOP) – is a service-learning module for students of occupational therapy in an Irish university. SOOP was born out of a need to enhance students' understanding of people as occupational beings (Wilcock, 2006; 1999) and increase their experiences with diverse populations. Fundamental to service-learning is the concept of reciprocity where all parties (students and community) gain mutually from the interaction (Gemmell & Clayton, 2009). The SOOP module meets this requirement in that students facilitate their service-learning partners to engage in occupations identified as meaningful to them. In turn students reflect on their experiences and develop their understanding of the person from an occupational perspective.

SOOP is a mandatory module that occurs before students' practice education clinical placements in the second year of a four-year honours Occupational Therapy Bachelors' degree in Science. Students are required to engage with their service-learning partner for two hours per week across the academic year. They are partnered with an individual in an organization or service with the purpose of facilitating occupations of meaning to their partners. An example of such engagement is: A student accompanied a house-bound lady to the hairdressers weekly providing her with an opportunity for social interaction as well as grooming. The occupation of meaning may be identified prior to the commencement of service-learning or through conversation between partner and student.

Students are encouraged to integrate their learning from their SOOP experience with theory and knowledge learned in earlier or concurrent modules on occupation, activity analysis, the environment applied, and disability studies. This learning is channelled to achieve academic, personal, and civic outcomes. It is facilitated by weekly debriefing sessions, weekly guided journal entries, bi-semester lectures, and biweekly moderated peer discussion in a virtual environment.

Methodology

Study Design

The study employed an intrinsic case study design using concurrent mixed methods to examine students' experiences of their service-learning module. In keeping with the case study design, it aimed to illuminate issues by providing a rich description of the context in an effort to facilitate others in applying any lessons learned to their own settings.

Study Background – Problem and Purpose

While, across time, student assessment has indicated that students have met the learning objectives of the module and presumably progressed their learning, anecdotal evidence suggested that students found the module considerably challenging. This provided the impetus to systematically analyze their SOOP experiences. While it is likely that some generic issues are inherent in experiential learning, especially where students are off site and without supervision, a pilot study review of students' concerns in previous years, and arising repeatedly in class debriefing sessions and guided

journals, revealed those that were particular to this module. Students' concerns and challenges related to the following:

- therapeutically using self and engaging the person,
- communicating appropriately & effectively,
- managing awkward situations,
- working with occupation,
- managing the environment (physical, social, institutional),
- understanding and expressing their role and function in the SOOP setting.

Accordingly, this study set out to systematically explore students' experiences of their SOOP service-learning module with a view to proposing informed changes to the module to enhance student-engagement with this teaching and learning methodology in future years. Specifically, the student experience refers to (a) students' reflections and perceived learning in SOOP; and (b) students' expectations of the module and their concerns.

The Sample

All of the second year (41) undergraduate students on the program were required to participate in this service-learning module and all were eligible to participate in this study. Most students come to this program directly from school having achieved excellent grades leaving high school to secure their admission. They were reasonably homogeneous with four mature students (>23 years old), three males, and coming from both rural and urban areas. In terms of prior experience with service users, in year one of the program each student participated in a service-learning module across the academic year but with no requirement to facilitate meaningful occupational engagement. They also had a two-week observation practice education placement in the first year.

Educators developed relationships with community organizations or services who were typically represented by volunteer-coordinators or occupational therapists. In this study, these are referred to as *community contacts*. Service-learning opportunities were collaboratively created by educators and community contacts; and subsequently presented to students for self-selection. Students then developed their own relationships with their service-learning partners who were individual service users within these community organizations/services. In this study, the individuals with whom the students engaged are known, interchangeably, as their partners or service-learning partners. The following table describes the range of service-learning opportunities developed for this cohort of students.

Table 1*Range of Service-Learning Partnerships*

| Student places | Nature of program/service | Type of activity |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| 7 | Primary/community care | Visiting older people usually in their own homes; sometimes in nursing homes or stepped care facilities. Student may go out with partner or stay in their home. |
| 5 | Day service for children and adults with physical disabilities | Some students went to youth club and discos run by the service in the evening time. Others socialized in the centers during the day engaging in activities; occasionally going on group trips. |
| 4 | Long stay hospital with centers for adults and older adults who need some nursing care | Socializing and participating in groups and leisure activities with adults with acquired physical/neurological disabilities who live in the hospital and with older adults who live in the nursing home wing. Hospital based. |
| 4 | Large service for people of with intellectual disability; residential, day services, and preschools | Engaging in activities in the preschool or trips and leisure activities with adults and older adults in residential care. |
| 3 | Long stay hospital with centers for adults and older adults who need some nursing care | Socializing and participating in groups and leisure activities with adults with acquired physical/neurological disabilities who live in the hospital and with older adults who live in the nursing home wing. Hospital based. |
| 2 | Hospice | Spending time with older adults. Usually stayed by their bedside. |
| 2 | Day center for adults with physical disabilities | Socializing and participating in groups and leisure activities in the center. |
| 2 | Service for people who are homeless | Visiting a long stay homeless hostel. Facilitating a leisure-based group. |
| 2 | Female prison | Befriending female prisoners. Meeting with an assigned prisoner in the visiting room in the prison. |
| 2 | Day center for adults with intellectual disabilities | Engaging in advocacy training and activities with people with intellectual disabilities in a space in their service. |

| Student places | Nature of program/service | Type of activity |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| 2 | Large nursing home | Engaging in group and individual activities in the nursing home with older adults. Nursing home based. |
| 2 | Forensic mental health service | Visiting and socializing with residents of a supported living house. Students made weekly trips into community. |
| 2 | Educational support service for teenagers in disadvantaged area | Assisting with homework and study and generally 'hanging out' with teenagers in a deprived area of the city. Center based. |
| 2 | Community health service for men who are homeless and have mental health problems | Socializing with homeless men with mental health problems. Playing pool in a city pool hall. |

Study Methods

This case study employed primarily qualitative methods obtaining data from guided reflective journals and an online moderated discussion forum. To support this data, a short student survey was conducted consisting of a non-standardized pre and post module questionnaire and producing both quantitative and qualitative data. Data collection utilized embedded concurrent mixed methods in which qualitative data were given priority as most fitting with the exploratory nature of the study's aims.

The Measures

The guiding questions in the reflective journals in the first semester required students to make plans for their SOOP experiences, to describe their service-learning partner, the environment they shared and the occupational engagement they facilitated, as well as their feelings, thoughts, and learning from situations that arose.

The guiding questions on the reflective journals used in the second semester aimed to promote a deeper understanding of personal, academic, and civic learning. They encouraged students to examine themselves in relation to their strengths and weaknesses, connect their past experiences with their current experiences on the module, and think about the impact they themselves might be having on the SOOP dynamic. These questions also guided students to consider any power differentials that might exist. The reflective journals prompted reflection on the impact the occupation, the environment, and the service-learning partner had on SOOP experiences, and the relationship between occupational engagement and health.

Additional information on students' ongoing experiences on the module was gathered through the analysis of a moderated online discussion forum. Each week a theme was posted by the module coordinator to prompt discussion. Students were also free to raise and discuss any issues related to the module. They sometimes posed questions and

regularly entered discussions with each other, gave advice, and provided examples from their own SOOP experiences. The moderator also contributed to the discussions and gave encouragement but only when deemed necessary to further the discussion/debate.

The anonymous, self-administered questionnaires were designed specifically for purpose with five items on the pre-module and 11 items on the post-module questionnaire. They contained open-ended and Likert scale questions that pertained to module concerns; anticipated learning (pre-module questionnaire) and perceived learning on academic, personal, and civic levels; feedback on the module in relation to usefulness of supports; advice for upcoming students and recommendations for changes (post-module questionnaires). There was no restriction on the information permitted in the open-ended questions. For instance, some students provided several examples of what they expected to learn during the module while others did not provide any.

Data Collection

At the start of the first semester, students were invited to participate in the study. The following week the pre-module questionnaire was made available to them. The questionnaire was anonymous and, those who consented to participate, returned the questionnaire to a collection box in the department's central office. The same procedures were applied to the post-module questionnaire administration with the exception that this took place in the last week of the second semester when all students had completed their service-learning experience. Students contributed to the online discussion forum at least bimonthly. Both journal and forum data were retrieved and anonymized by the project data analyst prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data produced were participant-generated, textual, and primarily qualitative (from the guided journals and discussion forum), with a quantitative element represented by the questionnaire data.

Data-sets from the journals and forum were analyzed using a computer aided data analysis package (QSR-NVivo). Using Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis, the data were coded completely by systematically working through each item in the data-set looking for chunks of data that addressed the research aims. These data-derived codes were collated and clustered under four major themes, following peer review and discussion (between analyst and authors) about the patterns, comparisons and contrasts within the coded data. Analysis, at the thematic level, was conducted using an occupation-focused lens such as that espoused by Wilcock (1999; 2006) in order to identify meanings within the data.

The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the frequencies of responses.

Rigor

In keeping with recommendations for establishing trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry, the following measures were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By way of optimizing the credibility of the study, students were encouraged to be honest with their reflections in their journals and online forum. To enhance this, students were made aware that neither method contributed to their module grade; the forum was moderated by an impartial individual external to the department who had no other contact with students; all qualitative data were anonymized prior to analysis.

Data were collected across time to ensure their credibility in representing students' ongoing, pervasive experiences rather than anomalies or reactions to irregular events. Additionally, no data-set were reviewed until several months after the end of the academic year to provide a cooling off period. To improve the dependability and confirmability of the study, data were analyzed by a researcher who was independent of the module and blind to the purpose of the study. Negative cases that contradicted the majority findings were examined and reported.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, qualitative coding was peer-reviewed by the authors, who were knowledgeable in service-learning. Codes were clustered and themes were mapped out following discussion. To safeguard against bias, however, the authors did not alter the original interpretation by the analyst and allocation of the raw data into codes.

Gathering both qualitative and quantitative data triangulated findings, enhancing the credibility and confirmability of the study. Pre and post-module questionnaires were anonymous. While the questionnaires were not standardized, thus reducing their reliability and validity, they were devised based on pilot study information, contributing to their relevance and credibility as being fit for purpose.

A requirement of the case study design, to provide thick description of the study context, sample, methods and procedures also enhanced the study's transferability. The study was granted ethical approval from the Faculty of Health Sciences in the focal university. All students in the study consented to participate.

Results

Thirty-seven students completed and returned the pre-module questionnaire, making a 90% response rate. Of this, 34 respondents were female and three were male. The response rate for the post questionnaire was 76% ($n = 31$), and only one respondent was male.

The results section of this paper is presented in two parts. Part 1 describes findings from the qualitative analysis of students' reflective journals and online forum entries. These results provide a rich overview of students' experiences on SOOP, meeting the principle aim of the study. Part 2 presents results garnered from the pre and post questionnaires reporting students' experiences in terms of their expected and acquired learning, their concerns, and their evaluation of the module.

Part 1: Students' Experiences on SOOP as Described Through Analysis of Their Reflective Journals and Online Forums

Student learning and development was examined on three dimensions – personal, civic, and academic. Through analysis of guided journals and forum entries four inter-related themes were identified. Several themes related to two or more of these dimensions which reflected the holistic nature of experiential and engaged learning. Themes were as follows:

- Theme 1: Understanding and using occupation
- Theme 2: Developing skills
- Theme 3: Showing a consciousness of power differentials
- Theme 4: Understanding their individual contribution

Theme 1: Understanding and Using Occupation

On an academic level, students developed a fresh understanding of occupation. Students identified the centrality of occupational engagement to their partners' lives, both in the present – "they thirst for activity" – and across the life span, by noting how older adults' moods improved when they had the occasion to describe the occupations they once engaged in, but could no longer.

Students not only developed a richer theoretical understanding of occupation but also a practical one through using occupation to facilitate engagement and build rapport. When their role was primarily to chat, several students prepared topics of conversation and used props such as old photos. They adapted the activity and ensured their partner experienced success, for example, adapting a baking activity by adding tick-boxes to the list of ingredients to accommodate memory difficulties. Students also noted how occupation needed to be meaningful in order to be motivating and worked hard to understand partners' interests.

While some students demonstrated skill in adapting activities, taking initiative and listening, several were also challenged, on a personal level, to generate ideas to engage their partner socially and occupationally. For example, one student commented, "as she only wants to chat the time passes very slowly and at times I struggle to find things to chat about." Ensuring that an occupation was of meaning to partners added additional pressure and a layer of complexity, especially with a partner who had communication difficulties. This represented an academic pressure that came from trying to meet the learning objective of the module. Sometimes students felt constrained by the nature of the organization to which they were attached. One student who attended an education-focused youth group commented:

"When I'm with her we normally do maths, however, she hates maths... Therefore it can't be an occupation of meaning to her. Although she does want to improve...whether this motivation is enough to consider it a meaningful occupation I'm not sure."

Theme 2: Developing Skills

Across the semesters, students developed on a personal level, demonstrating resourcefulness, problem solving, and independent-thinking and were able to identify their limitations and the skills they were yet required to develop. Following weeks of struggle to engage with their non-verbal partners, students expressed their delight in witnessing their partners' responses to their initiative.

"This week we decided to bring in music from the time when they were younger... One of the ladies responded really well to it and... she started dancing and then she grabbed our hands and started dancing with us... It felt great to see her enjoy it and calm down as she can seem agitated at times."

Students commented they were becoming more confident in interacting with and advocating for partners. One student described a situation that arose during an activity group:

"two of the clients, who are in a relationship with each other, started talking about quite personal things. I felt awkward and noticed that the other girl in the group was uncomfortable too. Before I would have just ignored it but this week I said 'we don't need to hear about that.' They apologized and we went back to the activity. I think because it wasn't just me I felt more compelled to do something in the situation."

On a personal development level, students' ability to cope with their partners' emotional states (depression and sadness) improved immensely across the academic year. Students commented on responding to partners' moods and flexibly changing plans to accommodate capacity at a given time. Students restructured the flow and process of occupational engagement to accommodate the person(s) and environmental restrictions. For instance, one student who facilitated a billiards group with men from a homeless mental health service explained that while she was playing a game with one man another came over and asked her to play with him. She stated that "I didn't want to leave the first man mid-game so I suggested the new man play the winner and we continued like that as more people joined in. I think I handled it well."

Relating to others and building interpersonal relationships was a key factor in students' SOOP experiences with their partners. Listening emerged as a having importance on two levels. It represented, in many cases, students' contribution to the focal occupation – it was students' role and what they did to facilitate engagement in conversation-heavy occupations such as reminiscence and social chitchat. Additionally, listening was seen as fundamental to understanding another's wishes and preferences.

Theme 3: Showing a Consciousness of Power Differentials

Students showed an awareness of the interpersonal dynamics that exist on a micro to macro level, its influence on occupational engagement and on the culture and atmosphere of an organization. One student commented, "...the administrator [boss] of the service stopped by which put the staff and service users on edge I noticed." In another service the administrator's presence also caused "a bit of a stir." This student

reflected that the administrator “was trying to tell some of the clients what to do rather than understanding their wants and needs.” She was aware that her role and relationship with her partner was at odds to this and described the administrator’s interactions further:

“She questioned why one girl sat alone and told her to sit with her friends. The girl’s reply was that the people at the other table weren’t really her friends and that she liked being alone, which I have come to learn since spending time with her. The administrator, in front of the girl, asked if there was any OT intervention for this. I was surprised by the situation.”

The basis of the student-partner relationship in SOOP was acceptance. Most of students were eager to engage with their partner – understand their occupational desires – and a non-judgmental approach supported this. When prompted to consider the power differentials within their partnership they reflected on their roles and one-to-one interactions. Regularly students referred to empowering partners to take ownership of and make controlling decisions about occupations particularly in occupational contexts that were designed by students. For instance, one student explained:

“I was the one to suggest going outside...she was the one with the final say that we should go to the flower garden...and when we should go back to the building, although I gave her a gentle reminder now and then.”

This was often how they collaborated with their partners. However, another student described a less than collaborative partnership explaining, “I am seen as semi-staff so I do have the power to send someone to the couch (service users sit on the couch as punishment for unsatisfactory behaviour).” The service users in this instance were people with intellectual disabilities and of a similar age to the student. Despite being linked to social or community-based health services, some students held a medical model view of partners and services and spoke in a non-collaborative language about ‘control’, ‘medical conditions,’ and ‘uncooperative clients.’ This language tended to wane by the end of second semester which may be a function of their exposure, classroom learning, or the journal and forum required reflections.

Theme 4: Understanding Their Individual Contribution

Recognition of the importance of contributing to their partners’ well-being spoke to students’ sense of civic engagement. Illustrating one student’s interest in communicating with her partner and joy at being valued she stated:

“I got talking to a very interesting lady who was unable to talk. However, through the use of a pen and paper, and also a picture chart, I was able to figure out that she was very fond of art! She seemed very enthusiastic to communicate with me. Kept writing the word ‘happy’, as if she was happy to be with me!”

It was important to students to feel that they were connecting with their partner and also making a difference. One student taught her partner to tie her shoelaces. "We then went bowling... and she asked for strapped shoes so she wouldn't have to tie the shoelaces. I was really disappointed."

Eliciting feedback from partners was not always straightforward. Where partners were not able to verbally communicate their feelings about the occupation and partnership, students looked for indicators that portrayed their interest such as a partner's regular and punctual attendance, body language and comments from other staff, if present. On completion of their weekly activity, one student explained how her partner "proclaims 'well done us!' and is smiling and looking proud so I am going to take this as an indication that we did achieve positive engagement in her desired occupation." To this end they valued the banal and the everyday.

Though their contribution was small in gesture and related to everyday life, students recognized that it could hold some significance for their partner. "Without me providing the time she would have to be fed...I simply had to sit beside her and help cut up things for her and just be patient." Many students noted that time was their greatest contribution to the relationship. Where services were rushed and staff unavailable, students had time. They had time to listen, to offer new experiences and to support independent activity.

Their presence was a diversion and marked a change in the social environment – "seeing a new face each Monday, even for a short while, gives them [service-learning partners] a new energy." Some concluded that, though they did not engage in any activity other than talking, they offered companionship. This was valued by their partner. One student commented that being available to spend time with her partner contributed to the well-being of her partner's family noting the its impact "trickled down through society, i.e. the nights I visit, the individual's daughter can take a break which means she can spend time with her children."

Part 2: Students' Learning Experiences and Concerns as Described in the Pre and Post-Module Questionnaires

Expected and Gained Learning

At the start of the module students' expected learning in relation to attitudes, skills, and knowledge was examined. Developing communication skills and an appreciation of other people's situations (attitude) were more frequently mentioned than gaining academic knowledge (see Table 2).

Table 2

Learning Expectations for Attitude, Skills and Knowledge Described on Pre-Questionnaires

| Attitudes (n) | Skills (n) | Knowledge (n) |
|---|---|---|
| Appreciate other people and their situations that differ to their own (9) | Develop communication & interpersonal skills (9) | Understand disability (5) |
| Gain new perspectives (7) | Manage difficult situations (2) | Understand how to adapt occupation/activities (3) |
| | Learn how to work with people with disabilities (1) | Impact on occupation (1) |
| | | Insight into supports (1) |

In keeping with their learning expectations prior to the start of the module, students perceived that they developed communication skills, an understanding of others' circumstances, an acceptance of difference and had learned a lot about disability. Students also believed their knowledge of occupation and its meaning had increased. Much of the social justice related civic learning noted by the end of the module, such as inequalities of service-learning partners' everyday experiences, had not been anticipated by students at the start of the module; neither had they expected to develop a better understanding of the application of occupation-centered theory to practice (see Table 3).

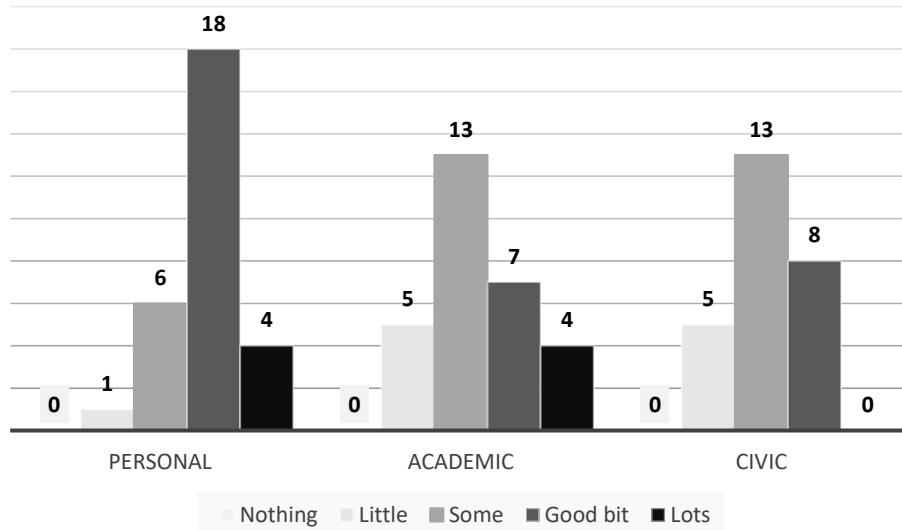
Table 3

Personal, Academic and Civic Learning Gains for Attitudes, Skills and Knowledge Described on the Post Questionnaire

| | Attitudes (n) | Skills (n) | Knowledge (n) |
|-----------------|---|---|---------------|
| Personal | Being patient, caring and understanding (11) Accepting people's differences (5) New perspective (3) Appreciating little things in own life (1) | Communication & interpersonal skills (11) Being prepared (2) Power of humor (1) | |

| | Attitudes (n) | Skills (n) | Knowledge (n) |
|-----------------|---|--|--|
| Academic | | <p>How to work with people with disabilities or who are different to me (4)</p> <p>How to apply theory to practice (4)</p> | <p>Know more about different conditions and disabilities & their impact (16)</p> <p>Meaning of occupation, occupational beings, barriers and enablers to occupational engagement (5)</p> |
| Civic | <p>Value of volunteering (3)</p> <p>How service-learning partners can view things differently (2)</p> <p>Personal value to community by using occupation (1)</p> <p>Positive attitudes of others towards service-learning partner (1)</p> | <p>How to make collaboration work (1)</p> | <p>Role (3), integration (1), rights (1) of service-learning partners</p> <p>Inequalities (3) experienced by service-learning partners</p> <p>Community resources & their importance (3)</p> |

Students rated their learning on three dimensions – personal, academic and civic – considered fundamental to the service-learning, learning experience (Bringle & Clayton, 2012). This showed they perceived most gains on a personal level. Figure 1 outlines students' perceived learning and development measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 'nothing' (rated zero) through to 'lots' (rated four). Referring to the high end of the rating scale, 22 students gained 'a good bit' or 'lots' with regards to personal development on SOOP; whereas just 11 students considered their academic learning, which included their engagement with the concept of occupation, to have developed to this degree. No student perceived their civic learning to have improved 'lots' while engaged in SOOP.

Figure 1*Students' Perceived Learning/Development*

Students reported positive interpersonal relationships with their service-learning partners, working together on the activity or occupation, but over a quarter ($n=10$) felt their interactions were not collaborative. See Table 4 for students' thoughts on collaboration.

Table 4*Students' Comments in Relation to Collaboration*

| Positive about collaboration (n) | Difficulties in collaborating due to (n): |
|---|--|
| Worked together on goals, tasks, occupations (10) | Nature of organization and being with groups of people (3) |
| Got on well together (5) | Activities already established – no negotiation required (2) |
| Partner always chose what to do (2) | Changing meeting times (1) |
| Prepared to be flexible and changed circumstances to enhance engagement (2) | |
| Improved over time (1) | |

Concerns at the Start of SOOP

Almost two thirds of students ($n=24$) stated they had no concerns. Of the 12 students with concerns, five were worried about their own performance and confidence in dealing with different or pressurized situations. A further four students were concerned that they may not like or develop a relationship with their partner. Just two students' focus of concern was for their partner – that they would be of little use to their partner or their engagement be perceived as intrusive.

Evaluation of the Experience

To enhance understanding of students' affective experiences with SOOP they were asked to describe the best and worst aspects of the module (see Table 5). Having direct contact with people was perceived most positively and having to contribute to the online discussion forums was, overwhelmingly, the most negative. The forum was perceived as: complicated to use, time consuming and an additional stressor in terms of thinking of something to contribute.

Table 5

Best and Worst Aspects of the Module

| Best bits (n) | Worst bits (n) |
|--|--|
| Meeting and accepting different and new people (13) | Contributing to online discussion forum (22) |
| Being with and building new relationships with the person (9) | Encountering difficulties in working with the person or setting (3) e.g. being embarrassed by person |
| Using occupation, activities and occupational therapy skills to work with people (5) | Traveling to setting (2) |
| Making a difference in someone's life (3) | Saying goodbye (2) |
| Having the opportunity to share experiences in class (2) | |
| It was practical and fun (2) | |
| Learning about impact of environment (1) | |

Discussion of Lessons Learned

This case study systematically examined the student experience of service-learning in their second year SOOP module with a view to informing pedagogical reforms. It was both process and product focused, in that the process was explored through examination of students' perceptions of the module as a way of learning (concerns, positives, and negatives of the experience); while the outcomes (product) of this experience were reviewed in terms of students' perceived learning.

Students were proud of their individual contributions and grew to recognize that, by providing their time and enthusiasm, there were many mutual benefits, including social and emotional advantages for their partner. Students' initial aspirations that their college-learned skills and knowledge may be employed beneficially, were replaced with a realization that their commitment and time were equally as important. Similarly, there was a shift in the focus of their concerns. Where students' concerns were initially related to their own performance, with little concern expressed for the experience of their service-learning partners, as the year progressed, their concerns became more orientated around their partners' well-being and continued occupational engagement. This emergent partner-centric focus demonstrated a clear strength of experiential

learning as a learning process taking place across time. It is also an example of Wilcock's (1999) understanding of occupation as a process of 'doing-being-becoming' – while engaged in the doing of service-learning across time, students' focus shifted from the self to become more partner-centric. This finding fit well with the occupational focus that underpinned the learning goals of the module.

Students in this study engaged in a variety of different service-learning experiences with a range of occupational engagement opportunities. Despite this diverse exposure and experience there was a common appreciation and recognition of the reality of occupation in individuals' lives and their need, or desire, to be occupied. Students reported that they understood occupation in a new way after their experience. This is an important finding as it relates to the aims of the SOOP module and affirms that this learning took place. It also attests to the mutual commitment of community contacts, service-learning partners, and students and their engagement with the learning process (Hansen et al., 2007). Appreciating the value of occupational engagement is a differentiating element to this service-learning experience. The importance of this to becoming a competent occupational therapist is also reflected on by Bazyk et al. (2010).

Students recognized how spending time with service-learning partners challenged and improved their verbal interaction and listening skills. Yu Brown and Thyer (2019) highlighted the importance of incorporating such skill development into the curriculum having found that interpersonal skills were predictive of success on several practice education (clinical placement) competencies. In light of this, as a preparation for practice education and as an essential element of the therapeutic use-of-self, this was viewed as a very positive outcome of service-learning.

Opportunities for the development of interpersonal skills were particularly identified in challenging situations that required students to rely on their own skills to resolve. Kennedy (2018) found that by experiencing, and ultimately managing, situations of discomfort, students discovered that they coped, which in turn gave them confidence in other situations. Given this, it is suggested that over-structuring service-learning settings may be prohibitive to providing this type of learning. Eyler and Giles (1999) referred to the 'just right' challenge as an important component of service-learning. Allowing students space to figure out interaction and encounter opportunities to operate in slightly unconformable or unplanned scenarios can be very valuable and may be a facet of this 'just right' challenge.

There was a recognition that sometimes, despite students holding positive attitudes towards empowerment and equality, this was not modelled by service providers. Students had to work hard at being considered equals and not being perceived as staff by services and individuals. According to Velde et al. (2011) collaboration is essential for successful service-learning partnerships. While many students reported they did develop collaborative relationships with partners, others felt they lacked the opportunity to do so. Barriers to this were identified as extrinsic, such as unsympathetic staff-attitudes and over-structuring of service provision. Ongoing dialogue between educators and community contacts (Hansen et al., 2007) and shared goals (Suarez-Balcazar et

al., 2006) is essential in developing collaborative relationships. From students' reflections it was clear that in some partnerships further dialogue was needed between educators and community contacts to communicate service-learning purpose and establish shared goals. In so doing, student-partner collaboration and the development of reciprocal relationships might also be better supported.

While civic engagement and an enhanced understanding of civic and social responsibility is typically an explicit goal (Panici & Lasky, 2002) and an often-reported outcome of service-learning (McMenamin et al., 2010), McMenamin et al. (2010) commented that other outcomes may be just as important for their healthcare students. Indeed, when asked explicitly, students in this module reported more personal development than academic or civic gains. That said, although students may not have overtly recognized the development of their civic responsibility, a strong theme in their journal reflections referred to their need to contribute and make a difference to their service-learning partner. This showed a desire to be of use to others in society and indicated an awareness of their social responsibility framed in other language. Students of occupational therapy may have an already established sense of civic and social responsibility given their chosen course of study, however, it is our belief that their service-learning experiences will have reinforced this. Their reflections indicated they not only had an understanding of their social responsibility but that, as Gitlow and Flecky (2005) found, service-learning was calling them to respond through action.

The online forum was designed as a way of increasing reflective opportunities and enabling group discussion and problem solving. Despite an expectation that students would embrace the technological element of their module, given their generation's general engagement with technology, this was found not to be the case. Student-feedback indicated that firstly, students felt pressure to think of something to add to the forum. Secondly, it was repetitive given that they were already engaged in weekly journal keeping, and thirdly, they typically needed access to a college computer or networked laptop in order to contribute, which was an extra inconvenience. Understanding the barriers to utilizing the forum are useful for future endeavours to encourage online group reflection and discussion. As much of the challenge of service-learning relates to the complex organization and implementation of experiences between faculty, student, and community, technology and virtual environments potentially may make a positive contribution to operationalizing and streamlining communication and learning. It is a recommendation from this research that virtual learning and group reflection environments continue to be explored as a method of consolidating communication and learning for SOOP service-learning experiences.

Limitations

This study relied on students' self-report of their experiences through the use of non-standardized questionnaires, guided reflective journals, and online forum discussions. While each of these measures were anonymous and none contributed to their module grades, it is possible that students' answers aimed to please the module coordinator and did not reflect the reality of their experiences.

Journal prompts orientated students to consider certain topics that were directly linked to the learning goals of the module. In this respect students' reflections were channeled. Consequently, the fact that certain topics arose in the analysis of the qualitative data were predictable but students' accounts of and individual experiences in relation to these topics informed the thematic analysis rather than the actual occurrence of topics.

Both in-depth interviews and focus groups were considered as useful means to further explore students' experiences. However, in this case they were deemed not appropriate given the power differential between students and facilitators who were also the module coordinators.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

In conclusion, using a case study design to explore students' experiences identified some key areas for consideration in order to ensure the best learning and development outcomes for the SOOP service-learning module.

It was reassuring to establish that an increased understanding of the importance and application of occupation in people's lives were garnered by students through encounters with individuals on this module. This demonstrated the utility of service-learning to meet the learning objectives of a module that placed strong emphasis on occupational engagement. However, also a core feature of this module is the importance of shifting the perceptions of students from charity givers to being agents of social change. Identifying methods which both complement the module's emphasis on 'occupational engagement' and facilitate this shift towards understanding themselves as agents of social change for all students is imperative. Hansen et al. (2007) emphasized that "Effective faculty mentors facilitate student growth by providing the right level of challenge in an authentic and appropriate context, emotional support, and guided reflection exercises that help students process their experience" (p.33). To facilitate this consistently, in cooperation with varying settings and at the level of the individual student, remains a key challenge in the delivery of the SOOP service-learning module.

An emphasis on collaboration between student and service provider/community contact needs to be engendered. For students it is an important outcome to feel that they contributed. Collaboration is also an important basic skill for future work as a therapist. The differing service-learning opportunities and structures meant that some experienced this less than others. There is an onus on the educators to ensure collaboration is supported by assisting them to negotiate issues at an organizational level while also making sure experiences are not over structured. The potential for virtual environments/online forums to act as a centralized way to communicate and collaborate between all stakeholders in service-learning is great. It is recommended that future educational research in this area would investigate how virtual environments might facilitate collaboration and communication between stakeholders. To enhance further exploration of the process and outcomes of SOOP, or similar service-learning modules, the inclusion of community contacts' and service-learning partners' perceptions and experiences of the module would advisedly also be explored.

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