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Abstract

Reflective practice is considered a highly valued graduate attribute in the field of occupational therapy. Occupational therapy educators influence and shape how students develop into reflective practitioners. Reflective practice requires a set of complex thinking skills that are typically focused on personal experiences and can be broken down into pre-requisite skills that aid in the teaching and learning process. This article introduces a six component Permissions model used with graduate level students during their first semester that combines experiential learning and pre-requisite skills of reflective practice. The model includes three broad domains: self-awareness, observation, and effective communication and six pre-requisite skills including: a) permission to slow down when necessary; b) permission for tolerating ambiguity; c) permission to notice, think, and ponder; d) permission to speak up; e) permission to listen with careful consideration of other's thinking; and f) permission to respectfully build or challenge the ideas of others based on visual evidence. Using experiential learning methodologies of Lego Serious Play and Visual Thinking Strategies, faculty actively and explicitly teach the Permission model skills while simultaneously helping students to see the relevancy and transferability of the pre-skills to more advanced professional skills.

Keywords

Reflective practice, object-based learning, permissions model, Lego Serious Play, Visual Thinking Strategies

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Permission to Learn: Intentional Use of Art and Object-mediated Strategies to Develop Reflective Professional Skills

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ABSTRACT

Reflective practice is considered a highly valued graduate attribute in the field of occupational therapy. Occupational therapy educators influence and shape how students develop into reflective practitioners. Reflective practice requires a set of complex thinking skills that are typically focused on personal experiences and can be broken down into pre-requisite skills that aid in the teaching and learning process. This article introduces a six component Permissions model used with graduate level students during their first semester that combines experiential learning and pre-requisite skills of reflective practice. The model includes three broad domains: self-awareness, observation, and effective communication and six pre-requisite skills including: a) permission to slow down when necessary; b) permission for tolerating ambiguity; c) permission to notice, think, and ponder; d) permission to speak up; e) permission to listen with careful consideration of other's thinking; and f) permission to respectfully build or challenge the ideas of others based on visual evidence. Using experiential learning methodologies of Lego Serious Play and Visual Thinking Strategies, faculty actively and explicitly teach the Permission model skills while simultaneously helping students to see the relevancy and transferability of the pre-skills to more advanced professional skills.

Reflective practice is a valued attribute of occupational therapy education. Faculty are charged with helping students to consciously think about past or present experiences, beliefs, or knowledge with the intention to inform future practice. In order for students to become reflective practitioners they must develop a high level of introspection and self-analysis, a capacity for abstract thinking, and agency that few students in higher education innately possess (Coulson & Homewood, 2016).

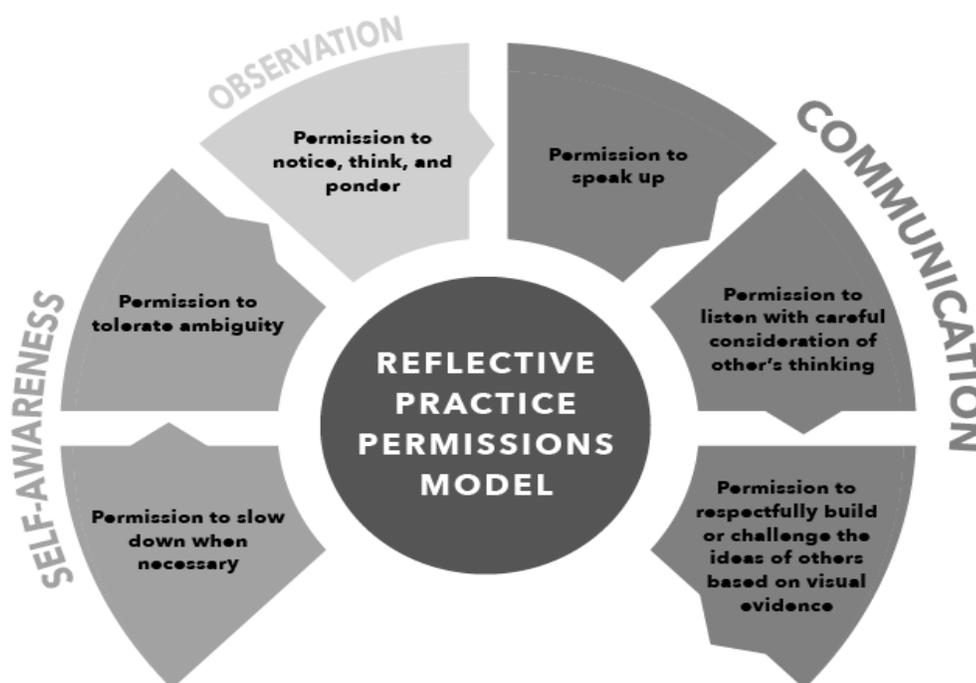
As faculty look in the reflective practice literature, they discover many approaches, but no generally agreed upon definition (Coulson & Homewood, 2016). This can lead to a lack of clarity on what and how to teach students reflective practice skills especially if the students are not yet in the field and have limited, if any practice experience (Coulson & Homewood, 2016; James & Brookfield, 2014; Kinsella, 2001; Ruch, 2007).

For purposes of this article, we adapted a working definition put forth by Karnieli-Miller (2020) that considers reflective practice as: deepening of ones' understanding of self, others, and situations that involves skills across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and evaluative components. Further, we assert that breaking down the components of reflective practice into pre-requisite skills allows for a scaffolding approach to teaching that developmentally supports students.

In this article, we share how faculty in a cohort-based accredited occupational therapy graduate program at a Northeastern University considered the complementary nature of experiential learning and reflective practice by introducing a 'permissions model.' By naming these permissions as pre-requisites skills to reflective practice, faculty bring the implicit nature of reflection out into the visual sphere. In doing so, faculty provide a structure for discussion and the scaffolding of teaching activities that support the movement towards advanced reflective skills (Jarvis & Baloyi, 2020; Jumaat & Tasir, 2014). Woven into the model is a constant connection with students to see the relevancy and transferability of the pre-skills to more advanced professional skills used in the occupational therapy practice field.

The permission-based model was inspired by the work of Dann (2018) and creates a foundational base of knowledge and skills in a holistic and inclusive way. The model covers three broad domains: self-awareness, observation, and communication, and six permission pre-skills that correspond to the three domains. The six permissions are: a) permission to slow down when necessary; b) permission for tolerating ambiguity; c) permission to notice, think, and ponder; d) permission to speak up; e) permission to listen with careful consideration of other's thinking; and f) permission to respectfully build or challenge the ideas of others based on visual evidence. See Figure 1.

The literature on reflective practice andragogical practices identifies that when faculty offer reflective practice assignments most use traditional reflection techniques such as journaling, classroom discussions, portfolios, or writing assignments (Crème, 2008; Hiemstra, 2001). Less common, but certainly emerging across the literature, are experiential learning techniques or methodologies that include visual, kinesthetic, or arts-based reflection techniques (Gauntlett, 2007; James & Brookfield, 2014; James & Nerantzi, 2019).

Figure 1*Permissions Model*

Our six-component permissions model is taught by using two experiential visual methodologies: an adaption of Lego Serious Play (LSP; Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014) and Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS; Housen, 1999, 2002; Yenawine, 1997). Briefly, LSP uses specialized Lego bricks as the vehicle for group communication by asking participants to build three-dimensional Lego models that represent metaphoric or symbolic stories. Visual Thinking Strategies uses the viewing of art images with a group to focus on observational skills, attention to details, and communication. Both methods require slowing down, pondering, thinking, listening, speaking, respectfully communicating to others, backing up interactional communication challenges with visual evidence and an openness to self-awareness. These two methodologies align with the permission model components by bringing objects into the classroom learning environment. In doing so, faculty use objects as communication catalysts and to disseminate disciplinary knowledge, observational, practical, and other transferable skills (Chatterjee et al., 2015).

We begin by first explaining our theoretical conceptualizations of experiential learning, object-based learning and object-mediated communication. Next, we describe our 'permissions' model in more detail. Then we describe the methodologies of LSP and VTS, followed by applied case examples. Finally, implications for teaching will be offered.

Theoretical Concepts

While many models or frameworks of reflective practice exist in the literature (Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 2015; James & Brookfield, 2014; Schön, 1983) we were drawn to the work of Schön (1983) who is best known for his writing about the reflective practitioner and how to engage in reflective practice. He developed the notions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as he considered the ways that practitioners could improve their learning and work through understanding their response to daily situations (p. 55). He argued that professionals use reflection to deal with the uncertainty that pervades the work, shape their thinking and to learn from experience (Schön, 1983). Schön (1983) contended:

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation (p. 68).

The ability to recognize the discrete elements of reflection are critical to professional growth. Schön (1987) contended that professional education must allow for:

...the freedom to learn by doing in a setting relatively low in risk, with access to [teachers as] coaches who initiate students into the 'traditions of the calling' and help them, by 'the right kind of telling,' to see on their own behalf and in their own way what they need most to see (p. 17).

Given reflective practice skills are complex constructs, entry level students would not be expected to have either the experience or knowledge acquisition necessary to engage in reflective practice at a deeper level (Coulson & Homewood, 2016; Stoltenberg & McNeil, 1997). Developmentally, it is the responsibility of occupational therapy educators to intentionally scaffold student learning while simultaneously helping students to see the relevancy or transferability of pre-requisite skills to more advanced clinical skills. Schön (1987) described this teaching predicament thusly:

The paradox of learning a really new competence is this: that a student cannot at first understand what he needs to learn, can learn it only by educating himself, and can educate himself only by beginning to do what he does not yet understand (p. 93).

Experiential Learning

There is extant evidence that experiential learning is considered a common andragogical practice in occupational therapy education (Bannigan & Moores, 2009; Bethea et al., 2014; Law, 2010; Schaber, 2014). Field work, simulations, and on-campus clinics where students provide community services under the supervision of a

faculty member are common experiential learning pedagogies (Erikson, 2018). Active reflection following these experiences has been shown to be predictive of successfully transferring skills to clinical practice (Coker et al., 2017; Iliff et al., 2019; Zigmont et al., 2011). In fact, Kolb and Kolb (2005) stated while the experiential activity itself is often considered as the primary catalyst for learning, the actual learning takes place during reflective practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Zigmont et al., 2011).

Our permissions model was also influenced by Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle model that included a focus on feelings as part of the learning cycle. Gibbs cyclic model was developed from an educational perspective, and while it can be applied to reflection on any type of experience, it is particularly useful to assist students to learn from everyday situations. Gibbs' (1988) traditional reflective cycle encourages students to think systematically about their experiences by posing key questions to guide the students' thinking. Students are asked to describe the event; to ponder on how they were feeling or what they were thinking about the event; to evaluate the event in terms of positives and challenges; to make sense of the event, and to consider how they might act differently if the situation arose in the future (Gibbs, 1998). Gibbs' reflective model provides an integrative perspective that includes experiences, cognition, emotions, perception, and behavioral action.

Object-based Learning and Communication

When experiential learning involves objects, it is referred to as object-based learning. Object-based learning involves active engagement with materials either visually or kinesthetically as the vehicle for communication (Chatterjee et al., 2015). A core facet of object-based learning is its multisensory nature where students construct new knowledge from their past experiences and draw upon their experiences when exploring objects either visually, manually or in some combination.

When the objects are further combined with narrative storytelling, the methodology becomes object-mediated communication. Object-mediated communication transforms thinking and language from the objects to metaphorically represent ideas, thoughts, and emotions (Roos & Said, 2006). Object mediated communication uses artifacts that serve as metaphors for dialogue that often quickly and candidly reach a deeper level of meaning and shared understanding, often generating new types of conversations, new perspectives and mind shifts (Palus & Drath, 2001).

Images, artwork, drawings, collages, museum collections, sandtray, or Lego bricks are common materials that provide multisensory and communication properties (James & Nerantzi, 2019). Object-mediated communication as a powerful andragogic tool engages and enriches learning and energizes teaching (Hardie, 2014). Both andragogical strategies used in our case examples used objects as the way to structure and communicate key skills needed for effective occupational therapy practice.

The Permissions Model of Reflective Practice

It is important to note while the six permissions are broken down into separate components for ease in teaching the students, they do not actually occur in a sequential order. The permission pre-skills often occur simultaneously making it an integrative model. For example: listening with careful consideration of other's thinking requires slowing down when necessary. Creating time and space for noticing, thinking, and pondering more deeply, may build a tolerance for ambiguity and a sense of safety to speak up within the group. To respectfully challenge the thinking of others backed by visual evidence, requires an openness to self-awareness and collegiality. When these permissions are carefully introduced, reinforced, and referred to throughout the curriculum, the potential to impact and contribute to student reflective practice competency is greatly enhanced.

Self-Awareness Domain

Permission to Slow Down When Necessary

One must slow down to be an effective reflective practitioner. Slowing down when necessary allows students time to consider their personal values, beliefs, and possible biases. By allowing this intentional slowing and time for reflection, students may gain deeper insight into their experiences, because simply having experiences will not necessarily bring new learning. Protecting time to slow down is not self-indulgent, but crucial to intellectual work necessary in graduate school. Without the active modeling of when and how to slow down the thinking process, students may instead complete tasks and thoughts in rapid succession, potentially missing important details that facilitate deeper and more critically advanced thoughts and questions.

This phenomenon of 'slowing down when you should or when necessary' has been explored in a variety of healthcare professions (Groenier et al., 2021; Moulton et al., 2010). While seasoned occupational therapists learn to switch between automatic or routine tasks and slower, more effortful complex thinking necessary for clinical reasoning, the beginning therapist needs permission to recognize when the phenomenon of 'slowing down' may be needed.

Slowing down when necessary takes intentionality, as there are both individual and environmental barriers that make slowing down difficult. Students with individual personality traits that thrive on rapid and fast-paced action may find the 'slowing down when necessary' approach personally challenging. Likewise, fieldwork environments with expectations for continual productivity and large client caseloads can make the 'slowing down when necessary' approach seem nearly impossible. While the need for quick and expedient responses in the practice realm can be expected, effective reflective practice necessitates allowing time for the intentional and structured process of reflection.

Permission to Tolerate Ambiguity

Given the complexity of client care, when the student asks a question, the faculty response may be “it depends”. Faculty recognize that this response can be frustrating for the student, as many beginning graduate students are highly motivated to learn, however they often deal with performance anxiety and evaluation apprehension, preferring direct instruction over experiences that teach them how to become comfortable with ambiguity (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 1997). The uncertainty of new content, plus a desire to seek a concrete or “right” way to accomplish tasks, may create a fear of engagement or impede full participation both mentally and physically.

Armed with this developmental knowledge, faculty introduce the permission for the tolerance of ambiguity concept early, as increasing or acceptance of this tolerance can be deliberately developed (Boss, 2006). By normalizing ambiguity as part of the complex process of client-centered care, students begin to reflect on their own discomfort and can begin to self-regulate this emotional distress to allow for deeper reflection of practice. As such, a self-aware professional begins to emerge.

The students’ high valuing of their academic identities and their performance-orientations may contribute to uneasiness when presented with ambiguous situations, however faculty can take the opportunity to deepen a student’s capacity for empathy by helping them recognize parallels between the student experience with ambiguity and the situations their future clients face with ambiguity related to health and change. Additionally, the permission to tolerate ambiguity is especially beneficial in the group forming stage of the cohort, influencing social connectedness, group cohesion, and a sense of universality or we are “in this together” phenomena (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). Students learning together in a cohort model can experience the reciprocal benefit of shared ambiguous experiences in both helping others and receiving help from others (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020).

Observation Domain

Permission for Students to Notice, Think, and Ponder

The permission to notice, think, and ponder requires students to once again slow down and extends into observation skills. The term ‘ponder’ is a synonym for contemplation and requires both focused engagement and a willingness to look for blind spots or omissions in thinking. This specific permission reminds students that reflection is more than a cognitive process, it is an embodied process, perceived through all our senses (Robinson, 2011). When students notice how they feel, the impact of the feelings, and the role they played in a situation, they are once more engaging in self-awareness. Turning the step of noticing inward, students may discover their initial readings of a situation may have shifted shape, perspective, or intensity (James & Brookfield, 2014).

Furthermore, the skills of noticing, thinking, and pondering are pre-requisites for observational skills that play a key role in improving patient/client outcomes. Yet possessing these basic observational skills is often assumed in many health care disciplines, rather than taught (Jasani & Saks, 2013). Explicitly exposing students to a

carefully sequenced series of activities aimed at strengthening observational skills helps to expand the student's visual fields to more carefully observe future patients, develop situational awareness, detail their observations, and clearly communicate the information to others (Torres et al., 2017). Conversely, it provides faculty with opportunities to help students notice, think, and ponder on the habitual or typical ways they may judge something to be true at first glance. This permission allows for both self and other-awareness and brings attention and focus to the concept of remaining open to new possibilities and perspectives.

Communication Domain

Permission for Students to Speak Up

Equally important to observational skills is the ability to accurately and effectively communicate observations to others. Building further upon previous permissions, a student must feel safe in the learning space to speak up, to share thoughts, to be vulnerable. A supportive communication climate involves creating an atmosphere that permits the sender the opportunity to develop a sense of safety, freedom, and the comfortability to share. If students feel judged when they ask questions or make comments, they may eventually quit speaking up.

The literature is abundant with techniques for creating psychologically safe learning environments (Edmondson et al., 2016; Grailey et al., 2021; Wheeler et al., 2020). Giving permission to speak up honors and validates the thinking and communication processes of students, even when they may be uncertain or grappling with ambiguous concepts. By speaking up and engaging in class discussion, they are actively learning and participating in the classroom community. Accordingly, speaking up and feeling psychologically safe in the learning environment are intertwined.

Speaking up to ask for help or clarification is a positive trait and faculty should work hard to instill this message and model it. Likewise, educators need to balance the speaking opportunities among their group of students. Experienced educators know there are always some learners who are eager to participate and speak more than others. While it is important to welcome their enthusiasm, it is also critical to ensure all students are provided the opportunity to speak. This can be accomplished with a balanced menu of andragogical activities that move from full group sharing, to small group, to triadic or pair sharing.

Permission to Listen with Careful Consideration of Other's Thinking

Permission to listen with careful consideration of others thinking assumes that students are skilled listeners, however this may not be the case. Listening involves several fundamental components, such as attention to verbal and nonverbal communication, empathy, acceptance, and the ability to be nonjudgmental (Shiple, 2010). The skill of active listening is an essential aspect of the role of an occupational therapist in both addressing the whole person and providing appropriate emotional support for patients/clients (Brown et al., 2020; Rahman, 2000).

Accordingly, the steps to becoming skilled in active listening can be taught, practiced, and modeled in the graduate school classroom. Listening for understanding brings active listening to a deeper level and requires a range of subskills, including restating, reflecting, paraphrasing, the use of pacing and silence, and feeling identification. The literature suggests modifying curricula and adding interactive listening activities that allow for self-reflection, constructive criticism, and feedback to facilitate development of listening skills (Davis et al., 2013; Meldrum & Apple, 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2005). This permission model takes a stance that listening with careful consideration of other's thinking applies across multiple contexts.

The role of active listening has been studied in health care (Fassaert et al., 2007; Jahromi et al., 2016). Study results focused on active listening resulted in improved information exchanges, improvements in quality patient/client care and strengthened client/patient-practitioner relationships (Cegala et al., 2000; DeVilbiss et al., 2013; Kohpeima et al., 2016). Additionally, other studies have examined the role of active listening with results indicating patients/clients have a strong desire to be listened to during their encounters with healthcare practitioners and may experience an increase in emotional and physical healing after being listened to by others (Fassaert et al., 2007; Shipley, 2010; Weger et al., 2014).

Permission to Respectfully Build Upon or Challenge the Ideas of Others Based on Visual Evidence

Evidence-based practice (EBP) is another occupational therapy key concept and is based on the integration of critically appraised research results with the clinical expertise of the practitioner, and the client's preferences, beliefs, and values (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2021). This type of practice requires students to be stewards of recent research and to have skills to communicate the values, beliefs, and preferences of the client based on observation and effective listening. While students will learn more about EBP as they move through the graduate curriculum, practicing communication based in visual evidence can begin early with the permissions model.

Translated to the reflective practice classroom, students are encouraged to engage in effective communication when building or expanding on someone's ideas or when challenging one another. When offering opposing claims, students are taught to provide the evidence for their alternate perspective based on what they have read in the literature or visual evidence based on observation to substantiate why they are making this claim. Faculty teaching and modeling this specific permission, offer their own alternate opinions in a clear and respectful manner to keep the overall psychological safety of the learning space at the forefront.

Respectfully building upon or challenging the ideas of others based on evidence is preparation for interprofessional practice. Occupational therapists typically work on interprofessional teams or consult with a variety of different professionals who possess different education, clinical skill sets, and unique perspectives contributing to the treatment of a client/patient. Developing the skill to remain open to the ideas of others supports successful integration of the best ideas and plans to benefit the patient/client.

Visual Experiential Learning Methodologies

Learning should be experienced. Visual learning methodologies offer students rich opportunities to experientially observe, participate in, and reflect upon the skills of the permissions model. The two methodologies used in the course where the permissions model is introduced will be explained, followed by case examples to illustrate how the model is used in the context of each methodology.

Lego Serious Play

Lego Serious Play is a multisensory facilitated methodology that uses specifically selected Lego bricks as a metaphorical vehicle for communication (Jensen et al., 2018; Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014; Peabody & Noyes, 2017). The LSP method provides all participants with an equal chance to speak and opportunities to creatively think while exploring self-awareness. The metaphorical nature of the method elicits insights among participants that would not be discovered via less playful means (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). "Serious play is not the building of literal models, but rather constructing metaphorical and symbolic creations that represent problems, solutions, realizations, and models of communication..." (James & Brookfield, 2014, p. 116). The LSP methodology has been explored in multiple higher educational contexts (James, 2013; Peabody & Turesky, 2018) including helping students understand specific course content across a range of multidisciplinary subjects (Barton & James, 2017; Mcnamara, 2018) and in the topic of reflective practice (James & Brookfield, 2014; Peabody & Noyes, 2017).

The LSP core process involves four steps that include: posing a question; construction of a model to answer the question; sharing the model and its meaning to the builder; and reflection on the experience (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). If time permits, LSP can be used in two stages, moving from individual model building to group shared builds. In shared builds, group communication skills are highlighted to reach communal understanding of a concept or a problem situation, followed by group dialogue around potential solutions.

Peabody and Noyes (2017) conducted a qualitative study using LSP as a method for reflective practice with occupational therapy graduate students. The outcomes of the study included: accelerated group cohesion; an appreciation for inclusive learning where student voice was amplified; a language for emotional content and deeper meaning-making; and an experiential process using materials that appealed to various learning styles. The study revealed a small number of students experienced minor tension with the process which provided unanticipated and transformative reflective learning in self-awareness (Peabody & Noyes, 2017). For instance, one student participant from the Peabody and Noyes (2017) research stated, "We really grew together as a little group, inside the larger group of the class. We became closer" (p. 237).

Another student commented:

In the beginning of the semester, I talked too much. In LSP, I made myself sit there and listen to other people first before speaking. As I sat there, I found I was more like, “oh they have a good point.” With the building, I actually had time to sit by myself, build, and then think of what it meant to me, and even if I pulled bits and pieces of what other people said into mine, the way I was able to represent myself, I had more time to think and more thought behind it. I think it pulled from a little bit deeper depth than just being prompted to talk and journal. (p. 238)

Still another shared:

Everyone was really nervous to be in school. We didn’t know each other yet, and I feel like it brought us together in a way that a typical classroom couldn’t. We were expressing ourselves through a piece of work that we had created, and so it wasn’t as direct and allowed people to open up in ways that if we were in a classroom, that wouldn’t have come out, and I really, really appreciated it. (p. 237-238)

Visual Thinking Strategies

Visual thinking strategies is a teaching method for visual literacy co-created by Housen (1999, 2002) and Yenawine (1997) 30 years ago—initially for museum visitors and later used with elementary school children. Over the last decade, VTS has been used in the training of healthcare professionals from nursing students (Klugman et al., 2011; Nanavaty, 2018) to dermatology residents (Zimmerman et al., 2016) to develop observation and communication skills suited to clinical practice.

Facilitating a group to view works of art by asking three seemingly basic questions: 1) what’s going on in this picture, 2) what do you see that makes you say that, and 3) what more can we find, the VTS method is meant to “help people look carefully, put their observations and ideas into words, and actively ‘scaffold’ on the thoughts of others” (Reilly et al., 2005, p. 251). All three of these outcomes are relevant to the practice of occupational therapy, when reframed as: making careful clinical observations, communicating those observations clearly, and collaborating with an interprofessional team toward a common goal of effective client care. In addition, ambiguity is a natural part of the close looking exercise. No guiding clues are offered by the facilitator and the discussion of the artwork builds solely from the input of participants. At the end of viewing each artwork, it becomes immediately obvious which students struggle the most with the ‘not knowing,’ as they are the ones who ask about the artist and title of the work. This provides a perfect entrée for a discussion about what it’s like to feel that ambiguity, how do others manage that feeling, and how to build tolerance for it—all as a precursor for the experience of ambiguity in doing the work of a healthcare professional.

Case Applications in a Reflective Practitioner Course

Case # 1: LSP Application

One of the first semester courses offered in this specific occupational therapy program is entitled “Reflective Practitioner”. The course addresses the artful elements of occupational therapy practice, with a focus on active student engagement in developing and refining skills for reflective practice. Topics covered throughout the semester focus on self-awareness, professional communication, developing skills to engage in therapeutic relationships, therapeutic use of self, and leadership skills.

The permissions model is introduced within the first weeks of the course as part of the overall program orientation that sets a tone for the culture, ethos, and program values. After a dyadic presentation of the model, students are introduced to the visual and object learning methodology of LSP. Faculty explain the process that includes a prompt, time to build a three-dimensional model in response to the prompt, verbal sharing of their model with the small group, and group reflection time.

All students in the course participate and are divided into smaller groups of five to six students. Students are provided with a collection of bricks specifically selected by the LSP kit designers to inspire the use of metaphoric story making (James & Brookfield, 2014). While the Lego kits have many traditional types of bricks, there are also trees, ladders, windows, containers, flowers, tools, transportation items, nets, linking chains, and numerous mini-figures and accessories (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014).

Because students have not been placed out in the field yet, they have limited, if any experience in their own occupational therapy practice reflection. At this point, what the cohort does share is the experience of being a new graduate student, therefore the LSP prompts focus on this shared lived experience. As the faculty facilitate the LSP experience, they intentionally use language from the permissions model pre-skills in the actual prompt. For example: *Build a model that represents a concept talked about in your classes this past week that is either ambiguous or intriguing. Take time to slow down, think, and reflect back to experiences this week where you felt intrigued about a particular concept or where you felt confused with an ambiguous concept.*

The educator also writes the prompt on the whiteboard so students can have a visual reminder. The early prompts typically provide students with a choice allowing students a level of comfort and control in the amount of sharing they disclose. This is especially important in first semester coursework, as students’ own professional identity and the cohort group dynamics are still forming. Developmentally, students are navigating their role with faculty and may only want to show the positive aspects of self-awareness and knowledge rather than vulnerabilities (Stoltenberg & McNeill, 1997).

Each student is given approximately five minutes to build the model and approximately three-to-five minutes to share the story of their model with the small group. Students are reminded to listen with careful intent to their classmates, and to communicate back with

a comment or question centered directly on the model. Focusing on the model and not the person at this point in the process is also developmentally intentional in terms of the pacing of the group process and comfort with self-awareness and disclosure.

As the students share their models and accompanying stories, the faculty member rotates among the groups, modeling comments and questions. For example: Tell us more about the space or positioning of your mini-figures. Does it hold further meaning? I notice all the bricks are the same color and wonder if that holds meaning? This type of questioning serves as a model for how to comment or ask questions that align with the permissions model skills including: noticing, thinking and pondering; listening intently; speaking up; and offering a question based on visual evidence.

Typically, two or three building prompts are offered during each 90 or 120 minute LSP activity. It is critical for the faculty member to allow ample time for both the experiential sharing and the fourth phase of reflection. The reflective fourth phase of the LSP methodology serves a dual purpose: a) to model reflective practice skills; and b) to explicitly connect the permissions model to reflective practice skills in the practice field.

The LSP reflection phase asks students to reflect on the skills embedded in the LSP process. The faculty can choose a variety of questions to ask based on a reflective practice model that resonates with them. For example, modifying Dye's (2011) adaptation of the Gibb's (1988) reflective model, faculty asked students to reflect upon any feelings experienced during the LSP experience. They asked to share what was positive or concerning about the experience, or what sense they made of the LSP experience as it related to occupational therapy practice. To connect back to the six components in the permissions model, students were asked to think about what skills they did well and which skills could they have done differently. Finally, students were asked to select a skill they would like to focus on during the next LSP experience.

To provide examples of how students have built models and stories, the following prompt was given. *Build a model that represents how you are thinking, feeling, or doing now that we are half way through the first semester of graduate school.* See Figure 2. One student built a mini-figure climbing a structure and placed flowers at the top of the structure representing graduation. The mini-figure had a tree on top of its head, representing the burst of new knowledge she was experiencing in just a matter of weeks. A different student responded to the same prompt by constructing a model of two mini-figures facing each other separated by a container holding two bricks. The accompanied story she shared involved the two mini-figures representing two sides of herself. The big brick represented all the work she had accomplished to be accepted into graduate school and the smaller eye brick symbolized how she was currently feeling. She shared she was acutely aware she was constantly noticing and comparing herself to her classmates. She was experiencing tension within the different sides of herself in trying not to compare herself with others, or in wondering if she was "graduate school" competent.

Figure 2

Recreations of Student LSP Builds



The reflection phase of LSP can be conducted in the small group format or the full group. If the reflection phase is a full group sharing, time constraints may dictate that only a few students will be able to share. Faculty can follow up with a written reflection assignment allowing all students the time and opportunity to reflect on the experience.

Case # 2: Reflective Practitioner Course: VTS Application

Also in the first semester of the Master of Occupational Therapy program, as part of the "Reflective Practitioner" course, occupational therapy students are introduced to VTS. An intentional andragogical choice for their first semester, teaching VTS to occupational therapy students is based on evidence in the literature that suggests it is an effective method for teaching clinical observation skills (Agarwal et al., 2020; Reilly et al., 2005; Zimmerman et al., 2016). Rather than assume that keen observation is an innate skill possessed by all occupational therapy students, a direct approach to teaching it is employed with VTS.

We begin class by presenting the foundational history and applications of VTS, then students are guided through several rounds of "close looking" exercises (Katz & Khoshbin, 2014) with different art images. At this beginning stage, the students' responses and reactions to VTS typically relate to their surprise at not noticing things that others had, dialogue with one another around shared observations, appreciation of the ample time allotted for close looking, and distress about the ambiguity of not knowing what the artist "really meant." In VTS this ambiguity is further enhanced by not revealing the identifying details about the artwork, e.g., the title or artist's name, which could potentially influence students' observations by providing contextual cues during the close looking exercise.

In its steps, the use of VTS as an andragogical approach directly addresses each of the six permissions. Before beginning the close looking exercise, the VTS facilitator provides direction to the group, “we are going to look at an image together; please raise your hand to comment and speak one at a time.” This sets the stage for an expectation of speaking up, of careful listening to others as they speak, and a procedure for building on the comments of others. The image is then revealed on the projector screen with the direction to, “take some time to look at this image.” The facilitator allows approximately 45 – 60 seconds for the group to view the image in silence, then offers the first of three VTS prompt questions to support close looking, articulation of observations, and prolonged noticing, thinking, and pondering: “What’s going on in this picture?”

As students make note of particular parts or details of the artwork, the facilitator draws the groups’ eye to those by using a laser pointer to emphasize them. Each verbal response from the students is paraphrased by the facilitator, which reinforces their observation for the group and validates their contribution to the process. The second prompt question is offered to the responding student here: “What did you see that made you say that?” This question is intended to support the student to more deeply articulate their observation and generate more details that other students can build on. When that process is complete, the facilitator poses the final prompt question to continue the close looking exercise: “What more can we find?” This question is an important indicator to the students that in fact there can be more to find, and the facilitator is explicitly slowing the process to allow time for them to do that. Visual Thinking Strategies recommends that groups spend a maximum of 20 minutes viewing one image.

The dosage of VTS that allows deeper application of VTS principles over time is critical to determine. However even with brief exposure, VTS skills can support the user’s ability to allow more time between their observations and their subsequent interpretations of those observations, tolerate ambiguity for longer periods, and remain open to and build upon the observations and interpretations of others. After participating in a facilitated VTS session during the Reflective Practitioner course, a student confirmed the utility of the VTS principles she had learned in this written reflection:

An aspect of the Reflective Practitioner course that left an impression on me was the visual thinking strategies classes. Learning alternative ways to think and communicate will be valuable as a therapist one day. I know my preference for communication is verbal or in writing, but my clients may be non-verbal or prefer a different method. Because of this it is important to be familiar with alternative ways to view the world and think about problems. A way I have started to use this concept is by doing some assignments in more visual ways rather than writing papers. I noticed that it results in me discussing ideas I would not have otherwise. An example is this assignment; I decided to make this website rather than a paper. I am still writing a lot, but it has a creative component. Having visual thinking strategies in your toolbox as a therapist will help you connect with clients and potentially go deeper in therapy.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

This article suggests several implications for occupational therapy faculty. First, faculty are encouraged to break down and scaffold key reflective practice concepts at the forefront of their curriculum. By practicing the permissions model and extending this into their own review of andragogical choices and experiential learning methods, the learning is maximized for both faculty and students.

Second, using experiential learning and innovative strategies helps with activity engagement. Arts, objects, and visual images are just a few of many object-based learning options available to faculty to include as practices of reflexivity early in the educational experience (Hodge, 2018).

Third, as professionals with expertise in activity analysis for clinical practice, it behooves us to use this approach in our teaching. The ability to competently analyze the dynamic relationship of the task, context, and client for evaluating occupational performance could be applied to exploring our own andragogical practices.

Fourth, re-visiting the use of the permissions model over the course of the curriculum is important to maintaining its value as a teaching tool. These permissions support the critical skills necessary for many client centered processes including caring, compassion, and hope, as well as other key student learning: communication, observation, collaboration, teamwork, and problem solving.

Last, as faculty it is important to be role models for students and practice what is taught. If faculty do not slow down when necessary, or speak over students, or do not invite respectful challenges to idea sharing, then teaching the permissions model can appear disingenuous. The authors fully recognize these permissions are difficult to embrace within academia, as academia privileges overwork, acceleration, deadlines, multi-tasking, and hurrying (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Permission granting includes oneself, in acting purposefully and taking the time for a reflective look in the mirror.

Conclusion

Developing into a reflective practitioner is a sequential process that emerges through stages along a developmental learning continuum (Kasar & Muscari, 2000). By facilitating the permission-based andragogical pathway situated within reflective practice, faculty contribute to creative ways of knowing, being, and doing the profession of occupational therapy. Teaching the pre-requisite skills of reflection early provides a solid base from which reflective practice can be experienced with the longer-range learning objective of informing efficacious reasoning and treatment.

Reflective practice must arise from an engaged, curious, critically concerned, and evidence-based stance, that is encircled in the situational context and the specific needs of the client/patient. If occupational therapy educators value a mind-set of permissions and scaffolding of skills from pre-requisites to more advanced reasoning

beginning early in a student's educational trajectory, they solidify the foundational base. Thereby, not only does the student begin to grow from a solid grounding that will ultimately help their future clients, the professional development of the occupational therapy educator also continues to flourish.

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