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## Curriculum transformation: A proposed route to reflect a political consciousness in occupational therapy education

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**ABSTRACT**  
*Introduction:* Curriculum review is an ongoing, dynamic, long-term process that forms part of occupational therapy education. The Department of Occupational Therapy, University of the Western Cape (UWC) recently responded to the challenge of becoming socially responsive and politically relevant by engaging in curriculum review. The review revealed that political reasoning was not clearly delineated previously in the curriculum. In response to this problem, over a period of several years we engaged in a process of curriculum transformation so that students become politically conscious.

*Methods:* The process entailed environmental scanning, feedback from teaching staff and clinicians, students' evaluations, regular curriculum revision meetings, academic development meetings, workshops and seminars. A qualitative study using a cooperative enquiry approach was conducted to analyse the data.

*Findings:* From the analysis the following themes emerged: (1) identifying the essence of occupational therapy education at UWC, (2) understanding political practice on a theoretical and then a personal level, (3) integrating and operationalising political consciousness into the curriculum. We discuss the debates and critical questions raised in our efforts to develop a curriculum that prepares graduates to be politically conscious and socially responsive. Finally, we present key strategies for the way forward.

*Conclusion:* Curriculum transformation around a political practice of occupational therapy does not merely mean just a change in curriculum content, but requires the internalisation of a political consciousness by educators individually and collectively.

**Key words:** curriculum transformation, occupational therapy education, political consciousness

### Introduction

In recent years, occupational therapy education programmes have been challenged to prepare their graduates to deal with occupational injustices in rapidly changing and different political, social, and economical contexts. This is evident in World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT) Position Papers on Human Rights<sup>1</sup> and Community-based Rehabilitation<sup>2</sup>. The implications for occupational therapy are also addressed in recent literature on transformation through occupation<sup>3</sup>, occupational justice<sup>4</sup>, service learning and practice in occupational therapy<sup>5</sup>, enabling occupation<sup>6</sup>, occupation-based occupational therapy, and a political practice of occupational therapy<sup>7,8</sup>. There is a move in occupational therapy education and practice to become politically conscious. According to Kronenberg and Pollard<sup>9</sup>, political consciousness allows occupational therapists to critically understand the influence of politics on human occupation and on the practice decisions that they make.

In order for occupational therapy curricula to facilitate political consciousness in students, there is a need for the curricula to be socially responsive<sup>9,10,11</sup>. Socially responsive education underpins values such as commitment to whole person care, reflective prac-

tice, human rights and community development<sup>9</sup>. For this reason, Kronenberg and Pollard<sup>11</sup> refer to socially responsive occupational therapy education as politically relevant education that enables students to critically understand the influence of politics on human occupation and the practice decisions that they make. They maintain that it is necessary for occupational therapy education to consider how it prepares graduates to contribute to addressing their country's health and social needs through being agents of social change. Pollard, Kronenberg and Sakellariou<sup>8</sup> assert that occupational therapy curricula should provide students with opportunities to explore how people who experience occupational injustices understand their realities and how occupational therapists can address those realities in practice. They assert that it is imperative that occupational therapy education facilitates students' understanding of the influence of politics on human occupation in order for occupational therapy curricula to become more socially responsive. Kronenberg and Pollard<sup>11</sup> propose the 3PArchaeology (3PA) as an approach to raise political consciousness. The 3PA refers to an in-depth critical exploration at inter-related personal-, professional-, political- levels of who we are, where we come from, what we value and stand



up for ('actual doing'). The '3P' in 3PA depicts the triad – personal, professional, political, and the 'A' refers to the idea of archaeology which is used metaphorically to indicate a process of excavating our occupational dispositions. The 3PA can be used with both individuals and collectives. Pollard, Kronenberg and Sakellariou<sup>8</sup> argue that in order to pursue their goals, occupational therapists have to know how these three dimensions affect their perceptions of events that surround them, and how these perceptions subsequently affect the strategies they adopt to pursue those goals.

The Department of Occupational Therapy, University of the Western Cape (UWC) responded to the challenge of becoming socially responsive and politically relevant by engaging in curriculum review. The review revealed that political reasoning<sup>a</sup> - by which students are challenged to think critically about inequities and power structures that exist in society and reflect on their own underlying assumptions in different practice contexts – was not clearly delineated previously in the curriculum. In response to this problem, we engaged in a process of curriculum transformation so that students become politically conscious.

This paper describes the process of curriculum transformation and presents the findings of an analysis of this process following a cooperative enquiry<sup>12,13</sup> approach. We discuss the debates and critical questions raised in our efforts to develop a curriculum that prepares graduates to be politically conscious and socially responsive. Finally, we present key strategies for the way forward.

## The UWC Occupational Therapy Programme

The undergraduate occupational therapy education programme at UWC focuses on a social approach to health and wellbeing (but incorporates a medical approach) within a Primary Health Care context. It is a community-based and community-oriented programme. The curriculum follows a developmental approach, and is underpinned by three themes that form the core pillars of the occupational therapy curriculum: theories and practice of occupational therapy, human occupation, fieldwork and research. There are eight permanent staff members in the Department of Occupational Therapy (Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of permanent staff in the Department of Occupational Therapy at UWC

Staff	Post levels	Age	Race	Gender	Years of experience
1	Associate Professor	46	White	Female	24
2	Senior Lecturer	53	White	Female	30
3	Senior Lecturer	33	Coloured	Male	10
4	Lecturer	52	White	Female	30
5	Lecturer	44	Coloured	Female	21
6	Lecturer	43	Coloured	Female	21
7	Lecturer	35	Black	Male	6
8	Vacant	-	-	-	-

### The process of curriculum transformation to develop political consciousness

Staff in the Department responded to the challenge of bringing about a socially responsive occupational therapy education programme by engaging in a process of curriculum transformation in order to prepare students to become politically conscious. This process entailed reflections from staff and clinicians regarding students' fieldwork experiences; teaching and learning strategies utilised; students' evaluations of modules including fieldwork; curriculum revision meetings; academic development meetings; workshops and seminars. The process occurred in two phases.

The first phase of this transformation dealt with developing

<sup>a</sup> As distinct from, yet complementary to, other levels of professional reasoning that occupational therapists exercise including clinical, narrative, procedural, ethical and pragmatic reasoning.

a more social approach to health and wellbeing within a primary health care approach and addressing cultural diversity issues. In this phase, curriculum transformation was characterised by educators developing a heightened understanding of South Africa's social and political context<sup>14</sup>. Accordingly, core principles related to primary health care, occupational science, cultural diversity, community-based rehabilitation (CBR) and community-based education (CBE) were included in the redesign of the curriculum.

In the second phase of the curriculum transformation process, we engaged with 3PA. Critical reflection on our understanding and application of this approach revealed that a socially responsive occupational therapy curriculum is one that includes 3PA as it allows for an articulation of a politically conscious practice of occupational therapy. We wanted to develop an educational experience at UWC that would assist our students to critically examine their attitudes and to broaden their understanding of their political role as occupational therapy practitioners. We believed that this would place them in a better position to advocate for social justice and transformation.

In 2007, part of the curriculum transformation process was to strengthen staff's theoretical capacity with the long term goal of increasing research and publication outputs. This initiative followed on from a previous Departmental academic review<sup>15</sup> and self-evaluation. The curriculum transformation process also involved self reflection and peer learning with a view to building the staff and enhancing its capacity to learn collectively. We reflected on, and articulated our perspectives about our theoretical foundation, underlying values, and relationship between theory and practice. We regard this as a process of heightening our political consciousness. This was not merely an academic exercise but at a deeper level it compelled us to reflect on our values and beliefs and deepen our understanding of our personal, professional and political ideologies within the broader scope of occupational therapy practice in Southern Africa. In Table 2 (on page 18) we present the activities in which we engaged to critically reflect on the political nature of occupation and occupational therapy.

### Analysis of the curriculum transformation process

Co-operative enquiry is a form of action research in which a group of people come together to explore a particular experience of which they are all part<sup>12,13</sup>. All participants work together as co-researchers and co-subjects. Hence, all members of the group contribute to the ideas that go into their work. Each group member takes initiative, exerts influence on the research process and draws conclusions from this experience. We, the three authors, used cooperative enquiry as an approach to analysing data for this paper. Data comprised documentation arising as a result of the curriculum transformation process activities described in Table 2.

### Findings

The following themes emanated from the authors' analysis of the departmental documentation generated from the curriculum transformation process. The various themes will be discussed with emphasis on the debates, discussions and critical questions that emerged.

Themes emanating from our engagement in the process of curriculum transformation to reflect political consciousness are as follows:

#### Theme 1: Identifying the essence of occupational therapy education at UWC

In the process of becoming politically conscious, we reflected on the history of the university as a historically disadvantaged institution<sup>b</sup>, and the diverse cultures and contexts that exist in South Africa. We also had to consider the background of our student population that

<sup>b</sup>Historically disadvantaged institution is a term given to a university that was established during the Apartheid era (pre-1994) for individuals classified as Black, Coloured (of mixed descent) or Indian, and that was disadvantaged in many aspects<sup>8</sup>



Table 2: Timeline of activities in which educators engaged

Date	Activity	Purpose	Outcome
2007	Series of workshops with outside facilitator	Strengthen theoretical capacity and theoretical output through self reflection and peer learning	Team building
Sept 2008	Workshop with outside facilitator	Develop and write statement of approach	Departmental statement of approach draft 1
Sept 2008	UWC Institutional Operational Plan (IOP) 2010 – 2014 workshop	Executive management shares IOP with middle management	Awareness of IOP
Sept 2008-Feb 2009	Departmental engagement with statement of approach	Refine statement of approach	Departmental statement of approach draft 2
2009	Academic development and curriculum planning bimonthly seminars	Educators read, present ideas and discuss	Academic development and curriculum review
June 2009	OTASA* National conference	Educators present papers and keep abreast with current developments	Sharing knowledge and generating ideas around a political identity, new vision and mission and research agenda
July 2009	Occupational Science Think Tank resulted in debates and discussions	Keep abreast with developments in occupational science	Implementation in curriculum
July 2009	Academic planning meeting	Gave feedback from conferences and start discussions around revised vision and mission	Stimulate critical thinking around curriculum issues
August 2009	Discussed research activities	Develop strategies around research focus, vision and niche	Identified research focus, vision and niche
September 2009	Political Practice I Workshop facilitated by Frank Kronenberg	Introduce educators to the theory of 3P archaeology <sup>8:13</sup>	Educators had better understanding of 3P archaeology <sup>8:13</sup>
October 2009	Political Practice II Workshop facilitated by Frank Kronenberg	Begin process of integrating political practice into curriculum	Implementation of political practice in parts of curriculum
2009	Three educators involved in collaborative writing of a chapter on political engagement	Reflect and write about experiences of political engagement	Document experiences of political engagement
November 2009	Faculty IOP workshop	Begin process of Faculty alignment with UWC IOP	Faculty IOP plan
November 2009	Workshop on political reasoning in occupational therapy curriculum	Follow-up previous workshops on political practice	Continued implementation of political practice in curriculum
February 2010	Departmental 2-day strategic planning workshop	Integrate and plan curriculum	Incorporating political practice into curriculum 2010
March, April 2010	Faculty IOP workshop	Revision of Faculty vision and mission	Revised draft of Faculty vision and mission
April 2010	Departmental teaching and learning workshop	Align UWC and Faculty teaching and learning strategies	Departmental teaching and learning plan
April 2010	**WFOT Congress; Meeting with South American universities	Presentations; Meet and collaborate with colleagues from (likeminded) South American universities	Keep abreast with developments in profession and share our experiences; South-south collaboration
May 2010	Clinicians seminar	Share revised departmental vision and mission, and our approach to teaching and learning	Clinicians were informed
May 2010	Departmental writing retreat	Provide a place and space for reflection and writing for publication	Produced draft of the present article
July 2010	Ongoing bimonthly academic development and curriculum development seminars	Continue debates and discussions related to political transformation of the curriculum	Continued reflection and critical thinking around these issues

Notes:

\* Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa

\*\* World Federation of Occupational Therapy



includes educationally and economically disadvantaged students. Through the curriculum transformation process we identified the essence of occupational therapy education at UWC as focusing on enabling occupation, community-based education, community development, health promotion and occupational justice.

This was captured in the departmental statement of approach<sup>16</sup>. The statement of approach defines our identity and articulates what our education programme is about. It describes our values and beliefs, practice framework, programme outcomes, graduate attributes, approach to teaching and learning, informing concepts, research and staff development. This statement of approach guides how we want to prepare our graduates to practise socially responsive occupational therapy.

## Theme 2: Understanding political practice on a theoretical and then a personal level

As part of the process of curriculum transformation, we made the strategic decision to involve Frank Kronenberg<sup>c</sup> in the curriculum transformation process because of his expertise and experience in political practice and occupational therapy. We held a series of workshops and seminars with the purpose of developing a theoretical understanding of political practice, and critically reflecting on personal, professional and political dimensions as these related to us individually and collectively (see *Table 2*).

Some staff attended Gail Whiteford's keynote presentation at the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa 32nd Congress entitled "Waves of change: enabling participation – an international perspective" in which she focused on occupational justice<sup>18</sup>. Other staff attended an Occupational Science Think Tank<sup>19</sup> seminar. Our participation in these events validated and confirmed our belief that our curriculum was in line with the occupational justice approach<sup>20</sup>. For example, students from first to fourth year engage in fieldwork in communities that are characterised by social problems and poverty, and address occupational risk factors through a social and community development approach. However, after reflecting on Whiteford's presentation and the Think Tank, it was apparent that the aspect of political practice, such as issues of power and power inequities, was not given much emphasis within our curriculum. We then identified the need to more formally operationalise this approach and foreground our identity as a politically conscious occupational therapy education programme.

Our engagement in the workshops and seminars (*Table 2*) evoked an internalisation of political consciousness that involved taking risks, challenging one another, standing up for beliefs, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, confronting individual prejudices, and negotiating differences. It also revealed the commonalities that we have as a team, meaning that we were developing political consciousness as a collective, as well as on an individual level. This was a significant step towards transformation and revisiting our vision and mission.

## Theme 3: Integrating and operationalising political consciousness into the curriculum

By understanding the theoretical foundation for political practice, and committing to transformation, we began to interrogate practical steps of how teaching and learning could facilitate students to negotiate power issues, and become culturally relevant and socially responsive in their practice. This was done through curriculum planning and academic development seminars culminating in a two-day strategic curriculum planning workshop. The workshop was structured around some of the trigger questions of the 3PArchaeology<sup>8</sup> approach:

Who are we?

Where do we come from?

What do we stand [up] for?

What do we most value being and doing?

<sup>c</sup>Frank Kronenberg is co-editor of *Occupational therapy without borders: learning from the spirit of survivors*<sup>17</sup> and an extraordinary lecturer in the Department of Occupational Therapy.

What are we most "occupassionate" about?

What do we regard as being our value-add to society?

What strategies do we use to put our values and beliefs into practice?

The workshop used methods of storytelling and story making by inviting staff to tell their stories of the UWC occupational therapy curriculum, and reflecting on each module. This allowed us to achieve a measure of clarity about where we wanted to be, but we were unsure of how we were going to do this. We considered how we could use the modules to engage students in 3PArchaeology<sup>8</sup> as an approach that would be integrated across the four years of the curriculum.

Alongside this process, some members of staff were involved in writing a collaborative chapter on the nature of political reasoning as a foundation for engagement<sup>21</sup>. The self-reflection that this entailed allowed for an examination of the opportunities and challenges that educators and students might encounter when adopting a political approach to education and practice.

At the same time, the University had developed an Institutional Operational Plan<sup>22</sup> (IOP) for 2010-2014. This plan outlines key goals and related strategies for the institution. Faculties and departments were expected to align their education programmes with the IOP. Of the eight goals, there are three that are relevant to the process of politicising the occupational therapy curriculum. These goals are: (1) teaching and learning, (2) research and innovation, and (3) internal and external profile and influence. The process of alignment with the IOP resulted in the department clarifying strategies for teaching and learning and research, and making our identity explicit within and outside the university. We also critically reflected on the gaps in these areas and developed action plans to address the gaps. We considered how we could utilise the 3PArchaeology<sup>8</sup> within teaching and learning as it was our vision to produce graduates who would embody a political practice of occupational therapy. Becoming politically conscious meant developing teaching and learning strategies that facilitate student empowerment; helping students confront prejudices and stereotypes; debating rights, morals and ethics; and practising political reasoning alongside other forms of professional reasoning in occupational therapy. At this stage the staff felt ready to develop a new departmental vision and mission statement (*Box 1*).

*Box 1: Revised vision and mission statement of the UWC Department of Occupational Therapy*

### Vision

Our occupational therapy training programme will prepare graduates who are equipped to respond to occupational needs and injustices within South Africa's cultural and contextual diversity.

### Mission

The occupational therapy department is an integral part of the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences at the University of the Western Cape. The department is committed to producing graduates who value people as occupational beings who have the right to choose and engage in meaningful and purposeful occupations. Graduates will understand the link between occupation, wellbeing and health in context. Promoting health and wellbeing is understood as addressing people's physical, emotional, psychological, economical, social and spiritual needs. By being politically conscious, graduates will understand the dynamics of power and their role as advocates as being central to addressing occupational injustices and human needs. By so-doing, graduates will be socially responsive agents of change.

The key strategies for taking forward the process of transformation in becoming a politically conscious education programme will now be discussed.

## Key strategies for the way forward

As a result of curriculum transformation, political consciousness has been identified as a fifth core theme that underpins the occupational therapy curriculum from first to fourth year. A new graduate at-



tribute is that occupational therapy graduates will understand the nature of a politically conscious practice of occupational therapy. The staff has concluded that teaching and learning about political consciousness is a developmental process and needs to be reflected as such from first to fourth year teaching and learning outcomes. This will be made explicit in the module descriptors (content, outcomes, assessments) throughout all four years. Staff in the department will continue to explore and debate teaching and learning strategies that will support the advancement of political consciousness in education, for example, through debating, students learn to listen critically and carefully to others' positions on given issues, and they develop and present convincing, clear and solid arguments in response. This is a concrete form of exercising political reasoning. Furthermore, we purposefully seek to develop student fieldwork placements that are regarded as marginalised and under-resourced. It will be crucial to monitor and evaluate the integration and operationalisation of political consciousness in the curriculum.

Another strategy is to interface with clinicians, community members and other stakeholders such as the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and the Occupational Therapy Association of South Africa (OTASA), in order to share our vision of a politically conscious occupational therapy education and practice. This will facilitate inter-institutional and professional debate to stimulate a move away from an exclusive bio-medical approach towards a more social and politically conscious occupational therapy practice and education. In addition we intend to use publications to promote the idea that occupational therapy can effect transformation within society around facilitating equitable and relevant opportunities and possibilities for occupational engagement.

We are developing collaborative partnerships with education programmes in Africa and South America by engaging with a group of occupational therapy educators and practitioners from Mozambique and South America. As we are living and working in countries in the Southern hemisphere, we assume that there are many similarities in contextual issues and social injustices experienced by people in these countries<sup>23</sup>. The purpose of these collaborative partnerships is to engage with occupational therapists who think along similar lines and who face similar challenges in becoming more politically conscious and socially responsive.

## Conclusion

We have come to the conclusion that curriculum transformation is a challenging process that is ongoing and dynamic. Incorporating political consciousness means letting go of some traditional ways of occupational therapy education and practice. Curriculum transformation around a political practice of occupational therapy does not merely mean just a change in curriculum content, but requires the internalisation of a political consciousness by educators individually and collectively.

## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contribution of our colleagues and students in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of the Western Cape for being active participants in this learning process along with us.

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