

# Service-Learning in Occupational Therapy Education

*Philosophy and Practice*

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Publishers  
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978-443-5000  
info@jbpub.com  
www.jbpub.com

Jones and Bartlett  
Publishers Canada  
6339 Ormindale Way  
Mississauga, Ontario L5V 1J2  
Canada

Jones and Bartlett  
Publishers International  
Barb House, Barb Mews  
London W6 7PA  
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#### **Production Credits**

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Acquisitions Editor: Kristine Jones  
Associate Editor: Maro Gartside  
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Manufacturing and Inventory Control Supervisor:  
Amy Bacus

Cover and Title Page Design: Kate Ternullo  
Cover Image: © Jorge Enrique Villalobos/Shutterstock, Inc.  
Composition: Glyph International  
Printing and Binding: Malloy, Incorporated  
Cover Printing: Malloy, Incorporated

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

6048

Printed in the United States of America  
13 12 11 10 09 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Preface

*“I realized how much occupational therapists can do in the community.”*

*“I feel I know more about what OTs can do rather than just what they do.”*

These students’ reflections on their experiences as part of an occupational therapy service-learning course demonstrate the impact of service-learning on professional formation of students as part of occupational therapy education. *Service-Learning in Occupational Therapy Education: Philosophy and Practice* grew out of our conviction that service-learning can promote the development of core professional formation and skill competencies needed by occupational therapy professionals for occupation-based practice in the twenty-first century (Gitlow & Flecky, 2002).

Since our first joint endeavor in the development of three service-learning courses in 2000, we have been committed to a perspective of professional education as a shared endeavor with community partners to promote students as citizens who move beyond the ability to answer the question: What knowledge and skills do I need to practice occupational therapy in community settings? More importantly, how should I use my knowledge and skills to practice and live in

relational communities with others as agents for social change? Our research and writings have demonstrated that service-learning can facilitate occupational therapy students' abilities to be flexible, to be collaborative, and to reflect on the ambiguities of working with others in community (Flecky & Gitlow, 2006; Gitlow & Flecky, 2005). These abilities will be needed by healthcare professionals in the healthcare environment of the future.

Although there are a variety of definitions of *service-learning*, its essence is based on a philosophy of learning by doing in collaborative relationship with community. An overview of major universities, college Web sites, and informational brochures points to the rapid growth of service-learning initiatives within the past decade. Service-learning is a form of community engagement and experiential education that ultimately has a vision or educational paradigm of learning as a means of fostering democratic principles and social change. It engages students, faculty, staff, and community alike in the process of breaking down the barriers that separate campus from community by working with community agencies, organizations, or groups to collectively address community assets and needs to solve community-based concerns. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) stated, "We view service-learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (p. 221).

Furthermore, occupational therapy professional education through use of service-learning experiences can foster professional occupational therapy students who exemplify "habits of the heart," or genuine compassion, care and shared vision of a greater community and notion of American society through community partnerships (Bellah, Madson, Sullivan, & Swidler, 1985). The chapters in this book represent a commitment to a shared vision of occupational therapy education that promotes student habits of the heart as well as the knowledge and skills to engage in collaborative dialogue and

relationships across diverse groups and communities. In a time of economic uncertainty and cynicism, the habits of genuine, heartfelt interpersonal communication and partnership can promote a community that is hopeful and looks forward to the future together (Arnett & Arneson, 1999).

## **OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS**

*Service-Learning in Occupational Therapy Education: Philosophy and Practice* is a unique collaboration of insights from occupational therapy educators. They share their expertise on use of service-learning to align occupational therapy education to the future of practice, which meets not only individual occupational needs, but societal and community needs as well.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an introduction that situates service-learning within the contexts of higher education and occupational therapy philosophy, education, and practice as a way to frame service-learning pedagogy. Chapter 1 details the foundations of service-learning through review of service-learning definitions and use in higher education, and, specifically, occupational therapy education. Chapter 2 describes how to prepare students for future practice using philosophical and theoretical principles of service-learning in relationship to occupational therapy philosophical and pedagogical traditions.

An important goal of this book is to illuminate service-learning through practical examples of how different institutions and occupational therapy program partnerships have met success and challenges in crafting service-learning courses. Chapters 3 through 10 describe effective service-learning partnerships and educational strategies in the community through case studies of service-learning in occupational therapy programs across the United States. Examples of how to design, implement, and assess service-learning projects and partnerships are described along with insights and lessons learned from faculty engaging in service-learning.

Samples of syllabi, readings, Web sites, assignments, and assessments are provided to link service-learning specifically to occupational therapy education and to encourage faculty to explore service-learning for course and curricular use. Important contributions to service-learning theory and research are illustrated in “lessons learned” from faculty, including the strengths and challenges of service-learning based on qualitative and quantitative assessment results and community-based research. Examples of community partnerships, course objectives, and syllabi aligned with Accreditation Council of Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) guidelines, readings, Web sites, and course support materials, as well as project and student assessment tools, are provided to illustrate relevant use of service-learning in a variety of occupational therapy coursework.

The book concludes with Chapter 11, which provides a commentary of service-learning in the context of professional formation and fieldwork, and Chapter 12, a summary of service-learning in occupational therapy education with a look to the future of professional education. Although service-learning is apparent in occupational therapy education, we have much to learn about its use and the use of other pedagogical strategies to enhance the professional formation and core competencies and skills of occupational therapy professionals. This is not the start or end of occupational therapy educator collaboration, but a continuing conversation of questioning and promoting best practice in occupational therapy education.

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# Acknowledgments

We gratefully dedicate this book and acknowledge the following groups and individuals who contributed to making the dream of this book a reality:

Occupational therapy students and community partners from Husson University and Creighton University who inspire us to become better teachers, collaborators, and citizens. In particular we would like to thank Architect Denis Pratt, AlphaOne, VSA Arts of Maine as well as Blackburn High School, Omaha Street School, Sacred Heart Ministries, and HELP Adult Services in Omaha, Nebraska, for their ongoing collaboration.

Occupational therapy educators who have graciously shared course materials and service-learning experiences with us in order to enhance occupational therapy education.

Family and friends for their support and love.

Christopher Bates and Robert Churchill for their editing guidance and skills.

Kristine Jones and Maro Gartside from Jones and Bartlett for their positive attitude, continuing guidance, and support throughout this book project.



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