Occupational therapy has gone online: What will remain beyond COVID-19?

As I wrote the Editorial for the last issue of the journal, I could never have imagined the different world in which we now live as a result of COVID-19. The importance of information that is consistent and evidence-based has never been more essential for occupational therapists and the people who access our services. Occupational Therapy Australia have supported the profession with lobbying and advocacy activities, regular communications, and resources such as guidelines that outline the practical and ethical considerations for delivering clinical care using telehealth (Occupational Therapy Australia, 2020). The sudden move to online technologies has been experienced by many within the profession and this editorial will discuss online learning within occupational therapy education.

In the COVID-19 response, university educators were required to move all teaching and assessment activities online at relatively short notice. As a result, all classes, simulations, practicums, vivas, and assessment, etc were adapted for the online environment and launched. From an educator perspective, the hours of planning and preparation, and the newly developed skills have been exceptional. From a student perspective, there has been adaptation and the opportunity to develop new skills, possibly including the provision of occupational therapy services via telehealth. As an example, imagine an online classroom with five breakout rooms - within each breakout room there is an actor who is a simulated patient. Each simulated patient will meet with a different student every 20 minutes in an occupational therapy session, and 100 students will have this experience across the day. In the background, staff who are marshalling the students, coordinating the entry into and out of the virtual breakout rooms, and providing feedback and support to the students and actors. This type of activity is exhausting for staff, and anxiety producing for students, when conducted face-to-face in rooms along an actual corridor - and this is magnified when conducted virtually. All educators, students, support staff, and actors are to be congratulated for what you have navigated and achieved.

This is not the first time that learning has been delivered online within occupational therapy curricula. Blended learning is the preferred approach of education providers, promoting the integration of online and traditional face-to-face learning experiences within a program. However, this is the first time that all learning has been delivered online and, from an
From a curriculum perspective, it is essential to review how online learning aligns with the pedagogy of the program, and the experience and well-being of the students. Students in the current online environment have spoken of challenges with self-regulation skills such as time management and motivation, and that they feel isolated and distant from the learning. This experience aligns with previous findings that student challenges in the online environment of blending learning include: self-regulation; technological literacy and competency; student isolation; technological sufficiency; and technological complexity (Rasheed, Kamsin, & Abdullah, 2020). There is a need to keep the focus on the students, their experiences, and their learning. Smith and Hill (2018) highlight that blended learning is only effective when the purpose of the online content is clear with explicit links made to the face-to-face classes. The learning environment is complex and further research is required to determine when and how online learning can support occupational therapy curricula to achieve their learning and graduate outcomes.

In conclusion, occupational therapy education has momentarily gone online. The educators and occupational therapy students have demonstrated that we can adapt courses and programs to an online format, and both groups will have undoubtedly gained transferrable skills within this online environment. However, despite demonstrating that it is possible, it is important to remember that this change has been undertaken during a crisis situation, and we must move carefully forwards adopting an evidence-based approach. Blended learning should remain the preferred approach and research is required to establish what online components can remain to support the development of occupational therapy knowledge, skills, and competencies.
References


blending learning: A systematic review. Computers & Education, 114,

Smith, K., & Hill, J. (2018). Defining the nature of blended learning through its depiction in
doi:10.1080/07294360.2018.1517732