The use of blogging to support professional learning

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Abstract
Web 2.0 tools are relatively new, yet fast growing Internet-based tools that have evolved from the websites that we have become familiar with. To be Web 2.0, the tool must support the coming together of people, to create online communities of interest focused on the creation or furthering of knowledge. Engagement in these communities is believed to provide opportunities for deeper learning. With this focus on learning, it is proposed in this article that Web 2.0 tools provides occupational therapists (and other health professionals) with the opportunity to use these tools either as an adjunct to, or replacement for, the traditional learning experiences of conferences, seminars or workshops. One tool, the blog, is discussed in depth, with examples from occupational therapy blogs provided to illustrate the value. Blogging offers the creator/reader with the opportunity to engage in discussion with others, leading to a process of reflection that enables better understanding of oneself and one’s actions, as well as those of others. The advantages of blogging over other professional development mechanisms are described, leading to the view that if academics, researchers, students and practitioners were active creators, readers and contributors to blogs, then the knowledge of the profession could be furthered.

1. Introduction
Fran Babiss [1] recently wrote in OT Practice that while occupational therapists tend to think about ways of using technology to assist clients in achieving their goals, technology also "offers us powerful ways to help promote the profession and share information about the benefits we offer others."[1] While this is true, in that therapists writing about their practice using tools such as blogs or wikis, are at the same time marketing occupational therapy to the world, these same tools can have other uses, such as being used as mechanisms for supporting the reaching of professional development goals.

In the Frances Rutherford Lecture [2], I described the future of an hypothetical occupational therapist who used blogs, Skype and wikis to assist her in meeting her learning needs. In this article, I show how that future has arrived; with occupational therapists able to supplement, or replace, the more traditional mechanisms of learning such as inservices, journal clubs, seminars (often viewed as appropriate professional development activities [3,4]), with Web 2.0 tools, focussing in particular, on the use of blogging. While the examples in this article predominantly arise out of the occupational therapy profession, the aim in writing and publishing this article is that more health practitioners will consider, and be inspired, to both explore and use more of these "free" tools to support in the achieving of their professional development goals.

2. What is Web 2.0?
Before talking about how we might use such tools, it is important to define the term Web 2.0. Have you heard of MySpace, Bebo, FaceBook, blogging, wikis, YouTube or even Second Life? Almost all have featured (not always positively) in the media over the past year or two. To be considered a Web 2.0 tool, the application (or tool) needs to provide opportunities to bring together people with a common interest, creating online
communities or networks of contributors [5] who together "create" knowledge founded in the experiences of the community network [6]. Membership of these networks/communities can stretch across the boundaries of geography and time, with the tools enabling conversation between individuals who share ideas, rather than monologues delivered by experts. The collective voice ensures distribution of resources and expertise rather than centralisation, and the opportunity to actively engage can lead to deeper learning.

How would you know if you’ve had any experience of Web 2.0 tools? If you have a space on Bebo or Facebook or MySpace then you’ve experienced Web 2.0. If you’ve read and then commented on a blog entry, or if you are member of a New Zealand Association of Occupational Therapists special interest group (who use Google Groups for communication), then you’ve used a Web 2.0 tool. Despite increasing use of these tools by the public to describe their experiences of occupational therapy intervention (see for example: http://momofthomas.blogspot.com/2007/09/therapy-makes-him-sad.html or http://mtis4gvn.wordpress.com/2007/06/12/we-did-it ), few occupational therapists have systematically explored and then published on the opportunities afforded by Web 2.0 tools. Two exceptions are Babiss [1] who discussed the marketing possibilities, and Erardi and Hartmann [7] who while identifying how Web 2.0 tools could broaden professional connections for purposes such as continuing education failed to demonstrate how the tools could be utilised.

This article builds on the early writings of occupational therapists focusing on the use of blogging to support ongoing learning (refer to Iain Doherty’s “Web 2.0: A Movement Within The Health Community” in this edition for a definition of blogging).

3. Blogging as a mechanism for learning

Occupational therapists engage in a range of methods for managing their ongoing learning. For example, Jackie Herkt’s [8] recently published research firmly places supervision as part of a learning experience. Experienced therapists in her study described the value of supervision as being the "gaining of knowledge......the weigh[ing] up of different perspectives....consider[ing] whether their practice or actions needed to change." [8]

While a supervisor can give one perspective that is different to that of the supervisee, attendance at a seminar or workshop can also provide the individual with multiple perspectives from both the presenter and other attendees. Therapists also gain from a range of perspectives in more informal settings such as informally discussing an issue when meeting with other therapists or team members over a coffee break. Supervision or workshop attendance is intentional learning, whereas that which happens when not planned is defined as unintentional learning [9]. In both types of learning, the opportunity to gain from the experience can be variable and very much dependent on the individual’s ability to capture the points discussed, and then to find the time to reflect, to read or discuss further and to engage in deeper learning. Could blogging be one means by which deeper learning can occur, and what does blogging have to offer that is different to the mechanisms we currently use for learning?

Blogging, I believe, does offer opportunities for deeper learning that are different to what we might currently use. As in supervision or seminars, blogging does provide the occupational therapist with an opportunity to "hear" multiple perspectives, but more importantly to engage in ongoing discussion that can lead to deeper learning. How can this happen? The therapist can read another therapist’s blog where the issue has been raised, and not only read other perspectives on the issue but also contribute to the discussion, just as they could at a seminar or around the coffee table. Alternatively a therapist can set up their own blog, writing a posting in such a way that other readers stop to comment. How is this different to the discussion in supervision, or attendance at a workshop? While the immediacy of a face to face discussion can be stimulating, how often do we walk away and in time forget the content of the discussion? What if we want to continue the discussion, but the person who led the seminar is an international expert, and they don’t return to New Zealand for another three years?

Blogging overcomes these restraints of time and geography, allowing ongoing discussion that encourages reflection, active debate/discussion, and learning for all (even if you end up agreeing to disagree). More importantly the discussion is public, so others can learn by following the discussion, even if they choose not to be part of it. Not only is this open discussion valuable for each individual’s learning but as Higgs, Andresen and Fish [10] argue occupational therapy practitioners, educators and researchers share a professional responsibility to use the essential skills of reflection, theorising and researching in order to make explicit practice knowledge; appraise knowledge use; and continually improve practice knowledge for the use of all. Blogging enables individual occupational therapists to meet their professional responsibility in a way that is perhaps more ‘user-
A recent blog posting by an occupational therapy academic at Salford University (http://www.frederickroad.blogspot.com/) demonstrates the value of a public blog as a mechanism for professional sharing. Sarah posted about her experiences of sharing personal information about herself in Facebook. This was responded to by not only two academics from New Zealand but others at Salford University and occupational therapy students. This discussion can be viewed at http://frederickroad.blogspot.com/2007/07/dilemmas-dilemmas.html along with a more recent one about traditional occupational therapy (http://bloggingot.wordpress.com/2007/09/06/traditional-ot/) which was responded to by three occupational therapy students, two academics, three occupational therapists and one occupational therapy assistant from the UK, the US, Finland and New Zealand.

Neither of these topics may have made a professional journal or a professional conference, but in making open their thoughts the two authors of these blogs providing an opportunity for others to reflect on their beliefs and understandings. In doing so, an opportunity to make practice knowledge explicit as described by Higgs, et al [10] occurred. The evidence is clear in the following comments left on these blog postings. From the owners of Frederickroad blog:

_Thanks for all your comments - they have prompted many discussions in amongst our team!_

And by one academic to the owner of blogging OT about the posting on traditional occupational therapy:

_Your blog entry promoted much discussion between my colleagues and I today. A few students joined in too, and we had a really interesting debate, so thank you for that._

What do I gain from being part of this online professional community? For me it is the opportunity to see what other occupational therapists consider to be important issues, to read the postings and the responses and to respond myself thus engaging with my international colleagues. This level of interaction wouldn’t be possible if people such as Sarah (http://frederickroad.blogspot.com) or Aishel (http://bloggingot.wordpress.com) didn’t choose to share their thoughts in such a way that discussion was provoked. Both issues discussed in their blogs are ones that either I hadn’t considered, or hadn’t thought about for many years, yet the process of being involved in the discussions did lead to a learning experience for me.

Having been involved in such discussions I believe that blogging is a legitimate tool for therapists wishing to raise issues related to their practice. Obviously under the Occupational Therapy Board of New Zealand Code of Ethics [11] we can’t discuss specific clients, or situations such that others might recognise them, but we can discuss related issues (see for example a posting by Karen Dobyns, an occupational therapy student who shows how this might be done: http://otstudents.blogspot.com/2007/06/dont-judge-book-by-its-cover.html).

4. Blogging as a reflective tool

Not only do blogs provide opportunities for indepth discussion and interaction on a national or international level, but they are also excellent tools for facilitating reflection at various levels as described by Valli [12] as technical (matching performance against external guidelines); reflection-in and on-action (basing decisions on unique situations); deliberative reflection (comparing personal viewpoints with research findings); personalistic reflection (being guided by one’s inner voice and the voices of others); and critical reflection (considering the social, moral and political issues). Examples of occupational therapy postings indicative of each level can be found. But why reflect and why reflect in such a public forum?

A recent article by occupational therapy academic Roberts [13] outlines the value of reflection. As mentioned earlier authors and contributors to blogs are engaging in reflection, an essential step in the recertification process [footnote A] that occupational therapists need to do [14]. Roberts suggests a number of strategies to encourage reflection including journal clubs, group reflection or private reflection. Usually any published list of strategies to promote reflection consists of activities that are either written or involve talking. These activities can be done alone, one on one or in small groups. Could blogging be added to these lists of strategies? Clearly creating a blog posting such as Sarah’s (http://frederickroad.blogspot.com/2007/07/dilemmas-dilemmas.html) does provide an opportunity for reflection (also see examples from http://occupationaltherapyotago.wordpress.com, http://oteducation.wordpress.com or http://healthskills.wordpress.com). You can argue of course that this already occurs in the real world - why should a busy therapist take time out to reflect in such a public open forum?
Blogs can be private, in that they can be made available only for a supervisor’s viewing or even be totally private to the individual user. But, if a therapist chooses this option, why not just keep it in notebook? The disadvantage of notebooks is that they don’t allow the user to go back and write over, or change parts (which blogs do allow), as new ideas or understandings are reached. Discussion in supervision can cover a range of topics over duration of the session and it can be difficult after the event to capture the flow of thoughts that occurred. Recording the supervision session online enables both therapist and supervisor to go back and continue the conversation after the supervision session has ended.

However, few occupational therapists appear to find writing of reflective journals easy. This may be in part due to the learning style of the individual. For example, a recent study of occupational therapy students using the VARK [15] showed that many are kinaesthetic or visual learners, with auditory the next preferred option [16] but very few are reader/writers. Therefore it is not surprising that few students, and therefore graduates find writing an effective tool for reflecting, with most choosing to reflect through discussion. However, while the value of face-to-face discussions cannot be denied, it is not always easy to find the listener when they are most needed. And a short conversation may not have the value that ongoing comments in a blog, can offer.

Blogging can work as a mechanism for occupational therapists whose learning style is auditory through the use of audiocasting. With the use of a MP3 player or digital recorder, an occupational therapist can audio record their reflections from a recent experience, and then upload this to their blog. Others reading the blog, can download or listen to the audio file, using the comments box in the blog to raise issues or answer questions raised by the therapist. The technology to do this is not expensive requiring something like a NZ$100 to purchase an MP3 player that has a recording function. An example of the use of audio files can be seen in my own blog (http://oteducation.wordpress.com/2007/04/29/thinking-about-capacity-development).

For the visual learner, blogs can also contain visual images; the process of taking a digital photo and uploading the image being much quicker than printing, cutting and pasting into a journal (see for example http://otstudents.blogspot.com/2008/03/therapeutic-media-lab-marathon.html). Even the kinaesthetic learner’s needs can be met with the use of video files uploaded to the blog and made available for viewing by others.

5. Advantages of blogging

Blogs therefore, provide a viable and dynamic alternative to the notebook style journal. Admittedly while a journal can be carried everywhere and a laptop or computer can’t, the advantages of blogs are that they are permanent and accessible from any where the user can access a computer and an internet connection. They can contain many more postings than a journal, and also allow the therapist to link to online articles or reflections they may have sourced from elsewhere.

In addition, a blog allows for group reflection as described by Roberts [13]. While therapists can meet for this type of discussion, busy schedules often preclude meeting regularly. However, blog entries can be made at any time and any place, and as they are written, the writer, through the process of creating their entry and engaging in ongoing discussion, is encouraged to reflect more deeply. The use of questioning by others, leads to the deeper reflection and therefore the learning that occurs when the occupational therapist pays attention not only to situations that occur in their practice, but also to the idiosyncrasies by asking "what didn’t I pay attention to at the time that I should have?" [17,18]. At times, it is only the questioning of others that points out the idiosyncrasies to the person reflecting, thus, making it possible for the individual to be more explicit, and therefore to more deeply appraise and further develop their practice knowledge [10].

Another advantage for the use of blogs is in the ability to read others’ postings. A therapist who creates a blog is more likely to also read others blogs, and hence reflection is further stimulated. While Roberts [13] notes that reflection can be precipitated by a surprising event, it can also be precipitated by an educational event, or a series of conversation with a colleague, or client or family member, or by an observation of another’s practice. Reading of others’ blogs can precipitate further discussion and thus opportunities for reflection which leads to deeper learning, and hence to advanced practice as outlined by Roberts [13], through the use of spirited enquiry [17]. The opportunity to read and leave comment is also available for those occupational therapists who do not want to maintain their own blog, but who do want to enter into the online community made possible through existing bloggers.

Finally, blogs have the potential to offer more than just benefits to the individual occupational therapist, whether blog owner, or poster. Engaging in reflection is "at the heart of what it means to be professional" [13], ensuring that practitioner decision-making is not ruled by tradition, authority or circumstance, but is informed by a person’s professional knowledge base [20,21]. A professional knowledge base is created through blending three
types of knowledge - propositional, generated through research and scholarship; personal, generated through life experiences; and professional craft, generated through professional experience [22]. Reflection is considered essential to the creation of professional craft and personal knowledges [10,23] and is integral in the creation of propositional knowledge that is “created to explain, explore or extend practice” [10]. The use of blogs by all in the profession (academics, scholars, practitioners and students) is a powerful tool for the blending of propositional, personal and professional craft knowledges in order to further the professional knowledge base of the profession, not just that of a few individuals.

6. Summary

Clearly blogging is more than a social diary or a daily journal of “what I did today”. Examples given in this article show occupational therapists, occupational therapy students and occupational therapy academics reflecting on their experiences and using the discussion that develops to further not only their own understanding, but that of others. In doing so, these pioneering occupational therapists are also indicating a potential mechanism for the blending of propositional, personal and professional craft knowledge to build the occupational therapy professional knowledge base.

Blogs are a powerful tools that overcome the boundaries of time and geography, enabling occupational therapists to connect in different ways. Blogs enable reflection and, thus, learning not only of individual, or small groups of occupational therapists but also provide a mechanism by which the profession’s knowledge base can be grown. Blogs therefore are an incredibly useful tool to be used as adjuncts to, or replacements for, some of our existing tools of learning or supervision. This article suggests the possibilities, the potential of which is limited only by our willingness to experiment.

NB: To locate a list of occupational therapy blogs check out http://oteducation.wordpress.com/occupational-therapy-blogs/. I maintain and update this list regularly as new blogs are launched.

Footnotes

A. To demonstrate ongoing competence to practice the Occupational Therapy Board of New Zealand [12] requires that occupational therapists complete a competence plan which consists of a number of steps including a self-assessment against given competencies; identifying objectives and a plan for continuing competence; recording when the activities have been completed; and, critically reflecting on the outcomes.

7. References


