



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Enhancing Occupational Therapy Students' Knowledge, Competence, Awareness, and Interest in Accessibility



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Summary *Objective/Background:* The purpose of this study was to assess whether the incorporation of an environmental assessment for accessibility, as part of an "Activity Analysis" course, would enhance new students' knowledge, competence, awareness, and interest in accessibility issues for people with disabilities.

Methods: In this research, we included an out-of-class training of environmental assessment for accessibility. One hundred and two 1st-year occupational therapy students at Tel Aviv University participated in this research. Of the 102 participants, 56 experienced the training and 46 did not but attended the regular Activity Analysis course. The students explored a typical community environment, during which a specific checklist was used for assessing levels of accessibility. The "Accessibility-Knowledge Competence Awareness and Interests" questionnaire was administered before and after the course to both groups.

Results: Students who participated in the out-of-class training showed significant increases in their knowledge, competence, and partial awareness of accessibility and also had better grades in two separate courses that required knowledge of accessibility. There was no significant difference in the results of the Accessibility-Knowledge Competence Awareness and Interests before and after the Activity Analysis course in the control group.

Conclusion: The findings of the current study support the contribution of teaching 1st-year occupational therapy students the principles and practices of accessibility for people with disabilities, by improving their knowledge and level of competence at this early stage of their professional lives. Further studies are needed, however, to determine the optimal course of implementation in order to enhance awareness and interest in the subject of accessibility.

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Introduction

An enabling environment is one of the central factors in optimizing an individual's performance of his or her everyday activities. This notion has been recognised by professional occupational therapy bodies (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014; Townsend & Polatajko, 2013). The implementation of laws and regulations designed to combat discrimination against individuals with disabilities in Western countries—especially those dealing with the provision of accessibility (Fembek, Butcher, Heindorf, & Wallner-Mikl, 2012; National Governors Association, 2012–2013; The Council of the European Union, 2000; U.S. Department of Justice, 2009; Waddington & Lawson, 2009)—has opened up new opportunities and given hope to those who stand to benefit. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) declared that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments, and the environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society. Subsequently, the education strategy of health professionals needed to be revisited so that students would become aware of, and fully understand, these concepts. Students who enrol in health profession programs can benefit from opportunities to explore the complex challenges facing people with disabilities in everyday life (Flecky, 2011). This poses unique challenges for an occupational therapy education program, whose goal is to implement these ideas into the curriculum (Ratzon, Avrech Bar, & Halevy, 2006).

Occupational therapy educators also need to deal with the challenge of providing an education curriculum that helps students move from a theoretical understanding to application of theory in the complexity of actual service situations (Spalding & Killett, 2010). To bridge this gap, health programs in general, and occupational therapy in particular, use different teaching methods such as problem-based learning (Reeves et al., 2004), clinical experience (Cavanaugh & Cohen, 2012; Rodger, Fitzgerald, Davila, Miller, & Allison, 2011), and simulation (Bethea, Castillo, & Harvison, 2014). Simulation learning has been recognised as facilitating the application of theory within a safe and controlled environment (Hope, Garside, & Prescott, 2011).

Occupational therapy educators use both traditional “chalk and talk” lecture approaches with more active learning techniques in their courses (Bennett, 2001; Jakee, 2011). They “develop teaching styles based on their pedagogical beliefs and use instructional methods that can be broadly classified as teacher-centred (e.g., lectures) or student-centred (e.g., simulation, experiments, field experiences)” (Lawson, 2014). The way educators construct and present course content can lead students to value it in a particular way (Stes, Coertjens, & Van Petegem, 2010). Adult students are better learners when they are actively engaged in learning (Bennett, 2001). Therefore, student-centred methods that involve active learning tend to correlate positively with better academic performance outcomes (Stes et al., 2010). These methods enhance students' experiences and help them integrate and analyse information in ways that lectures and in-class activities

alone cannot (Lawson, 2014). In a study that explored the effectiveness of a universal course design in an occupational therapy curriculum, it was found that occupational therapy students who received multiple and flexible methods of teaching, such as course application through labs and fieldwork, gained a better understanding of the information than students who only received the traditional lecture-based approach (Simmons, Willkomm, & Behling, 2010).

First-year students are generally not aware of the major environmental impact of mobility technology on the lives of people with disabilities. By enabling students to physically experience everyday environmental barriers, they gain a better understanding of the challenges of accessibility for people with disabilities and are more motivated to look for solutions (Block et al., 2005). To this end, several studies have had students use wheelchairs for their mobility. This not only increased the students' awareness of the ramifications of disability but also increased the students' understanding of the importance of accessibility (Grayson & Marini, 1996; Kirby, Crawford, Smith, Thompson, & Sargeant, 2011). Moreover, it has been reported that students who have participated in field work among people with various disabilities claim an understanding of disability as a complex construct involving family and societal groups, occupations, physical environment, and attitudes. Importantly, these students better understood the concept that environmental barriers are a cause for separation from the social milieu and context (Gitlow & Flecky, 2005; Merzel & D'Afflitti, 2003).

In summary, the literature supports the need for developing educational strategies that include both theoretical and practical approaches in a learning process intended to facilitate the students' awareness, raise their levels of competence and knowledge, and arouse their interest in the subject of accessibility for people with disabilities. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether incorporating environmental assessments for accessibility (outside class), as part of an “Activity Analysis” course, would be effective in enhancing students' knowledge and feelings of competence, awareness, and interest in accessibility issues for people with disabilities. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. Was there a difference in knowledge, competence, awareness, and interest in accessibility in occupational therapy students who had experienced the out-of-class training and those who had not experienced the out-of-class training (control group)?
2. Was there a difference in students' achievements in courses that required knowledge of accessibility in those who had experienced the out-of-class training and those who had not?

Methods

Study design

This was a prepost study design: questionnaires were administered prior to the Activity Analysis course and on

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