



Communities, Occupations and Narratives

*Las comunidades,
las ocupaciones
y las narraciones*

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The Fed wasn't concerned with adaptation, writing activities were not therapy, but cultural activism.

People with disabilities were activists in the Fed. I wanted this to be possible for clients I worked with.

With colleagues from the Fed and professions, several groups of people were able to share opportunities to represent their occupational narratives to a wider community

But the community of the occupational therapy profession is a small. The number of OTs world wide is equivalent to the population of Barbados, about a quarter of a million people. Many of them are from the West, and in the West they are mostly white, middle class and female. As a mature student in the 1980s who had spent some time in long term unemployment and drifting between low paid jobs, and having already become involved with the Fed depicted in these slides, I was surprised to find that the conception I had of human occupation was not really recognised in the occupational therapy training of the time. This was so even though my course included visits to a range of working environments such as the local railway works. As we know, many of the issues which we deal with as occupational therapists arise from the wider social, geographical, economic and community environment in which the people we work with live.

Introduction

All human action is framed within a continuous narrative developed around what people do (Mattingly 1998). This presentation discusses ways that occupational therapists can work with clients to make these narratives more explicit.



All human action is framed within a continuous narrative developed around what people do (Mattingly 1998).

La federación de escritores-trabajadores y editores de de la comunidad (Fed) es un comunidad de las narraciones ocupacionales

A lot of the content of this presentation and the references which follow for further reading owes its existence to the practices of community publishing. I can't say much in ten minutes so please contact me to discuss more. I am very interested in discussing similar experiences, so don't hold back. Community publishing is a form of expression which can engage many people in a range of activities. It concerns narratives of human occupations. The publications and performances which result are in a sense meta-narratives of human occupation, a process by which people put themselves and facilitate each other in being part of a story. Mattingly (1998) discusses therapeutic employment as the storymaking between clients and therapists which underpins the engagement of intervention, and describes storymaking as a problem solving process.



For example, to give a brief occupational narrative of my previous life as a bus conductor, I issued a ticket on a rush hour bus every few seconds and saw many hundreds of hands in the process of taking fares. In a city of heavy industry, steel works, cutlery workshops and engineering firms many of the hands had fingers missing. Mattingly (1998) raises another aspect of this problem when she discusses the difference between the way a patient personally experiences their body and we experience the body of the patient technically or physically. She gives examples of narratives which are very like those encountered in community publications, for example a woman with arthritis describing how she finds it hard to chop meat for cooking. She says she has hands like her

grandmothers, she likes to cook, but now she finds it hard. After hearing this story the occupational therapist prescribes a rocker knife.

Hang on a minute, let's think about this. Do you like to cook? I like to cook. Some of the meals I cook come from South American recipes (of course these recipes are adapted for what you can buy in the US or UK!). I might look for a corn fed chicken – you can only buy a *whole* corn fed chicken, not a tray of pieces. You have to use a big cleaver to cut up the chicken - not a rocker knife! It is part of the recipe, the process, the story of the food you are serving. Community publications can be cookbooks, and the recipes are not just technical descriptions of food, but things handed down, an exchange of love stories, family histories, gifts of both narratives and the senses. The story of the patient is not just a thin soup refined out of a technical process producing identical stock cubes, but a rich combination of elements, complex and well marinated.

It is not just in terms of the technical that occupational therapy engagement with narrative is limited. Mattingly (1998) is also concerned with the way that we construct the narratives we experience through our patients in professional terms. One boundary that we must maintain as professionals is that of distance. The orientation we have to our patients is only surface deep, and when we stray beyond that we are concerned that we might be getting overinvolved – it's a danger because we are passionate about occupation. But this distancing is not only from the patient, it is also from ourselves and our own experiences, and from ourselves as members of communities. We separate our occupational therapy lives into 'work' and 'non-work' categories.

Readers should be writers;
a beginner writer is not a
beginner thinker

Los lectores deben ser escritores. Un
escritor principiante no es un
principiante pensador

Working class autobiographers and autodidacts developed community publishing ('publishing' means any dissemination, not just print) to record personal and community experiences of everyday life and vernacular expression, occupations and identities that are threatened and marginal. This tacit knowledge is often not recognised in traditional education, research, or therapeutic practice.

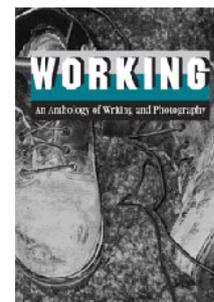
Rapport, despite its importance in building up an occupational history of the patient, is often 'non-work' but forms the basis of our enablement and facilitation of activity. The professional environment and culture in which we work persuades us to misrecognise when we are performing skills – and sharing skills – which underpin our work, the collaborations we form with people, and only to recognise when we treat people as patients. In a project in Sheffield where people with

mental health problems are encouraged to write about their experiences, to knit and talk together, and to work together on a large garden allotment, the clients, the staff and the doctors who refer the clients all stress the pivotal importance of the rapport which has been built up over a long period of working together to maintain this vulnerable group. When other services treat people as patients rather than as people, the rapport is not as strong and the communication not so well invested. Care is haphazard and needs are not met.

This separation is evident in our professional education. Beagan (2007) has noted that working class occupational therapy students can be silenced by the majority of their peers when discussing issues in the middle class milieu of the university environment. This is not a phenomenon restricted to occupational therapy education, but our profession has a very defined profile. Some programmes have sought to address this through service learning or other learning experiences where their students can experience life away from the institutional professional environment and in the wider community. With the narrow culture, gender and class base of the occupational therapy profession there is a risk that many stories cannot emerge, or may not be recognised. Paradoxically, these invisible stories are about everyday occupational activities, vernacular knowledge, the know-how by which people often experience their identity, their acknowledgement from peers, and their identification with communities and spaces. De Certeau and his colleagues (1988, 1998) have called these 'micro histories', stories which refer to where you can buy the best bread, the best pub, the quick route through the centre of town, or the person who can fix your washing machine. Of course, these are stories that occupational therapists share too.

Narratives of doing

Community publication and worker writing reproduce vernacular forms of English (French, Spanish etc) about ordinary lives. Many publications have 'working' (rather than 'occupation,' or 'occupational') in the title, and concern what people do in their working day and the domestic life they return to in the evening.



Community publishing ('publishing' is loosely used to describe many dissemination forms, not merely print) developed as a cultural statement of identity by working class autobiographers and autodidacts. It is concerned with recording personal and community experiences of everyday life and vernacular expression. Really it is a reinvention of earlier or traditional oral or folk expression. This knowledge is often not recognised in traditional education, research, or therapeutic practice. And it sometimes struggles to

be recognised in traditional working class environments. The boots in this photo belong to an American electrician. *She* tells about her fight to be recognised by her own union. Content frequently expresses opposition to the conventions of formal knowledge which would seek to contain and reduce it, intellectualise it, or fix it in the way that folk music traditions became stultified as they were captured by literary collectors and mined out as the sources for classical and popular music. People often record occupations and identities that are threatened and liminal – in ways that reflect their ownership of those occupational identities. I'm going to briefly present some collaborative examples of community publication, risks and benefits, where occupational therapists can develop community engagements with marginal groups.

Occupational therapists can work with clients to make occupational narratives more explicit

The occupational therapy profession has a narrow culture, gender and class base; there is a risk that many stories about everyday occupational activities, vernacular knowledge, the know-how by which people often experience their identity, and express their identification with their communities and spaces may not emerge.

Maybe the first question to ask is what makes life meaningful. This is not such a philosophical problem for many people, it's a question of getting on with whatever it is you have to do – more of an occupational dilemma. I reviewed around 300 examples of writing by Fed writers and found that the majority of them were concerned with their daily work, or the work they had done over their lives, and the relationship to this and where they lived and the people they lived with. But behind this perhaps unsurprising finding was another significant theme for many of them, since they were worker writers. This was experiences of hardship. Many of these narratives could be described as narratives of survival, keeping family together, keeping integrity, but they have all been set against the microhistorical context of their specific community.

This aspect is an important element of the engagement that occurs through community publishing. The work the Fed and local writers in Grimsby did with the Voices Talk, Hands Write group of people with learning difficulties was concerned with the development of publications, performances and community engagements which talked about and demonstrated the group's active membership of their community. They went to visit local places of interest, took part in local events, got on stage and performed and featured in the local press, whereas many people with learning difficulties do not have the opportunity to represent themselves outside the learning difficulty community. An exchange between mental health

service users in Doncaster and a survivors' poetry group (the term survivors refers to survivors of mental distress) in Dumfries featured writing and learning opportunities which were based around local cultures. The Dumfries group taught the Doncaster group about Scots literature and history and the local dialect, and in return some of their group came to a residential course in South Yorkshire to experience Yorkshire culture. Part of the experience included a poetry evening in which both groups performed material that they had written to a local audience.

Do-be-do-be-do: hacer, ser, convirtiéndose, pertenecientes

Do-be-do-be-do: Doing, being, becoming, belonging

Organising cultural activities has many occupational spin-offs, not just writing and sharing experiences in groups, but marketing, publishing, performance, making the tea, the cakes and collecting the money, opening up the workshop and encouraging new members. But... the content of these community narratives is also all about representations of occupation.

Worker writers (including people with experiences of disability) write about: work, their community, their childhood, their family, the changes they have experienced. They write about them because they need to record them for generations who may not believe they have lived as they have done (Vincent 1981).

There are many risks of course with this form of activity. Writing can be very intense and set off powerful feelings. People can be intimidated by using skills they associated with repressive learning regimes in schools – in the Fed we accept that people may not be able to spell, that oral expression can be more effective than writing, the democratisation of the right to cultural expression (and though the tradition of worker writing predates Freire, he was an influence on some of the literacy work in the UK) is paramount. People who are vulnerable should not be exploited for a 'good narrative', but need to have their intellectual copyright respected. Some community members object to the right of others to express themselves, particularly when we are family or community members, exposing family or community issues. In the UK this activity is not usually politically dangerous, but in other countries it would be, or we may need to anticipate that it could easily be.

The benefits are that as writers and community publishers you have formed a cultural group. You can quickly begin to experience occupational spin-offs through your cultural presence and seeking the challenges of taking your narratives to appreciative audiences. Selling books, CDs directly to the audience feels good and gives you positive feedback – products don't have to be expensive or look glossy, just good enough and affordable. It is more important to involve people and to be realistic about how you can sell and distribute your work and to use it to raise awareness on your own terms. You don't even have to be a 'writer', it is important to have cakes and tea, good posters to promote activities, someone to facilitate the group,

manage the funds or negotiate where you can meet or perform.

I have talked about mental health and learning difficulty but any area of disability has the potential for this kind of work: there have been examples in the UK of clients with head and spinal injuries, stroke, dementia, and a number of Fed writers have written from the perspectives of both carers and their own wide ranging experiences of disability.

Conclusion /Contribution to the practice/evidence base of occupational therapy.

It's important to recognise the vernacular knowledge that arises through everyday experience and its centrality to an occupational sense of employment; the challenges arising from the recognition of the vernacular to the paradox of occupational therapy's holism in combination with a narrow culture, gender and class base, and the potential of community publishing approaches to addressing these issues. Finally, the narrative element of community publishing may offer a tool for a range of spin-off activities or as an intervention stage. Please contact me if you want to talk more.

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