

Creative Arts for Persons with Disabilities: Uniquely Collaborating with the Very Special Arts

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Abstract

This poster describes a unique community partnership between an occupational therapy program (a course in Creative Occupations) and the Very Special Arts/Nebraska. The Very Special Arts/Nebraska is a 501(c)3 organization with a mission to promote creativity in persons with disabilities and special needs by providing educational opportunities and fulfillment through the arts. Students participated in sessions to help individuals with disabilities engage in the creative arts. Artists from the community provided the instruction in visual arts, music, drama or dance. The intent of the collaboration with the artists was to promote inspiration, inclusion and participation for clients with the creative arts. The hands-on experiences were also service learning opportunities that helped to celebrate and build community.

Objectives

1. Gain an understanding of and value for the creative arts when working with persons with disabilities
2. Gain awareness about the lived experience of persons with disabilities who pursue creative arts as a career
3. Describe the unique collaboration of the VSA and local arts council in educating others especially students about the opportunities for persons with disabilities and the creative arts
4. Describe three different creative arts experiences as unique hands on learning opportunities for occupational therapy students in the community

The collaboration with the VSA Nebraska provided unique hands on experiences as well as service learning opportunities to also celebrate and build community. Some of the artists with disabilities came to class to share their personal experiences of working in the creative arts as a career and overcoming stigmas or barriers as well as describing effective adaptations with tools or processes. Guest artists for some of the workshops in the community provided unique experiences with music, theatre, dance or visual arts. Students provided insights and perspectives about client populations, participation, adaptation of tools, environments, or procedures and ways to promote client engagement with the media.



Students worked with various artists and clients on site in both hospitals, clinics, residential facilities and in the community. Artists, musicians, actors/directors, and choreographer/dancers provided a variety of experiences that allowed students to see that the creative arts were meaningful occupations to many persons with disabilities. Many clients had engaged in the creative arts before occupational therapy services were required and now wanted to re-engage in these creative occupations or learn new creative occupations.

Creative Arts Experiences with the VSA



Dr. David Nabb, Music Professor from the University of Nebraska Kearney demonstrates an adapted saxophone developed so he could play the instrument successfully with one hand. Dr. Nabb had a stroke and identified playing the saxophone as one of his primary occupations both vocationally and for leisure with his family and friends. During Dr. Nabb's visit to class, students were able to hear his lived experience of having a stroke and his road to playing the saxophone again. He discussed physical adaptations to his musical instrument but his primary hurdle was his initial depression and wondering if he could ever engage in the creative arts again.

"I will never forget Dr. Nabb relating the need for client centered practice and how playing music was his main rehabilitation goal. The other rehabilitation objectives such as regaining ADL skills were secondary to him. He emphasized that his depression needed to be addressed as much as his physical needs and he was wanted developing occupational therapists to truly address the whole person." Student in OTD 331

Michael Fitzsimmons is a professional drummer who provided an experience with therapeutic drumming for clients at Quality Living in Omaha, NE. QLI is a residential facility treating clients with traumatic brain injury. Everyone from clients to staff and students participated in the drumming session with a variety of drums and percussion instruments. Persons who otherwise never participate in other types of sessions become animated and actively engaged with the drumming.



Occupational therapy educators can utilize the creative arts as a part of confluent learning, engaging students with the affective part of learning. Fidler (1999) stated that the creative arts are a means of stimulating and stretching the imagination, engaging the senses and the mental processes that enhances the individual's ability to understand as well as problem solve. One of the objectives of the Creative Occupations course was to help students gain a first hand understanding of creative arts and value creative arts on several levels. The creative arts is part of a client's identity and the creative occupations can be a powerful tool for therapy.



Capturing Lived Experiences of Artists with Disabilities

Some of the artists with disabilities have chosen a career in the creative arts. These artists were interviewed by the occupational therapy course instructor. The artists provided insights regarding barriers and challenges encountered as well as tips for successfully pursuing the creative arts as a career. The interviews are included in a DVD developed for public dissemination and education. The artists discuss how the artist with a disability thrive in the competitive creative arts world. The DVD was intended to:

- Raise awareness about assisting persons with disabilities in the creative arts especially those who seek a career in the arts
- Provide inspiration, increased understanding and value of the creative arts as an important aspect in the lives of individuals with or without disabilities
- Reduce the stigma of working with persons with disabilities who dream of working in the creative arts or want continued engagement in the creative arts as a leisure pursuit
- Hear and see success stories of artists with disabilities
- Identify and develop community resources to assist persons with disabilities engage in the creative arts (examples include a prevocational workshop, training manual with mentors in the community, city wide arts festival showcasing work from artists with disabilities as well as artists without disabilities, scheduling TV or radio interviews of artists with disabilities, etc)

Collaboratively discussing this DVD can be an enriching learning experience. It can be more effective to see and hear actual artists with disabilities talk about their personal and professional experiences than to read a chapter in a book or an article in a journal. Here are some questions for students to consider:

- What important lessons or tips were shared by the artists? What were some of the individual stumbling blocks that were discussed by each artist and how did he or she reframe the challenge?
- Once you inspire or support someone to go for their dream of a career in the creative arts, what is the next step? What resources do you have in your community to assist persons with disabilities pursue a career in the creative arts? What can be done to help your community better understand the need? Are there funding sources to assist in this endeavor?



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