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Using Problem Based Learning in Training Health Professionals: Should it Suit the Individual' s Learning Style?

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ABSTRACT

Context: Recently, problem-based learning (PBL) methods have been incorporated into occupational therapy (OT) curricula as in healthcare curricula worldwide. Yet, most studies examining the effectiveness of these methods have not taken into account the individuals' learning style and occupational functioning, despite of their importance. Objective: Our research examined the question of whether specific learning styles correlate with a higher self-evaluation by occupational therapy students of their occupational functioning (learning, studying) during a new course incorporating PBL method and with greater course satisfaction. Methods: 40 female students took part in the study. The various learning demands in the new PBL course are described. We assessed students' learning styles using Felder' s Index of Learning Styles, while Self-Assessments of Occupational Functioning (SAOF) provided learning outcome data. We used both a modified 23-item SAOF and a novel 26-item adapted version, to examine the occupational functioning required of healthcare practitioners. Course satisfaction was assessed accordingly. Results: Occupational therapy students adopt all learning styles (sensing, intuitive, visual, verbal, active, reflective, sequential, and global) equally. Nevertheless, two-tailed Pearson' s tests revealed that a sensing (i.e. practical, facts-oriented) learning style most strongly correlates with greater assessed occupational functioning in the areas of habituation and performance, e.g. time organization, routine flexibility, and communication ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.05$). An intuitive learning style correlates with a significant ability to identify problems ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$) and set goals ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.05$), and global learning style yielded greater course satisfaction ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.05$). Conclusions: Students having sensing and intuitive learning styles gain most from the use of PBL method. Thus, the apparently contradictory findings of earlier research regarding the efficacy of PBL methods may have arisen from differences in the learning styles of the populations surveyed. Since problem-based and traditional teaching methods appear to suit different learning styles and to better impart different skill sets, they should be regarded as complementary.

KEYWORDS

Healthcare Education, Teaching Methods, Occupational Therapy, Occupational Performance (Functioning)

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