Assessment in Practice

The Occupational Therapy Assistant Program: A Case Study

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August 2021

Introduction

Over the last seven years, LaGuardia's Occupational Therapy Assistant (OTA) Program engaged in extensive work to develop pedagogical practices to address "Evolving the Loop" of assessment for learning. This work involved two critical elements: the careful consideration of the OTA Program curriculum for scaffolding new assignments, and the assessment of student learning to embrace the new Core Competencies and Communication Abilities. At key junctures, the program redeveloped its ePortfolio culture to support longitudinal learning, curricular cohesion, and reflective practice. The OTA Program's needs were complex because we needed to align the Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs), the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE) standards (it has 175!), the LaGuardia Mission, and the new Core Competencies and Communication Abilities. Faculty professional development thus became essential for our success, especially through our CTL seminars and Learning Matters Mini-Grants, focused on the Core Competencies and Communication Abilities. The mini-grants unfolded over multiple semesters to provide sustained support for curricular integration, including for assignment development, piloting, revision, and feedback data from our annual Benchmark Readings.

To better understand our process, it's important to know what our program teaches. Occupational therapy is defined as the "therapeutic use of everyday life occupations with persons, groups, or populations (i.e., the client) for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation" (AOTA, 2020). An occupational therapy assistant is a vital member of the interprofessional health care team who delivers occupational therapy services to clients in settings across the life span and health care

continuum under the supervision of and in partnership with an occupational therapist (AOTA, 2020a). The LAGCC OTA Program is one of ten Allied Health programs in our Health Sciences Department. The program completion leads to an Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree, and full-time students can complete the clinical phase in eighteen months. At completion, graduates become occupational therapy assistants eligible to sit for the National Board Certification for Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) examination required to license practice in New York State.

The program fulfills LaGuardia's Mission: educating a diverse student body of critical thinkers who are actively engaged in learning, and who are well-prepared to enter the evolving healthcare services workforce in traditional and emerging areas around Queens, New York. Indeed, our OTA student profile reflects the breadth and diversity of LaGuardia's students: non-native born students consistently comprise 60-70% of those admitted to the clinical phase. The majority of our students are also non-traditional: typically, more than 50% are over 30 years old. The program builds on this diversity to prepare students to collaborate in diverse healthcare teams and with diverse clients within their communities.

Our process for revising student learning outcomes in the OTA program to integrate LaGuardia's new general education competencies and abilities helps make visible how the College 'Evolved the Loop.' After LaGuardia developed its new general education framework, assessment and Academic Affairs leaders provided workshops to academic program directors to examine their curriculum maps to identify courses at key points in the curriculum where the Core Competencies and Communication Abilities could be intentionally embedded and assessed. Program directors returned to their departments with proposed changes, and received further input from faculty and department chairs. The curricular integration of the new competencies and abilities was particularly challenging for the OTA Program because of three separate and mutually dependent processes addressing programmatic and student learning outcomes: the action steps from our 2013-2014 Periodic Program Review (PPR); our on-going ACOTE Self-Study for re-accreditation in 2015-2016; and our re-design of OTA's Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs). All three processes required OTA program leadership and faculty to carefully examine the new general education rubrics next to our program's curriculum map (Figure 1), course syllabi, course objectives, and key assignments. Program learning outcomes (Figure 2) had to explicitly address the ACOTE standards for curriculum to meet the clinical and professional competencies required of the entry-level occupational therapy practitioner. Developing a strong ePortfolio pedagogy played a central role in our work to support curricular cohesion and to provide evidence of learning across the curriculum.

Evolving the Loop in the OTA Program

Before we could create an ePortfolio strategy, we had to revise our curriculum. This was urgent because our program Benchmark Reading in 2013-2014 coincided with LaGuardia's revision to its general education competencies. The OTA Program curriculum map thus needed to be reimagined. The

faculty needed to consider how recent program review recommendations would incorporate the curricular work of developing methods and pedagogy to address those competencies and abilities. Considering Global Learning, Integrative Learning, and Digital Communication would be a priority — after all, conceptualizing these in the OTA Program curriculum would require full-time and part-time faculty to engage in extensive curricular review to identify courses that would align with them. What did it mean to be a "global learner" or an "integrative learner," and to be an occupational therapy assistant student developing a professional identity? How did the faculty interpret the language and implications of these competencies and abilities for application to their courses? The program leadership designed a series of faculty conversations and budgeted at least one or two years for the process, but support structures and funding from the college would be necessary.

College support made the process of designing change easier. OTA faculty participated in CTL seminars, and secured a Learning Matters Mini-Grant to address assignment development for the new competencies and abilities. Their priority was understanding the rubrics for Global Learning, Integrative Learning, and Digital Communication, and especially the ways they would align with the OTA Program curricular threads and program learning outcomes. It was necessary, then, to compare how the rubric dimensions could be incorporated into program assignments.

The first step involved examining the curriculum map [see Figure 1] that showed a student's pathway to degree completion. Faculty identified courses in the early, middle, and late phases of the clinical program whose objectives and content closely aligned with the new Competencies and Abilities. These courses were targeted for assignment development that would align with the general education rubrics. Conversation ranged over what assignments (current and new) might work best in the selected courses where they would be piloted and deposited as student artifacts for assessment. Mapping the courses also set the stage for longitudinal assessment, since the maps would indicate to faculty which courses would need to deposit student work for scoring against the relevant rubrics. This became the OTA Program deposit map (Figure 1).

LAGCC OTA PROGRAM	BASELINE	INITIAL PHASE - EARLY				MIDDLE PHASE - MIDDLE					FINAL PHASE - LATE				
	HSF090	SCO 101	SCO110	SCO200	SCO230	SCO 204	SCO 214	SCO114	SCO 284	SCO 294	SCO 205	SCO 215	SCO 175	SCO 285	SCO 295
Inquiry & Problem Solving					Written/Digital							Written			
Integrative Learning		Digital	Oral/Digital			Digital				Digital	Oral				Digital
Global Learning	Written	Oral/Digital					Digital		Written		Oral/Written		Written/Digital		

	CC/CA	ASSIGNMENT	SEMESTER	
INITIAL PHASE				
SCO101	IL/DIG	eMap of Life	FA I & SP I	
	GL/DIG	Global Summit	FA I & SP I	
MIDDLE PHASE				
				Refelction that conncects multiple artifacts
SCO204	IL/DIG	OTA Journey Revision	FA I & SP I NEW	
SCO294	IL/DIG	Professional Development	FA II & SP II	
FINAL PHASE				
SCO295	IL/DIG	Professional Development	FA II & SP II	

Figure 1. OTA Program Deposit Map.

Using the general education rubrics, faculty developed new competency-based assignments for the identified courses in CTL and mini-grant seminars, then piloted and revised them. Next, they deposited artifacts of student work for the annual Benchmark Reading assessment to see how they worked with the rubrics. Faculty then examined the data they received from the annual assessment to make revisions to assignments and to re-affirm the curriculum deposit map. Most significantly, the benchmark data was used to revise assignments created for Global Learning and Integrative Learning. Making those two competencies foundational early in the OTA Program helped develop them into the curriculum, and drove forward pedagogy through to the Capstone. The Integrative Learning rubric's dimension prompting self-reflection on learning and experience, for example, supported how students developed their professional identity and leadership during their assignments (See Figure 2; PLO #5).The program introduced and reinforced this dimension of the rubric using ePortfolio practice, which we address in more detail below.

Figure 2. The Occupational Therapy Assistant Program: Program Learning Outcomes.

1. Demonstrate the ability to integrate academic coursework and clinical experiences to achieve the professional identity of the entry-level occupational therapy assistant. (**Integrative Learning**)
2. Identify the role of engagement in meaningful occupation in the promotion of health and well-being across the lifespan within the global community. (**Global Learning**)
3. Use critical thinking and clinical reasoning to identify, select, and perform client-centered, evidence-based interventions in a variety of practice settings. (**Inquiry and Problem Solving**)
4. Communicate effectively in oral, written, and digital media using vocabulary appropriate to the audience. (**Oral, Written, and Digital Communication Abilities**)
5. Use reflection and self-assessment to develop a sense of self as a learner to support the development of leadership qualities (**Integrative Learning**)

Simultaneous with the piloting and revision of the new Core Competency and Communication Abilities rubrics during the 2015-2016 academic year, the OTA Program engaged in the Self-Study process for re-accreditation by ACOTE. This year-long process required a faculty-driven, comprehensive assessment of all facets of the program including administrative, curricular, and clinical fieldwork standards. Mapping the clinical program courses to the ACOTE curriculum and clinical fieldwork standards provided opportunities to align the LaGuardia and ACOTE learning outcomes assessment processes. Faculty participation in CTL seminars and mini-grants organized around the new Competencies and Abilities over a multi-year period was necessary to fully implement the changes to the program. The program director led initiatives with small teams of faculty who made changes and assessed them. The teams would share their results with the rest of the program before implementing new changes. Regular meetings focused on accreditation allowed faculty to crystallize how the general education curriculum could also address our goal to

strengthen the OTA Program for 21st century learning. Merging our college and program assessment practices with national accreditation standards resulted in relevant and intentional linkages. Each process supported the other in a systematic, complementary manner. The alignment and implementation of our program learning outcomes with LaGuardia's competencies and abilities provided a foundation for assessing student learning over time, allowing us to see student growth emerge in key competencies and abilities.

CTL seminars focused on Digital Communication and Integrative Learning provided vital support to faculty during our process, but so did mini-grants framed through intensive ePortfolio pedagogy. Crucially, connecting curricular threads around the general competencies and abilities to our ePortfolio practice became a common foundation for faculty and students to examine and discuss learning over time. The development of the core ePortfolio provided a student-centric site to upload assignments, to introduce curricular and co-curricular connections, to engage in reflection and professional development, and to make longitudinal learning visible.

Outcomes Assessment and ePortfolio in the OTA Program

We determined that deepening our ePortfolio practice would be meaningful to students, faculty, and the college because ePortfolio makes learning and professional growth highly visible. The multi-year development of the OTA program's student learning outcomes thus acts as a case study for Evolving the Loop with ePortfolio practice. The development and infusion of ePortfolio as a pedagogy across the OTA Program curriculum became a central, driving force in the program. Our focus on LaGuardia's Integrative Learning Core Competency and our Digital Communication Ability provided the foundation for considering how ePortfolio practice could be utilized for a broader and deeper purpose in our curriculum.

We wanted our ePortfolio practice to be student-driven, supported by carefully crafted and scaffolded assignments with intentional opportunities for reflection on learning over time. In addition to providing a visible and meaningful space for student self-authorship and metacognitive reflection, we envisioned ePortfolios as a space to support curricular cohesion, assess longitudinal learning for general education, provide opportunities for advisement, and reinforce growth of professional identity and leadership. In order to meet these objectives, OTA Program faculty secured an ePortfolio Learning Matters Mini-Grant for two consecutive years. Our ePortfolio pedagogy would be developed as a high-impact practice throughout the OTA Program curriculum over that time in a scaffolded, intentional way. We would use that time to also create a core ePortfolio that each student would use throughout all their academic courses and co-curricular experiences in the program. The core ePortfolio would evolve through modifications in the Digication platform to allow for greater individuation, self-expression, and reflection.

We began our mini-grant work by identifying key characteristics of our clinical phase students and the use of ePortfolio in the curriculum. First, we considered the importance of sustained academic excellence in the pre-clinical phase

necessary to achieve candidacy into the OTA Program. We found that students often took a siloed approach to taking key courses in order to achieve a higher GPAs and candidacy rank scores for successful admission to the clinical phase. This led to a greater disconnection between the pre-clinical and clinical phase courses. Once they gained admittance to the OTA clinical phase, they generally perceived general education as less important, which also diminished the liberal arts education they articulated. By revising our assignments with the college's new competencies and abilities, we would stress their affinity with modes of liberal arts learning, and hopefully would help students see their value.

Second, we considered our ePortfolio practices anew, and how some faculty and students perceived ePortfolio as a "filing cabinet" for housing student work, or just a functional requirement for the annual Benchmark Reading. In addition to the lack of connection between the general education coursework in the ePortfolio, students were not asked to identify or explain the ways in which learning built over time in the curricular sequence. Self-reflection was minimal and reserved for the end of the Capstone course. We asked ourselves key questions about the ramifications of these disconnections and the lack of cohesion in the curriculum: How could we develop ePortfolio pedagogy to demonstrate visible connections across general education and the OTA Program clinical courses, and curricular cohesion and longitudinal learning for students, faculty, and external stakeholders?

In turn, we created a process for curricular cohesion whereby students could connect and apply previous learning to different contexts across the curriculum. We introduced an initial ePortfolio template (See Figure 3) that successfully integrated key elements of three distinct ePortfolios as a pilot. This process successfully provided a consolidated core ePortfolio that would provide the foundation for curricular cohesion. Using the program deposit map, assignments were crafted and strategically placed in the curriculum to create opportunities for students to make connections to assignments and experiences in pre-clinical courses and then for clinical courses and fieldwork. These assignments also made visible the competency and ability curricular threads that students would utilize for the core ePortfolio, which integrated their work from First Year Seminar to capstone. We provide examples later in this paper.
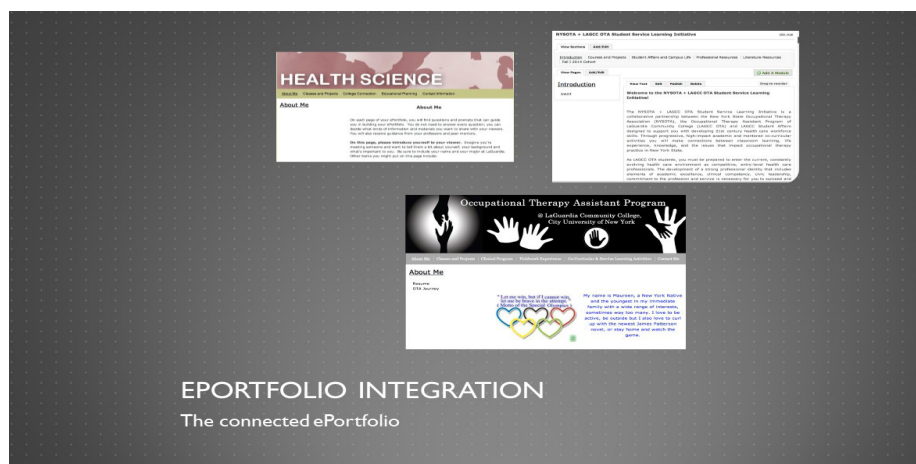
Figure 3. Initial ePortfolio template.

The integrated core ePortfolio template laid the groundwork for the next phase of our ePortfolio strategy. We wanted to support curricular cohesion and longitudinal learning with the new competencies. Moreover, the next-generation interface created by Digication provided even more capacity for connectivity for the core ePortfolio because it allowed for new media and design features. It also supported new digital assignments that would allow us to leverage the entire core ePortfolio for Integrative Learning. With longitudinal learning in mind, we created a scaffolded process where students could intentionally reflect on their professional transformation from student to occupational therapy practitioner, and where faculty could provide advisement accordingly.

As noted, over 60% of students in the OTA Program are immigrants and non-native English speakers. It became evident early in the clinical program that these students had difficulty contextualizing and articulating the value that their diversity brought to the practice of occupational therapy. We asked ourselves: how could ePortfolio pedagogy and assignments designed to align with Integrative Learning, Global Learning, and Digital Communication support self-reflection, communication, professional development, transformation, and self-advocacy? We revised assignments in each phase of the program so that ePortfolio practice became the driving tool to address these formative questions. Further, we saw the recursive staging of assignments as a model for curricular cohesion and longitudinal learning, and to create opportunities for self-advocacy, professional development, and strategic advisement. We paid particular attention to creating and revising assignments that would closely align with the rubric dimensions and language of the Integrative Learning, Global Learning, and Digital Communication Ability; the rubric dimensions already pointed toward our objectives.

We piloted the first assignments in our Introduction to Occupational Therapy course in the clinical program. We considered it an ideal place to lay the groundwork for the curricular threads for the Integrative and Global competencies and Digital ability. We scaffolded our 'Interactive eMap of Life' assignment, developed as an ePortfolio digital template, in three distinct 'chapters' through the semester. Each asked students to progressively explore connections between course and learning contexts, including linking their life experiences to global issues in health care. We felt these links would make personal growth visible, and that the visibility could also arise through the multimedia ePortfolio platform. The assignment asked students to utilize Prezi as the tool for their interactive, digital presentations. We included the dimensions of the Digital Communication rubric defining multimedia and holistic design in the grading criteria for the assignment. Through

hyperlinks, the students make connections from the assignment to other sections of the core ePortfolio, including pre-clinical coursework, an Occupational Therapy Journey Statement, and a professional conference poster constructed for the Global Occupational Therapy Summit. They address Integrative Learning through reflective prompts to reinforce professional growth and the development of the occupational therapy assistant identity.

In the middle phase of our clinical curriculum, we integrated ePortfolio practice with Integrative Learning and Digital Communication into both the academic courses and the co-curricular clinical fieldwork experience. We scaffolded three ePortfolio-based assignments through the first 200-level clinical applications course. We empowered students to utilize the Digication ePortfolio so they could design the look and feel of the sub-pages to individually express the multimedia and holistic concepts of the Digital Communication rubric.

For their first full-time, Level II fieldwork experience in the middle phase of the program, students now engage in a reflective exercise designed by Michele Mills, OTR/L, who is the students' Academic Fieldwork Coordinator (AFWC). The exercise addresses their midterm evaluation, which is provided by the clinical educator, to develop a professional development plan for improvement in targeted areas for the remainder of the clinical experience. In turn, the AFWC utilizes the professional development plan for advisement toward graduation and career path. A final reflection in the course asks students to incorporate their experiences of the clinical coursework and the co-curricular fieldwork to formulate a revised Occupational Therapy Journey Statement. In that reflection, students connect the Integrative Learning dimensions to their experiential learning. The reflection acts as a site for making their emerging leadership and professional identity visible to themselves.

In the final phase of the clinical program, these threads were pulled through into the Capstone course and the terminal, full-time, Level II fieldwork experience. The Capstone course studio-hour focuses on ePortfolio-based assignments that include a student-authored 'best practice' video, a community-based advocacy assignment, and a final Occupational Therapy Journey Statement, one which incorporates the programmatic curricular and co-curricular experiences as a whole. Integrative Learning and Digital Communication form the foundation for students' terminal fieldwork experiences in physical disabilities and pediatric practice. Students engage in a second, recursive professional development assignment process to continue their journey toward entry-level clinical competence. They also integrate advisement by the AFWC to consider their career readiness and clinical practice, and they use their ePortfolios for self-reflection.

The final core ePortfolio is a culmination of the entire OTA Program degree curriculum. The core ePortfolio demonstrates the outcome of carefully scaffolded assignments and reflections to reveal the students' transformations into occupational therapy practitioners ready for entry-level practice. The learning outcomes for the assignment again incorporated dimensions from Integrative Learning, Global Learning, and Digital Communication. The ripple effect of the core ePortfolio has helped make student's professional identity and leadership qualities more visible, and also encouraged opportunities to for students to support each other's emerging professional voices. Making their growth visible empowers students to feel like they're directing their own future. For example, students are able to narrate how the program has advanced their career goals in occupational therapy, and provide examples of coursework to show their range of accomplishments. Further, they're able to design a professionalized site where they can share their program learning with external audiences, including potential employers.

At this point, we conceive the student's core ePortfolio practice as a multi-layered site for assessment, and one that integrated national, collegewide, and program methodologies and learning objectives. Since our restructuring, we have seen steady progress toward competency in all areas we've measured. We feel the positive effects of our implementation of ePortfolio as a high-impact practice across our curriculum. Of course, assessing for learning is an iterative process, and our annual assessments of the competencies, abilities, and program learning outcomes always gives us new ideas for evolving our curriculum to revise assignments to better reflect changes in occupational therapy, and to address our rapidly evolving society.

Please Cite As:

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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