

Craftivism for occupational therapists: finding our political voice

Craftivism and occupational therapy

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Abstract:

Craftivism is an ongoing movement, combining craft with activism, to bring about positive change in the world. There is a growing emphasis on the need for occupational therapists to engage with the politics of the profession to tackle occupational challenges and injustice. This opinion piece considers whether, with the historical links to and resurgence of craft internationally within the profession, now is the time for occupational therapists to engage in craftivism to effect positive change and transformation for a just and inclusive society. It suggests that craftivism may enable the profession to find its political voice and suggests ideas for action.

Introduction

This opinion piece examines the topic of craftivism and considers its potential for occupational therapy. It starts with a description of craftivism followed by a brief history of the role of craft in occupational therapy. The fit between the philosophy of craftivism and the founding principles of occupational therapy is discussed. Finally it is suggested that craftivism may be one way for occupational therapists to enhance their professional voice and offers ideas for occupational therapists to start to promote the profession in an effective and creative way.

Craftivism

Craftivism, which combines ‘craft’ with ‘activism’, has been defined as “the art of gentle protest” (Corbett 2017, loc 3) and as “creating something that gets people to ask questions” (Greer 2014, loc 117). It is a growing worldwide movement where people engage in creative craft skills to address political or social causes. It is about creating changes at grass root level, identifying an issue to highlight and then crafting something to get the message across. This could be stitching a message on a flag, weaving words onto street signs, knitting messages of hope into clothing, making handmade items to raise money for charity. Craftivism enables people to have their voice heard in an alternative way when the usual channels of communication may not have been effective. It works due in part to the dissonance between what is seen as an unthreatening occupation (craft) and the message highlighting a political or social concern.

Although the term craftivism was first coined in 2003 by Betsy Greer, on her website <http://craftivism.com>, it is not a new idea. As Lothian (2018) describes, the Suffragettes stitched banners, sewed slogans and handcrafted items to raise money. During the dictatorship of Pinochet, women stitched fabric pictures (“arpilleras”) to depict the difficulty of life under the regime and to record the many people who were disappeared. These arpilleras were smuggled out of Chile to inform the world of their plight. A more recent example of craftivism is the 1996 AIDS memorial quilt, designed to celebrate the lives of those who had died of AIDS and to highlight the scale of the

health issue at the time. Other examples include support for the Occupy Movements in 2011 through craft projects, and supportive friendship flags to improve community spirit following the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013. There are many ongoing projects such as guerrilla kindness (handcrafted artworks left in cities around the world to raise people's moods), charity quilting, crafting collectives, collaborative bunting, and interactive yarn storming, where public spaces are decorated to convey specific ideas. While some craftivism objects are designed to spread happiness with messages of affirmation, others have a particular message attached to highlight a social or political issue, designed to enhance awareness or stimulate debate. Craftivism's intention is to make the world a better place by "promoting challenging conversations instead of silencing them" (Greer 2014, loc 1528). All of these projects are aimed at bringing people together, challenging the status quo, asking the receiver to consider the concern more actively, or offering collective support in the face of tragedy or injustice.

### Occupational therapy and arts and crafts

Early occupational therapy pioneers in both Europe and America were influenced by the moral treatment movement (Reed et al 2013). The central tenet of the moral movement was a humanist approach to enabling active engagement in occupation for people confined in asylums. Craft was seen as one of these occupations which had a therapeutic benefit. The Arts and Craft Movement, led by both John Ruskin and William Morris, also inspired the development of craft within occupational therapy. Ruskin and Morris founded guilds to further the value of handicrafts and to combat the commercialisation, as they saw it, of mass production. Both were engaged with social reform and the idea of creativity and craftsmanship as restorative occupations (Wilcock 2001).

Early pioneers of the profession, such as Mary Black working in Canada and the United States, used arts and crafts therapeutically to "busy idle hands with good, moral activity" (Morton 2011 p325). Craft was seen as not only providing skills but treating the whole person. During the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> world wars occupational therapists used craft in workshops to address the mental health and physical needs of wounded soldiers (Reed et al 2013).

As the medical model took root, the use of craft fell out of use (Reed et al 2013). Occupational therapists began to follow a much more reductionist approach to practice when the core skills of occupational therapy, particularly in the medical setting, were redefined pragmatically in response to work settings and government drivers (Clouston and Whitcombe 2008).

However Leenerts and Evetts (2016) have suggested that there is mounting evidence to suggest that craft has immense therapeutic benefit and, with the advent of social media and sites such as Pinterest reviving interest in craft generally, this may be a good time for occupational therapists to reconsider this as an intervention and potentially as a way of promoting the profession.

### Craftivism and the philosophy of occupational therapy

Wilding and Whiteford (2009) suggested nearly 10 years ago that practitioners should be connected to the philosophical foundations to meet the profession's ethical and moral obligations. Currently Rudman (2017) suggests that occupational therapists should be giving attention to the 'politics of occupation' and engaging with broader aspects of occupation, such as occupational injustice.

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One way of connecting to the philosophy and addressing these politics of occupation could be through craftivism. As previously described, craftivism is about creating things and starting a dialogue. Craftivism is concerned with political and social reform and shares its roots with occupational therapy in the social and moral reform of the Arts and Craft Movement (Morton 2011). Indeed Wilcock (2001 p370) suggests that Ruskin “acted at times as an intellectual ‘occupational therapy’ entrepreneur addressing issues related to social health and well-being through occupations”.

It seems timely to consider how this might be extended to enable occupational therapists to engage in craftivism to promote occupational therapy, raise consciousness and consider occupational justice. Indeed outside of the profession craft has been recognised as helping people to learn about themselves through the things that they make (Sennett 2008), in enabling connections and social capital, finding common ground, reducing isolation, and promoting community worth (Gauntlett 2011), all aspects of the wider goals of craftivism. There is a danger that occupational therapists could get left behind in this current recognition of the value and therapeutic potential of craft, if we do not stand up and declare our heritage and philosophy in the value of doing.

Finding our voice

Highlighting occupational therapy has had only limited success. Back in 2004 Finlay suggested that occupational therapy could be described as the most misunderstood of the health professions, and this is still true today. In the UK, the Royal College of Occupational Therapists’ Strategic Intentions 2018-2023 (RCOT2018) urge us to enhance the profile of the profession to a range of audiences and to define the value of occupational therapy. We could consider our wider role in social transformation and reflect on how we could deploy the occupation of craftivism as one way to highlight occupational injustices and promote the value of the profession in meeting occupational challenges.

Craftivism opportunities are endless and very much depend on the skills and interests of the individual, and the particular injustices or challenges within the local environment. This could take the form of impactful craft objects, strategically placed, with a succinct message and opportunities for interaction with the public. It could be a ‘stitched’ letter to a commissioner or person of influence. Occupational therapy bunting, quilting, and yarn storming could all be employed with clients to highlight specific needs. Craftivism might form part of an appropriate intervention or occupational therapists may choose to use it as a form of advocacy for clients. Not only does this have the potential to enhance the profession but also gives occupational therapy craftivists the opportunity to benefit themselves from the wellbeing associated with engaging in craft.

Conclusion

Has the time come for occupational therapists to find their political voice and to start their own gentle protest, to recognise and act on occupational injustice and to promote the profession? Some may feel uncomfortable taking direct action or by potentially reinforcing the link between occupational therapy and craft, rather than the wider benefits of engagement in occupation. However craftivism could be an effective way to bring about change, promote the value of occupational therapy and highlight occupational challenges. It is an opportunity for occupational

therapists to experience what they espouse, in terms of engaging in craft for health and wellbeing, as well as utilising occupation for social transformation.

#### Research Ethics

Ethics approval was not required for this opinion piece.

#### Consent

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For Peer Review