



Letter to the Editor

Sustainable Occupational Therapy: Glocalizing our Knowledge, Praxis and Professionalization

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This article to the editor is largely drawn from a 30-minute special lecture I delivered at the 55th Philippine Academy of Occupational Therapists Annual Convention held last 24 November 2024 at Royce Hotel, Mabalacat, Pampanga, Philippines. While the topic is evidently addressed towards Filipino occupational therapists, I believe that the principles, issues, and propositions discussed in this article will also resonate with all health professions. Herein, I aim to focus on problematizing the sustainability of occupational therapy (OT) as a knowledge, human, and societal resource.

Sustainability has been a buzzword in recent years. This concept is largely related to agricultural harvesting where resources are continuously replenished and not permanently depleted. In Filipino, sustainability is translated as “likas-kaya,” which is characterized by a collective consciousness on social and economic progress by conserving Earth’s life support systems today and in the future.¹

In this article, I would like to address sustainability issues within the local OT profession through Aristotle’s dimensions of knowledge: episteme, techne, and phronesis.²

Episteme refers to scientific knowledge and answers the question, “How do we know what we know?” In OT, our episteme is predominantly drawn from evidence-based research and academic journals. *Techne* denotes practical knowledge and answers the question, “How do we know how to do things right?” Our skills in evaluating a client, using technology to perform evidence-based intervention, and measuring health outcomes through a standardized tool are some examples of techne. *Phronesis* means ethical knowledge and answers the question, “How do we know if what we know and do are morally just?” Actuating phronesis entails juxtaposing scientific and practical knowledge to produce ethical practice. In any professional practice, avoiding and reducing wasteful consumerism and fostering work and workplaces that cultivate the well-being of workers while exercising prudent actions are examples of phronesis.

Apart from identifying problems, I will be asking questions that are free for interpretation by all readers. After that, I will be proposing potential and ethical solutions by actualizing phronesis with the goal of sustaining our beloved profession. To make my position reflexive and

propositions more concrete, I will be underpinning them based on my global and local knowledge and experiences.

Issues on sustaining our episteme ask these questions: “What is the knowledge base of OT knowledge among Filipino OTs?” and “How do we create local OT knowledge today for use by the next generation of OTs?” During my OT schooling 15 years ago, there was this unspoken principle referring to “West is best!” In lecture and laboratory sessions, we have been told what assessment tools or intervention approaches are considered “gold standard” and “with the highest level of evidence”—most come from the West and there was no question about that. As I get further trained until I started practicing the profession, I wondered if there would ever be a “Filipino standard” assessment tool or approach made by Filipinos and occupational therapists that would fit the local population? Answering this question becomes even more obscure when OT episteme focuses largely on individual recovery and independence as the primary outcome, and the fondness of using jargon in practice influenced by the biomedical regime that has encroached on the profession since its inception in the 1950s.

Issues on sustaining our techne ask these questions: “What skills (competencies) do we develop among Filipino OTs today that will be used for the future?” and “How do we optimize technology in our OT practice?” The OT curriculum in the Philippines intends to produce entry-level practitioners who will mainly work in clinics and hospitals. While being equipped with profession-centric competencies allows them to pass the licensure examination and legally practice the profession, this alone does not necessarily prepare them to practice within the complex local health and social care systems. For example, several standardized tools from the West are still being used for training in school that is not utilized in actual practice. If ever used in practice, they are not translated nor validated for optimal use by the local population. This issue is related to how more continuing development (CPD) activities are promoted

locally. Although further education has become more available for Filipino OTs in recent years, the competencies being built by these CPD activities promote hyperspecialization, with minimal emphasis on general health (i.e., use of AI in health practice, improving telehealth competencies, electronic documentation utilization) and interprofessional competencies (i.e., team communication and conflict management training). This is exacerbated by the fact that more CPD points are awarded to activities that lean towards targeting profession-centric aims rather than those that will target general competencies that welcome different professions. But if we really are sensitive to local policies, the valorization of hyperspecialization is counterintuitive to the implementation of the Universal Health Care Act (Republic Act No. 11223), which aims to galvanize cost-effective and equitable primary health care services through the community and via health promotion and prevention approaches.

Issues on sustaining our phronesis asks the following questions: “How can we promote an OT practice that is sustainable for registered Filipino occupational therapists?” How do we address the ‘brain drain’ of our very own skilled OT workforce?”, and “How do we optimize an OT practice that allows OTRPs to serve more people with quality, while earning better?” We cannot ignore the fact that many OTRPs are fleeing the country for greener pastures elsewhere.³ The shortage of OTRPs serving the country has been a human resource issue since the profession has been established locally. However, countering the diaspora by opening more OT schools is historically proven to be a failed solution. This is confounded by the fact that in legal terms, the local OT profession engenders “occupational closure,” preventing many not to entering the profession.⁴ While having our own law benefits and protects the profession at large, some ethical concerns arise, including the process of producing more practitioners to address the manpower shortage, compensating OTRPs who deliver services to people from lower socio-economic status, and ensuring that OTRPs are

healthy (physically and mentally) and financially stable despite the increasing demand for our services.

If you are still reading the article up to this point, thank you for keeping up. I will fully understand it if you end up with more questions than answers. Before we make a long list of issues, allow me to outline the proposed possibilities, in action form, that I have curated upon actuating my phronesis:

Episteme

- Hire OT academics who will be paid to do research and scholarship on a full-time basis.
- With the lack of OT research laboratories to conduct experimental and RCT research, we can initially focus on creating knowledge drawn from reflections, experiences, mixed-method approaches, and indigenous knowledge. For instance, these types of research can be promoted for implementation in local graduate OT programs.
- Create a local journal that houses peer-reviewed articles for occupational therapy and occupational science research in the Philippines
- Generate a knowledge synthesis of Filipino OT knowledge through a textbook.⁵

Techné

- Develop general care, teamwork, conflict management, and interprofessional competencies as part of continuing professional development of OTRPs.
- Train for professional and clinical reasoning, technology use, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, leadership, cultural competence, ethical AI utility, and learning local languages. Train also for skills on how to evaluate and intervene in relation to context, environment, justice, and occupational concerns of not just individuals, but groups and communities.

- Integrate technology in all dimensions of the OT process during the post-pandemic era i.e., telehealth services.⁶

Phronesis

- Opening more OT schools is not a sustainable solution to increase the number of OTs. Rather, we can reimagine OT education by giving opportunities for second-courers and allowing non-OTRPs to take a master's degree and licensure (akin to psychologists and professional teachers) to become OTRPs. Make local OT practice open to foreigners.
- In terms of the Rehabilitation 2030 Initiative (WHO 2023), we need to reimagine how we develop a more stable and competent rehabilitation workforce through continuous staff training, openness to interprofessionalism, and optimization of technology.
- Reframe how practitioners are paid not by constantly increasing the amount of the salary but by capitalizing on time-based services anchored on client-centred care principles. For instance, allowing for OT sessions that are paid for 15, 30, or 45 minutes, depending on services provided, instead of the traditional hourly-based session model in the country.
- Promote not only entrepreneurship (i.e., building businesses that provide OT services) but also intrapreneurship, where OTRPs are hired by organizations and companies to use their OT skills to develop programs, processes, and products.

As I end this article, it is my ambition that the OTRPs of today and tomorrow will continue to ask each other critical questions with a collective goal of generating ethical and sustainable solutions to keep us motivated, inspired, and healthy as we practice the occupational therapy profession wherever we are. Having introduced a nuanced understanding of knowledge, from an Aristotelean lens, we can now imagine OT not just as a profession, but as an ethical and sustainable vocation. It is my hope that you share

this article with colleagues and peers within and outside OT to discuss, debate, and further question because it is only through this *disorienting dilemma*—an occurrence where difficult questions are asked and discomfoting conversations are formed—that we can fully realize the transformation of the local OT profession for a sustainable tomorrow.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author of this paper is a member of the editorial board of PJAHS.

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