

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES



COLUMN EDITOR: TOM GRANT

gOT Spirit Challenge: Building a bridge for occupational therapy students across Canada

Brianna Boyle, Anita Hamilton and Pamela Armstead

Over the past three years a buzz of excitement has rippled through occupational therapy programs throughout Canada in the fall semester. The excitement was due to the gOT Spirit Challenge, a nation-wide competition designed to showcase the celebrations of Occupational Therapy Month by occupational therapy students across Canada. The gOT Spirit Challenge was created by innovative University of Alberta (U of A) graduate, Pam Armstead in 2009, after she noticed that students in her program had few connections with occupational therapy students in other programs. Pam's vision was to connect occupational therapy students through a meaningful activity that would create a sense of shared identity, and to create a groundswell of excitement among students about the potential of occupational therapy.

Pam's vision was founded on her experience of attending Kin Games as an undergraduate. Kin Games is an annual sports competition between students in Kinesiology programs across Canada. Pam noted that she experienced a profound sense of belonging by participating in Kin Games. As fortune would have it, Pam was able to see a way to enact her vision while participating in a module called "Online technology for Occupational Therapy". The module, developed and taught by assistant professor Anita Hamilton, was designed to enable students to learn about using online technologies for networking and education. Students participating in the module were required to design their own project and this became the ideal platform for Pam to create a students' networking project titled the "gOT Spirit Challenge". As Pam had friends undertaking occupational therapy education in other provinces, she used her existing network to initiate connections with other programs.

The challenge was set: Which occupational therapy program in Canada has "gOT [the most] spirit"? The gOT Spirit Challenge is simple: All events and activities that are included in a school's submission must take place within the month of October of that year (Occupational Therapy Month), each school is responsible for posting their own submission on the gOT Spirit webpage by the deadline, and, most importantly, everyone has to have fun!

The first three years

In 2009, the first year, Pam invited the incumbent president of CAOT, Elizabeth Taylor, to judge the student-driven

competition. The inaugural winner was University of Western Ontario, who submitted a multi-faceted and exciting entry that clearly demonstrated that they gOT Spirit! In 2010, the University of Alberta was judged winner by the new CAOT president, Sue Baptiste. Their submission revealed that they were a dynamic student population as they included a flash mob dance, fundraising efforts, volunteer experiences and their organization of, and attendance at conferences designed to further professional development. That year, CAOT initiated the awarding of a prize for the winning team. In 2011 the University of Toronto was recognized as having the most outstanding entry to the gOT Spirit Challenge, with another multi-faceted entry detailing nine wonderful Occupational Therapy Month events hosted by students.

In 2010, the gOT Spirit Challenge was coordinated by University of Alberta student Brianna Boyle. Brianna was excited to assume the role but recognized that she had big shoes to fill when she agreed to organize the second year of the Canada-wide challenge. As challenge organizer, Brianna contacted all the Canadian occupational therapy programs to invite them to be a part of the gOT Spirit Challenge and gave them the link to the website where the previous submissions and competition rules were housed (<http://otschools.wetpaint.com/page/The+2009+Challenge>).

Brianna doubled her contribution in 2010 by being both the coordinator of the overall competition and the leader of the University of Alberta submission. Brianna undertook to plan, choreograph, and coordinate a flash mob dance, which occurred at the university on October 6, 2010 (<http://www.>



University of Alberta students hosting an OT Month pancake breakfast for the wider university community.

youtube.com/watch?v=TaHGY0N5b1k). The submission was a program-wide effort with over 160 students taking part in several Occupational Therapy Month events. All schools' submissions for that year can be viewed through this website: <http://otschools.wetpaint.com/page/2010+gOT+Spirit>.

Why it works

The success of the gOT Spirit Challenge can be explained through the writings of two occupational therapy scholars, Charles Christiansen and Ann Wilcock. Christiansen (1999) states that participation in meaningful activities helps to shape our identity. The gOT Spirit Challenge provided a means by which occupational therapy students in Canada could connect with each other through their shared role and identity of being 'occupational therapy students'. Wilcock's writings (1998; 2006) help us to understand that through positive doing and being we can feel that we are part of something bigger than just the occupational therapy program we are attending. We are starting to belong to the wider profession of occupational therapy.

Through the gOT Spirit Challenge over the past three years, students have participated in a range of activities and events to celebrate Occupational Therapy Month to raise the profile of occupational therapy. Through these 'doings', students were able to explore and express what they knew about occupational therapy, what they were most passionate about, and what they, as fresh-faced recruits, can bring to their new profession.

The activities that students undertook within their



University of Alberta students share information about occupational therapy across campus in OT Month.

About the authors

Brianna Boyle is a University of Alberta graduate and still has a passion for dance. She works as an occupational therapist with OrionHealth Calgary where she enables people with chronic pain and traumatic psychological injuries to discover their own functional independence in productive and meaningful occupations. You can contact her at: bboyle@orionhealth.ca.

Anita Hamilton practiced as an occupational therapist in mental health and vocational rehabilitation for 14 years before becoming an educator nine years ago. Anita is presently undertaking her PhD and is examining the role of online technologies in the advancement of information management and knowledge transfer. She has been teaching at the University of Alberta since October 2007. She can be contacted at: anita.hamilton@ualberta.ca.

Pamela Armstead is a University of Alberta graduate and works as an occupational therapist with Prairie Valley School Division in Saskatchewan where she builds capacity in schools while supporting students to be successful in achieving academic development. Her email is: pamela.armstead@pvsd.ca.

communities helped build a sense of connection with each other as occupational therapy students. Wilcock (1998) explains that to "be", we need time to discover who we are as individuals, "to think, to reflect and, to simply exist" (p. 250) within the context and space of occupational therapy. Although there is often a loud groan from students when they are asked to reflect, the gOT Spirit Challenge managed to encourage them to reflect in a fun and non-threatening way. The submissions put forward by each program indicated what students believe about occupational therapy, which is important to understand as they are the future of the profession. The submissions also show the complex roles many of the students maintain in their lives: dancer, singer, videographer, storyteller, volunteer, organizer, and so on. Students demonstrated who they are as individual beings, shaped by past and current experiences, and who they envisage themselves becoming in the future.

A new sense of camaraderie emerged among students from university to university and, despite the long hours spent at university, students found time to share their passion with and commitment to the occupational therapy community. This passion was evident through the increased participation and calibre of submissions across the three years of the competition. In 2011 entries were more creative and more complex than they were when the Challenge started in 2009.

Technology plays key role

Online technology played a pivotal role in the success of the event as it provided a platform to share a celebration of occupational therapy. In the first two years of the event the online 'stage' for the challenge was a wiki program called Wet Paint™. A wiki is an interactive website that can have multiple contributors and facilitates collaboration (Hamilton, 2010). The first wiki was titled "mOTion across Canada" (<http://otschools.wetpaint.com/>). In the third year of the challenge, student organizers Ann Boyd and Laura Mireault decided to host the event through Facebook. Facebook provided a simpler way for the students to upload their submissions, and, with over 500 million users worldwide, Facebook was easier for visitors to find. The gOT Spirit 2011 page can be viewed at: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/217078958355077/>

Encouraging students to use online technology through the gOT Spirit Challenge enhances students' readiness to use online technology for professional education, networking, publicity, and client education in preparation for future practice (Hamilton, 2010). Brianna and Pam both noted that as students became more invested in the competition, they began to take ownership of their entries and their technological capacity improved exponentially. As students became more confident in using the technology, their submissions became more creative, which resulted in some impressive marketing outcomes for occupational therapy. As a result, those who participated in the event developed a range of transferable skills that will inform future practice habits.

The gOT Spirit Challenge is quick, competitive and exciting. The success of the competition illustrates how one person's vision can be realized by connecting with the right people and using the right tools. Brianna said that "using online technology well is like putting an idea on steroids". To illustrate the pervasiveness of the concept, Pam recently received an enquiry from a group of occupational therapy students in the United States who had found the wiki. They were interested in how the competition had impacted occupational therapy spirit in Canada, and were planning to run their own version.

Creating strong networks

When Pam Armstead envisioned this friendly competition, she wanted to achieve two key outcomes: To connect occupational therapy students across Canada in a meaningful activity to create a shared identity, and to create a groundswell of excitement about the potential of occupational therapy. Through the use of online technology and the shared goodwill of the occupational therapy community, the gOT Spirit Challenge has facilitated students in Canada to do so that they may become better as individuals and groups to connect and know that they belong to a wider community of occupational therapy students. It is hoped that the gOT Spirit Challenge will be a foundation for strong networks that will carry on as they enter the profession as colleagues.

To participate in gOT Spirit Challenge in October 2012 please contact this year's organizers, U of A students Christine Walker at: cwalker1@ualberta.ca, or Rachel Toppin at: rtoppin@ualberta.ca.

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