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Assisting Transition Through Website Building

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As occupational therapy practitioners are expanding their roles in school-based transition planning, website building can be a valuable intervention to address transition goals. This article will explain how the first two authors developed web-based technology as a purposeful, meaningful, and occupation-based therapeutic modality through the Work Appreciation for Youth (WAY) program. Website building was used to increase self-awareness and promote self-advocacy in youth aged 14 to 21 years with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in an alternative high school. Youth with EBD have less successful transition outcomes when compared with students in the general population (Nochajski & Schweitzer, 2014). Students created personal websites as interventions for more successful transition from high school. These websites highlighted students' interests, talents, and goals, while assisting with transition resources. The occupational therapist and occupational therapy assistant worked closely with vocational specialists and teachers to implement intervention sessions. This article shows how web-based technology can be used as a therapeutic intervention.

The literature review revealed a small number of studies using website development as intervention. Schmitt, Dayanim, and Matthias (2008) found that developing websites increased adolescents' feelings of mastery and self-expression. Website building also contributed to improved self-esteem (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). More evidence identified using other technologies for self-expression. Photovoice, a photography-based intervention, demonstrated increased self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-efficacy (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005). Harley and Hunn (2015) showed Photovoice was effective in gaining insight on hope and spirituality among low-income African-American adolescents. A recovery narrative-based Photovoice benefitted participant reflection on the effects of disability on their identities, demonstrating that narrative program outcomes assisted empowerment and community integration (Mizock, Russinova, & DeCastro, 2015). Yi-Frazier and colleagues (2015) used Instagram, a photo sharing application, for adolescents with diabetes, and found that a face-to-face support component was necessary for them to be comfortable sharing personal images. Similarly, the National Alliance on Mental Illness's program Smarts for Advocacy, assisted people with mental illness to turn their personal stories into succinct narratives, leading to increased self-advocacy (Pandya, 2012).

The Work Appreciation for Youth Program

The WAY program was designed for at-risk high school youth with

EBD to develop the skills needed to choose, get, and keep a job, while appreciating the purpose of education and the value of work (Coles, 2013). Every student in the WAY program had the opportunity to develop an individualized website, as a portion of transition services. Other services were individualized transition interventions, job readiness training, life-skills workshops, and career exploration. Websites were created through collaboration between students and practitioners to showcase students' talents, goals, and individual information. Occupational therapy practitioners' role in transition services was to empower students to develop their own transition plans, rather than prescribing plans for students.

Weebly (2015) was chosen as a web hosting platform, allowing students without advanced computer skills to create websites. Weebly uses drag-and-drop functions for ease of use. Choices of themes and design options afforded the opportunity for creativity and individualism. As autonomous creators, students were more engaged and much more attentive in developing websites than they had been in more prescribed activities.

Students presented their websites at Committee on Special Education meetings, individualized education program (IEP) meetings, and state vocational rehabilitation meetings. The opportunity for students to be actively involved in the IEP process resulted in increased self-awareness (Conaboy et al., 2008). Websites could also be used at job interviews, showcasing student success and abilities as well as work experiences. Students in this high school had options to embed their résumés within their websites and to revise their website content at any time, reflecting their current information. The websites were accessible and available after high school graduation.

Privacy issues when using web-based technology were addressed by teaching and enforcing student Internet safety and appropriate disclosure of personal information. Content filtering software was used to limit student access to age-appropriate sites. Available Weebly safety features were used, including administrative monitoring, password protection capabilities, and content filtering.

It is impossible to disregard the influence of technology on youth born after 2000. Digital technology has become a considerable component of society's cultural, social, and virtual contexts (Blair, Claster, & Claster, 2015). As occupational therapy practitioners, observing frequent technology use within classrooms at this alternative high school inspired incorporating website building into therapeutic intervention. Within this computer-based intervention, the challenge became how to engage students as creators. In addition to Weebly, students learned to use other technology, such as iPads, digital scanners, search engines, and cameras. Students were encouraged to document field trips, major life events, accomplishments, and day-to-day activities. During online research to gather information related to interests or future jobs, students narrowed search results through reflective moments, which enabled them to process their thinking or experiences into content for their websites. Students increasingly shared their websites with others, once they believed the websites were true representations of their lives and experiences.

Case Example

TJ was 17 when he started receiving transition services within his classroom. While classmates participated in prescribed activities, TJ remained withdrawn. Even with the introduction of technology-based web activities, TJ was reserved and showed little interest in engaging. When asked why, his answer was simple: he wanted more freedom to create and take ownership of his webpage. Intervention sessions were then restructured from restricted template-based websites to empty webpages where students organized and created content as desired. TJ and other students involved in website building participated in 45-minute intervention sessions once a week. After the template-based approach was discarded, TJ filled his website with his own artwork as he chose. This was a turning point, as TJ now accessed his website independently and showed his work to others. He identified his strengths, built his self-confidence, and told his story through his art and his website. Further, he demonstrated initiative in assisting other students. Through TJ's role shift, the traditional practitioner/student association was transformed, with practitioners developing a lateral and equal relationship with TJ. Opening traditional roles to a more level playing field allowed TJ to teach staff and community members who he really was.

This was also a turning point for the website-building intervention. Though some students benefitted from engaging with formatted websites, others preferred more autonomy. The original website-building plan expanded to include more freedom with uploading content. The WAY program was asked to present the website-building concept to various audiences. TJ was asked to showcase his work and, despite his nerves, presented his website masterfully. This quiet and withdrawn young man overcame fear and experienced a victory while expressing himself in the best way he could—digitally. TJ has since presented his website and his story to numerous occupational therapy classes, the state occupational therapy association conference, and even traveled to Baltimore for the American Occupational Therapy Association's (AOTAs) Annual Conference & Expo. TJ graduated from high school and maintained contact with the WAY program. He found a niche with animation and gaming through freelance projects.

Program Outcomes

Building personal websites promoted self-awareness in students with EBD in the WAY program, consistent with findings of Schmitt and colleagues (2008) that constructing personal websites positively affected identity development. Students reported showing webpages to teachers, counselors, potential employers, and other professionals. During an IEP meeting, one student used the personal website to self-advocate and have IEP goals changed to become more meaningful. Students also reported that website building enabled them to learn about and advocate for themselves better.

At its core, the process of developing websites with students was a relationship-building activity. By allowing students to create content freely, they shared personal stories and had conversations with clinicians, facilitating positive relationships. Clinicians assisted students in reflecting on experiences and personal goals, benefiting the therapeutic environment. Clinicians' therapeutic use of self, through actively listening and facilitating conversations about goals and personal experiences, was an essential part of the process (AOTA, 2014). Building therapeutic relationships was identified as a strong indicator for positive outcomes; the Intentional Relationship Model (IRM) has described these relationships as a precursor for engaging clients (Bonsaksen, Vøllestad, & Taylor, 2013). The six IRM therapeutic modes (advocating, collaborating, empathizing,

encouraging, instructing, and problem-solving) were used in the website developing sessions. Practitioners used empathizing and encouraging modes to facilitate collaborative relationships while students were developing webpages and when gathering information to discuss personal goals.

Summary

While no formal research exists on website building as an occupational therapy intervention, the WAY program begins to support website development as a timely and important occupation for youth in transition. Potential exists for web-based intervention application beyond transition contexts into other settings and populations. Using Weebly to build personal websites became much more than just filling a page with text and pictures. It allowed practitioners and clients to meet on a level playing field, where students felt comfortable sharing personal information. Students taught occupational therapy practitioners and others about themselves using a variety of media. Through practitioners' therapeutic use of self, plus the platform of technology, the WAY students became stronger self-advocates.

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