

BE BETTER TEST: Global Initiatives for the Critical Analysis of Competency Progression in Occupational Therapy Students: An Occupation-Centered Simulation Tool

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This preliminary document, presented as a preprint, captures the reflective processes of an academic program committed to developing a competency progression assessment for advanced occupational therapy students. This initial version outlines the rationale and methodology of the process, offering a foundational perspective on the ongoing work. This study contributes to the critical analysis and refinement of competency evaluations in occupational therapy education.

The reasoning behind this approach

"Occupation-centered education" transcends simple application; it entails training students to critically integrate the value and theory of human occupation into their professional reasoning, while considering the profound significance that occupation holds in people's lives.

This pedagogical approach aims to ensure that students not only "apply" but also "think" and "reason" about occupation as a tool that transforms realities (Hooper, 2006).

Promoting an occupation-centered education involves preparing students to comprehend and apply the concept of human occupation as the foundation for professional reasoning and therapeutic interventions. This necessitates an educational approach that encourages students to view occupation as a vehicle for personal and social transformation, enhancing

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their ability to identify and address individuals' occupational needs in a contextual and meaningful manner.

In this context, the structure of the Occupational Therapy (OT) curriculum, which supports the understanding of its subject matter, must maintain a relational character with other fields of knowledge and professional practices (Zimmermann et al., 2019). However, this characteristic should not leave the occupation-centered perspective to chance. It is essential to emphasize the application of methods that are based on or centered around occupation to enhance communication and critical self-reflection about what we do, how we do it, and what we say about our own actions (Fisher, 2014).

The evaluation of student learning in Occupational Therapy must align with the principles of occupation-centered education, promoting not only the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, but also the ability to critically reason about the transformative value of human occupation. Designing assessments and evaluation instruments with this approach ensures that future professionals comprehend the relevance of occupation as the fundamental axis of their practice and prepares them to respond meaningfully and contextually to people's occupational needs, thereby fostering lifelong learning (Hristov et al., 2023).

Therefore, occupation-centered assessments must go beyond merely measuring outcomes; they should serve as formative spaces where students can reflect on their learning, articulate their reasoning, and demonstrate how they integrate occupational concepts into their professional decision-making (Fu et al., 2024). This type of assessment not only validates the mastery of technical competencies, but also fosters self-reflection, creativity, and the ability to coherently communicate the impact of their interventions, thereby strengthening professional practices committed to personal and social transformation.

Be Better Test: Meaningful Learning in Occupational Therapy

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For the Occupational Therapy program, examining the purpose of the Be Better Test integrates essential elements that define the occupational nature of the field. This encompasses not only the "object of study" within the profession but also serves as a reflection of its participants: the academic community, represented by both students and faculty.

One way to express this integration is through the necessary interconnections of knowledge, skills and the values centered on occupation—the sense and meaning of how these values shape students' learning processes, influencing how they internalize their knowledge and make it tangible and reliable in diverse human realities. On the other hand, these values guide the program in establishing a robust framework that ensures solidity, coherence, and alignment between pedagogical practices, faculty consensus (Myers et al., 2020), and the intentional organization of learning environments, such as the integration of "microcurricula."

The *Be Better Test* in Occupational Therapy is grounded in the *significant learning* framework, emphasizing the importance of moving beyond content domains toward learning experiences that are "worthwhile" in creating effects and synergies between the learning objectives pursued by faculty and the significance assigned by students (Fink, 2013). It also addresses non-cognitive learning domains, including leadership, interpersonal skills, ethics, character, tolerance and abilities to adapt to change.

Within this framework and in accordance with Fink's (2013) taxonomy of significant learning, six key categories were identified:

1. Foundational Knowledge: Enables understanding, information retention, and recognition of different perspectives.
2. Application: Reinforced through intellectual engagement (critical, creative, and practical thinking) as well as physical and social actions, enhancing relevance for participants.

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3. Integration: Enables students to discern connections between various aspects (e.g., fields of knowledge, experiences, disciplines, people, and experience transfer).
4. Human Dimension: Involves personal and social implications that shape students' understanding of themselves and others
5. Caring: The significance attributed to learning influences volitional perspectives, such as emotions, interests, and values. This sense of value about what the student is learning determines the amount of energy devoted to meaningful participation.
6. Learning How to Learn: Empowers students to autonomously, reflectively, and effectively manage their learning processes in a self-regulated manner throughout their lives.

Based on this taxonomy, the program adopts these components through the lens of occupation-centered learning, integrating the six dimensions to align the educational process with the discipline's principles.

Foundational knowledge serves as the starting point, where students must comprehend the problem based on reliable data and the theoretical underpinnings of conceptual models, frameworks, and approaches. From this foundation, the application of this knowledge leads to the development of viable solutions that are communicated clearly and effectively. Subsequently, **integration** enables students to connect scientific evidence with the proposed interventions, consolidating clinical reasoning based on hypotheses and articulating different levels of analysis. At a deeper level, the **human dimension** encourages students to reflect on their own learning processes and abilities, thus enhancing their professional self-awareness. Caring reinforces the understanding of sociocultural and technological contexts in knowledge construction, promoting a critical and contemporary perspective of occupational reality. Finally, the ability **to learn how to learn** ensures autonomy in literature searches, time management, and interactions with key stakeholders.

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Together, these dimensions establish a solid foundation for evaluating skills within occupation-centered assessment, ensuring that students can analyze, integrate, and apply knowledge in professional settings.

Objectives of the *Better Test* in the Context of the Occupational Therapy Program

This evaluation aims to facilitate students' critical reflection on their educational process by applying occupation-centered competencies and assessing their ability to respond to complex challenges akin to those encountered in their future professional practice.

From this perspective, the Occupational Therapy programs aim to:

- Evaluate the alignment of training with professional demands
The academic program assesses how students apply the principles of human occupation in simulated scenarios, ensuring that the competencies acquired before and during their internship align with the actual demands of occupational therapy practice.
- Identify key areas for competency development: The test helps to identify strengths and areas for improvement in students' training process, providing the program with relevant data on how to adjust content and teaching methods to enhance occupation-centered competency development.
- Validate the relevance of the curriculum content
Implementing an occupation-centered test allows the program to verify whether the theoretical and practical content taught is relevant to professional preparation, ensuring that students acquire the competencies necessary to address complex occupational issues.
- Promote critical reflection on occupational practices
The test offers students an opportunity to critically reflect on the value and impact of human occupation on health and well-being, fostering stronger and more ethical professional reasoning for future practice.

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- Monitor the impact of occupation-centered learning
It enables the academic program to track how the focus on occupation contributes to students' overall development, demonstrating how the knowledge acquired up to that point allows them to solve real-world problems and provides innovative solutions through Occupational Therapy.
- Ensure readiness for advanced practice: By assessing students' competencies, the program ensures that they are prepared to meet the demands of advanced practice and immersion in real clinical, social, educational, and business settings, thus minimizing gaps in knowledge and expected competencies.

Defining the Expected Learning Outcomes

For the Occupational Therapy program, the expected learning outcomes for the *Be Better Test* align with the core competencies of occupational therapists, integrating critical analysis skills, innovation, and scientific foundations to address contemporary challenges in the field. In this regard, the learning outcomes are described below from two perspectives: the first focuses on competencies related to global analysis and scientific foundations in Occupational Therapy, while the second emphasizes competencies for innovation and scientific justification in Occupational Therapy.

1. Competencies in Global Analysis and Scientific Foundation in Occupational Therapy

It refers to the theoretical or conceptual basis that supports an idea, project, action, or study. It involves grounding in paradigms, models, frameworks, or approaches that represent a set of principles and theories that give meaning and direction to an argument or proposal, justifying its relevance.

- Associate components of paradigms, models, frameworks, or occupation-centered approaches in Occupational Therapy with the analyzed issue, justifying how these

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components support hypothesis formulation and the development of specific and contextualized solutions.

- Conduct a global analysis of personal, community, contextual, occupational, and occupational identity factors based on a review of the scientific literature or reliable information sources, demonstrating a deep understanding of the interconnection between these factors and their impact on solutions.

2. Competencies in Innovation and Scientific Justification in Occupational Therapy

This refers to the defense or justification of an established proposal, argument, or project. This involves presenting evidence or arguments that support or validate a proposal before an audience or evaluation committee.

This process is typically more practical and argumentative and incorporates empirical results or evidence to establish credibility.

- Develop a proposal with innovative components that comprehensively and adaptively address the identified needs of the target population, offering value from a perspective unique to Occupational Therapy.
- Design and implement innovative strategies in Occupational Therapy that respond to emerging challenges and adapt and personalize evidence-based interventions to maximize their impact on the well-being and occupational participation of the target population.

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Methodology for Designing the Initiative

The redesign of the *Be Better Test* has emerged as an opportunity to reconceptualize assessment as a dynamic process of learning and curricular enhancement. Through a situated reflection exercise that incorporates students' perceptions alongside the critical insights of the program's faculty, a novel methodological approach has been developed. This approach reconceives assessment not merely as a measurement tool, but as a mechanism to strengthen professional reasoning and equip future occupational therapists to address real-world challenges. This section presents the working methodology employed in this process, highlighting how situated reflection and constructive alignment are key elements in ensuring that assessment has a meaningful impact on both student training and the program's curriculum.

The development and evolution of the *Be Better Test* transcend a mere exercise in competency measurement; rather, it is conceived as a dynamic, reflective, and situated process where students' experiences and faculty expertise converge to generate knowledge and drive curricular transformation.

This methodological approach recognizes that learning in Occupational Therapy should not be validated solely through standardized tests but must also be connected to professional realities and the challenges students face in their training. In this context, the *Be Better Test* is reconfigured as an authentic assessment tool capable of informing the curriculum and reinforcing the alignment between teaching, learning, and assessment; a concept is known in pedagogy as constructive alignment.

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A Process Based on Co-Creation and Faculty-Student Participation

To ensure that the test was relevant to the professional development of future occupational therapists, the faculty team adopted a co-construction methodology, comprising the following phases:

- Phase 1: Review of the Lessons Learned

A critical analysis was conducted on the perceptions of students who had participated in previous versions of the test, identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement. This review facilitated an understanding of how assessment influences students' perceptions of learning and their preparation for professional practice.

- Phase 2: Faculty Consensus Workshop

A workshop was held with faculty members to explore the conceptual focus of the test. Using a word cloud, they were asked to reach a consensus on the core themes of the Be Better Test. The emerging terms—professional reasoning, critical reasoning, integration of knowledge, problem solving, application of learning, and professional confidence—guided the formulation of a new assessment framework.

- Phase 3: Expanding the Understanding of Assessment: From Disciplinary Measurement to a Holistic Perspective

A key finding in this reflective process was the identification of a limitation in the initial versions of the Be Better Test: its narrow focus on measuring competencies in five disciplinary subjects and overlooking the broader body of knowledge and learning experiences accumulated throughout students' educational journeys.

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Upon investigating the reasons for this limitation, a new word cloud exercise with faculty members revealed terms such as conceptual foundation, conceptual culmination, fields of action, professional focus, and intervention bases. These responses indicated that the test was conceived as a final validation of disciplinary knowledge rather than as an instrument reflecting the integration and articulation of learning through professional training.

This finding led the working team to reconsider the purpose of the assessment, shifting from an isolated measurement approach to a holistic and situated perspective. During this intermediate phase, discussions focused on how the test could capture the evolution of students' professional thinking, their ability to integrate different levels of knowledge, and how these competencies translate into problem-solving and decision-making in real-world contexts.

With this new understanding, it became clear that the Be Better Test needed to go beyond being a mere measurement tool, and instead function as a formative and reflective process that actively informs and supports the curriculum. This critical exercise laid the groundwork for the subsequent phase, redesigning the assessment instrument to more accurately reflect the complexity of occupational therapy training and the real impact of acquired competencies.

- Phase 4: Redesign of the Assessment Instrument

Based on the collected insights, the working group initiated a process to reshape the test's structure, focus, scope, and evaluation criteria, ensuring that each component more precisely reflected the skills required for professional practice in Occupational Therapy.

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Innovation in Assessment: Beyond Competency Measurement

The primary goal of the Be Better Test extends beyond assessing students' knowledge; it seeks to evaluate their ability to apply this knowledge in complex and evolving contexts. Therefore, the redesign aims to:

- Promote professional and critical reasoning, ensuring that students not only recall concepts but also strategically apply them in problem-solving.
- Foster the integration of knowledge, thereby avoid knowledge fragmentation, and ensure an interdisciplinary understanding of Occupational Therapy.
- Strengthen problem-solving skills and the application of learning, enabling future occupational therapists can intervene effectively and creatively in diverse contexts.
- Build professional confidence by reinforcing students' ability to make informed decisions in practice.

BE BETTER Test as a Tool for Curricular Transformation

Beyond its evaluative function, the BE BETTER Test serves as a strategic input for curriculum transformation. By identifying patterns in student responses and performance, the program can

- Review and adjust content and methodologies to ensure that teaching aligns with real-world professional demands.
- Strengthen the relationship between theory and practice by fostering more situated and contextualized learning experiences.
- Ensure internal curriculum coherence by explicitly aligning training objectives with the expected test outcomes.

To enhance the impact of BE BETTER as a tool for curricular transformation, it is crucial that the assessment strategy reflects the complexities and challenges of professional

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practice in Occupational Therapy. To achieve this, three essential criteria were established for selecting an assessment approach:

1. Authenticity and professional relevance: The strategy requires placing students in real decision-making scenarios aligned with contemporary challenges in the field and tangible opportunities for knowledge application.
2. International projection and competitiveness: The approach exposed students to global assessment standards, fostering their ability to develop proposals in demanding and diverse environments.
3. Interdisciplinarity and transformative vision: The challenge was to encourage students to integrate various areas of knowledge acquired through their training, promoting critical thinking, problem-solving, and the generation of innovative solutions.

In accordance with these criteria, and after exploring various alternatives, the decision was made to implement “international calls for proposals” as the strategy to advance the objectives of BE BETTER. A comprehensive review of multiple international calls was conducted, culminating in the selection of the "Aging in Place Challenge Program Funding Opportunity: Healthy Aging Community Living Labs" for the initial iteration in 2025.

This call, issued by the Canadian government, not only aligns with the established principles, but also offers a unique opportunity for students to engage in an assessment that transcends knowledge measurement, positioning them as professionals capable of addressing real-world demands in both local and global contexts.

Upon securing the necessary permissions, a favorable response was obtained for its use as a learning activity, thereby consolidating an assessment environment that extends beyond academia and engages in real-world knowledge generation and innovative proposals.

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This strategy immerses students in an authentic experience where they must demonstrate not only their analytical and applied knowledge skills, but also their ability to tackle concrete professional challenges in a globalized context. The requirement to develop proposals within an international call for proposals exposes them to high-quality standards, methodological rigor, and social relevance, thereby reinforcing their professional confidence and argumentation skills in highly competitive settings.

Thus, the BE BETTER Test is enhanced as an assessment mechanism that not only measures student performance but also immerses them in real-world dynamics of innovation and transformation, ensuring that their training not only meets local needs but also prepares them to engage in international environments and actively contribute to the development of knowledge in Occupational Therapy.

Thus, the BE BETTER Test is enhanced as an assessment tool that not only evaluates student performance but also immerses them in the real-world dynamics of innovation and transformation. This approach ensures that their training meets local needs while also preparing them to engage in international environments and actively contribute to the advancement of knowledge in Occupational Therapy.

This methodological approach to evaluation in Occupational Therapy aims not only to assess competencies and learning outcomes but also to critically reflect on the purposes and implications of the assessment itself. By integrating elements of professional reasoning, disciplinary knowledge, and contextual relevance, this initiative fosters a space for continuous dialogue and improvement. Moving forward, it is essential to question and refine both the goals and strategies of evaluation, ensuring that they align with the evolving needs of the profession and the communities it serves.

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