



Reimagining healthcare education: considerations from a hybrid Occupational Therapy programme

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Abstract

Hybrid educational delivery models are increasingly prevalent in professional healthcare programmes, reflecting a growing commitment to accessible learning environments. However, tensions surrounding hybrid professional education, especially in Healthcare, remain. Hybrid education blends in-person and online learning (Hunter et al., 2025). This opinion piece asserts that our hybrid Occupational Therapy (OT) programme offers a replicable model combining virtual flexibility with hands-on skill acquisition. The number of OT programmes delivering content in a hybrid format continues to grow. The versatility of this model holds broader implications for Learning Development professionals across healthcare and graduate disciplines. Building on pandemic-era innovations and emerging workforce demands, we examine challenges in hybrid OT education, such as facilitating practical training, supporting digital equity, and preserving community. We also propose solutions transferable to other practice-based fields. Finally, we call on Educational Developers and Learning Developers to adopt intentional, evidence-based hybrid instructional designs with support for student learning that reflects the realities of contemporary education and professional practice in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: hybrid education; Occupational Therapy; Learning Development; hands-on skills training; online education.

Introduction: reframing the challenge

How are students able to learn hands-on psychomotor skills when they are miles away from campus? Although Occupational Therapy (OT) education has evolved over several decades beginning with audio teleconferencing and online courses in the 1990s, this question emerged with new urgency during the Covid-19 pandemic (Belarmino and Bahle-Lampe, 2019). Healthcare academic programmes, including OT, were unprepared and forced to adapt swiftly by shifting skills-based, experiential, and collaborative learning into hybrid formats (Costa et al., 2021). Learning from this experience, novel hybrid OT programmes have emerged through innovative learning models and instructional design, providing a model for broader transformations in higher education. We contend that our hybrid OT programme provides a replicable model for delivering professional competencies by blending intentionally designed, flexible online learning with face-to-face, hands-on skill development while preserving the principles of effective learning. Currently, OT is a dual-entry profession in the United States, with both master's and doctoral graduates eligible to sit for the national board certification examination. This opinion-piece is based on an entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) programme at a public institution located in a rural Midwestern context. The programme spans six trimesters and is completed in two years. Across the curriculum comprising 100 credit hours, students engage in approximately 47% distance education, 15% on-site laboratory immersion, and 38% clinical education. The first year consists of synchronous and asynchronous online coursework supplemented by six in-person laboratory immersions. The second year aligns with national clinical education requirements, including two in-person, 12-week Level II fieldwork experiences and a 14-week doctoral capstone experience.

Beyond the discipline: why hybrid OT matters for Educational Developers and Learning Developers

Though OT education may appear niche, its instructional challenges such as teaching psychomotor skills, reasoning abilities, and interpersonal communication are familiar across applied disciplines like Physical Therapy, Social Work, Nursing, Engineering, and Education (Jämsä et al., 2024). Educational Developers supporting these fields must

balance accessibility and cost-efficiency, working with academics and Learning Developers to ensure andragogical quality in hybrid formats.

OT's adoption of hybrid delivery offers transferable insights. Online asynchronous content allows students to learn at their own pace while synchronous virtual discussions and in-person labs ensure real-time engagement and hands-on practice (Thibault, 2020; Hwang, Shim and Cheon, 2023). The hybrid model yields outcomes comparable to traditional programmes, with research showing that hybrid OT students perform equally well on certification exams and workforce readiness measures (Banning et al., 2021). Another benefit is that hybrid delivery expands access to quality education and enables nontraditional learners to enter high-demand professional fields (Lin, Zhang and Dixon, 2015).

A hybrid delivery format may be more affordable for students. Without the need to relocate, students save on housing and other related expenses. Institutions benefit from reduced overhead costs, as there is not an ongoing need for dedicated classroom and faculty office space. Such cost savings could be passed on to students in the form of lower tuition fees. Moreover, reduced reliance on physical resources makes hybrid programmes better able to increase capacity and meet the growing demand for occupational therapists and other professionals. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) projects a high rate of employment growth for occupational therapists (11%) through 2033, which is much faster than the average for all professions. Hybrid models may attract students who are unable to attend in-person programmes, creating a more accessible option allowing academic institutions to assist in meeting projected workforce demands. Learning Development services should also be equipped to support such students through the use of hybrid models as well.

Tensions surrounding hybrid professional education

Despite its promise, hybrid OT education surfaces core tensions that any discipline seeking to teach practical competencies online must address. One of the largest challenges is ensuring students receive adequate hands-on training. Most programmes implement technology, such as simulation-based education and virtual reality, to provide students with hands-on training. However, these technologies may not completely replace

the firsthand experience of interacting with clients. Hybrid programmes must intentionally scaffold learning by integrating online instruction for foundational knowledge with in-person laboratories that promote applied skill and reasoning development. Under faculty supervision, laboratory sessions reinforce and extend online learning, while post-lab reflection and feedback ensure continuity and progression from knowledge acquisition to skill mastery.

The second hurdle is the transcendence of technology-driven barriers. Non-traditional students may experience digital literacy barriers, especially if they are not accustomed to the platforms employed in online learning. Additionally, reliable internet and hardware are crucial for online learning, and some students may lack the necessary equipment. Institutions must embrace digital literacy and invest in quality tech support infrastructures (Costa et al., 2021). Maintaining a sense of community is also a perceived challenge within hybrid programmes as less face-to-face interaction may lead to feelings of isolation. To counteract this, programmes can offer a detailed programme orientation that addresses programme structure and requirements, introduces active learning, and offers an opportunity to engage with programme faculty and classmates (Walters-Archie, 2018; Horvath et al., 2019; Rotar, 2022). Additionally, the implementation of academic coaching groups and peer-to-peer feedback opportunities fosters interaction and a sense of community within virtual environments (Kumar and Coe, 2017; Rotar, 2022). Academic coaching groups can further enhance student success by providing structured support such as clear timelines, regular check-ins, and coordinated peer feedback, practices shown to improve learner persistence and degree completion (Kumar and Coe, 2017). These strategies are easily transferable to other hybrid programmes where structured guidance, accountability, and peer connection strengthen student engagement.

A model for Learning Development: intentional hybrid design

A cornerstone of hybrid education is a commitment to learner-centered andragogy, one that has significant implications for Educational Developers and Learning Developers across disciplines (Knapke et al., 2024). The success of hybrid OT education lies not in the mere union of online and on-campus elements, but in the thoughtful redesign of instructional design to meet adult learners' needs.

Another fundamental strategy taken by our hybrid OT programme is backward design. This approach reflects Biggs' concept of constructive alignment (1996), in which learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessments are deliberately integrated to promote meaningful learning. Faculty begin by identifying key professional competencies such as clinical reasoning and then build learning activities and assessments to meet these outcomes. This intentional alignment ensures that every component of the curriculum directly supports the development of skills essential for effective OT practice.

Our programme utilises a multimodal approach to education that aligns with the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education by emphasising active, inquiry-driven learning experiences that move beyond passive content delivery and engage students through varied interactive modalities, such as asynchronous modules, synchronous sessions, and on-campus experiences (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015; Hwang, Shim and Cheon, 2023). Asynchronous modules encourage self-paced engagement with foundational content, while synchronous sessions are reserved for flipped classroom activities such as collaborative problem solving and application. Students may explore a concept through a video module, apply it in a virtual group discussion, and then deepen their understanding during hands-on practice in the field or during on-campus experiences. On-campus experiences should be intentionally designed to develop opportunities for students to practice and hone psychomotor skills while fostering the implementation of knowledge learned during distance education components of hybrid learning. This layered structure promotes integration rather than duplication of learning.

To remain effective over time, our OT programme incorporates feedback loops on an ongoing basis. Reflective journals ask students to evaluate their own learning processes, and online exit interviews and alumni surveys provide an insight into the programme's long-term impact. The feedback loops allow for iterative course development and foster a culture of responsive teaching (Alt, Raichel and Naamati-Schneider, 2022).

For Educational Developers, these practices align with traditional principles of curriculum design for online learning, offering a replicable model for other disciplines striving to deliver practical or professional skill sets in hybrid modalities. The OT delivery model presented here demonstrates how hybrid education can be deliberately scaffolded, integrating online

instruction with on-campus immersive experiences in a design intentionally grounded in andragogical theory.

Conclusion: reimagining possibility, not compromising quality

The need for occupational therapists has prompted OT programmes to grow responsibly; however, growth without planning risks undermining educational quality. Educational Developers and Learning Developers have an important role to play in evaluating hybrid designs across disciplines using shared frameworks and helping faculty integrate active learning tools that translate effectively to online environments. Additionally, we must advocate for institutional investment in hybrid infrastructure that centers on both student access and instructional quality. Our hybrid OT model illustrates that with careful design, even technical fields can deliver rigorous, inclusive education that meets future workforce needs. Hybrid OT education challenges the false dichotomy between quality and accessibility. By blending tradition and innovation, OT educators have shown that professional training can be both flexible and robust. For Learning Developers, the task is not to replicate these models, but to adapt their principles across contexts to help other disciplines navigate the shifting landscape of higher education with intentional, learner-centered design.

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