Converge at Pacific University

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Converge at Pacific University

Description
The School of Occupational Therapy at Pacific University and York St. John University have been working together since 2010. The two institutions are creating a Student Exchange program for study abroad opportunities, as well as a partnership to share research and education. The occupational therapy programs of both schools were interested in creating a connection to explore the impact and role of occupational therapy between the two countries and cultures. Through the relationship, Pacific learned of the Converge Program at York St. John for mental health consumers. After seeing the success and impact of Converge, Pacific's School of Occupational Therapy sought to bring Converge “across the pond” in order to benefit mental health consumers in the local community. Three occupational therapy students and a faculty advisor spearheaded the project. Due to the structure of Pacific, the undergraduate campus provided an excellent opportunity both for a partnership with the Applied Theatre program and a university location to familiarize mental health consumers with college campus life.

Participants for the pilot program of Converge at Pacific University were found through the Early Assessment Support Alliance (EASA). EASA is a program offering a two-year outreach treatment for young adults, ages 15-25, experiencing early psychosis. The symptoms must have begun within the last year and not be due to any other medical condition or substance abuse. EASA started with five counties in 2001 and now covers 19 counties in Oregon, with the goal to cover the entire state by 2015. EASA strives to “keep young people with the early signs of psychosis on their normal life paths” (Early Assessment and Support Alliance [EASA], 2014, para. 3). This is done by increasing community awareness and providing easily accessible and effective treatment by an interdisciplinary team of highly skilled clinicians and professionals. Within the program, EASA provides individual and group counseling, occupational therapy, low-dose pharmacological treatment, life-skills coaching, 24/7 crisis support, family education and support, and vocational training. Pacific University and EASA have a long-standing relationship, including multiple Pacific graduates working in the organization as well as ongoing fieldwork placements of current occupational therapy students. Due to EASA’s mission and values regarding both building community awareness and increasing client participation, this organization was the perfect fit for our pilot program to implement the Converge model in the U.S. (EASA, 2014).

Workshops were held over the course of three consecutive weeks in March 2014 at the Pacific University undergraduate campus. For each class, three applied theatre students and three occupational therapy students participated as peer role models and social supports. Theatre students were familiar with the games and activities used in the workshop and were closer in age to the EASA members, providing an excellent source of typical peer interaction. The occupational therapy students were unfamiliar with the theatre curriculum and learned the games along with the EASA members. The occupational therapy students also provided additional support to EASA members and observation of possible crisis signs from within the workshop. Practicing occupational therapists were available to provide support and crisis services as needed.

Disciplines
Occupational Therapy

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Converge at Pacific University
Michelle Apsley & Maja Kohl Emerson
Pacific University
School of Occupational Therapy
Approximately one in four adults (61.5 million) in the United States are affected by mental illness every year (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2013; National Institutes of Health [NIH], n.d.); it is the leading cause of disability (NIH, n.d.). Mental illness is defined by NAMI (n.d.) as a “medical condition that disrupts a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning.” Individuals living with mental illness not only face challenges when it comes to the symptoms and disabilities associated with the disease, but also with the stigma and prejudice surrounding mental illness. Corrigan and Watson (2002) argue that “people with mental illness are robbed of the opportunities that define a quality life: good jobs, safe housing, satisfactory health care, and affiliation with a diverse group of people” (p. 16). Individuals with mental illness are more likely to drop out of school (NAMI, 2013) and face social isolation.

Art and mental health initiatives have been shown to support recovery for mental health consumers (Spandler, Secker, Kent, Hacking, & Shenton, 2007). A study in England looked at the influence of participatory arts and mental health work with people with mental illness. Through survey, it was found that people with mental illness that participated in an arts-based program showed significant improvements in empowerment, mental health, and social inclusion. While no difference was found in occupational activity or education, one third of participants believed that involvement had increased their future employment and education opportunities (Secker, Hacking, Spandler, Kent, & Shenton, 2007). Occupational therapy is uniquely suited to address the challenges faced by many mental health consumers. Occupational therapy can focus on specific areas of occupation including education, work, leisure, and social participation (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2008).

Started at York St. John University in the United Kingdom, the Converge Program provides an avenue for mental health consumers to access higher education and the arts in an environment that is both flexible and supportive (Rowe, 2010). Due to the need for slightly more support, as well as the stigma held by society towards mental illness, mental health consumers often face challenges in taking advantage of higher education (Jacklin, Robinson, O’Meara, & Harris, 2007; Rowe, 2010). The Converge model was designed to provide this experience to mental health consumers as an age-appropriate occupation with additional resources built in to support their needs. Converge creates an important opportunity for clients to renew or establish their role of student in a safe and nonjudgmental environment. Clients are taught as typical students in the classroom and effort is made to normalize the experience (Rowe, 2010). Occupational therapy services are available for help in transitioning to the classroom and generalizing skills gained to other areas.

**Bringing Converge to Pacific**
The School of Occupational Therapy at Pacific University and York St. John University have been working together since 2010. The two institutions are creating a Student Exchange program for study abroad opportunities, as well as a partnership to share research and education. The occupational therapy programs of both schools were interested in creating a connection to explore the impact and role of occupational therapy between the two countries and cultures. Through the relationship, Pacific learned of the Converge Program at York St. John for mental health consumers. After seeing the success and impact of Converge, Pacific’s School of Occupational Therapy sought to bring Converge “across the pond” in order to benefit mental
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Numerous stakeholders were involved in bringing Converge to Pacific University. Nick Rowe, co-founder of the Converge Program, provided background information and offered suggestions as to how to develop the curriculum and run the theatre workshops. Dr. Rowe shared his expertise in this area with Jacob Coleman, the applied theatre professor at Pacific University. Using the information from Dr. Rowe, along with his own experience in applied theatre, Coleman created a working-curriculum for the pilot session of Converge at Pacific. The occupational therapy students provided training for the applied theatre students, highlighting what Converge is, the vision for this program, and the potential needs of the client population.

Clients at EASA were introduced to Converge at Pacific by the occupational therapists at their site. To promote the program and provide further information, the occupational therapy and theatre students from Pacific visited the EASA locations. Clients were encouraged to participate in the workshop regardless of their prior experience with acting. These meetings gave clients an opportunity to ask questions about the classes and participate in an example theatre game.

Converge at Pacific Pilot Workshop
Workshops were held over the course of three consecutive weeks in March 2014 at the Pacific University undergraduate campus. For each class, three applied theatre students and three occupational therapy students participated as peer role models and social supports. Theatre students were familiar with the games and activities used in the workshop and were closer in age to the EASA members, providing an excellent source of typical peer interaction. The occupational therapy students were unfamiliar with the theatre curriculum and learned the games along with the EASA members. The occupational therapy students also provided additional
support to EASA members and observation of possible crisis signs from within the workshop. Practicing occupational therapists were available to provide support and crisis services as needed.

Each workshop started with simple icebreaker games, such as a clapping circle to establish a comfortable rapport. These games centered around basic movements, recalling others’ names, and funny sound effects. There was an emphasis placed on fun and humor, and all participants were encouraged to “fail big.” Coleman often reiterated that this was a nonjudgmental environment and that everyone was encouraged to challenge his or her own comfort zone or boundaries. Many of the games resulted in laughter and joking, further establishing the human connection and creating equality within the room despite the differing levels of experience and education. As the group became more comfortable, the session moved on to movement-based ensemble games and activities exploring “flow.” “Viewpoints” is a performance language used to articulate and investigate elements of time and space for the theatre practitioner. Exercises in Viewpoints work often focuses on ensemble-building, group listening, movement, and tempo (Bogart, 2005). For example, in the second session the group had spent about three hours working together and had built a relationship through movement in the same space. The session had fifteen participants and the goal was to have everyone involved in an activity to create group cohesion and reinforce the group identity. After 20 minutes of moving together silently through the room, the group attempted to count to fifteen in order with only one person saying each number. If two people spoke at the same time, the group would start back at one. This is an amazingly hard activity that takes a large amount of group awareness and connection to achieve. After seven attempts, the group finally made it all the way through the fifteen numbers. This was a great moment in the workshop because there was an overwhelming feeling of group accomplishment shared.

From an outsiders perspective these theatre games may seem trivial and relevant only to the performing arts. However, when viewed through an occupational therapy lens, it becomes clear that they can have a huge impact on a mental health consumers’ life in general. Many of these games required a social awareness of taking turns and approaching others in space. We challenged personal boundaries both in physical and emotional space. The workshops were full of constant peer interactions, many of which occurred on the nonverbal level, and activities created a cohesion that established group identity and provided a feeling of membership to something greater. Although based on principles in theatre, these activities align well with the occupational therapy scope of practice to support clients in both social participation and accessing higher education (AOTA, 2008). Kielhofner’s Model of Human Occupation guided the occupational therapy students in their observation of how the workshops explored the roles and volition of EASA clients (Kielhofner, 2008). Throughout the sessions, EASA participants’ struggles with volition, routines, and role identity became more apparent.

During the last workshop, each participant created and directed their own visual montage based on the theme of “love and loss.” The montages were presented at the end of the workshop in groups of three. The presentations were very profound, well constructed, and every client completed a full montage of his/her own. This activity served as the culmination of the three-week pilot program at Pacific and created a group feeling of accomplishment. After the montages and a quick closing activity, the group members were thanked for participating and
invited to stay for refreshments, providing an opportunity for casual socialization typical of college students.

**Feedback and Lessons Learned**

Clients that participated were asked to complete a two-page evaluation of their experience, adapted from the form used at Converge. Nine feedback forms were collected. Most of the individuals who provided feedback participated in one or two of the three workshops. Overall, a majority of participants indicated that they enjoyed the experience, would be interested in future theatre-based activities, agreed that they felt welcome in the class, and that it was fun. Feedback also identified having other EASA members involved as important, and that individuals’ enjoyed having the chance to meet new people. See Appendix A for a summary of the data.

At the end of the workshop, one participant asked, “Is this some kind of college class?” John White, the School of Occupational Therapy director, responded that this was a special class that the occupational therapy and theatre departments were teaching. The participant then asked, “Can you take theatre classes in college?” When he was told yes, and that you could even major in theatre, the participant replied, “Oh man, I might even go to college now!”

Feedback from the occupational therapists at EASA highlighted both the challenges and the strengths of the pilot program. Due to the somewhat rural location of where Converge at Pacific classes were held, getting to and from the site was difficult. The EASA occupational therapists also had trouble identifying what happened during the classes or what support they could provide. This was because 1) the occupational therapists were not participating members of the workshops, 2) the EASA clients were often unable to express what occurred, and 3) no report was given to the EASA occupational therapists by the theatre or occupational therapy students. Strengths of the program include a perceived sense of community, EASA members liking that they “didn’t have to think” and could communicate on a more physical level, and seeing the clients making gains during the final class/performance. One individual reportedly said that it felt really nice to be part of a group.

**Looking Forward**

After debriefing with the occupational therapists from EASA, it was clear that there were areas to improve for future workshops. We had spent a lot of energy attempting to replicate Converge’s program from the UK and we now realize that there are cultural and organizational differences that make that difficult. The EASA occupational therapists had a hard time visualizing what happened in the sessions, as they did not get a clear picture from the clients and did not have contact with us for debriefing until the project was over. This is an aspect that we would change for the future. We would build in time to communicate with the occupational therapists both what was occurring in the workshops and to receive information on how clients were doing in treatment. We also established a need for more training for the undergraduate theatre students in mental health symptoms, diagnoses, and sensitivities. Boundaries need to be set for undergraduate students so that confidentiality is not broken and workshops adhere to EASA’s policies. Lastly, we want to explore partnerships with local community colleges to ease some of issues that have presented. Accessing a campus closer to EASA would make transportation easier for all parties and decrease the strain on the EASA staff. Also, community college is a more typical avenue for education for the mental health consumers to access in the
future. Financially, community college is more affordable and admissions are not nearly as competitive. As we continue, we will focus on supporting our US program and tailoring the workshops to the needs of the clients here in our own community.

In the future, we hope that Converge at Pacific can continue to grow and expand to other areas of the arts and higher education in general. This pilot project was successful mostly due to the generous donation of time and effort of those involved from EASA, Pacific University Occupational Therapy, and Pacific University Applied Theatre. This meant that there was no cost to the planning and implementation of the three-week workshop. As classes expand however, funding may become an issue. Further research will need to be done in the area of grants and funding available to support the educational endeavors of young adults living with psychosis. With financial backing, Converge could expand to help thousands of young adults in our community achieve their dreams.

**Acknowledgements**
We would like to thank Danielle Williams for her tireless work on the planning phase of this project and her participation in the workshop, as well as Sean Roush for supporting us throughout this project with his wealth of wisdom and uncanny advice. We would like to acknowledge Dacia Davison and Marissa Gottlob from EASA for their flexibility, time, and transportation. We truly appreciate Jacob Coleman and the Applied Theatre students for their time and dedication to this project; it would not have been possible without them. Our thanks go to Nick Rowe and everyone from Converge at York St. John for sharing their research, knowledge, and experience in order to help form our own project despite the challenges of time zones. We thank John White for his willingness to jump in at a moment’s notice, as well as his photography skills. We appreciate the opportunity Pacific University has given us to be a part of such a rewarding community project and truly hope it continues in the future.
References


Appendices

Appendix A. Summary of Feedback Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt welcome in the class(^1)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercises and games were explained clearly</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The theatre course was fun(^2)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The theatre course was challenging(^3)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The theatre course was good for me(^4)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to do more theatre in the future</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was important to me to have a change to meet new people</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was important to me that the course took place at the university</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt I worked hard in the sessions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt able to ask for help if I needed it</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were enough breaks for me in the classes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was important to me that the theatre course involved other EASA members</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was important to have university students in the class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that the theatre course has improved my general confidence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to do more courses at the university</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would recommend the theatre course to a friend</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) One participant did not respond
\(^2\) One participant stated that the last class was fun
\(^3\) One participant stated that the first two classes were challenging
\(^4\) One participant stated that the last course was “good for me”; one participant did not respond
Converge at Pacific University

MICHELLE APSLEY, MAJA KOHL EMERSON, & DANIELLE WILLIAMS

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY
Background
Mental illness, stigma, and access to higher education

- 1 in 4 adults affected by a diagnosable mental illness
- Challenges
  - Symptoms and disabilities associated with disease
  - Stigma and prejudice
- Arts and mental health initiatives
  - Improvements in empowerment, mental health, and social inclusion
  - Future employment and educational opportunities
- Role of occupational therapy
The Converge Program

- **What is Converge?**
  - A program designed for mental health consumers that offers creative arts classes

- **Converge Model**
  - Focuses on normalizing the educational experience through de-stigmatizing the university environment

- **Result**
  - Has supported these individuals in re-defining themselves based on their skills and positive attributes
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EASA</th>
<th>Theatre Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Assessment Support Alliance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Early onset psychosis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ages 15-25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mission</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- To support these individuals in returning to a normal life path</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participating Oregon counties</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Multnomah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Washington</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Contacted head of undergraduate theatre department</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Applied theatre program</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Created partnership with Jacob Coleman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Promote at EASA

Met with undergraduate theatre students

Pacific University & EASA present:

Interested in acting and movement? Come learn how actors prepare for their work

Theatre Workshop

Theatre games, movement, and group FUN in a no pressure environment

- Explore a university theatre environment
- Make new connections and learn new skills
- Learn about social interaction
- Explore sharing space with others
- NO public performance involved
- NO previous experience necessary

Wednesday nights 6:00-8:00pm
March 5th - March 19th, 2014
Pacific University, Forest Grove
Workshops

- 3 consecutive Wednesday nights
- 10-12 EASA participants
- Intro and icebreaker games
- Viewpoints language
- Visual montages
Example Activity

LET’S COUNT TO....
**Why Theatre?**

- Increased social awareness
- Body in space, personal bubble
- Social cues and interaction
- Group identity/membership
- Environment
## Feedback Highlights

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>😊 Strongly Agree</th>
<th>😊 Agree</th>
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</table>
## Lessons Learned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Sense of community</td>
<td>• Distance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• EASA members liked that they “didn’t have to think”</td>
<td>• Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gains made during final performance</td>
<td>• What happened during class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Need for additional training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Future Endeavors

- Continue Converge at Pacific
- Expand into other arts and subjects
- Explore funding options
- Focus on US program needs