

Accommodating diversity within occupational therapy education: Exploring the experiences of non-traditional students.

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Introduction

- Occupational therapy (OT) pre-registration education in the UK stands at the intersection of the fields of higher education (HE) and professional practice and is subject to various government agendas, including an ongoing commitment to widening participation in HE and to diversifying the health and social care workforce to reflect modern society.
- Reflecting the changing profile of the student population in the UK, 67% of the 2005 intake were mature (COT 2007) and increasing numbers continue to enter with non-traditional academic backgrounds (which include, for example, various vocational qualifications, Access Certificates, Foundation Degrees, A-levels as a mature student).
- Compared to more 'traditional' students, the skills, prior experiences and expectations of students with non-traditional academic backgrounds may generate particular challenges in negotiating the transition to, and persisting and succeeding within HE (Leathwood & O'Connell 2003; Sambell & Hubbard 2004; Walker et al 2004).
- Students from such backgrounds who graduate from OT programmes are as academically successful as traditional school leavers (Howard and Jerosch-Herold 2000; Shanahan 2004), however little is known about how students actually experience and negotiate the demands of their programme of study.

Research Method

- A longitudinal case study methodology was utilised to capture complexity and understand the issues within their natural context (Yin 2003). Thirteen volunteer participants were drawn from a single OT cohort at one of the UK's research intensive universities.
- Data were collected via initial focus groups exploring pre-entry educational experiences and expectations, reflective diaries recording educational experiences deemed significant or meaningful by participants and 1:1 semi-structured interviews conducted towards the end of their 1st and 3rd years of study which focused on exploring learning experiences.
- To examine how experiences might be influenced by the history and structure of students' natural social contexts, theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) of transcribed data was underpinned by Bourdieu's (1990) conceptual tools of:
 - Field:** Bounded social spaces or arenas of life which form distinct social worlds and include unique, established and taken-for-granted practices that are imposed, without necessarily ever being explicitly stated, on those who seek to enter or remain within them.
 - Habitus:** Unconscious patterns of being and perceiving acquired over lengthy periods of exposure to particular social conditions, which are structured by social forces while simultaneously structuring behaviour.
 - Capital:** Any resource holding symbolic value within, and therefore acting as a currency of, a particular field.

Findings

While all of the participants identified their affinity with the OT profession, this provided no guarantee of affinity with the HE field they had entered and their experiences of learning within it were complex and varied. Clusters of shared experience which emerged towards the end of their first year of study ('Fitting in', 'Adapting', 'Resisting' and 'Excluded' – see Watson et al 2009) evolved into a model of those whose (at times changing) habitus ultimately saw them (a) find a comfortable fit within the new field, (b) occupying the margins of the field or (c) excluded from it. Underpinning these experiences, and pertaining particularly to the academic learning environment, were a number of key factors:

'Rules of the Game'

The established practices, expectations and requirements of the field, including those that are made explicit (for example, via learning outcomes and marking criteria, academic and programme regulations) and those that are more implicit (including, for example, how to behave, take responsibility for and manage learning, access and utilise support, present knowledge and understanding in the required manner). Conforming to the rules of the game is pivotal to attaining a legitimate position and succeeding within the field.

Linguistic Capital

The particular form of language valued within the field, which relates to the accessibility of various learning activities, particularly when that deployed by more powerful players within the field (staff) is markedly different from that held by an individual student. It is central to the interpretation of learning outcomes, marking criteria and feedback, and is critical to the capacity to present knowledge and understanding in a form legitimated by the field.

Academic Capital

The particular form of academic skills and knowledge valued within the field, which ultimately translate into academic attainment. It includes, for example, skills associated with searching for, accessing and critically appraising knowledge sources and the use of referencing and citation conventions, the presentation of submitted work, including the structure and tone of academic writing, the depth and level of disciplinary and related knowledge valued and expected within the field.

Social Capital

Comprises valuable social networks developed within the field, which confer benefits in the guise of, for example, access to collaborative study groups, peer-review of draft submissions, the sharing of resources, practical and emotional support. It can serve as a powerful mechanism to aid the deciphering of the 'rules of the game' and for facilitating the acquisition of linguistic and academic capital. Not all social networks are equal; those developed amongst marginalised students do not afford the same capital value as networks including students who fit more comfortably within the field.

Conclusions

- Academic backgrounds are not, in themselves, sufficient to explain the challenges students encounter when they enter the HE field. Individual habitus, born out of varying pre-entry social contexts, influences affinity with the dominant culture of the new field and the portfolio of relevant capital that students bring into it.
- To secure a legitimate position within the field, students need to conform to, or play by, the 'rules of the game', and demonstrate and/or accumulate capital valued by the field. Failure to adequately do so results in exclusion from the field.
- Particularly for those whose established habitus does not afford natural affinity with the HE field, linguistic and social capital are important, inter-related precursors to the development of academic capital and learning how to fulfil the 'rules of the game'.
- Failure to acknowledge the pervading culture of individual HE institutions, and to recognise the often tacit demands defining the legitimacy of knowledge and understanding, is likely to impede the much sought-after diversification of student and professional populations.
- Awareness amongst educators of the dominant institutional culture and its influence on the logic of practice within the field, together with the embedding of strategies to support the development of relevant capital by individual students (e.g. bolstering the development of social networks, being as explicit as it is possible to be about the 'rules of the game', encouraging collaborative group work to examine learning outcomes and marking criteria and to undertake other learning activities, etc) may go some way to enabling individual students to find a legitimate position within the field and therefore progress to join the professional workforce.