

The Transformation from Student to Occupational Therapist: Using the Delphi Method to Identify the Threshold Concepts in Occupational Therapy

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Introduction

As academics explore teaching and learning theories and models to support student learning, in an increasingly complex higher education environment, the theory of threshold concepts has emerged, generating significant scholarly interest. Threshold concepts are described as “portals” that open up “new and previously inaccessible” ways of thinking about something (Meyer & Land 2003, p.1.). They represent a deeper level of understanding that is essential for students to progress.

Threshold concept theory has much to offer the health disciplines given its wide and almost universally positive application in other areas. However, only four studies identifying threshold concepts have been undertaken in Occupational Therapy (OT).

Authors in OT have proposed the following threshold concepts in OT: Caring (Clouder 2005); Client-centred practice and the use of self, developing a professional self-identity, and practising in the real world (Tanner, 2011); Client centred practice, integral nature of OT theory and

practice, identity as an Occupational Therapist, thinking critically, reasoning and reflecting (Rodger & Turpin 2011), and Occupational science (Killett 2010).

Method

The Delphi method of establishing consensus was used with a final sample of 30 participants comprising final year OT students (N=6), OT clinicians (N=14) and OT academics (N=10) sourced from across Victoria, Australia. Snow-ball sampling was used to recruit potential participants. Three rounds of Delphi survey were conducted.

The first survey made use of open ended questions to establish the concepts and capabilities that participants identified as troublesome, transformative and integrative in OT. Participants were also asked to identify the threshold concepts for the discipline. This data was analysed thematically by three researchers. Delphi surveys two and three asked participants to respond to the same questions by rating their level of agreement with statements generated from survey one on a four point Likert scale. Consensus was considered to have been reached within the group when 70% or more participants agreed or strongly agreed with a statement. Quantitative data from surveys two and three were analysed using descriptive statistics. A rank order of threshold concepts for the discipline was also produced.

Results

There was a substantial level of agreement between participant responses in all three of the Delphi surveys.

Ten threshold concepts were identified in this study. These were; Occupation; Understanding and applying the models and theories of OT; The OT role; Clinical reasoning, Discipline specific skills and knowledge; A client centred approach; Reflective practice; Evidence based practice, A holistic approach; and Practicing in context.

Conclusion

This study identified ten threshold concepts for the Occupational Therapy discipline. The study used rigorous methodology in the form of the Delphi survey with a representative participant group from across the OT discipline. These findings build on the work previously undertaken investigating the threshold concepts of OT and provide valuable information regarding the fundamental concepts and capabilities that students must acquire in the transformation from student to professional.

References

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