

Threshold concepts and authentic assessment: Learning to think like an occupational therapist

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Introduction:

Design and development of the occupational therapy undergraduate and graduate entry curricula at the University of Queensland is underpinned by five threshold concepts: purposeful and meaningful occupation, client centred practice, the integral nature of occupational therapy theory and practice, identity as an occupational therapist, and thinking critically, reasoning and reflecting (Rodger and Turpin, 2011). Davies & Mangan (2006) and Land, Cousin, Meyer & Davies (2005) have suggested key features of the learning environment, crucial for transition through liminal space and mastery of threshold concepts. These features include increasingly complex authentic problem solving allowing for variance in student mastery of concepts and opportunity for reworking in light of conceptual development. Given the centrality of assessment in course and program design (Boud and Associates, 2010) inclusion of these features in the design of assessment is a critical aspect of the learning environment. However, to date, neither the ability of assessment activities based on these features to engage occupational therapy students with threshold concepts, nor the experience of students completing these learning activities including negotiating liminal space and crossing conceptual thresholds has been addressed.

Objectives:

This mixed methods research study explored student and academic staff experiences of assessment within three consecutive pre-clinical courses undertaken over 18 months/ three semesters within an occupational therapy curriculum. It aimed to develop an understanding of whether purposively designed assessments engaged students with the threshold concepts and the students' experience of this engagement.

Methods:

Five (5) authentic assessment tasks were designed to engage students with threshold concepts underpinning the child and youth courses of the first year of a graduate entry masters and the first and second years of an undergraduate occupational therapy curriculum. All students completing these courses (n=224) were invited to participate in on-line surveys and focus groups addressing their experience of completing the assessment activities, including their learning process and the supports they utilised in completion of authentic assessment. Perspectives of academic staff (n=2) involved with the assessment tasks were obtained from interview. Focus groups and interviews were transcribed and analysed for themes (Patton, 2002).

Results:

The majority of students found the authentic assessment tasks to be motivating (94.3%), even when encountering troublesome knowledge (95.4%) and perceived the assessment tasks to challenge understanding, encouraging them to rethink concepts (88.46%). Two key themes emerged, firstly, "Being in and moving from stuck places" reflecting the students experiences when encountering troublesome knowledge and the supports that assisted them at different stages to move out of these spaces. Secondly, "Pulling it together", relating to how students viewed the assessment activities as facilitating their integration of knowledge presented within the course and across courses, as well as development of their emerging identity as therapists.

Conclusion:

Authentic assessment enabled students to engage with troublesome knowledge and cross conceptual thresholds. Facilitators and barriers to student engagement with assessment and

threshold concepts were identified that can be used to inform curriculum design, in particular the development of learning activities to enable the integrated conceptual mastery required to think and act as an occupational therapist.

References

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