Teaching in the New Millennium: An Autoethnographic Approach to Exploring Occupational Adaptation of Occupational Therapy Professors

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This autoethnographic research examines the lived experience of occupational therapy faculty. Researchers penned their teaching narratives and identified themes related to teaching today's students. Upon completion, the researchers completed both first and second cycle coding of their own story and then the story of the co-investigator followed by the development of themes stemming from the collapsed data. Five themes emerged: faculty community, dancing as fast as I can, values, self-perception, and emotional rollercoaster. The findings provide insight into the lived experience of faculty members and the importance of these experiences to faculty identity, competence, and adaptation. The authors describe the implications of these findings to faculty growth and development and student learning.

Keywords: healthcare education, lived experience, Narrative Collaborative autoethnography, Kielhofner's, Model of Human Occupation, occupational identity, occupational competence, occupational adaptation

INTRODUCTION

> *"Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood."*
> *Helen Keller*

According to a recent survey, the four greatest challenges facing universities today include declining federal funding, rise in student mental health concerns, embracing and growing diversity and inclusion efforts, and affordability which impacts student debt (Association of Public Land Grant Universities, 2020). To remain open and sustainable, higher education is having to rethink its business strategies and respond to consumer (i.e., student) demand (Higher ED Dive, 2020). Institutions have begun to morph in response to consumer/student demands which has also affected the delivery of that education.

To that end, research around the scholarship of teaching and learning has gained momentum over the past decade and has focused on the study and development of best practices related to pedagogies (Gupta & Bilics, 2014; Lockhart-Keene & Potvin, 2018) with an emphasis on the characteristics of learners and their environment. Much has been written of late about today's traditional students, who are part of the cohorts known as the 'Millennials' and 'Generation Z'. Millennials have been described in the literature as

technologically savvy, assertive, and positive (Johnson & Romanello, 2005) while simultaneously immature, full of self-doubt (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004), and motivated by financial gain and receiving feedback (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). Generation Z on the other hand has been described as open-minded, compassionate, and loyal (Seemiller & Clayton, 2016). They also read less, have a shorter attention span than their predecessors, and require immediate feedback (Shatto & Erwin, 2016). To meet the needs of these two cohorts, faculty have been called upon to shift pedagogical approaches away from lecture-based approaches to ones that are more interactive, targeted, and sensorily engaging. Specifically, research shows that students in health care professions respond well to experiential learning, authentic cases, and simulation experiences (Taff, Price, Krishnagiri, Bilics, & Hooper, 2018).

Technology, socio-cultural climate, economic pressures, and changes in student learners have influenced the art and science of teaching (Eagan et al., 2014; Morreale & Staley, 2016). Understanding the characteristics of and learning needs related to current students is one variable in the success of higher education. Faculty are also part of the learning environment, however their narratives regarding teaching in the current landscape of academia have not been adequately captured; to ignore the educator's voice is to try and solve a problem with only half the equation.

Capturing one's voice through narrative as an approach to scientific inquiry reflects an outgrowth of human rights movements including civil, disability, and women's movements in which perspective taking is crucial to understanding the rights and lived experience in question (Moen, 2006). Researchers in health care professions often use narratives to gain a deeper understanding of the client's experiences in their environment to inform practice (D'Cruz, Douglas, & Serry, 2019; Murray & Tuqiri, 2020; Westby, & Culatta, 2016). Despite its growing use in nursing to inform teaching and learning practices (Diekelmann, 2001; Nehls, 1995; Sulzer & Dunn, 2019), narrative pedagogy or using the lived experiences of teachers and learners to inform teaching and learning practices has not been widely used in other healthcare academic programs. While some phenomenological inquiry relies on the researchers analyzing the narratives of others, collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012) is a research methodology that is predicated on the researchers simultaneously being the subjects of their research and collaboratively analyzing the data. This allows for subjective interpretation of concepts that may lead to further inquiry. The current study aimed to answer the question, "What is the lived experience of faculty members teaching in an occupational therapy program?"

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Two occupational therapy faculty members participated in this study and were also the researchers. Both faculty members are White, female, and have over 20 years of teaching experience. They each hold doctoral degrees and currently teach in an occupational therapy graduate program at a private university; both have taught at public universities as well.

Method

The researchers used an analytical collaborative autoethnographic approach as described by Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2012) to collect and examine the data. This allows the researchers to transcend mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation.

Both researchers responded to the prompt, "Write your teaching story" by crafting a typed narrative. Upon completion, to ensure objectivity, the researchers individually analyzed the data qualitatively by first coding their own story and then the story of the co-investigator. Once the researchers completed the first cycle or macro-coding, they collaborated to compile final codes, produce categories, and collapse data into themes and subcategories. After the themes were established, the researchers used concepts from Kielhofner's Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner, 2008; Taylor, 2017) to describe the faculty experience with specific attention to occupational identity, competence, and adaptation.

RESULTS

Five themes emerged from the data: faculty community, dancing as fast as I can, values, self-perception, and emotional rollercoaster. Each theme was reflected in both narratives. Table 1 lists the five themes and corresponding subcategories.

TABLE 1
THEMES AND SUBCATEGORIES FROM FACULTY NARRATIVES

THEMES	SUBCATEGORIES
Faculty Community	Social environment
	Physical environment
Dancing As Fast As I Can	Finding the connection
	Meeting student needs
	Finding balance
Values	Active engagement in the learning process
	Safe environment
	See Me
Self-perception	I am capable
	Imposter syndrome
Emotional Rollercoaster	

Faculty Community
Social Environment
The theme, faculty community, emerged through statements reflecting the critical influence that both the social and physical environments in higher education had on shaping the researchers' trajectories and professional identities. The participants described divergent social experiences in terms of being enculturated into academia. One participant described bridging the gap from clinical to academic work positively. Factors that made the transition positive most notably included strong mentorship by accomplished faculty as revealed in the comment, "I have been blessed with amazing mentors in occupational therapy…they have provided support, guidance, and role models for excellence. I feel so very fortunate." Conversely, statements indicating absent or insufficient mentorship negatively influencing faculty development included, "My first day [name redacted] walked me in and said something to the effect of 'Be nice to her.' And that was it – the extent of my formal teacher training;" and "So for 14 years I kind of did my own thing…oh I think I was probably more connected than some simply because I had been a student in the same program in which I taught but by and large [I was] figuring it out on my own."

Altruism as a social construct arose from the data in terms of the opportunity to give back to others. For example, one participant wrote, "I support alumnae, students, and colleagues in professional activities in my attempt to emulate [name redacted] and my other mentors who I saw do this so many times."

Physical Environment
Researchers emphasized the influence of the physical environment on performance, as suggested by the comments: "No office so the labs became my nesting ground." "Not being able to see daylight for an entire work-day made me sick, fluorescent overhead lights. I walked out feeling awful and many days had a headache." "I had my own office with a big picture window that overlooked a palm tree. I loved it."

Dancing as Fast as I Can
This theme was reflected as a visceral sense that nothing is ever enough as participants described trying to manage multiple faculty roles; please students, colleagues, and administration; and find balance in one's

life. Three subcategories emerged within this theme including: 1) finding the connection between faculty and students; 2) meeting student needs; and 3) finding balance.

Finding the Connection

Trying to find the connection between faculty and students was reflected through statements in the narrative such as, "No one in that cohort laughed at my jokes, no one embraced exploration, no one embraced making a mistake (and certainly couldn't tolerate me making one)." "How do you function in an environment like that where you literally have to keep dancing to get through the semester and where you are continually trying to find the hook to connect with them."

Meeting Student Needs

The study participants described efforts to meet student needs as reflected in these statements. "I consistently receive feedback that my expectations are not clear. I created rubrics, exemplars, go over the assignments in class, meet with students etc. and they still state this…honestly I feel like I cannot win." Another participant wrote, "I feel adrift. Do I get caught up in the current of this generation and roll with their punches and try to please them at every turn? …. but clearly I'm not 'getting it', whatever 'it' is."

Finding Balance

The final subcategory related to finding a balance in one's life as the participants described finding enough time to complete faculty teaching, scholarship, and service roles, including professional and personal obligations. These sentiments were summarized by the narrative statement, "Many faculty experience this strain of balancing everything. It is something I have worked on throughout my career."

Values

Values refer to "beliefs and commitments about what is good, right, and important to do" (Lee & Kielhofner, 2017 p. 46). The narratives revealed the researchers' personal and professional values and subsequent feelings of distress when the participants' values were not in alignment with students' or colleagues'. Subcategories under values included: 1) active engagement in the process; 2) safe environment; and 3) see me.

Active Engagement in the Process

Many comments in the narratives expanded on the theme related to the value of personal responsibility taking. Participants struggled with perceptions that students were not taking enough responsibility for their learning and placed greater value on the product or grade rather than on the process of learning. The following statements exemplify the centrality of and struggles with these values to the participants. "Most of the time students meet to discuss the A-, B+, or B they received. When I let them know these are good grades and they worked hard on the paper, they look frustrated." "I have started classes this semester by saying 'I cannot learn for you'."

Attempts to actively engage students in the process emerged in the narratives as participants described using "hands-on", "experiential", "case-based" learning, and incorporating "clinical stories" in the classroom. Furthermore, the participants expressed feeling unsure as to how to effectively challenge students to engage in the process of learning. "They [students] want to know the 'right answers' and not be challenged to find multiple answers." "It's hard for me to balance this [students wanting faculty to provide 'right answers' requiring them little problem-solving or time investment] with what I hope they learn (therapeutic reasoning, independent thinking, love of knowledge) from the classroom." "I feel that many students want easy solutions." In addition to this perceived lack of intellectual engagement, the participants noted a lack of creative engagement as evidenced by the statement, "Pinterest rules, creativity is lost…" Subsequently, a sense that a student's education rests completely on faculty emerged. Comments supporting this sentiment included, "It seems more difficult to hold them [students] responsible for their learning.", "With class sizes of 50-54, it is difficult to individualize learning so that everyone's needs are met.", and "I started to feel as though I was responsible for entertaining them."

Safe Environment

Participant narratives communicated a desire to feel psychologically and emotionally safe in their work environments. Participants described instances in which the work environment was perceived as threatening often due to lack of transparency and therefore not supportive of psycho-emotional safety. In one scenario, a course was shifted to another faculty member and the participant was only notified after the fact and after preparation for said course had taken place. "This was MY course...a course I had been teaching for years and no one had the courtesy to have a conversation with me about it...the epitome of feeling looked over and abused." Another story arose in which a participant recounted an incident that occured in the midst of interviewing for a more advanced position. A colleague with whom she had worked for several years indicated during the course of being interviewed by several members of the faculty that she was unqualified for the position as her terminal degree did not qualify her to engage in rigorous research. Psycho-emotional safety also emerged as a concern among students as told by faculty. "I can only begin to describe what I am now seeing in students as the manifestation of generational trauma....students triggered left and right despite frequent trigger warnings."

See Me

The final value reflected a desire for the participants to be acknowledged; acknowledged for their contributions and efforts even when and in spite of incidences in which those contributions and/or efforts may have fallen short. Participants described instances where they were appreciated for their work as noted in comments such as "asked to be a mentor", "receiving grants", "working with colleagues", and "receiving positive teaching evaluations." They also described periodically feeling un/underappreciated for their work by students and colleagues as reflected in comments including, "students don't always appreciate efforts." "I feel very knowledgeable (and this is reflected on course evaluations), but not as appreciated."

Self-Perception

Self-perception emerged as a dichotomous experience of self. On the one hand, participants experienced moments in which they believed their knowledge and experience could influence the trajectory of the next generation of occupational therapy practitioners. On the other, they struggled with self-doubt and the imposter syndrome. "I am the greatest thing since sliced white bread -she is the worst teacher ever and now I don't want to be an OT."

I Am Capable

Participants described striving to succeed in educating "excellent thoughtful creative practitioners" as well as being "productive and engaged" faculty members. Faculty described the importance of "challenging students" during their education and the distress caused in finding the right degree of difficulty. Faculty acknowledged their expertise and ability to influence the next generation, "At this point in my career I feel very knowledgeable about the subject matter...". "My teaching has improved." "I feel like I am doing better at bringing clinical examples into the classroom and including experiential learning while challenging students." They also expressed dedication to the student's journey as reflected in the statement, "I include students in publications, presentations, and work outside of the classroom. I feel these activities are also a part of teaching as well as keeping in touch with alumni."

Imposter Syndrome

Interspersed with self-perceptions of capability, participants questioned their effectiveness in the classroom and in particular their ability to meet students' needs (and connect) as reflected in statements including "Did I know anything? Could I keep up with the other faculty?", "I have been floored by the behaviors of students and it has left me wondering, is it them or is it me?", and "...G*d forbid I should ever give myself credit for knowing anything."

Emotional Rollercoaster

Despite the stereotypic image of the stoic professor, the data revealed strong emotional responses from both participants associated with the faculty role. Emotions ran the gamut from love and passion to anger and despair as reflected in the statements below.

"I was over the moon with delight [being asked to teach]."

"I enjoy adding projects or experiences that benefit the community and students."

"It was awful. Feeling alone in front of a class, like that is so raw and you feel so vulnerable..."

"I was mortified, angry as hell and broken once again...

"I agonized over the decision! I did not want to leave the students...I felt such an emotional connection to the student body and a loyalty to the university."

"Not knowing is fine BUT acting like you know when you don't is a whole other story. I was livid."

DISCUSSION

The findings from this current study on the lived experience of faculty provide insight into the challenges experienced by faculty. The authors used Kielfhofner's Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner, 2008; Taylor, 2017) as a framework to synthesize the findings to better understand the lived experience of faculty.

Kielhofner's Model of Human Occupation (Taylor, 2017) is predicated on general systems theory and describes the relationships between the person (faculty member), environment (academic contexts, and students) and daily occupations (teaching). According to this model, people engage in those things they value and find meaningful, and for which they are successful as this provides them satisfaction and promotes positive identity (Kielhofner, 2008; Taylor, 2017). Over time they achieve success, develop skills required to engage in the occupation, leading to occupational competence. Having a strong occupational identity (self-concept regarding one's occupation) and competence (success over time) allows the person to adapt to changes and continue to succeed (occupational adaptation). These concepts are important to understanding faculty roles and responsibilities and performance over time. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of these concepts with the themes derived from the data in this study.

FIGURE 1
RELATIONSHIP OF MODEL OF HUMAN OCCUPATION TO THEMES
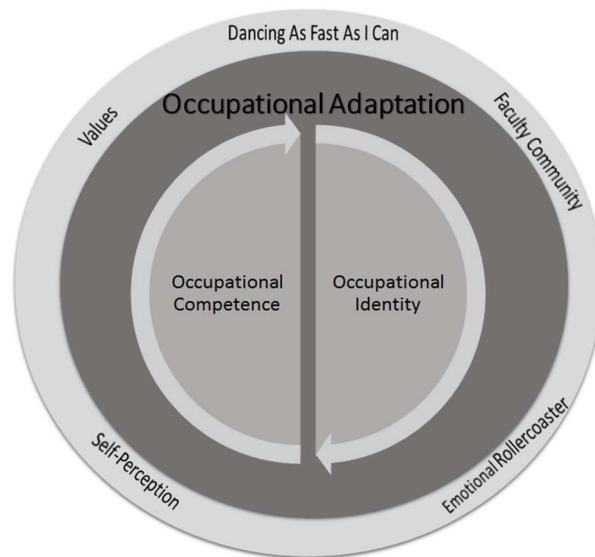
Occupational identity is one's definition of the self and includes self-concept, roles and relationships, capacity and effectiveness, values, and personal desires and goals (Christiansen, 1999). Kielhofner (Kielhofner, 2008; Taylor, 2017) postulates that occupational identity supports life satisfaction and leads to successful occupational performance. A positive occupational identity informs roles and habits and reinforces positive behaviors, success, and creativity. In this study, faculty experienced periods of growth as well as distress regarding occupational identity; participants described feeling capable and also feeling like an "imposter" at times. These feelings appeared to be heavily influenced by the social environment. Participants expressed not being acknowledged, heard, or seen, which in turn impeded development of positive self-perception. They described a disconnect between who they aspire to be and who they currently perceive themselves to be which created a disruption in the development of occupational identity. These disruptions resulted in feelings of occupational incompetence.

The degree to which one sustains a successful pattern of occupational participation that reflects one's occupational identity is termed **occupational competence** (Kielhofner, 2008; Taylor, 2017). Occupational competence is compromised when a person lacks environmental support or personal factors to perform, resulting in feelings of inefficiency and disruption of occupational identity. For example, a faculty member who does not receive support from colleagues or does not have adequate skills required to teach (e.g., making tests, adjusting to new requirements) may have difficulty feeling effective or competent in one's desired occupation. The findings in this study reveal challenges in occupational competence as participants described lack of support for teaching, being left without guidance, struggling to meet everyone's needs, and difficulty finding the connection, particularly with students.

Occupational identity and occupational competence converge to support a person's ability to flexibly respond to change (i.e., occupational adaptation). **Occupational adaptation** refers to having a positive occupational identity and the corresponding occupational competence constructed over time through the dynamics of a constant interaction between personal factors and environmental impact (de las Heras de Pablo, Fan, & Kielhofner, 2017). The findings from this study suggest that faculty experience both positive and negative occupational identity influencing their ability to consistently perform their roles to achieve occupational competence making it difficult to adapt to changes (occupational adaptation). As reflected in the theme Dancing As Fast As I Can, faculty described an inability to adequately meet student needs. Not meeting these needs lead to doubt about their faculty role and associated skills which lead to difficulty adapting as exemplified in statements such as "I feel adrift" and "I'm not getting it...whatever *it* is".

Disruptions in identity and competence resulted in challenges adapting to the rapidly changing academic landscape.

The current findings suggest that faculty experience challenges with occupational identity, occupational competence, and corresponding occupational adaptation within higher education (See Figure 1). These concepts are interrelated. Therefore, addressing one aspect may result in changes to another.

For example, addressing faculty skills and abilities through advanced instruction on teaching methods, test making, or classroom engagement strategies may result in improved student performance and satisfaction, leading the faculty member to feel and be more competent and embrace their identity. Engaging faculty in mentorship programs that support their skills, abilities, and feelings so that they can feel part of a faculty community reinforces one's occupational identity. This in turn, facilitates one's belief in their abilities and can motivate the faculty member to succeed, further establishing one's identity and competence. Over time, faculty who identify strongly in the role and gain competence are more likely to have the skills, abilities, and internal motivation to adapt to changes within the educational environment, leading to enhanced student learning outcomes.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

The ability to adapt to environmental and personal changes requires a multi-system approach. Opportunities to promote occupational identity and occupational competence lead to an overall sense of satisfaction and competence resulting in an enhanced ability to perform in a changing environment. As faculty become more satisfied and competent in their roles, they are able to create positive changes to support student learning. The themes that emerged in this study highlight strategies that may support occupational adaptation (See Table 2).

TABLE 2
STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT OCCUPATIONAL ADAPTATION

FACULTY COMMUNITY	
Social environment	• Develop mentorship programs to support professional and social growth of faculty. • Find a professional support person and communicate issues as they arise. • Provide training in specific job-related skills, such as grant writing, publication, teaching, and administrative training to build performance skills. • Increase transparency with students by including them in departmental/curricular decision-making processes as appropriate. • Decrease potential to trigger the stress response in students, which can fuel disconnection by teaching from a trauma-informed lens. (See Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (July, 2014) for foundational information regarding trauma-informed care).
Physical environment	• Conduct a needs assessment related to the physical environment. Consider aspects such as sound, color, light, flexibility of the space, etc. • Create inviting physical environments (learning and formal/informal professional spaces) that are reflective of the expressed needs of faculty.

DANCING AS FAST AS I CAN	
Finding the connection	- Create opportunities for faculty and students to develop connections outside of the traditional classroom environment such as occupational balance nights or virtual social events. - Create opportunities for students and faculty to form working connections in the form of faculty mentored research or service opportunities for example.
Meeting student needs	- Conduct regular student needs assessments that reflect the unique characteristics and needs of specific cohorts. - Conduct regular town halls to support an open and affirming environment. - Provide education regarding the professional way in which feedback should be constructed and provided. - Create regular classroom-based opportunities for students to provide constructive feedback about the course.
Finding balance	- Acknowledge the central role of faculty; provide opportunities to process concerns within the workplace. - Encourage faculty to engage in self-care and provide space and place for self-care to occur such as a dedicated area for meditation or quiet time to recharge and/or mental health days for example.
VALUES	
Active engagement in the learning process	- Create safe spaces (physically and psycho-emotionally) to allow for active engagement, creativity, and problem solving. - Be transparent with teaching and learning philosophies in the classroom. - Model that which you want to see in students in terms of interactive, creative, and problem-based teaching. - Explore a variety of leadership models that support problem-solving, creativity and increased interaction in the classroom.
Safe environment	- Promote a collaborative working environment where students and faculty feel safe engaging in teaching/learning. - Model intellectual humility - Create faculty spaces/forums in which authenticity and transparency is valued and encouraged. - Provide training on burnout and actively engage in practices that minimize the potential for burnout. - Create a collective vision board that reflects departmental values and the desired environment to be cultivated.
See Me	- Validate, acknowledge, and listen to faculty concerns on a regular basis. - Be intentional about providing supportive and regular feedback to faculty. - Provide opportunities to highlight faculty accomplishments of all sizes, shapes, and forms.

SELF-PERCEPTION	
I am capable	- Support faculty development for teaching, scholarship, and service. - Provide ongoing training on educational methodologies to support teaching. - Address strategies to teach students. - Utilize an appreciative inquiry approach with faculty to focus on strengths and abilities.
Imposter syndrome	- Intentionally acknowledge that this is a common experience that many faculty share. - Work with faculty to intentionally acknowledge strengths and support development of a plan to address challenges. - Engage in training or journal clubs around this topic and how to combat.
EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER	
	- Provide opportunities for faculty to describe formally or informally their narrative. - Conduct a SWOT analysis to identify factors influencing performance. - Affirm the affective nature of teaching and learning and support efforts by both faculty and students to develop their emotional intelligence, which is a central aspect of the process.

Facilitating teaching narratives to support faculty in transforming their educational strategies to better meet their needs and the needs of current students benefits all parties (Melton et al., 2017). The act of providing one's narrative can by nature change one's narrative. The participants of this study supported each other and validated concerns as they found commonalities within the themes. Providing space and supports for faculty narratives to emerge may inform creative solutions to current educational challenges. Being critically reflexive not only about one's teaching but about what it means to be a faculty member, including one's needs, wants, and expectations provides insight that informs how one can make necessary changes to succeed in an academic environment.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

Autoethnographic studies are by design reflective of and relevant to the researchers/subjects; having two subjects does however limit the generalizability of the findings. The subjects also identified as cisgender White females in approximately the same age range who work at the same university and therefore their lived experience does not reflect a diverse collective voice related to the lived experience of faculty members. While this design allows the researchers to describe their experiences in depth, there is also the potential to lose an objective perspective in the midst of one's own narrative. While the researchers chose to code both their own narrative and that of the co-researcher to minimize the risk of bias, it could not be eliminated altogether.

CONCLUSION

The five themes, faculty community, dancing as fast as I can, values, self-perception, and emotional rollercoaster reflect the study participants' lived experiences of teaching in a graduate health care profession. These themes help to explain both strengths and challenges associated with occupational identity and competence that converge to support or hinder occupational adaptation. Teaching is becoming

even more complex given changing delivery models of education as well as shifting business models upon which colleges and universities are structured. Understanding student learning needs and morphing pedagogy to meet those identified needs represent part of the teaching and learning equation; an equation that cannot be solved without adequate representation of the lived experience of faculty. Capturing the lived experience of faculty in higher education and in particular, faculty teaching in occupational therapy programs can provide insight into both challenges and successes of these faculty. These insights can then be used to inform practices that support the development of positive occupational identity and competence which can enhance faculty members' ability to occupationally adapt to the rigorous demands of the current environment of higher education. These insights may provide a window into how these challenges and successes impact student learning outcomes as a result of the dynamic interaction between faculty and students.

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