

2022

First Year Occupational Therapy Students' Engagement in Learning Activities: A Qualitative Study

Mona Asbjørnslett
Oslo Metropolitan University

Helen Bull
OsloMet- Oslo Metropolitan University

Gry Mørk
VID Specialized University

Tore Bonsaksen
Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/jote>



Part of the [Occupational Therapy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Asbjørnslett, M., Bull, H., Mørk, G., & Bonsaksen, T. (2022). First Year Occupational Therapy Students' Engagement in Learning Activities: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Occupational Therapy Education*, 6 (4). <https://doi.org/10.26681/jote.2022.060401>

This Original Research is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Occupational Therapy Education by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

First Year Occupational Therapy Students' Engagement in Learning Activities: A Qualitative Study

Abstract

When students enter a bachelor program in occupational therapy, they engage in a variety of learning activities. To explore students' perceptions of learning activities, this qualitative study investigated the experiences of six first year students participating in an occupational therapy study program at a Norwegian university. The students took part in two focus group interviews. The interview analysis focused on meaning and ended up with three main themes: 1) Getting to know each other through collaborative learning activities, 2) Engaging in classroom learning activities, and 3) Approaching the syllabus and doing assignments. The study concludes that early engagement in social and collaborative learning activities can be a meaningful prerequisite to future learning focused on meaning and feeling safe in the learning environment. Teaching styles also influence students' engagement in the occupation of studying, with the change from one teaching style to another being particularly challenging for the students.

Keywords

Education, engagement, learning activities, occupational therapy, students' experiences

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the first year students who gave their time to take part in this project.

First Year Occupational Therapy Students' Engagement in Learning Activities: A Qualitative Study

Mona Asbjørnslett, PhD¹

Helen Bull, PhD¹

Gry Mørk, MSc²

Tore Bonsaksen, MSc^{2,3}

Oslo Metropolitan University¹

VID Specialized University²

Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences³

Norway

ABSTRACT

When students enter a bachelor program in occupational therapy, they engage in a variety of learning activities. To explore students' perceptions of learning activities, this qualitative study investigated the experiences of six first year students participating in an occupational therapy study program at a Norwegian university. The students took part in two focus group interviews. The interview analysis focused on meaning and ended up with three main themes: 1) Getting to know each other through collaborative learning activities, 2) Engaging in classroom learning activities, and 3) Approaching the syllabus and doing assignments. The study concludes that early engagement in social and collaborative learning activities can be a meaningful prerequisite to future learning focused on meaning and feeling safe in the learning environment. Teaching styles also influence students' engagement in the occupation of studying, with the change from one teaching style to another being particularly challenging for the students.

In Norway, entering a bachelor program in occupational therapy means, for most students, their first entry into a university. This transition means becoming accustomed to an occupation-based curriculum, occupation focused learning, occupational science and that the use of occupation to enable health is the center of their education (Coppola, 2013; Hocking, 2016; Hooper et al., 2015; Howarth et al., 2018; Price et al.,

2017; Wilcock, 2000). The curriculum also requires students' engagement in a variety of learning activities, such as groupwork, attending lectures, discussions, reading the syllabus, doing assignments and skills- training. The learning activities take place both inside and outside the classroom. Including, in the context of this study, planning and performing a field trip as a collaborative practical activity.

Studying requires students' engagement in sustained occupational effort, persisting with diverse activities over many years (Ennals, 2021). In Norway occupational therapy is a three-year bachelor study, a period where the occupational therapy students develop their independence and generic skills (Stigen et al., 2022). The initial year can be a particularly sensitive period where students become accustomed to the student role in higher education, develop their academic identity and adapt to a series of new learning activities (Keptner, 2019; Spedding et al., 2017; Thordardottir et al., 2020). Like any other health care students planning to practice in health and social services, occupational therapy students must engage in both academic learning activities and practical training, such as self-directed learning, web-based learning (technology and visual aids), and clinical skills training (Hills et al., 2017). They take part in activities such as attending classes, completing assignments, and reading prescribed texts. From a student point of view, these activities are not always perceived as positive. Negative experiences also influence students' roles, and the effort to become more scholarly can be frustrating (Ennals et al., 2016). For example for students with mental illness, activities such as attending groups and classroom activities can be particularly demanding (Ennals, 2021).

For first year students, the process of finding their place and belonging in a new and different learning environment and to make sense of their learning can be problematic (Crooks, 2017; Masika & Jones, 2016). Students must deal with some level of uncertainty, tension, and frustration as they may lack the necessary skills, strategies and resources to adjust to the unfamiliar learning environments and new occupational patterns (Kaelin & Dancza, 2019; Keptner, 2019; Masika & Jones, 2016; Spedding et al., 2017).

Activities that involve meeting other students and socializing can increase their confidence and help students develop individual and social skills, student identity, and belonging (MacFarlane, 2018). Activities such as group work and social activities can also contribute to a sense of community (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). Students benefit from situations where they can learn from each other, such as discussing common issues in group work and in peer tutoring. These situations provide opportunities to improve their academic engagement and increase their awareness through clarifying concepts with peers (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Hammar Chiriac, 2014; Spedding et al., 2017). Learning activities that enhance teacher and student relationships and communication are important to motivate student learning, and students enjoy approachable and encouraging teachers, who treat them as adults and with respect (MacFarlane, 2018; Meriläinen, 2014). A learner-centered approach, including activities stimulating and supporting students' reflection processes can enhance students' professional

development (Dahl & Eriksen, 2016). Lecturers in occupational therapy can engage their students by providing examples, enthusiasm, feedback, and class discussions to bridge the gap between theory and practice rather than traditional, instructional strategies (Murphy et al., 2020).

This study is contextualized within a larger prospective cohort study, where the data collection is largely based on annual student surveys. Several studies from the ongoing project have expanded the knowledge about students' learning, their perceptions of the learning environment, and how such perceptions develop across the study program. These are all studies based on quantitative methodologies (Bonsaksen et al., 2017; Stigen et al., 2022; Thordardottir et al., 2020; Thygesen et al., 2020). Thus, insight into the occupational therapy students' learning experiences and the activities from which these experiences arise, as derived from the students' own words, is lacking. The first year occupational therapy students' learning experiences are vital for the students' retention, and therefore important to address in research (Boehm et al., 2017). Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate learning activities as experienced by first year occupational therapy students.

Design and Methods

This qualitative interview study is part of a longitudinal investigation into the learning processes and learning environment as perceived by occupational therapy students in Norway. In the larger longitudinal study, one cohort of students (starting the education program in the fall of 2017) was followed up with annual surveys throughout their three years in the study program. All six occupational therapy education programs in Norway were involved in the larger study.

In addition to the annual surveys, interviews with students were conducted at various time points at the involved universities. In this qualitative study, the data were collected from students at one of the universities (Oslo) towards the end of the first study year. As the interview studies were considered supplementary to the annual surveys, we did not want to add to the students' demands by asking them to participate in several interviews throughout the study program; thus, we restricted the interview period to this stage of the students' progression.

Participants, Context, and Data Collection

The participants were first-year, fulltime students in a three-year bachelor program in occupational therapy. The students were recruited to the interview study based on their willingness to participate in an annual survey conducted with this cohort of students. Among the first-year students eligible for participation in the survey (n=76), 24 opted to participate. Among these 24 students, several also stated on the consent form that they were willing to participate in subsequent interviews. These students were later re-approached and asked to participate in interviews, and six of them confirmed their willingness to do so. They were five women (F) and one man (M) aged from 19 to 43 years: F, 26 years; F, 19 years; M, 23 years; F, 43 years; and F, 23 years.

As a part of the context the first-year curriculum consists of four different courses: Health, occupation and activity analysis; Anatomy and physiology; The everyday life of children and adolescents; and Physical health, occupation, and participation. To get to know each, the students attended lectures, groupwork, and skills training and took part in learning activities consisting of both indoor and outdoor activities. Social activities such as playful activities in the gym, and a fieldtrip in the woods, involving collaborating on activity-analysis were also considered learning activities. Each course is organized by two lecturers, while many lecturers are involved in teaching the courses.

Interviews

The participants were divided into two groups. Each group was interviewed twice about their experiences and perceptions of learning activities and environment. Two associate professors and researchers, who were employed at the present university and already known to the students, performed the focus group interviews. In the interview situation, the first author had the role of the main interviewer, and the second author had the role of a moderator (Halkier, 2003). The first interview aimed to explore the students' engagement in and experiences of different learning activities. The second interviews explored the students' perspectives on how they learn and the influence of the learning activities and environmental factors on learning. Both interviews made use of open-ended questions where the students were encouraged to discuss specific events or situations of studying. Typical questions were: How do you learn? Can you tell us about some learning activities or situations where learning happened? Can you give us some examples of being engaged in learning activities or situations?

Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. We used interview analysis, focusing on meaning content and performing a theory based analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). To gain an overview of the material in the initial phase the authors read the transcribed material, consisting of 109 pages, double lines. In the first phase we looked for relevant patterns and themes, but also for contrasts and similarities in the material (Malterud, 2017b). Three of the authors (MA, HB, GM) had several discussions and meetings to explore natural meaning units and preliminary themes. We then condensed the temporal meaning units of text material according to similarities and differences of relevance to the research question (Malterud, 2017a). Then we started to code the meaning units, to systematize and organize them into code groups by adding one or more keywords to the meaning units (Malterud, 2017a).

First Level Analysis

By staying close to the informants' quotes we ended up with codes, such as *Possible activities for learning*, with subgroups of learning activities such as for example: *watching videos*, *listening to lectures*, *discussing in groups* and *in the classroom*. The key words could, for example, be related to difficult language and lack of motivation.

Second Level Analysis

For the second level analysis the code groups and our continuous discussions lead to three themes, which we analyzed from a critical commonsense understanding (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The researchers' critical commonsense understanding in this situation was that they shared and discussed an understanding of the field of occupational therapy and occupational science, of educating occupational therapists and of research. These experiences contributed to our discussions.

Third Level Analysis

Then, as a third level of interpretation, we added a theoretical understanding to our discussion (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Our theoretical view was inspired by an occupational perspective, where the term occupation involves meaning and experience, while activity, such as cooking, is an objective term (Cutchin & Dickie, 2013; Jonsson & Asaba, 2017). Students are viewed as occupational beings, where occupations (such as studying, learning and teaching) influence their health and wellbeing (Wilcock, 2000). From a transactional perspective students' learning and knowledge production is seen as a constructive, social, and meaning making process, a co-creation of knowledge and value from a common purpose (Boyles, 2018; Garrison, 2013; Rudsberg et al., 2013). Meaningful teaching, education and learning involve processes of inquiry, discussions, reflections and common investigations of meanings and standpoints, and active experimentation in learning activities is considered essential to learning and something we do (Garrison, 2001, 2013; Hansen, 2002). Therefore, to understand the aim of education, teaching and learning we need to take the learners' perspectives into account (Harðarson, 2018).

Trustworthiness

The two researchers who conducted the interviews were familiar with the context of the study and themes that were open for discussion. This raises questions of 'going native', from being personally involved with the students and in discussions (Silverman, 2017). This is, however, a qualitative interview study, that never claims to be objective in the process of gathering the empirical data material. By conducting a follow up interview, based on their position as associate professors, the two researchers who conducted the interviews were also in a position of interacting with various themes and follow up questions in terms of respondent validation (Silverman, 2017). Their familiar relationships with students could have influenced their responses.

In the process of analysis transparency and respondent validation is based on using the informants own words to elucidate themes (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). Our interpretations were not discussed with the students, which weakens the member validation from their perspective. The first three authors met several times to discuss the possible meanings to shape the findings, thereby added communicative validity to what we believe is the main content of the students' reflections. By presenting key reflections and discussions in a first person perspective and presenting our commonsense and theoretical interpretations we also aimed at achieving communicative validity in the process of analyzing the material (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The first three authors are also well informed on occupational science literature and a transactional perspective,

which strengthens the theoretical validity of this project. The results represent only six Norwegian students and cannot be generalized to other students at other universities. They can, however, contribute to a better understanding and knowledge of how some occupational therapy students' learning activities are perceived and can therefore contribute to a broader debate of studying, learning, and teaching as central occupations.

Ethics

According to the relevant research ethics procedures, the study received approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data for gathering, storing, and using the data (project no. 55875). At recruitment, all participating students signed a written consent to participate. Several students also consented to participate in additional subsequent interviews. When approached with the invitation to participate in the interviews, six students confirmed that they wanted to take part. All participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw their consent at any time.

Results

The results are presented in three themes: Getting to know each other through collaborative learning activities; Engaging in classroom learning activities; and Approaching the syllabus and doing assignments.

Getting to Know Each Other Through Collaborative Learning Activities

Our informants all agreed that starting a bachelor's program was challenging, but talked about how teachers, through the planned organization of collaborative learning activities and social occupations, created opportunities that could facilitate the development of safe relationships within the student group. Although the introductory course covering occupational therapy, occupational science and activity analysis was a comprehensive course with many learning outcomes, the students spoke first and foremost about the importance of the social environment:

You know, very few people learn well if they feel lonely, so the fact that we have a strong focus on establishing a good social environment in class, that may be what helps us try a little harder, so we can test our capacity when the social life has calmed down a bit.

The students emphasized the importance of some level of social belonging and social support for generating the necessary will to take the risks involved in doing learning activities. One student even argued that this was a prerequisite to future learning. The main point was that feeling safe in the classroom together with their new classmates was important for wanting to learn, to come to the university, and to push yourself a little further.

During the introductory course the students took part in several collaborative occupations in the gym that involved creativity, play, expression, and physical contact. One of the occupations was planning a field trip in the forest with games and a lunch. The planning included activity analysis of the route into the forest, including the use of

public transport and finding the right paths in the forest, of the steps involved in barbequing and of the introductory games involving students and teachers when they had reached their destination. These occupations were mostly appreciated and seen as fun. At the same time being forced to engage in creative activities was also challenging, and students described initial tension participating in these activities. However, occupational collaboration and having fun were found to be a key to the development of trust between the students, and probably between the students and staff in a new learning environment:

We are forced to be with each other. No one has the energy to be tense over a long period of time when we are placed in situations where we must be together with each other.

The students also thought groupwork and practical activities were important for the development of a safe learning environment. They particularly mentioned the importance of projects where they had to make something, where there was a lot of give and take, where everyone made suggestions, and not all suggestions were feasible. One example was making splints, a project that allowed everyone to make suggestions and communicate to solve practical issues in developing this competency.

Engaging in Classroom Learning Activities

Students described that their engagement in classroom learning activities to some extent depended on how teachers conveyed the curriculum. The students in our study described that they could become disengaged in learning activities if the teacher for example relied on reading a manuscript out loud as opposed to conveying the content with engagement. Lecturers mainly repeating the syllabus without adding new knowledge can be boring for the students, and did not promote learning in the same way as discussions and reflection around central problems did:

I don't like it when they only read the PowerPoints, I can do that on my own at home. But if they really explain the main points of that PowerPoint, that's what you really want, and then things fall into place.

In general, the students wanted the teachers to frame new knowledge within a familiar context, and to both facilitate and expect the students to work on integrating new knowledge. The students expressed appreciation of teachers who enabled them to understand difficult issues through posing good questions. Engaging discussions on central issues in the curriculum was mentioned as one way to integrate knowledge.

Talking in the classroom takes some courage, and some students said they felt vulnerable within that context. Interestingly they could feel insecure both if teachers gave clear answers, stating what was right and wrong, and if teachers refrained from answering the question but opened it up for reflection. Their main point was the lack of consistency in teaching styles, so they did not know which response to expect from the teachers.

The students found it challenging to adapt to different expectations and teaching styles. This experience is exemplified by a quote where one of the students explained the experience of transitioning between the four different courses:

No matter which course you attend, it is like a new shock, because you have grown used to one way of thinking, then you get a teacher with another way of thinking and reasoning, and you must get used to that, so you spend quite a lot of time getting used to it.

From a student perspective lack of consistency and predictability in teaching styles between the teachers at the occupational therapy program could reduce the students' engagement in classroom learning activities. They pointed out that the process of learning could meet some challenges when they transitioned to the next course, encountering different expectations among their teachers than they were used to from the previous course. We give some examples in the following results.

Approaching the Syllabus and Doing Assignments

The students were engaged in many different learning activities, such as reading required literature to fulfill their learning outcomes. All students agreed that to organize and read the first-year syllabus was a complex learning activity. It took time to get to know the syllabus, read it properly and find meaning in the texts. Some even said that they had no benefit from reading as they found the literature heavy reading as it could be written in other languages than Norwegian, poorly written, and sometimes of poor quality:

It's a bit boring to feel that you're missing out on knowledge because it's very hard to read. And then it is very good to have a seminar that clarifies it so that it becomes easier to address the English texts

Some seminars were constructed around reading, presenting, and discussing a book-chapter or an article. They served a dual purpose of sharing thoughts and discussing content. The content and meaning of complex literature can be hard to grasp, and the seminars were a place where students had the opportunity to discuss both with other students and with teachers. Discussions could also relieve some insecurity, and help students understand the broader context and meaning of what they had read.

How teachers organized their reading lists varied. In the first course the teachers provided information on which part of the syllabus that would be covered in the lesson, and which part of the reading list to read for each lecture. One student pointed out that with this information she could spend her time reading the syllabus, without having to look up which books or articles to read and when to read them, as this was experienced as time-consuming and challenging. In the next courses they found that reading lists were not structured in the same way:

Because now you are meant to organize the reading list yourself, and then I lose my capacity like that! I mean, it's fine that we should look things up in the literature, get to know the reading list, I thoroughly agree with that. But, to have the knowledge to know what is more relevant – if I must spend time on that, then I'm spending time on that rather than on reading something.

Students did not agree that they themselves should sort out relevant literature, and it made little sense to them to find the relevant literature on their own when teachers knew where to start reading. The students suggested that when teachers have already decided what to read, they might also give some supervision, as they have the expertise to know what is most important to read when and why. Learning to navigate a reading list was not a priority to them.

Just as important, the students found that other activities, like drawing, looking at pictures or videos were important for their learning:

I don't get anything out of reading because it goes straight out again. So, I must sit and draw, like drawing the respiratory system, not reading about it, because then I don't understand a thing. So, I must watch videos with, for example, a person explaining, and then see pictures and videos about it.

In some subjects the students may learn from watching videos. This was frequently mentioned as a learning occupation they did in addition to attending relevant lectures. One student explained that s/he got the central points from watching videos for every diagnosis they needed to learn. The students also made use of scrutinizing pictures of muscles and joints together and discussing in groups:

I had to be with two other buddies on the course, and we sat together for several hours every day for a couple of months, and learned together, and we just simply... we didn't even read it first. Then we just got together and tried to remember something from the lecture, and then it was like - No, this is wrong.

Working through the lecture in a group seemed to provide a safe learning environment where the students could find out whether they had understood the lecture or not. Students are also expected to submit various assignments. Sometimes what they were expected to do was unclear to them, because complicated language made the assignments difficult to understand:

There is quite a barrier to start the assignment in front of you, because of the phrasing and language. You know, when the language is really complicated, the will to get on with that assignment, for me anyway, is much lower. Because, in a way, when the language is difficult, and those around you don't understand it either.... then in a way... it's difficult to know what the assignment is about.

Discussion

Our first result shows that when the students first become engaged in collaborative learning activities and social occupations, this engagement can create opportunities to develop a safer relationship within the group of first-year occupational therapy students. Previous research has shown that when students enter the university they can feel lonely, and it can be challenging for students to get accustomed to new paradigms of academic and practical learning in a new environment (Crooks, 2017; Ennals, 2021; Spedding et al., 2017). From a perspective of learning, both academic and social context are important when students transition to higher education (MacFarlane, 2018). From an occupational perspective, learning is literally something they do that engages their attention, interests, and expectations (Cutchin & Dickie, 2013). How social and academic activities influence students' learning is therefore relevant information in building an educational environment between students and teachers. This relationship between learning and learning environment is also in line with the main learning outcomes of the Norwegian curriculum in occupational therapy, addressing the relationship between occupation and health as main outcomes.

Our informants also suggested that the importance of developing a safe and supporting relationship between new students, social belonging, and social support can be a prerequisite to coming to school and wanting to learn. This argument is supported by research indicating that meeting new friends and developing social relationships can help students transition to university (MacFarlane, 2018). This highlights Dewey's conception of environment, that education is never direct education, but is achieved by means of the environment (Hansen, 2002).

From an occupational perspective the health and wellbeing of individuals is strengthened when occupations are perceived as meaningful (Wilcock, 2000). Bringing people together through engagement in shared activities is also occupation in practice (Humphry & Wakeford, 2013). Our results also show that when students are "forced to be together" in social activities as part of their learning activities, this can be meaningful and helpful in developing friendships and getting to know the other students better.

Previous research argues that working as a team and helping each other is also central to the sense of belonging to a course (Masika & Jones, 2016). Sense of belonging from the students' perspectives, can in addition to taking part in learning activities be enhanced through activities such as playing in the gym and planning and implementing the forest fieldtrip. The activities are examples of creative, playful, collaborative, and social activities helping the students in the process of finding their place and belonging to a course. At the same time, the nature of occupation is subjective, and we (as teachers) cannot know if occupations offered to students are meaningful to them (Howarth et al., 2018).

Occupational therapy is embedded within occupation-based learning and science, where engagement in occupation is the core subject of occupational therapy (Coppola, 2013; Hooper et al., 2015; Howarth et al., 2018; Sadlo, 2016; Wilcock, 2000). A central part of the occupational therapy curriculum in Norway is to promote health and quality of

life through engagement in meaningful occupations and participation. In the context of education, teachers need to be aware of the aim of education, as achieving that aim is a prerequisite of successful teaching at the end of a course (Harðarson, 2018). Within the context of education, we see that occupational therapy lecturers build some of their educational activities on occupations that are both playful and creative while serving the overall aim of addressing learning outcomes such as activity analysis, engagement, activity adaptation and social participation, all unique purposes in occupational therapy practice. As a part of their education, social activities can also serve as learning, and according to Dewey this practice is education as creative work and an art to fulfill the aims of education (Garrison, 2009).

By offering a variety of activities and being aware of the meaning of occupations and that the engagement in for instance playful activities varies between students, lecturers can facilitate engagement for many. Some find playful and social activities challenging, while taking part can also relieve some social tension and strengthen the students' capacity to develop trust within their group. The helpfulness of collaborative, playful activities is open to discussion, as there are students who do not favor social and creative activities; however, we gain some support from Dewey in that education and learning are a cooperative, social process of problem solving (Coppola, 2013; Dewey, 1963), demanding some form of interaction for learning to take place.

Our results suggested that the students found groupwork important to learning. Previous research points out how the meaning of social and communicative action for example in working as a group facilitates learning, and particularly academic learning (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). For the students, learning activities where they must make something, such as making splints, can be important to enhance practical problem-solving skills.

The second theme concerns students' experiences with teaching styles. This reminds us that what teachers do in the classroom is important for the learning environment, for students' learning and for meaningful teaching (Hansen, 2002). Our results point out that the consequence of reading PowerPoints verbatim or repeating the textbook, can be loss or lack of engagement, at least for those who have done their preparation and read the literature. The students' experience also suggest how the communication with teachers in the classroom can help them learn and understand matters they did not understand before the lectures. Reflective learning as a part of the art of education is supported by Dewey, it is also considered meaningful learning, and thus a valuable support to developing a positive student identity (Garrison, 2009; MacFarlane, 2018). Having a sympathetic attitude towards the activities of the learner and entering into a common or conjoint experience may empower students' learning and be consistent with Dewey's conception of a clarifying learning environment (Hansen, 2002).

This brings up the problem of what Boyles (2018) referred to as transmission or transaction of learning, where transmission can be seen as reduced to procedures of reproductive learning. Instead of transmission (such as reading from PowerPoints) the students suggested that teachers discuss and reflect on their literature with their

students and expand their lectures with practice examples (transaction). Meriläinen (2014) wrote that teachers' duty is to support students in studying and learning, and approachable teachers support students' wellbeing. Hovdhaugen and Aamodt (2009) suggested that a closer contact, guidance and follow up can improve the learning environment. Lectures filled with discussions engage the students in this study, and can contribute to better learning. This is also supported by the idea that when teachers and students make meaning together this is regarded as education from a transactional perspective, supporting the idea that the classroom should be a space of conjoint inquiry where teachers are socially engaged co-learners together with students (Boyles, 2018; Garrison, 2013). This also highlights the matter of how to build on students' engagement and interests to encourage activities like reflections and to approve the value of discussions of common problems, aims and purposes as important classroom activities (Harðarson, 2018; Rudsberg et al., 2013). At the same time, and consistent with Ennals (2021), the occupation of studying involves environmental demands and challenges, such as talking and discussing in the classroom, activities that, according to our informants, can make them feel vulnerable.

Our third theme is about students' experiences of how to approach their reading lists and doing assignments, activities that according to our informants are time-consuming activities, while they are not necessarily seen as promoting learning from students' point of view. We follow Jim Garrison's reflections that theory, simply put, is the thoughtful, reflective phase of good practice (Garrison, 2013). Our results suggest that some students can find it difficult to understand the relevance and relative importance of the literature they read at this point in their education. They may find the literature complex and hard to read, sometimes also poorly written and irrelevant. Our results also indicate that based on relevant lectures some students can engage in groups "for hours and weeks" and can learn for example anatomy and physiology without reading the proposed syllabus. When students perceive the assignments and goals to be unclear, it can be difficult to see the purpose of the course they are attending, and a lack of purpose may be considered an aspect of choosing unproductive learning strategies (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Mørk et al., 2020). According to Harðarson, improvements in skills and abilities in an area needs to be clearly decided from predefined aims, shared with the students (Harðarson, 2018). Following this argument, we suggest that when the aim of education is clear, students can find various alternative activities for acquiring knowledge and skills, a practice which can support students' increased autonomy in learning and open up a variety of options for learners (Harðarson, 2018; Murphy et al., 2020). Scrutinizing pictures of muscles and joints can be seen as valuable activities to help students reach their goals in the occupations of studying and learning at a university. Such activities support a transactional approach of seeing students as growing, inquiring beings (Boyles, 2018). In our last result we have pointed out that sometimes teachers' use of complicated or unclear written language can be a barrier to doing assignments, as it can make the intention of the assignment hard to grasp. Since doing written assignments (and exams) are one of many important learning activities this can be viewed as transmission of teachers' intents and authority, but without clear communication it is not always sufficient to engage the students in their process of education.

Limitations of the Study and Further Research

This study has several limitations and serves mainly to open the conversation regarding students' experiences of studying, and their engagement in the learning activities within their study program. The study is limited to a particular context and involved a limited number of Norwegian students enrolled at only one Norwegian university. Thus, it does not represent all first-year occupational therapy students' perceptions of their engagement in learning activities. From following first year students in this study, it would be relevant to follow up with second- and third year students. Exploring the perspectives of students who are more advanced in their university course might expand findings and demonstrate the changes that take place in the students' learning needs as they progress through the course. It would also be relevant to include a broader selection of students from other universities and countries and to explore a broader selection of learning occupations in various learning environments. It would also be relevant to repeat the study to explore how the social distancing during covid has influenced learning and the learning environment.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

Lecturers in first year occupational therapy education can be aware that students can feel lonely and that organizing both social and collaborative activities, such as playful activities and field trips can help students get to know each other better and be an investment for future learning, but at the same time be aware of what students find meaningful or not meaningful must be investigated. When teachers organize their teaching activities in the classroom, awareness of how they engage the students in the process of their own learning and education can be important to address in the discussion of teaching and learning. Learning activities such as presenting PowerPoints, and initiating discussions are important activities that can be engaging or feel irrelevant to the students. Reading and organizing the reading lists was brought up as particular activities in the occupation of studying and learning. This is a problem open for discussion to teachers. Relevant problems to address; Do the students need guidance to sort out the literature according to the learning outcomes or not? Is the literature teachers suggest relevant to practicing occupational therapy? Is the language sometimes too complex to grasp for students? Our last result indicates that teachers' intent and implicit language and knowledge of why they are doing what they do may be unclear to students and calls for a discussion whether teachers need to reflect on their academic expectations and their ability to convey the aims of the study program. This is a problem raised by Crooks; that of teachers needing to take their own epistemological beliefs into account (Crooks, 2017). From our view, this needs to be considered in transaction with students' perspectives, experiences, and reflections.

Conclusion

When first year occupational therapy students enter university, social and collaborative activities can be a relevant prerequisite to feeling safe in the learning environment and in the occupations of studying and learning. Students find different ways to make sense of required learning activities, such as taking part in lectures. Reading the required literature is one of the activities that sometimes makes little sense, and poorly worded and academic language in the curriculum can represent a barrier to students' learning.

Transitioning between different course modules and adjusting to the different expectations and ways of doing required activities of learning can be particularly demanding for the students. When teachers have different ways of organizing reading lists, communication, and assignments between the courses, this influences students' learning and the meaning attached to these occupations. As a part of communication, when teachers use complicated written language, this can be a barrier to doing written assignments.

References

- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does* (4th. ed.). Open University Press.
- Boehm, J., Cordier, R., Thomas, Y., Tanner, B., & Salata, K. (2017). The first year experience of occupational therapy students at an Australian regional university: Promoting student retention and developing a regional and remote workforce. *Australian Journal of Rural Health, 25*(1), 22-27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12252>
- Bonsaksen, T., Brown, T., Lim, H. B., & Fong, K. (2017). Approaches to studying predict academic performance in undergraduate occupational therapy students: A cross-cultural study. *BMC Medical Education, 17*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-017-0914-3>
- Boyles, D. (2018). From transmission to transaction: John Dewey's imaginative vision of teaching. *Education 3-13, 46*(4), 393-401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2018.1445473>
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *InterViews- learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3. ed.). Sage.
- Coppola, S. (2013). Deweyan educational philosophy in occupation-centered curricula. In M. P. Cutchin & V. A. Dickie (Eds.), *Transactional perspectives on occupation* (pp. 199-213). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4429-5_16
- Crooks, S. M. (2017). Finding place in higher education: An epistemological analysis. *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 8*(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.1.2>
- Cutchin, M. P., & Dickie, V. A. (2013). Transactional perspectives on occupation: An introduction and rationale. In M. P. Cutchin (Ed.), *Transactional perspectives on occupation* (pp. 1-13). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4429-5_1
- Dahl, H., & Eriksen, K. Å. (2016). Students' and teachers' experiences of participating in the reflection process "THiNK". *Nurse Education Today, 36*, 401-406. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2015.10.011>
- Dewey, J. (1963). *Experience and education*. Capricorne Books.
- Ennals, P. (2021). The dark side of studying at university. In R. Twinley (Ed.), *Illuminating the dark side of occupation* (pp. 148-155). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429266256-20>
- Ennals, P., Fortune, T., Williams, A., & D'Cruz, K. (2016). Shifting occupational identity: Doing, being, becoming and belonging in the academy. *Higher Education Research & Development, 35*(3), 433-446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1107884>

- Garrison, J. (2001). An introduction to Dewey's theory of functional "Trans-Action": An alternative paradigm for activity theory. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 8(4), 275-296. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327884MCA0804_02
- Garrison, J. (2009). The art and science of education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 41(1), 17-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270802192214>
- Garrison, J. (2013). 2012 Dewey Lecture: Making meaning together beyond theory and practice. *Education and Culture*, 29(2), 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eac.2013.0011>
- Halkier, B. (2003). *Fokusgrupper* [focus groups]. Samfundslitteratur Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Hammar Chiriach, E. (2014). Group work as an incentive for learning - students' experiences of group work. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 558. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00558>
- Hansen, D. T. (2002). Dewey's conception of an environment for teaching and learning. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 32(3), 267-280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-873X.00228>
- Harðarson, A. (2018). The teacher is a learner: Dewey on aims in education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(5), 538-547. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1395735>
- Hills, C. M., Levett-Jones, T., & Lapkin, S. (2017). Generation Y health professional students' preferred teaching and learning approaches: A systematic review. *Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1278>
- Hocking, C. (2016). Launch of "Teaching Occupation". *Journal of Occupational Science*, 23(4), 484-487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2016.1232643>
- Hooper, B., Mitcham, M. D., Taff, S. D., Price, P., Krishnagiri, S., & Bilics, A. (2015). Energizing occupation as the center of teaching and learning. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 69 Suppl 2(Supplement_2), 6912360010p6912360011-6912360010p6912360015. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2015.018242>
- Hovdhaugen, E., & Aamodt, P. O. (2009). Learning environment: Relevant or not to students' decision to leave university? *Quality in Higher Education*, 15(2), 177-189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320902995808>
- Howarth, J. T., Morris, K., & Cox, D. L. (2018). Challenges of teaching occupation: Introduction of an occupation focused teaching tool. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 25(1), 142-148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2017.1397535>
- Humphry, R., & Wakeford, L. (2013). Educational implications of taking a transactional perspective of occupation in practice. In M. P. Cutchin & V. A. dickie (Eds.), *Transactional perspectives on occupation* (pp. 215-228). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4429-5_17
- Jonsson, H., & Asaba, E. (2017). Aktivitet som begreb i aktivitetsvidenskaben. In H. K. Kristensen, A. S. B. Schou, & J. L. Mærsk (Eds.), *Nordisk aktivitetsvidenskab*. Forfatterne og Munksgaard.
- Kaelin, V. C., & Dancza, K. (2019). Perceptions of occupational therapy threshold concepts by students in role-emerging placements in schools: A qualitative investigation. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 66(6), 711-719. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12610>

- Keptner, K. M. (2019). Relationship between occupational performance measures and adjustment in a sample of university students. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 26(1), 6-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2018.1539409>
- MacFarlane, K. (2018). Higher education learner identity for successful student transitions. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(6), 1201-1215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1477742>
- Malterud, K. (2017a). *Kvalitativ metasyntese som forskningsmetode i medisin og helsefag [Qualitative metasynthesis as a research method in medicine and health sciences]*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Malterud, K. (2017b). *Kvalitative forskningsmetoder for medisin og helsefag [Qualitative research methods for medicine and health sciences]* (4th ed.). Universitetsforlaget.
- Masika, R., & Jones, J. (2016). Building student belonging and engagement: Insights into higher education students' experiences of participating and learning together. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(2), 138-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1122585>
- Meriläinen, M. (2014). Factors affecting study-related burnout among Finnish university students: Teaching-learning environment, achievement motivation and the meaning of life. *Quality in Higher Education*, 20(3), 309-329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2014.978136>
- Moen, K., & Middelthon, A.-L. (2015). Qualitative research methods. In P. Laake, H. B. Benestad, & B. R. Olsen (Eds.), *Research in medical and biological sciences* (2nd ed., pp. 321-378). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-799943-2.00010-0>
- Murphy, L., Panczykowski, H., Fleury, L., & Sudano, B. (2020). Implementation of universal design for learning in occupational therapy education. *Occupational Therapy In Health Care*, 34(4), 291-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07380577.2020.1780663>
- Mørk, G., Magne, T. A., Carstensen, T., Stigen, L., Åsli, L. A., Gramstad, A., Johnson, S.G., & Bonsaksen, T. (2020). Associations between learning environment variables and students' approaches to studying: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Medical Education*, 20(1), 120. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-020-02033-4>
- Price, P., Hooper, B., Krishnagiri, S., Taff, S. D., & Bilics, A. (2017). A way of seeing: How occupation is portrayed to students when taught as a concept beyond its use in therapy. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71(4), 7104230010p7104230011-7104230010p7104230019. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2017.024182>
- Rudsberg, K., Öhman, J., & Östman, L. (2013). Analyzing students' learning in classroom discussions about socioscientific issues. *Science Education*, 97(4), 594-620. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21065>
- Sadlo, G. (2016). Threshold concepts for educating people about human engagement in occupation: The study of human systems that enable occupation. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 23(4), 496-509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2016.1228098>
- Silverman, D. (2017). *Doing qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.

- Spedding, J., Hawkes, A. J., & Burgess, M. (2017). Peer assisted study sessions and student performance: The role of academic engagement, student identity, and statistics self-efficacy. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, 16(1), 144-163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475725716687166>
- Stigen, L., Mørk, G., Carstensen, T., Magne, T. A., Gramstad, A., Johnson, S. G., Småstuen, M.C., & Bonsaksen, T. (2022). Perceptions of the academic learning environment among occupational therapy students - changes across a three-year undergraduate study program. *BMC Medical Education*, 22(1), 313-313. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-022-03291-0>
- Thordardottir, B., Stigen, L., Magne, T. A., Johnson, S. G., Gramstad, A., Gran, A. W., Åsli, L.A., Mørk, G., & Bonsaksen, T. (2020). Student perceptions of the learning environment in Norwegian occupational therapy education programs. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11038128.2020.1831058>
- Thygesen, H., Gramstad, A., Åsli, L. A., Stigen, L., Magne, T. A., Carstensen, T., & Bonsaksen, T. (2020). Associations between learning environment factors and student satisfaction among occupational therapy students. *Irish Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 48(2). <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOT-10-2019-0015>
- Wilcock, A. A. (2000). Development of a personal, professional and educational occupational philosophy: An Australian perspective *Occupational Therapy International*, 7(2), 79-86. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oti.108>