Stories We Teach By: Intersections Among Faculty Biography, Student Formation, and Instructional Processes

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KEY WORDS
• curriculum
• education
• faculty development
• identity formation

Becoming a professional who embodies certain dispositions is known as identity formation. Little research has explored what intentions educators hold for student identity formation or how such intentions influence their teaching. Nine faculty members (all female) in an occupation-centered curriculum were interviewed and observed over 8 weeks. Data were analyzed primarily through narrative writing and data matrices. Ultimately, educators in this study taught who they were; each personified an implicit curriculum, which conveyed the kind of people students were to become and the ways of knowing they were to adopt through the culture, artifacts, rituals, and modes of communication within a program. In the formation of self-defining professionals who embody occupational therapy’s ethos, equal attention is needed to the biographical experiences of faculty members, to thoughtful design of the implicit curriculum, and to the ways of knowing portrayed to students every day in the classroom.


Professional education is about identity formation, which involves helping students form the character, dispositions, beliefs, values, ways of knowing, and ways of seeing that are characteristic of their chosen profession (Foster, Dahill, Golemon, & Tolentino, 2006; Palmer, 1999a). Acquiring these traits is considered essential not only for students’ personal growth but also for equipping them to contribute positively to society (Friedson, 1994; Sullivan, 2005). Thus, educators invite students to become certain kind of people and to create work that is simultaneously good for society and integral to the profession and to whom they are as people. Although students invariably enter a field having formed particular identities, identity formation through graduate education refers to inviting students to deepen some previously adopted dispositions and to form and transform others. Related to occupational therapy, identity formation refers to inviting students to embody the profession’s unique ethos (Pelouquin, 2005).

Scholars in occupational therapy have long recognized how indispensable identity formation is to practice (e.g., Fidler, 1996; Kasar & Clark, 2000; Ledet, Esparza, & Pelouquin, 2005; Randolph, 2003). Yet little empirical research has explored the intentions educators hold for student identity formation or how such intentions are reflected in their teaching. This article describes one set of findings from a larger case study of occupation-centered education. Two questions are addressed: (1) How are educators’ intentions for student formation reflected in the instructional processes they use? and (2) How are educators’ intentions for student formation related to their own personal and professional journeys? In this study, the intentions educators held for student identity formation appeared to be rooted in their experiences in occupational therapy and their lives in general. Some of their biographical stories bore witness to the intentions for formation into which they
invited their students through select instructional processes.

Background

Scholars of professional education argue that identity formation is so closely tied to effective practice skills that without it, practitioners’ efforts will “misfire and fail” (Foster et al., 2006, p. 11). Peloquin (2005) argued similarly about the efforts of occupational therapy practitioners. Effective practice depends on therapists who believe in and act on the guiding beliefs and fundamental values of the field; who are kind, caring, empathic, helping, and respectful people; who enter relationships authentically and are truly present to the other; and who see in self-care, work, and leisure the making of a life. Forming these dispositions enables therapists to engage clients in “occupations that heal” (p. 622). By contrast, dispositions often endorsed in health care and educational institutions can collide with those identified by Peloquin for occupational therapists. “Time, place, and circumstance produce profit margins. Performance fixes dysfunction. Therapy is a detached transaction. Problem-solving is essentially the work. Effective practice is best-researched protocol” (p. 618).

Such are some of the dispositions that cause the efforts of practitioners to “misfire and fail” by thwarting occupational engagement; disregarding authenticity and connection; and valuing technical proficiency over the quest for agency, dignity, and well-being. Inviting students to form one set of dispositions and not the other requires that professional education carefully attend to identity formation and transformation as important curricular aims.

Student identity formation is influenced through the “implicit curriculum” more than it is through the explicit curriculum (Eisner, 1985; Foster et al., 2006; Sullivan, 2005). The explicit curriculum encompasses the learning intentions communicated through the courses, course sequences, syllabi, tests, and assignments. The explicit curriculum encompasses the desired ways of being that are communicated through the culture of the program, its customs, its rituals, and its patterns of relating. For example, the implicit curriculum may include what faculty members believe is most important to know, what intentions they hold for students, what teaching processes they value, and what content they do or do not avail students with opportunities to learn. The implicit curriculum also may include how knowledge is portrayed, how authority is distributed, how faculty members relate to the subject and to students, how students are expected to relate to each other, how much time is provided for thoughtful study, or how fieldwork is debriefed. Through the implicit curriculum, students grasp what kind of person they are to be as occupational therapists.

Although not usually acknowledged as such, petitions for occupation-centered curricula have been petitions for new implicit curricula in the field as much or more than they have been petitions for new explicit curricula. That is, they have emphasized helping students identify with the guiding beliefs, dispositions, values, and ways of seeing that support occupation-centered practices. For example, although Yerxa (1998) proposed that occupation and the rich ideas it embeds ought to become the central organizing framework for curricula, she did not propose, except for a few content areas, much in the way of the explicit curriculum. Instead, she developed her ideas for curricula around the premise that “the curriculum creates the future through its ability to influence the way graduates perceive ideas, themselves, the persons they serve, and environments of practice” (p. 366). She proposed that “the curriculum is a powerful force for self-identification, intellectual freedom, and autonomy”; that it provides “a way of thinking”; a “pair of glasses”; “tools of thought”; that it “influences what graduates notice”; and that it transmits “the values, beliefs, and traditions of the field” (p. 366). Similarly, Whiteford and Wilcock (2001) and Pierce (1999) urged educators to develop curricula that centralize occupation in all content. Yet, ultimately they hoped that each student would become a certain kind of person—a knowledge integrator who avoids reifying stand-alone topics (such as anatomy) and who self-identifies as an agent of occupation. In another example, Wood et al. (2000) reported a process of designing an occupation-centered curriculum, yet they also described a process of identifying the dispositions, values, and perspectives that a graduate would need to bring about a particular future for occupational therapy. Thus, seminal calls for educational reform have been, at their heart, calls for more attention to the implicit curriculum where student formation is most effectively influenced.

Conceptual Framework for the Study

The conceptual framework for this study was developed through a review of literature on teaching and learning in occupational therapy and a review of corresponding theories in education. Three themes appeared to underlie the occupational therapy literature: (1) curriculum designs need to revolve around the core subject of human occupation (e.g., Clark et al., 1991; Hooper, 2006; Pierce, 1999; Whiteford & Hocking, 2000; Whiteford & Wilcock, 2001; Wood et al., 2000; Yerxa, 1998); (2) education aims to promote students’ transformation toward becoming self-authoring professionals (e.g., Fidler & Gillette, 2005; Hammel, Finlayson, Kielhofner, Helfrich, & Peterson, 2001; Kornblau, 2001; Lindstrom-Hazel & West-Fraser, 2004; Royeen, 2001; Yerxa, 1998); and (3) preferred instructional processes...
empower students to critically construct knowledge from core values of the profession and the particulars of each client’s life (e.g., Cohn, Dooley, & Simmons, 2001; Hammel et al., 2001; Nolinske & Millis, 1999; Peloquin, 2002; Peloquin & Osborne, 2003; Royeen, 1995; Tickle-Degnen, 2000).

Theoretical strands from the educational literature, more specifically the transformative learning literature, were selected to correspond to the previously mentioned themes in occupational therapy. Palmer’s (1998) perspective on subject-centered education, Kegan’s theory of self-authorship (Kegan, 1994, 2000), and Baxter Magolda’s (1999) theory of constructive developmental pedagogy were selected. Taken together, these three perspectives frame learning as the transformative development of new stances toward knowledge and the central subject of the field. All three propose that new stances toward knowledge are accompanied by a reformed identity and deeper sense of self and others and result in a new capacity for self-authorship. This conceptual framework guided my interviews, observations, and data analysis.

Method

The research involved a case study of an educational program considered an exemplar in occupation-centered education. The study design and methods used for the project have been described elsewhere (see, e.g., Hooper, 2006). Here, I discuss the methods most relevant to the research questions addressed in this article. However, it appeared contradictory to write an article on the narrative influences on practice yet document the methods in a researcher-neutral voice. Therefore, I used a narrative format to describe the data analysis process.

Case Selection

Originally, the case was selected because (1) the curriculum design process was prolonged and extensive, (2) the curriculum design process had undergone peer review and was reported in the literature, (3) the faculty members presented the curriculum design process at the American Occupational Therapy Association Conference, (4) faculty members were consultants on occupation-centered curriculum design, (5) all faculty members agreed to have their classes observed and videotaped and to reflect on their classroom activities, (6) the program was not facing major changes in personnel, and (7) 100% of graduates had passed the certification exam. However, the most relevant aspect of the case for this article was that the faculty members systematically co-designed the curriculum and subsequent classroom activities (content, assignments, grading rubrics, and teaching and learning processes) to elicit the dispositions, values, perspectives, and ways of knowing they felt were important for graduates.

Moreover, they had spent several years working to establish a “faculty identity” that supported the curriculum design. They did this, in part, through specific recruiting strategies and through ongoing engagement with each member’s research and clinical projects. These concerted efforts suggested that the group, on some level, had recognized that a curriculum in large part would be an extension of who they were as individuals and as a group. Therefore, the case offered what Creswell (1998) called “a bounded system” (p. 61) for exploring the role of faculty identity in teaching and student formation.

Participants

The study took place at a public research university in the United States. All nine faculty members were women who had been teaching from 2.5 to 18 years. Four faculty members had doctoral degrees, five had master’s degrees, and one had a board certification in gerontology in addition to a master’s degree. Two faculty members had received departmental teaching awards, and one had received a prestigious university teaching award. All nine participated in the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected over an 8-week period in the fall semester using two semistructured interviews, ongoing unstructured interviews, classroom observations, and artifact review (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). This article describes findings related to the first semistructured interview and subsequent observations. In the initial interview, each faculty member told stories about key experiences that led to a career as an educator. I elicited stories through the use of metaphor (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Dirkx, 2000). I presented a picture of a stream with approximately six stepping stones crossing from one side of the stream to the other. One side of the stream was labeled “then” (anytime before entering academia); the other side of the stream was labeled “now.” I asked each participant to describe experiences that had become “stepping stones” for her engagement in teaching and academia. This interview provided the biographical data reported here.

Data Analysis

The possible connections between biographical experience, student formation, and instructional processes were constructed later in the data analysis process. I was spending a week analyzing and writing at my favorite retreat center in Michigan. I had been immersed in the data for some time—tagging lines of text and exploring connections between assumptions or beliefs and teaching practices. My codebook included “assumptions about learners,” “beliefs about the aims of teaching,” “beliefs about what occupational therapists
need to know,” “connecting topic to occupation,” among many other codes that now feel a bit colorless. Meanwhile, the authors I was reading at the time included David Whyte (2001), Thomas Moore (1992, 2001), Parker Palmer (1983, 1992, 1999b), Carl Jung (1957/1990), and Marie Raineri (1903–1908/2000). I took these authors (and my cross-country skis) along—for the time I would spend “stepping out of the data” (Dickie, 2003, p. 53). Most of these authors plumb the deeply interpersonal as a source for the work we do and the connections we have with others, questions that have simply been imprinted into who I am. Gradually, I began to carry these authors with me each time I stepped back into the data. Their writings led me to wonder if there were story lines in the data that traced the deeply personal into the meanings and acts of teaching.

With that question, I returned to the data from the first interview. At this point, free writing became the primary analytic tool (Dickie, 2003; Richardson, 2000). I practiced writing stories about each participant based on her key experiences leading to a career as an educator and on the classroom practices that I had observed. Writing these stories led me in and out of the data repeatedly. However, I began to question whether the connections I was creating between biography and teaching were more about my own lifelong quests and current developmental milestones than about the participants’ experiences. Were the participants becoming conduits for my ideas rather than master teachers about phenomena in the data? To address these questions, I asked participants to read a draft of their “story.” Each person that commented thought the story was grounded in her experience.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness involves, in part, unmasking the tension between what the researcher brings to the data and what the data bring to the researcher (Christians, 2000; Dickie, 2003). It also involves creating adequate “depth, detail, emotionality, nuance, and coherence that will permit a critical consciousness to be formed by the reader” (Denzin, 1997, p. 283). Understanding the stance of the researcher and having adequate description, the reader can evaluate the interpretive sufficiency of the study. I have tried to reveal some of the interpretive tensions through describing the influences on my thinking at the time of analysis. I also have tried to use sufficient detail in describing the study’s findings. Standard methods of establishing trustworthiness also were followed (see Hooper, 2006).

**Findings**

To convey how extensively across participants I saw the links between biographical experience, intentions for student formation, and instructional processes, I present the findings in brief “snapshots” of select faculty participants and in matrix displays of each faculty member in the study (see Tables 1–4). Matrix displays illustrate intersections across categories of data and communicate a great deal of information in an efficient manner (Averill, 2002). The matrix displays, or tables, used here graph connections between participants’ biographical experiences, intentions held for student formation (although the intentions highlighted cannot begin to capture the educator’s full vision for students), and instructional processes employed toward those intentions. Each snapshot is structured similarly. The matrices and snapshots are organized into four categories: (1) student formation and the issue of authority, (2) student formation and the issue of personal experience, (3) student formation and the issue of constructing knowledge, and (4) student formation and the issue of authoring occupational therapy practice.

**Student Formation and the Issue of Authority**

Faculty members appeared to envision two paths for student formation around the issue of authority. They desired that students develop the dispositions necessary to relinquish authority for the sake of promoting the authority clients have over their own lives. They also desired that students develop the dispositions necessary to hold on to the authority of their knowledge as occupational therapists. Three participants, Gail, Martha, and Judith, illustrate these intentions (see Table 1).

**Snapshot: Gail.** Gail made a life-changing move during her early high school years. She moved from the segregated South to a more racially integrated area of the North, entered a new high school, and found a new boyfriend. She was White and he was Black. Her move prompted “a real transformation from being fearful of anybody different from me to finding a fascination with people . . . a curiosity about their experiences and their world.” There, too, she experienced teachers who were “interested in me as a person and my viewpoints. . . .” The move instilled an abiding curiosity in Gail about the “different worlds people experience because of their unique backgrounds.” She saw firsthand how values, beliefs, and ways of interacting vary widely from one place to another. When she later moved back to the South, she carried with her a deep desire to listen to others’ voices and understand their experiences.

Gail’s intentions for student formation appeared to be rooted in some of her biographical experiences. She hoped students would learn to enter into others’ experiences respect- ively and compassionately, not intrusively or nonchalantly. She hoped that students would “never have this barrier that the people who are their clients are something other than
Table 1. Student Formation and the Issue of Authority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biographical Experience</th>
<th>Intentions for Student Formation</th>
<th>Instructional Processes</th>
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| **Gail: Honoring and respecting the authority of the other** | - Empathy and respect for others  
- A sense that “students will never have this barrier that the people who are their clients are something other than themselves”  
- Ability to enter into the experiences of others respectively and compassionately, not intrusively or nonchalantly  
- Ownership of the unique contributions of occupational therapy | - Shared personal experiences  
- Relinquished her authority to encourage students to claim their own authority  
- Graded assignments on depth of personal reflection on experience  
- Assigned disability narratives to help understand the clients’ experiences  
- Provided simulation exercises  
- Assigned reflective journaling |
| **Martha: Collaborating with the authority of the other** | - Sensitivity to the expertise of clients  
- Collaborative relationships with families, staff, and other professionals  
- Capacity to share and sometimes relinquish authority | - Established a collaborative, nurturing classroom environment  
- “That is the modeling piece. My interaction with them is hopefully one of respect for where they are, that they bring a lot of experience and exposure to various things with them as they come into the program. . . . Hopefully that translates into seeing people that they work with in the same way.”  
- Told clinical stories that highlighted empowering others through sharing authority  
- Shared subject-matter authority with students, inserting herself when students missed something important |
| **Judith: Declaring one’s own authority** | - Ability to uphold occupational therapist’s authority  
- “Do not trivialize one’s own knowledge or give up power to others.”  
- “Don’t ever trivialize your knowledge because it’s really important and powerful. Don’t give your power away just to fit into a niche. Don’t just adopt techniques and learn how to mimic them.”  
- “Form real relationships. Don’t just talk over clients like they are not there while you do your things to them.” | - Called on and questioned students  
- Promoted dialogue and debate  
- Challenged students to be accountable for their own intellectual processes and knowledge  
- Deflected questions back to students  
- Graded on grasp and critical evaluation of occupational therapy literature  
- Emphasized core ideas in occupational therapy’s history  
- Told stories that reflected times she herself did not “stand and deliver” as a professional |

…themselves.” She hoped that students would form dispositions of empathy and sharing authority with others.

These, in turn, were the dispositions Gail modeled in her teaching through opening space for student experiences, sharing authority with students, and guiding students into empathic experiences. For example, in a presentation to graduate social work students, Gail began class by asking the students to share their experiences working on an interdisciplinary team. In turn, Gail shared her personal experiences working with social workers. Particularly, she explained that her mother had been a social worker, and she believed that through her mother she “had learned a great deal about how social workers think.” Later in the class, these same students worked collectively on a case study that involved a woman with a mood disorder. Gail relayed that the woman would often choose to go off her medications. Then she added, “I bet many of you have had experiences with people with manic depression and know the struggle they have with maintaining a medication routine.” Gail not only opened space for students’ experience, she also embodied the empathy she desired that students develop for clients’ struggles.

In another example, Gail co-facilitated an interdisciplinary gerontology seminar with a physician colleague. In class, students discussed a case from a text Gail and the physician had co-authored. After a short discussion, the physician asked students to “turn the page and see what goals we [Gail and I] established for the patient.” But, Gail quickly interjected, “you know, let’s have them generate their ideas first. . . .” The students proceeded to create goals for the person in the case from the perspective of each of their disciplines. Gail relinquished her expertise, sharing authority with students, and honoring their experience and abilities.
It was not unusual to see Gail sharing authority with students by taking notes on their comments in class, “to make sure I understand what [they] are saying.”

Gail’s assignments reflected her intention that students form empathy for clients. Journal writing was one example. In their journals, students reflected on experiences of simulating, or reading about, impairments that clients may encounter. Gail graded on the depth of the students’ reflections in hopes of sparking a disposition for empathy and critical self-reflection.

**Student Formation and the Issue of Personal Experience**

Faculty members appeared to envision a path for formation that led students to become integrators of personal experience and scholarship. They desired that students develop a disposition toward using concrete experience as a touchstone for research and scholarship on occupation. Two participants, Pat and Elizabeth, help illustrate this intention (see Table 2).

**Snapshot: Pat.** As a graduate student, Pat discovered that she loved “disconnects”; she learned best by identifying gaps between current research and what she saw and experienced in her clinical work and by entering a conversation with those discontinuities. Reading research and observing clients created interesting disconnects between knowledge and practice, disconnects that kept propelling Pat forward to obtain more education.

I started running into ideas that conflicted with the traditional OT practice. I came from a very strong NDT [neurodevelopmental treatment] background . . . when I went to graduate school I started discovering new ideas and places where NDT didn’t work . . . what they were talking about in terms of child development wasn’t matching what I knew and saw. So, I’d already started to become dissatisfied with practice. The combined effort of taking what I knew and adding it to how OT’s were practicing at the time was fun . . .

Pat’s intentions for student formation appeared to be rooted in some of her learning experiences. Pat hoped, among other things, that students develop a disposition toward sensing “disconnects” between personal experiences and their readings in class. She hoped such disconnects would become a source of dissatisfaction and propel students to create knowledge.

These, in turn, were the dispositions Pat modeled in her teaching. Students began most course units by reading research related to child development. Concurrently, they

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<th>Table 2. Student Formation and the Issue of Personal Experience</th>
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<td><strong>Biographical Experience</strong></td>
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<td>Pat: Structured academic experiences as sources for learning</td>
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<td>• As a child, she discovered she loved “disconnects.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reading research and observing children led to interesting disconnects that propelled her into further education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• She entered into a personal conversation with these disconnects to discover new knowledge.</td>
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<td>Elizabeth: Prior personal experiences as sources for learning</td>
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<td>• She had a long-term personal interest in “the problem of boredom.”</td>
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<td>• She became dissatisfied and on the verge of leaving the profession.</td>
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<td>• New Model of Human Occupation (Kielhofner, 1985) drew her back because of how well it explained her life experiences.</td>
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<td>• “I think I’d have to say it was the Model of Human Occupation that really pulled me back into occupational therapy. It just made it make sense to me. By then I had a lot of life experience to draw on. I knew what it was like to be at home with nothing to do except deal with kids and knowing that I didn’t want to be there doing that in that way—how that felt. I’d also lived out of the country for a year. These were things that just helped me better understand the value of occupation.”</td>
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<td>• She loved reading broadly (e.g., anthropology, psychology, folk art, philosophy) and relating her readings to human occupation.</td>
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conducted field observations for 3 hr each week in day care and preschool settings. Pat provided questions to help students relate the research topic of the week to their particular experiences with children. For example, students read research on children’s development of pretend or imaginative play. Pat guided their observations with exercises like the following:

1. Observe how the environment is constructed by adults to create opportunities for pretend, dramatic play. Consider the cultural and social messages associated with objects that might elicit pretend, dramatic play. Relate your observations to readings for 9/27.

2. Review thematic content described by Farver & Shin and the principles of Goncu et al. Can you find examples from your day care of how these ideas are reflected in pretend play? If you are not seeing the children’s imagination running wild into fantastic themes can you propose a hypothesis for why not?

Back in the classroom, students shared lively stories of imaginative play observed in preschools. Pat continually tapped their stories to emphasize how personal experiences can serve as a basis for both understanding and critiquing scholarship on pretend play.

**Student Formation and the Issue of Constructing Knowledge**

Faculty members appeared to envision a path for formation that led students to critically synthesize and create knowledge for themselves. Two faculty participants, Karen and Anne, help illustrate these intentions (see Table 3).

**Snapshot: Karen.** Karen’s learning biography included stories that paired, paradoxically, an appreciation for ambiguity and a passion for clarity. Karen remembered feeling frustrated when she was an occupational therapy student. Her instructors did not provide the concrete answers she desired; they even appeared intentional about making

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**Table 3. Student Formation and the Issue of Constructing Knowledge**

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<tr>
<th>Biographical Experience</th>
<th>Intentions for Student Formation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Karen: Making sense of things for yourself</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>She had teachers who intentionally promoted ambiguity rather than concrete answers.</td>
<td>Ability to synthesize knowledge, “dig into” content, “make sense” of it for themselves</td>
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<td>“I see how much of me that became . . . how I practice education—ambiguity that was very uncomfortable as a student, but I realized why it had to be. That made it easier for me to teach that way”</td>
<td>Comfort with ambiguity, yet understanding of the process for reaching clarity</td>
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<td>She had a mentor who was skilled at explaining concepts clearly, who used an explanatory style of teaching.</td>
<td>Balanced need to make things clear and a need for students to experience ambiguity to make things clear for themselves.</td>
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<td>. . . and to this day that is something I feel very good at—explaining and making sense of things.”</td>
<td>Clearly explained how ambiguity was intentionally built into the curriculum.</td>
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<td><strong>Anne: Authoring knowledge with others</strong></td>
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<td>Her early teachers were controlling and enforced uniform rules that made no sense.</td>
<td>Students develop as scholar practitioners who do not accept and apply therapeutic interventions uncritically; who question, give evidence for, and use observations to generate new evidence.</td>
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<td>One teacher recognized and nurtured her gifts.</td>
<td>“One of the things I’m really trying to get across is the importance of an evidence base for practice, the importance of critical thinking around issues and not taking things at face value or making assumptions and not challenging those. . . . So, I want there to be some critique and some critical abilities that students do . . . .”</td>
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<td>She became disillusioned with occupational therapy: “There was no evidence base for what we were doing!”</td>
<td>“Part of what we’re really trying to do . . . is to socialize them in the culture of this is ‘the way scholar practitioners behave.’ These are the values, the actions. These are the things I’m going to role model for you.”</td>
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<td>She took additional courses, became involved in research, and gave presentations.</td>
<td>“Find a connection [with a research topic] and figure out how they can insert themselves into the spaces that are wide open.”</td>
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<td>She was offered a supported position in a doctoral program.</td>
<td>Modeled how scholar practitioners think and act.</td>
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<td>Her mentor challenged her and supported her ideas.</td>
<td>Exposed students to research and the problems research fails to address.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mentored students in how to understand and respond to research.</td>
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<td>Had students read her (Anne’s) research and generated questions the research did not address.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Then the students conducted a comprehensive literature review on one of the unanswered questions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fostered a nurturing, safe environment where students can take the risk to grow.</td>
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content ambiguous. However, several years after graduating, confronting the ambiguities of practice, Karen recognized the lessons in living with ambiguity. She realized that concrete answers did not exist in external authorities like instructors, and it was up to her to create her own knowledge in response to ambiguous situations—to make sense of things for herself. Yet, long before becoming an occupational therapist, an early mentor had a lasting impact on Karen’s teaching. Her mentor was a teacher who was very skilled at explaining concepts clearly. She remembered,

she had this gift for teaching in an explanatory way that wasn’t altogether a lecture but wasn’t participatory either. It was “explanatory” . . . to this day that is something I feel very good at—explaining and making sense of things.

Karen’s intentions for students appeared rooted in some of her early learning experiences. Karen hoped, among other things, that students would form a disposition toward learning that included “digging in,” “making sense,” and “piecing together knowledge for themselves.” These, in turn, were the dispositions Karen modeled in her teaching. In one class, for example, students struggled to understand the Occupational Adaptation Model. Karen commented, “It does take a while with this model in particular. You have to read, to think, to talk to each other, and to be critical . . . and make those decisions for yourself.”

In her lecture, Karen displayed a graphic of the model on an overhead projector. On the graphic, she had demarcated different elements in several colors showing students “the cues I have used to help tease out the parts of the model for myself.” In displaying her own process of making sense, she modeled for students a process by which they also may achieve more clarity. At the end of the lecture, responding to nonverbal communication from the students, Karen stated, “some people look puzzled.” One student replied that she was so puzzled she could not even formulate a question. Karen validated her feeling of ambiguity. Nevertheless, rather than help the student by repeating an explanation of the model, she provided a clear explanation of how the students could next begin to make sense of the information for themselves:

[T]hat is the process you will go through in struggling with new information. It’s like housecleaning, things may get worse or you may make a bigger mess before it finally takes on some order. It tends to get messier before it gets clearer. The process of coming to understanding continues like that. You hit a point where it gets clearer, but then you move to another level and it gets messier again, then it gets clear again. It’s back and forth like that . . . I can only provide a certain amount of structure because you need the opportunity to dig in, own it, and make sense of it.”

Karen used her gift of clearly explaining to teach, not only content, but also the process of making one’s own sense of the content, thus modeling for students comfort with ambiguity.

Student Formation and the Issue of Authoring Practice

The faculty members in this study possessed an almost evangelical desire that the graduates from their program become people who change, expand, and renew occupational therapy. They hoped students would create practices that clearly and profoundly reflect core ideas around human occupation. The theme of “change agents” was adopted as a key curricular thread and used as a basis for learning objectives in most courses. Two participants, Cindy and Leslie, help illustrate this intention (see Table 4).

Snapshot: Cindy. In her 12 years as a therapist, Cindy encountered a recurring frustration—the script-following response of therapists to policy and legislative changes. Cindy observed occupational therapists too often being authored by issues like state practice acts, Medicare reimbursement guidelines, or simply by “the way we’ve always done it.”

I think there’s a history of us sort of riding the back end of changes that are going on and suddenly scrambling to redefine who we are in response to things that we feel we’ve been buffeted by; instead of . . . scanning the environment and looking ahead at what’s out there . . . knowing where to look means that you have control as a profession as well as a practitioner and can be a change agent as opposed to being Chicken Little, running around and saying, “oh, my God, the sky is already down! And why didn’t the AOTA do something about it?”

Cindy’s observations and experiences propelled her into political activity on behalf of the profession. She advocated for particular legislation, urged others to take action, interpreted new legislation, and attempted to understand the rules and regulations well enough to work within them yet not surrender core aspects of practice to them.

A real simple example: you can moan and groan about what Medicare doesn’t cover . . . or you can step back and say “you know, how does Medicare get changed? Should I be grousing and complaining about this to my co-workers? If I think it’s important enough, do I write to my congressman?” Or you can even step back in the bigger picture and say “you know, the reality is, Medicare is a finite dollar source, and Medicare doesn’t pay for everything. Neither does any other insurance cover everything. And so, yes, we might want to change Medicare, but we also want to ask is it a reasonable expectation that any third party payer is going to pay for everything?” So, you can keep stepping back. . . . If you haven’t become accustomed to the pragmatic reasoning needed, you get stuck . . . without ever seeing that that situation can be
Table 4. Student Formation and the Issue of Authoring Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biographical Experience</th>
<th>Intentions for Student Formation</th>
<th>Instructional Processes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cindy: Avoid being authored by the practice context</td>
<td>· She suffered frustration over “the script-following response of therapists to changing policy, legislation, and “the way we’ve always done it.”</td>
<td>· Detailed knowledge of the issues that impact occupational therapy in a given setting, state, region and doesn’t let those completely dictate practice</td>
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<td>· She became politically active on behalf of the profession, advocating for legislation and teaching about the impact of legislative efforts.</td>
<td>· Ability to work within and around constraints to create authentic occupational therapy practices</td>
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<td>· Her middle initial “A” seems to stand for “change agent.”</td>
<td>· “...the more you can be a change agent for the pieces you see as obstacles to effective practice or unfair to your clients. Be sure you understand the forest you are operating in.”</td>
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<td>Lesley: Authoring an occupation-centered practice</td>
<td>· She had several experiences in which accepted practice in pediatric occupational therapy did not make sense to her.</td>
<td>· Introduced students to the myriad of factors that help shape practice.</td>
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<td>· “Writing 10 straight lines was supposedly related to writing their name, but if you are 16 and you still can’t write your name, I’m thinking name stamp (if even that)!”</td>
<td>· Engaged in exercises to help students see the factors shaping their current lives as students.</td>
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<td>· “I was always most concerned with how kids were occupying their time and what occupations they needed to do and how I could facilitate that.”</td>
<td>· Encouraged discussion.</td>
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<td>· She recreated priorities for occupational therapy practice in particular settings.</td>
<td>· Assigned interactive journals.</td>
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<td>· “It was then I decided not to do the motor-sensory integration there anymore. If this child needs to pour juice at lunch, then that is what we are going to work on.”</td>
<td>· Gave interactive lectures.</td>
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<td>· “What are the possibilities? What can you use it for? What other things does it relate to? And, then how can you tie those things together to look at something from a new perspective or create something new?... that’s how I think...”</td>
<td>· Told clinical stories.</td>
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<td>· The capacity to become “good thinkers and good clinicians who cultivate a perspective of practice as rooted in and evaluated against the concept of occupation”</td>
<td>· Assigned fieldwork.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>· The skill to piece together multiple concepts to create an occupation-centered practice</td>
<td>· Repeatedly conveyed that knowledge about professional tools and techniques could not be learned and applied generically but must be combined with the specific interaction with an individual and a particular circumstance, and be continuously linked to the larger context of occupation.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>· “With every client, you’re doing something different...how you put your knowledge together with what is already there is what makes practice an art.”</td>
<td>· Held labs so that students could experience the limitations of accepted professional tools and techniques and have to modify the tool for use in varying contexts.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>· Repeatedly conveyed that knowledge about professional tools and techniques could not be learned and applied generically but must be combined with the specific interaction with an individual and a particular circumstance, and be continuously linked to the larger context of occupation.</td>
<td>· Led inductive discussions that led students to combine multiple concepts.</td>
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changed, or that there’s a different way to frame it than just, you know, “oh, this is my daily irritation.”

Cindy’s intentions for student formation appeared rooted in some of her professional experiences. She hoped, among other things, that students would form a disposition, a sense of self that, knowing full well what the issues are, could write and rewrite the scripts of practice accordingly. She wanted students to see the “forest” in which practice occurs:

I love teaching this course because it is a chance at the very beginning of the curriculum to say “yes, this [external influences on practice] is also an important part of what happens and the more you understand it, the more you can be a change agent for the pieces of it that you see as obstacles to effective practice, or as unfair to your clients. But just to understand the forest that you’re operating in.”

This was the disposition Cindy modeled in her teaching: understand the issues so as not to be authored by them. At first glance in her course, Cindy appeared to simply offer students “basic” information about the internal and external influences on occupational therapy practice. Students reviewed different educational degrees offered in the field and the process of becoming certified and licensed. They defined acronyms and discussed various professional roles. They identified professional organizations and governing bodies, debated ethics, and discovered the parameters of reimbursement for therapy services such as Medicare and Medicaid guidelines. Through this content, Cindy hoped to empower students to go into practice with their eyes wide open to the external and organizational pressures on practice. She thought that by having a broad understanding of the pragmatic inner workings of the field, students could resist allowing the setting to dictate how occupational therapy is practiced.

The first week... I gave them a big overview of what I knew about context and how there’s a BIG world of OT practice. But then [that narrows because] your state
defines OT a certain way... and then [that narrows again because] your setting defines OT a certain way. It reminds me of the little Russian dolls. Then we broke into small groups. They [students] had an assignment to look at the different contexts and influences that shaped their role as a student here.

Then Cindy helped them draw the parallels between how their role as student is shaped by external influences and the particular program they attend and how their role as therapist will be shaped by external influences in a particular practice setting.

Discussion

This study elucidated three dimensions of the intersections between educator biography, student formation, and instructional processes. First, the educators in the study taught who they were. Second, the educators personified an implicit curriculum. Third, they exemplified the process of how knowledge is assembled in social context.

Educators Teach Who They Are

Each faculty participant held certain intentions, hopes, or visions for student formation. Those intentions grew out of particular biographical experiences and in turn shaped and became expressed through classroom processes. In essence, the participants taught who they were. These findings concur with scholarship on educators in other fields. Palmer (1998), for example, noted that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). Similarly, in a study of clergy education, Foster et al. (2006) found that professors “give form to their teaching practices with habits and dispositions they seek to cultivate in their students” (p. 110). In that study, one professor noted that in her early years of teaching, she focused primarily on covering content but later came to realize “that above all else one is always teaching oneself” (p. 105). Apps (1996) described how his teaching ultimately reflected his experiences living in a rural area in Wisconsin. Likewise, in this study, teaching could not be fully described by the curriculum design, the content covered, or the techniques used. The curriculum and content were occupation centered; the teaching methods were largely constructivist (Hooper, 2006). At the same time, the content and methods were extensions of each educator’s biography—her hopes, her expectations, why she was there, and the culture she had critically co-created with other faculty members. Thus, content and methods appeared to be more means than ends in themselves—means toward what might be formed in students and toward authenticity of the educators.

Educators Personify an Implicit Curriculum

This study suggests that, even with careful attention to the messages conveyed to students through the explicit curriculum, an implicit curriculum may be personified by each faculty member. According to Foster et al. (2006), the implicit curriculum, defined as that which is taught through the rites, rituals, and customs of a program, is a primary vehicle for student identity formation and for learning what kind of person to be as a professional in a particular field. Although these descriptions cannot begin to represent the entirety of any single participant’s teaching practice, each participant in the study personified a unique implicit curriculum. Gail and Martha, for example, personified an implicit curriculum that invited students to become people who share authority with others. Other participants personified implicit curricula that encouraged students to become people who master and uphold the authority of their own knowledge, attend to disconnects to discover new things, possess deep understandings of human occupation as it plays in their own and others lives, struggle with and create knowledge for themselves in connection with others, act as scholar practitioners, resist external influences that have a deforming effect on occupational therapy, or translate principles of occupation into daily practice.

In each case, that which was personified pointed also to the skill sets believed to be important for competent practice. These findings concur with Foster et al. (2006), who found that professors “had in mind some expectation for the kind of... leaders their students will become. In this regard, the attention of... educators to the future performance of their students... was directed to concerns associated with the apprenticeship of identity formation” (p. 125). Professional education involves the “formation of a distinctive habitus aligned with the deepest values and priorities of the tradition” (Foster et al., 2006 p. 112). For students, this habitus does not exist outside of the program in which they are enrolled. Rather, “on a day-to-day basis during the novice’s most impressionable period, the faculty, the curriculum, and the teaching practices of the school represent the world of the profession” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 196).

Educators Exemplify Ways of Knowing

Each faculty participant taught as though she envisioned a path for student formation that led to reformed ways of knowing. Whether consciously or not, each faculty member exemplified what Baxter Magolda (1999) referred to as contextual knowing. Contextual knowing stems from the assumptions that knowledge is mostly uncertain but can be judged as more or less substantiated and is acquired by synthesizing expert opinion, existing evidence, and one’s own
and other’s experiences. Contextual knowing presumes that knowledge is formed within communities of people who are continually coming into new awarenesses and conclusions about a subject (Palmer, 1998). Faculty members exemplified contextual knowing in various ways. For example, Judith engaged students in reading the literature carefully, supporting their views with evidence, and thoughtfully critiquing how practice is constructed within historical influences. Elizabeth engaged students in careful reading and discussion of very diverse representations of human occupation across disciplines. Anne involved students in evaluating unanswered questions in the literature and adopting one of those questions to explore for themselves. Leslie engaged students in developing occupation-centered interventions for diverse, ever-changing cases and settings. Throughout, knowledge or content was portrayed as uncertain and variable. Students engaged in evaluating and forming knowledge in a social context. Thus, the often-invisible process of how knowledge is assembled in community appeared to be made visible through how faculty crafted courses and classroom activities. Education aims to help students acquire contextual knowing because it is associated with self-determination or self-authorship, critical thinking, using evidence, seeing and understanding one’s cultural press, and seeing oneself as a participant in creating knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 1999).

Implications for Educational Practice

Findings related to “educators teach who they are” suggest that attention to changing curriculum design, course content, or teaching methods may be insufficient for improving education without simultaneous attention to the formative experiences of faculty and subsequent intentions for students. It is important to remember that this case was selected in part on the basis of the group’s commitment to extensive and continuous study of curriculum in light of emerging knowledge in, and future visions for, occupational therapy. It is likely that such in-depth engagement helped create the congruence noted between the implicit curricula, the ways of knowing enacted in the classroom, and who these educators were, both as individuals and as a group. When these findings are interpreted in the larger context of educational research, however, such congruence is not standard practice. For example, as Baxter Magolda (1999) proposed, it is not uncommon for faculty to adopt identities that can be at crosshairs with positive changes in education, given how they have been socialized in certain groups. Cranton (2001) proposed that being socialized into a view of teacher as objective expert, knowledge disseminator, or an actor “putting on a performance” interferes with authentic teaching (p. 43). Therefore, more attention is needed to how we teach who we are.

Stories are one way of exploring how we teach who we are (Cranton, 2001). For example, faculty members may reflect on the most influential experiences that carried them into occupational therapy education and if or how those experiences relate to what happens in the classroom environment. Alternatively, exploring the connection in reverse form, faculty members may reflect on critical incidents in teaching and explore the intentions for students that may be conveyed through those stories. Then the intentions uncovered could be traced to any formative biographical experiences that may have played a role in their significance. Faculty members may talk or write about their leading hopes for students and the personal experiences that have inspired those hopes. However, it cannot be assumed that faculty biographical experiences automatically translate into intentions for student formation or into educational experiences that magnify the program’s vision or the profession’s ethos. To do so, each series of stories needs to include an honest, critical, self-appraisal. Cranton (1996) argued that critical self-reflection opens doors to educational change.

Findings related to “educators personify an implicit curriculum” highlight the importance of thoughtful design and analysis of a program’s implicit curriculum that equals the efforts invested in design and analysis of its explicit curriculum. Again, because of the extensive curriculum design process undertaken by faculty in this study, it appeared as if the implicit curricula personified by faculty were congruent with the explicit curriculum. However, it is common that contentions exist between implicit and explicit curricula. According to Sullivan (2005), students apprentice to competing and possibly conflicting emphases within professional education. Namely, they apprentice to the intellectual foundations of a field and the skills employed by its practitioners—the explicit curriculum—and the dispositions for being a practitioner in a given field—the implicit curriculum. He argued that these dimensions of professional education “reflect contending emphases within all professional education” (p. 209). The challenge to faculty is to bring these “disparate pieces . . . into coherent alignment” (p. 208). One way of meeting this challenge is through careful analysis of the implicit curriculum at both programmatic and individual levels.

Such analyses could include, for example, an examination of the rituals around entering and exiting a program, the phrases and metaphors repeated among faculty and with students, the physical images that decorate the program’s spaces, the authority shared among faculty and with students, the issues that students are held accountable for, or the supplies stocked and not stocked. Findings from this study also underscore the importance of examining the compatibility of the implicit curricula personified by faculty
members. Sources of data for this type of self-study may include interviews with students, reflective exercises by faculty, videotaping classroom processes for self-evaluation, or instituting a series of peer-teaching reviews that include feedback on the implicit elements of the classroom. Taken together, these data could be critically evaluated in light of their congruence with the vision of the program and ethos of the profession. The data may be used to create a philosophy and design for the implicit curriculum that could help strengthen for students what Sullivan (2005) called the “apprenticeship of identity formation” (p. 21).

Findings related to “educators exemplify ways of knowing” highlight the important role faculty members may play in the formation of students’ personal epistemologies. In this study, instructional processes consistently called for contextual knowing. Yet some common teaching practices inadvertently promote and reinforce absolute knowing among students. Absolute knowing stems from the assumptions that knowledge exists in absolute form, is mostly right or wrong, and is held by, and directly received from, experts or authorities (Baxter Magolda, 1999). For example, early in a teaching career, it becomes all too easy to assemble knowledge in private and present it to students in public, as if the content existed somewhere in absolute form, without the fingerprints and molding of the instructor with the professional community. Equally, after years of academic experience, it becomes all too easy to present to students the content one knows so thoroughly—again, as if the knowledge existed somewhere in absolute form, fixed, not having been crafted by a professional community in different ways over time (Graff, 1992, 2003). In both cases, the processes by which the content—whether occupational therapy assessment, intervention, or even splinting and anatomy—was fashioned and remains conflictual is invisible to students. They can go on assuming that knowledge about practice is held by authorities, and their role is to receive that knowledge from their instructors, clinical educators, and practice settings. This cloaking is similar to what Graff (2003) referred to as “academia’s ways of fogging over its conversations” (p. 83). Thus, it cannot be assumed that teaching content is equivalent to teaching the ways of knowing that compliment the content. Educators may inadvertently exemplify and reinforce absolute ways of knowing when their aim is to promote contextual knowing among students. When this happens, educators undermine the intention of graduating self-defining professionals.

Conclusion

Interrelationships were found among educators’ biographical experiences, their intentions for student formation, and the classroom processes in which they engaged, thus highlighting teaching and curriculum as extensions of the deeply personal. The deeply personal aspects of teaching and curriculum design are key elements of the implicit curriculum. In turn, the implicit curriculum is the site where the deeply personal elements of being a practitioner are formed in students. With the implicit curriculum playing such a vital role, it is important that we attend to it with the same level of commitment we have given to explicit curricula in the field. This means, at the individual level, attending to the identity of faculty members; the stories that carried them to become educators; their desires for what dispositions will be formed in students through graduate education; the degree to which the ways of knowing exemplified to students support those intentions; and the compatibility of intentions, ways of knowing, and identities across members of a faculty group. Attending to these elements can help identify places where our educational processes may be at odds with our aims. Consequently, we can take steps to strengthen the coherence of the educational experience and to ensure that the invitation into formation consistent with the larger professional ethos is not lost to students.

Study Limitations

Data for this article were collected through three means: (1) an initial interview about each educator’s path to academia, (2) classroom observations, and a (3) final interview about teaching approaches. The links between classroom practices and biography were traced by the researcher. The intersections may have been stronger if a method were used whereby each faculty wrote her own story about the biographical influences on her teaching and her hopes for students. However, the links made were clarified specifically with participants and generally in a member check session with the group. ▲

References


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