

**0205**

**With a little help from my friends: The value of social capital in higher education.**

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**Background**

Pre-registration occupational therapy (OT) education in the UK stands at the crossroads of higher education (HE) and professional practice. It is subject to various government agendas, including an ongoing commitment to widening participation in HE and to diversifying the health and social care workforce to reflect modern cultural diversity, which have contributed to a changing profile in the OT student population. In 2005, 67% of the intake was mature (COT 2007), and increasing numbers are entering with 'non-traditional' academic backgrounds, an umbrella term which subsumes a variety of entry qualifications.

The early weeks of study in HE can prove challenging to students as they settle into the new learning environment and begin to understand what will be expected of them (Yorke 2005). It has been suggested that those from non-traditional academic backgrounds may find this transition, particularly the need to take a high level of responsibility for their own learning, difficult as a result of the skills, experiences and expectations they have developed throughout their pre-entry educational experiences (Sambell and Hubbard 2004). While small-scale studies suggest that students from such backgrounds who graduate from OT programmes are as academically successful as traditional school-leavers (Howard and Jerosch-Herold 2000), there is little evidence offering insight into how they actually experience and negotiate the demands of their programmes.

**Research Questions**

The research presented in this paper focused on developing insight into and understanding of the educational experiences of students with non-traditional academic backgrounds as they studied OT in an HE environment.

**Methods**

Recognising that learning and teaching are inextricably linked and embedded with the milieu in which they occur, this research adopted a case study methodology to capture complexity and to understand issues within their natural context (Yin 2003). In an instrumental single-case design (Stake 1995), a neither unique nor extreme undergraduate OT programme became a vehicle for exploring the educational experiences of students with non-traditional academic backgrounds.

A longitudinal study followed thirteen volunteer participants who were drawn from a single cohort in one of the UK's research intensive universities through their undergraduate programme. Data were collected via:

- a) focus groups conducted prior to and in the first days of the participants' first semester, exploring their pre-entry educational experiences and motivations for, expectations of and perceived preparedness for studying in HE;
- b) reflective diaries recording any educational experiences that participants felt were particularly significant or meaningful;
- c) one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted towards the end of their first year, informed by individual reflective diaries and focusing on participants' initial experience of learning in HE;

d) one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted towards the end of their third year, informed by individual reflective diaries and other previously collected data, and focusing on participants' learning experiences during the latter phases of their programme.

## **Frame**

As the study progressed, the data available at the end of each phase was subject to theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) underpinned by Bourdieu's (1990) conceptual tools of habitus, field and capital. Emerging codes converged to represent themes suggesting clusters of shared experience amongst some of the participants. Further examination of each complete data set enabled exploration of how individual participants were positioned in relation to the field of HE and it was evident that some felt much more comfortable within it than others. Juxtaposing the nature and expectations of the new field in relation to those previously occupied by individual participants and the established habitus that each brought with them helped to shed light on this situation (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

## **Research findings**

With the role of language as a high-value form of cultural capital discussed elsewhere (Watson et al 2009), this paper focuses on the role of social capital in participants' experiences of learning in HE. Reflecting the potential for valued capital to beget capital, the study's findings highlight that social capital plays an important role in how participants manage the challenges they encounter within in the field, and its role in facilitating the accumulation of further capital relevant to the field. Drawing on examples from amongst the study's participants, this paper explores how social capital confers advantages in a number of guises to those participants who found that they could comfortably fit into, or ultimately adapt to, the field of HE. It also highlights that an apparent paucity of relevant social capital limited the resources available to those who struggled to adapt and remained on the margins of, or were excluded from, the field.

Employing Bourdieu's conceptual tools adds a new dimension to understanding individual experiences of learning in HE. By illustrating the important role played by social capital in the way that students learn to play 'the game' and present knowledge and understanding in the 'legitimate' form recognised and accepted by the field, this paper adds to understanding of the role of social integration in student experiences.

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