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'I'm not the same person I was in September': Engaging occupational narratives through an arts-based approach to ethics education.

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Introduction

This paper discusses occupational narratives that emerged through an innovative approach to ethics education at a Canadian university. Occupational therapy students were invited to reflect on their ethical commitments and the implications for their future occupations as therapists. Students engaged in reflective journal writing and the creation of an artistic representation of ethical practice as a means to explore their understandings about what it might mean to be an ethical practitioner. Theoretical lenses that inform the project and frame the current study include: narrative identity, narratives of occupation, narrative ethics, narrative imagination, and narrative and aesthetics. Literature from these domains informs the theoretical rationale for adopting an arts-based approach to foster reflection.

Objectives

The central question of the study is: What is the nature of the occupational narratives of students who participate in an arts-based approach to the discernment of ethical commitments during occupational therapy education?

Methodology

191 Master of Science students, in clinical occupational therapy, participated in the study over 4 years. A hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was used to examine students' art work and reflective writing. A focus on occupational narratives was explicitly brought to the interpretive frame.

Results

Exemplars of occupational narratives reveal key themes, which include: the link between personal and professional domains, embodiment, transformation, moral imagination, moral agency, identity, and creativity. Occupational narratives were discussed in terms of the implications for walking the talk with occupational therapy students, public and private spheres in professional life, practitioners as worldmakers, educating ethical practitioners, becoming a professional, and engaging vision through an arts-based approach.

Conclusion

An innovative arts-based approach to ethics education has the capacity to engage students in deep levels of reflection, to elicit rich occupational narratives, to explicate students' ethical commitments and to make explicit the emerging identities of occupational therapy students.

Contribution to Practice

The findings have implications for the design of meaningful education in occupational therapy.