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“Putting on our people lens”: Lived Experience as Pedagogy

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Abstract

In the professional education of mental health practitioners, including occupational therapists, there has been a lack of meaningful inclusion of people labeled with mental illness into curricula, beyond guest speaker panels and presentations. This study explored the experiences of students, faculty, and ‘Experts by Experience’ within a mental health occupational therapy course that incorporated Experts with lived experience as co-facilitators of weekly fieldwork debriefs. The study utilized focus groups and interviews to understand the experiences of students, mental health faculty, and ‘Experts by Experience’. Key themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis were organized under three broad categories: 1) Students experienced powerful insights, 2) Experts conveyed the complexity of the work, and 3) Faculty grew from co-creating learning experiences with the Experts. This research makes a significant contribution to occupational therapy education by shifting the Expert’s role beyond traditional speaker panels or storytelling. This broader responsibility elevated experiential knowledge into the realm of practice in clinical reasoning by shifting the context of the knowledge from storytelling to support practice reasoning. While this created significant learning opportunities for the students, it also did appear to cause emotional risk for the ‘Experts by Experience’. It is important that efforts to include ‘Experts by Experience’ in curriculum also include sources of support and financial remuneration.

Keywords

Mental health, lived experience, occupational therapy education, consumer participation, clinical reasoning

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“Putting on our people lens”: Lived Experience as Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

In the professional education of mental health practitioners, including occupational therapists, there has been a lack of meaningful inclusion of people labeled with mental illness into curricula, beyond guest speaker panels and presentations. This study explored the experiences of students, faculty, and ‘Experts by Experience’ within a mental health occupational therapy course that incorporated Experts with lived experience as co-facilitators of weekly fieldwork debriefs. The study utilized focus groups and interviews to understand the experiences of students, mental health faculty, and ‘Experts by Experience’. Key themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis were organized under three broad categories: 1) Students experienced powerful insights, 2) Experts conveyed the complexity of the work, and 3) Faculty grew from co-creating learning experiences with the Experts. This research makes a significant contribution to occupational therapy education by shifting the Expert’s role beyond traditional speaker panels or storytelling. This broader responsibility elevated experiential knowledge into the realm of practice in clinical reasoning by shifting the context of the knowledge from storytelling to support practice reasoning. While this created significant learning opportunities for the students, it also did appear to cause emotional risk for the ‘Experts by Experience’. It is important that efforts to include ‘Experts by Experience’ in curriculum also include sources of support and financial remuneration.

Background

In the professional education of mental health practitioners, there has been a lack of meaningful inclusion of people labeled with mental illness into curricula, beyond guest speaker panels and presentations. Given the long tradition of debriefing in mental health practice contexts, a group debrief was integrated into an academic program's mental health immersion course that included a Level I fieldwork experience. This weekly debrief supported students' development of clinical reasoning, collaboration, and critical reflection skills. It created an opportunity for students to consider the application of concepts learned in the classroom to the real world of clinical practice, increase their understanding of occupational therapy's role in mental health practice, and make better sense of their fieldwork experiences. As a result of the debrief, faculty observed that students became more empowered, were able to adjust to the expectations of their fieldwork site, and had a stronger grasp of concepts learned in the classroom. However, faculty identified that the voice of the mental health consumer was missing from the dialogue and hypothesized that including the voices of 'Experts by Experience' would be a way to enable students to better understand the experience of recovery and decrease stigma towards individuals with mental illness.

Literature Review

'Expert by Experience' is a term used by the recovery movement to draw attention to the value of working alongside persons with lived experience. It makes a claim for a specialist knowledge base rooted in an individual's experience of using services. It suggests a relationship of equals (between clinician and 'Expert by Experience') whereby one individual's expertise has been gained through their training and practice and the other through their experience (McLaughlin, 2009, p.1111-1113). Sometimes clinicians and academics are referred to as 'Experts by Education.' It is important to acknowledge that other terms are often used, including Service-User Educator (LeBlanc-Omstead & Kinsella, 2023) and Consumer Academic (Happell & Roper, 2002). For clarity, throughout this paper, we will refer to 'Experts by Experience' as Experts and the people we work with as occupational therapists as clients.

There is a history of Experts being involved in the education of health professionals, beginning with the use of 'patients' as teachers of core professional skills dating back to the early 1970s. Health profession students practiced their skills with 'patients', now often referred to as standardized patients. The incorporation of Experts was expanded in the early 1990s, influenced by ideas regarding full participation of patients in their care, as well as the World Health Organization's call for health professional education to be socially accountable (Towle & Godolphin, 2011).

Many academic programs invite Experts to tell their story to occupational therapy students, but this approach has limitations and may restrict Experts to telling medically sanctioned versions of their story (LeBlanc-Olstead & Kinsella, 2023). A few academic programs have developed courses to explicitly incorporate the voice of mental health consumers into the design beyond storytelling. Agrawal et al. (2016; 2021) co-produced an advisory course for third-year psychiatry residents which provided service user mentorship to third-year psychiatric residents. This structure allowed residents to

understand the experience of mental illness and recovery, while also building a close relationship with a service user. An international group of Experts and mental health nurse academics “combined experiential and academic knowledge” to co-produce a module on ‘mental health recovery’ to be integrated into existing undergraduate nursing programs and taught by an Expert (Biering et al., 2020, p. 1; Horgan et al., 2015). Fokuo et al. (2017) developed a mentoring program in which mental health consumers guided nursing students to more deeply understand the lived experience of mental illness. Qualitative analyses indicated the potential for this to decrease stigma regarding individuals with mental illness among nursing students. Another study included mental health consumers on an oral assessment team in an undergraduate occupational therapy educational program (Logan et al., 2018).

Exploration of the use of Experts in mental health professional education has been most extensive in mental health nurse education. Happell and colleagues (2018; 2019) have produced a significant body of work exploring the benefits and challenges of creating and sustaining Consumer Academic positions (Happell et al., 2022) and the role of non-lived experience health professional academics as ‘allies’ (Happell et al., 2023). Perhaps influenced by the work of their nurse educator colleagues, occupational therapy mental health educators in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand surveyed occupational therapy programs regarding Expert involvement (Scanlan et al., 2020). They found that while involvement had increased, considerably more work was needed to realize the full potential of the contribution that Experts can make to occupational therapy professional education. This study contributes to this gap.

Description of Level I Fieldwork Debrief

The faculty authors partnered with a local consumer-run mental health organization to include Experts as facilitators within a weekly Level I debrief with entry-level Master’s occupational therapy students. The weekly debrief is a component of an 8-unit, 9-hour mental health practice immersion course that also includes a Level I fieldwork experience. Debrief groups were comprised of six to eight students, and were co-facilitated by one Expert and one faculty member. Level I fieldwork sites consisted of a range of mental health practice settings, including acute inpatient and community-based outpatient settings. Debriefs were scheduled weekly following each fieldwork day for ten weeks, and lasted for approximately 75 minutes.

All faculty researchers were current or former instructors in the course or served as the mental health practice Academic Fieldwork Coordinator, and had practiced in the mental health service sector (ranging from 5 to 40 years) with children and youth and/or adults labeled with psychiatric disabilities. All had practiced from a Recovery Oriented perspective and felt strongly that it was important to decrease stigma and support full integration of individuals labeled with mental illness into society. The faculty wanted to incorporate Experts into the classroom because of the stigma they had observed among students, and felt that having Experts present at the debrief would decrease this stigma. Experts recruited from the local consumer-run organization all identified as a person with lived experience who had served or completed trainings as a peer support

specialist. The Experts were not currently associated with the Level I fieldwork settings; however, some had received treatment at some of these settings in the past. Prior to the incorporation of Experts into the fieldwork debrief, planning meetings were held with leadership from the consumer organization to build consensus on the purpose, process, and ways to support the Experts.

Course faculty, and debrief co-facilitators met with the Experts to orient them to course design in which the debriefs were embedded, the role of students at the fieldwork site, and some specifics about each fieldwork site. Experts also met weekly with one of the faculty to debrief. In those debriefs, the faculty member was able to make additional clarifications and Experts and faculty served as a support for one another. The University contracted with the consumer organization to pay the Experts at an hourly rate for all activities described above.

In this paper, we will describe the study design of the fieldwork debrief co-facilitated with Experts, present the outcomes, and make a claim for greater integration of Experts into occupational therapy curricula.

Methods

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this as an exempt study. All participants were required to review an information sheet on the study before participating.

Research Design

The study used qualitative methods to address the primary question, “How will integrating Experts into the classroom for weekly debriefs impact the learning experience of the students, as well as the experiences of the faculty and Experts?” because this approach allowed for deep exploration of lived experience, understanding the emic experience of participants, consideration of context, and illumination of multiple perspectives. Faculty conducted all focus groups and interviews, and faculty and some Experts completed the analysis together. Faculty researchers wrote the article and the Experts provided feedback. The Experts’ perspectives were then further incorporated into the article. Tracy’s Eight Big Tent Criteria guided the design of the study, in particular, the criteria of sincerity, credibility, significant contribution, and ethics (Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2010) described sincerity as being honest about one’s perspective, and transparent in the research process. Faculty and Experts demonstrated sincerity by reflecting on the process during team meetings, interrogating their own assumptions and interviewing one another about their experiences. Credibility was strengthened by incorporating multiple perspectives into the study, including students, faculty, and Experts. This approach demonstrated crystallization, where researchers achieve a more nuanced understanding by gathering multiple perspectives. Researchers continually reflected on their ethical obligations to faculty, Experts, and the students throughout this study.

Recruitment

Entry-level Master's students enrolled in the Mental Health Practice Immersion Course from Fall 2018-Fall 2019 (n=138) were invited to participate. Faculty described the study to the students during class, provided them with an information sheet describing the study, and invited them to participate in a focus group. Faculty and Experts who co-facilitated the debrief were also provided with an information sheet about the study and invited to participate in an interview.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Focus groups and interviews were used to explore the experiences of the faculty, students, and Experts in the debriefs. Different qualitative methods were utilized with each participant type. Focus groups with students were utilized to strengthen the quality of the perspectives from students that might emerge. Given the smaller number of Experts and Faculty involved, interviews were conducted. All focus groups and interviews were conducted at the close of each semester in which the fieldwork debrief was conducted.

The lead interviewer for each focus group was a faculty member who had either not participated in the students' specific debrief group, or was not their instructor for that particular semester. This strategy was used to help the students feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. A teaching assistant for the course assisted the faculty interviewer by taking notes and recording the focus groups. A total of nine (9) focus groups were held, each lasting approximately 75 minutes. Faculty interviewed one another and the Experts, for a total of five (5) faculty interviews and five (5) Expert interviews, in an effort to strengthen crystallization by providing a greater number of perspectives to generate deeper findings (Tracy, 2010). Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Focus group and interview guides are included in Table 1.

Table 1

Interview and Focus Group Guides

Student Focus Group Guide	Faculty Interview Guide	Expert Interview Guide
<p>We would like you to think back on your experience when the debriefs co-lead by the 'Experts by Experience' first began. Can you describe that experience for us?</p> <p>As the semester progressed, how did your experience in the debriefs co-lead by the 'Experts by Experience' change?</p> <p>If you can think of one, describe a time when the 'Expert by Experience' did something that stood out to you.</p> <p>What aspects of the debriefs co-lead by the 'Experts by Experience' did you like best?</p> <p>What aspects of the debrief with the 'Expert by Experience' would you recommend the instructors of the course change, if anything?</p> <p>How has the 'Expert by Experience' influenced you, if at all?</p> <p>Is there anything else about the debriefs with the 'Experts by Experience' that you would like to share?</p>	<p>As you reflect back on the semester in the fieldwork debrief sessions with the 'Experts by Experience', what comes to mind?</p> <p>What opportunities emerged from the experience?</p> <p>What challenges were you confronted with?</p> <p>From your perspective, how did having the 'Expert by Experience' co-facilitating the debrief influence your work with the students? Can you share an example?</p> <p>From your perspective, how did having the 'Expert by Experience' co-facilitating the debrief influence you? Can you share an example?</p>	<p>Think back to when you first began facilitating the debrief this semester. Can you describe that experience?</p> <p>As you reflect back on the semester as an 'Expert by Experience' in the fieldwork debrief sessions with the students, what comes to mind?</p> <p>What opportunities emerged from the experience?</p> <p>What challenges were you confronted with?</p> <p>From your perspective, how did your lived experience influence the guidance you gave or support you offered to the students? Can you share an example?</p> <p>From your perspective, how would you define or describe your role as an 'Expert by Experience' in the fieldwork debrief process with students? How was it similar or different from your faculty facilitation partner?</p> <p>Is there anything about your experiences in the debrief that I should have asked you, but didn't?</p>

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted by five faculty and two Experts. First, the team engaged in qualitative content analysis of a select number of transcripts (Sandelowski, 2000) during three team meetings, each approximately two hours duration. Team members completed a chaptering process (M. Lawlor, personal communication, June 25, 2019), whereby each team member read the transcript and created chapter titles, often using participants' words to do so. The team proceeded with a paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry to create themes from these stories and chapter titles (Polkinghorne, 2006). Team members discussed the chapters, comparing similarities and differences in interpretation. Through this dialogue, themes emerged. Data collections were identified and organized for each theme. The transcribed interviews were then delegated across the team for review. Each team member completed multiple readings of the transcribed interviews, and noted interpretations of the qualitative data during each read-through, sorting stories into relevant themes. Team members then created a "good story" collection to sort stories that did not align with the originally identified themes. Exemplars for each "good story" were identified, and new themes emerged. Through this group-based analysis, we further refined interpretations of the data. These findings have been organized into the ten key themes within three categories that are presented in this paper.

Results

Key Themes

Key themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis and are presented in the table below across three main categories: 1) Students' Experience: Powerful Insights, 2) Experts' Experience: Complexity of the Work, and 3) Faculty Experience: Co-Creating Learning Experiences.

Table 2

Themes

Category:	Students' Experience: Powerful Insights	Experts' Experience: Complexity of the Work	Faculty's Experience: Co-creating Learning Experiences
Themes:	Putting on my people lens	It takes work: being ready	Navigating the partnership
	Awareness of language: Words matter	It takes work: It's always a risk	Felt more complete doing it together
	It's ok to feel	It takes work: I need to take care of myself	
	I believe it from her	It takes work: I can walk through it	

Students' Experience: Powerful Insights

Findings from the student focus groups revealed that students gained powerful insights from the experience of engaging with Experts during the weekly fieldwork debriefs. Students learned from the Experts that 'little things' create a major impact. The perspectives of the Experts were valuable to the student's overall learning experience, helping them to consider the perspective of the clients they worked with, and from these connections, focus on building strong relationships.

Putting on My People Lens. This theme emphasized the *importance of the relationship* and recognizing the value of the person's perspective. Having the Experts in the debriefs provided the students with an opportunity to think more deeply about the client's perspective, as opposed to only the practitioner's perspective. Students gained an understanding that clients wanted to feel heard and that their service providers were there for them. One student referred to this as "getting out of our practitioner lens and... putting on our people lens."

One student noted how the Expert, through sharing their experiences of living with mental illness, helped the students to better understand and respect the unique perspectives of their clients (refer to Table 3). One student described how their relationship with the Expert helped them to shift from a focus on doing to a focus on connecting:

I was still thinking about what kind of interventions...or just activities to plan. But I think she helped me realize that it's more of just building the rapport and it's all in the conversations you have with a person that can be really helpful, so you don't have to think of elaborate activities to do.

Through discussion with the Experts, students began to see the value in connecting with their clients or "putting on our people lens" when supporting their clients.

Awareness of Language: Words Matter. The students were more mindful about their use of language when the Expert was present during the debrief. This included using person-first language, as well as thoughtfully considering how they would describe encounters with individuals labeled with mental illness that had occurred during their fieldwork experiences during the debrief sessions. An example is included below:

"It was helpful...in terms of...making sure I was thinking through everything I was saying, and make sure that my language is appropriate...making sure that everything that I was saying was...person-centered."

Students expressed pride in practicing the skill of language use, and noted their own individual progress in developing this skill. They demonstrated self-compassion when recognizing mistakes:

"I enjoyed practicing language, I guess. That felt good and...if I do accidentally say something negative, it doesn't feel good to me, so it's nice to be able to say things in...a strengths-based way."

The attention to language carried over from the classroom into students' daily lives. They found themselves paying more attention to how others around them would speak about persons with mental illness (refer to Table 3).

Some students expressed initially being nervous or hesitant to speak, worrying that they might say the wrong thing and potentially offend the Expert. As the debriefs progressed, students expressed feeling more comfortable with their language use and applying it intentionally. It took the Expert creating a safe space and encouraging the students to "say anything" to get the dialogue going.

It's Okay to Feel... This theme illustrated how the presence of the Experts created a safe space for the students to share feelings and be heard during the debriefs in class. The Experts' willingness to show their emotions helped the students be more vulnerable. The occupational therapy students described being able to express their feelings and process their learning experiences because the Expert helped them feel it was acceptable:

"I was sharing about a story, like an impact I had on a client. I didn't think I was gonna cry but I did. And I was trying not to but he was... telling me that it's okay to feel what I feel. Like it is very tough to work in this setting. It's okay to express yourself. It's not unprofessional to do so."

I Believe it From Her. Experts' perspectives were described as being more believable than what they were learning in their textbooks or in class. As one student stated, having a "real person right in front of us," seemed to make what they were hearing more credible. Interacting with a person, instead of a case study or textbook, made the learning more impactful and provided meaningful context and perspective that enriched the learning experience. The Experts' personal experiences and strategies added more depth and enriched what they were learning in class.

A student reflected on how restraint was described at their fieldwork site from a risk management perspective of staff, compared to the perspective of an Expert who placed value on the restraint experience, as it made the Expert feel safe. What the expert shared had a different impact and seemed to carry more weight.

It's one thing to hear a provider say, 'Oh yeah, sometimes restraint is necessary and we have to do it for the safety of our staff,' or whatever. But when you hear a client say that, it has a much different impact when they're talking about themselves going through that, versus someone who does that to other people all day. I feel like without their perspective, we would all be kind of lost, [not knowing] if what we're doing as clinicians is actually helpful or not, you know?

Another student provided a contrast, stating that it was not that the Expert was more trustworthy or believable, but rather that their stories really resonated (see Table 3). Students conveyed that what the Experts shared had a significant impact on them and their practice experiences in fieldwork. Learning directly from the experts was more

believable, and resonated in a way that was compelling and different from learning from faculty or a textbook. This deepened the students' learning experience and helped them to think more critically about varying perspectives.

Experts' Experience: Complexity of the Work

Experts emphasized how complex they found the nature of the work of co-facilitating the debrief, including how different it was from other roles (e.g., peer specialist, or serving on 'lived experience' speakers' panel). This notion that "it takes work" conveys the complexity of their role. They described this role as helping students "crack the code," trying to understand the experiences of those they were working with. Findings illuminated the developmental growth process of the Expert, risks involved in doing the work, the challenges in managing those risks, the skills involved in doing the work, and the recognition of the need for the Expert to actively engage in their own recovery process.

It Takes Work: Being Ready... The Experts engaged in a developmental growth process in order to be ready to do this work. They reflected that many of their peers with lived experience might want to do this work, but that not everyone may be ready. The Experts acknowledged that previous experiences such as speaking on panels to share their personal stories of lived experience, and training and serving as a peer provider had prepared them to be ready for this role as an Expert in the academic setting. Here, an Expert described the work they did to prepare for this role.

"Yes, everything before even starting this debrief, even before the idea of it came along. Facilitating groups, doing lots of speaker's panels, telling my story a lot of times, and ... ordering the narrative of it. All of that made me absolutely ready to do this."

One Expert described their development process as a "career path of peer advocacy" (see Table 3).

It Takes Work: It's Always a Risk. The Experts shared that there was risk involved in co-facilitating the fieldwork debrief, as a result of debrief format and the content of the dialogue that emerged. The debrief was structured as an interactive dialogue between students, Experts, and faculty. Some Experts shared that this structure felt riskier than presenting as part of a speaker panel. In preparing for speaker panels, they had developed a 'script' or way of telling their story. These presentations were one-time encounters that did not include establishing a long-standing relationship with the audience. In addition, their consumer organization framed all speaker panels with a set of rules. These rules included that the audience could ask any question of the panelist, but that the panelist had agency over whether to answer or not. While this was clearly an option in the debrief as well, the nature of the debrief process meant that they developed and maintained ongoing relationships with the students for the duration of each semester. Doing so meant that the decision to disclose in the debrief context was experienced as different, less scripted and had to be made within the flow of the debrief dialogue.

Further, because the Experts were disclosing or reflecting on their lived experiences in the moment, the content of the dialogue itself presented clear risks. In the speaker panel, the Expert had control of what was shared; in the debrief the students brought up topics that were sometimes triggering for the Experts, reactivating past trauma and suffering (see Table 3). The stories the students told about their experiences at their site sometimes caused distress because the students were assigned to mental health care settings where Experts may have received mental health services in the past. Hearing scenarios occurring at these sites often triggered past feelings, reminding them of traumatic events experienced at the site and leaving them feeling vulnerable.

It Takes Work: I Need to Take Care of Myself. The Experts engaged intentionally in their own recovery process and acts of wellness in order to be present to do this work with the students. They recognized the need to take care of themselves in order to have the capacity to support the students. They reflected on the need to ensure they had the necessary support in place to cope with the emotions, feelings, and thoughts that emerged. They described the particular self-care actions in which they engaged and how they drew upon their established circle of support. Self-care and coping strategies included participating in one-on-one therapy and/or group therapy multiple times per week, exercising, meditating, and engaging in other healthy leisure activities (see Table 3). These personal recovery strategies played a key role in their capacity to remain effective in their role as an Expert.

To support their growth in their role as Expert in the fieldwork debrief, the Experts met weekly with one of the mental health faculty to process what they were experiencing. The reflections in this context were focused on their role as an Expert and how to respond to students' experiences; they reported finding these valuable.

In addition to drawing upon their recovery strategies, the Experts described the sense of safety they felt within the classroom as another factor supporting their capacity to “walk through it.” The Experts shared a level of comfort in displaying emotion when triggered during dialogue, and noted that their emotional reaction, in turn, validated the student’s emotion. This shared experience was made possible by the sense of safety the Experts experienced.

It Takes Work: I Can Walk Through It. As a result of these active recovery strategies, Experts acknowledged their capacity to engage in this process with the students and faculty, amid the potential risks involved. Fulfilling the role of the Expert in the fieldwork debrief seemed to allow them to face their fears and further embrace the process of their own recovery (see Table 3).

Further supporting the notion of the complexity of this work, the Experts shared valuable insights about their own personal growth through co-facilitating the debrief. They acknowledged their difficulties in continuing to work through their own mental health challenges juxtaposed with a tempered sense of pride in their contributions as an Expert:

I tried not to let it get to me, but I know, I'll be honest, I do go home and I cry a little bit. I'll vent with my partner and I'll tell him how... Because he'll be, 'How was your day?' And I'll be, 'Okay. Well, this and this happened.' It's a reminder of what it was like, but I also feel that as I cry and I go home and I look back at my day and what I've done and all that, it's like I'm shedding skin as I cry. You know what I mean? That's what I call it. It's like shedding skin. You know, you're growing a little bit more. You're growing that thicker skin and shedding some old skin at the same time.

This dual experience of navigating risk AND experiencing personal growth and recovery is not uncommon when people are faced with challenges. The effect of risk-taking is often experienced as giving an individual a sense of what they are capable of. The Experts affirmed the seriousness and complexity of the work of being an Expert, and as one reflected:

“And I have to be there, and this is important stuff that's affecting not just me, not just these students, but also where these students are going to go professionally, and everybody else that they're going to be interacting with. So yes, it's serious.”

Faculty Experience: Co-creating Learning Experiences

Findings from the faculty interviews indicated that facilitating the debriefs with the experts enhanced their teaching experience, and also involved navigating new experiences, including the experience of partnering with the Expert.

Navigating the Partnership. As they worked to make sense of partnering with the Expert, faculty reflected on how they interacted with the Expert during the debrief initially and how those interactions evolved. Faculty wanted to ensure that the Experts were actively involved in the discussions, and in the beginning may have prompted them by saying something like “Do you have something to add?” without pressuring them to speak. Observing body language and dynamics in the group helped faculty to navigate this new partnership initially. After a few weeks, the Expert more readily contributed to the debrief discussions, and the process evolved naturally over time. Students also eventually took action to draw the Expert into the conversation, such as by asking, “What do you think about this?”

Faculty considered how to communicate with the Expert outside of the debrief session. Arriving to class early to chat with the Expert, or setting up regular phone calls with the Expert were strategies faculty used to foster their partnership with the Expert. Some of the Experts also intentionally reached out to faculty to initiate communication.

Faculty shared how they navigated differences in approaches recommended to the students by the faculty and the Experts, as sometimes their perspectives differed (see Table 3). When these differences emerged, the faculty evaluated their perspective and considered what to share with the students, how to convey their perspective, while also holding the Expert's perspective in mind. An important aspect of the collaboration was

to reconcile their own instincts with the perspective of the Expert. For example, when the Expert described earlier in the paper shared that they had found restraint a helpful practice, the faculty conveyed that many consumers also find this practice traumatizing. When reviewing this theme together in the process of data analysis, the Experts also identified examples of how they had also worked to navigate the partnership with the Faculty.

Felt More Complete Doing it Together. The faculty found that the partnership between the Expert and faculty led to a more complete experience for the students. One faculty reflected how the Expert's perspective deepened the students' understanding of a concept that they (the faculty) had just shared:

She would share how she experienced hoarding and what was helpful for her. [And] What was not helpful for her.... When she described her experiences, they really got it. She would describe that...she didn't want to invite people into her house and she didn't want them to touch her stuff or critique her, or jump right in to intervening. And they [the students] really got that once they heard her story. Whereas in my mind, I also wanted them to take a slow approach, to get to know people, to find out what people wanted of their living space. And I definitely didn't want the students to jump in and start trying to organize someone's house or getting them to throw out stuff. But I don't think I was saying that explicitly and I wasn't sharing [lived experience] stories about it.

Even though the faculty conveyed similar information with the students in a person-centered way, it was the Expert's sharing of their own lived experience that seemed to resonate with the students and solidify their understanding of concepts. The combination of perspectives provided from faculty expertise and from lived experience narratives of the Expert resulted in a more complete learning experience for the students.

Table 3*Themes and Supporting Data*

Theme	Quotation
Students' Experience: Powerful Insights	
Putting on my people lens	"...she [the Expert] would be speaking about someone who is actively experiencing psychosis or somebody that I wouldn't really be able to see what their perspective was or what they were thinking in that moment. And even though everybody's experience is completely different, having her [the Expert] be able to give her perspective of what that person might've been thinking about or not thinking about in that moment and her being willing to get to a very emotional state to where she could relay that was just really helpful..."
Awareness of language: Words matter	"I don't know if it changed the way I spoke but I was critical of it if I heard other(s) ...[who] maybe have less time to sit back and really consider language and stuff. I think that language does a lot in terms of our perspective, even to treating people. Even if it is behind their back, it still ... changes your mentality, how you talk about things."
I believe it from her	"I would say that it resonated more...the interactions and the communications [became] more real...and it resonated more than to have a very factual communication. [It came] from a place of experience."
Experts' Experience: Complexity of the Work	
It takes work: Being ready	"I can talk about it like peer advocacy, like a career path of peer advocacy. First it was just participating in groups, and participating in conversations, and giving peer-to-peer support within group conversations. Then it's facilitating a group myself, and getting used to providing information while still being in tune with what people's experiences are, and if necessary helping people process whatever is going on."
It takes work: It's always a risk	"There's a difficulty that's coming up for me right now... [It] is in telling my story and being reactivated by telling those stories, or hearing these stories. It's different from being in a speaker's panel where I'm telling about my past. I'm in control of what's being said, and what's being talked about right now. But the students are having these experiences right now with someone who is in crisis right now. That sort of temporal difference makes it much easier for me to get reactivated

	about my own trauma and suffering. It's always a danger when I have to reflect on my crisis and trauma, and getting reactivated by it.”
It takes work: I need to take care of myself	“I have a therapist each week. I do a lot of self-care. I go walking every day. I do some meditation. I listen to a ton of music. I don't have a television. I don't drink alcohol. I don't smoke cigarettes, so I have a lot of self-care stuff that's healthy.”
It takes work: I can walk through it	“I felt the more I [am] scared, the more I try to be careful with my life and not step into any landmine, but now instead of tip toe[ing] around a landmine, I am deactivate[ing] the landmine...So I'm not so scared trying to step on it, instead I can walk through it....It's like [going] from having a breakdown to trying to find a way to be alive again, and to survive through it and to tackle and then live through it, and then be stronger and study about it. And then now, and contributing and sharing about my experience too. Like how am I going to get rid of the leftover fear? And this is one ... indirect way of getting rid of my fear...”
Faculty Experience: Co-creating Learning Experiences	
Navigating the partnership	“Well, I think it was in those moments where her experience contradicted my knowledge, for example, her saying that sometimes she would talk about not wanting to interact with anyone and not wanting to enter into any relationship when she was upset. And I think this [perspective] contradicted my sense that students could approach people with a friendly face and a willingness to listen...”

Discussion

This study revealed that the debrief experience with the Experts, faculty, and students created an impactful learning experience that strengthened students' clinical reasoning skills and fostered a deeper understanding of the lived experience of recovery. The findings from this study emphasized what a rich overall learning experience this was for students, faculty, and Experts; the risks involved for the Experts and the absolute importance of this work in occupational therapy education, which aligned with previous studies on this topic.

Putting on My People Lens

This theme emphasized the importance of the relationship and recognizing the value of the person's perspective. Through discussion with the Experts, students began to see the value in connecting with their clients or “putting on our people lens” when supporting their clients. Debriefing with the Experts strengthened students' therapeutic skills as

they spoke about being able to better take the perspective of their clients, value relationships and focus on connection. The course in which the fieldwork and fieldwork debriefs was situated offered the students a perspective on the limits of the medical model (Mattingly & Fleming, 1993) and the difference between clinical and personal recovery (Deegan, 2002). The presence of the Experts in the debrief, and the views they shared about their own lived experience, seemed to make these limits much clearer. Adopting the medical model or evidence-based practices that they were learning in the classroom did not always result in the students connecting with their clients. Students came to understand the benefits of non-medical and non-clinical frames of reference from the Experts, to build relationships while they provided clients support. This extended other findings that indicate that including Experts in education supports students to individualize their treatment, attune to the person's perspective, and focus on the relationship (Arblaster et al., 2015; Arblaster et al., 2018; Happell et al., 2019; Horgan et al., 2015). Our findings clarified that it was through taking on the person's perspective through the help of the Expert that students better understood the value of individualizing treatment and focusing on the relationship. The Experts conveyed the value of the relationship between the practitioner and the client by bringing it back to "just being there," which the students appreciated.

Awareness of Language: Words Matter

Attention to language has been a key feature of occupational therapy education, whether the emphasis is on person-first and/or identity-first perspectives. Despite that, it appeared that this became even more clear to the students when the learning experience was the result of practice-based mentorship from an Expert. Students spoke about becoming more aware of language in and outside of the classroom, expressing a desire to speak in a way that demonstrated respect and concern for the Experts. We perceived this as a desire to reduce stigma in their communication. This finding aligned with a variety of studies that found including Experts as educators led to less stigma (Arblaster et al., 2015; Bell et al., 2006; Fukuo et al., 2017; O'Reilly et al., 2010) and for some, a desire to advocate to reduce stigma (O'Reilly et al., 2012).

It's OK to Feel

This theme reflected how the Experts' presence seemed to create more vulnerability on the part of the students. This was similarly reflected in Agrawal et al.'s finding that psychiatric residents paired with a consumer adviser felt permission to "be a little bit more candid and a little bit more personable than what we perhaps normally feel comfortable with" (Agrawal et al., 2021, p. 392)

I Believe It from Her

Including Experts in the academic context enhanced students' learning as they found they could understand lived experience better from a real person compared to a textbook. Some felt it was more believable to hear experiences directly from an Expert. This finding aligned with other programs where students have been taught or mentored by Experts. In Byrne et al. (2013), students spoke about how they appreciated being taught by someone with a mental illness because "we've got someone who actually knows what they are talking about" (p.199). In O'Reilly et al. (2010), students reported

that after the mental health educator intervention, they felt that "mental illness seemed more real to them and helped them gain insight into what it was like to suffer from psychotic symptoms" (p. 6). As one participant expressed, "It is just a textbook thing until you actually speak to someone...people are actually hearing voices and there is someone who is actually seeing someone who's not there" (p. 6). The current study confirmed previous findings that connecting with a real person made learning more impactful.

This education may also be different from the learning that happens as a result of direct interactions with clients in a fieldwork setting because students were positioned as mentees in relationship to the Experts during the fieldwork debriefs, a very different type of relationship from that of therapist/client. As in Agrawal et al.'s (2021) study where consumers were positioned as advisors to psychiatric residents, the power dynamic shifted.

It Takes Work: Being Ready

The insights offered by the Experts were reflective of Benner's (1982) work focused on the developmental progression from 'novice to expert', which suggests that both education and experience are required aspects of the professional growth process. An individual learning their craft moves from the level of a beginner and advances through the developmental stages to reach the level of an expert only after a depth and breadth of experiential learning has occurred. These professional experiences are grounded in context and the person learns "ways of being" through the making sense of these experiences (Benner, 1982, p.133). Thus, attaining the proficiency of an 'expert' is the culmination of both educational knowledge and experiential knowledge (Altman, 2007; Benner, 1982). This aligns with the Experts' experiences of initially receiving peer provider training and then gradually gaining experiential knowledge in the role of a peer provider, which equipped them to be ready to serve in the role of Expert in the debriefs.

It Takes Work: It's Always a Risk

The work of an Expert was a complex experience, involving risk. This finding echoed other findings that the position of educator or peer provider often left Experts vulnerable and exposed (Byrne et al., 2017; Felton & Stickley, 2004; LeBlanc-Olmstead & Kinsella, 2023; Mehan & Glover, 2007). They had to make decisions in the moment regarding whether or not to disclose vulnerable information from their lives. This echoed Schön's (1983) 'reflection-in-action' as these were momentary decisions that had to be made based on how the Expert was feeling at the time, the Experts perception of the relationship they had with the students in the debrief that day, and other factors.

We were initially surprised to learn of the extent of the risk involved for the Experts. More research is needed to understand the complexities of this risk, as well as how to best provide support to Experts to cope with the risks (Happell et al., 2021). In addition, findings point to instilling the importance of confidentiality during debriefs with students, to further protect the vulnerability of the Experts. Despite the risks, our team of Experts and faculty concurred that this risk is worth it because this work is important. It matters.

It Takes Work: I Need to Take Care of Myself

This theme emphasized the need for the Expert and the institution to create supports. Other studies confirm the emotional challenge and the need for institutions to provide follow up support (Mehan & Glover, 2007; Towle & Godolphin, 2015), as well as the need for the Expert to set clear boundaries for themselves (Happell et al., 2021). While that was seen in this theme as well, what stands out here is the Experts' sharing the work they did to take care of themselves. The support of the institution was valuable; yet their own self-care work played a role in their ability to walk through it, the next theme.

It Takes Work: I Can Walk Through It

Finally, the experience of fulfilling a role within the debriefs was meaningful for the Experts, as many described the empowerment that came from the experience. Experts talked about the surprise and "beauty" of being able to answer the students' questions, and the satisfaction of impacting "one student at a time." They spoke about professional growth and development, aligning with other findings that including Experts in education helps Experts grow professionally and is empowering (Happell et al., 2021; O'Reilly et al., 2012).

Navigating the Partnership

It wasn't always easy. As in Felton and Stickley's (2004) study, faculty in this current study worried about the risk to the Experts as well as perceptions that we were engaged in tokenism. We navigated communicating with the Experts to create inclusive debriefs and address differences that arose. Occasionally, students remarked on tension between the faculty and Experts' perspectives. Towle and Godolphin (2011) described how the presence of the Experts can challenge faculty knowledge and power. Mehan and Glover (2007) described how Experts sometimes felt that teaching faculty did not value their lived experience at the same level as academic experience. Bie (2020) questioned whether the relationship between Expert and faculty can be truly collaborative, given unequal power relationships. They suggested that being explicit about this inequality and honoring the inherent distrust of academic institutions and the faculty within them is critically important. Factors, including pay structure and culture within academic institutions, create inequitable environments where it is difficult to create truly collaborative relationships (Soklaradis et al., 2021).

A few years after this pilot study, we encountered logistical hurdles. We were unable to include the Experts in the debrief the semester after returning to in-person learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time the faculty felt strongly that without the Experts, we were missing important perspectives and experiential knowledge during our debriefs; therefore, we worked hard to integrate them back into the debriefs.

Felt More Complete Doing It Together

Faculty authors embarked on this process initially to benefit the students and the clients they would work with; however, in reflecting on the experience, faculty also benefited deeply from the multiple perspectives incorporated into the debriefs. LeBlanc and Kinsella (2016) asserted that the elevation of experiential knowledge is essential. Including Experts in the debrief elevated experiential knowledge beyond the storytelling

of lived experiences often seen in occupational therapy education (LeBlanc-Olmstead & Kinsella, 2023). Inclusion of the Experts in the debrief created a more meaningful experience for faculty as we developed a new partner in education, which enhanced connection to the community beyond academia.

Limitations

This study focused on better understanding the experiences of students, faculty, and Experts from a private university with significant resources. Findings may not be transferable to other types of educational institutions with fewer resources. In addition, power differentials between all of the different groups may have made it difficult for participants to share honestly. Students may have felt compelled to focus more on positive aspects of the experience during the focus groups because they were led by faculty whom the students may have had past, present or future connections with. Students and Experts may have felt hesitant to express disagreement or disappointment about the debrief for fear of disappointing the faculty, or due to peer pressure from one another.

We took steps to minimize these limitations including assigning students to focus groups with a faculty not involved in the students' specific debrief group or who was not the student's faculty instructor that particular semester. We worked intentionally to create trusting relationships between Experts and faculty and conveyed that we valued honesty. Still, given our close campus community and power differences, students and Experts may have felt pressure to create a good impression with faculty members.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

This research makes a significant contribution to occupational therapy education by offering an alternative and elevated role for Experts compared to participating in speaker panels. It points to the need to create meaningful opportunities for Experts to engage in our academic institutions. If incorporating Experts into fieldwork debriefs is not a viable option, faculty or clinical supervisors could consider incorporating Experts into similar roles where they have opportunities to coach, mentor, or consult with occupational therapy students in mental health practice. For example, an Expert could hold office hours for students engaged in mental health fieldwork to drop in for coaching, or an Expert could join a community of practice for Doctor of Occupational Therapy capstone students engaged in mental health settings for mentorship. Towle and Godolphin (2015) provided a useful toolbox for embarking on this work.

From this experience, we argue that occupational therapy faculty must create welcoming, equitable, inclusive environments and meaningful opportunities for Experts to engage in academic institutions. As one of the Experts stated, "this is important stuff." Some of the Experts shared that when they first began, they doubted the contributions they would be able to make, feeling uncertain of their place. It is essential to create an environment which supports their contributions. This is not always easy to do within an academic institution (Bie, 2020; Mehan & Glover, 2007; Soklaridis et al., 2021; Towle & Godolphin, 2011).

However, it is not enough to include Experts. We must also acknowledge the value of the Experts in terms of compensation. This is crucial in order to elevate the voices of persons with mental illness and eliminate the systemic oppression they face in our communities. Due to the resources within our institution, we were able to pay our Experts an hourly wage and cover parking. We believed that this was essential, and that Academic leaders must value funding these sorts of projects or seek funding from grants or other resources. Still, though our compensation of Experts certainly demonstrated our valuing of the expert, we still encountered inequities in our relationship, as did Soklaridis et al. (2021). Hiring experts as faculty within our institutions as Happell et al. (2022) described would be a way to ensure more equity and true partnership. It would allow for attaining what Tew et al. (2004) described as the highest level of partnership, where experts and faculty “work together systematically and strategically,” making all decisions together (p. 54). We hope this project serves as a call to action to prioritize partnering with persons labeled with mental illness within academic institutions in occupational therapy education.

Conclusion

Despite the risk experienced by experts and the discomfort sometimes experienced by students, the integration of Experts into the debrief had a positive impact on students, faculty, and Experts. Including them in the debriefs shifted their role beyond traditional speaker panels. The debriefs appeared to create a forum for Experts to share their experiential knowledge, “knowledge that comes from the direct experience of madness and distress” (Faulkner, 2017, p. 508). They elevated their experiential knowledge into the realm of practice in clinical reasoning by shifting the context of the knowledge from storytelling to support in practice reasoning.

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