

Podcast transcript

Career conversations: Jacqui Plumbley and Georgia Vine

Hannah Spencer:

Hi everyone and welcome to this podcast recorded and produced by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists.

This is one of a series of podcasts which really focus on hearing and sharing the career narratives of our diverse workforce and highlight a whole range of possibilities in occupational therapy.

My name is Hannah Spencer and I'm an occupational therapist that's had the absolute pleasure and privilege of facilitating and capturing these conversations with members of our occupational therapy community.

So let's start with some introductions. Do you mind introducing yourself and your current role or roles?

Georgia Vine:

Hi, I'm Georgia. I'm a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Huddersfield

Jacqui Plumbley:

Hi I'm Jacqui, and I'm a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Huddersfield.

Hannah:

Well, thank you for both talking with me today.

So the purpose of today's conversation is around career journeys, thinking about your occupational therapy career and your experiences and getting to this point, I found it quite helpful to use the analogy of career journey as river course and in a sense, to use the Kawa model to guide my thinking. So that will come through in a few of the questions, I'm sure.

So let's start right at the beginning. What drew you to occupational therapy? Can you pinpoint the source? How did it all start?

Georgia:

I've had occupational therapy input all the way throughout my life from birth due to my disability. And I'd always known that I wanted to go into a healthcare profession. I thought I was always nurturing. and very much a people person, but I really liked maths and problem solving [laughter] I always get that response!

So I really wanted something to like bring that problem solving element into it. Obviously I know that we're not fixing people and we're not always problem solving but I really liked that creative element of occupational therapy. And then my last input from OT was when I was driving and I had no idea

the breadth of OT. We were talking about what I want to study and I was like, 'I'm thinking about studying occupational therapy' and she went 'oh, I'm an occupational therapist' and for me that was it, I was like 'yep, that's the one'.

Jacqui:

For me, it was... because I've got a disability... I was always interested in sort of a caring profession, but because of that disability, I always felt it wasn't an option for me. I just thought, no, I wouldn't be accepted into that, I couldn't do that. But it was my sister who'd been born with a medical condition, and it was life limiting and it was the care and the support that she received that really brought OT to my attention. She had a pulmonary hypertension and she was such a social person because as she'd become more and more unwell, she'd really retreated into herself and it really helped bring her back. And then I had an opportunity. I was made redundant from a job that I'd been in quite a long time. It was, right, okay, my son had gone off to university and it was, I want something for me, what can I do? And I started looking at it. It was like this whole journey, and I really reflected on what I wanted to do. And a friend whose sister was an OT started talking to me and it just started from there.

Hannah:

How many stories of occupational therapy start with those little conversations?

Jacqui & Georgia:

Yeah.

Hannah:

What skills, experiences and opportunities have contributed along the way then?

Georgia:

For me, being a disabled OT, reflecting on my own experiences I feel like I've used my experiences more than what I would have to get here. I feel like when you're a student, you're told... you kind of get the impression that you can't use your experiences, that you've got to remain confidential professional value, which we have to do and it's not about us. But actually I feel like if it wasn't like for my experiences disability and ableism in the profession then and I would have never got here anyway, I would find not trying to get in any way stereotypical stuff you get because they didn't meet my access needs so that kind of why I'm here.

And it was a bit of a journey to get here because I didn't get the job that I was that I thought I would get... not that there was anything in particular, you just always had this vision... And I guess, part of that was that I'd not got plan because of my disability, my life has always been planned to the max like two years in advance I knew I was going to do cos I had to make sure that that met my access needs. So it's always been living quite a regimented life to then not knowing what I were going to be doing was quite a weird, weird process for me to get my head around. But then like I say, being able to find this role and enable me to find this role doing networking and conference, but I didn't know... if I had not been to that conference and not networked, I wouldn't have been here because I didn't know how to find roles like this.

Hannah:

Wow. So there's a lot of that synthesis of you and your personal lived experience and you as becoming a therapist. Yeah, that's part of the mix. And also some of that challenging the notions of what's gone before and some of that not being appropriate and kind of carving your own path, I guess, and then serendipitously finding good opportunity through networking at conference.

Georgia:

Yeah.

Hannah:

How about yourself, Jacqui?

Jacqui:

For me, I graduated last year, so there's the reasons why I wanted to go into OT. And then when I started the course, it was like it just makes sense to me, all the theory, because I'm a very theory driven person and I really like to analyse and pick things apart and break everything down and it just felt so right for me. I think when it came to graduation and we'd had one of the modules at the university was widening occupational therapy and it really started to make me think because when you start, you think, okay, I've got to go into clinical practice. And that module really made me think that OTs had value elsewhere. OTs have value in supporting students because the course team here, because I studied at the university, are so amazing and so supportive. And it was... I'd graduated and I was thinking, I really don't want to go into clinical at this point in my life, it's not right for me.

And I started thinking... and I just happened to look at the university's job website. I was actually looking for a job for my son and I saw the job and it was like, well, there you go. I read all about it and I thought, yeah, this just feels right for me. And so I applied, and I was still a bit of imposter syndrome all through the process... applying for it, having the interview and not really expecting that I would get the job, but I did. When I'm with the students and I'm talking to them and I get joy from talking about OT to them.

Hannah:

Can you tell me a bit more about that transition from student to registered professional for yourselves?

Georgia:

So mine was very hard in terms of becoming registered in the first place so that was quite kind challenging in terms of it made me question my own practice in terms of what am I here for? What do I stand for in occupational therapy? What makes me unique to occupational therapy? like if I don't want to go into this clinical role then why am I here? I did a real lot reevaluating and wrote a lot of reflections during that time and then for me it was just... So the role that I'm doing now wasn't the role that I originally had at the university.

Hannah:

Okay.

Georgia:

So I got a different role. It were being a clinical demonstrator which worked for me because I got to

be on placement with the students, be in a kind of clinical role, it was in a primary school so it wasn't like clinical clinical, but I wasn't actually doing the physical elements of the clinical role so it worked for me, I could do it and I wasn't like... and it was really good, because of my physical disabilities sorry. And then obviously I got here now and I think maybe... even though at the time, I'm not gonna lie, it was kind of I want a job now I'll just take whatever comes up. It wasn't... It's actually suitable, I wasn't applying for jobs that wasn't suitable... But as soon as a suitable job was coming up, I wanted to become an occupational therapist so I grabbed it.

But now, I sit in lectures and I'm thinking oh my gosh, I couldn't imagine being anywhere else. When I'm sitting in lectures I'm always sitting in lectures for like the second time around so like it's really consolidating my learning thinking oh my God, I didn't interpret it like that. But now I'm here, I see that that's different and it's just been such a great tool and made me think, wow, like occupational therapy is such a beautiful profession and it made me really appreciate the academic value of occupational therapy and occupational science. Within this role being able to do research and being able to help students, you are impacting the wider society, and it's just like... it's a bit mind-blowing really to get your head around, that we're all occupational beings and it just has massive kind of snowball effect...

Hannah:

And there's something about challenging that narrative as well of almost an assumption that you have to go into clinical practice, but occupational therapy is so beautiful and rich and diverse that the scope and the potential is huge.

Jacqui:

It is, yeah. When you think about it, when you start off and you think, oh, I'm going to go into clinical. But then when you start to learn more about it and everyone everywhere, everything that everyone does is occupation. And we are enabling students to do the things they need and want to do.

Georgia:

And I would say, coming into it thinking they're going to expect me to know everything when actually when you do turn round and say I don't know that they kind of appreciate you more for being honest.

Hannah:

So, Jacqui, can you tell me a bit more about your transition from student to professional?

Jacqui:

Because I only graduated last year it's been extremely fast and I started this job on the 1st November, had my graduation ceremony on the 9th November... Just from finishing the last piece of work and then it was okay, I'm having a bit of a rest and it was like that's it it's just gone so fast. I actually don't feel like I've taken a breath but the team have been so supportive I've just been so busy. That transition was extremely quick.

Hannah:

A whirlwind?

Jacqui:

Yes!

Hannah:

How about... you said you had a previous career. How's that transition from your previous role into occupational therapy been? Have you brought skills, experiences from that?

Jacqui:

I think because I worked with for local councils, worked in key account managing for quite a long time in sales, so there was a lot of project work, a lot of organisational work, and I dealt with a lot of public funding and business support and roles like that. So although extremely different, there are elements of the day to day things, the analysis that I would have to use that is transferable a lot of the skills from there, particularly when doing project work.

Hannah:

Georgia there's lots of other roles that you've brought to the mix too.

Georgia:

Yeah, I did everything. So actually this job is not only my first job as an occupational therapist, it's my first job ever. Cos due to my disability I couldn't work and study, so I've never worked before coming here. But, I do think I'm slightly different to Jacqui in terms of you being straight into the GTA role, but I had the clinical demonstrator role beforehand. So because that one wasn't... that one was very different to the graduate teaching assistant role. I didn't see the team that much because I wasn't working. I didn't really feel like I was working at the uni to be honest because I was on the placement. But I guess that helped me in terms of that transition somewhat, because I had some idea of how the university worked before going into the graduate teaching assistant role.

Hannah:

And I think as well, Georgia, some of your voluntary roles as well, they've contributed to your skills and experiences as well.

Georgia:

The main reason that I went for this job is that it allows me to do my advocacy work aswell because they are integral I cannot be an OT without disrupting and without using those skills. So we did a session on ableism...absolutely loved it. Was just, can you pay me do this every day?

Jacqui:

We came out and we were like that was amazing. It was so exciting.

Hannah:

Absolutely.

So in what ways has your environment enabled or restricted your career journey so far, do you

think?

Jacqui:

For me, it's more of roles that say that impact me. Always felt that I had a specific role that wife, mother, go out to work, things like this. I always felt there was like this lane that these certain lanes and roles that I was expected to do and I felt that... and having the medical condition that I do, I always felt that they kept me in those lanes and limited me. So I felt very restricted there. And it wasn't until a big change, such a big change in my work environment, because that comfortable workspace was no longer there anymore, that allowed me to just plod in that little lane, that made me re-evaluate things.

My family, my social environment, my husband has really supported me and family have extremely supported me through this. I wouldn't have been able to do this without them. I think that's a positive, but also having those responsibilities I have, like my mother lives with me and they provide these positives. But the responsibilities that I have also put pressures on me with regards to study now that I'm working here. The work environment and the people that I work with are so supportive. And it's that being able to talk to about OT, to people that understand OT and understand OT within this environment really supports me and impacts and improves my learning...

Hannah:

and professional identity, I guess?

Jacqui:

And that's one of the things, when you're not going into the traditional role, that's one of the things that you struggle with. The actual job itself, it allows me flexibility so that I can work at home when I don't need to be on campus, which really helps with my fatigue levels so... And that allows me to work because I think if I was working full time in practice, I'd just be too exhausted. Working here supports my wellness and facilitates me being able to do the job the way that it's structured.

Hannah:

How about yourself Georgia? How's your environment around you enabled or restricted your career journey, do you think?

Georgia:

I think with me, like, again, I would reiterate things like Jacqui was saying like flexible working and things like... but at the minute I'm just doing it and not doing it the way that... it's just a temporary way that I'm doing it but it's been temporary for quite a while. We need to kind of consolidate this plan which we're hoping to do really soon because, yeah, driving is a bit hard and kind of it's also getting my wheelchair out of the car when I get here. Obviously going into placements that can happen, but that didn't happen every night. My poor dad has been a trooper really, he's been taking me to and from work... like four hours, an hour each way, like four hours out of his day... Yeah.

But obviously I can... but with, I guess... because I'm only 23 I'm not very... I could be a lot more autonomous than what I am. I still find the need to, when I see my line manager, say I'm working these hours today is that okay? I still get really like, I'm still getting into the habit. Like today I booked leave off but I've ended up coming in because I wanted to support the lecture, and I'm like what do I do because my line manager doesn't know that I've decided to come back in and they say like It's valid, take it back as a day in lieu. And then because I'm so new to working in general that has been very hard to get my head around that. And because I'm so new to this having so much

autonomy and organising my own diary and not having to ask someone and... in someone very young that means that's been really hard because I always want that revalidation.

But then, on the other hand, it's great because we can work from home on some days and I love the flexible working, it's just getting used to that; used to that pattern, but it's still taking its time I guess. But then my family have really supported me as I say, my Dad has gone the extra mile I think it was hard at first because I've always been local. I went to uni in the same city where I live, I've always been a home person so it did take some adjustments for myself and my family because I wasn't looking for a job anywhere other than my home city and then found one 45 minutes away but we're managing that. We now know that yeah, it wasn't the ideal situation and in some ways it still isn't ideal, we've still got stuff to figure out but we know that like, it's worth that... I wouldn't plan to go anywhere I don't know anywhere, anywhere else. Even if this job did come up at another university, I wouldn't do it at another local university. This team and this structure have made me the occupational therapist I am. For example, our line manager is a paediatric OT by background and that's my main interest so I get a lot from her not just within this role but within paediatric occupational therapy that I can do into the projects that I do outside of this role.

Yes it's tiring, I only do three days a week and generally don't go in more than more than two of those days because fatigue will hit but the positives definitely outweigh... the enablers definitely outweigh the barriers.

Hannah:

It's good to hear.

Georgia:

Yeah.

Hannah:

Thinking about some of those challenges that you've both had along the way, what do you think would have helped to overcome them?

Jacqui:

Because I'm a lot older and I think ideas from when I was growing up of... someone with my disability, I have epilepsy, so someone... were a lot different than they are now. And one of the things that Georgia said, that internalisation of those negative things, it was myself, those thoughts internal, I was internalising those negative, the negative words, people would say their thoughts, and that restricted me.

Hannah:

Okay.

Jacqui:

So that's why there was things that I thought, okay, that I can do that, I can do that and I can do that and I'll do my best that I can within that sphere. If it hadn't been that way or if I hadn't I suppose maybe if I'd had an occupational therapist to help me, then that it may have been different, but I think it's a lot different now. There is still some limitations, but it's not quite as bad.

For example, when I went to school and I was diagnosed, it was that thing of, well, you need to be out of the school. You can't be in a school with normal children, but my mom had to fight for that. So you internalise that. But it's different nowadays to a lot there's still struggle with a lot of people, but I think for me, that's just been the thing that's restricted me for quite a while. I thought, I'm valuable, I've got skills, this is what I can do. I can do this. I'm good at this, I'm good at this. Go for it. They can only say no.

But it was a bit of a journey before I applied at this university because it was right, okay... Because my education had been disrupted, I had to get the qualifications to go, so I started working towards that. So it was a few years, but I still had that in my head to do that. But it was just, well, they can only say no. And my best decision since then have always been whenever I said they can only say no.

Hannah:

How about yourself, Georgia? What have been your challenges along the way and what's helped?

Georgia:

Because of my disability and things like that like Jacqui said, I've internalised a lot of those challenges. I do this quite a lot now and think I really think it can't be valid... But sometimes going out of that comfort zone can be very hard. When you have a disability because it's already exhausting to fight for stuff within your comfort zone, to go out of that comfort zone it's like an extra level of fatigue that you haven't got the spoons for. I've been quite... I'll just work here because I know that it's 5 minutes away from home and it'll like... I just do that to save energy... but I'm trying to challenge myself into you need to do this, you can enjoy this... because this role is a developing role it's a two year contract... We go next year, we go back to uni. We got the learning to do. I've got to invest in my future and looking at it thinking about, yeah, there are going to be times when it, when it is a struggle and it doesn't work out with your life, but it's thinking about that bigger picture and thinking about the end result rather than thinking about now.

Hannah:

I guess it's OT-ing yourself to an extent?

Georgia:

These roles are brand new to the university, so when I was studying people wouldn't have been aware of these roles, but I think it would be helpful to be aware of where different roles are and how to find them because you get told, oh look at charities, do this, you can work here... But actually, when you're a 21 year old like I was, and you've never really had a job, dipping your toe in the traditional job route is hard enough, never mind dipping your toe in the what is seen as a non-traditional job route.

However, sometimes I say to people I'm in a non-traditional role and it does help because we know that not many people know what we and it does help to create that picture, but then it always did come back to how we got this - it is a traditional role because, what we do, we provide, is enabling students to do their occupation of studying so there's no untraditional bits about it.

Hannah:

You're working as occupational therapists in education. I think it's all about challenging that narrative, isn't it? That's a bit of a theme throughout your whole conversation, challenging narratives.

Georgia:

It's challenging your own narrative, never mind other people's.

Jacqui:

There's still moments that when I've started I'm thinking, oh, am I a teaching assistant, a graduate teaching assistant, or am I an occupational therapist? And that's where reflection really helps because I say, okay, what have I done today? And then I can break that down and then I realise I am doing something that is one of the same thing. That's it and by not reflecting... And I think that's where it's obviously reflection is so important within the profession and it's also important in teaching as well. But I think that's where reflection has been really helpful to bring me back what has been or is most helpful for you in your development and progression in that occupational therapy journey.

Hannah:

So reflection is one of those things. What else is helpful in terms of your career development and progression? Peer support.

Jacqui:

I think having the team that we work in yeah, the team... we've got buddies and I think that experience that really supports the experience and the knowledge that when I'm supporting sessions, I'm learning something new all the time, it's always progressing.

Hannah:

And Georgia, what else do you think you found helpful in the mix in terms of your progression development? What supported you, what's helped?

Georgia:

Definitely having good support from the team.

Hannah:

Team, peer support, reflection.

Georgia:

Yeah, supervision has been great, actually. We have still been using the career development framework.

Hannah:

The RCOT one?

Georgia:

Yeah. When I got the job I would have a look at the pillars and then I had like a review and then I set myself goals according to the career development framework and that really helped me understand, actually, I can do achieve these goals, how can I do preceptorship? I'm not in a clinical role, how

can I do a preceptorship? But actually, you can do that preceptorship. So I'm kind of doing my annual review... I've got a lot of deadlines at the minute... but I'm really looking forward to that annual review to find out what I've learned and what I've done. What you've actually used without realising.

Hannah:

What do you wish you'd known prior to joining the profession? What would you say to anybody else in your position now?

Georgia:

That you can create your own path.

Jacqui:

Go for it. It's really rewarding and it's such an exciting and diverse career. I think once you start studying, you start to see how broad it is. It's so diverse. You're not fixed in one position. And what you think you want to do with the beginning could be that journey can be totally different at the end.

Georgia:

I think it's about not being scared as well like, I get it, these roles don't come up often and if you wanted a role like this, then you were like, where do you find anything? Unfortunately, I don't have the answer, I don't have that tangible concrete answer that I wish I had, but for people who do want a role like this, it does take time and I'm still getting used to it. It's hard... but it's also about being open minded. I still don't see myself as academic; I never thought I'd go into academia but I'm learning so much from this about myself and I think like oh actually I am quite academic, I do like, I do fit in well with this role. But it's about like not being scared and testing yourself because you never know. That's what so unique about occupational therapy because it's the centre of everything. Even though you're in a different role, you can double it back to your roots.

Not being afraid to try. It doesn't matter if it's not the one, it's not the one. Maybe it wouldn't last long but it will still be relevant and will help you on your journey. Whether you realise that now or realise that ten years down the line.

Hannah:

It's almost like unanticipated twists in the journey, isn't it? Like your river has kind of turned in a way that you're not really expected, but just being willing to say yes and give it a go and trust in the process.

Jacqui:

Yeah.

Georgia:

I'm a big believer in everything happens for a reason so yeah.

Hannah:

Do you feel like you've been able to be yourself in occupational therapy to bring your best self to occupational therapy?

Georgia:

Definitely that's one thing that I do love about this role, I can be myself. I'll be with like students and we'll be teaching these concepts and be like, yeah we've got to teach this bit, but it's a bit ableist... If you want me to get into debate, come back in, come back and see me. You can do that.

Jacqui:

I feel more because I've I've already mentioned about, you know, about my medical condition and that, and I always felt that it was something that it wasn't something that I talked about to an employer or anything like that, but the environment that I'm in now, it's like, you know what? My experience of this... My experience of this will enable you to understand people that you're working with and the people that I'm working with understand my perspective as well. So I just feel more open and more free to not be on guard and that I can talk because it's valuable. My experience of that is valuable.

Hannah:

Absolutely.

Georgia:

My disability will always be the biggest tool in my OT bag.

Jacqui:

Yeah. Who you are, isn't it?

Georgia:

Yeah. There's a lot of people that say me like, there's that whole thing of like 'I don't let my disability define me' and I'm like, I let my disability define me because if it wasn't for my disability I wouldn't be an OT I wouldn't be doing this, I wouldn't be doing this. So actually, my disability does define me.

Hannah:

Is there anything else that either of you would add to anything we've said today?

Georgia:

Probably 100 million things that we've missed. You've opened such a can of worms in a kind of way and I can't thank you enough for doing that, because you made me think about it more critically and I know that my reflections from this... it's definitely going to take a new direction in a different turn that needs them to make. Thank you, so much.

Hannah:

You're welcome.

Jacqui:

Talking about things, being able to say... it starts your thinking processes and it makes you think about things that you don't realise that you were reflecting on and the way that you're going to look at something differently. So, yeah, it's been invaluable to be able to discuss this.

Hannah:

And I think similarly with people that are going to hear your story as well in the things that you've said and the experiences that you've shared. People will hear possibility for themselves. And I think that's the power of narrative, isn't it? That's the power of human story.

So I've got a quick fire, finish the sentence question for us to finish with.

Jacqui:

Okay.

Hannah:

Being an occupational therapist is...

Jacqui:

Me. It is me. It's what I am.

Hannah:

Georgia?

Georgia:

Beautiful. I think it's beautiful. You get to explore so many avenues. You get to look at the world from such a different perspective. Yeah, it's got its faults but it's a really beautiful profession.

Hannah:

Love that, both of you. Brilliant answer. Thank you for joining me today, both of you.

Georgia:

Thank you for having me.

Jacqui:

Thank you.