Sheltering in Quiet Waters: Ngã Roopu Awhi for Integration of Social Work Learning

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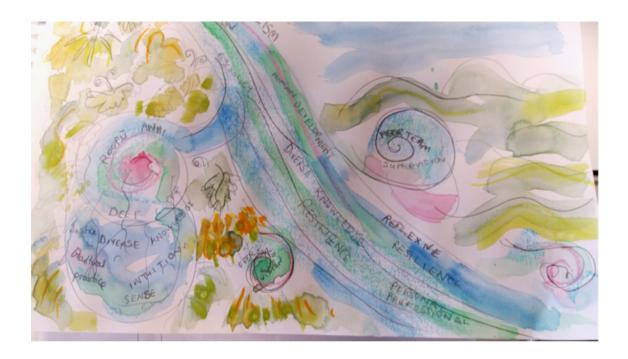
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ABSTRACT

Social work educators face significant challenges in creating for students learning opportunities that span multiple activities: the navigation of personal/professional boundaries; development of links between theory and practice; cultivation of mature relational and critical thinking skills; and cultural self-awareness. The successful acquisition of these skills requires a sustained focus on how they are actively integrated into student learning (Adamson, 2011; Boud, 2010; Gibbons & Gray, 2002; Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery, & Van Stratum, 2014).This article describes Ngã Roopu Awhi, weekly creative tutorials designed to be the juncture at which all learning comes together, a key feature of a new four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree in Aotearoa New Zealand that incorporates the concept of integration at multiple levels. Research into the effectiveness of the tutorials is under way; this article serves as a preliminary practice exposition, providing a rationale for, and description of, Ngã Roopu Awhi for social work educators and students.

NGÃ Roopu AWHI – THE CONTEXT

Our campus is located in a small Aotearoa New Zealand city and, at the time this article was written, the social work education team of five academics was well into its second year of delivering a new Bachelor of Social Work degree. The teaching team considered it important that the student experience and their emerging practice be the primary focus on which all teaching was based. The approach was inspired by the "Plymouth model" of social work education (Adamson, 2011; Bellinger, 2010; Gibbons & Gray, 2002), which offers a "philosophical, conceptual and structural re-organization" of social work education (Adamson, 2011, p. 23) that moves away from a traditional, modular system of knowledge delivery. Assisting students to develop the capacity to practise effectively in complex environments means offering more than simply *what* to think (knowledge and theory), but also *how* to think critically and reflectively and to actively locate meaning and its implications as future practitioners. The Ngã Roopu Awhi tutorial was introduced as a vehicle to facilitate this, offering an emphasis on integration and reflective learning.

NGÃ Roopu AWHI – THE TUTORIAL

Ngã Roopu Awhi is a Māori name gifted to the social work teaching team by local kaumatua. *Ngã* provides the plural for *Roopu* which is group; *awhi* is a verb meaning to embrace, aid, or hug. The title refers to the opportunity students are offered to "shelter in quiet waters," to think creatively, reflectively, safely and collaboratively about what it means to be a social worker in today's world.

The tutorials occur weekly for one hour throughout the academic year for all year levels and the groups for each year run concurrently in different rooms. The sessions are supported by a structured debrief and planning discussion held by tutors, where the week's teaching, assignments due, and current social, global, national, community issues are discussed. General observations about student wellbeing, levels of motivation, energy and general capacity to learn are shared and activities are designed to respond to these if necessary. A final

agreement is negotiated regarding the topic or theme for the week, and a decision is made about how the group will be facilitated drawing from a variety of sources and using a range of theoretical perspectives and reflection activities. Opportunity is provided to think deeply and creatively, providing opportunities to share more intimate and personal perspectives of, for example, gender or ethnicity.

A key feature of this process is the departure from a commonly held practice of mapping sessions out for terms or semesters in advance. As such, an opportunity is provided each week for the team to work collaboratively and spontaneously, to be responsive to the immediate needs of the students and to current social issues. Importantly, the purpose of the integrative tutorials is deliberately and purposefully upheld in order that consistency of student experience is kept at the forefront of the tutorial design. A clear meeting structure is followed, with notes taken and stored in a common workspace for future reference and accountability.

At the beginning of the year, students are gathered together for a brief orientation to the concept of Ngā Roopu Awhi and what they can expect from tutorials, all of which may be revisited at times during the year. Ngā Roopu Awhi is presented as a facilitated, contracted group process where students will be offered the place to link learning from different subject areas and consider social or professional issues from a variety of perspectives. The tutorials are positioned as enjoyable, safe environments to experiment with ideas, to ask questions, to be courageous and creative.

As well as being oriented to what Ngā Roopu Awhi *is*, tutors have found it useful to expressly outline for students what Ngā Roopu Awhi *is not*. For example, it is not a place to discuss issues or concerns about individual students or tutors or to hear a lecture or lesson delivered by a tutor – the focus is on the process of learning rather than the introduction of new content. Neither is it group counselling – personal issues are discussed only as they relate to learning about social work.

The role of the tutor is to deliberately safeguard the integration of learning as a key focus of the group, to facilitate discussion rather than present new information, and to assume an overall duty of care for the students. It is expected that a balance be maintained between confidentiality/group autonomy, and the need for there to be consistency of learning across the groups. Opportunities for students to develop the skills required to work collaboratively are provided in Ngā Roopu Awhi and are transferable to other professional social work activities such as supervision (particularly group supervision), teamwork and inter-professional collaboration.

In summary, Ngā Roopu Awhi offers a space for students to gain reflective and relational skills, to bring together bicultural and cultural principles, theory and practice, the personal and the professional and a range of disciplines and types of knowledge. Students bring themselves – their experiences of life, of social issues, of practice (volunteer work or field placements) – and integrate these experiences with learning acquired from across the degree. The Roopu generate a collective wisdom and a practice setting of support and wellbeing.

NGĀ Roopu AWHI AND THE CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Social work educators are expected to cultivate resilient, reflexive, academically rigorous practitioners, and educators must also emulate these qualities and have opportunities to practise them (Adamson, 2011; Beddoe, 2007; Ruch, 2000). Integral to the development and delivery of Ngā Roopu Awhi is the parallel tutor process of weekly debriefing and planning, the purpose of which is to design integration of content, but which also supports principles of collaborative and reflective practice. When tutors work co-operatively, the benefits gained include improvements in course content and assignments, professional development through providing peer feedback, and developing more effective teaching styles (Crow & Smith, 2005). It is logical to consider that, if the teaching team are working collaboratively, the students will benefit and learn by example (Carter, Barrett, & Park, 2011). This approach offers opportunity for the teaching team to grasp opportunities for developing quality of inter-personal communication and a culture of human interchange (Bogo & Wayne, 2013).

Social work practice is situated within a prevailing neoliberal climate, with risk-averse policies which privilege bureaucratic and reductionist responses to human concerns. Social work educators are equally challenged to uphold principles of social justice and human rights in education programmes delivered from within a neoliberal tertiary education sector and increasingly restrictive legislative environments (Fenton, 2014; Morley, 2016; Ruch, 2000). This reality offers both a rationale for the inclusion of Ngā Roopu Awhi in the social work education programme, and a significant challenge to its delivery.

Tightly allocated teaching hours and room provision, and the prioritisation of bureaucratic tasks for staff are common features of modern tertiary education environments. Neoliberal values and managerial practices ensconced in social work education are inevitably transmitted to students through what Bogo and Wayne (2013) refer to as the *implicit curriculum* – the context within which education is delivered that powerfully conveys values about the nature of education and which influences student expectations. For example, a commodity-driven learning environment transmits a belief that learning is achieved by receiving content, that knowledge is paid for, delivered, and consumed by students (Bogo & Wayne, 2013). This reality sits in contrast to the findings of educational researchers, who recognise that "an emphasis on content coverage lies at the heart of the problem of achieving deep learning in all educational settings" (Ballantyne, 2016, para. 13). A critical understanding of the concept of implicit curriculum provides a structure within which social work educators can identify learning opportunities and to understand that all student experiences in the learning environment can be harnessed as "grist for the educational mill" (Bogo & Wayne, 2013, p. 7).

Ngā Roopu Awhi is a contracted, reflective and structured professional activity and although not defined as supervision as such, elements of the normative, restorative and formative functions of professional supervision are incorporated (Inskipp & Proctor, 1993), offering students an introduction to the nature of this important professional relationship. Further, the value gained from effective participation in, and understanding of, group processes, prepares students to be able to make use of the "rich and valuable learning" which is available within group supervision opportunities (Davys & Beddoe, 2009) during student placements and in future practice.

It is expected that social work degree programmes will provide inspiration and tools for bi-culturally and culturally competent practice, requiring knowledge and understanding of indigenous approaches, theory and practice (Tsuruda & Shepherd, 2016). Ngā Roopu Awhi is an ideal forum for students to develop understanding about the processes and impacts of colonisation on personal and relational levels. Learning does not occur in a vacuum; accordingly, students' relationship with colonization varies when class composition comprises both indigenous and non-indigenous members (Giles & Rivers, 2009). Furthermore, developing critical reflection is a mechanism to equalise different sources of knowledge including biased historical knowledge, scientific knowledge, practice knowledge and cultural and intuitive knowledge (Trevithick, 2008).

The value of tutors modelling critically reflective behaviour in their relationships with students is emphasised by Brookfield (1995) who articulates the need for teachers to be constantly aware of how they are viewed through the eyes of students. It is hoped that the collaborative and team teaching principles of Ngā Roopu Awhi provide tutors a much-needed opportunity to develop and maintain a critically reflective stance, to be aware of personal assumptions and awareness about the power of the dominant group, which is the critical task of social work today (Fook, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Tutors are anecdotally pleased with the outcome of Ngā Roopu Awhi, and to gain a more formal investigation into the effectiveness of this approach, an ethically approved, structured, reflective conversation has been held with the goal of capturing tutor perspectives of the strengths and challenges of the teaching method. Findings generated from the thematic analysis of this conversation, together with analysis of feedback from social work students to be gathered in the next academic year will be used to inform future teaching.

Future development of this learning method will focus on extending and diversifying the repertoire of activities used in Ngā Roopu Awhi (Walton, 2012), on scaffolding reflection across year groups (Coulson & Harvey, 2013), and will continue to focus on learning in need of critical attention, such as bicultural pedagogical development, practice of group leadership roles, basic facilitation skills, and critical analysis of key social issues.

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