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ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK & WELFARE EDUCATION

"Unauthorised Access to the Soap Dispensers": Holding Space Open for Emancipatory Social Work Practice

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Abstract

Dismantling inequality, discrimination and oppression are core tenets for critical social work practice and foundational for social work education. Yet, increasingly, social work students find themselves grappling with identifying and challenging issues of social justice in contexts influenced by neoliberal hegemony. Such contexts emphasise individual "failings", ignoring structural barriers for people experiencing social problems such as poverty, inequality, incarceration and racism. Through co-production with social work students, our research aims to inform social work teaching practices which can best equip graduating social workers for emancipatory social work practice. Here we report on an exploratory study that outlines student experiences and understandings of an undergraduate social work subject which explicitly aims to equip students with skills for social justice practice. Our findings reveal that at the start of a semester, students have very little understanding of social activism for social work but through experiential learning they acquired knowledge-by-doing, which was transformational in their journey to becoming social justice advocacy practitioners.

Keywords: *Social work education; Emancipatory practice; Social justice; Neoliberalism; Critical pedagogy; Activist pedagogy*

Introduction: The story of "unauthorised access" to the soap dispensers

In 2017, a group of students added red dye to campus soap dispensers and placed posters above them, exclaiming "Blood on Your Hands". The students' campaign aimed to raise awareness of, and to encourage university students and staff to sign their petition against testing soap products on animals. Campaign initiators were second-year social work students enrolled in a compulsory undergraduate social action subject, completing their assignment by working in small groups to plan and implement a social action project. Controversy arose when an unsuspecting staff member using the bathroom, was left with red dye on their hands and alerted campus security.

In response to the staff member's report to campus security, university administration expressed concern about the modalities of the social action. This created division in the academy. Some staff saw the students' actions as merely a student prank. In the contemporary risk-averse climate, others questioned the necessity for the students to act as change agents. And others saw the action as a constructive approach to not only learning about activism but drawing attention to an issue that was part of a broader social movement, whereby students are cognisant of, not only human rights but also animal rights (Fraser & Taylor, 2020). What transpired constituted a disconnect between tackling a significant social issue through direct action and, conversely, proposals from university administration that future cohorts of students write about social action rather than actively engage in it. This disconnect arose from what we see as a "risk management" paradigm that now pervades many organisations where social workers are employed. The ascendance of a risk society, designed to protect organisational reputation, can stifle creativity and even critical thinking.

This incident and responses to it, prompted us, as critical social work educators, to reflect on a question with which we have been pre-occupied in our teaching roles. This led us to developing a research question: What are the most effective approaches for teaching social justice understandings and practices to social work students? To respond to this question, our study was framed around exploring what students might gain from integrating critical understandings with devising and implementing social action projects. This paper reports the findings of exploratory research with students in a cohort that followed the "unauthorised access" campaign.

Students in the second year BSW subject – Community and Social Action – are exposed to critical frameworks and practices of social change and social activism directed towards progressing social justice. Global statements of social work (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)) define social justice as a core brief of social work practice (IFSW & IASSW 2014). This is supported by the Australian Association of Social Workers (2020) and underpins student action. Applying critical pedagogy, which underpins the social action subject, students, working in small groups are asked in their key assessment to identify a social problem of concern to them and design and implement a small social action project directed towards socially just change. Students frame their chosen projects within relevant social movements focusing on concrete local actions which reflect goals of the wider social movement.

Frequently, students make connections with other groups and organisations currently involved with their chosen social issue. Recent examples of student projects include a campus community garden (Environment movement); university branded clothing to be sustainably and ethically sourced (Sustainable Fashion); lobbying the local member of parliament and the local council to increase disability parking close to a campus located alongside a busy shopping mall (Disability Rights movement); strategic placement of recycling bins next to lifts on campus (Environment movement); and conducting a social media campaign directed towards ending Australia's indefinite mandatory immigration detention policy (Refugee Rights movement).

Background

Social justice formulations abound in social work. They are often abstract in nature, which presents a conundrum for social workers about whether it is possible to learn about social justice without *doing* social justice. Probing social justice tenets in relation to practice, education and constraint is not new. Taylor et al. (2017) analysed the content of Norma Parker addresses from 1969–2008, which were delivered by presidents of the AASW, revealing that social justice was represented as an enduring guiding principle and moral responsibility of social work. Consistent with the themes of our research, the lectures included material on practice, education, and constraint.

Confounding the long-standing and ingrained quest for social justice is the ideology and application of neoliberalism that has a profound influence on how social work has moved from an idealistic profession to one where the relationship with the state has become fraught. The neoliberal agenda seeks to reduce activities of the state and shift them to the private economic sector (Ife et al., 2022), overturning welfare systems (Morley et al., 2019) that provided a social justice safety net and diminishing opportunities for challenging dominant discourses. The transmuted relationship with the state results in social workers not only being forced to become compliant with injustices arising from state policy, through funding and policy mechanisms, but has minimised social justice activism that has been constrained by neoliberal ideology. Since the mid-1970s, neoliberalism has influenced political and economic practices, with the ascendancy of market-driven ideologies and resistance to interventions that prevent the operation of the free market (Cummins, 2020, p. 50). Globally, neoliberalism has shaped both social work practice and social work education (Hyslop, 2018; Strier, 2019, p. 340) while suggesting that socially engaged and politically situated everyday practice of social work is inherently resistant to neoliberalism. This alludes to two competing possibilities that arise for social work futures. Emancipatory elements of social work practice, Hyslop (2018) argued, might be dismantled in the decade ahead. Alternatively, social work could become a more powerful voice for social justice. Our teaching and research provide optimism that through transformative education and a politics of resistance, the latter can be achieved.

Social work is beset with contradictions in practice. Social workers are frequently content to work at individual or even charity-oriented levels, resulting in reluctance to take on broader advocacy, such as the "blood on your hands" campaign. Such activism is seen by some as incompatible with practice organisations where the influences of neoliberalism are pervasive.

As Morley et al. (2019, p. 83) noted, while social workers are heavily shaped by social policy injunctions, the role of social movements and other forms of activism influence critical social work. Social work activism is likely to occur outside employing organisations but influenced by social work education and social justice and human rights. This has the benefit of collective action and political campaigning to challenge oppression, whereby imposition of neoliberal values can give rise to resistance (Ferguson, 2010). Alain Touraine's 1980s' landmark work on new social movements still influences social work today (as cited in Ottmann & Noble 2020, p. 466), particularly his ideas on how history is made by people engaged in collective action, with social movements having a central role in the workings of society. For Ottmann and Noble (2020, p. 470), this work enables the bridging of gaps between social activism, social work practice and social work education.

Critical and activist pedagogies equipping graduates for socially just practice

For social work education, critical pedagogies purport to respond to new and merging social problems, ethically supporting a democratic public, not undermine it, tackle global social problems and imagine alternatives for a socially just world. According to Freire (1998) "Education never was, is not and never can be neutral or indifferent in regard to the reproduction of the dominant ideology or the interrogation of it" (p. 91). As social work educators, we are engaged in nurturing of individuals who can think critically, challenge existing norms and systems which marginalise people and engage in praxis. Social work's emphasis on praxis draws on the interconnection between thinking and action rather than a dichotomy between the two (Freire, 1972).

Neoliberalism may have undermined the role of activism in social work but "critical social work education can reinvigorate opportunities for critique and action" (Morley, 2019, p. 437). Social work's role is not limited to helping people cope or adapt to their individual hardships, it has a legitimate role in advocating for social change (Morley et al., 2014). If neoliberalism is more an assemblage than a dominant mono-culture (Wallace & Pease, 2019), then it is important to lay bare its constituting elements for students of social work to understand the different levels at which they need to pitch their intervention. According to Wallace and Pease (2019, p. 503), "While managerial processes appear omnipresent and foreboding, the net effect has been differential, dependent on location, and mitigated by disciplinary, cultural, industrial and historical context." In a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic classroom with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the understanding of the contextual implications of neoliberalism is crucial for our pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy, according to Giroux (2007, p. 2), "forges both critique and agency through a language of scepticism and possibility and a culture of openness, debate, and engagement, all elements that are now at risk in the latest and most dangerous attack on higher education." Critical pedagogy opens up a space for students to come to terms with their own power as critical agents, enter into critical dialogue, challenge stereotypes and practices which disempower people and take responsibility for action in a society which they inhabit (Giroux, 2007). Critical pedagogy is, therefore, not only about facilitating the process of critical thinking for students but also enabling them with skills and knowledge for social action.

It is a process through which we integrate critical consciousness in the social work curriculum by uncovering one's own privileged social identities in research and practice (Nicotera & Kang, 2009).

Critical reflection creates a space of personal discomfort and disturbance and is important for transformative learning (Morley et al., 2019a, p. 12). It necessitates changes to our everyday ways of living. It is crucial for students of social work to experience that discomfort and unpack their own locations of privilege, before they embark on their journeys for social change. According to Ollis (2012, p. 44), "intent to critically reflect is underpinned by the need to discover a desire and awareness to change". Understanding the "self" and locating one's positionality in the different matrix of power is a crucial skill for a social worker. According to Morley (2019, p. 445), "modelling activist practises as educators can be a catalyst for fostering students' participation in activism". Morley (2019, p. 442) noted that an engagement with critical theory promotes a sense of personal agency for the students.

Critical pedagogy will also need to be attentive to the politics of space, language and embodiment. Merleau-Ponty (1962) propounded that knowledge and skill is gained through experience and being in the world, rather than cognition. Embodied ways of learning include the mind, body and emotions and is "in contrast to rationalist approaches to pedagogy, which are disembodied and largely focussed on mind and thought" (Ollis, 2012, p. 52). Hence, learning is not only in thinking, but also in "feeling" and "doing". The classroom is the space where the feeling and doing begins and students learn how to "transgress" racial, sexual and class boundaries (hooks, 1994). It is imperative for students to move in and out of physical, cultural and social borders (Giroux, 2018).

Social justice education and critical pedagogy are aligned in classrooms; however, Meister et al. (2017) argued there is a disconnect, particularly for students from traditionally marginalised communities in such learning environments. Social work skills are frequently taught by "doing". A number of means of linking structural critique with agency are used, for example role plays and simulation activities, case studies, "call to action" based lessons, engaging with field practitioners whose work is underpinned by critical approaches, and community engagement projects (see Bay, 2020; Dudziak & Profitt, 2012; Fenton, 2018; Meister et al., 2017).

As social work educators we need to make a conscious effort at reflecting on our pedagogies and our engagement with students. Our location as employees of the neoliberal university may, in principle, make us complicit in the neoliberal approach to education but our agency as educators and an activist pedagogy can lead to a transformative learning experience for the students. While resisting new materialism and economic rationality in the academy (Preston & Aslett, 2014), engaging in activist pedagogy requires for us to first, self-reflexively locate our positionality within the academy.

Preston and Aslett (2014, p. 514) define an activist pedagogy as:

> ...a complicating approach to education that exposes, acknowledges, and unpacks social injustices, implicates personal and structural histories and currencies, and is founded in a commitment to personal and social change both inside and outside the classroom and the academy. It recognises the historical material context but avoids reification of such context through fluid explorations of power, subjectivity and social relations.

An activist pedagogy can enable students to develop knowledge and skills to resist and bring about change for a "socially just, democratic, ecologically sustainable and compassionate world" (Morley et al., 2019b, p. 2). It is important to prepare students for the unpredictable situations that will confront them while practising social work, instil in them a spirit of taking risks and also introduce them to the idea of imagining alternatives. A "pedagogy of hope" (Freire, 1992) that showcases the possibilities of disruption and resistance to neoliberalism can go a long way in engaging students with issues of social justice and equipping them for practice.

Our university has a wide range of students from very diverse backgrounds – first-generation learners, Indigenous students, recent migrants and refugees and socio-economically disadvantaged. Students from these diverse backgrounds occupy the same classroom space and it is our responsibility as educators to lay emphasis on the need to respect diversity, subjectivities and encourage dialogue. This is important as the classroom is a microcosmic reflection of the wider social, political and economic forces.

Methodology

The learning environment

The objective of the social action subject is to promote students' capacity to analyse dominant power relations and to develop skills in community engagement and building solidarity, as well as increasing knowledge of strategies and methods to progress social justice change. The first author coordinates the social action subject and is responsible for its design and delivery. Students apply critical understandings to collectively designing, planning and participating in small group social action campaigns, taking on the role of active change agents over the semester. Students are encouraged to select social justice issues for their activism projects which are meaningful for them. They might, for example, draw these from their own lived experiences of injustices which impact themselves, their families, or groups they identify with or from social issues to which they want to contribute to progressing socially just change. As the subject had been running for over a decade, with continual refinement, it was timely to appraise the extent to which transformational learning took place through experiential activism. The "unauthorised access" skirmish was an additional motivation. Accordingly, we posed the following research question: What are the most effective approaches for teaching social justice understandings and practices to social work students? The research was conducted through focus groups with students who were studying online during 2020.

Design

A phenomenological interpretive approach was adopted in this exploratory research. This approach aimed to centre participants' voices as co-producers so they could frame their experiences of carrying out their social activism projects in ways which are culturally and contextually sensitive for them. This approach also acknowledges potential power imbalances between the facilitators in the focus groups and the student participants; further, it recognises that researching with students lessens power barriers and provides genuine participatory conditions (Kellett, 2011).

Drawing on social justice and critical pedagogy literature, a semi-structured focus group schedule was developed to enable students to direct the narrative and centre what they regard as most important. Our intention was to gain insights into ways students frame social justice concerns and the required methods and strategies to promote student recognition, understanding and critical skills for socially just practice in contexts increasingly shaped by neoliberal constructions.

Co-design in the development phase of research is increasingly used as an inclusive practice strengthening exploratory methods, enabling collaboration between students and researchers as more equal partners when shared decision making is a core tenet (Hyett et al., 2020). In keeping with this principle, the authors worked collaboratively with a cohort of three Field Education (FE) social work students, embarking on a research placement, to refine the focus group schedule. The FE students piloted potential focus group questions with each other and two additional FE peers. The questions were then further refined.

Focus groups

The three focus groups, conducted at the end of semester, comprised 16 social work students enrolled in the social action subject, see Table 1 for a breakdown of participant demographics for each focus group. Student participation in the focus groups was voluntary and solely dependent on their interest in participating. They were recruited through an invitation flyer posted to their online "student blackboard" by a member of the research team not directly involved in the subject. Those willing to participate in the focus groups were invited to initiate contact. Students were informed they could withdraw from the research at any time with no negative consequences whatsoever. The research was given ethics approval by Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Table 1. Focus Groups Demographics

Focus groups	FG 1	FG 2	FG 3
Women			
18 - 24 years	4	3	2
25 – 30 years	2	2	
Men			
18 – 24 years	2		1
Total	**8**	**5**	**3**

Data collection and analysis

The source of data from the three focus groups was student narrative. Questions in the semi-structured focus group schedule were designed to be used as prompts, an approach that afforded the opportunity for the young people to speak freely with minimal interruption by the focus group facilitator, author 1. The students were invited to share their learnings and experiences from their participation in their social action projects during semester.

Focus groups varied in length from 20–30 minutes. Transcriptions and field notes were thematically analysed by authors 1 and 2 and interpreted for insights (Stanley & Wise, 2013). Thematic analysis was conducted following the prescribed steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) through a six-phase guide: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing the themes; defining and naming themes; developing a narrative in relation to the research question. At the end of this process, findings were crosschecked with the students to establish accuracy of analysis and meaningful understandings.

Research limitations

The length of time undertaken for focus groups was consistent, with the first two groups taking 30 minutes each and the third 20 minutes. Though brief, participants without haste directed discussions and expressed their views while the facilitator was able to clarify meaning with each of the cohorts. Further, although the data yielded rich results, student participation was not as high as hoped for. Out of a cohort of 302, 16 participated. We speculate that students were weary by the end of the semester and were unwilling to engage in a voluntary activity. Nonetheless, the findings provide preliminary leads for the next stage in the project which will involve a comprehensive exploration of students' immersive experiences across their subject participation.

Findings and discussion

Two main themes arose from analysis from the focus groups:

1. Understanding and applying strategies for social change
2. Students identify some enablers of their social activism

Understanding and applying strategies for social change

> My views around social activism have been challenged.

Some students reflected on their changing views about social activism during their study period:

> Previously my definition of an activist was simplistic in nature, predominantly limited to media representations of riots and violent protests.

It is not surprising that neoliberal-shaped perspectives are often reproduced in students' initial analyses of social justice activism. Most of our students have grown up in socio-political contexts in which neoliberal policies, values and practices have become "normalised" (Fenton, 2018). Mainstream media, for example, often reflects this dominant hegemony, when it depicts images of (oppressive) reactions to activism, conveying a message that activism is destructive and negative. Such responses can cause those who are oppressed [to] "lose the means by which to critically respond" Freire contends (1972, p. 68) consequently "learners must, then, develop a critical consciousness in order to recognize that unequal social relations construct a 'culture of silence' which is created to oppress" (Freire, 1972, p. 68). This is illustrated by the perspective of a student who stated:

> [I learned] activism is not necessarily violent…it is more nuanced…this subject made me question my understandings and change my perspectives…understanding people's situation and keeping an open mind, understanding people have barriers so you need empathy and a non-judgemental position.

Despite social justice being core to social work ethics (AASW, 2020) social work education, does not necessarily offer students opportunities to critically reflect on power relations and challenge received world views (Fenton, 2014). Pedagogy is key. Pedagogy, Morley and Ablett (2020, p. 201) point out, shapes the theoretical and political orientation of future practitioners, impacting whether graduates see their role as agents of genuine change in the lives of the people they work with, or rather, as essentially administrators of welfare regimes.

> Pedagogy can embrace an instrumental rationality thus often erasing critical analysis; and allowing learnings and skills, particularly at the micro level of interviewing and counselling, to be underpinned by hegemonic assumptions and promoted at the expense of a broad range of social work practices that can be harnessed for progressive social change (Morley & Ablett, 2020, p. 205).

As one student reported:

> The subject material and action combined forced me to think about how to do social action and why – [it] confronted me about future social work career pathways from [my plan of] case work in child protection to being open to think about what else is possible.

With the aim of promoting students' capacity to analyse and interrogate dominant power relations; and develop skills to challenge, rather than reproduce the status quo, Freire's work, in particular, though not solely, underpins the pedagogy of this social activism subject. As educators, we accompanied students as they are exposed to, reflect on and grapple with critical frameworks which challenge some of their previously held beliefs, including hegemonic depictions of social issues as individual problems and of change agents as "deviant". The importance of critical pedagogy, such as Freire's, is apparent in this student's narrative:

> Freire's Pedagogy of the oppressed…it's been life changing – mind shifting – now when I watch a program about racial issues – everything makes sense – this subject is making connections [for me] outside the subject with what I see in the media and around me.

Noting that ideas changed in the course of experiential learning, we ask whether shifts to mor critical understandings translate into social justice activist practices. Fenton (2014) reported that students do not necessarily connect structural critiques with their realisation (see also Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). The point of social work education, Morley and Ablett (2020, p. 210) proclaim, is not simply to transmit knowledge but to "create the conditions in which forms of agency are available for students to learn how not only to think critically but to act differently". Freire advocates "praxis" i.e., enacting/applying critical awareness (1970). Following Freire, Giroux is critical of education which only engages students to interrogate social dimensions of power, but does not also "create opportunities" and enable the conditions to apply these in practice. Transformative learning, both "within and beyond the classroom", he argued, is needed to "overcome those social relations of oppression that make living unbearable for those who are poor, hungry, unemployed, refused adequate social services, and under the aegis of neoliberalism, viewed largely as disposable" (Giroux, 2006, as cited in Morley & Ablett, 2020, p. 207). As educators we aimed to support our students to engage with the process of translating their critical understandings into agency and transformational practices.

Applying these insights, students in this subject, working in small groups, were given, as previously noted, the assignment of selecting and undertaking a social activism project which aimed to progress social justice. They were required to link "knowing with action, learning with social engagement" (Giroux, 2011, p. 148) and apply critical understandings in their strategies and activist practices, thus making their understandings concrete and particular. Alongside this, students interrogated the complexity of developing campaigns that were not only true to critical understandings but required substantial effort as the following comment from one of the students' highlights:

> It's quite hard to develop a social action campaign plan. It seems simple but there is lots of research and collaboration with organisations… Freire's bottom up approach was important.

Students identify some enablers of their social activism

> You can champion your social issue spreading the message and getting the word out to find who is interested – finding your people.
>
> [We had]…an amazing group working together with like-minded people.

Recognising the importance of, not only "finding your people", but also of maintaining these relations i.e., "keeping your people", students learned to successfully work together early on in their projects when they found they might not share exactly the same perspectives, but had common concern/interests in the issue they selected.

In their small groups students built community and created solidarity through identifying their diverse strengths in relation to their projects, valuing their diversity, respectfully responding to differences in the group and with external partners. Mindful of not alienating members of their group and external collaborators, most constructed a space that enabled all involved in their project to participate as equal partners in social interactions (N. Fraser, 1998). Such participatory parity, maintains Fraser, is the most general meaning of social justice (1998). Focus group participants identified consciously holding open a space, through careful listening, accepting, and supporting each members contributions, drawing on each other's resources and strengths, hence enabling their diverse opinions and understandings to be made available to each other. As these students explain:

> Our strength was in being flexible with what we planned to get the campaign started.... There could be doubts [about process], so you need to check what are their [group members] aims for change, listening, understanding, being non-judgemental, having empathy.

> A great strategy we used to get our campaign happening was that two of the team members called on their existing networks with children.

Students thus enacted their critical understandings within their social activism groups. Exposure and valuing of diverse perspectives, knowledge and skills, supported their developing capacity for working within diverse practice contexts and verifies young people's collective community-building capacity.

Through their activist projects, in tandem with weekly small group discussions in class, students in the focus groups described a change occurring in the way they saw themselves. They began to identify their own position within dominant structural power relations. Giroux declares this to be an essential step towards agency, stressing that knowledge needs to be not "just received" by students but "open to be challenged" by critical reflection and "related to the self" (Giroux, 2011, p. 156). As this student reflected:

> [It encouraged us] to reflect on our own personal experiences of oppression of discrimination. That way you can tie theory or link theory to practise and use your own life experience or your parents experience... [it helped] to reflect on our experience of social injustice to be able to develop that level of empathy.

By "doing" activism, students made connections with, and began to understand, issues from the perspectives of service recipients which further contributed to challenge notions of social issues being individual problems. Making links between their own locations within power relations and structures with those of service recipients, they recognised affinities and engaged more as equals with those experiencing the social injustices of their projects' focus. As one student explained:

> I now believe that activism is a process. It requires knowledge and understanding of oppressive systems and the way in which we...are positioned within the power structures.

Of this process, another reflected:

> My eyes have been opened.

To regard others as equals without particular knowledge of them can engender interconnection and solidarity, according to Arendt (as cited in Hayden & Saunders 2019, p. 178), who develops this further arguing that standing in solidarity alongside others can inspire agency and action. Power is "never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (Arendt, 1972, p. 24). Drawing on Arendt, Bay (2020, p. 448) articulates that the capacity to act comes from being with plural others and "acting in concert" with them, an approach adopted in the social activism classes. Participants in the focus groups reported that the weekly small group space in class provided them with a safe context for critical insight and planning activist practices to address the social justice goals of their projects. Students working together also had "immediate" experience of the benefits of working collectively. Of working collectively, some students observed:

> It takes huge courage challenging the status quo. I felt it a lot. I believe in it [the cause] but it was challenging, and I had to prepare myself to counter any negative comments and explain/defend our position in social media [media campaign]. I felt vulnerable and challenged when dealing with entrenched views. It took courage even using alternative methods – like digital technology. Working in our group I felt supported.
>
> ...Working with the (NGO) organisation made us feel safe to act.

For example, students conducting a social media campaign aiming to contribute to ending Australia's indefinite detention policy for asylum seekers arriving by boat, made connections with asylum seeker advocacy groups. These connections also supported their capacity to develop a campaign outcomes report which the students sent to the Minister for Immigration. Growing solidarity is vital to collective social change work (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012, p. 245). Experiencing connection with peers and then opening up to community organisations, NGOs and service recipients, to further their social action activities inspired students' continued engagement, as well as being necessary to achieve campaign goals:

> It is very difficult...to have a voice with external organisations if you don't have a way in. Without an existing network it would have been too hard.

Collaborating with peers, the community, NGOs and service recipients where all are "active subjects", rather than "objects of help" (Dudziak & Profit, 2012, p. 246) revealed further benefits of participatory parity (N. Fraser, 1998). Students became more aware of the limits of individualism, undermining a central assumption of neoliberalism. Further, working together on their projects normalised collective work for social change (Dudziak & Profit, 2012, p. 250).

Collective work also acts as a counter to social workers' unwittingly assuming superior knowledge as "experts" and, even with the best intentions, imposing their world view on others (Ife, 2012, p. 331).

Rather than their prior feelings of pessimism and a sense of hopelessness, students began to discuss how positive social change requires being "realistic" which they now described as having "patience" and "persistence". As these students stated:

> New covid restrictions meant that at first, I felt I couldn't do anything. Social action is also something new and there is a lot to learn. I learned that you need to keep a flexible mind and be able to follow where the movement takes you and that you just keep going.

> At first, I felt overwhelmed, this is not easy work this is tough…it's incredibly challenging and it's taxing mentally, emotionally, even physically. I think having realistic goals and combining theory and practice is of the essence. It's bringing real life into the classroom.

When experiencing setbacks in their projects, students within their groups supported each other to take "the world as it is" (Arendt, 2006, p. 186) and encourage each other to, as Arendt exhorts, begin anew to shape and change the shared world (Arendt, 2006, p. 186; Bay, 2020, p. 448). Mutual support is crucial:

> If you're working in a group together you are on a roll. It is much easier if you e xperience setbacks to persist with the campaign.

Students from the focus groups observed that regularly sharing process and insights from each of the social activism group projects with the wider tutorial group helped them to draw links between one another's projects; in particular identifying and discussing similarities in underpinning power relations. Students also discussed alternative understandings of activist approaches. Broadening the frame of possible actions meant emerging social workers could identify with and take on alternative perspectives; they began to view activism and the possibilities for taking a social justice stance as involving a broader range of strategies and tactics than they had previously envisaged. Knowledge of social work professional identity formation coalesces around the view that social work identity is influenced by contextual factors and so is more interactive than the comparatively "straightforward adoption of the role or category of professional social worker" (Webb, 2015, p. 3). This coheres with Fraser's conception of identity construction as an element of participation (N. Fraser, 1992). The wider group discussion drew from students' experience in their smaller activist project groups where the students negotiated decision making, taking on different roles in their group and their project depending on what each identified as their own and each other's strengths and skill sets.

These processes also allow those students who are wary of activism (thinking it requires confrontation often portrayed as negative), to connect with activism and locate their professional identity as social workers, within activism:

> [I've learned] activism is not always overt. It can be quiet, subtle and especially friendly.
>
> Activism is for anyone and its okay if you want to be out of the limelight.

Conclusion

Students' collective agency on their social activism projects; their reflection-in-action and the connections made with social processes of resistance and challenge, encouraged and underpinned students' capacity – to both imagine and to contribute to – different futures.

Students challenging issues of social justice in contexts of support and engagement, appears to be a catalyst for students who, in the "doing" of activism, go through a process of actively deconstructing and reconstructing their social work identities, locating themselves within activism and reimagining possibilities through expanded horizons. Further, students' recognition of themselves operating within systems of power facilitate their critical self-awareness, supporting reflexive praxis, promoting social empathy as they incorporate new knowledge and experiences. Thus, actively participating in social change in the context of facing personal challenges becomes part of the student's development as an emancipatory practitioner.

For students, a critical and activist pedagogy was central irrespective of success – the actual doing of social action facilitated student learning – linked directly to their agency and professional identity as emerging social workers.

When students were at the point of beginning their social activism projects, despite developing deeper critical understandings through their coursework, many expressed pessimism and a sense of hopelessness about possibilities for change. Being able to have hope and "to imagine otherwise in order to act in other ways" is, Giroux identifies, a precondition for making a difference. Freire informs us, however, that critical educational practice implies an "educated hope" which goes beyond the classroom; hope needs to be connected with agency and transformative action (Freire, 1970, as cited in Tiainen et al., 2019, p. 643). Reinforcing Freire's conviction, hooks explains that, without constructive action for change, critical understandings can manifest as cynicism which may operate to sustain power imbalance and oppression (2003, p. 14). Accordingly, for critical understanding to powerfully motivate change to shape future trajectories; hope supported by agency and social processes is required (Bryant & Ellard, 2015).

As this student noted:

> It was a brief amount of time to learn about and apply social activism, but it's been life changing.

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