Relationships Matter: Building Positive Relationships Between Social Work Educators and Online Students

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Abstract

Relationships matter in higher education in a range of ways. Positive relationships between students and educators can contribute to the creation of a safe learning environment and sense of connection, and thereby enhance learning outcomes for students. Advances in technology, combined with the need for flexibility for students managing multiple demands and responsibilities – particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic – have resulted in the expansion of online education. The relationships between students and teaching staff, and between peers, take on new dimensions in the online space. This paper explores the perspectives of students on relationship-building, and what barriers and enablers are experienced in the creation of optimal online learning spaces. Strategies to better foster safety and connection in the online learning environment are also explored.

Keywords: *Social work education; Pedagogy; Online learning; Relational teaching; Teaching; Support*

Introduction

> Imagine that student in a room, by themselves, with a computer. How do you get in the room with them? We want our room to be full (with the lecturer, and with other students), we don't want to be sitting there by ourselves at a computer.

The above quote from a student participant in the exploration of experiences of online social work education, provides a succinct summary of the central question that challenges social work educators. It is the question of creation of meaningful engagement; the bringing together of student, lecturer, and peers; and once all are in the room together in the online space, how relationships are developed and sustained.

This study was conducted with graduating students from the online Master of Social Work program at Griffith University, in Australia. The Master of Social Work (MSW) program at Griffith University was first established in 2008 as an external offering in collaboration with Open Universities Australia. Students are eligible for this qualifying MSW after completion of an undergraduate degree where they are required to have covered at least one year of study in social and psychological sciences. The MSW degree is two years full time or part-time equivalent.

The online delivery of social work education has been undertaken with some misgivings by a number of educators (Jones, 2015; Maidment, 2006; Reamer, 2013), particularly related to the relational aspects of this delivery method. Afrouz and Crisp (2020) caution that more research is needed to provide evidence for claims of the superiority of face-to-face education in social work, arguing that different groups of students experience modes of study in different ways. Despite the many challenges, online delivery of social work education has grown as an important avenue for study in Australia, in part in response to the challenges of relative low population levels spread over a large geographic area (Miles et al., 2018). The 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic further accelerated the growth in online education, as Australian universities were forced to temporarily move all teaching to an online platform. Given this context, understanding the impacts of the online delivery method of social work education on relationships and safety in the classroom takes on greater importance.

Literature review

The pace at which technology is advancing and infiltrating the higher education environment is rapid (Davis et al., 2019; Stone & O'Shae, 2018; Wretman & Macy, 2016). Only two decades ago, students who were unable to access a university campus due to geographic location were able to study through the distance education system, which involved postage of large volumes of print materials (Crisp, 2018). Only a small number of Australian universities offered distance education for social work programs in the 1990s, and by 2017 only 12 of the 30 Australian universities offered social work programs online (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2017). It is evidence of the shift from distance to blended and online social work education that increasing numbers of Australian universities currently offer all, or part, of their social work programs in online mode, a situation influenced largely by the COVID-19 pandemic. The same trend is occurring in many other countries (Moore et al., 2015).

Change is under way, and the impetus is on social work educators to work with an appreciation of the implications of this changed delivery method, educating students, not only about how to engage online in learning, but how to integrate technology into their practice (Hitchcock et al., 2019). A much-cited explanation of learning styles and learning spaces published by Kolb and Kolb (2005) recommends that educational institutions continually evaluate learning structures and processes. This recommendation is supported by more recent Canadian social work research focused on scholarship in the neoliberal university where it is convincingly argued that three key elements should be in place to support online education (Smith et al., 2018). These include efforts to bring external students on to campus at the beginning of an online program to build relationships; keeping online classes small; and providing institutional investment and support. The Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020) set a requirement that social work students enrolled in distance/online programs must attend on campus for a total of 20 days. This requirement allows students to connect with a peer cohort and with lecturers to build a sense of community – a goal that is also recommended in research conducted by Thormann and Fidalgo (2014).

There are a number of ways of viewing the relationship between the students and teaching staff when considering this topic. At the commencement of this study, the researchers had conceptualised this topic through the lens of both relational teaching (T'Kenye, 1998) and the therapeutic alliance (Martin et al., 2000). The role of relationships and, in particular, the student–teacher relationship, is an important consideration in on-line learning and teaching, as studying at a distance can reduce the opportunity for relationships to establish and deepen (Miles et al., 2018; Stone, 2012). Relationships depend on elements such as trust, respect, and mutuality (Gillespie, 2005), and on-line educators are faced with the question of how these building blocks are laid down via this medium of delivery. Students from a 2014 study indicated that creating a space where they feel safe and respected is the most important criterion for effective online learning (Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014). More recent research, conducted in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, reinforced the need for teacher presence as one of the most important factors in effective online education. The tripartite requirements of cognitive, social, and facilitatory presence value-add to provide a contextual experience that allows the teacher to both immerse and overview what is happening in the online space (Rapanter et al., 2020).

Research examining the process of creating *safe spaces* to promote optimal learning in social work define this as spaces that provide protection from harm in a psychological or emotional sense (Holly & Steiner, 2005; Mishna & Bogo, 2007). A meta-analysis of research on the learner-centred teacher–student relationship concluded that positive relationships, including teacher variables of empathy, warmth, and encouragement of learning are associated with positive student outcomes and enhanced learning (Cornelius-While, 2007). Attention to emotional well-being of students through creation of respectful learning environments will also positively impact capacity to engage in the educational process (Morrisette & Doty-Sweetnam, 2010; Naude et al., 2014; Okech et al., 2012).

This relational dimension matters for student motivation and willingness to take risks, ask questions, and participate (Joyner et al., 2014; Rodriguez-Keyes et al., 2013). Safety in the classroom is also important to support critical thinking in relation to topics of sensitivity and importance (Gayle et al., 2013). Attention has previously been paid to the legal and ethical issues of bringing guest presenters into the online learning environment (Sage, 2013).

Beyond this consideration of the relational aspect of teaching, the online environment provides both opportunities and risks in social work education. Online educators report opportunities for slower and more considered discussions possible through online learning as compared to face-to-face classroom interactions (Smith et al., 2018). Skills development, however, is an area where educators express concern in relation to online social work education. A major study in the USA of the perceptions of social work educators found a consistent level of concern about the effectiveness of online education in relation to practice-oriented content (Levin et al., 2018), although some studies have concluded that clinical skills can be effectively taught online (Jones, 2015; Wilke et al., 2016). Student satisfaction and performance also appear to show little difference between online and on-campus education (Afrouz & Crisp, 2020), although there is still contention that skills-based competencies are better taught face to face (Levin et al., 2018).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study utilising student voices as expressed during their participation in two focus groups. Participants for this study were recruited from the 74 students enrolled in the 2017 cohort of an MSW capstone course. Face-to-face focus groups were held after students had completed their final assessment task before graduation. Participation was voluntary, and only students who were due to complete their degrees on successful completion of this course were eligible to participate. This was identified as a requirement in the ethics approval for this research, to ensure that students were no longer in the position of being assessed by the researchers (ethics approval #2017/782).

Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, and each group lasted just under one hour in duration. Eleven students agreed to participate. This group consisted of 10 women and one man. The median age of participants was 44.3 years – older than the median age of 33 years of the total cohort in this course. The participants were from locations spread across Australia. This small size allowed for in-depth exploration of themes that emerged both through invitations to students to identify topics of importance to them, and through more targeted questions to explore themes of interest to the researchers.

Focus group transcripts were coded using inductive analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Themes were identified by the researchers independently, and then compared and refined to arrive at the six themes. The process of refining themes was undertaken in a manner consistent with the method suggested by Nowell et al. (2017).

Findings

There were essentially six themes that emerged from the discussions, many of which have been highlighted in previous literature, but some that provide suggestions for strategies that course conveners could adopt to increase the sense of connectivity and safety within an online course.

1. Responsiveness, connection, and contactability

A very powerful message from students in this study related to the adverse impact on relationships, and their sense of connection with the lecturer, when their contributions on Discussion Boards were not responded to, or when there were significant delays in responding to questions from students on the course sites. A common practice in online courses is to encourage students to begin in a course by introducing themselves on the Discussion Board, just as we might do in a classroom situation. The failure by lecturers to respond to some of these posts was noted by one student as quite discouraging for her further engagement in the on-line process:

> ...as a student you write your introduction and then the convener doesn't comment on your introduction, it's really...I found it invalidating...I had it early on in my degree and I just felt invisible from the beginning. And then I thought "oh what's the point, I'm like one person in a hundred."

When asked about how important it is for the lecturer to respond to a student Discussion Board post, one student explained that "...it would be like sitting in a classroom, me saying something to you, and you just be quiet."

Timeliness of responses was also flagged as important in building trust and connection with lecturers. One strategy used by a number of online lecturers, particularly when teaching large classes, is to encourage students to use the Discussion Board as the first channel of communication for assessment-related questions. Students expressed frustration when lecturers did not keep up their end of the agreement:

> One particular course I did that was online I had my question, sent it off, check in, check in, check in...and in the end I had to email the lecturer and say, "I've asked this question", and it's just about that reciprocal sort of communication. Don't ask us to do something and we do it and you don't come to the party. That's really frustrating.

Students also expressed appreciation for regular invitations from lecturers to connect, and regular announcements that expressed interest in, and support for, the students:

> For me it was your regular contact, your regular checking in. And reduced a lot of my stress. You're by yourself, at home in front of your computer, but you were constantly checking in, like, this is "if you're up to here, great, but don't get stressed because there's flexibility and you're travelling along well" and it was just like, just like if we were to come to class every week, you'd probably have that kind of conversation of "how are you going? Has everyone started their work? Not a worry." Also you seem to think of us, how we're travelling. That's not really usual.

This finding related to the importance of responsiveness is very consistent with the results of an earlier study by O'Shae et al. (2015).

2. The human face of the lecturer

As well as connection being fostered through responsiveness, students also expressed that knowing the lecturer as a person helped to facilitate this sense of connection. Participants discussed the importance of photos and videos of their lecturer:

> What I remember is [lecturer's name] doing a little video snippet introducing herself. So I immediately thought, "ooh she's invested in me" because you could see her reactions.

A student in the other focus group also commented on this video introduction. The facilitator asked the student if they could pinpoint what happened that helped them to feel comfortable to make contact with a lecturer to ask for assistance:

> I think it was I felt we did get to know the lecturers quite well. It was a video of herself at the very beginning and it was just happy like "hi, this is me, a bit of an introduction." And it wasn't a lecture, but it was just her being present.

Images and videos of lecturers seem to aid in building relationships, and similarly hearing the lecturer's voice – such as when receiving feedback on assessment tasks – was also identified by students as very helpful in building both relationships and safety. A facility within the Turnitin assignment submission tool in Blackboard is the option for a marker to leave three-minute voice memos instead of, or as well as, written feedback. When asked why voice memos were an effective method of receiving feedback one student responded:

> Because you can, you hear tone. It's like a human connection thing I guess, it's a visceral thing, you have a body response to it rather than just reading it, logging on, not really paying attention to it, it sort of seeps in a little bit more. And it's a bit more personal and like you don't just take it as a criticism, like "oh I only got four marks out of 10 for whatever it might be." It's like with the voice memo you actually explained, "do you know what? This was really good but I was looking for this."

Another student explained that hearing the tone of voice of the lecturer helped to settle negative self-talk that can arise for some students when reading corrective feedback:

> Because I could tell, it goes back to the tone, I could tell from your tone and your voice and where you were going, it was so quick, I went "yes I get it." Whereas in an email, you know, sometimes you can overthink things. You know, that you can apply distorted thinking.

3. Synchronous and asynchronous tools for communication

There is significant literature about the advantages and disadvantages of both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools for online learning (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Singh, 2003). While there are a number of tools available within the Blackboard system, the two most commonly used for online engagement with students are Blackboard Collaborate and the Discussion Board. Students provided some important insights into both of these tools. While the asynchronous Discussion Board is used in all courses as the primary method of online communication, Blackboard Collaborate is not used in every course. Collaborate is a synchronous tool that opens up at a specified time, and generally sessions run for one hour. It allows for real-time voice and text communication between the lecturer and all participating students, as well as the use of shared resources such as PowerPoint slides and a virtual whiteboard.

The general consensus was that Collaborate is a valuable tool for learning, but that this needs to be structured so that all students who make the time to engage online are able to be actively involved. Students gave an example of one particular course in the MSW, the First Australians and Social Justice course, that was structured around a model of contribution. One student commented:

> It was so engaging. It engaged everyone in the group. Everyone had something to contribute, they were going around in a circle so everyone had to. So every single student had something to say to it involved everyone...it was well organised.

Students explored their use of Discussion Boards, which are the equivalent of the online classroom, and their engagement with teaching staff in these forums in some depth. The Discussion Board is an asynchronous tool that is managed by the lecturer, who typically sets up discussion threads each week with questions related to the course content.

One of the difficulties with management of Discussion Boards is the implications of large student numbers in online courses. It is typical for courses to have enrolments of anywhere from 20 to 400 students, and attention then needs to be given to the division of students into smaller groups within the Discussion Board functionality. While some lecturers elect to manage a course with all students in together, students in these focus groups commented that, with large numbers, responsiveness decreases and that smaller groups are preferred. One student commented:

> In the Discussion Boards some subjects were broken down into smaller groups to communicate. So you might have a group of 12 that was much more manageable... you didn't have a whole class of 100...like a table of people. It's like sitting at a table and connecting.

One of the MSW courses, Interdisciplinary Professional Ethics, has assessment linked to Discussion Board responses. Students are required to submit a total of four Discussion Board posts for assessment (worth 20%). Students commented that this strategy was valuable in activating connection between peers, as explained by this student:

One subject you had to comment in two people's posts as well as provide your own. So that particularly, because otherwise I've gone in at other times and just put my bit in and then checked out. But it forced me to really look through and connect. Find people that I had similarities with or what they've said has resonated in me, so that is particularly good.

There are many ways that Discussion Boards can be used in online teaching. The clear message from students is that active engagement will build relationships, and this, in turn, will encourage students to ask questions and interact.

4. Class recordings versus mini-lectures

Content is provided to online students in a number of forms. Course sites are commonly organised around modules, and course content within these modules is typically text, diagrams, reflective questions, and short "mini-lectures." These mini-lectures last between five to 10 minutes, and may include PowerPoint slides and an audio recording of the course convener speaking to these slides, or a video of the course convener speaking to camera about an aspect of one module. Two courses within the Master of Social Work program also include full recordings of on-campus classes using Echo360, which captures both audio and the material displayed on the data projector in class. These, much longer, in-class recordings reflect the older method of delivery of online courses developed prior to the more recent standardised online conversion of courses undertaken by the school. One understanding that has driven the online conversion process has been that students prefer shorter, bite-size mini-lectures to these full class recordings; however, students in these focus groups challenged whether this is universally the case.

A number of focus group participants identified that the full class recordings served a number of useful and, for the researchers, unexpected benefits. As part of a discussion of safety, and specifically in relation to barriers that may discourage students from making contact with course conveners, a number of students identified that hearing the way that the convener responded to in-class questions enhanced their sense of safety with that particular convener, and thereby increased their likelihood of making contact with the convener – particularly to ask for assistance. Under the theme of the student's sense of safety with a convener, one student commented on the impacts of listening to in-class conversations between a convener and students:

> ...how someone is teaching a subject and interacting with students, it tells you a whole lot more about, for me, it tells you a whole lot more about the convener on a personal level as well.

Another student added to this point:

> Your authenticity came across. And I know with other lecturers that I've listened to online, you know, they're just chomping through the content and you thought, "yeah I think if I've got a question I'll go and find someone else." And that's, it was the authenticity and you felt that you could trust you because you were so...approachable... and available.

The message implicit in these statements is that actions speak louder than words – that invitations to make contact, and assurances of support through statements such as, "there are no dumb questions," only go so far in creating safety. When students hear congruence between these statements and the way that a convener responds to a student, they are more likely to take a risk and make contact with that convener themselves.

Similarly, students form views about the character of conveners, and the likelihood of a supportive response if they make direct contact with the convener, by observing the convener's online interactions with other students. One student recounted a Discussion Board interaction that occurred early in their studies that had stayed with them:

> And then there was something happened on the Discussion Boards, when there was a particular student who obviously had a few issues, and something blew up. And I just remember [lecturer's name], and just the really lovely, sensitive, beautiful, kind way that she'd handled it. Because yes, the student wasn't culturally aware of Aboriginal culture and had made a comment that had obviously deeply upset and hurt other people and it was brought to our attention. And it was just so sensitively and kindly handled.

In addition to adding insight to the character of the convener, and thereby increasing the likelihood of students making contact with a convener for assistance, students also commented on the passion and enthusiasm for a topic that can be conveyed by listening in on a classroom lecture as compared with reading about a topic, or listening to a mini-lecture recorded by a convener sitting alone in an office:

> And the other thing as well is just by listening to the lectures, and the tone of the lecturer's voice, they can convey a lot of passion and interest in a subject and all of a sudden it comes alive for you as an online learner…it's just the warmth and the passion and the interest in the subject comes across when you're just sitting down with your headphones on and listening to it.

One possible interpretation of these comments is that the convener's passion and energy for a topic may be more present in recordings of in-class conversations than recordings made by course conveners sitting alone in an office because the lecturer is enlivened by the feedback in a classroom setting.

5. Strategies for student peer support

Students make use of a range of online mediums for social support. Some of these sit within the university structures, while others sit outside and are set up by students often without the knowledge of teaching staff. For example, it is not uncommon for student cohorts to set up their own Facebook groups either connected to a course or to a program like the MSW. The students in these focus groups commented on their use of a Facebook group that did not have any staff presence, and described it as a way to stay connected to others in their beginning cohort, and to ask questions of each other that they did not feel comfortable asking lecturers in a public discussion forum.

One student said:

> (Facebook) kept me going, and a few of us who were in that group have really connected well. And when there were times that we had no content or instruction and everybody was confused and weren't sure if we could ring the lecturer, we would be onto each other "what did they mean by this?" "What are you doing?"...and if someone said "I don't have a clue"' they weren't being watched and weren't being judged.

The absence of staff in these peer support groups can have unintended negative impacts. One such impact is that misunderstandings about course requirements can be propagated, as students may not know what they do not know when attempting to help another student with assessment-related questions. One student suggested that these groups are mostly helpful, but there is a risk without staff involvement:

> ...there were people on the Facebook group, and they were talking about how good that was, but then I'm also conscious that the lecturer's not involved in that and sort of understandings get propagated that might get a bit off track sort of thing.

6. Rupture and repair

Rupture and repair are inevitable parts of any relationship, and a therapeutic perspective suggests that these moments can offer opportunity for deepening of relationships (Safran et al., 2001). The online learning and teaching space may carry greater risk of relationship ruptures, and these ruptures may not be as easily identified and therefore repaired, as compared with an on-campus classroom. This elevated risk may be, in part, due to the limitations of text-based communication, and the absence of both tone of voice and non-verbal cues.

The focus group discussions highlighted some instances when students felt hurt or disrespected by lecturers in this online learning space, and some of these have been explored elsewhere in this paper. While the researchers did not pursue in depth the topic of how these conflicts were resolved, there were a couple of occasions where students concluded their story with a statement that suggested that they pulled back in terms of their further engagement with the lecturer, rather than seeking to repair the rupture.

The researchers were left with the question of whether there is a greater risk in the online environment of students withdrawing rather than seeking to repair relationships with lecturers, and, also, whether there is more risk of lecturers failing to notice that a rupture with an online student has occurred, as compared with an on-campus student. Our view is that this is a question deserving of further consideration, and this will be the subject of further targeted research.

Discussion

This study analysed transcripts from focus groups conducted with graduating Master of Social Work students to examine what aspects of their experience as online students aided and detracted from their social work education. The thematic analysis of their views, combined with findings from our review of literature on this topic, has identified a number of lessons that the authors will take away from this process, and we offer these in case they are relevant for other online social work educators. While many of these findings are not new, they do add to the growing body of literature already identified in recent scoping reviews (Afrouz & Crisp, 2020).

1. Responsiveness matters

These students painted a very powerful image for us of their journey as online students, alone in their room. The link to us as online educators is through a number of interactions that could be considered fairly tenuous when compared with the opportunities available to their on-campus colleagues – brief, typed responses to their online questions, replies to their emails, and the opportunity to engage in online Collaborate sessions if these are offered at a time that they can attend. In that context, little things matter. This is a finding that is supported by previous research that concluded that responsiveness was a key factor in student motivation to continue engagement in the face-to-face context (Rodriguez-Keyes et al., 2013). The reminder that not responding to a student post on a Discussion Board is akin to ignoring a student contribution in a classroom setting, for example, is helpful. Given the importance that timeliness takes on in the online space, management of expectations can also become more important. Reminding students of the likely timeframe for responses from teaching staff may assist in this regard.

2. It's personal

These students valued knowing their lecturers, and they provided us with some guidance about how to help make this happen. Photos and authentic, personal video introductions by lecturers can be a great start to a more human connection. Opportunities for students to be a fly on the wall in on-campus classes can help on a number of levels, but one way that this can help is by giving the online student a greater sense of how the lecturer relates to other students, which gives them more confidence in predicting how their own contacts with this lecturer in the future might unfold. Students look for congruence between words and actions from lecturers, and a sense of safety depends on this congruence, as you would expect. We also heard the students tell us that receiving verbal rather than (or as well as) written feedback on essays can create more openness to receiving this feedback, but also may help assure the student that corrective feedback on an assessment task is well intentioned. In short, verbal feedback if done well can help build positive relationships.

3. Stay in touch

Again, the image of the student alone in their room is a relevant reminder in relation to this theme. The students we interviewed valued regular emailed announcements from their lecturers, particularly when those announcements provided both guidance and encouragement. Students expressed appreciation for weekly contacts from their online lecturer.

4. Communicating course content with feeling

Students alerted us that the online learning environment risks being devoid of the lecturer's enthusiasm. Students commented on the energy and passion for the content being discussed by one lecturer in his on-campus class recordings. The implication from this discussion was that online course content can at times be missing this energy. This is a theme that the authors will explore in future research. In the meantime, we are examining options for enlivening online mini-lectures, such as through the use of interviews rather than recordings made by a staff member alone in their office.

5. Managing synchronous and asynchronous student engagement effectively

Central to online learning and teaching are these core tools of asynchronous Discussion Boards and synchronous communication opportunities such as Collaborate sessions. Some simple, but important, advice that emerged from these focus groups was that:

- Well-facilitated Discussion Boards with timely and active engagement by teaching staff, perhaps supported by assessable participation expectations, are highly valued by online students.

- Use of small groups in Discussion Boards can help support participation, just as breaking into groups for in class activities often generates increased engagement.

- Collaborate sessions, when carefully planned and facilitated, offer a great opportunity for students to feel more connected both with teaching staff and with their cohort.

6. Watch for ruptures

The authors intend to further investigate this theme, as this was a topic that was alluded to but not investigated in depth during the focus groups. The students have alerted us to the importance of the small but significant moments of direct contact with online students. We will aim to check with students if we have any doubts about whether there is an unresolved matter that may need attending to.

Conclusion

This paper has explored a number of issues at a micro level that impact the relationship between students and their lecturers in the online teaching context. Social work as a professional discipline is committed to relational practice (Ruch et al., 2010) – the value of the relationship is central to the work that social workers do, and modelling the value of relationships is an important part of social work education. Master of Social Work students come to a degree that is not their first, with many expectations about online study. For most, expectations were met, and for some there was an element of surprise that relationships could in fact be fostered through online contact. There were, however, some very important realisations about online teaching as a space that is more prone than on-campus teaching to ruptures in the student–lecturer relationship for reasons that are often unanticipated, invisible to one side or the other, and less able to be repaired as needed to maintain engagement. There is also the possibility of peer–peer ruptures that could impact the safety culture required

for optimal engagement. As higher education worldwide continues to grapple with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is fertile ground for research on many of the issues and questions raised in this and other papers. Online education for social work is an inevitable consequence of the post-COVID-19 world, and lessons learned from pre-COVID-19 experiences are well worth serious consideration as the path forward is forged drawing on the benefits of these experiences.

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