Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education

ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK & WELFARE EDUCATION

Critical Beyond Reflection: Simulation-Based Learning in Social Work

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Abstract

Simulation-based learning (SBL) has been used widely in social work education to support skill development and critically reflective practice. However, the influence of technical, rational and narrowly evidence-based practices informed by the neoliberalisation of social work is of concern. There is great potential for simulated learning to be used more intentionally to develop social work students' capacity for critical analysis, critical praxis and emancipatory change. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how simulation might be used to develop students' ability to recognise the influence of broader social and political structures, navigate power relations and think critically about the theories they use to inform their practice. This contrasts with the ways SBL is used as a technicist strategy for skill building. This paper reflects on the authors' approaches to SBL in their social work education practice. The first, a virtual simulation assessment tool used for assessing students' readiness for field placement. The second, an in-person, peer role-play simulation and critically reflective discussion readying students for interpersonal practice. It speaks to their interest in the topic, experiences of simulated practices in social work education and outcomes of their specific SBL practice in social work education. Both authors propose that an intentional embedding of critical pedagogy within simulation-based education is favourable for developing student' capacity for critically reflexive practice.

Keywords: *Simulation-based learning; Social work education; Field placement; Critical pedagogy; Technicism; Critical social work*

Introduction

Simulation-based learning (SBL) has been used as a pedagogy for social work education for decades and, more recently, to support preparation for field placement (Jefferies et al., 2024). However, with advances in technology, the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic and new insights incorporating critical thinking into simulation pedagogy, the delivery and diversity of SBL approaches has developed over time (Keeney et al., 2022; Merideth et al., 2023). According to Bland et al. (2011, p. 688), SBL is "a dynamic process involving the creation of a hypothetical opportunity that incorporates an authentic representation of reality, facilitates active student engagement and integrates the complexities of practical and theoretical learning with opportunity for repetition, feedback, evaluation and reflection". SBL can be utilised in various formats; however, fundamentally it involves replicating a real-world practice experience in a guided, immersive and interactive format (Gaba, 2004). Critical evaluation of the ways we implement SBL into social work education and field placement is important, yet limited, particularly if the aim of social work is to uphold the values of social justice and emancipatory practice.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) suggests the key features of social work are both practice-based and educational, promoting social cohesion, social change, empowerment and liberation (2014). The central principles of social work according to the IFSW are social justice, human rights and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2014). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) equally prioritises social justice as a core principle and proposes that its members promote these values as part of their commitment to personal liberation and progressive societal change (AASW, 2020). Many social work educators would agree that social work practice requires a moral and ethical commitment to socially just practice (Fook, 2016; Morley et al., 2019; Pease et al., 2009) coupled with understanding of the historical, social, political and cultural conditions that have implications for people seeking support (Morley & O'Connor, 2016). Furthermore, critical thinking and analysis, the linking of theory and practice (praxis) and social action are considered important aspects of transformative social work education and practice (Fook, 2016; Macfarlane, 2009).

Contrary to these values, social work has become more focussed towards a neoliberal agenda, whereby practice, in many contexts, is more business-like than value-driven, more individualised than collective and more technicist than emancipatory—which has implications for how we educate emerging practitioners (Ferguson, 2008). If the aim of social work is socially just practice, the mechanisms we use to support education need to reflect this. The use of role-play scenarios for conceptualising practice has been recognised as a valuable and creative means to facilitate the acquisition of learning outcomes in social work education (Keeney et al., 2022; Mooradian, 2008).

However, as our technological world has progressed, new opportunities to support social work education have emerged through SBL (Jefferies et al., 2024; Keeney et al., 2022). With the disruption to education through the Covid-19 pandemic, many social work programs were forced to consider alternative and creative ways to socialise students to the field (Jefferies et al., 2021b, Harris & Newcomb., 2023).

Simulation practices were recognised as a solution with the introduction of simulated placement practices to enhance students' practice skills and critical reflection, while addressing the barriers to rich learning opportunities within some placement settings (Harris & Newcomb, 2023). As the popularity of SBL increases, critical inquiry into the ways that SLB is used in social work education and field practice is important, identifying whether, and how, it supports critical thinking and analysis, developing praxis and supporting social change is also important—particularly, if social work is to meet the emancipatory aims it espouses.

We (the authors) are both in favour of simulated learning and have embedded SBL processes into our social work education pedagogy. We also recognise the limitations of SBL if implemented uncritically. As a cisgendered, white woman with a Western background, I (Author 1) feel that having a well-developed critical analysis is important to avoid reinforcing colonising conditioning in my own practice and the emerging practice of the students I work with. I espouse a critical social work approach to education using critical performance pedagogy (CPP) as the foundation for my education practice (see Carruthers, 2020). I was inspired to use this pedagogy to support students to engage in learning about social work because it offers an opportunity to disrupt dominant assumptions that students might hold and allows for a critical focus using creative strategies and collaboration as a platform for transformative learning (see Carruthers, 2023). Furthermore, coming from a drama background, my interest in using SBL stems from my enthusiasm for incorporating embodied learning approaches in my education practice. I use SBL in social work education as a novel opportunity to play with new ways of facilitating critically reflective and reflexive practice, as demonstrated in example two below.

I (author 2), as a male social worker, acknowledge that my positionality influences my perspective, and is shaped by my personal experiences, cultural background, and social location. As a white male, I recognise the privilege and power dynamics that come with my identity. I am aware that my experiences will differ from those from marginalised communities, and I must be mindful of the potential biases and blind spots that can (and will) arise as a result. I come from a place of cultural humility, recognising that it may not fully capture the complexities and nuances of diverse lived experiences. With a background in coordinating field placements for social work students, I have a strong interest in ensuring students are well prepared for the complexities of professional practice. I have found the use of simulation to be an effective way of addressing gaps in student knowledge. It is therefore crucial that, in my own use of simulation, students are afforded the opportunity to engage and reflect upon practice scenarios essential in social work practice. As a social worker, I am committed to promoting social justice, equity, and inclusivity and to ensure that the simulation exercises I develop are designed and implemented in a way that reflects the principles of social justice and anti-oppressive practice. This includes actively challenging and addressing systemic inequalities, power imbalances, and discrimination within the simulation process (see Jefferies et al., 2024). This can be achieved by critically reflecting on my positionality and engaging in ongoing learning and dialogue. I strive to contribute to the ethical and effective use of simulation in social work education.

In this paper, we will provide a reflective evaluation of SBL, its value and limitations as it applies to our use of SBL in social work education and field placement. A critique of technicist approaches will be explored with particular emphasis on how technicism combined with self-reflection is not enough to meet the social justice aims of social work. Following is a demonstration from our own use of SBL and a call for critical pedagogy to be considered as an important element in practitioners' development of SBL and students' development of emancipatory practice.

Simulation in Social Work

The use of simulation for learning has been most prominent in health and allied professional settings and extends to social work (Abrandt et al., 2016, p. 613). In social work, particularly in the context of higher education, simulation has been a prominent approach since the 1980s (Asakura & Bogo, 2021; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019), however, it has only recently drawn attention in Australian social work education (Jefferies et al, 2021a). It can be described as "a learner centred, experiential approach that integrates multiple facets of learning (e.g., cognitive, affective and psychomotor) through a form of 'authentic' reproduction of environments and practices" (Hopwood et al., 2015, p. 271). The use of simulation in education is not new. At its inception into the helping professions, it took the form of peer role-plays to practise client/worker interactions, however, has evolved over time to represent a range of low-tech supports (e.g., use of mannequins in nursing), no tech (e.g., peer-assisted or actor assisted role-plays) or high fidelity (use of high tech equipment, video imagery and sound) to represent a realistic environment (Bogo et al., 2014; Hopwood et al., 2016). It can be seen as a bridge between education and professional practice framed as providing "authentic learning experiences under safe and controlled conditions" (Abrandt et al., 2016, p. 613). The development of new technologies has resulted in opportunities for simulation to imitate, as much as is possible, real situations associated with practice whereby students can practise skills and techniques related to their profession through an immersive experiential interaction (Sturman et al., 2021). The simulated learning environment creates possibilities for students to evaluate and reflect on knowledge and skill development in a way that mistakes can be made without having a detrimental impact on people in real life experiences of distress (Bogo et al. 2014; Hopwood et al., 2015, p. 271).

Most commonly, SBL has been used to enable students to develop competency through the application of specific skills and to reflect on their use of these skills as it applies to social work practice (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). SBL has been embedded into curricula as a means to advance social technologies in social work programs (see Sturman, 2021) and as a way to assess "holistic competence" in field education. According to Kourgiantakis et al. (2019, p. 433) and Roberson (2019), holistic competence is recognised as the combination of "knowledge, skills, values, as well as cognitive and affective processes", whereby the student is positioned at the centre of the learning process and learning is operationalised through experiential learning theory which facilitates "holistic engagement" through interaction with a particular environmental context. The use of simulated learning as a tool for measuring competence might be useful; however, it does give rise to questions as to how and whether this actually aligns with the social justice aims of social work and, therefore, whether it supports critical learning.

Critiques of simulated learning suggest it is misleading, often neglects theoretical groundwork, lacks an ideological basis and has a fixation on technology (Hopwood et al., 2015, p. 168; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). Simulation is often mistaken as requiring the use of technology to advance the immersive experience. At the same time, technology can be seen as a valuable platform to enhance the simulation experience (Sturman et al., 2021). Some of the barriers to developing quality simulation activities include the cost involved as well as the time required to develop, prepare and deliver the simulation (Bogossian et al., 2018; Jefferies et al., 2021a). Some of the resistance to using more technologically advanced simulation can include educators experiencing a level of fear or lack of confidence in the use of technology to advance the approach (Bogossian et al., 2018; Jefferies et al., 2021a), or due to the health implications (e.g., cyber sickness) and the occurrence of technical issues (Sturman et al., 2021). As we continue to learn more, evaluate and share knowledge about the use of SBL in social work education, the ability to reduce discomfort and increase confidence in the use of immersive simulated learning becomes more accessible.

Kourgiantakis et al. (2019, p. 445) recognised the value of SBL to teach students to "locate themselves, use cultural attunement and sensitivity and examine influences of power, privilege and oppression" as well as developing students' capacity to ground their practice in the "intentional use of theory". However, in their evaluation of SBL, the explicit use of theory in simulation approaches for social work was limited (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). In some instances, simulated learning approaches have extended to developing a critical analysis, reflecting on links between theory and practice, interrogating reflexive assumptions and providing a relevant critique of decisions made within the simulation experience (van Soeren et al., 2011, p. 434). There is potential for simulated learning to be more than an immersive tool for developing and reflecting on skills, however, it would require intentional integration of critical theory as part of the pedagogical approach.

Contesting technicist practice in SBL

In social work education and field placement literature, it has been well evidenced that the dominance of neoliberalism and capitalism has become a justification for a more technical rational and narrowly evidence-based educational approach (see MacFarlane, 2009; Morley & O'Connor, 2016). This represents what Paulo Freire (1970) referred to as a *banking model* of education, whereby knowledge is seemingly deposited into the minds of students who uncritically accept this knowledge as the 'best way to proceed (Carruthers, 2020). Freire (1970, p. 52) suggested we must "abandon the educational goal of deposit-making" and replace it with "problem posing", which would involve moving towards a more "socially transformative educative praxis" that rejects the intentional dispatching of knowledge and promotes new embodied modes of teaching and learning (Carruthers, 2020; MacGill & Whitehead, 2011, p. 38). Macfarlane (2009, p. 328) pointed to the "emphasis on competency-based approaches, narrowly defined forms of evidence and an overemphasis on risk rather than more complex needs" as problematic for social work education (Macfarlane, 2009, p. 328).

SBL is "a way" that Freire's vision of a socially transformative educative praxis can be actualised, however, there is a danger that SBL unintentionally (or intentionally) reinforces the very apolitical, technical rational, competence-based approaches it seeks to avoid. This is particularly concerning if SBL is reduced to the acquisition and demonstration of a generic set of technique-driven tasks void of engagement with theory, critical thinking and analysis and reflexive examination (Morley et al., 2019). Even in instances where SBL does assume to espouse a critically reflective approach, this does not always equate to a robust social and political analysis of disadvantage, marginalisation and oppression. This suggests that a move away from technicist approaches supported by self-reflection and, instead, moving to a more intentional embedding of critical theory in simulation practice is desirable (MacGill & Whitehead, 2011, p. 38).

What this would require is an intentional engagement with critical praxis which supports the linking of theoretical understanding with "becoming an ally in the struggles of social justice" (Morely et al., 2019, p. 148). Such an approach explicitly aligns with the moral, political, social, theoretical, cultural and (in some regards) spiritual dimensions of social work. Furthermore, it requires an ethic of care when navigating complex, uncertain and divisive circumstances indicative of problem-based learning (MacGill & Whitehead, 2011).

In the next section, the authors share an example of their approach to using simulation-based learning in their education practice. The first, a virtual immersive experience to support students in preparation for field placement presented by Author 2. The second, a peer-based in-person role-play simulated learning approach presented by Author 1. Each author provides a description of the approach, their experience using the approach and their observations and outcomes of students' engagement in the simulated environment.

Example one (Author 2):

This example demonstrates my use of virtual technology to immerse students in a family and domestic violence case study. The activity is utilised as a formative assessment to support students' development without the pressure of formal grades attached. The example is designed to be implemented after foundation-level courses, including introduction to social work theory courses. In my experience, having this foundational knowledge supports the following key learnings:

- Ability to assess factors relevant to the case study and apply professional reasoning;
- Demonstrate ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practice;
- Ability to critically reflect on emotional reactions to the practice scenario.

The virtual case study activity is designed to replicate the complexity involved with supporting someone experiencing family and domestic violence. Ensuring that the scenario reflects the reality and complexity of the context is a crucial component of the SBL process. Following a tutorial providing students an orientation to the practice environment of family and domestic violence and a briefing on the simulation is provided. The briefing sets out the case study and provides students with intake notes. The initial part of the activity allows students to understand the purpose of the activity, their role and the task required.

As part of the simulation experience, students are immersed in a family and domestic violence presentation using a 180-degrees video of a client intake session. The interactive video allows students to look around the room and take in the surroundings and service users' presentation including non-verbal cues. The video is filmed from the social worker's viewpoint and affords the student an opportunity to observe an intake session. Once students have watched the video, they are tasked with completing an initial assessment of the situation, including identification of factors relating to accommodation, finance, risk factors, protective factors and to propose a plan for follow up.

On completion of the initial assessment, students come together to undertake a group debrief. The debrief is an essential part of the activity if learning outcomes are to be met. The debrief allows students the opportunity to draw links to theoretical concepts from their espoused practice. The approach used is the Diamond model (Jaye et al., 2015) consisting of three stages to support students' learning: 1) description; 2) analysis; and 3) application. During the debrief, students apply critical thinking to the case study and evidence theory in practice. Concepts of power, language, strengths and anti-oppressive practice are central to the discussion with the intention to afford students the opportunity to reflect on ways they have (or could have) integrated theory and practice as part of a critically reflective process.

My reflection on student engagement with the activity found a sense of enthusiasm for the authenticity highlighted in the activity. There was an initial anxiety with the use of technology; however, this seemed to disperse once an initial walk-through version was undertaken as a class. This allowed students the opportunity to familiarise themselves with navigating the activity. Students commented positively on the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in a practical scenario and have time allocated through the debrief to make sense of this application. Students 'leaned in' to the activity with the opportunity to make mistakes safely, debrief learnings, practise again and most importantly, learn a solid foundation for future critical reflection in practice.

The limitations of this approach can be in *stereotyping* family and domestic violence presentations. This can be addressed through careful consideration within the debrief to apply frameworks for assessment and critical thinking skills rather than simply applying technicist skills with self-reflection.

Example two (Author 1):

My approach to SBL uses peer-based role-plays supported by established case-scenarios developed with the intention to support critical social work in interpersonal practice. This assessment is used in two communications for social work units in a critical social work program: 1) a second year first semester undergraduate social work and human service course; and 2) a first year Master of Social Work Qualifying course with a focus on developing communication for interpersonal practice. This is a formative assessment that is not graded; however, it is linked to a reflective evaluation assessment piece that is worth 40% of students' grade.

In this process, SBL is used to prepare students for interpersonal practice with people experiencing the impacts of trauma, bereavement and crisis from alongside Brown and MacDonald's (2020) critical clinical perspectives on interpersonal practice. Attention is given to centralising social justice in the practice-based interaction and creating the scaffolding for students to develop a social and political analysis and use of critical skills for interpersonal social work practice (e.g., normalising, validating, consciousness raising and critical questioning) as a priority. There are three key components to this simulated pedagogical approach:

- the development of the case-scenario filtered through a critical theory lens;
- a response-based approach, prioritising critical skills for practice; and
- role-play reflective and reflexive evaluation.

The commentary below provides a brief explanation and analysis of how I facilitate this process to support students to think critically when conceptualising interpersonal responses.

Case-scenario development

The scenarios are informed by empirical and practice knowledge with a focus on highlighting, as authentically as possible, a real-life situation relatable to practice that requires the assistance of a social worker or human service worker. Consideration of social, political and cultural aspects of the scenario are thoughtfully and intentionally embedded in the scenario using terms relevant to the: 1) identity of the person; 2) their cultural background; and 3) the social and political context of the situation. From my experience, it is favourable that the gendered identity (e.g., cis, trans, non-binary) of the service user is purposefully highlighted in the scenario to support students' recognition of diverse genders and sexualities as identified in queer pedagogy (see Kaighin, 2020). This is not about problematizing gender identity or sexual orientation but, rather, moving beyond the male/female gender binary in case-study role-plays.

Cultural background is explicitly added with the name chosen being relevant to an archetypal (i.e., commonly presented) as opposed to stereotypical (i.e., commonly assumed) representation of culture within the context (see Carruthers, 2023). For example, for the purposes of developing awareness of cultural diversity, when the scenario presents a situation with a person from a diverse cultural background, it is useful to use a name that is common to support familiarity to the context—however, it is also important to avoid essentialising culture or reinforcing discursive stereotypes and therefore risking representations that might be offensive or derogatory. Sensitivity and discernment provide an opportunity to model cultural safety (see Duthie, 2019) through this consideration in the development of the case-scenario.

In contrast to the consideration of cultural sensitivity, at times language is intentionally used to reflect dominant social discourses (e.g., the impact of neoliberalism, capitalism, sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.) power disparities (e.g., power imbalances that exist between key stakeholders) and discriminatory assumptions (e.g., assumptions about particular population groups or service user presentations).

This might mean using language (e.g., slang or colloquial terms) that is relatable to the dominant social context and discourse. My intention is to create a context that is conducive to critical deconstruction as part of a critically reflective and reflexive analysis, as such providing an opportunity for students to examine assumptions they might hold about practice and the people they work with as service users. The intentional framing is designed to support a deeper intersectional layering and implementation of useful fracture points for transformative insights to be realised.

Response-based approach using critical skills for practice:

Students are encouraged to adopt a response-based approach to interpersonal practice (see Hydén et al., 2016). I have prioritised response-based practice as it provides a solid framework for interpersonal practice with social justice as central to the focus of analysis and intervention. This approach builds from systemic and interactional approaches—linking microanalysis in face-to-face situations with broader critical analysis (Hydén et al., 2016).

In the context of this assessment, students are provided with the scenario immediately prior to completing the role-play demonstration and have approximately 5–10 minutes to look over the scenario, highlight certain points and prepare themselves contextually prior to completing the role-play demonstration. The reason for the limited timeframe is for students to avoid scripting their responses and therefore positioning the service user as the expert in the interpersonal interaction which allows for students to be guided by the service user (i.e., encouraging service user agency and self-determination), rather than their own solution-focussed assumptions that might position them more conservatively as the expert. There is a different theme for each weekly tutorial (e.g., grief and bereavement, crisis and assessment, gender sensitive work, gendered violence, homelessness, mental health and substance use). Students choose which topic week to complete their assessment and the lecture and reading materials prior to that week are based on building a foundation of knowledge, application and critique related to the topic.

Particular focus is given to the ways that students respond according to their conceptual understanding of the social, political and cultural analyses that are relevant to the topic, and the application of skills and how they might be used in ways that normalise social control positioning themselves as the expert or foster a social justice focus using the critical skills they have been exposed to in the course. For example, in a case-scenario relevant to responding to sexual assault drawing on a feminist perspective, it would be important to ensure that students' responses normalise symptoms associated with the impacts of sexual assault (e.g., hypervigilance, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, suicidal ideation) and recontextualise internalised assumptions of self-blame or shame. The importance of demonstrating that they believe the service user's account of the situation and reassuring the service user that what happened was not their fault warrants a well-developed analysis of gendered violence that skills alone would not facilitate.

Role-play reflective evaluation:

The role-play is a catalyst for reflective class discussion. Students are encouraged to explore what they did within the role-play demonstration and the rationale behind their responses focussing on how this reflects the critically reflective and reflexive criteria for the task and where the approach might have defaulted to a more conventional, technicist interaction. Through facilitated reflective group discussion following the demonstration, students are encouraged to recognise dominant social discourses, avenues for advocacy and potential directions for social and emancipatory change. Questions from the tutor, drawing on Fook's (2016) critical reflection approach are targeted toward unpacking students' assumptions that lead the dialogue in a particular direction. Furthermore, reflecting on how the response was (or could have been) informed by a more robust social, political or cultural analysis.

Discussion around skills might include what skills were prioritised and why. How these skills might have disrupted internalised oppression (e.g., shame and guilt), or how the use of certain skills at a particular time might reinforce these assumptions. Fundamentally, the opportunity for students to learn how to sit with discomfort, listen deeply, acknowledge and validate the service users' experiences of injustice can be incredibly powerful. All skills used in social work practice, critical or not, have the potential to empower or harm depending on how and when they are used in practice (Pease et al., 2009). The opportunity for students to recognise and critically evaluate their use of theory and skills in interpersonal practice builds a foundation for critical praxis (Carruthers, 2023). Students are graded on a written critically reflective and reflexive evaluation of the role-play with a focus on deconstructing key aspects of their role-play demonstration.

From my observation, students are often apprehensive about completing the role-play, particularly knowing they will not have access to the scenario until just prior to completing the role-play. However, they do understand the rationale for why this is important and can make clear links to how this supports them for their future practice, whereby they will have limited information (and sometimes inaccurate information) prior to meeting with a service user for the first time. Students attest that they learn not only from doing the role-play but also from watching their peers and engaging in the critically reflective discussion following the scenario. What strikes me is the ways they support each other in the process and at times when students become overwhelmed and go blank, the whole group rallies together in ways that demonstrate empathy and understanding, holding space for the student and providing supportive gestures and comments to encourage their peer. Students' feedback to their peers following the role-play is most often supportive and productive.

Some of the limitations of this approach include students' choice of topic, barriers for students with English as their second language, and confidence in the process. Sometimes students choose a topic that is specific to their own lived/living experience which can evoke an emotional reaction when seeing the scenario for the first time directly before the role-play. Students are encouraged to choose a topic that is not too close to their own lived experience if this is of concern.

Measures have been put in place to provide further debriefing and support in these instances. In addition, for students with English as their second language it can be confronting to have to read and translate the scenario in a short space of time and this can lead to misunderstandings. Care is taken to encourage students to ask clarifying questions and extra time is provided where needed. Furthermore, students can become incredibly nervous about completing a role-play within the simulated environment and this can result in implications for their confidence and performance. Care is taken to normalise the artificial context and assure students that their performance in the role-play is not reflected in their grade.

When SBL is delivered with thoughtful discernment about the ways it can be developed and delivered to facilitate critical learning, as shown in the above examples, it can be useful to support the broader aims of social work. Our discussion focuses on why this is important for social work and supports accountability of pedagogues to consider the ways that simulated learning is used to transform social work students' understanding and to develop their capacity for emancipatory practice.

Discussion

Simulation education can be a valuable tool for developing and enhancing skills, knowledge, and critical thinking in social work education (Meredith et al., 2023). When utilising simulation, it is essential to consider the specific expectations and challenges experienced by social workers in the field, including the need for culturally sensitive and inclusive approaches. From our experience, it is essential to approach simulation with cultural humility, consider the unique Australian context, and promote social justice and inclusivity. Engaging with the social and political complexities inherent in social work by championing anti-oppressive practice is a starting point. Morley and O'Connor (2016) would suggest the focus on technical skills detracts from practitioners' ability to establish a broader vision of social work as emancipatory.

When adopting a critical approach to SBL, as has been demonstrated in our examples, it is not enough to combine technical skill building with self-reflection and call it critical practice. This is a fundamentally flawed logic considering the demonstration of skills and reflecting on how they align with social work practice does not require students to adopt a critical lens. Critical education does, however, require students to consider their position of power in a given situation, recognise the social, political and cultural implications of suggested interventions and fundamentally requires a focus on emancipatory change (Mullaly & West, 2018). The point here is that 'skills', in and of themselves, are not enough.

The expectation for social work practice to adhere to technical rational competencies is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, technicist approaches create the view that "practice is somehow unaffected by the dominance of neoliberal, capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal and medicalised influences" (Morley et al., 2014, p. 184), and secondly, separating theory development and practice offers little scope for questioning or challenging how we apply theory to practice (Healy, 2014). Therefore, simulation-based education that encourages a theoretical basis for practice that is critically informed is a way to avoid unintentionally informing practice from a "politically conservative" or "politically neutral" standpoint (Morley et al., 2014, p. 184).

Rossiter (2019) suggested the separation of theory and practice offers little scope for questioning dominant social forces and power relations by which social work continues to be a colonising force. As such, the linking of critical analysis (theory) and response-based action (practice) is crucial if, for example, assessing service user presentations and engaging in interpersonal practice is to be oriented towards social justice.

If SBL is positioned as a transformative approach to social work education as identified by Nimmagadda and Murphy (2014) who referred to simulation as "a pedagogy using a real-world problem in a realistic environment to promote critical thinking, problem solving, and learning" (p. 540), our examples above provide some guidance as to how this can be implemented. For example, a critical approach to SBL would consider the ways that interpersonal approaches in social work can promote self-determination and agency and raise conscious awareness of the social and political forces people and practitioners are required to navigate in their everyday lives through anti-oppressive, critical clinical and response-based approaches (Brown & MacDonald, 2020; Hydén et al., 2016; Mullally & West, 2018). In addition, to resist the conservative assumptions that position practitioners as the expert in the interpersonal relationship and, instead, foster a collaborative alliance (see Brown & MacDonald, 2020). A unique feature of a critical approach to SBL is that it positions interpersonal work as *part of*, not *separate from*, advocacy and social action reinforcing the understanding that, in social work, the personal and political are inextricably linked, which is reflected in our examples of SBL. What this highlights are the ways that, despite the different modes (e.g., virtual and in-person), SBL can be used as a means to transform society through the development of students as activist practitioners by supporting their ability to develop a solid social, political and cultural analysis leading to socially just action.

Drawing on MacGill and Whitehead's (2011) suggestion, one way for SBL to move from a technicist-oriented approach supported by self-reflection to a socially transformative educative praxis, would be for educators to inform their SBL approach with critical pedagogy. The value of incorporating critical pedagogy into the SBL pedagogical approach has been put forward to encourage the incorporation of social cues within simulations that assist students to learn how to resist mainstream assumptions of social work born out of a neoliberal agenda, and rather, develop a broader social, political and cultural analysis (MacGill & Whitehead, 2011).

Using critical pedagogy as a foundation, educators would need to be reflexive in their education practice, critically reflecting on their own personal, social, political and cultural assumptions to ensure that socially just practice is central to the simulated scenarios. In addition, ensuring that the foundational education preparing students for the simulation experiences is critically focussed, discussions are both critically reflective and reflexive and that interpersonal practice is situated as more than simply therapeutic and is equally a catalyst for advocacy and activism.

Conclusion

This paper has explicated, through the use of examples, the possibilities for SBL to move beyond a technicist approach for skill building and self-reflection and become a foundation for a more critically reflective and reflexive approach to social work education. It speaks to the ways that simulation can be used to further the aims of a neoliberal agenda by focussing on technicist and narrow, evidence-based competencies, or, alternatively, as a means for transformative educative praxis. The examples born out of our own use of simulation in social work education, demonstrate *practically* the ways that SBL can be developed and delivered. Highlighted are the ways SBL is used to assist students to examine, resist and contest the influence of dominant systems and structures that perpetuate inequality, individualised explanations of social problems, their own reflexive societal conditioning and cultural assumptions as they develop their framework for socially just practice. This paper evidences the potential for simulated learning to be used more intentionally as a way to develop social work students' capacity for critical praxis and to encourage emancipatory practice.

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