Making it Real: Socially Just Simulation for Transforming Social Work Education

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Abstract

Simulation is a well-established experiential learning approach in social work education that allows students to explore and practise new skills in a controlled and supportive environment prior to real-world application. Emerging research suggests that simulation learning can support students to engage with, and embody, social justice values in their practice. Yet, to date, few studies have examined the use of simulation to help students understand and apply social justice principles and disrupt business-as-usual practices which contribute to oppression. Designing and implementing simulations that are socially just is a critical responsibility for social work educators. Without adequate application of social justice values in the development and running of simulation learning experiences, there is a risk of inadvertently reproducing social norms that perpetuate discrimination, marginalisation, and stigma. Reinforcing such norms in simulations negatively impacts students and educators from marginalised backgrounds and limits opportunities for social justice-oriented learning. In this article, we describe the concept of "socially just simulation" and provide examples and tensions from our teaching practice to illustrate how simulation learning can foster critical consciousness among social work students concerning issues such as decolonisation, intersectionality, and regenerative practice. We conclude by considering how simulation design can draw on knowledges that disrupt stereotypes, resist discrimination, and facilitate collaborative responses to real-world issues, offering new insights on the potential for simulated learning to realise the transformational mission of social work.

Keywords: *Social work pedagogy; Social justice; Simulated learning; Intersectionality; Sustainability; Indigenisation; Decolonisation*

Introduction

Uses of simulation in social work education must embody contemporary social justice values that ethically represent the diverse communities where social work practice occurs. Simulation-based learning (hereafter "simulation") is a well-established tool in social work education (Doel & Shardlow, 1996; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Simulating situations and tasks encountered in social work practice involves the "creation of a hypothetical opportunity that incorporates an authentic representation of reality … and integrates the complexities of practical and theoretical learning with opportunity for repetition, feedback, evaluation, and reflection" (Bland et al., 2011, p. 668). The value of simulation for social work education lies in its capacity to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and social work practice (Kourgiantakis, Bogo et al., 2019; Kourgiantakis, Sewell et al., 2019; Tufford et al., 2018). However, the authenticity of such representations and what is effectively simulated tends to be assumed rather than examined. Despite its widespread implementation, social work education has engaged in relatively little critique of whether simulation design and application meet this professional commitment (Joseph, 2021).

In this article, we discuss *socially just simulation* as a pedagogical response to the challenge of making learning activities real: simulating authentic representations of practice that engage with current, real-world issues consistent with social work's commitment to social justice. We offer three examples of ways we apply social justice values in simulations for social work education. In the first example, we share the development of simulations that aim to decolonise, Indigenise, and promote sustainable and regenerative social work practice. The second example explores communication skills training (CST) and implementation of "own-problem" over role-play as a more nuanced and socially just option, reducing risks of oppressive stereotyping in the classroom (Joseph 2021). The third example explores a broader imaginary of what constitutes simulation, focused on non-immersive and extended simulation, which spans multiple teaching sessions. We conclude by considering how simulation design and implementation can draw on knowledges that disrupt stereotypes, resist discrimination, and facilitate collaborative responses to real-world issues. Such responses engage with real-world complexities of simulating authentic social work realities, interactions, issues, and practices that realise the transformational mission of social work.

Background

Simulations in social work allow students to engage with complex real-world situations and genuine issues, including relatively uncommon and critical scenarios, while minimising harm to service users (Beddoe et al., 2011; Roberson, 2020; Sewell et al., 2023). It offers learners a greater sense of security to explore their vulnerability in a supportive learning environment (Doel & Shardlow, 1996). The benefits of simulation have been realised across multiple fields of practice in social work, including interprofessional collaboration in health (Kuehn et al., 2017; Manning et al., 2016), mental health (Gellis & Kim, 2017), substance use (Sacco et al., 2017), child safety (Pecukonis et al., 2016), and domestic violence (MacDonnell et al., 2016) as well as qualifying social work education (Carter et al., 2018; Rogers & Welch, 2009; Tompsett et al., 2017). More recently, the potential of using various technologies for simulation social work education has been explored (Asakura et al., 2020; Jefferies et al., 2023).

Despite the multi-level nature of social work internationally, the predominant focus remains on micro-level interpersonal CST in single-episode consultation, often involving human-based or computer-based simulated "client" (e.g.. Bogo et al., 2012; Dodds et al., 2018; Egonsdotter & Israelsson, 2024; Jefferies et al., 2023; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2023). The notion of the standardised scenario, imported from medical education, has focused on clinically oriented practice, student demonstration of knowledge, accuracy in problem assessment, and technical fidelity to intervention skills (Asakura, 2024; Gellis & Kim, 2017). Multi-phase simulation exercises, a feature in disaster management education (Corbin, 2018), are rarely discussed (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020).

While using simulated or standardised *clients* is a long-standing practice, ways that simulation design and implementation portray people's lives have not been critically interrogated until very recently (Asakura, 2024; Joseph, 2021; Lee et al., 2022). Educator inattention to ways that simulations are designed, rendered, and performed uncritically, results in scenarios constructed from essentialised and abstracted client stereotypes. This arrangement reproduces ideas of an idealised, neutral professional self and a pathologised, Othered client, which is reinforced by competency-based, standardised methods of simulation which frames the social work role as "wielding a clinical interpretation" and imposes social control through assessment, formulation, and intervention (Joseph, 2021). In this way, the pathologised client is appropriated for professional preparation and skill acquisition, mostly divorced from the political, cultural, and historical contexts in which social problems are manifested. Such approaches rarely acknowledge or problematise how simulation design or implementation becomes complicit with social injustice (Joseph, 2021, p. 1410). In glossing over these contexts, traditional simulation experiences risk not adequately preparing students to recognise and respond to experiences of racism, ableism, colonialism, and classism. Further, it risks the erasure of marginalised identities and the perpetuation of the ongoing injustice and harm these identities experience (Joseph, 2021). Professional authority to name experiences in the form of wielding clinical interpretation can perpetuate epistemic injustice in parallel to more readily recognised structural injustices (Fricker, 2017). These injustices can have immediate impacts in micro-aggressions for students and educators whose experiences intersect with the simulation scenario, alongside perpetuating negative stereotypical assumptions about people when students "arrive" in practice (Asakura, 2024). Given social work's keen interest in developing a socially just pedagogy (Asakura et al., 2022; Nicotera, 2019) to educate students for socially just practice (Ortega & Garvin, 2019), the limited scholarship on how to incorporate social justice theory and values effectively and appropriately in simulation-based learning is surprising.

Perpetuating stereotypes, even inadvertently, is not authentic to social work values nor are they authentically representing reality. Encouragingly, there is growing interest in creating and using a more comprehensive range of simulation scenarios that more closely reflect the diverse individuals and communities who encounter social workers (Asakura, 2024; Lee et al., 2022). Achieving this requires attention to the design and conduct of simulations that intentionally depart from and challenge stereotypes of service users. Such work includes collaborative work with First Nations communities to co-construct curriculum resources (Bennett et al., 2017), which presents a method for engaging with communities that encounter social workers and human services organisations.

Schreiber and Minarik (2018) and Logie et al. (2015) highlighted the need for social work educators to integrate diversity into their simulation scenarios, equipping students with essential skills to effectively engage with service users with distinct needs stemming from different backgrounds and circumstances. A recent scoping review of simulation in social work education found that just over one-third of the included studies addressed issues of culture and diversity (Kourgiantakis, Sewell et al., 2019). While this development is encouraging, there remains a lingering concern that such efforts to integrate diversity remain uncritical, solely aimed at presenting an image of populations social workers engage with, and become tokenistic exercises included to meet accreditation or other representation requirements. To support a more critical approach, Joseph (2021) highlighted the need to ensure simulation development and implementation is theoretically informed by critical, intersectional social justice theories.

Making it Real – Socially Just Simulation

This article addresses two interconnected pedagogical concerns: (1) how to ensure social work simulation-based learning is socially just; and (2) how to enhance real-world authenticity of simulation-based learning in social work. The focus on ensuring social justice and authenticity in social work simulation raises critical questions for educators: what do we need to simulate, what are we *actually* simulating, *and why* are we simulating it? These invite critical dialogue around what knowledges and lenses are privileged in design and implementation phase of simulations, learner and educator positionalities, and how we explicitly integrate interrogation of social and cultural operations of power and privilege. These questions connect with workings of implicit and hidden curriculum (Rossouw & Frick, 2023). Without a critically reflexive lens, the risk is that simulation becomes a practice of abstraction and rote replication of oppressive stereotypes, where scenarios and characterisations remain soaked in prevailing colonial, neoliberal assumptions. This replicates and consolidates damaging assumptions of people who encounter social workers through the educational experiences of future social workers as students. As Joseph (2021) argued, "this pedagogical practice cannot continue without acknowledgement of the harms it advances and the complicities it permits" (p. 1409).

The following discussion outlines and reflects on instances where we have endeavoured to ensure that simulations are both authentic and socially just within the context of the Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) and Master of Social Work (Qualifying) courses at University of Tasmania (UTAS). Our team positionalities traverse First Nations, White, straight, queer, diverse genders, settler-colonial and migrant histories and experiences, and an array of practice backgrounds. We express our collective commitment to greater social equity in our teaching practice, which includes a collaborative approach we have developed to sustain critical reflexive practice as we design, implement, and review all our teaching, including the simulation examples discussed here.

Positioning Our Pedagogy

Our efforts to design and apply social justice principles to simulation have been led by a program-wide agenda to transform our teaching and learning practices by decolonising and Indigenising our curriculum and engaging a depth education pedagogical approach. Within our team, Baltra-Ulloa and Vincent (2023) have detailed the evolution of this agenda and the institutional challenges and opportunities that have hindered and supported efforts to decolonise and Indigenise social work education at UTAS. At their core, these efforts have aimed to disrupt the status quo by addressing three primary challenges identified by our social work program in advancing socially just education: White superiority, White fragility, and cultural humility (Baltra-Ulloa & Vincent, 2023, pp. 6–7). White superiority, the uncritical privileging of Western worldviews, undermines efforts to decolonise and Indigenise social work, as it reinforces the notion that Western perspectives hold ultimate authority. Since Australian social work remains firmly rooted in Western knowledge (Walter & Baltra-Ulloa, 2019), efforts to incorporate non-Western epistemological and ontological traditions risk being, at best, tokenistic or superficial.

Depth education is a transformational pedagogy that prioritises learning and unlearning, engaged cognitively, affectively, and relationally to encourage learners to "step back and observe with scepticism one's personal narratives, desires, and identifications and disidentifications" (De Oliveira Andreotti, 2021b, p. 64). By contrast, mastery education as the dominant Western educational approach focuses on flattened, standardised content and maximising individuals' economic value within narrowly defined goals (Stein et al., 2024). Depth education invites students to step outside of narrow White superiority to engage with complex and intersectional difficulties and uncertainty in real-world contexts of radical change. hooks' (1994) groundbreaking work, *Teaching to Transgress*, proposed a similar *pedagogy of freedom* wherein teaching and learning approaches are used to challenge prevailing social and cultural norms that paralyse efforts to progress and achieve social justice. These norms collide across and within intersectional identities and constellations, engaging simultaneously with restraints created through sexism, ableism, cis-heteronormativity, ageism, and classism, to create injustices. Depth education challenges students to connect with notions of authenticity at personal, relational, and collective dimensions, beyond superficial focus on tasks or "bits" of knowledge. In the social work program at UTAS, we have sought to put depth education into practice, guided by a vision for enabling an intersectional, socially just future.

Example 1: Developing Simulations for a Regenerative Future

The following example of teaching practice showcases our efforts to advance our commitment to socially just learning experiences through a simulation focused on regenerative social work. The simulation is situated in the *Social Innovation, Sustainability and Regenerative Social Work* unit offered in the 3rd year of the BSWHons and the 1st year of the MSWQ (for a detailed description of this unit, see Baltra-Ulloa & Vincent, 2023). This unit was the product of cultural change in both the social work program and the broader institution, focused on advancing commitments to decolonisation and Indigenisation, and prioritising sustainable and regenerative futures in lutruwita/Tasmania and beyond.

Applying depth education, it seeks to reshape students' understanding of social work's engagement with the non-human world, encouraging them to unlearn and challenge their Whiteness to draw from the array of possibilities inherent in diversity. In this unit, the realities students engage with in simulation are present-to-future oriented. They address the authentic present issues of responding to climate crisis and colonisation, then challenge students to imagine how social work practice may become sustainable and regenerative.

The unit is built around a flipped classroom model, consistent with the teaching approach to all our social work units, where recorded lectures or small "provocative propositions" (Sharp & Dewar, 2017) prepare students for interactive learning in tutorial or workshop sessions. These provide opportunities for students to engage with contradictions; instances in which currently accepted knowledge in social work would potentially short-circuit the chance for sustainable, regenerative practice to exist. For example, the inherent contradictions of White privilege, which often promotes a mode of social work that uses its power and privilege to help the less privileged, are critically explored and tested against the principles of sustainable and regenerative social work practice, which seek to dismantle systems of privilege entirely to eradicate social inequity and injustice.

The unit content includes global and local case studies of sustainable and regenerative practice, ranging from real-life examples to simple, playful explorations of "what ifs" (Sharp & Dewar, 2017), that seek to challenge traditional business-as-usual approaches in social work practice. Included case studies provide examples of: (i) social or cultural work from any field of practice informed by whole systems thinking; (ii) First Nations knowledges; and (iii) interaction with Nature as a healer and holder of knowledge, wisdom, and science. For example, "What if we could work outdoors regularly, walking and talking instead of counselling people in offices for a restricted period?" These help students envisage sustainable and regenerative practice and what it can look like within a framework of decolonisation and Indigenisation. Following students' engagement with this content, we offer an embodied pedagogy through simulations that enable students to collaborate, cultivate a sense of agency, critically reflect on conventional social work practices, and begin to creatively envision what a sustainable and regenerative social work practice would look like, feel like, and be like (Lehtonen, 2012).

The Simulation: Imagining Responses to the Climate Crisis

The simulation has developed through two iterations since the unit's introduction in 2019. In the first iteration, we adapted elements of De Oliveira Andreotti's (2021a) "Education 2048 thought experiment" scenario to situate social work practice within the context of a future society on the brink of collapse. Students were introduced to a scenario outlining the global and local context spanning from 2018 to 2048. This context depicted humanity's denial of their impact on Nature, escalating social inequality, relentless environmental crises leading to wars, famine, pandemics, worldwide human displacement, economic crisis, and eventually, social collapse. Subsequently, students were asked to simulate sustainable and regenerative practices, working in teams in lutruwita/Tasmania as an imagined refuge island where millions of forced migrants were being resettled.

This simulation: (i) prompted reflexive discussions about the role of social work in addressing global challenges like climate change; (ii) established connections between social work practice and the impacts of environmental degradation on human wellbeing, as well as highlighting concerns over sustainability; and (iii) problematised the Eurocentric orientation of Australian social work practice (Baltra-Ulloa & Kostecki, 2024).

Following our experiences of the global COVID-19 pandemic and local environmental disasters such as the devastating flooding in Lismore, New South Wales, Australia, we recognised the need for the next iteration of simulation development. The purpose of this was to acknowledge the personal and visceral experiences that many students had as they grappled with the impacts of climate change occurring closer to home. We reconfigured the simulation to focus on the fate of four families being relocated from Lismore. Employing principles of futurist education, which involve the co-development of a vision for a better future in which ecological and social issues are sustainably and explicitly addressed (Lehtonen, 2012), the simulation exercises were embedded into every fortnightly workshop in the unit.

The future thinking encouraged collaborative exploration of new ideas, that could harness and support the growth and potential of a sustainable and regenerative social work practice. These ideas needed to challenge the current unsustainable and degenerative way of life, expand opportunities for bringing people and Nature together, and restore a culture of reciprocity and mutuality. Future awareness and future visions encouraged students to be creative and innovative in their responses to the simulated families they had been assigned to. This meant connecting sustainable and regenerative practices with a practice of stewardship over the whole planet, mindful of how social processes could foster a culture of living within planetary limits and with generational foresight and accountability.

Example 2: Practice, not Role-Play – Applying Own-Problem as Socially Just Design

Simulation, either in role-play or other interpersonal exercises, is a consistent feature of pre-practicum CST in social work education (Banach et al., 2018; Leveridge, 2003; Tompsett et al., 2017). The pre-practicum CST unit *Communication and Assessment Skills in Social Work* introduces students to a critical and relational approach to social work interviewing, founded in deep listening and critical self-awareness. The non-directive approach for the unit draws on person-centred, strengths-based, and narrative practices to enable students to integrate decolonising, Indigenising, and socially just concepts into interpersonal practice, not simply procedural competencies (Lee et al., 2022). The unit deploys a range of learning activities aimed at challenging stereotypical assumptions about others' lives, including case study discussions. However, when it comes to practising interview components, the learning activities employ an own-problem approach instead of role-play. While own-problem is neither new nor unique (Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2023; Wells, 1976), it removes one of the key factors contributing to oppressive practices in role-play simulations, that of the manufactured scenario which treats others' suffering in voyeuristic and stereotyping ways.

Joseph's (2021) critique regarding packaging and commodification of people's suffering for educational consumption in simulation scenarios demonstrated the ethical challenge of maintaining an intersectional and social justice lens in CST. Ethical issues equally arise in implementation, related to the tendency to resort to stereotype or caricature when students role-play an experience that is not their own. Challenges related to authenticity appear also in divergences between simulated and real-world practice in the context of CST, illuminated through conversation analysis studies (Niemants & Stokoe, 2017; Pilnick et al., 2018; Sikveland et al., 2022; Stokoe, 2013; Stokoe et al., 2020). Sikveland and colleagues (2022) argued that CST simulations often work from presumptions about communication effectiveness which may not match effective practices in real-world interaction. A key factor they identified that creates differences between real-world and simulation pertains to the level of interactional investment or "stake" in the conversation. Inauthenticity seeps into simulations where parties have less stake in the conversation and its outcomes (Sikveland et al., 2022).

Stake represents a significant pedagogical resource in the context of practising new skills before using them in real-world encounters, which falls on a gradient of low–high for all participants. Doel and Shardlow (1996) highlighted the benefits of lower stakes practice environments in building skills before stepping into real-world practice settings on placement. While own-problem simulation of interpersonal encounters still involves less stake than a real-world social work encounter, it occupies a higher point on the stakes gradient than role-play because the interviewee has an authentic personal interest in the matter. A person responding to questions about something that is genuinely their experience has less need to fabricate how this-character-who-is-not-themselves might respond (Stokoe, 2013) and consequently less prone to drawing on harmful stereotypes (Joseph, 2021). Where we implement experiential learning for students, we need to create brave spaces that support and encourage active experimentation while making simulations real enough to support students in practising the desired skills (Arao & Clemens, 2023).

The Simulation: Practice, not Role-Play

In querying what *real* we needed to simulate for this unit, the answer lay squarely in deep and effective listening, non-directive exploring of problems, and options for creating change. Inviting students to select their own problems for practising does not require simulating an abstract Other's suffering for student consumption, as is the risk in role-played scenarios. In the *practice, not role-play* approach for tutorial and assessment activities, students use their own personal experiences as the basis for skills practice rather than made-up scenarios. Tutorial activities in this unit use pair and trio activities – comprising roles of the listener/social worker, speaker/"service user", and observer/coach – to practise and then integrate the micro-skills of a non-directive and relational approach to one-on-one interviewing. These begin with activities linked to deep listening skills, progressing into exploring concerns and contexts, and setting the foundation for a first meeting with someone seeking help to engage in assessment and intervention planning. The pre-practicum practice skills unit has the dual role of building student interpersonal skills and establishing student readiness to embark on placement.

In tutorial and assessment activities, we guide students in selecting topics for interview that are real for them, but which are not a serious or crisis issue. This provides students with choice over the topic or experience they are willing to share within the tutorial group for learning, while also not constituting a severe matter requiring a response beyond the capacity of a fellow student's level of skills development. A comparison own-problem with role-play for CST (in psychotherapy) identified minimal differences in outcomes and determined that the key to skills development was active experimentation by students (Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2023). Building upon this insight, the choice most consistent with social work's commitment to social justice would be to use an approach that minimises oppressive exploitation of marginalised people's suffering. This reflection highlights the tensions experienced by social work programs and educators when aiming to develop socially just simulations in learning activities without creating fictitious and detrimental learning experiences when meaningfully grappling with the concepts of decolonisation, intersectionality, and regenerative practice and how these can be manifested in interpersonal encounters.

Example 3: Extending our Simulation Imagination – Multi-Phase Simulations

While the most well-recognised type of simulation in social work education is the one-on-one interview or session, this is only one of many types of social work activities or tasks. Numerous tasks, activities, settings, and roles can be simulated in the vast diversity of settings where social workers practise. The core pedagogical consideration is what real-world situation or activity you aim to simulate, what students will learn, and – critically for social work education – how and why we create these to be socially just and avoid reproducing oppression. In this third example, we explore uses of multiphase simulated activities to offer learning and practice opportunities for a diverse range of social work skills. In design terms, they have process similarities with disaster response simulations, where multi-phase design is applied to simulate a series of events and adaptive activity responses occur over time (Corbin, 2018). While such learning activities are likely familiar to social work educators, as noted earlier, they are rarely identified as simulations in the literature.

As with the more familiar types of simulations, the key pedagogical tasks are to identify what needs to be simulated and how to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Expanding our notion of simulation offers greater scope for educators to design learning and assessment activities that provide higher face validity for students through a closer reflection of activities undertaken in real-world practice, including taking advantage of elements of time that create a longitudinal simulation, in contrast with the single session snapshot. In this section, we discuss a different approach to imagining simulations: presenting a broader setting or scenario and creating a simulated social work process over a series of tutorial or workshop sessions. These simulations specifically ask students to apply knowledges and content to a manufactured work setting to gain practice in a range of social work tasks. In this context, the real-world features are being simulated through characteristics of the scenario and activities that students are asked to undertake, and the socially just is addressed via the embedded pedagogical efforts to design simulations that overtly address the issue of why we seek the use of simulations in social work learning.

The Simulations: Extended Simulations over Multiple Teaching Sessions

The final year unit 'Trauma and Justice' applies group-work skills for responding to people and communities impacted by traumatic events and experiences. Using a consistent case scenario over six weekly tutorials, the simulated practice experience offers a facsimile of real-world practice settings where such design work may occur over a series of weekly meetings. The sequential multi-phase simulation includes creating a proposal, managing funding or resource constraints, designing for social justice that integrates diversity and cultural humility, session planning, and facilitation skills for responding to group dynamics. The *real* features simulated in the design of these learning activities include constraints on time and resources commonly encountered in social work practice, ordinary concerns in people's lives where those lives and communities include intersectional identities, and the challenge to sustain a socially just approach to practice. The design of tutorial activities incorporates a progressive development of the simulation scenario, presenting students with successive anticipated and unanticipated developments. These draw on practice experiences and reflect ordinary processes and constraints involved in designing and implementing a groupwork project in response to an identified community need. It also incorporates the *real* of collaborating with colleagues to create and implement a successful and socially just group process (Ortega & Garvin, 2019).

The second iteration of the simulation in 'Social Innovation, Sustainability and Regenerative Social Work' also implemented multi-phase simulation in fortnightly workshops. Each session addressed key topics like 'Sustainable and Regenerative Micro-practice', 'Sustainable and Regenerative Collaborations', or 'Exploring Tools for Regenerative Social Innovation'. Working in small groups, students engaged in hands-on activities aimed at developing the skills and knowledge needed for sustainable and regenerative practice, considering the needs of every family and each of its members. The fortnightly focus on developing and expanding the simulation through the application of weekly online learning content prompted students to deeply explore future thinking, awareness, and visions (Lehtonen, 2012). Here, the simulation invited students to find ways to incorporate into their simulated family responses in ways which people could become active change agents, meaningfully influencing policy-making processes by being at the decision-making table, owning their ideas, and caring about how these ideas are implemented. Futurist education, in the context of this next development phase of the simulations, enabled students to develop an understanding that they can influence the future even if the status quo suggests otherwise (Wayman, 2009).

Implications for Social Work Pedagogical Practice

As educators, we are responsible for identifying what we need to be real enough to make experiential learning meaningful. In our teaching examples, the notion of *real* has included addressing the climate crisis as a central concern affecting everyone alongside drawing on other real-world practice experiences and tasks to create practice-near learning activities. This includes analysing the design, conduct, and impact of simulations for the hidden or implicit curriculum that crosses a line into perpetuating injustice for people with lived experiences of intersectional identities that may be simulated. We need to continue critically reviewing the *real* skills and applications that any learning activity aims to simulate – does this commodify others' suffering for consumption?

How can we learn to listen to challenging stories beyond our personal experiences in socially just and decolonising ways? Further, why do we seek to do all this work? Are there implicit blind spots that impede our efforts to create and carry out socially just simulated teaching and learning?

An ongoing topic of dialogue for the use of simulation in social work practice includes how to navigate the range of competing demands on social work education, aiming to prepare students for *any* eventuality or *all* eventualities. More broadly, a significant issue for simulations and social work education is the increasing demands on curriculum inclusions. This often takes the form of perceptions from multiple stakeholders, including students themselves, that students should experience or be exposed to specific situations before graduating. Such calls are frequently identified in discussions of marginalised experiences where service users wish professionals had more knowledge about their care needs and professionals wishing they had learned about identified domains during their degree courses. It would be nigh impossible for students to have exposure to all possible situations in the learning practice settings, with the alternative being that the topics would be so superficially addressed that they become meaningless, or courses would become unsustainably long. From a social justice perspective, it is vital also to interrogate what exposure really contributes to student learning and capacity to practise ethically as new graduates. Where such exposure has a clear pedagogical basis, our challenge as educators is how to create and conduct simulations that disrupt stereotypes, resist oppression, and facilitate collaborative responses to real-world issues.

Socially just simulations, grounded in real-world practice and collaboratively created with communities, can support students to develop transferable skills that help prepare them to respond skilfully to any eventuality. This approach leads to thinking about the pedagogical practices for designing simulations that resist stereotyping in design, acting, and responses. How do we authentically engage with lived experience communities to create learning environments where students can practise, get things wrong, and authentically build their skills authentically preparing them for real-world practice and avoid creating more harm through unexamined stereotypes? While beyond the scope of this article, these questions will be vital to the debate over simulation in field education and placement hours, where critical attention to hidden curriculum will be vital.

Bennett and colleagues (2017) presented a collaborative method to work with cultural humility with First Nations communities as knowledge holders to develop simulation learning activities. Todd (2012) proposed one way to rescue simulations from perceived or experienced scriptedness through drama techniques of improvisation to focus more clearly on the spontaneous and relational characteristics of social work encounters. Such approaches offer directions for imagining simulations that navigate between being real enough, as minimally contrived or artificial as possible, encouraging a spontaneous and non-scripted approach, while maintaining the safety net around students to engage actively in practising within a supported and supportive learning environment.

Conclusion

Social work education aims to induct students into embodying social justice values in their emerging professional practice. Social work education, likewise, needs to embody social justice values in how we design and conduct simulation-based learning, which includes monitoring for and changing pedagogical practices that may reproduce oppression. As social work educators, we need to work creatively and think incisively to identify what realness needs to be simulated, why we seek to simulate this realness and how to achieve this through applying social justice principles to avoid reproducing oppression in learning activities. The consistent feature of effective simulation-based learning experiences occurs when students are actively engaged – as experimenters in a simulated role and for observers actively involved in coaching and debriefing (Asakura et al. 2022; Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2023, Wells, 1976). These findings align with the advantages of experiential learning (Kolb, 2014). Our responsibility as educators lies in ensuring that activities, outcomes, and learning experiences are socially just, cease commodifying marginalised communities' suffering, and cease to replicate the persistent privileging of a singular way of knowing, being and doing in the world. By combining authenticity in practice-near learning activities, social justice oriented ethical design and implementation, and focusing on what *real* elements need to be simulated for the intended learning outcomes, we set the groundwork for learning through *socially just* simulations.

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