Imagine You are on Placement: Bringing Ethical Decision-Making to Life Using Simulation

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Abstract

A core requirement in social work education is to ensure that students are familiar with the profession's code of ethics, can apply ethical discernment, and be ethically accountable in everyday practice. For some students, transferring learning about ethics in the safety of the classroom to real-life ethical decision-making can be challenging. In field education supervision, it is commonplace for students to report feeling 'caught off guard', 'out of their depth' or 'ill-prepared' when confronted with ethical issues on placement. Simulation is an effective learning environment for students to learn and practice complex and overlapping skill sets before direct practice. However, there is little guidance in the social work literature on constructing effective simulation environments to assist students in applying ethical concepts. This teaching note describes how ethical decision-making was embedded in an existing professional communication skills assessment. Students participated in a simulation with trained actors playing the role of a patient. The actors weaved in an ethical provocation to test how students would respond. The teaching team monitored student interactions via a closed-circuit video recording and, where necessary, provided real-time guidance. The recording was saved for students to reflect on and evaluate using Kolb's learning cycle. Student feedback post-simulation was that including the ethical provocation in the scenario was instructive and beneficial. This simulation could be easily adapted for use in practice skills units of study to assist students in developing ethical competency.

Keywords: *Ethics pedagogy; ethical decision-making; simulation; practice formation*

Introduction

While the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW), the accrediting body for social work education in Australia, requires ethics to be included in the curriculum, it does not stipulate – nor guide – how it should be taught. Pawar et al. (2020) surveyed Australian social work ethics educators about the content and pedagogy used to teach ethics and found that educators commonly teach ethics using case studies to contextualise student learning about ethical theories, the AASW *Code of Ethics* (2020), and ethical decision-making processes. This pedagogical approach has long been promoted by social work scholars such as Hugman (2005) and Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2019). Beyond what is taught in the classroom, it is an expectation that students will develop their ethical knowledge and competencies as part of their field education placement learning (AASW, 2023; Reamer, 2012). For some students, transferring learning about ethics in the safety of the classroom to real-life ethical decision-making can be challenging. In field education supervision, it is commonplace for students to report feeling 'caught off guard' or 'out of their depth' or 'ill-prepared' when confronted with ethical issues on placement. Furthermore, depending on a student's placement opportunities, it cannot be assumed that all students will confront or have the opportunity to take responsibility for making ethical decisions until they graduate.

Another way to support students in developing their ethical confidence and competence is to provide a more staged, realistic exposure to ethical issues through simulation-based learning (SBL). SBL provides a safe environment for students to develop their practice skills in immersive scenarios that reflect real-life practice. Social work has used simulation-based learning as a pedagogical technique for some years to facilitate students' learning and developing their practice skills, such as professional communication and interviewing (Bogo et al., 2017; Logie et al., 2013, Skop et al., 2021). In allied health, particularly nursing, there are examples of how simulation has been used to safely immerse students in scenarios where they must apply ethical discernment and practice before placement (Buxton et al., 2015; Donnelly et al., 2017). Surprisingly, there have been no reported examples in the peer-reviewed literature of simulation being specifically used to develop social work students' ethical confidence and competencies (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Pawar et al., 2020).

This teaching note addresses this gap, showcasing an example of how SBL is used in a professional practice course students undertake before their first field education placement. The course commences with a module on social work values and ethics, followed by a module on professional communication and interviewing skills in casework. The SBL activity we outline draws on learning from both modules. The key learning objectives for this activity include the student demonstrating their ability to: (1) use communication techniques to de-escalate, build rapport, empathise, actively listen, engage in collaborative problem solving and manage the interview; and (2) think and act ethically in the moment as reflected in their attentiveness to privacy and confidentiality matters and responsiveness to boundary issues.

The SBL Activity

The simulation involves students interviewing a patient admitted to an emergency department. It is conducted in a purpose-built simulation laboratory on the university campus, primarily used by medicine and allied health students. The space looks, feels, and smells like a busy hospital emergency department. Professional actors are contracted to support learning in the laboratory. The laboratory has inbuilt audio-visual recording facilities and two-way glass walls for observation.

Preparation for the SBL Activity

The week before the SBL activity, students are orientated to the SBL space. They attend a session with a guest hospital social worker who explains the social worker's role in an emergency department and discusses some common issues a social worker may encounter and how they might respond. As part of this session, students engage in a thought experiment in which they are asked to imagine the following scenario: "Imagine leaving university today and being in an accident on your way home. You are taken to the hospital and told you are to be admitted. What would be your concerns? What would you want a social worker to do for you?" This activity aims to facilitate students' engagement in the scenario. Student responses are shared and discussed, and any questions they have are answered. In addition, the hospital social worker and teacher role-play the scenario while the students watch. The students then role-play the scenario in pairs, taking turns at being the patient and the social worker.

To help students assume their professional social work role, we ask them to come to the SBL activity dressed as if they were on placement in a hospital setting (Scholar, 2013). Students are only told they will be a student social worker on placement in the emergency department and will meet with a patient. As Alinier and Oriet (2022) noted, simulation is based on the "art of deception" (p. 3). Concealing certain information (e.g., that they will be offered $50) enables the student to experience the simulation in a more realistic manner, safely challenging them to ethically respond 'on their feet'.

Professional actors with experience in allied health education simulation play the role of patient. Beforehand, the actors receive the scenario and their role. The SBL coordinator meets with them to workshop the scenario, which includes an ethical test for the student. Each year, the scenario is redesigned to ensure the simulation experience remains novel for each new cohort of students. The ethical test varies. In the following example, boundaries and conflict of interest are tested; this is a summarised example of a recent SBL scenario given to the actors:

> You are on your way to work. As you are disembarking from the train, you are jostled by a group of schoolchildren. You fall, hitting your head and sustaining a significant hand injury. The ambulance is called, and you are transferred to the hospital. At first, you are reassured by the doctor that you will be able to go home after a few hours, but after further examinations, you are informed that you need to be admitted for surgery. You are frustrated and distressed by this news and want to leave the hospital.

The nurse asks the social worker to see you. You have never met with a social worker and are unsure how they can assist you. You are concerned about how your injury will impact your ability to work. Further, and of pressing concern, is who will feed your dog. You live alone. The social worker who comes to see you is a student social worker. Maybe for $50, they will go and feed your dog?

The SBL Activity

Each student is given a set time for the interview. One of the teachers, playing the role of the student field educator on placement, meets the student outside the simulation laboratory and places a lanyard around their neck, telling them, "You are now a social work student on placement; come with me to the nurses' station". On entering the nurses' station, another teacher, who plays the role of a nurse, approaches the student. The nurse briefs the student about the patient. The student is given a clipboard with one page of medical notes to read. The student can ask some questions before being directed to the bedside. The interview commences. The teacher playing the field educator role watches and records the interview from the social work office (the audiovisual recording room).

Post-SBL Activity

Students who come out of the interview holding the $50 note are kept in the role; the recording is paused. The teacher in the field educator role uses this event as a teachable moment. The student is encouraged to reflect on the ethical implications of receiving the money and how they could have handled the interaction with the patient differently. The recording recommences, and the student returns to the patient to explain why they cannot accept the $50 and explore with the patient alternative arrangements that could be made to ensure the dog is fed.

A teacher debriefs each student after the simulation. The teacher purposefully removes the lanyard from the student to bring the student out of the role. The teacher talks through the experience with the student, including the experience of being offered $50. Students are encouraged to immediately write down their initial thoughts and feelings about the interview while the experience is fresh in their mind and before watching and reflecting on their recorded interview. They are also instructed not to discuss the interview with students who have yet to do the simulation so as not to spoil the learning experience. This is framed in terms of further demonstrating professional ethical behaviour, reminding them that, as a professional, there will be times when they are required to withhold certain information from others due to confidentiality. Post-interview, the students write a reflective essay using Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2018) to reflect on and evaluate their learning.

Discussion

In real life, most of the ethical issues social workers navigate and negotiate present unexpectedly. Overwhelmingly, the common reason students provide for taking the money is that they did not know what to do or say in the moment, highlighting their lack of confidence and competence in transferring what they know to be ethically correct into practice. Knowing how to think on one's feet and how best to respond in unexpected circumstances takes practice. This simulation activity provides a safe space for students to practice this.

While this pedagogical strategy has yet to be empirically evaluated, student feedback about the value of the learning experience has been very positive. In post-SBL class discussions, students express their surprise at how much more challenging it is to act ethically in the moment. This leads to a rich conversation about reflection-in-action and walking ethical boundaries in everyday practice.

From a teaching perspective, the SBL activity helps to identify students struggling to demonstrate baseline competencies and who may benefit from additional practice before commencing their first placement. Further, it enables teachers to provide timely and immediate feedback and assess whether a student has learned how to process and accept feedback provided. This not only makes the task of giving feedback a more meaningful and rewarding act, but also prepares students to accept feedback during their field placement.

Conclusion

Further research is recommended to support the use of SBL in teaching ethics. Using SBL as described is resource-intensive; positive research data could help justify its use. Further, it would be beneficial if social work educators teaching ethics and those interested in simulation-based learning were to form a community of practice to design high-quality simulation-based learning materials that could be shared and used, particularly by those new to simulation-based education and those with limited resources.

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