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Authenticity Over Risk Aversion: Defining Simulation in Australian Social Work Education

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Abstract

Simulation in social work education has only recently developed a following in Australia, with many social work educators and academics utilising a variety of approaches to teach micro practice skills. However, there is growing interest by Australian social work educators for broader use and understanding of simulation pedagogy. One hurdle in the adoption of simulated activities is the definition of simulation itself, with many educators unsure of the rationale for simulation, the benefit of simulation activities, the requirements of themselves as teaching staff, and the impact on students in their learning. A small group of educators initiated an analytic autoethnographic methodology to understand how social work educators were defining simulation, and then enacting the pedagogy. This reflective narrative seeks to inspire a national conversation into the various advantages of embracing, and adopting, a simulation pedagogy in Australian social work curriculum.

Keywords: *Social work education; Simulation; Student learning; Reflection*

Simulation is a pedagogical approach, supporting the development of learners in an authentic, replicated and safe environment. Simulation-based learning activities are used in many practice-orientated disciplines, usually in teaching and assessing technical skill acquisition (Eyikara & Baykara, 2017). Social work training has featured simulation, traditionally in the form of scenarios to develop practice behaviours through role-play (Bogo & Rawlings, 2016); however, there is a growing number of examples of simulation that utilise digital technology to immerse students into practice contexts (Goldingay et al., 2018; Harris & Newcomb, 2023).

Definitions of simulation are often borrowed from various disciplines for appropriation in social work education, and Australian experiences are limited in literature. However, with growing interest, Australian social work educators have been developing nuanced understandings underpinning the practice of simulation, enabling us to now elicit a deeper analysis of how simulation is currently constructed.

An Analytic Critical Reflective Methodology

To elicit a narrative understanding of how simulation is defined by a group of social work educators, the authors of this article engaged in a reflective narrative methodology, designed to elicit critical reflective discussion and debate. The methodology requires the researcher to be a full member of a research group, visible in published texts and accounts of the groups' undertakings and have a commitment to the development of theory as it relates to social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). In the quest to understand, not only the dominant definitions of simulation in social work education, but also the enactment of these definitions, drawing from collaborative analytic autoethnography approach to critical reflection, authors of the article, and participants, engaged in a reflective discussion surrounding the current dominant definitions and theoretical ideas, while testing each other's held assumptions and pedagogical beliefs. The group comprised an existing cluster of academics across universities formed to advance the focus on simulation in social work education.

The purpose of the discussion was to analyse participants' experience to form a suitable working definition for simulation in social work to assist educators utilising simulation. This discussion was recorded and transcribed and then individually analysed by all the participants involved. These individual analyses were then brought together in a reflexive discussion whereby the broader context of individual findings were synthesised into resultant themes (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). In collaborative autoethnography, this process is termed meaning making and is understood as a process of deep listening to individual narratives, which then go on to inform the questioning of assumptions and conclusions (Chang et al., 2012). Given the strong history of critical reflection, reflexivity and the focus on self-narrative in social work (Witkin, 2014), a collaborative approach to critical reflection logically provided a rigorous analysis method to the eventual findings reported on in this article.

Simulation both is, *and* is a representation of, *authentic practice realities*

The notion of simulation being a representation of an authentic practice reality centred on the extent to which examples from social work practice were able to be replicated in a teaching space. The connection between the reality and the representation became key to understanding simulation as a pedagogical approach, as Gerard noted, "[simulation can be both] genuine and replicating practice". As a representation of reality, simulation activities consider what is being defined as social work practice in a suspended space for students. As Mim reflected, simulation "sits in that imagination space ... what we're talking about is making it, it comes back to that word authentic, as real as possible".

Authenticity was viewed as multifaceted by the group, requiring consideration of multiple elements of practice, with the social work educators then reflecting on the ways authenticity was created and experienced by students during simulation activities. Sera explained that authenticity did not mean that practice examples needed all elements to be experienced together in real time, with aspects of represented practice being foregrounded or shadowed:

> Whether that is the environment, or whether that is, you know, the exchange, or the skills, or the smells, or whatever, but not necessarily bringing them all together all the time, like to actually have that separated, so that for a learner there's this opportunity to break things apart and put those components together.

Gerard agreed and added that simulated practice examples, "allows them [students] that opportunity to break it apart. But then practise it again. Develop confidence and competence". This element of repetition was linked to building confidence and reducing anxiety for placement and future practice, as Mark observed, interviewing students after doing the simulation and students saying, "I really would recommend to students to do it because it helps with both understanding some of the technical side of things, my position, but also yes, I can do this. Yes, I can step into this". Mim noted that simulation could not only be repeated, but also replicated: "We can all run the same simulation in our different universities and spaces." Students can repeat the same simulation activity, whereas, as Gerard recognised, in placement practice, "the same client is not going to walk through the door in exact situation", limiting opportunities for students to then practise from feedback and reflection.

Authentic representations of practice through simulations also included experiences that may not be available to all students throughout their programs, due to variations of placements or limited opportunities due to risk to students or service users. As Gerard pointed out, "Like some parts of practice, when students are on placement, they may get an observation, or at best an opportunity, to practise in that spot. So, if you think about a suicide assessment. Many students go through their degree and never see that".

The group acknowledged that simulation gave students' opportunity and space for critical reflection based on an embodied experience. Students could experience a replicated practice example and then critically reflect on their responses and actions.

In contrast to peer role-plays, where collectively students' primary reference points of social work practice may be from the learning space alone, the authenticity of the simulated example offered deeper learning. As Sera explained:

> Students have the opportunity to really think about the awareness about themselves of, you know, developing identity... and how it feels like to be in the moment. Of course, students are learning about practice on placement, but they're learning it in, you know, in context that is really difficult to pull apart. And in simulation, that's the freedom for students that those things can be layered, and that actually can remove a layer to really hone in on one particular area. Not necessarily just skill, but about the reflection-in-action on themselves.

Simulation requires intentional design that builds upon the social work learning journey

In defining simulation, the group of social work educators spoke at length on the ways planning, delivering and reflecting on teaching and learning through simulation was highly intentional in design. The scaffolding across subjects and years of a social work program gave scope for simulation to be designed in ways that situated the students' learning across time. As Gerard stated,

> [Simulation can be] scaffolded in the way it's like a student's own learning so depending on where they're at in their progression for the program that, you know, the complexity that's involved in a particular practice setting is mapped across where they are at in their learning.

This intentionality offered the educators the chance to carefully select practice examples and recreate contexts (both of direct and indirect social work) where students could develop holistically through a cycle of action, reflection and action, with feedback from sources such as peers, academics, actors, social workers or service users built into the simulation learning cycle. Mim reflected on the nature of this cycle, "It's embodied feedback in the way, the same way it is embodied experience. So, you watch students actually sit taller, being more confident in their practice, actually be able to become a practitioner in a different way."

Creating safety in the learning experience was reflected upon in nuanced ways, with the group observing that safety needed to be embedded in all aspects of the simulation design and learning cycle. Sera offered that in intentionally building safety in the learning experience, this also corresponded to how students needed to meet the activity, "There is a bit of bravery and courage that it requires, and I think that simulation really builds on that for students to sit in that uncertainty ... simulation [creates] discomfort! It's a safe discomfort." Safety in simulation activities was also understood as integral to the authentic experience of practice, so that students had genuine opportunities to know how they would move through practice examples as they began to identify as an emerging social worker.

In defining simulation, the group also unpacked teaching and learning strategies, such as role-plays, that may have elements of simulation, but not have the intentionally designed learning outcomes or cycles of feedback and debriefing. As Mark noted, "Frequently what we sort of see is that it's this sort of truncated experience, that students are having. They do the role play, but actually there isn't that much alongside that which is supporting students to integrate the experience."

Sera added,

> With role plays, or some of the activities where it's not really intentionally designed, it can be so superficial that you don't get to that point where students go to that growth edge where they're confronted with a consequence of what they said. And in simulation, we want those consequences so that we can learn from them.

Simulation is more than the experience gained from the activity and therefore needs to include a structured debrief where the learning is translated for practice outside of the activity.

A working definition of simulation

Two components of a working definition of simulation for social work education emerged from the collaborative process of analysis:

1) Simulation both is, and *is a representation of*, authentic practice realities.

2) Simulation requires intentional design that builds upon the social work learning journey.

The Implications for Defining Simulation in Australian Social Work Education

In exploring our collective experiences of simulation together, the group found a working definition of simulation in Australian social work education. In summary, simulation in social work education is a representation of authentic practice realities, which are inclusive of the organisational setting and broader policy contexts. An implication from this study requires that social work educators attend to intentional design simulation that builds upon the social work learning journey. To completely realise the potential that simulation has in Australian social work education more broadly, there would need to be a localised scaffolding and integration of program and field education curricular, alongside the student's own critical reflection and development of their professional identities. Once traction has been gained on a localised program level within individual universities, the possibility of a national approach, or a national curriculum for social work simulation, can be realised. It is at that point in the future that Australian social work education can be sure it is delivering high-fidelity pedagogy, an authentic real-world training ground for our future social workers.

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