

Editorial

Reclaiming Simulation for Social Work Education

Guest Editors: Sera Harris, Gerard Jefferies and Mark Lynch

There has been growing interest in simulation in social work education over recent years. While there can be several reasons for this, the Covid-19 pandemic critically signalled a time for broader rethinking of social work teaching and learning (Morley & Clarke, 2020), and simulation has increasingly begun to be recognised as a viable pedagogical approach. We note that simulation had been used in social work teaching and learning long before Covid-19 pushed us online. As pedagogy, as methodology – long before virtual or augmented reality, or artificial intelligence came into play – social work has used in-person role play as a form of simulation, bringing complex scenarios from practice into the learning space for students to unpack through a curated experience of it (Bogo & Rawlings, 2016; Heuer et al., 2022).

Broadly, outside of social work, simulation is a key pedagogical approach in higher education to enhance learning and development of practical skills. Bland et al. (2011) defined simulation as “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” (p. 668). Simulation is recognised as an authentic approach to teaching, learning and assessment, and has been found to provide a safe environment for students to make direct links between theory and practice (Lee & Peacock, 2020). Importantly for social work, simulation can be understood as “a technique – not a technology – to replace or amplify real experiences with guided experiences that evoke or replicate substantial aspects of the world in an interactive manner” (Gaba, 2004, p. i2), highlighting simulation as a pedagogy, not a technological platform, though it may use one.

Though field education has been argued as being the ‘signature pedagogy’ of social work, the use of simulation in its many forms offers learning from and in practice in all stages of social work programs. Simulation is much more than doing, or technical skill development, although it certainly is useful for that, as we see in many other disciplines. Simulation as a teaching approach comfortably nestles in the nexus between theory and practice. In preparing learners for practice education, simulation can offer a safe and supported experience of professional socialisation, rather than a ‘sink or swim’ approach or, at worst, the professional hazing in some less-than-positive placement experiences that students can have in long, unpaid placements.

Over the past few years, this editorial group along with Associate Professor Mim Fox, formed a small community of practice to share our insights into our use of simulation in our respective universities. We named our group the Simulation Practice Community (SPC) and have been meeting with the aim to create a supportive space to advance what we know about simulation as well as map how we can further develop and adopt simulation in social work education. When, as members of the SPC, we made the call for this Special Issue, it was a chance to find the others in social work education who also utilise and test simulation to bring practice and lived and living experiences into the education space, hoping to better prepare students for professional practice. Our objective was to hear from educators who design and use simulation, not only in preparing students for direct practice with individual service user interactions, but also in exploring simulation for broader contexts of practice. These contexts include the complex environments in which social work interactions occur – pressurised settings with competing demands, within bureaucratic neo-liberal organisations – as well as simulation within all social work settings, such as policy work, research, and community work. Beyond traditional role play, we sought to understand the expansive potential of simulation in social work education.

Through this Special Issue, we can glean what kinds of simulation we are currently using and what shared lessons readers can adopt in their own use of simulation, in preparing their students in, and for, practice. Because of this, you will see we have a range of articles as well as reflections and teaching notes that capture the emerging nature of our simulation practice. That is what is at the core of simulation and this Special Issue – sharing of experiences, learning and knowledge – from those who are engaging it right now.

The editor's choice for this issue is "A Blueprint for Domestic and Family Violence Education in Social Work Through Virtual Reality Design" by Schaffer et al. The authors articulate a plan for the use of virtual reality in education of domestic and family violence. The innovative approach for preparing students for responding to family and domestic violence highlights the practical benefits of simulation-based education. With simulation-based education being re-imagined within social work education, these findings will support educators and curriculum developers with the significant value that virtual reality simulations can provide.

The exploration of what defines social work simulation is then explored by Fox, and this editorial group. As a small community of practice of social work educators, we have come together in the reflection "Authenticity Over Risk Aversion: Defining Simulation in Australian Social Work Education" to explore how simulation can expose students to what is classified as high risk or highly complex in practice settings. We highlight that simulation can encourage students to explore their understanding and practice in situations that may present complexity or risk, rather than risk aversion.

The adoption of simulation is further advanced through multi-disciplinary team simulations as outlined in Lynch and colleagues' reflection: "Professional Identity Development in Field Placement Learning: Simulation and Student-led Conferencing" The paper discusses how the use of simulated medical case conference sessions within a multi-disciplinary team can support students' learning.

The model has evolved to trial a student-led approach to further develop interprofessional knowledge for students. This multi-disciplinary approach prompts further reflection and adoption to other contexts for social work practice.

A key benefit to the inclusion of simulation within curriculum is the support for students' practical skills prior to practice with service users. When preparing students for practice in highly emotive practice settings like forensics, Lattas and colleagues discuss in their article "Developing Simulation-based Learning for Forensic Social Work", the design process for such a simulation activity. Utilising a forensic case example, this paper outlines the framework utilised to set educational expectations for both student and educator. The findings highlight how exposure to authentically based simulation activities can enhance student capability for practice. It is also interesting to note the control of exposure in which the framework supports.

Looking back to the Covid-19 restrictions in Sydney, Australia, Fox's teaching note, "Teaching Social Work in Healthcare: A Covid-19 Simulation Guide" outlines a guide for an actor-based simulation learning activity based in a health care setting. Fox offers a rich and staged scenario, which includes student and actor briefings, highlighting the opportunities for feed-forward, feedback, and reflection. This guide is ready for application, though Fox suggests ways it can be adapted for other practice settings.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) within education is currently the topic of much scrutiny. Heinsch and colleagues' highlight an opportunity for AI to enhance virtual simulations, with their article "Enhancing Simulation in Social Work Education using Artificial Intelligence: Social Work Virtual". This article outlines a simulated learning experience designed to develop students' digital social work competencies coupled with the guidance of experienced clinicians. The simulation program featured showcases how AI, with well-scaffolded supports, might contribute to a 'risk free' environment which 'slows down' the learning, all while not causing potential harm to vulnerable clients.

Spencer and Drummond's teaching note, "Imagine You are on Placement: Bringing Ethical Decision-Making to Life Using Simulation" outlines a simulation activity which encourages the ethical competence and confidence of students before they attend their first field education experience. Their teaching note shares an example for educators to support students' application of ethical concepts into their emerging practice.

Scenario-based simulation teaching, which risks essentialising service users and situations of practice are explored in Canty and colleagues' article, "Making it Real: Socially Just Simulation for Transforming Social Work Education". Canty et al.'s research critically questions the traditional design of simulation scenarios, with consideration to the social work value and mission of social justice.

The final article in the Special Issue highlights simulation-based education as far greater than a tool for advancing and refining technician skills for professional practice.

Carruthers and Jefferies' article, "Critical Beyond Reflection: Simulation-based Learning in Social Work" outlines in practical examples, how simulation might be utilised so that students "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 article serves as a framework for educators to advance students' application and understanding of theory, through simulation-based education.

Social workers work with some of the most vulnerable people in the community. The role of social work education programs is to train ethical and capable graduates to promote social justice and support people facing complex social challenges. Complexity in practice is evolving, but so too is the process for preparing future graduates. Traditionally, social work has relied on field education to provide students with opportunities in practice skills development. However, with greater pressures on placements and supervisors, the development of practice skills varies across each field education experience. Simulation can play a strong role in achieving learning outcomes and allow students to explore practice scenarios before having to be entangled in them. Well-considered and carefully designed simulations offer a space for students to explore their emerging knowledge, skills, and identity as social workers in a context that is closer to the experience of real-world practice than the classroom can ever be alone.

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