Integrating Research on the Impact of Volunteering Following the Rena Oil Spill into the University of Waikato Social Work Teaching Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

On 5 October, 2011, the MV Rena ran aground off the coast of Tauranga, New Zealand, resulting in an oil spill along the nearby coastline. Some of the oil was removed from beaches by volunteers from the community organised by the Bay of Plenty Regional Council. Social work and psychology academics from the University of Waikato and Bay of Plenty Polytechnic researched the experiences of these volunteers. Students from their programmes, representative of the gender and ethnicity of the volunteers, conducted and transcribed qualitative interviews, reporting that their involvement as research assistants was valuable. The findings were used in class to educate social work students on disaster-informed community development and to teach critiquing skills. Students critiqued a presentation given by one of the researchers and discussed the impact of the oil spill on their communities and the role of community members in responding. They reflected on the response of tangata whenua (local indigenous people) and considered issues of human rights, social and environmental justice, and the disproportionate impact of disasters on specific communities. We learned that using real-world events to teach students about social work and acknowledging human connectedness to our broader social, spiritual and natural environment is central to social work discourse.

Keywords: *Oil spill; Volunteering; Disaster; Curriculum; Environment; Indigenous; Community Action; Research; Teaching; Social Work*

Real-world events hold great value in providing teaching opportunities for social work education. In this paper, we describe how we were able to incorporate learning from a local disaster into social work teaching and research.

On 5 October, 2011, the MV Rena ran aground on the Astrolabe Reef, 12 kilometres off the Bay of Plenty coast. This accident resulted in a spill of an estimated 350 tonnes of oil and marine diesel. Within a few days, the winds and tides dispersed the spill along the nearby coast-line, with communities waking to black tides. The people in Bay of Plenty communities and farther afield were determined to clean the beaches and, despite initial reluctance by the authorities, a volunteer programme was established to coordinate their work. Due to the quick response from local citizens and community leaders, volunteers cleared more than 1,000 tonnes of oily waste from Bay of Plenty beaches over a number of weeks.

Alongside this huge volunteer effort, a team comprising social work lecturers and psychologists approached the Bay of Plenty Regional Council, who were organising the volunteer response, to initiate research on the experiences of the volunteers. We undertook an online survey followed by in-depth interviews with volunteers (Sargisson, Hunt, Hanlen, Smith, & Hamerton, 2012; Hunt, Smith, Hamerton, & Sargisson, 2014). Ethical approval was gained through the School of Psychology Research and Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato and the research received some funding support from both the University of Waikato and the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic. The researchers combined their individual research experiences as well as their interdisciplinary professional knowledge in the research methodologies. One psychology academic contributed statistical expertise in designing the online questionnaire and analysing those data, while the other authors shared their skill in interviewing and thematic analysis, and in working with indigenous groups.

In this article, we begin by briefly describing our research, specifically focussing on the involvement of students as research assistants. We also describe how we have used the Rena research project in classroom teaching about both research and the role of social workers in disaster responses. Finally, we reflect on the importance of including disaster-related material in the social work curriculum, and how real-world disaster events can be used to make the curriculum immediately relevant to students.

OUR RESEARCH AND STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

In the initial phase of the research, we invited registered volunteers to complete an online survey. We then interviewed 39 volunteers and nine key informants involved in the management and organisation of the volunteer programme. We asked what had motivated them to volunteer and how volunteering had assisted individuals and communities to adjust to the situation they were facing. We learned about the contributions made by volunteers in the clean-up, and were able to make recommendations about the support that volunteers need to work effectively as part of a managed response (Sargisson, Hamerton, Smith, & Hunt, 2013).

In the interviews, participants reflected on cultural, spiritual, social, and environmental concerns. Many reported that participating in the clean-up had helped them deal with their emotional responses to the oil spill and provided them with a sense of control. As others suggest (e.g., Halpern, 1974; Lowe & Fothergill, 2003), our volunteers reported that volunteering was useful on both personal and practical levels, and also helped with information sharing and community building. As one person said:

[It was] useful on a whole lot of levels… it was healing for the people. It was healing for the land… if the people had been told they weren't allowed to be part of the clean-up process, I think it would have looked a lot different today… people would still be angry and bitter about all those things.

The Rena oil spill had cultural impacts, particularly for Māori communities, as the oil contaminated customary food sources and areas of historical and spiritual significance (Sargisson et al., 2012).

I think for us Māori, where I grew up down the road, there's still a lot of hurt and anger about what's been taken land-wise anyway… I think it was like, oh great, ruin some more of our beautiful resources. And just not having any control over what goes on.

We have an obligation to look after our natural resources. We are the guardians for future generations.

Māori communities were especially vulnerable to the effects of the oil spill, both because of their history of land loss and marginalisation, and also because they depend on kaimoana (seafood) for their economic and cultural wellbeing. After other oil spills, researchers have noted that communities which depend on environmental resources for their social, cultural, and economic existence are particularly vulnerable to disaster events (Ritchie, Gill, & Picou, 2011).

When designing our research, we included seven University of Waikato psychology and social work students as paid research assistants to carry out administrative tasks, interview volunteers, assist with focus-group interviews and transcribe audio-recorded interviews. We provided them with training in the research aims, interview process, use of recording equipment, and the research process in general. The students reported that this hands-on research experience was valuable, especially for those who were planning to progress to postgraduate study. In addition, the involvement of the students was critical to the process of gathering information in a culturally sound manner, as we were able to match interviewers with participants of the same ethnicity and gender. Māori students provided valuable cultural knowledge and assisted with focus groups on a local marae (a communal and sacred meeting place for Māori, the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand).

USING THE RESEARCH TO TEACH PRESENTATION SKILLS

Once we had completed the research with Rena volunteers, we presented our findings at a number of local, national, and international forums (Hamerton, Hunt, Sargisson, & Smith, 2013; Hunt, Smith, Sargisson, & Hamerton, 2013). In preparation for the Asia Pacific

Social Work Conference in the Philippines in June 2013, the third-year Bachelor of Social Work students who were enrolled in a community-development course listened to the presentation. They were asked to provide constructive feedback on content, timeliness, visual impact, and presentation style and to consider what made a presentation "good".

One of the social work researchers revised the presentation in response to the student feedback, and repeated the process with a different group of Bachelor of Social Work students. These fourth-year students were completing a course on social work decision-making and were preparing for their final assessment which was an individual 15-minute presentation on their semester's work to a symposium of their class-mates, other students and invited guests from the social services sector. The class topic the previous week had been preparing for presentations; students were invited to apply what they had learnt to critiquing the social work researcher's presentation in order to structure their feedback and deepen their learning.

Discussion following the presentation covered a broad range of relevant topics related to preparation for a particular conference setting and audience, the logic and structure of the presentation itself, and the presentation style. The student feedback assisted the researcher in polishing her presentation and also provided the students with an opportunity to experience the detail of what could be involved in preparing for a presentation themselves.

Biggs and Tang (2007) state that, to develop a "deep approach" to learning, educators need to elicit an active response from students which builds on their existing knowledge. Accordingly the students' learning was tested when presenting their own research. They needed to develop their own personal style of presenting, as well as to have confidence in their decision-making process and theoretical knowledge. It was envisaged that the students would draw personal meaning from the lessons learnt through the exercise of the presentation of the Rena research; we anticipated that they would then need to apply this new knowledge to their own presentations. In order to do this, they needed to develop their own critical analysis. Students all have their own learning styles and capabilities, so the variety of teaching methods used in this exercise enhanced wider student engagement and learning.

INCORPORATING OUR RESEARCH INTO THE SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM

Gray, Coates, and Hetherington (2013) state, "social work has expanded its theoretical considerations and practice interventions so that the physical environment, and human connectedness to the entire planet and all of life, became more central to social work discourse" (p. 4). The presentation to social work students about the Rena volunteer research provided an opportunity for them to consider the notion of environment as it applies to social work, including the concepts of ecologically responsible social work practice and deep ecology (Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Drengson & Inoue, 1995).

Māori worldviews emphasise the inter-connectedness of all life which has descended from common origins (Durie, 1998) and Māori views of the natural environment focus on the long ancestral association that *tangata whenua* (people of the land) have with their land,

waters, and natural resources (Forster, 2011). From these intrinsic inter-relationships between people and their environments comes the principle of *kaitiakitanga* – an obligation for tangata whenua to protect, and keep in balance, human, material, and non-material elements within their environment, so as to sustain them for the benefit of future generations (Durie, 1998; Forster, 2011; Kawharu, 2000). Social work curriculum needs to link closely to Māori and other indigenous values which reject the commodification of land and emphasise practice grounded in understanding the intimate and holistic relationships between people and the land (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2007; Green & Baldry, 2008; Ruwhiu, 2001).

Ruwhiu (2013) claims that social work with Māori requires a "…deep understanding of [their] umbilical connection with the land" (p. 128). This involves considering and acting upon natural rights, which are universal (Ife, 2010). These rights are linked to an "ecospiritual perspective" which acknowledges the importance of addressing environmental injustices and the links between the environment and spirituality (Coates, Gray, & Hetherington, 2006). The "Rena long-term environmental recovery plan" (Ministry for the Environment, 2011) draws on indigenous perspectives by recognising the significance of the cultural, spiritual, and the environmental impacts of the oil spill, through incorporating the Māori concept of *mauri*. Authors of the report on the "Rena environmental recovery monitoring programme" defined *mauri* as: "life force, the life essence contained in resources both animate and inanimate….[*mauri*] encompasses the environment holistically as one interlinked and interrelated system……mauri connects the past with the future and therefore protects and preserves systems for future generations" (Battershill et al., 2013, p. 3). Restoring the *mauri* of the environment to its pre-Rena state was the stated goal of the New Zealand Government's Rena recovery plan. The acknowledgement of *mauri* has significance in terms of environmental care and environmental justice for *tangata whenua* who had places of cultural significance and customary rights affected by the oil spill, and who depend on the land and sea for physical and spiritual sustenance. Ruwhiu (2013) notes that developing culturally responsive social work practice is about awareness of structural inequalities in "stories of displacement, discontinuity and cultural awareness" as well as how "narratives can contribute to building a strong cultural identity for Māori and to providing a sense of belonging and connection with the world" (p. 130). Cultural competence in terms of the environment, sustainability, and environmental justice is about taking into account the values, beliefs, worldview, and needs of Māori as *tangata whenua* and *kaitiaki* (guardians). Critical analysis of this aspect of cultural competence was discussed with students in relation to the Rena oil-spill response. In writing this article, and further reflecting on our teaching practice, we discovered additional possibilities for incorporating the research experience into our teaching. Richardson (1994) describes writing as not only being a vehicle for telling but also as a method of critically examining one's analysis. We plan to ask our students to more deeply consider and discuss the links between environmental justice, social justice, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

TEACHING ABOUT DISASTER SOCIAL WORK

When teaching students to conceptualise issues surrounding community resilience and disaster management, speakers who share their front-line experiences and encourage

students to apply social justice principles to practical disaster responses have been effective (Jones, Smith-Rotabi, Levy, & Gray, 2012). Previously, our second-year social work students had listened to the experiences of social workers who had assisted in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes to integrate the academic teachings about crisis theory. These social workers were able to provide first-hand accounts of the realities of practice, and the needs of a community in the midst of a disaster. Students commented that they were able to envisage the immediate needs of people in crisis and that these examples helped them to understand the social worker's role more clearly.

In our teaching across the four-year Bachelor of Social Work, we use the research findings as an example of community action, to teach social work students about disaster-informed community development, and to re-vision concepts of environment and the social work role (Besthorn & Canda, 2002). Students who assisted in the research itself were unable to readily lead or contribute to classroom learning as they had already exited the programme. Discussions with the students about New Zealand's preparedness, or lack of, for dealing with an environmental "accident" led to debates about the ethics of New Zealand's desire for a non-renewable energy source, such as oil, which promotes short-term comfort for our society at the expense of other societies and a potential cost for everyone. Students were invited to reconsider the impact of the oil spill on the community, and the role that members of the community took in mitigating the problem, including reflecting on how tangata whenua responded.

The research on the Rena volunteer effort enabled social work students studying community development to consider how the Rena oil spill impacted on community dynamics in a time of crisis. Ife (2013) states that, in crises, communities change as they are more likely to respond collectively, pooling resources and utilising existing community-based structures for support. Students were asked to consider how existing social capital in the region's community structures was utilised in the immediate crisis response to the Rena oil spill as well as in the recovery phase. They were able to reflect on this recent, real, disaster from a community-development perspective and additionally consider the role that social workers could take in working with groups and in supporting community preparedness by developing social capital. Issues of human rights and social justice were considered, including issues of environmental justice, and the disproportionate negative impact on specific communities, such as those communities who depended on the coast for their food compared to others who predominantly used the coast for recreational purposes.

Our research had a lot of relevance to the students, as most of them had been affected personally by the Rena oil spill, and many had assisted in the volunteer clean-up; this was evident in the depth of thought and critique that the students imparted about social and environmental justice. In class discussions, students expressed their feelings and experiences of having had a technological disaster in their community. In accordance with the concept of deep ecology, through teaching about the Rena research project, students were enabled to envisage human well-being in terms of humankind's relationship with the natural world, and conceptualise the links between the environment and environmental justice (Besthorn, 2012).

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND INDIGENOUS VOICES

The Rena example also demonstrated the importance of indigenous voices in mainstream social work (Gray et al., 2007). We invited students to reflect on their understandings of environmental justice or "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, income, nation origin or educational level with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies" (National Association of Social Workers, 2008, para. 10). Concepts of fair treatment imply that no population is forced to disproportionately bear the consequence or burden of pollution or other environmental outcomes of a decision or policy. Again, in writing this article, we have been able to consider how to further utilise our research in teaching, and this reflexivity will enhance our teaching practice (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002).

Environmental justice is about equity, sharing natural resources, responding to environmental hazards and disasters, and issues of sustainability, in a global market-place (Dominelli, 2013). The environment is central to social work. The International Federation of Social Work-International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW-IASSW) definition of social work states that "social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments" (para. 1). However, social work in New Zealand and other Westernised nations has historically been mainly preoccupied with people's *social*, including cultural and economic, environments, to the exclusion of natural, or physical, environments (Humphreys, 1999; Maidment & Tudor, 2013).

The definition of social work also provides a link to social work ethics, in terms of the profession's obligation to challenge unjust policies and practices and to seek solutions based on solidarity, or community participation. Besthorn (2003) claims that "social work's failure to attend to the relevance of nature exists at the same time that cultures all around the world are sensing a growing awareness of a deep alienation between humans and natural systems" (para. 7). A result of this is a growing "ecological consciousness" in which social work educators are stressing the importance of instructional activities that create reflectivity about the place of the profession by taking a radical stance to environmental protection and structural inequalities (Dominelli, 2012; Hawkins, 2010). Maidment and Tudor (2013), when reflecting on the aftermath of the recent Christchurch earthquakes, state that, while disasters can initially generate a strong sense of community identity and community service, they also illustrate established structural disparities that have an impact on vulnerability and resilience.

In the face of climate change, combined with natural and technological disasters, environmental justice, with its focus on care for the environment, presents a contemporary challenge for social workers (Dominelli, 2013). This challenge is extended to social work educators, as they need to work towards developing effective strategies that will ensure that the future workforce is well placed to address community and global issues brought about through environmental disasters and climate change.

Student–teacher collaboration on authentic research projects of mutual interest such as the Rena oil spill has been found to assist with professional socialisation (Hunter, Laursen & Seymour, 2007). The integration of research into classroom teaching is vital as it encourages

discussion and resultant understanding about how research processes and activities inform professional knowledge (Brew, 2007). The research–teaching nexus was strengthened through integrating applied social work research into classroom teaching, and through the inclusion of students as part of the research process (Elsen, Visser-Wijnveen, Van Der Rijst, & Van Driel, 2009).

Curriculum needs to incorporate the growing interest in environmental social work into social work education (Briggs & Roark, 2013). In the wake of the Gulf Coast oil spill and Hurricane Katrina, social work educators at Virginia Commonwealth University set up a student discussion forum about improving disaster responses, drawing on their recent experiences. Student discussions centred on the needs and special interests of minority groups as a focus point for disaster-related curriculum, acknowledging the need for training and development about how to respond in a culturally appropriate manner (Jones et al., 2012).

This approach values the students' life experiences and uses them as a foundation from which to build knowledge, allowing them to participate actively in the learning process (Zepke, 2003). Under this methodology, the lecturer is not the sole creator of knowledge, but guides the students through the learning process. Integrating research on the impact of volunteering in a local environmental disaster into student learning created a setting from which the students could critically reflect on prior learning and life experiences, and created a space in which new learning could emerge. Students' prior learning and knowledge was incorporated by allowing students to lead discussions and create space in lectures to discuss concepts and to reflect on what they were learning.

CONCLUSION

Our research created an opportunity to involve students in the research in a number of ways. Senior social work and psychology students participated in the research as research assistants and administrators. The findings of the research were incorporated back into teaching, and presentations of the findings were used as a teaching tool to assist students with understanding the stages and strategies involved in research dissemination. Our Rena research was a particularly powerful example because all Bay of Plenty residents were familiar with the Rena incident and many had been affected by it, or had been part of the volunteer response.

The University of Waikato Social Work programme team, as part of its annual review and planning process, is currently considering the significance of environmental social work and where and how to further integrate this and other disaster-informed material into our curriculum content. As part of this review, we want to include discussion about how social workers might support and work alongside indigenous groups in responding to future environmental disasters.

Our research found that good communication and training for both organisers and volunteers was essential to the success of the Rena volunteer clean-up (Hunt, et al., 2014). Preparation for future disasters is important for all who might be expected to respond. As social workers will be one of the groups expected to respond to community

need in a climate of increasing environmental and technological disasters, training in the immediate and long-term needs of vulnerable and affected communities will be vital to addressing issues of environmental justice and sustainability.

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