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ADVANCES IN SOCIAL WORK & WELFARE EDUCATION

Building Whanaungatanga Online

Teaching Note

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Abstract

In Aotearoa New Zealand, social work has traditionally been taught face-to-face. Historically, there has been resistance to online or blended courses, despite studies highlighting similar student learning outcomes if these courses are well designed and taught effectively.

Changes to legislation impacting the provision of tertiary education, and lockdown during the COVID19 pandemic, have potentially heralded a new era in the provision of social work education; one in which the online component of blended learning receives more focus. What this means for professional and applied programmes like social work, is that the role of teaching academics will need to include an understanding of pedagogically sound ways of engaging and interacting with students online.

There is now significant understanding of what works in online modes as well as a growing awareness of what teaching tools are helpful in emergency situations (such as during lockdown). The importance of building and maintaining whanaungatanga (relationships, community and connection) is central.

This reflective piece describes one social work academic's attempts to increase the level of online engagement and interaction (between herself as teacher and her students, between the students themselves and between students and course material) to build whanaungatanga in the group during lockdown between March to June 2020.

Several online tools were used and are evaluated here; the value of each tool is considered in relation to how well it contributed to building whanaungatanga within a particular cohort of students. Finally, the challenge to social work educators presented by lockdown learning is positioned in the broader context of the social work profession.

Introduction

I first track the progress of blended learning in social work education before providing context for what actually occurred during the lockdown period, including what we know to date about helpful responses in similar situations. Borton's (1970) reflective model (what? so what? now what?) provides a useful frame to examine what we did in the virtual classroom, what then happened and the issues raised.

Blended learning in social work

As a discipline, social work has been traditionally a late adopter of technology (Hansen et al., 2002; Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). Attitudes noted in an early study of over 200 social workers by Galinsky et al. (1997) found low levels of comfort and knowledge of technology-based practice. Participants raised concerns about confidentiality, and the depersonalisation and the mechanisation of a basically human process. Arguably, these have persisted through the decades.

But "we are people people" and "*we work kanohi ki te kanohi*" (face to face) are sentiments that are still heard today. However, multiple studies have now established that there is no significant difference in learning outcomes for students who study in traditional classroom settings and those in blended programmes (Reamer, 2019; Siebert & Spauling-Givens, 2006; Wretman & Macy, 2016). The debate is no longer whether technology should be used in social work and social work education but instead, the ethical and equity issues around its use (Gair & Baglow, 2018; Goldingay et al., 2020). Remaining though, is a commitment to preserve the face-to-face contact which is deemed "critical for a well-rounded social work education and therefore irreplaceable" (International Federation of Social Work, 2020, para. 2h).

From the mid-2000s, there has been rapid global growth in blended social work programmes which combine face to face and online elements (Ayala, 2009). Blended learning is used to "provide educational opportunities that maximize the benefits of each platform and thus more effectively facilitate student learning" (Ayala, 2009, p. 277).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, all programmes recognised by the Social Workers' Registration Board (SWRB) are described as *blended* in course documentation however, the nature of the online component is variable (J. Duke, personal communication, 15 December, 2020). Social work educators' use of online modes has often occurred on an ad hoc basis and the time and expertise which would foster pedagogically sound, blended course design are frequently unavailable to educators.

COVID lockdown

In most of Aotearoa New Zealand, lockdown extended for a period of seven weeks, between late March and June 2020 (New Zealand Government, 2020). Lockdown meant students could not attend face-to-face classes on campus. Government notification of the country moving to lockdown was made a few days prior to its commencement. Some educational institutions moved holidays forward to allow staff time to prepare, while for other educators, the move to emergency remote teaching happened within a week of the government announcement.

Blended, online or emergency remote teaching?

The term *emergency remote teaching* (ERT) was coined to differentiate what was happening in the emergency teaching space from *online learning* (as the terms were being used interchangeably, but are distinct). Hodges et al. (2020) defined ERT as:

> A temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. The primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis. (para.13)

This contrasts with blended programmes where the online and face-to-face components are characterised by a careful and planned approach to learning design, which may take months of iteration before a course is offered to students. In a recent blog post, tertiary educators argued that it is "this careful design process that will be absent in most cases in these emergency shifts" (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 7).

In this context, the author who is a tutor on a Bachelor of Social Work degree programme at a small tertiary education provider (which draws a high proportion of students with learning disadvantage and financial deprivation), and her colleagues, moved the teaching of sociology, social policy and skills papers from the classroom to fully online.

What works?

After the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, learning institutions in the city were faced with similar issues to the lockdown, that is, they had to maintain continuity in teaching and learning for students when classroom spaces were uninhabitable. Four factors that helped student engagement through the post-earthquake experience were identified by Seaton et al. (2012) in their study of nursing students in Christchurch. These included the importance of building and maintaining whanaungatanga, maintaining structured routines, emphasis on good communication and clarity, and the reassuring and consistent presence of a tutor.

Numerous national studies have also identified the value of using concepts from Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), to inform teaching practice in Aotearoa. One of these is whanaungatanga, defined here as community, connection and relationships. It is further defined as the "principle of working together to support each other across all generations. Whanaungatanga implies that one is not on one's own but has the guidance and support of the wider community" (Pere, cited in Taraporvala, 2019, para 3).

The connections that students form with each other, the tutor, and with the learning material are important predictors of success as they heighten engagement generally (Frielick & Sciascia, 2016; Karena & Fenton, 2015; Sciascia, 2017).

We also know that the level of engagement and the skill and effort that teachers use to create learning experiences are the most important determinants of a quality learning environment (Jeffrey et al., 2012).

What we did

Bearing in mind the value of whanaungatanga, I evaluated several of the online tools which I used with my year two and three social work students during lockdown. I wanted to see to what extent these tools promoted whanaungatanga in the group. Due to the contact restrictions of lockdown, only readily available methods for collecting data were used, including course results and student feedback (formal and informal). I added targeted questions to the standard institution post-course survey which prompted specific feedback on the online tools we were trying out together, both at the time of their use and again in the final survey.

Ethical issues relating to the power imbalance in the student–tutor relationship were canvassed at the time of data collection and advice was that, since standard review and course evaluation processes were used, no approval process was necessary at that point. Student consent to use any of their statements or images was requested from individual students for the purpose of a subsequent conference presentation and potential article and was received in writing. This occurred after the course end date and all marking of assessments had been completed. This student–tutor relationship has not continued into the following academic year as the tutor has left the employment in that institution. Nonetheless, issues of perceived power are likely to have been present and this is one of the limitations of this study. Table 1 lists some of the tools utilised in classes and a comment on how they were used.

Table 1. Focus Groups Demographics

Tools	
E-text	For students who did not have reliable Internet connectivity or were needing extra support with maintaining motivation.
Padlet[1] application	An e-pinboard where tutor and students were invited to post articles and items of interest.
Moodle[2] forums	Particularly, the video and audio functions and the deliberate use of forum tasks that necessitated students' interaction
Moodle Chat	For connection, informal chat, 'catch-ups', and student questions
Zoom[3] chat rooms	For intensive skills practice and oral assessments (which replaced written ones).
Narrated PowerPoint presentations	For course content
Mini lectures using Zoom and Edpuzzle which allowed the tutor to add questions and comments throughout a video clip.	For course content and tasks
Quizzes	For recall, practice and fun.

1 Padlet is an online virtual "bulletin" board, where students and teachers can collaborate, reflect, share links and pictures, in a secure location.
2 Moodle is a learning management system (LMS).
3 Zoom is a video-conferencing application that offers free versions.

Results

Formal and informal conversations with students highlighted that they appreciated regular communication that was reassuring and responsive, learning that had structure and followed a regular pattern, as well as the opportunities for (synchronous) connection via chat, Zoom, forums, e-text, and the use of all of these in a single lesson. Students also used their private Facebook group to keep connected and share resources. Consequently, the e-pinboard was not widely used.

In their evaluations, students noted that annotated video lectures, narrated PowerPoint presentations, quizzes, readings, links to resources and the option of oral assessments were helpful. Students particularly valued the interactive aspects of the learning and the mixture of synchronous and asynchronous modes worked well for most students.

As students became used to the requests for feedback, they became more forthcoming with detailed responses. For example, one student summed up her experience of the lesson during a Moodle chat session:

> I really like the way you were able to introduce a variety of tools to get us interacting today. Pre-readings, Zoom and the video lecture as standalone tools would not work for me, but...combined is fantastic.–Today's use of breakout rooms was also useful and the time limit will actually keep us on our toes. Content is quite a lot so this topic is perfect to showcase the need for all these mediums. I agree with (names another student) about the Video lecture being helpful for notetaking so this is good for content heavy chunks. The cafeology (Moodle chat) is going to be useful for immediate questions/ feedback. Tino pai (excellent) everyone! (Participant 1)

Students also appreciated the chance to interact as explained by Participant 2. "I thought the lesson was great – I enjoy seeing everyone interact as if we were in class" (emphasis added).

For some students struggling with failing technology, the chance to present assessment tasks orally in a live Zoom session was appreciated. For instance, Participant 3 said, "This option was amazing and I felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from me."

Other results were that the retention, academic results and course pass rates were very similar to 2019 results. Opportunities for academic growth were taken up by two students who had reflective pieces accepted for a peer-reviewed journal. A further five students also co-presented with me their experiences as learners at a trans-Tasman conference (*Same Storm, Different Waka*, ANZSWWER online conference, November 2020). Students also reported that their relationships with other students and with me, their tutor, deepened during lockdown.

So what?

As I reflected on what the student feedback and academic outcomes meant for me as a teacher of social work, several themes emerged. The first was that whanaungatanga in the group had been maintained and further strengthened during lockdown. I was also reminded of the value of asking for ongoing informal feedback from students and how useful detailed student feedback is for my teaching. I saw the value of critical reflection as a way of integrating this feedback with the empirical knowledge base of what we already know about effective teaching and learning in social work.

I saw both constructivist and connectivist learning principles at work and I experienced what I call real life *ako* where the teacher becomes learner and the learner, the teacher. The sharing of knowledge and power between teacher and learner occurred naturally as the students and I experimented with online tools and engaged in creative problem-solving together.

One consequence of getting to know each other better and deepening relationships through the period of emergency teaching, was that inequities in the student cohort became much more visible. As we saw into each other's homes, met children and pets, and heard about the impact of the lockdown on family life and student wellbeing, I realised quickly that the effects of the pandemic were hugely inequitable. Some students had more than usual time and resources at their disposal, while some were coping with illness and death, housing crises, low incomes and in some cases, food insecurity. As a social work educator, I was confronted with the reality that "whilst we are all indeed vulnerable to the virus, we are not all equally vulnerable" (Featherstone et al., 2020, para.13).

Now what?

As social workers and educators, we are privileged to have access to the lives of the people we work with. Many of us saw the conditions that others were forced to endure during lockdown including poverty, sickness, domestic violence and family tragedy. When we can confront our shared vulnerability to misfortune, our feelings of compassion intensify.

In their summary piece on the profession's COVID response for the International Federation of Social Workers, Truell and Crompton (2020) argued that, "for social work today, there is an opportunity to move from the recently imposed role of picking up the debris at the bottom of the cliff, to its original role of building fences at the top" (p. 37).

As New Zealand activist and academic Mike O'Brien (2020) said in a recent blog post, to move forward as a profession, social work needs to articulate:

> ...a vision for the new normal which looks above the daily parapet, joins with colleagues and supporters from different places to set out a new picture, a genuinely different picture which will give practical meaning to the new normal for those we work with, for our colleagues and for ourselves in all aspects of our lives. This is a time, despite the social distress ahead, to aim for real change in the social. (para.12)

As social work educators, the challenge is to join with our colleagues in practice to look above the parapet to risk different ways of doing things. Our students need to be prepared for a world which is different to the one any of us could have imagined. As future practitioners, educators, and researchers, our students need to be able to move confidently in both face-to-face and online modes both locally and globally.

During lockdown, my students proved they were flexible, innovative and creative. They were able to give detailed and immediate feedback on what online tools worked well and those that did not, so that we could work together on finding the best way forward. Students were able to support each other to get through lockdown and the course using online modes to communicate and collaborate.

As social work educators, we must support and challenge students to take the best of the visions for the future forward. We need to link with others who share similar visions. And we need to start now. This is the time, not in spite of the distress ahead, but because of it.

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