Confronting the Past so we do not Disempower Families in the Present: Reflections on use of a Digitised Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Working genuinely and respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians begins with graduates recognising Indigenous people's inspirational struggles against the legacies of colonisation, and their experiences of ongoing racism, loss of dignity, and the intergenerational removal of children. In a second-year subject we teach at a regional Australian university, we undertake difficult conversations about Australia's violent, hidden past, and how disempowering practice can increase the despair felt by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In this article we review relevant literature before describing our classroom-based use of an authentic, digitised case study to facilitate students' learning. We conclude by sharing our observations that use of the digitised case study teaching tool enhanced students' engagement and empathy regarding the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians.

Keywords: *Colonisation; Racism; Social work education; Social work practice; Digitised case studies*

INTRODUCTION

In a social work subject we teach at a regional Australian university, we begin by talking about how Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples survived, strong and proud in their cultures, for more than 60,000 years before British colonisation. More recently, they have endured and resisted over 230 years of human rights violations, slavery, forced removals of children, land theft, disease, and enforced poverty (Atkinson, 2002; Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2012a, 2012b; Bottoms, 2013; Smallwood, 2011). Many stories identify that these injustices have impacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's wellbeing and mental health (Atkinson, 2002; AHRC, 2012; Bottoms, 2013; Healing Foundation, 2019).

We identify that, while Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islander peoples share a common history of colonialist rule, unique differences exist between Australia's Indigenous populations. These differences include languages, traditions and culture, the geographical location of their traditional lands, and the impact of colonisation on their peoples, languages, and cultural and spiritual practices. According to the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development (1997, p. 4) "colonisation of the Torres Strait was not accompanied by wholesale and violent seizure of Islanders' land" while, on the mainland, many Aboriginal communities experienced massacres, stolen children and forced removals of their peoples to government missions (Bottoms, 2013; Smallwood, 2011). However, much of the available literature combines these Indigenous groups, making reference to separate experiences difficult.

It is hard to imagine the extent of the intergenerational impact and trauma for Australian Aboriginal families and communities after the mass removal of children, justified in the past as being for their "protection" (Libesman & Briskman, 2018, p. 258). Across the world, colonised countries paint a strikingly similar picture of disempowerment of Indigenous peoples, and human rights violations that include policies authorising the removals of thousands of children from their families (Weaver & Brave Heartz, 1999; Yellow Bird, 2004). The enormous 'ripple effect' of grief and trauma felt by families and communities over forced child removals, and over the missing children who were never returned, has been documented (Atkinson, 2002; Atkinson, Nelson, & Atkinson, 2010; Healing Foundation, 2019; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 1997). Nevertheless, the related grief and despair for the missing children known as the Stolen Generations[1] has not often been seen in the same light as missing non-Indigenous children. Until recently, the ongoing impact and trauma of intergenerational child removals appears to have eluded the awareness of many mainstream service providers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018).

We share with our students that, not only has there been ongoing impact from colonisation for Australia's Indigenous peoples, but that they are reluctant to access available services when they need them because of mistrust of health and welfare services based on past experiences. Making a different point, Durey (2010) and others identify how ill-informed service provision from workers who lack skills and cultural awareness often results in ineffective, or even damaging, outcomes for the individuals and families they want to help (Hunter, 2007; Libesman & Briskman, 2018).

In social work education, case studies provide opportunities for students to actively engage in the learning process in a way that meaningfully connects concepts and theories to a practice context they are likely to encounter (Jones, 2003). While paper-based case studies commonly have been used in social work and welfare education, more recently literature has emerged on the use of simulation, virtual worlds and digital case studies as useful teaching tools (Ballantyne, 2008; Asakura, Bogo, Good, & Power, 2018; Goldingay, Epstein, & Taylor, 2018; Grogan, Hollingsworth, & Carter, 2019). In this article we discuss the background context of a subject we teach, before focussing on our use of a digitised case study to enhance students' skills and insight for working respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Teaching about the past to inform future practice

Within the social work programs (bachelor's and master's) at a regional university, we teach a second-year subject called "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander skills and frameworks for practice". A key learning objective in the subject is for social work students to understand the past, hidden history, so they can understand its significant impact in the present. We seek to convey the importance of building relationships with Aboriginal and Islander families and communities, and respecting cultural ways of working that support, and do not disempower, families. We begin with Uncle Ernie Grant's framework (Grant, 1998). Uncle Ernie Grant speaks of the critical need to understand the interrelationships of land, language, culture, time, place and relationships from pre-colonisation, to colonisation, and through to the contemporary context. We invite weekly grassroots Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guest speakers from this region so students can hear their stories.

In trying to convey the larger political and policy context, we direct students to key reports. These include The Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody (1991) a landmark document highlighting the high incarceration rates and concerning deaths in custody of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, although there have been more deaths in custody since that Royal Commission. Equally, we argue the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC) (1997) "Bringing Them Home Report" is vital reading, to highlight the mental health consequences for removed Aboriginal children, and the impact on their families and communities. Guest speaker Aunty Florence Onus tells her own story of being removed, and reminds students that on 13 February 2008, then Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, presented an Apology to The Stolen Generations for the misguided child protection policies that resulted in the forced removal of children.

The Apology was welcomed by many and was seen as signalling a new era of hope for Indigenous–non-Indigenous reconciliation. However, one Townsville guest speaker, Aboriginal activist, Dr Smallwood, quotes Nelson Mandela as saying "In South Africa we are having reconciliation with the truth; in Australia they are trying to have reconciliation without the truth" about an invasion that resulted in the coordinated crushing of Aboriginal peoples' spirit and culture (Nelson Mandela, cited in Smallwood, 2011, p. 226).

We discuss readings by Aboriginal teacher and academic Professor Chris Sarra (2011) about how in the past, written records of early encounters with Aboriginal Australians reflected the highly derogatory mindset asserting the intellectual superiority of white people. He

argued that Aboriginal people "end up internalising" Aboriginality as a negative attribute (Sarra, 2011; Savage & Gair, 2014, p. 88), resulting in low self-esteem, psychological despair and increased vulnerability to mental illness. According to Pascoe (2014), despair is reinforced everyday an Aboriginal person has to fight to maintain their cultural pride and honour their ancestors.

Equally, Haebich (2007, p. 21) argued that a type of "forgetfulness" exists in Australia about the atrocities of the past, resulting in limited empathy for the ongoing trauma and legacies that are felt in the present. As argued by Denzin and Giardina (2018, p. 12), "We must mobilize students against the violence of organized forgetting".

Teaching about human rights, racism, and whiteness

With regard to our obligation to uphold the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples, we draw students' attention to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples, and the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, which all call for recognition and respect for the dignity and worth of all peoples (AASW, 2010; Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2012a; Ife, 2008; United Nations, 1948). Most recently, we discussed how in Australia, through the Uluru Statement from the Heart, there have been calls for the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be heard, for the truth to be told, and for a binding treaty to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' sovereignty over their traditional lands (Ferguson 2019).

We remind students that racial discrimination is prohibited under Australian law which includes the Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975, and state-based civil and criminal laws dealing with racial vilification. Yet, the Australian public has been blind to many past atrocities, and often have denied the individual and structural racism impacting the everyday lives of Indigenous Australians (Haebich, 2007). Gordon (2004) and others identified the theft of land and resources, and the murder of populations as the extremes of racism, while much more subtle forms include turning a blind eye to the everyday implications of racism (Cohen, 2001; Gordon, 2004). In teaching this content we remain alert to all students' responses so that the learning environment can be a safe space, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Fernando & Bennett, 2019).

We talk to students about 'whiteness' as a useful but sometimes resisted way of identifying invisible benefits in the everyday lives of non-Indigenous people (Bessarab, 2012; Moreton-Robinson, 2000), and the "social logic" of white privilege (Perera & Pugliese, 2011, p. 65). We include content on decolonisation theory and critical race theory, adding to the challenging content students must engage with, in our quest to prompt critical self-reflection that in turn can help students develop cultural respect and understanding (Muller, 2014; Savage & Gair, 2014).

In considering students' classroom and assessment-based reflections, our observations were that, while non-Indigenous students may accept that atrocities happened in the past, they can struggle to comprehend the repercussions and legacies of colonisation felt by current

generations. In turn, this may mean they fail to see these impacts and implications in their decision-making in professional practice contexts (Savage & Gair, 2014).

Use of a digitised case study as a teaching tool towards informed practice

Use of case studies in social work

According to Jones (2003), using case studies provides opportunities for social work students to actively engage in a learning process that connects concepts and theories the students have been studying to a practice context they are likely to encounter (Jones, 2003). Equally, Short et al. (2017) and others identified the power of a case study to illuminate the humanity of a situation respectfully and to provide opportunities for theoretical and experiential learning (Battle & Hill, 2016; Gair & Zuchowski, 2019; Wessels, 2017). In our teaching we have tried to close the gap for students in understanding how the past can have multiple impacts on the present through the use of our "Big Uncle Mick" case study. The case study was written by the authors drawing on the first author's lived experiences. This case study identifies how a home visit to a family by a new school social worker unfolds in unhelpful and ill-informed ways. We have used a paper-based version of the case study in this subject for six years. More recently, the case study has been transformed into a visual, digitised learning and teaching tool.

Use of simulation and digitised case studies

As noted earlier, literature is growing on use of simulation, virtual worlds, and digital case studies in social work education (Asakura et al., 2018; Ballantyne, 2008). Simulation activities reportedly have proven useful in helping students in practice-based professions to gain practice skills and knowledge, including when undertaking home visits (Vandsburger, Duncan-Daston, Akerson, & Dillon, 2010; Wilson, Brown, Wood, & Farkas, 2013). Asakura et al. (2018) discussed the value of using tailored, video-recorded simulation in the classroom, particularly if costs prohibit in-class simulation with paid actors. While not all authors may see the use of advancing technologies as good for teaching social work (Clark, 2000, as cited in Ballantyne, 2008, p. 617), Asakura et al. (2018) identified that such resources help provide a bridge between the classroom and the world of professional practice.

Goldingay et al. (2018) and others also note the need for new ways to prepare students to understand structural inequalities in online learning environments (Reinsmith-Jones, Kibbe, Crayton, & Campbell, 2015). Goldingay et al. (2018) identified use of digital case studies and digital story-telling formats as helpful for students to understand cultural perspectives that otherwise may be inaccessible to them during their studies. Further, they detailed their use of an online digital practice resource to enable students to engage in authentic, yet safe, ways with the lived experiences of clients. Most recently Grogan et al. (2019) identified use of videoed stories to embed Indigenous voices in the university curriculum. They found that authentic, digitised storytelling was more effective than other resources in enhancing students' emotional engagement and empathy.

Developing our digitised case study resource

To make our digitised case study, we called on a colleague at our university with expertise in digital resource development. Using the print-based case study, a female voice-over narrator recorded the script as an .mp3 file using a standard audio recording device. This audio file

was then laid as the sound track of the video learning artefact using Adobe Premier Pro. A conscious decision was made to use freely available stock photographs to illustrate Big Uncle Mick and the other characters in the case study (Ballantyne, 2008; Higgins, Moeed, & Eden, 2018).

Another deliberate decision was to use posterisation, a digital visual effect. Posterisation converts normal photographs into images consisting of distinct, but flat, areas of different tones or colours. The image is still recognisable, for example, as that of a big, Aboriginal male in the case of Big Uncle Mick's character, but the model or subject is not easily recognisable. The use of such visual effect reduces potential unintended associations, perceptions or distractions on the part of the student viewer (i.e., liking or disliking a person based on the way they look). Instead it keeps the visual engagement to the essence of what is presented (Higgins et al., 2018). In the same way, dramatising the dialogue was ruled out to avoid adding unintended inflections or nuances to the delivery that may affect viewers' perceptions and interpretation of the case being presented. A major benefit of transforming the once paper-based case study into the tailored digital video tool was that it opens a shared viewing experience among students and educators. This shared viewing experience encourages continued shared learning as students discuss their answers to the activity questions posed in relation to the case study – these questions serving as a bridge between the video-mediated learning experience and the classroom discussion that follows.

The case study – "Big Uncle Mick"

Ronny, 12 years old and his brother Lex, 11, are from Mount Isa and recently have moved to Townsville to live with their big Uncle Mick and his family. Uncle Mick has four children. He had a difficult childhood himself, suffering abuse at the hands of his stepfather. He spent time in youth detention and, when he became an adult, he spent several years in adult prisons. He has a history of alcohol and drug use when he was younger. Mick did not finish high school and has no formal qualifications. He has worked hard at jobs including working for Main Roads and Queensland Railways, and more recently he started working part-time at the Youth Detention Centre counselling young people. Mick is a big, loving family man. He wants to support Ronny and Lex to finish their schooling in Townsville. They really miss their family, friends and usual hangouts in Mount Isa. Staying with Uncle Mick and his wife, Jenny, is Jenny's teenage sister Tara who is pregnant, and a friend of Tara's is staying for the weekend. Mick recently lost his licence for three months when he drove Tara to hospital at 8.30pm one night with severe stomach pains. He had consumed one can of beer and holds a P-plate driving licence. He also recently appeared in Court on a public nuisance charge (using obscene language at the police who saw him as he pulled up at the traffic lights on the way to the hospital and told him to pull over).

Brothers Ronny and Lex had been physically fighting with each other in the playground at school over the past week. They have not attended school for the last two days, causing the teacher to ask the new school social worker to visit the family. The non-Aboriginal social worker is new to the area. She arrives at the house on Friday afternoon and walks to the front door. She looks through the open window and sees at least a dozen people in the lounge room all talking noisily. She knocks loudly on the door and asks to speak to Ronny and Lex's Mum or Dad. Uncle Mick immediately says it is an inconvenient time to talk,

and asks her can she come back on another day. She is told the boy's parents are not there. Undeterred, she asks Uncle Mick "when will the parents will be back?" "They will not be back", she is told. Uncle Mick again says it is not a good time, and that she cannot stay. She persists, saying she is from the school and she would like to speak to someone while she is here. She is concerned about the boys fighting, and their absence from school. Uncle Mick says sternly that they will return to school when family matters and "sorry business" are dealt with, and she needs to leave. Uncle Mick walks towards her. She turns quickly and hurries towards her car.

The social worker goes back to the school and summarises her concerns in a note to the Principal. The accommodation where the boys are living is the likely cause of the fighting at school. There appear to be too many people living at the house, which is probably not conducive to the boys successfully completing their studies. The tone used towards her by a man at the house was unfriendly, even threatening. She believes there may be fighting in the home and that is why the brothers are fighting at school; that is, the brothers are acting out in the playground those behaviours they are witnessing at home. She concludes that the boys may be unsafe in their current environment. Her next steps are outlined. She needs to find out where the parents are, and when she can talk to them. At the very least, she feels she needs to be taken more seriously and not just told to leave the house. The boys' fighting at the school is disruptive and needs to stop, so she recommends a suspension for the boys. In concluding, she tells the Principal she will visit the home again on Monday accompanied by the police for her own safety. If she is still not happy with the outcome of Monday's visit she will contact the Department of Child Safety.

Activity questions:

1. What are the key issues you see as relevant in this case?

2. What skills and knowledge does the new worker have, and what other skills and knowledge might be needed?

3. What are the steps/next steps you would/could take if you were the worker in this scenario?

Our reflections: Producing graduates who do things differently

Over the years we have used the Big Uncle Mick case study in the classroom following a presentation by guest speaker Uncle Alfred Smallwood, who discusses a men's groups he facilitates. Uncle Alfred focuses his talk on the overrepresentation of Aboriginal men in the criminal justice system; how many men have lost their way regarding their cultural responsibilities and their role in the family. In the past two years, the Big Uncle Mick digitised case study has been played after his presentation, replacing the paper-based version. Students are asked to watch the digitised case study of a home visit, respond to the identified questions in small groups using butcher's paper and pens, and then present their responses to the larger group. This resource is not used as a flipped classroom activity, where students view it individually outside the classroom, because it is important that the students and educators collectively view and discuss the case study (Higgins et al., 2018). After the students have

presented their discussion points to the larger group, a wider discussion follows about issues arising for them.

It is common for students, whether school leavers or mature-aged, to query why much of the course content is new to them and why it was not taught at school. International students report finding some content difficult to comprehend in relation to their previous knowledge about Australia. The discussion is related back to the importance for future practice, particularly for non-Indigenous graduates, of reflecting on how past trauma impacts on current realities and how their own positioning and professional decision-making could further disempower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Our reflections on the use of this digital case study are that there are advantages in its use when considering the previously used paper-based version. For example, students' active listening was very evident in the classroom as the digitised case study came to life on the projector screen. Further, with similarities to the enhanced student learning and engagement reported by Grogan et al. (2019), we believe there was increased active learning in the small groups after the viewing, and students appeared to be more animated and passionate in their discussions as they worked to collectively answer the activity questions.

We observed increased student reflections on what they believed were shortcomings in the worker's approach, skills and cultural awareness, and the implications for professional practice. Equally, there appeared to be increased expressions of empathy for the family's circumstances when we reflected on our previous use of the print-based version (Grogan et al., 2019). Admittedly, as with the paper-based version, some students needed encouragement to see beyond distracting surface factors to the broader structural issues. Additionally, after viewing the digitised case study rather than reading it, students appeared to more deeply consider the importance of respecting "family needs, caring responsibilities and Sorry Business", as noted by Zubrzycki and Crawford (2013, p. 189) in the textbook used in this subject. Equally, students appeared to be more inspired, after viewing the digitised case study, to reflect on what skills and knowledge would be needed if they were the worker in a similar practice scenario, and what alternative decision-making could be considered in order to do things differently. We believe the use of this digitised case study provides students with an additional layer of learning where they can connect concepts and theories in their readings with this visually portrayed home visit experience that helps convey the cultural perspective of the family.

We consider that the digitised case study helps our students to better understand a key message in the subject that social work graduates need to work from the standpoint that families are the priority in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. It is true that several centuries of trauma may have hindered and damaged some families' immediate abilities to nurture children, or to express their support needs in a hostile mainstream context where there is real fear of "the welfare" (Bamblett, 2007, p. 10). To add to their fears, current removals of children continue at an alarming rate, in turn fuelling families' ongoing mistrust of workers (AIHW, 2019; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care [SNAICC], 2019). Yet, we confirm with our students that when respect, cultural awareness, genuineness and empathy are key elements in their practice, workers will find increased

opportunities to work effectively for the sustained wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Limitations

In this article we have described our purposes, methods and reflections on the use of a locally produced, culturally relevant, digitised case study to critically engage students. While this learning resource may not be comparable to the use of other simulations or virtual worlds evident in some programs (Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015), we believe the use of the digitised case study has advanced students' learning when considered alongside the paper-based version we previously used. We acknowledge a lack of documented evidence, beyond our observations and reflections, to help confirm students' enhanced learning. Consequently, in proposed future classroom-based inquiry we hope to gain students' perceptions about the effectiveness of paper and digitised case studies as tools to enhance their learning and active engagement with study materials.

CONCLUSION

The message we want to leave students with at the completion of the subject discussed here is that working genuinely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues, families and communities begins with acknowledging their strengths in the face of past human rights violations, and ongoing discrimination, cultural misunderstandings and lack of respect. We have observed that use of a digitised case study has advantages over the previously used paper-based version in bringing a common practice encounter into the classroom. We observed that this resource helped heighten students' awareness of the impact of Australia's colonialist past on current generations of Indigenous Australians, and the importance of respecting cultural ways of working with families, including their rights to manage family matters without the threat of further imposed, colonising practices.

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Note

[1]The term *Stolen Generations* is said to have been coined by historian Peter Read to draw attention to the generations affected by the government policy of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families and placing them in homes with white foster parents, on missions or in institutions where they were totally cut off from their Aboriginality (SBS, 2019).
https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/explainer/explainer-stolen-generations

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