Reflexivity in Action: Building Student Resilience During a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: The current novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has transformed social work tertiary education delivery across the world. In this case, the university's response was to initiate a hasty transition from a 'blended' program, comprised of both the use of technology and face to face components, into an entirely online learning model. This scenario suggested a need for academics to be open to creative ways of building and maintaining relationships with students to facilitate positive learning outcomes and student wellbeing. This article uses reflexivity to examine two vignettes that present our responses to students' collective and individual issues experienced during the COVID-19 isolation period in Australia. A reflexive lens illuminated the role of practical, emotional, and relational work in social work education in a virtual context. Specifically, this article offers important insights for academics concerning ways social work students and academics may work together to create a sense of hopefulness during uncertain times.

Keywords: covid-19; hopefulness; online learning; reflexivity; resilience; social work education

The authors are senior academics delivering both undergraduate and postgraduate social work education to students in regional and metropolitan centres. For over a decade, the program has enthusiastically embraced course delivery in a 'blended' learning format, conceptualized here as "the use of technology with a mix of pedagogical methods or philosophies" (Allan & Green, p. 5). Within this paradigm, the position of the educator has shifted from "being the keeper of all knowledge" (Davis, Greenaway, Moore, & Cooper, 2019, p. 37) to one where students are supported to be self-directed learners. Though embracing educational technologies to support both theoretical and conceptual learning, the social work program highly values the face-to-face context and utilizes this as a vehicle for teaching skills, engaging with students, and facilitating effective learning relationships. Each of the university's five campuses has a dedicated 'course advisor' whose responsibilities include linking vulnerable students into academic supports to facilitate positive academic outcomes and assuming a support role to foster student well-being. Consequently, retaining the face-to-face workshop component within the social work program has been core to the process of relationship-building that engenders student trust and hopefulness.

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The university promotes the 'flipped classroom' model which reverses the usual structure. In the 'flipped classroom', students are expected to complete a range of activities before attending 'face-to-face' workshops which are designed to provide opportunities to "clarify concepts and contextualise knowledge through application, analysis, and planning and problem solving" (University of Adelaide, 2018). Hence, it was expected that our educational model would retain a face-to-face component and we would continue to support our students this way. However, the COVID-19 pandemic not only altered how we teach, but how we nurture our relationships with students in a world of technology that eschews face-to-face contact. The one-week turnaround that signalled the transformation of the 'blended' program into an entirely online learning model using 'zoom' provided little opportunity for staff to enhance their technological skills. Critically, this scenario also required innovation to build relationships with students (Levin, Whitsett, & Wood, 2013), and support both their emotional wellbeing and capacity to develop resilience (Cowie & Summers, 2020; Harikrishnan & Ali, 2018; Goldingay, et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

We adopt a reflexive stance to examine two vignettes that present our responses to students' collective and individual issues experienced during the COVID-19 isolation period and the contexts in which they occur. Acknowledging the challenge of defining a concept so variable as reflexivity we draw on D'Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez's (2007) seminal review to conceptualize reflexivity as a self-critical approach informed by critical, postmodern and psychodynamic concepts that privileges relationship-based interactions. Consequently, our understanding of reflexivity focuses on talking and sharing on practical and emotional levels, working in inclusive and empowering ways (Ruch, 2002, Ruch, 2012) and the ways these key reflexive dimensions influence knowledge creation (D'cruz, et al., 2007), particularly in contexts enmeshed in a dominant discourse (Downey et al., 2017).

Vignette one

The requirement to transition to on-line teaching via zoom due to the pandemic occurred in a very short time frame with many academics lacking experience with on-line delivery and little opportunity to develop the level of expertise needed to troubleshoot unanticipated challenges that could emerge in the online classroom. As a senior academic within my discipline, I was very mindful of the need to support both ongoing and casual staff as we made this transition; as well as believing that students had expectations of my ability to problem-solve issues. My position then in this unfolding vignette is as both participant and researcher. Casual teaching staff were also required to embrace this approach without the advantage of paid professional development. Family illness for one of our casual staff resulted in their withdrawal from teaching and another staff member generously assuming the on-line class. A quick 'update' of the online portal and it was considered 'ready to go' for the replacement teacher.

However, just before the first class commenced for the replacement facilitator, I received a frantic telephone call from the facilitator informing me they were unable to access the online classroom. *Don't worry, I replied* (wanting to quickly locate myself as the effective problem-solver)*, a quick call to Information Technology Services (ICT) will resolve this*. ICT did resolve and the tutor was quickly admitted to the 'on-line classroom' however the students were now excluded. Student emails started appearing to advise me they were now 'locked-out' of the online classroom

A return email was quickly despatched to inform, *we are working on the problem, 'stay tuned',* accompanied by multiple apologies. Student access issues persevered, and more apologetic email responses sent before further feverish contact with ICT resulted in successful resolution of the problem. This scenario has no doubt played out across Australian and international universities since late March and will occur again. What is worth noting and celebrating was students' generous response. Once resolved and students entered the online classroom, they emailed their appreciation for being updated about developments.

What were my assumptions and beliefs in this scenario – where did I position myself? First, I held to the belief that as a senior academic, I needed to demonstrate an unfazed ability to readily resolve the situation. Second, that students would find this event stressful and would need me to resolve it quickly to assist them regain their equilibrium. The assumption was based on my experience of earlier less frantic times when a late-arriving tutor might find students disperse within a few minutes and later issue a justifiable complaint. What seemed to be evident here was increased accommodation to the 'shared challenges' in embracing this new world. The assumptions upon which I had based my ideas in pre-pandemic times needed review as they could no longer be considered as an 'accurate' account in this changed world. The higher education literature discusses the importance of promoting resilience in students. There is evidence in this scenario of resilience, of students making a positive adjustment (Brewer et al., 2019). These are very challenging times for students as they navigate their studies in a virtual world, manage dwindling finances due to casual job losses, and maintain relationships within a mandated 'isolated' world. The ICT issue, a seemingly minor event, could easily have become the tipping point for students in the context of these cumulative stressors (Hosken, 2018). As social workers, instilling hopefulness is part of the mandate. The generosity of students in this vignette gave the author 'hope' that despite these challenges they too have a sense of hope (McCarter, 2007).

Vignette Two

As a rural social work academic, I am part of a team whose roles encompass myriad elements including school, campus, community and industry engagement and service, subject coordination across all five campuses, research, teaching and the course advisor role. In some years, the role includes facilitating group and individual supervision for students whilst they undertake field education, the signature pedagogy for social work, in local human service agencies. In Australia, students undertake 70-day placements in both the third and final years of the Masters' program where they have opportunity to integrate theory, concepts and skills central within classroom learning and the practical context of the field. Placements are critical to students' development of the competencies necessary for professional practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2012). This scenario also enables development of strong and dynamic relationships between academics and the local service system, colleagues, and students, as well as a good knowledge of university processes.

It is common for students to seek support from academic staff regarding personal and family issues that impact on their ability to study. These problems include bereavement, as well as multiple, complex physical health issues, their own and their family members' mental health issues, homelessness and family violence. At all campuses, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown resulted in increased calls for support. In the rural space, a consistent theme

in students' stories was the experience of family violence. One student, for example, had left their home after sustaining multiple physical injuries during a family violence incident. Police responded and interaction with the legal system resulted in the Court convicting the perpetrator and granting a Violence Order. In this case the student was safe and supported in temporary accommodation, yet had fled without their laptop, making do with a temporary replacement and experiencing unstable internet connectivity. In prior years the student had sought support from me and the university wellbeing team regarding managing study during depressive episodes that required medical management. The student felt it important to mention their experience of family violence to me as it had potential to affect both their mental health and their learning.

Wanting to explore the student's emotional and wellbeing supports, I enquired *Can you tell me which services are supporting you and how?* I was relieved to learn that these services were well regarded agencies that employ many of our graduates and had supported the student through legal proceedings. To address the technology issues I responded reassuringly, *don't worry, there are things we can do. I can help you apply for university bursaries, funding for housing and a new laptop*. Advocacy resulted in senior staff prioritising the student's claims and the offer to further support their human right to education by keeping them engaged with studies.

My work as a social work academic is informed by social work values (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010), as well as university procedures. As social workers embedded in everything we do is a commitment to engendering hopefulness. Not hopefulness borne of 'magical thinking', rather, hope borne of a sense of possibility that encourages insight, as well as positive change in political and organisational contexts, and development of self-competency and capability. As observed by Collins (2015, p. 209) "the maintenance of hope in social work requires support from within the context of the organisation and from other systems". Here, a sense of hopefulness maintained both my own and the student's resistance and tenacity during a challenging time (Collins, 2015).

The student's embarrassment about facial injuries sustained required a creative solution to preserve their dignity and the confidentiality so important in close-knit rural communities (Alston, 2010). I asked, *did you know you can choose not to have your camera on when using zoom*? The choice to join online with audio rather than video technology resolved the dilemma of the student's ongoing participation in workshops, where they are an active contributor. Further, consultation between rural social work subject coordinators resulted in special consideration and extensions granted for assessments, and in this case, where the student's first language was not English, an alternate mode of assessment, oral rather than written, was offered. I also assumed the role of university liaison during the student's final placement which enabled the provision of academic and emotional support, necessary to build the students' resilience during this critical time (Mugisha, 2018).

Critical reflection about rural students' experience of family violence focussed attention on key elements of the dominant discourse of Australian rurality, notably, patriarchal structures that perpetuate traditional gender roles and construct rural masculinity in ways that privilege domination and control (Campo & Tayton, 2015). Importantly, here, the strength of my established relationship with the student appears to have overcome some of the challenges facing rural women leaving a violent intimate relationship including perceptions of shame and a lack of

confidentiality associated with disclosure (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2016). Overall, discussions with my peers suggested that students appeared to construct academics as trustworthy confidants and a consistent, helpful resource. These constructions are important given the independence, stoicism, and sense of privacy concerning family problems that may characterize rural communities (Kenny & Connors, 2017). Critically, students' disclosures suggest their commitment to challenging the considerable disadvantage in socio-economic status, health, education, and employment outcomes experienced by rural residents (Australian Institite of Health and Welfare, (AIHW), 2016; AIHW, 2017), through continuing their education.

A reflexive lens enables reflection at an emotional level. First, the outbreak of COVID-19 limited opportunities for face to face contact, and in some cases, this scenario was exacerbated by connectivity issues. Consequently, communications with students were conducted mostly via email and telephone, and rural academics were frustrated by the impersonal nature of our interactions. Second, awareness of the boundaries of our role as social work educators meant trusting other professional supports to respond appropriately. We were acutely aware that in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, welfare agencies were struggling to move to unfamiliar service delivery models, mindful all the time of regulated physical distancing requirements. At the same time, familiarity with the broader local service system enabled trust that all supports would exercise their duty of care responsibilities to students well. Third, whilst horrified by the pervasive nature of family violence we were heartened that students' openness to sharing their accounts strongly suggests that family violence has now moved from the personal to the public domain. Finally, we were struck both by students' agency around seeking support and their resilience. The concept of resilience amongst tertiary students is an area of increasing interest in the literature much of which highlights the role that it can play in "mental health and success both at the university and in the workplace because of its association with coping with social, mental, emotional and educational challenges" (Brewer et al, 2019, p. 1113).

Reports of family violence escalated during the catastrophic bushfires of the 2019/2020 Australian summer (Downey et al., 2020; Parkinson, 2019). The outbreak of COVID-19 further emphasized entrenched gender inequities (Parrish, 2020). Family violence advocates suggest COVID-19 social isolation measures are further exacerbating women's experience of violence in Australian homes (1800RESPECT, 2020). This vignette offers hope by illustrating the important role of relational work in resisting the dominant patriarchal discourse of Australian rurality. In addition, although online delivery is not this author's preferred mode of teaching, the experience presented in this vignette resulted in new knowledge about the potential for online learning to support student wellbeing when family violence is a factor. In this case, online delivery offered the student opportunities to continue with education that would have been impossible in a program that included a face to face component.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article was a collaborative exercise between two social work academics separated by vast geographic distance. Our discussions during this process offered a safe space for moving beyond comfortable reflexivity focussed on the self, to realize a balance between our subjective experiences and the ways we position ourselves and our students (Cooper & Burnett, 2006) in stories that illustrate a sense of hopefulness. Discussion concerning our choice of vignettes, for

instance, was a reflective and iterative exercise that enabled us to acknowledge our contribution yet privilege the role of students in creating hope. At first glance, the contrasting vignettes presented here may appear incongruent given the technical and emotional focus of each story. However, in combination, these vignettes illustrate the breadth of the issues encountered by students and academics, and both depict relationships of respect and understanding, a mutual presence in an uncertain time.

We acknowledge the theme of reactivity in our vignettes of students' technological and personal issues. Consequently, further research is needed to explore social work academics' proactive strategies for managing student wellbeing and course delivery during these extraordinary times.

However, reflexive exploration of these two vignettes points out the myriad ways social work education may be a relational practice even when situated in a virtual context. The students in Vignette One demonstrated collegiality that reflected awareness of the shared challenges experienced in this new online world. In Vignette Two, the student/educator relationship appears to be an important factor enabling resilience and the continuation of learning in the face of considerable challenges. Consequently, the vignettes illuminate the relevance of emotions in our work and position hopefulness as a dynamic resource informing crisis response (O'Connor, 2019) during the shift from a blended learning environment to one that is fully online.

The online classroom 'recasts 'the usual power relationship between educator and student (Ruch, 2002). In the online setting, the educator may look into a sea of faceless names, unable to determine if their audience is engaged or even present. Students may mute/unmute and be seen/unseen as they choose, leaving the educator adrift and anxious. Though the online classroom is not the authors' preferred delivery mode, Vignette Two illustrated it may offer the student more direct influence over their learning in some circumstances.

One important learning is that as academics we parallel students' experience of personal, family, and technical issues during COVID-19. We have attempted to ease the generalized anxiety experienced by students over the past months by providing them with certainty that we are continuing to provide valuable learning experiences for them and are available and responsive to their needs. We have acknowledged in many ways that online learning is difficult for students and we also need to be forgiving of ourselves. Hope is considered a critical element of emotional self-care, particularly in the face of shared trauma (Lemieux et al., 2020) and a factor enabling career longevity (O'Neill et al., 2019). Importantly, the opportunity to write this reflexive piece together enabled a greater sense of collegiality and hope to develop between the authors, so important during the imposed COVID-19 isolation period This collaborative process provided us a rare opportunity to capture both tacit and explicit theoretical knowledge (Ruch, 2012) that reflects virtual and rural realities, and present it in an accessible form. Consequently, this article contributes to the emerging bodies of literature examining both use of positive emotions in diverse social work contexts (O'Connor, 2019; Collins, 2015; McCarter, 2007) and students' wellbeing in the online social work education context (Cowie & Summers, 2020; Goldingay et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2020). In sum, this article offers important insights for academics concerning ways social work students and academics may work together to create a sense of hopefulness during uncertain times.

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