

Title

Simulation: social work education in a third place

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Abstract

The curriculums of social work education are traditionally divided, with professional and theoretical knowledge taught largely in the classrooms of academia, whilst practical skills and experience are developed mostly in workplace settings. This paper locates simulation in Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Paulo Freire's pedagogy, considering its potential to offer social work education a third place, complementary to, yet unique and distinct from the first place of academy and the second place of placement. The authors present findings from the first stage of their evaluation of the introduction of simulation to social work curriculums at a UK university. Narrative responses are presented across six, overarching themes: the pedagogical approach; authenticity; engineered failure; applying theory in practice; developing practice skills; reflection and feedback, demonstrating that respondents valued opportunities for deliberate practice which enabled them to experience emotional responses and learn from their mistakes without negative consequence. Although these findings predate COVID 19, they are ever-more relevant as social work education reconsiders how to reach, teach, and engage social work students during the pandemic and beyond.

Keywords

Simulation; pedagogy; theory to practice; practice learning; zone of proximal development

Introduction

The relationships between theory and practice, personal and professional, academy and workplace unexpectedly shifted as the social distancing requirements of COVID 19 forced both social work education and social work practice to adopt remote working practices. Whilst as recently as 2019, social workers had reported feeling ill equipped to embrace online and digital technology (Social Care Institute for Excellence & British Association of Social Work, 2019), the pandemic dramatically reduced in-person contacts (Ferguson et al., 2020) and forced an exponential surge in the use of information technology as practice moved online (British Association of Social Work, 2020). In England, each route to gain qualification as a social worker has a mandatory, practice-based learning component, the structure, duration, and range of which must '...support the achievement of the learning outcomes and

the professional standards' (Social Work England, 2019, p.12). Historically, students typically completed a minimum of 170 days in placements over the duration of their programme, but as the pandemic took centre stage, existing notions of the nature and location of practice-based learning rapidly evolved. For social work education providers and social work students part way through placements, what constituted practice-learning, and whether there was actually a *place* requirement to placements became highly contested.

Social work education combines the teaching of professional and theoretical knowledge with the development of practical skills and experience (Boisen and Syers, 2004; Roulston et al., 2018). Although there are diverse modes and models of social work education, curriculums across the globe are predominantly compartmentalised in such a way that professional and theoretical knowledge is largely taught in the classrooms of academia, whilst practical skills and experience are mostly developed in workplace settings. This undermines notions that theory and practice are intrinsic and symbiotic, implicitly signalling to students that knowledge and theory are the reserve of academia, whilst skills and experience are what is important *on the job*. A significant task for contemporary social work education, therefore, is to find ways to better unify learning so that students are supported to develop the ability to apply knowledge and theory alongside practical skills. The COVID-19 pandemic has added a further dimension, necessitating a rapid move to remote methods of both education and practice. For students studying to become social workers during the pandemic, the majority of theoretical learning will not take place in a physical classroom, just as the majority of practical skills development will not take place in a physical workplace: the places of social work education have collapsed into cyberspace.

This paper considers how simulating deliberately designed, life-like practice scenarios presents possibilities to synthesise a traditionally separated curriculum, and Freirean opportunities of critical conscientization. It locates simulation in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, reflecting on the potential for peers and educators to mentor students within their zone of proximal development, supporting them to explore theoretical knowledge, rehearse practice skills, and reflect in a third place (Olenberg and Bissett, 1982). The authors provide a case study of their approach, reporting emerging findings from the first stage evaluation of the introduction of simulation to the social work curriculums of a UK university. Although these findings predate COVID 19, they are ever-more relevant as social work education has been forced to relocate from traditional environments of classroom and field and reconsider how to reach, teach, and engage social work students during the pandemic and beyond.

The schism between theory and practice in social work education

The International Federation of Social Workers' *Global Definition of Social Work* holds that ours is both a 'practice-based profession and an academic discipline' (International Federation of Social Work, 2014). A recurring debate within UK social work education centres

on the balance between these two elements; is theory the essential foundation of practice (Dominelli, 2004; Payne, 2014; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014) or have academies over-emphasised its importance at the expense of practice skills (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009; Grant et al., 2014; Narey, 2014)? Whilst discussion of the need to integrate theory and practice is omnipresent (Raskin, 1994; Bogo and Vayda, 1998; Skolnik et al., 1999; Fortune et al., 2001; Boisen and Syers, 2004; Bogo, 2015; Department for Education, 2019; Lee et al., 2020), meaningful descriptions of what such a synthesis actually looks like are elusive. Emphatic, but ambiguous imperatives to relate theory to practice may cause students to feel inadequate, ambivalent, or even develop what Thompson (2018) terms *theory-fright*, where the negative and confused emotions the student associates with theory result in theory-avoidant, anti-intellectual practice (Heslop and Meredith, 2021).

Although social work education is diverse, globally (Roulston et al., 2018) and in England where the authors of this paper are based, learning tends to be divided into two strands delivered in two distinct environments. Professional and theoretical knowledge is largely taught in the classrooms of academia, whilst practical skills and experience are mostly developed and honed in workplace settings variously referred to as fieldwork, practice learning, placements and practicums (for consistency, hereafter the term placements will be used). A divided curriculum is not an auspicious premise under which to prepare the future social workforce to meaningfully integrate theory and practice. Competing perspectives appear to pit theory against practice, and students may infer that they need to choose which to prioritise. As almost all of those entering social work education do so with the intention of practising, theory may become elective by default (Walton, 2005). Social work is contextualised in the lives of people in need, and very often takes place during times of crisis: the need for very practical, relational, and interpersonal skills is unequivocal. However, to view social work practice as a purely practical task, or to subscribe to what Neil Thompson (2010) terms the fallacy of theoryless practice, is to negate the complex internal processes social workers must navigate in order to develop understandings and reach sound professional judgments. People in need and crisis deserve much more than a reductive, uncritical, and procedural approach.

Freire's seminal text, the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968:2006) argues that education is never a neutral act: it either liberates, or it disempowers. Student social workers are not empty vessels to be treated as repositories for received academic or practice wisdom - they have an array of perspectives, characteristics, knowledge, and skills developed over their diverse life experiences. Social work education is the crucible in which these unique, personal qualities are augmented with professional values, skills and theoretical knowledge (Hennessey, 2011) as they develop and construct practice premised on professional use of self (England, 1986; Nixon & Murr, 2006; Mandell, 2008; Howe, 2008; Ward, 2008; Reupert, 2009; Froggett et al., 2015; Schneider and Grady, 2014; Council on Social Work Education, 2015; Trevithick 2012, 2018). An empowering social work education engages both sides of

the dyad - student and educator - in exploring and becoming critically conscious of how knowledge is constructed, located, and employed within contexts of culture, power and oppression (Freire, 1998). Clearly these ideas strongly resonate with fundamental social work concepts such as empowerment, co-production, critical reflection, reflexivity, and anti-oppressive practice (Heslop and Meredith, 2021), but can be difficult to realise through traditional teaching formats which offer limited opportunities to integrate "...theory and practice, the individual and social, art and science, field and classroom" (Gibbons and Gray, 2002 p.539).

Third Places

Oldenburg and Brissett's sociological theory of Third Places (1982) proposes that individuals achieve wellbeing through the combination of interactions with three essential environments: home (the first place), work/ education (the second place), and social spaces which provide support and respite from both familial and occupational responsibility (third places). The rapid progression of the digital age challenged the theory's original conceptualisations of first, second and third places as the World Wide Web (WWW) provided opportunity for dynamic environmental configurations in cyberspace (Soukup, 2006; Memarovic et al., 2014). Oldenburg and Brissett explicitly recognised theirs to be a middle class theory (1982), and Littman (2020) highlights that socially marginalised groups (for example older people, people in prisons, homeless people) have always faced economic, legal, physical and geographical constraints which impede or prevent access to traditional first, second, and third places. Littman proposes an alternative theory of *collapsed places* which recognises that people '...uniquely build meaning within their respective place contexts.' (2020, 1). The social distancing requirements of COVID-19 meant that work, education, and social interactions ceased to exist in three distinct settings, and largely took place within the collapsed place of the home, across the medium of the WWW. Social work education rapidly moved to a collapsed place which was largely neither academy nor field, and the regulator devolved decisions about how best to manage practice learning to individual institutions:

'We encourage education providers to make local arrangements for the assessment of each student's practice learning, in conjunction with practice educators, and how any gaps in learning can be filled.' (Social Work England, 2020)

Considering how social work students' practice learning requirements could and should be interpreted and met during the unprecedented times of a pandemic presents a liberating opportunity to think differently and flexibly about practice-learning in the longer-term. Simulation can provide a literal and theoretical third place for social work education which is neither classroom nor field but synthesises learning from both and facilitates critical consciousness through experience and reflection. Simulation in realistic, rather than

classroom environments has long been a central component of medical (Boet et al., 2014), nursing and health (Boet et al., 2014) education. The available evidence on applying such approaches into social work education has largely originated from North America, and there is relatively little evidence of uptake elsewhere in the world (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). Research studies value simulation as a method to prepare social work students for practice (Bogo et al., 2011; Gellis & Kim, 2017; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020), but demonstrate that it continues to be viewed mainly as ancillary to classroom teaching (Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2020).

Simulation as a pedagogical approach

The term simulation is perhaps most commonly associated with computer programming, but essentially refers to any reproduction of behavioural traits through the act of pretending, imitating, or enacting a situation. Humans have rehearsed and re-enacted events to learn and reflect for time immemorial. Using role-play to simulate social work practice is not a new concept (Bardill, 1976; Fulmer 1983; Doel & Shardlow, 1996; Hargreaves & Hadlow, 1997; Logie et al., 2013); the authors of this paper variously trace their own social work educations back as far as 1980s and 1990s, and can attest that role-play was routinely employed as a teaching tool. However, the limitations of classroom-based role-play are well recognised (Kinney & Aspinwall-Roberts, 2010), with students often reluctant to engage in what they perceive as a pretence which lacks authenticity and relevance (Mazza, 1998).

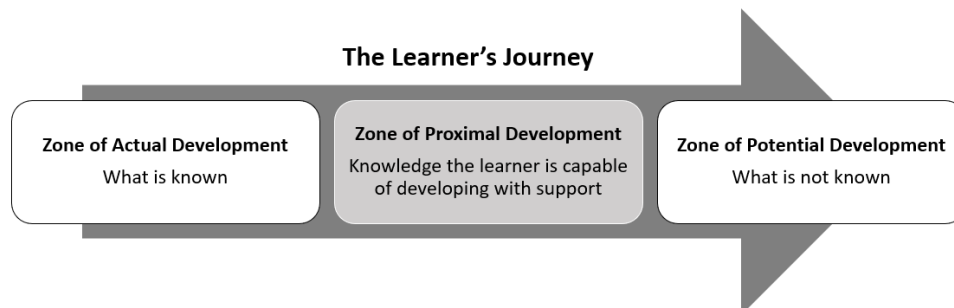
The significance of simulation as a pedagogical approach is articulated in sociocultural theory, which originates from the early twentieth century work of Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, who theorised the role of play (simulation) in learning as a core aspect of human and cognitive development (1933:1966). Vygotsky used the example of sisters playing a game in which they were also sisters and speculated that play-acting (simulating) presented a safe and highly effective mechanism for them to explore and learn about their roles. Simulating their relationship in the game enabled them to develop skills and gain new insights which they could then apply in their real-life relationship. Importantly, although much valuable learning could be drawn from aspects of the pretence which had not gone well, these could then be set aside with no on-going negative effect. Steinberg and Vinjamuri refer to this as *engineered failure*, ‘... “failing” in a safe, structured, supportive environment that promotes the risk taking that is inherent in participatory learning’ (2014, p.372).

The *zone of proximal development* (ZPD, see figure 1) is another core concept of sociocultural theory, which Vygotsky defined it as

the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through

problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1930-34:1978, p.86)

Figure 1: the zone of proximal development



The ZPD essentially encompasses the knowledge the person does not yet have and the skills they cannot yet perform, but which they are capable of learning with support. Someone with more advanced knowledge and skills (e.g. a peer, colleague, academic or practice educator) can mentor the learner within the ZPD as they engage in activities and social interactions which integrate new information with their existing knowledge. Rather than expecting learners to develop understanding of concepts that they have only encountered on the page, a process which Bruner (1978) termed scaffolding enables them to develop incrementally and experientially through activities such as observation, critical discussion, skills rehearsal and reflection. Pedagogical approaches of mentoring and scaffolding are consistent with Freirean principles of learners being actively engaged in selection and discovery, rather than passively mimicking and recollecting received wisdom (Bruner, 1978).

The ZPD can be readily understood in the context of sport, where specific skills - perhaps a golf swing or taking a penalty in football - are targeted for development, learned, and then honed through repetition, coaching and feedback. Deliberate practice under the mentorship of another provides opportunities to scaffold the sportsperson's competence and confidence, and can then be incorporated into a competitive match, where hopefully practice pays off and influences a better result. Social work is very different from sport. The variable nature of placements which make it extremely difficult to regulate and standardise the learning opportunities available to social work students (Roulston et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). However excellent a placement, it cannot predictably guarantee it will provide the learning opportunities a particular student identifies as needed. Social work takes place in the context of people's lives, and practice learning must be ethical, never voyeuristic.

Over the past two decades, digital advances have made simulation-education much more sophisticated than classroom roleplay. Immersive technologies such as 3D, virtual and augmented reality provide the ability to create highly realistic, interactive environments in which students can experientially learn in ways which would not be ethical or appropriate in

a real-life situation. This presents Vygotskian opportunities to mentor and scaffold learning - for example, through deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2008); stopping to reflect in-action, provide feedback, or coach the student (Dill, 2019); and repeating performances to refine behaviours and develop skills. These approaches promote the development of essential social work skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and reflective practice (Nimmagadda & Murphy, 2014), developing confidence through opportunities for engineered failure (Steinberg and Vinjamuri, 2014) which do not have real life consequences. Mazza crucially recognises that simulated practice is ‘...both real and unreal. That is, the roles created for the simulation are fictional, however, the students acting those roles experience real feelings’ (1998, p81). Simulating situations in which students encounter their own, instinctive, sensory, emotional, and cognitive responses provides a powerful learning experience. Reflecting on this provides new insights and enables students to consider how they will regulate their emotions in real practice (Bogo et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2020).

Introducing our simulation model to the social work curriculum

Doel and Shardlow define simulations in social work education as ‘*any device which is designed to accelerate the student’s learning as preparation for active work with the service user*’ (1996, p. 19, italics in original). This presents an endless number of possibilities, however, the most widely-recognised forms of simulation are: role play with peers/colleagues (Doel & Shardlow, 1996; Miller, 2004); simulation with standardised human actors for teaching and learning; simulation with standardised human actors for assessment of learning (Bogo, et al., 2014), and virtual, technology based interactions (Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2020). Simulations may be delivered in person, online or through a combination of both. Northumbria University has a state-of-the-art clinical skills facility which houses adaptable environments equipped with an extensive range of immersive, multi-sensory and digital technology, which has long played a key part in teaching, learning and assessment on health programmes. Nursing colleagues invited the authors to observe a large-scale simulation they were running within the facility, and this was both illuminating and invigorating. The authors observed a shift in focus from didactic, educator-centred teaching, to experiential student learning through engagement with novel and creative opportunities to explore the ambiguous nature of practice. Teaching and learning felt less constrained as individual students experienced and responded to scenarios differently depending on their unique qualities and perspectives, and scenarios dynamically evolved in response.

From the academic year 2017/18 onwards, the authors and their colleagues deliberately developed and introduced a broad range of simulation-based learning opportunities across the curriculums of all social work programmes, and were given ethical approval by Northumbria University to evaluate student social workers' experiences of this (Dodds et al., 2018). Our model of simulation builds on Freirean and Vygotskian principles introduced earlier in this article and incorporates Gibbs’ (1988) view that learning by doing is the

mechanism via which students progress along the continuum from abstract (lectures) to real world (placement/professional practice). Practice-focussed simulated scenarios take place before students undertake their first placement, enabling them to explore and prepare. When students return to teaching after placement, more complicated simulations are incorporated, enabling them to apply and refine their practice learning. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to identify and reflect on how they and their peers have professionally developed as a result of their placement experiences.

Some simulated scenarios have been quite simple, for example students have simulated telephoning service users to introduce themselves and arrange a visit to develop initial engagement skills. At the other side of the spectrum, the authors have developed and facilitated a three-day, real-time simulation involving actors, online elements and moving between different physical and virtual environments. Table 1 provides a non-exhaustive range of examples of environments and practice situations which have been simulated. In order to create a more authentic learning opportunity which is not simply characterised by educators' experiences and perspectives (Moss, 2000), community members, people who have used social care services and current social work practitioners have been consulted and involved in designing and delivering simulations. Steering groups have been established to govern complex simulations. At the end of any simulation, students complete a reflective tool based on Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988), and then participate in a plenary debrief incorporating feedback which enables both students and educators to reflect and learn from the experience.

Table 1: Examples simulated environments and practice situations

Examples of simulated environments	Examples of simulated practice
People's homes	Duty work - responding to unexpected situations; triage; prioritising; information gathering/sharing; decision making etc.
Social work offices	Home visits – communication and engagement; interpreting sensory and environmental cues; managing power dynamics; respecting others' space etc.
Remote working via telephone/ computer	Assessments – sensemaking and developing multiple hypotheses; collaboration; assessing of risk, needs, mental capacity; assessment of specific client groups; creating genograms, ecomaps, and chronologies; care planning etc.
Hospital	Interventions – crisis; systemic; motivational interviewing; task-centred; group work; solution focused
Court	

Meetings – contributing; working with other agencies; chairing; joint decision making; defensible decision making; respectfully challenging

Supervision – relating theory to practice, managing the supervisory relationship, reflection, and reflexivity

Court skills - Giving evidence/ being cross examined

Research Methods

This study is an evaluative exploration of the efficacy of simulation as a pedagogical approach in social work education, intended to generate evidence to inform the planning and delivery of social work programmes at Northumbria University. The evaluation is informed by the following research questions:

1. How do social work students relate to simulation-education?
2. Do social work students reflect on theoretical knowledge during simulated practice?
3. What practice skills do social work students develop during simulation-education?

The study was conceived as a staged evaluation, seeking first to capture data from current social work students on their experiences of learning through simulation before subsequent stages explore the impact of simulation-based learning on and in social work practice. This paper presents a case study of the themes and findings emerging from the first stage. Kirkpatrick (1959: 2005) proposes four levels of evaluation of training programmes: *reaction* elicits participants' views, most often through completion of a questionnaire (Campbell (1997) terms these *opinionnaires*); *learning* establishes objectives against which the participants' knowledge, skills and competence (Rowe, 1995) are assessed; *behaviour* measures improvements in performance related to the training objectives; and *results* considers how the outcome of the training relates to organisational objectives. Kaufman and Keller (1994) suggest that Kirkpatrick's levels should be extended to incorporate a fifth, evaluating the *societal contribution* of the training programme. Bramley and Kitson (1994) suggest that whilst levels three and four of Kirkpatrick's model are critical objectives, effectively measuring how a programme of training has impacted on individual practice and agency objectives (and, if Kaufman and Keller's fifth level is incorporated, society) is so difficult that the vast majority of UK and USA evaluations only engage level one, and to a lesser extent, level two. The findings presented here arise from a level one evaluation, however, evaluation across all levels is intended through subsequent stages.

Bristol Online Survey (BOS) was used to design a questionnaire based upon the research questions and employing mixed methods to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were generated via responses to questions that required either Likert scaling or yes/no answers, and qualitative data were generated by narrative responses to

open questions. Questionnaires were anonymous and did not collect demographic data other than identifying that the participant was a current social work student at Northumbria University. All students who participate in any form of simulated practice as part of their social work education at Northumbria University are invited to complete the anonymous survey as part of the on-going evaluation. Findings presented here were collected from students who self-selected to participate during the final semester of the academic year 2017/18 and the full academic year of 2018/19, n=68. Participants could choose whether to self-administer the questionnaire electronically online, or as a paper copy, and the authors collated a dataset of numerical and narrative information from the completed questionnaires. Analysis combined exploratory and confirmatory components (Turkey, 1977) and employed NVIVO 12 Software (Aronson, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004) to identify patterns and themes across the dataset.

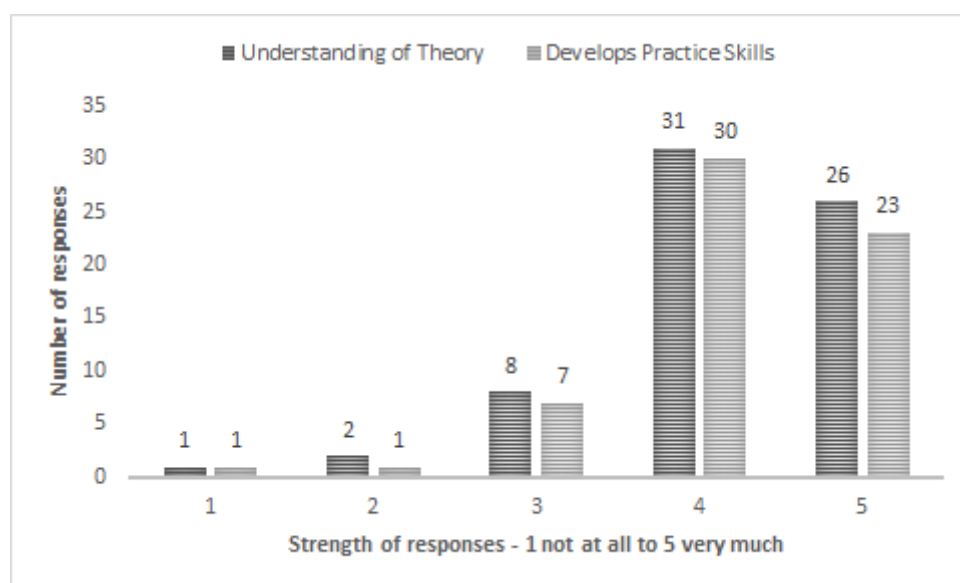
Research Findings

The evaluation’s first stage recruited 68 students to complete the survey questions. Table 2 reports the quantitative responses to the questions:

Did the simulation add to your understanding of theory in social work practice?
Was the simulation helpful in developing your skills for social work practice?

84% of respondents felt that the simulation had added to their understanding of theory in social work practice (rating 4 yes, or 5 yes very much so), whilst 79% indicated that simulation had helped to develop their practice skills.

Table 2: Simulation promotes students understanding of theory and practice skills



Narrative data comprised responses which were grouped into six, overarching themes: the pedagogical approach; authenticity; engineered failure; applying theory in practice; developing practice skills; reflection and feedback. A representative sample of comments for each theme is presented below.

The pedagogical approach

Respondents were positive about the learning experiences simulation provided in comparison to other approaches, and many commented on its interactive and hands on nature:

“The hands on element makes learning more interesting and also I think it helps us to learn / remember the information better.”

“[simulation is] hands on experience, better than lecture for this experience” and “it helps to have more hands on practice.”

The ability to bring life to scenarios was welcomed:

“this was a better learning experience than reading a case study from a handout.”

One student commented that:

“It's interactive and less teacher talk and us being talked at. It's a group exercise and I find it much more engaging and exciting. I feel I retain more information with this- particularly as my learning style is best suited to this type of learning.”

The authors' have found that students are generally more willing to engage with simulations than with classroom-based teaching, and a number of responses appeared to concur with this view:

“everybody seemed more willing to join in” and “I think there was a higher engagement and interaction of students in this environment.”

Others commented that simulations contributed to preparation for practice:

“I thoroughly enjoy this way of learning. I felt that I was more able to get involved with learning content and it helped me to gain further confidence. Thank you.”

“We got a chance to simulate a home visit which I think was really helpful to me as to what I might be looking for. I think overall they were all enjoyable experiences and I would recommend them for future students as I think it can be good preparation for the real thing!”

Authenticity

Several respondents commented on the authenticity simulation offers:

“I felt that I gained more from the simulation exercises as they were more realistic than reading about experiences/life from a book and I enjoyed how they were interactive as it made the situation we were learning about seem much more realistic.”

The act of stepping into an immersive learning activity seems to be a powerful experience, where pretence and reality blur as students embody their roles

“I think the moment that stood out was when I first entered the room where the simulation took place as it made it seem much more like stepping into someone's home as a social worker.”

“I actually forgot that it was a simulation and thought I was actually in my manager's office being handed a case. #realistic”.

One emphatic response simply read “It is real.”

Engineered failure

Students often feel anxious that they will not know what to do when they are on placement, or will get things wrong, resulting in consequences for people who use services and themselves. As discussed earlier in this paper, engineering opportunities for failure (Steinberg and Vinjamuri, 2014) allows students to work through such experiences in a safe and supported space, and several respondents welcomed this:

“simulation is a safer environment where you can cut your teeth and if you make a mistake then it is not part of your assessment.”

Others recognised the simulation as a chance to “learn by your mistakes”, a “practical exercise that allows you to make your own mistakes and reflect on it, in a safe environment.”

Simulation was seen to provide the opportunity to rehearse deliberately and safely in preparation for placement:

“on placement you are more under pressure to do well, but during simulation you don't have the added pressure.”

“With placement you are carrying a case load with multiple things to look for in a stimulation it is one experience in a safe learning environment.”

One respondent commented quite evangelically:

“Simulation based learning enables the learners to learn in a safe environment. Safe from judgements and students worrying they might do something wrong or approach situations incorrectly. It is in my opinion it's extremely innovative and something that should be utilised and used much more within this context. I would feel very energised and excited to know I was having some simulation settings days.”

Applying theory in practice

The emerging data are generally very supportive of the authors' hypothesis that simulation-education promotes synthesis of theory and practice. This is evidenced through statements such as, “it [simulation] combined theory with practice application”, and “[simulation is] putting theory and knowledge into practice”.

Some felt that their learning was more contextualised and cohesive:

“I have really enjoyed simulation, it has helped me to put all of the pieces together”

“I am a hands-on learner so found this helpful when understanding the theory of social work.”

One respondent noted that simulation revealed the reciprocity of theory and practice:

“in terms of case studies it allows you to apply the knowledge you have been given through lectures. It also allows you to understand real life scenarios.”

Respondents also commented on how they viewed simulation in relation to placements:

“Both placement and simulation work allow for a better understanding of social work. Simulation is good to begin with as it means you gain better ideas of how situations will be and allows mistakes to be made and learned from.”

This supports the notion that simulation can form a bridge between classroom learning and placement practice. Another student, however, noted that simulation is rarely incorporated during placement:

“in some cases it is useful as it breaks up learning but it also allows you to think about learning gained from lectures. However, in placement it doesn't play that strong of a role.”

Developing practice skills

Narrative responses supported the quantitative data trend that students believed simulation helped to develop their practice skills. One reported:

“Having first hand experience in a controlled environment allowed me to further develop skills required for practice without the pressure of worrying whether my decisions would directly affect a service user. Good practice.”

Some gained new insight into the skills they would need in practice:

“Interviewing the grandparents builds up an awareness of how much planning may be needed i.e. what do you need to know in order to make a full assessment with evidence.”

Others found immersion in different environments made them consider sensory, as well as cognitive processing skills:

“Using your observation skills, builds confidence/familiarity with social work roles and brings a different type of learning.”

“It also allowed me to use my observational skills that would not have been used at all in a lecture.”

Reflection and feedback

Opportunities for individual and collective reflection, as well as mentoring through supportive feedback are built into each simulation. Respondents welcomed the ability to gain new insights in conjunction with peers and educators:

“the opportunity to discuss the case with colleagues and tutors was really helpful”

“simulation makes me think about my own practice, in much more depth. It's much more personal and a way of engaging with other students in understanding their perspectives.”

“gives more insight, helps us reflect in practice.”

Even when the simulated experience itself was not valued, the opportunity it provided to explore learning together with peers and academics was:

“whilst I do not think the simulated environments gave me much there were aspects such as the opportunity to discuss with tutors and colleagues that I found really helpful.”

Some recognised areas they needed to develop:

“after many simulation tasks I realised things I forgot to ask or thought I should have done differently.”

Another respondent noted that reflection helped them to consider the ethics of their actions:

“[During] the home environment simulation, the service user was not home. I still entered the property, looking back on this I would not have done this in real life practice. Excellent reflective piece of simulation for me.”

Some simulations are video recorded to enable students to review their practice on video playback. One respondent commented on the benefits of

“being able to see and hear myself, as well as receiving feedback from tutors and peers.”

Others gained new insights into their physical behaviours:

“Looking back at how I reacted in some situations and identifying certain behaviours I displayed was very interesting such as I fidget in my chair and bite my lip.”

“I found the exercise useful. I felt I got more constructive feedback from more structured simulations which were recorded.”

Discussion

These findings represent the first stage of an on-going evaluation designed to inform educators at a specific UK university about how students are responding to the introduction of simulation to social work curriculums. They are limited in that the sample size is small and self-selecting, and as a level one evaluation, responses demonstrate opinions and preferences (Kirkpatrick, 2005) which in isolation cannot be used as a measure of efficacy. The findings are not generalisable across other student social work groups or institutions, but nevertheless, they indicate that this specific group of social work students positively experienced simulated, immersive practice-learning opportunities. The findings also present an unanticipated snapshot of how students experienced simulation-education (both in person and online) pre-pandemic, at a time when most teaching was modelled on traditional, in-person and on-campus lectures and seminar discussion.

Much has changed since the evaluation was first designed; the pandemic has unexpectedly stimulated social work education's appetite for digital and technology-enhanced, remotely deliverable approaches. In this context, simulation might be viewed as compensatory, rather than valuable in its own right. The authors, however, do not suggest simulation as a make-do solution, something to fall upon as a contingency until normal service can be resumed, at which point it must return to its ancillary position (Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2020). Freire (1968:2006) held that effective and empowering pedagogies occur when teachers willingly relinquish the automatic status of expert (1968:2006). The findings demonstrate that respondents experienced simulation as a move away from didactic, educator-led teaching, towards a more empowering and Freirean pedagogy, which presented authentic experiential learning opportunities that they and/or their peers were more able to participate in because they were shared with, rather than dominated by educators. Reflecting together with educators and peers, and giving and receiving feedback were valued as opportunities to learn from multiple perspectives, and this aligns with Vygotskian notions that mentorship is meaningfully provided by peers (1930-34:1978), and should not be viewed as the exclusive domain of the academic or practice educator. For most students who responded to this evaluation survey, simulation appears to have provided an effective opportunity to scaffold their learning within the ZPD. Responses highlight being able to relate theoretical knowledge and rehearse practical skills through their own experiences of deliberate practice, their observations of peers' practice, and through multifocal reflective activities which incorporate both giving and receiving feedback.

Historically, the social work curriculum has been divided and practice-learning has been seen as synonymous with placement-learning. The COVID-19 pandemic collapsed social work practice and education into a less distinct space, and in doing so, revealed the possibility of learning, practicing, and practice-learning differently. The findings presented here suggest that simulation constitutes a third place for social work education - one which does not replace academic or placement learning but offers benefits and proximity to both. In this third place, practice-learning is contextualized in simulated, rather than real life scenarios, as students are supported to synthesise theoretical knowledge and practical skills application in situations deliberately designed for their particular learning needs. This ability to experience real (and often unanticipated) emotional responses, to learn from mistakes without negative consequence, and critically reflect with others to gain meaningful insight is more than just valuable preparation for placement, it can offer practice-learning opportunities that the placement cannot.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a case study of from an on-going evaluation of the introduction of simulation into the social work curriculums of a UK university. Whilst the findings are limited,

they provide initial support for the authors' view that simulation offers something beyond the traditional first and second places of academy and placement. As the third places in Oldenburg and Brissett's theory (1982) offer something unique and distinct from, yet complimentary to the first place of home and the second place of work, so simulation presents a unique, distinct and complementary third place for social work education. This third place embodies a zone of proximal development within which students can receive a high level of support to synthesise theory and practice through an empowering pedagogical approach rooted in long-established Freirean and Vygotskyian theoretical principles. At present, the potential this third space offers is speculative, however, the authors' evaluation continues, and subsequent findings will be reported in future publications.

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