Harnessing Opportunities: What impacts MSW(PQ) students studying at a distance?

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Abstract

Despite a long history of engagement with distance education models in Australia, the adoption of distance learning in social work education has been cautious and social work educators' ability to teach and develop relationship-based skills in distance and online environments, is consistently questioned. This paper reports on a research project conducted with staff and students of a regional Australian university offering a qualifying Masters of Social Work (MSW [PQ]) program through distance learning models. Underpinned by a framework of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the project employed focus groups and semi-structured interviews with staff and an online survey with students to identify issues of concern and to inform the redesign of course delivery. Pivotal to students' experience was the need to create a sense of cohort to overcome perceptions of isolation and abandonment when subjects are delivered in distance modes rather than face to face. Moreover, inaccurate assumptions about post-graduate students' familiarity with basic academic conventions and online teaching strategies was seen to contribute to a sense of personal failure and incompetence that could lead to withdrawal from the course. Strategies and processes introduced to address these matters are discussed and preliminary evaluations of their impact shared.

Key Words: online learning; distance learning; social work education; cohort building; appreciative inquiry.

Introduction

Australian higher education institutions have made a sustained commitment to some form of distance education to off campus students for a number of decades (Reiach, Averbeck & Cassidy, 2012). Not only have distance education approaches to tertiary learning been embraced to overcome the significant geographical isolation of many Australian students, they have also been adopted to meet the educational needs of people excluded from on-campus study by health issues or social and economic disadvantage (Author, 2012). More recently the widespread availability of web based technology and the changing profile of the student population have contributed to an unprecedented promotion of online learning in all Australian universities (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Maple, Jarrott & Kuyini, 2013). In fact, engagement with online educational technologies for tertiary students and staff is now critical to inclusive education and to an 'education for all' agenda (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016, p. 264).

Despite this widespread use and acknowledged importance, distance learning alternatives to face to face teaching continue to be viewed as a secondary instruction platform for many tertiary institutions, teachers, and students (Author, 2012; East, La Mendola & Alter, 2014). Moreover, the adoption of online distance learning models in social work education has been slower and more cautious than in other disciplines with many practitioners and educators debating the capacity to teach and develop relationship-based skills in distance learning environments (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011). This paper describes the innovative approaches developed to address the concerns and improve the retention and participation of post graduate social work students studying in a regional Australian university. While distance learning strategies can improve access, many models, especially those that integrate technology enhanced teaching modes, can also generate challenges for postgraduate social work students.

Background

Social Work Education and Technology

Social work education has experienced significant pressure in the past decade to embrace an online environment as a method for distance learner engagement (Mirriahi, Alonzo, McIntyre, Kligyte, & Fox, 2015); however, it has been notoriously slow to adopt principles and practices associated with academic technology (Ayala, 2009; Holmes, Tracy, Longs Painter, Oestreich & Park, 2015; Youn, 2007). The debate about the inclusion and integration of technology in social work education centres primarily on the scepticism of social work practitioners and educators about the contributions technology can offer to teaching and developing clinical, relationship-based skills (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Holmes et al., 2015). Jones (2015), for example argues

> Experienced online social work educators express concerns about the effectiveness of learning practice skills solely in this format. They specifically question the ability of students to demonstrate and educators to observe self-awareness, use of self, cultural competency, and relationship skills without face-to-face interaction (p.226).

It is unsurprising therefore that even when academic programs adopt some online teaching methodologies, there is an ongoing and persistent reliance on "…in-person, face-to-face contact where students met with instructors in real time in a physical space rather than virtual" (Quinn & Barth, 2014, p.40).

This reticence continues despite research that demonstrates enhanced student learning, higher student satisfaction and increased student competence with technology when online models are offered to distance students (Holmes et al., 2015). Research has also highlighted the potential of using web-based teaching to respond to social justice issues such as equitable access to education for diverse students (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011) and increased professional development opportunities for isolated rural social workers (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008). These

positive aspects of online pedagogies coupled with the relentless institutional pressures to increase student numbers and to attract more non-traditional students, has seen an increasing interest in technology-enhanced distance education options in Australian social work education (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; East et al., 2014).

Blended Learning Approaches in Social Work Education

Midgley (2017) describes distance learning as "learning remotely without being in regular face-to-face contact with a teacher in the classroom" and notes that such learning may include "occasional face to face encounters". The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2012) embraces such a definition, requiring all accredited social work courses to include at least 20 days of face to face, on campus tuition across the entire degree. Therefore, the term 'blended' approaches to distance learning accurately describes the experience for social work students in Australia. Blended approaches provide the opportunity for social work educators to take full advantage of both online and face to face platforms, and to promote student learning in ways that exceed what can be achieved by each method alone (Ayala 2009). Blended approaches to distance learning involves two or more of the following elements: traditional of face-to-face teaching, online materials, mentors or coaches, simulations, structured classes, on-the-job training, informal learning, managerial coaching and eLearning (McGee & Reis, 2012). More comprehensive definitions of blended approaches also emphasise concepts of flexibility and student led learning thus supporting the value base of social work education. In this study, blended learning is understood to include course designs that

> …involve instructor and learners working together in mixed delivery modes, typically face-to-face and technology mediated, to accomplish learning outcomes that are pedagogically supported through assignments, activities, assessments as appropriate for a given mode and which bridge course environments in a manner meaningful to the learner (McGee & Reis, 2012, p. 9).

While these blended or hybrid approaches to distance learning have proved to be popular, questions continue to be raised about the capacity of e-learning strategies to provide

pedagogical alignment with the core aspects of social work practice and their potential contribution to transformative learning opportunities for students (East et al, 2014). As a result, blended learning approaches continue to be used in an ad hoc manner in many social work courses and therefore the strengths and possibilities of their integration in the social work curriculum are not being fully realised (Bellefeuille, 2006; Ayala, 2009).

Digital Literacy and Social Work Educators

Facilitating student engagement in, and developing a coherent curriculum for, blended learning are key challenges faced by social work educators and addressing these issues relies on a high level of digital literacy amongst them which cannot be assumed (Quinn & Barth, 2014; Mirriahi et al., 2015). The work of Mirriahi et al. (2015) highlights that social work teaching staff can be inhibited in their use of blended learning strategies by their lack of familiarity with technological tools, a perceived lack of technical support, and persistent doubts about the relevance of technology to student learning.

Further, research has highlighted that the adoption of learning technologies is primarily influenced by the demands of local curriculum contexts as they are perceived by individual academics (Kennedy, Jones, Chambers & Peacock, 2011). Yet, many institutional strategies addressing low digital literacy and low uptake of technology-enhanced teaching strategies among academics are offered as institutional- wide, one-size-fits-all training. The individual nature of facilitating factors and barriers to technology usage suggests these models may do little to contribute to changes in beliefs and behaviours among staff.

Kennedy et al. (2011) reveal that many tertiary teachers are well aware of their digital literacy deficiencies and cite the lack of appropriate, timely technological support as key to their reticence in using online tools in their teaching. The inaccessibility of support is also highlighted by Smith (2015, p 239) who claims that, “like their students, instructors who teach online may experience feelings of isolation and welcome increased opportunities for live-time interaction with, and the social presence of, colleagues and institutional representatives”. All

these issues point to a mind shift among educators as critical to the competent and confident adoption of blended approaches in social work distance education.

Master of Social Work student learning needs

Literature which focuses specifically on the learning needs of students in social work postgraduate programs indicate that this cohort face particular challenges which require flexible, personalised responses. In Australia, students with relevant bachelor level qualifications are accepted into MSW(PQ) degrees. These courses are considered entry level by the professional accrediting body, preparing graduates for beginning practice in the social work profession. However, they are simultaneously considered to be advanced academic courses ranked at level 9 in the Australian Qualifications Framework (2014). This conflicting identity for MSW(PQ) students (i.e. novice in professional skills but advanced in academic skills) creates some unique challenges for educators in integrating technologically-enhanced teaching strategies for students studying at a distance.

While MSW(PQ) students are expected to have previously developed a range of skills and capacities, the assumption that such graduate students have the academic skills they need to be successful is untested (Owens & Lilly, 2017). For example, the previous study experiences of MSW(PQ) students can be from a time when face to face teaching was the norm, and distance education was provided via print media only; their competence with web based programs cannot be assumed. Other issues that impact on the educational experience of MSW(PQ) students include geographical barriers, employment (and therefore time availability), and family and community responsibilities (Freddolino, Blaschke & Rypkema, 2009).

These issues were highlighted by Holmes et al.'s (2015) research into the use of 'flipped classroom' techniques with MSW students, which identified that initially these students were "overwhelmed by the amount of new technologies used in the courses" (p.221). This research concluded that gradual and highly supported introductions to blended learning pedagogies was vital to allay the anxiety of students returning to formal study (Holmes et al., 2015). So while

the initial access to educational opportunities for MSW(PQ) students can be facilitated by a flexible, technology-enhanced curriculum, their long term engagement can be severely hampered by the disconnected and incoherent use of web based mediums. A social presence, facilitated by student engagement with others and with the educator, is important to the development of meaningful interactions and engagement with and for MSW(PQ) students (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015).

This Project

XXX is a regional university servicing a large and relatively sparsely populated area of Northern Australia. Distance learning strategies have been core to social work education at XXX since 1995 when lecture materials and specified readings were printed and posted to off campus students (Author, 2012). In contrast, on campus students participated solely in face to face lectures and tutorials. However, by 2012 the increasing use of online technology for all students was evident and the distinction between on-campus and distance students became less apparent. For example, in 2001 70% of the enrolled distance students resided more than 20km away from the central campuses; however, by 2011 this had changed.

> It is no longer the case that students making use of distance education mode are almost exclusively geographically distant from the campuses…. higher proportions of students …choose distance education modes to better accommodate their family and work commitments (Author, 2012 p. 251-252).

The MSW(PQ) was introduced in 2012 and is now institutionally recognised as a successful program with steady enrolments and strong retention rates. Nevertheless, in response to changing AQF standards and accreditation requirements, the MSW(PQ) curriculum was re-developed in 2014 and significant changes were made to structure and composition of the degree. Despite these changes, MSW(PQ) students continued to be segregated in terms of the traditional split between on-campus and off-campus cohorts, with on campus students engaged

in traditional face to face classroom environments and distance students participating primarily through online methodologies.

The first cohort of students entered the redeveloped program in 2015 and although initial enrolment numbers were like those in previous years, early withdrawal rates were significantly higher – almost 25%. Anecdotal feedback indicated that withdrawing students were primarily distance students who found it challenging to manage the different delivery styles evident in each subject and the limited opportunities to network and build relationships with other students. Rather than continue an ad hoc, individualised response to these issues, a project team was formed to lead an evaluation and review process. Institutional funding was received to investigate the nature of blended learning opportunities relevant to our course and our students, the attitudes and approaches of staff in applying blended learning principles, and the possibilities for alternative processes especially for distance students.

Method

Framework of Inquiry

A process of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was chosen as a framework for the project. Grounded in social constructionism, AI is a fully participative approach that emphasises capacity and resourcefulness. Cockell & McArthur-Blair (2012, p. 2) describe AI as a "co-constructed practice informed by all those who work on creating conditions for growth and change". The core value of inclusivity is an important theme inherent in the AI approach ensuring "that knowledge, understanding and participation are not confined to a small elite group whose conclusions may be rejected by others" (Reid, 2007, p.70). This emerged as an important factor in this project, as it became evident that institutional responses to the issues raised above often focussed on addressing perceived deficits of staff and students fostering division, distrust and negativity (Kadi-Hanifi, Dagman, Peters, Snell, Tutton & Wright. 2014).

In contrast to centralised institutional responses, the AI process enabled the group to explore how best practice could be developed and maintained through the recognition of achievements

and strengths, the celebration of success, and the active appreciation of what is already working (Bellinger & Elliott, 2011). The potential of AI to "influence the desired cultural shift through its process as well as its outcome" (Bellinger & Elliott, 2011, p.710) was particularly important as the goal was to value and affirm the strengths of our student body and the strategies already used by staff group.

While there is a growing body of literature sharing successful narratives of applying AI processes, there is some critique that claims the unwavering focus on positives is evidence of a research process lacking rigour (McCoy, 2014). This was considered by the project team in discussions of the potential of AI as an approach, however as Reid (2007) asserts, all research is partial. The team recognised AI as opportunity to move away from "a disengaged and distinct exercise, carried out in isolation from all other conversations" (Reid, 2007, p.76) to explore people's individual and collective success.

The Research Journey

The AI framework informed the five stages of the project, that were designed to focus evaluative attention on 'the best of what is' and the potential of 'what might be' (McCoy, 2014, p. 108.). The five step AI model guided the process through distinct stages: definition, discovery, dreaming, designing and destiny (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). We sought to engage both staff and students in the process and used diverse methodologies as outlined below to access the views, ideas and expectations of each group as relevant to each stage.

Defining the focus

The process of *definition* guided the process from beginning to end and as such, significant attention was paid to ground the preferred future in "the best of what already is" (McCoy, 2014, p. 108). During a collective workshop, staff were encouraged to consider when was the course "at its best"? (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012) and how could this best be reframed to become the focus of this project. This process elicited two goals: to develop a course that provided all students with the sense of being part of a cohort, sharing a learning

experience with others on a similar journey; and developing a consistent and well-designed pedagogic framework using appropriate and well-articulated blended approaches. With these goals as the guiding focus, the project team moved to the next phase of the process.

Discovering strengths, capabilities and resources

The team embarked on a process of *discovery* to identify the strengths, motivations and passions that influenced each staff members' teaching approach and to understand what resources and capabilities existed that could support the development of a cohort in the MSW (PQ) and the consistent application of blended learning approaches. Individual discussions with each member of the staff group inquired into their "exceptionally positive moments" (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p.26).

The outcomes of this discovery process highlighted that staff were committed to the aspirations captured in the program's Mission Statement, the University's strategic intent and the AASW's professional values. The Australian Qualifications Framework (2014) and the Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2012) were identified as resources to frame the learning and teaching outcomes and content of the MSW(PQ) program. The process of discovering strengths and capacity within the staff team highlighted staff sensitivity and understanding about the unique skills and capacities of the MSW(PQ) students as well as the challenges that confronted them.

The process of *discovery* also included the opportunity to hear student voices and to identify the positive aspects of their experiences. Given the diverse locations and situations of our student group, an online survey tool was used to gather student perspectives and thoughts, providing them with explicit opportunity to be a part of the re-design process. This survey process was approved by the university's Human Ethics committee and applied in 2016 with students who had commenced their studies in 2015 and 2016. These responses were integrated with staff reflections to discover strengths and issues as understood by the student group. Approximately 25% of the potential student group from 2015 to 2017 responded to our survey invitation. This respondent group reflected the gender and age demographics of the MSW(PQ)

group as a whole with at least 80% women and 70% aged between 30 and 50 years. Two thirds of the respondent students had not studied for at least five years, with nearly 40% of them returning to study after 10 years or more. These figures indicated that many of the issues raised earlier about the characteristics of post graduate social work students are likely to be part of our students' experience.

While nearly 90% of respondents were engaged in some kind of paid employment for over 25 hours per week, 74% were enrolled in their studies as a full time student. Eighty seven percent of the respondent students lived within 20 kilometres of one of our university campuses though over seventy percent considered themselves to be distance students. Yet, a significant majority of the students who responded to the survey indicated they chose the university because of its proximity to their home perhaps indicating some expectations about the nature of their study experience.

When asked what they thought a blended learning approach should look like, students exhibited a highly informed comprehension of the nature of the educative experience they were to engage in.

> *Education that is delivered in different modes…through digital and physical spaces. Also an ability for students to have some control over the time and place which they decide suits them best.*
>
> *Providing multiple forms of engaging with educational materials and expecting a level of autonomy that participants will navigate these and use the materials in the way that suits their learning styles. Face-to-face elements round this off and provide an opportunity to confirm understanding or clarify misunderstandin*g.

However, one comment conveyed a less positive view of blended learning:

> *A mix of in class with access to a teacher, and being treated like a second class student where teachers don't give a damn, present through skype or videos, and refuse to answer emails and use the message board systems,*

depriving students of help, and essentially offering a painful version of distance education.

It was clear, however, that the respondent students from 2015 and 2016 shared the view of staff that their experience was lonely and often confused as they attempted to navigate different subject structures and designs.

I feel like I have been on my own and my motivation and engagement levels have been flatter due to the decrease in student and lecturer interaction.

I don't have relationships with any of the students I interacted with online

Not being able to find readings etc as a beginning student in beginning subjects.

Highlighting the commonality between the students experience and the staff recognition of that experience allowed the staff team to consider future strategies (Maple, et al., 2013; Ayala, 2009; McGee & Reis, 2012; Bellefeuille, 2006).

Dreaming a shared vision of what could be

These findings were shared with the staff group who then came together in a number of focus groups to envision a way forward, "creating shared images of a preferred future" (Cockell & McArthur -Blair, 2012, p. 28). Beginning from a position that highlighted strengths and capacity among all staff avoided defensiveness and allowed for the joint development of a shared vision. While each staff member acknowledged the effort and creativity inherent in developing unique teaching strategies for different subjects, an awareness of how unique approaches impacted students was quickly realised and the focus became how to create better experiences for students. Feedback from students about improving their experience was used as a guide for the *dreaming* phase of the process.

Through a series of focus groups the *dream* took shape and incorporated a number of elements developed from staff and student input:

(a) Instead of dividing students into on campus and distance, all MSW(PQ) students are now one cohort engaged in the course through the same processes. This ensures resources are directed at all students.

(b) A clear pedagogical statement to underpin the blended learning and teaching approach to be adopted across the MSW(PQ) program – one which reflected the tropical uniqueness of the university; acknowledged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context/s; captured local issues; and included a global lens;

(c) Scaffolding strategies to ensure that students were clear about how the knowledge and theories contained in each subject were interrelated and integral to professional practice;

> *More targeted lecturer involvement in contextualising information. I'm seeking the input of an experienced professional and academic to inform my sense making process.* (Student survey response, 2016)

(d) Face to face contact with the students at the beginning of the course to familiarise students with university systems and processes, including how to navigate online sites and access available support services, and build a sense of being part of a student cohort.

> *Please orientate students to the different technology options as some may not be conversant with them especially in a learning setting.* (Student survey response, 2016)

(e) A coherent prototype for the delivery of online subjects in which to embed subject content, tasks and assessment in a clear and consistent way across all subjects.

> *The use of blackboard s is dependent on the lecturers' ability to use the technology. This needs to be more standardised among lecturers.* (Student survey response, 2016)

(f) A guide for students to navigate the program with the inclusion of course mapping and relevance of learning in relation to subjects, to placements and to professional practice.

The *dreaming* workshops provided the opportunity for staff to collaboratively engage in processes that focussed on how to make our current 'best practice' even better. The inclusion of student input into dreaming an alternative vision provided a sensitising measure that allowed the group to promote and prioritise the student experience.

Design: co-constructing the how

This step of the process required the group to translate the plans, dreams and hopes of the staff and student participants into practical action. The team explored questions such as what actions are needed to make the preferred future happen? Who needs to be involved? Changes to the delivery of the MSW(PQ) have included the introduction on an additional face to face workshop at the very beginning of the course. Ongoing discussion groups have addressed questions such as 'what will a social work subject look like in this blended environment?' Students have been engaged in providing ongoing feedback and review of the new strategies and actions undertaken. A subsequent student survey in 2017 shows that for some students the changes have been overwhelmingly positive, facilitating major improvements in their overall experience.

> *The mandatory workshops at the beginning of the course were a fantastic opportunity to form relationships with other students and develop a support network. Learning to use online technology was a bonus.*

> *Thank you for a challenging yet rewarding first semester. I learned more than I had anticipated and I think it was due to the blended learning, new technologies, and having to use them. The lecturers were also very personable and were of high calibre. It was a pleasant surprise given most subjects were external. There was a nice balance.*

However, for others there is still work to be done

The course is good but it could be so much more... The lack of integration between subjects, lecturer's abilities (or lack of) to place information on the website in an easy-to-locate way, and a co-ordinator to contact needs to be devised/promoted

I loathe technology and feel put-upon having to participate in education that can be more fanciful than useful.

Destiny: Improving the delivery

Given the emerging aspirations of staff to continue this journey with students, the project team will now revisit the stages of the AI process. This is an opportunity for ongoing reflection, evaluation and celebration, by sharing what has changed, and what is going better. Further workshops, ongoing student feedback and continuing development of our own skills and capacities – all these things help us to sustain the energy for positive change.

Discussion

This project was initiated with the goal of improving the learning experience of a cohort of students studying a postgraduate Masters of Social Work in an Australian regional university. Early explorations highlighted the challenges for distance students and revealed multiple tensions that remain unresolved. The definition of a 'distance student' is confounded by students' multiple and sometimes conflicting needs and can no longer be determined only by distance from a campus. Moreover, those students who commit to an on campus experience have an expectation that face to face contact will be provided. When decisions were made to include technologically mediated approaches for all students, students noted their disappointment in these innovations and perceived their experience as less than expected.

Despite these tensions students communicated an appreciation of any strategies that developed a sense of inclusion and shared experience with other students. As highlighted by Holmes et al. (2015) the gradual and scaffolded introduction of technology ensured students felt in control of their educational experience.

The project confirms that setting up blended learning approaches is resource intensive and needs strategic planning and support for technology integration (East, et al. 2014). Blended learning approaches need to be pedagogically sound and administratively supported. Staff need time, resources and encouragement for training and growth. While the AI approach used here to improve the MSW(PQ) program appears useful, more needs to be done to strengthen staff members' ability to teach into blended learning modes. Research in this areas highlights that the requirements and support for training in and delivery of blended learning approaches vary across universities and teaching loads are generally not reduced when blended learning models are applied (Quinn & Barth, 2014).

While the insights gained and subsequent changes made are important, the application of the AI model consolidated the benefits of collaborative processes which enabled a constructive engagement with all members of the academic team. Without this commitment to collaboration the task could easily have been reduced to one of convincing reticent staff to comply with externally developed web based strategies and to integrate unfamiliar and untried online tools. Having the opportunity to explore and debate the advantages and challenges of adopting a blended learning approach (Holmes et al., 2015) has elicited a commitment from staff to upgrade their own skills to improve the student experience. This commitment was particularly important to the project because, even though students themselves may be willing, and even keen, to engage with technology and integrate it into their learning strategies, unless staff were familiar with and able to use the technology, there was little application of the processes and tools on offer (Holmes et al., 2015).

In the process of debating the advantages and challenges of adopting a blended learning approach, staff had opportunity to voice their observations about the market driven context in which blended learning was being introduced into the higher education sector. While blended learning approaches are being promoted as strategies that can lead to higher student numbers and the apparent capacity to do more with less, staff expressed concern that as University

lecturers in the global online education sector they were now also expected to fulfil the roles of content facilitator, technologist, designer, web administrator and online group facilitator in addition to their current position of lecturer and researcher (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011). Given that context, resistance to change could be understood as survival, and non-compliance as self-preservation which, as Author (2011) states, if discussed as examples of strength and capacity in a safe environment can lead to meaningful change. Indeed, by way of the AI process, these observations and critiques of the global context were able to be acknowledged and understood as issues that needed to be managed, while at the same time accepting that new technologies and teaching methods are able to contribute to positive outcomes for students.

Conclusion

Applying AI processes facilitated the development of blended learning as a positive and achievable teaching approach to the MSW(PQ)program. However, while the positives associated with blended approaches to learning and teaching should be acknowledged, there is also a need to critically monitor the intent and purpose of policies that aim to be cost effective and competitive with little regard for the wellbeing of staff and students. AI processes facilitated a commitment to engaging with and building on strengths and feedback from students and staff to ensure positive learning experiences in distance learning. The strength of the AI process has been to highlight the efficacy of collaboration with and between staff and to facilitate a well-designed approach that can meet the needs of both staff and students alike. This project remains a work in progress. The next stages of the project will continue to offer multiple opportunities for teams of staff and learners to work together to ensure the integration of blended approaches benefit all.

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