


Teaching Social Work Practice Skills: A Collaborative Autoethnography Identifying Key Practice Skills and Modes of Delivery in the *Art of Social Work Practice*

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Abstract

Social work students must advance their social work skills gaining practice competencies. And, whilst practice learning takes place in field education placements, social work students often also enrol in a dedicated unit/ course whereby the teaching of practice skills is facilitated in class. A practice skills class is another learning space to imbue practice wisdom. Adjunct teaching staff are often employed on short-term university contracts to teach social work students in the area of practice skills. Whilst these practitioners can bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the undergraduate classroom, it cannot be assumed that adjunct teaching staff have formal training in curricula development nor pedagogical delivery. The goal of this article is to identify the critical elements of teaching practice skills and to examine the ways in which teaching content is delivered. This article presents the ‘teaching the teacher’ experience of three social work educators at an Australian university. A collaborative autoethnography identified three themes from the inductive analysis: (i) teaching best practices, (ii) teaching role and (iii) teaching practice skills. Finally, implications for social work are discussed and recommendations shared.

Keywords: authenticity, collaborative autoethnography, empathy, practice skills, teaching, use of self

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Introduction

Social work students need to gain practice competencies, not only if they are to meet assessment criteria and qualify, but also if we are to align with [Starr's \(2007\)](#) observation that 'practice is our purpose' (p. 2). One way to fulfil this is for social work programmes to prioritise the advancement of clinical practice skills ([Bogo et al., 2020](#); [Bragg et al., 2020](#)). A dedicated in-class social work practice skills class links theory to practice and is tasked with imbuing in students an understanding of complex human relational skills such as reflection, empathy, and self-awareness as well as the knowledge and skills needed to utilise them ([Kourgiantakis et al., 2020](#)). However, more importantly in addition to the field education experience, it is the adjunct teaching in-class practice skills, who has the critical responsibility of both 'socializing students to the profession and to the practice of social work' ([Varghese, 2020](#), p. 145).

Complicating the preparation of social work students for practice is poorly prepared in-class adjuncts teaching practice skills. [Clark et al. \(2011\)](#) notes 'there is evidence that departments may rely extensively on the availability of individuals to teach rather than teaching experience' (p. 1019). Further, many practice-rich adjuncts have had no formal academic training in pedagogical theory or instructional methods, nor any mentoring in educational best practices ([Webb et al., 2013](#)). In line with international trends in social work education, many universities employ non-tenured adjuncts, academics with short-term or casual fractional contracts. Playing a crucial role in teaching students, these part-time staff may be referred to as: sessional ([Hitch et al., 2018](#)) or casual academics in Australia ([Anderson 2007](#)), adjuncts in the USA and UK ([Klein and Weisman, 2001](#)) and non-tenure-track in the USA ([Simmons et al., 2020](#)). Whilst 'contingent staff' ([Lima, 2018](#)) and 'contract faculty' ([Brownlee, 2015](#)) have also been noted, this article will use 'adjuncts' to indicate temporary academic teaching staff.

Whilst a master of social work (MSW) qualification is crucial for adjuncts and specifically in-class practice educators in most social work programmes, it is the rich classroom experience that synthesises the practice skills and teaching needed to operate as a successful in class social work adjunct teaching practice skills. Here, educators lay the foundation and affirm that 'the significance of human relationships is central

to social work values and at the heart of practice' (International Federation of Social Workers, ND). However, there is a gap in the literature on what are the key elements of a practice skill unit and how are adjunct educators going to teach these?

Whilst social work students are immersed in learning practice skills during field placements this article explores a dedicated practice skills unit/course, specifically the in-class teaching experience of three social work educators, two adjuncts and an ongoing, permanent academic. We borrowed from a clinical supervision model where newer social work educators engage in teaching supported by skill building whilst also using shadow observation and debriefing to further develop their instructor skills. This research attempts to answer the question: What are the essential elements of a social work practice skills unit and how might this content be delivered? First, we review the literature examining the value of practice education for students, and then we explore the art and skill of social work educators teaching practice. Next, the article presents three themes illuminated during an autoethnographic study. Finally, implications for social work are discussed.

Literature review

In a UK social work education programme, students identified their learning in practice as crucial for placement navigation (Joubert, 2020). Researchers (Bogo *et al.*, 2020) have suggested that an integrated knowledge-practice approach is needed where theory, reflection, practice feedback and group debriefing are used. Stanley and Bhuvaneshwari (2021) contend that:

The core purpose of social work education is the development of professional competence that enables budding professionals to inculcate evidence-based knowledge, harbor person-centered values and foster skills of accurate assessment and effective intervention (p. 827).

However, it is not enough for social work practice skills to be merely talked about, they must be applied, rehearsed and performed, specifically the 'techniques, procedures, and actions that can positively impact the client's social functioning' (Sheafor and Horejsi, 2008, p. 2).

Needed practice skills

Whilst examining teaching practice skills, researchers (Gates *et al.*, 2022) have detailed findings such as *self-compassion* and *loving approaches* as essential in social work practice education. A joint publication (2020) by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, p. 11) states that

the practice instructor's aim is to impart 'skills and knowledge required to design and deliver effective, ethical and competent interventions'. Using social work practice skills when teaching students, which would normally be used when working with clients, was proposed by Knight (2001) as providing both a positive learning environment and constructive role modelling of social work skills. Her research examined sixteen instructors' behaviours based upon Shulman's (2016) model of social work practice and supervision.

Teaching practice skills

Examining practice teaching is not new (Reynolds, 1985), specifically attempting to identify the qualities of a good teacher (Salmon *et al.*, 1991). Some (Teater and Lopez-Humphreys, 2019) have posed the question of whether social work education could be a form of social work practice itself. Research has also focused on the delivery of teaching, examining for example immersion learning as an experiential teaching tool (Robinson, 2018). Perhaps surprisingly, it has been argued (Trotter and Hewitt, 2001) that direct social work practice is not necessary to be a good practice instructor and that it may be more important to examine teaching effectiveness. Cartney (2000) further expands this enquiry by poignantly asking, do 'skilled social work practitioners automatically develop into skilled practice teachers? Might it be the case that different skills and knowledge are required for such a transition to take place?' (p. 610). Social work educators who were 'aware of the realities of the field' (Mirick and Davis 2015, p. 184) are continually cited as essential by students. Others (Johnson and Munch, 2010) have sounded a warning of changing policy and university culture threatening the retention and recruitment of social work programme faculty with practice experience. Ultimately, this may lead to social work education running the risk of being out-of-touch with current practice. Further, Varghese (2020) has highlighted that 'many social work practice courses are taught by adjuncts who ... have been trained in practice but have not been trained to teach practice, which involves a unique knowledge and skill base' (p. 156).

Practice skills—the *art of social work*

Students often want a 'cookbook recipe' of how to help or a specific skill set that they can employ when working with client problems. Techniques such as using open questions and paraphrasing or specific intervention approaches such as motivational interviewing are examples of some of the tools provided to students in their pursuit of becoming an

expert helper. However, a study (Karpeticis, 2017) of twenty-three articles on social work skills found that none of them elaborated on the process through which skills are effectively operationalised in social work practice. Harms and Maidment (2017) detail that in concert with technique and scientific knowledge, the art of social work focuses on the social worker's ability to weave their own personal strengths, distinctive cultural experiences and practice wisdom, through an intuitive framework for distilling and adapting these to the unique practice situation presented. However, the scholarship on the exact skills to teach the art of social work practice can be elusive.

Laidlaw *et al.* (2020) describe that providing opportunities for students to develop self-determination, critical reflection and an understanding of their values within a collaborative environment is essential within contemporary social work practice. Whereas, empathy, a hallmark practice skill and arguably critical for practice, has been noted as scarce in the social work literature (Stanley and Bhuvaneshwari, 2021). Thompson and West (2013) suggest that effective social work practice is determined by *practice wisdom* conceptualised as 'a dynamic process [incorporating] (i) the application of insight, skills and values into competent practice as well as (ii) the capabilities required in recognizing personal limitations and when seeking additional knowledge' (p. 118). Whilst the formation of practice wisdom has been examined by researchers (Glumbíková *et al.*, 2021), it is the therapeutic alliance which has been described by Earle and Freddolino (2022) as the 'heart of all helping relationships' (p. 76). Adding to this growing list of practice skills, Sinai-Glazer (2020) examined key building blocks of an effective helping relationship, identifying seven attributes: (i) love and support; (ii) trust and feeling safe; (iii) listening and feeling understood; (iv) making an effort to help; (v) humanness, compassion and sensitivity; (vi) availability, continuity and being there when needed (vii) and chemistry.

Methods

After approval was obtained from Western Sydney University *Human Ethics Research Committee* (Ethics ID H13814) for this analysis to be undertaken, we borrowed from the notion of a *reflexive practice educator* (Fearnley, 2022), highlighting the importance of an educator exploring 'what they do as a social worker' and 'how they are going to teach what they do' (p. 55). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) was at the heart of this qualitative study (Anderson, 2006) allowing us the roles of both researcher and participant. As three social work educators we examined 'data on the self' (Foster *et al.*, 2006, p. 47), feeling it important to make ourselves visible in the process, as well as acknowledging and valuing our subjectivity (Chang *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, the benefit of CAE was

its ‘focus on relationship building through shared vulnerability, flattening hierarchies, and establishing trust’ (Lapadat, 2017, p. 600).

Participants

The context we shared—the teaching in a fourth-year unit, Practice Skills for Social Work, at an Australian University—gave our experiences and perspectives meaning, but it also interacted with us each differently. Author 1, G.W.T. co-taught tutorials with Author 2, D.S.C. and Author 3, R.R. Following is a first-person account of who we are.

G.W.T.: Originally from the USA, I have extensive practice experience working the last fifteen years in private practice. Prior to that I worked in administration, programme management and direct services. In addition to my MSW, I have earned a MEd, and PhD that focuses on teaching pedagogy and curriculum development. I have taught in social work programmes since 2012. My experience around academic mentoring (Turner and Crane, 2016) helped guide my approach to this study. I have a full-time teaching appointment and served as the Unit Coordinator (e.g. lead instructor).

R.R.: I am in my fourth year of teaching social work full time as an adjunct and have the most extensive university knowledge within the teaching team. I have more than twenty years’ direct social work experience (e.g. Aged Services Manager, Community Development and Neighbourhood Centre Team Leader). I am also keen to pursue a doctorate.

D.S.C.: Having completed my MSW(Q) (2018), I have the least amount of teaching and practice experience within the team. I migrated to Australia in 2016 from Nepal. I have experience in disability, and homeless services. I am a full-time adjunct whilst I explore entering a PhD programme.

Data

The data for this project were the written reflective logs related to teaching experiences that the members of the team kept for eleven weeks during semester, followed by group discussions which were noted. A framework was provided for the reflections focused in five areas: (i) teaching insights or struggles, (ii) mentor feedback, (iii) critical thinking, (iv) new skills learned and (v) miscellaneous. Seven zoom meetings were held during semester break where co-authors critically reflected on teaching processes and related issues in reference to the five areas above.

The initial stage of the inquiry involved G.W.T. and D.S.C. identifying the most relevant themes during an addition four zoom meetings. The

first phase of data analysis comprised critical readings of the data to derive initial codes followed by a line-by-line coding method (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Grouping codes based on conceptual similarities was adopted to generate themes. Interrelationships were explored and sub-themes identified. An inductive approach was utilised to delve deeper into the themes (Strauss and Corbin, 2014). This was followed by two stages of qualitative analysis—open coding and thematic analysis, during which R.R. reviewed the initial analysis for validation of the data.

Findings

Through a process of sense-making embedded in the constructivist and interpretivist epistemology of auto-ethnography, we have curated three themes providing a framework for subthemes. In this section, results of a cross-case thematic analysis are highlighted. Themes are introduced and direct quotes from the reflective logs are incorporated to reflect researchers' voice whilst explicating the point.

Theme 1: teaching best practices

Teaching best practices was defined as the demonstration of engagement, tips and tools that facilitated increased interest and learning from students. As an experienced educator,

G.W.T. felt it important to step outside of his teaching of students on occasion, to share the rationale for what he was doing with his co-instructors who were adjuncts. He was both teaching social work students whilst simultaneously mentoring the adjunct staff and sharing pedagogical best practices. He would periodically have aside conversations with his co-tutor pausing his teaching to showcase a teaching tip. He would literally call 'time' and speak directly to the tutor saying, 'Make note of that for us to discuss later'. D.S.C. commented 'This learning has been rewarding to me.' R.R. commented that G.W.T. was engaged in 'teaching outside the box' in terms of mentoring his co-tutors. Three sub-themes were identified within this theme.

Engagement

Engagement is seen by participants as developed aptitudes employed to enhance teaching and learning experiences in the classroom setting, such as use of humour or delivery style. D.S.C. reflected on impactful expressions of the mentor, sharing, 'G.W.T. brought a certain vibe to the class whilst delivering the learning materials. I found this was key to student engagement.' The adjunct instructors elaborated on this as: G.W.T.'s

proficiency of teaching social work practice, an approach enhanced by his practice experiences, an enthusiasm and energy for the topic, a commitment to authenticity and genuine vulnerability, as well as a huge personality and natural ‘cheekiness’ that were significant factors in elevating students’ commitment to learn.

Tips

Tips are defined as student-focused suggestions or advice for the adjuncts, used to enhance the learning environment. These tips were used to increase students’ attendance and expand their interest in classroom discussions and unit content. One such tip was a *Study Buddy*, a fellow student who was randomly assigned on day 1 for the sole purpose of providing support. Students were informed that this was a resource for them to cultivate and they were encouraged to pose questions about the unit to their study buddy first before approaching the tutor. The goal was to foster community and help build professional collegial skills. Whilst some students reported that initially they were not keen on this approach, they also noted how useful it was to have a peer on call to help them.

Another tip was, offering a ‘drop-in’ zoom meeting with the Unit Coordinator both during the day and night to accommodate students’ schedules, and blocking off time for an ‘AMA’ event. This ‘Ask Me Anything’ time encouraged students to bring their practice questions. This could have been follow-up to previously discussed content or something we had not explored that the student was hoping to have a conversation about. It was also an opportunity to model vulnerability, boundaries, rapport building and use of self to both the students and the co-tutors as G.W.T. addressed difficult and possibly personal questions from the students. D.S.C. stated, ‘Attending tutorials without any agenda but having opportunities to learn more from students was quite new for me. I found it very effective’.

Another tip was prompting students to find ‘gems’ in the unit each week. Gems were defined as key points from weekly readings and lectures and placed responsibility on the students to be actively engaged in their own learning. D.S.C. noted, ‘The gems encouraged students to come prepared. I noticed their willingness to contribute to the discussion increased in subsequent classes’.

Tools

Tools were defined as teaching aids used to enhance the learning environment, illustrate skills or concepts and make the teaching material more interesting. Examples of tools used included role plays, co-tutor debate/discussion, fishbowls and stepping out. Role plays enabled

students to take the role of the social worker or client and practice real-world social work skills based on case scenarios either with their classmates or with the instructors. Debates included a lively one-to-one discussion between G.W.T. and the co-tutors tackling a topic as students considered questions for follow-up discussion.

Fishbowls involved G.W.T. moving from a group teaching moment to a more personal, almost private one-on-one conversation with a student, but held and demonstrated publicly. This was typically triggered by a student's question or comment. It was signalled by G.W.T. grabbing a chair in close proximity to a student or moving into a very personal space with a student (prior to the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions). It often involved deeper processing, sometimes challenging a student on a particularly difficult practice conversation. There was often a sense that the rest of the class were observers into a more intimate conversation, hence an individual teaching/ learning moment became available for all. This was then followed by debriefing the learning.

Stepping out included pausing the discussion to have a separate conversation to showcase a practice example that just took place. It was common for G.W.T. to physically move to one side and point to where he once stood and ask students, 'Do you see what I did there?' This prompted a class discussion on the way a practice skill was utilised. It was also a way for G.W.T. to highlight a demonstrated example and to check if students had made connections to the skill or concept.

Theme 2: teaching role

Teaching roles were described as positions or opportunities for multi-level student engagement to facilitate student learning. Some early social work adjuncts may only focus on their role in content delivery. However, in-class practice educators often operate within differing and distinct spheres, coalesced here into three sub-themes.

Content expert

Content expertise is described as knowledge and skill proficiency with the subject matter. Whilst not always possible, our research demonstrated participants' views on the benefits of having a social worker with a rich and strong practice history. D.S.C. and R.R. reflected that G.W.T.'s understanding of the unit content, enriched by his practice expertise, enhanced the student experience as evidenced by student feedback and in-class practice instructor observation. R.R. expressed, 'You made it okay [for students to be open and vulnerable] for the upcoming conversations about sexuality'.

Pastoral care

Student well-being can be addressed through emotional support and welfare counselling and is also known as ‘pastoral care’. This often-overlooked emotional labour is considered by some as outside the scope of educators, and it can be delivered in various degrees by educators. However, its importance cannot be overstated. An example cited in the (post unit discussion) was how a student remained after class and came out as gay to the tutors. The student shared the difficulty he was experiencing in field placements as well as his appreciation for G.W.T. coming out during class. This critical role of educators in student care-taking was made exponentially evident in relation to the extra support provided due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The teaching team helped students make a smooth and quick transition from face-to-face to online learning whilst managing their own anxiety about the pandemic. Unit coordinator, G.W.T., took time to ensure students succeeded, taking on roles as caretaker, anxiety manager and COVID-19 transition coordinator. In team process meetings, G.W.T. noted that it was the instructor’s role to be the ‘calm in the storm’ and sometimes that meant putting on a happy face to inspire the group to finish. But it also meant balancing vulnerability and demonstrating the frequent uncertainty in social work practice. R.R. observed, ‘You have gone further than anyone before. You were a constant’. R.R. further opined on the limitations faced by adjunct academics:

Seeing the amount of time and effort Turner put into having all students ready to use ZOOM and to start on time, was impressive! So many learning sessions were provided [to students], plus one for tutors, as well as multiple instructions and links to self-learning the application. It would never occur to me [to do this] because of funding.

Cheerleader

The educator’s role as a cheerleader was another theme that emerged out of the data from reflective sessions. Strategies used to inspire students and adjuncts were instrumental in reducing students’ and adjuncts’ anxieties. For example, G.W.T. posted an encouraging video of Broadway stars covering ‘Go the Distance’ from Disney’s ‘Hercules’ (<https://www.insider.com/broadway-stars-sing-disney-hercules-go-the-distance-video-2020-4>) to commemorate the halfway mark in the semester. This gesture prompted many students to comment ‘just in time’ perhaps noting that instructor recognition of their mid-semester stress was timely, welcomed and useful. In addition to the essential administration tasks, online announcements were used on the university teaching portal to post occasional humorous memes. G.W.T.’s strategy of frequently

inserting memes and quotes in tutorial slides and announcements was positive for the students as well as co-tutors.

Theme 3: teaching practice skills (the 'art' of social work)

The *art of social work* is seen to exemplify unique practice skills. We examined these through teaching and the processes of also using the teaching environment to model these social work practice skills. This theme had seven different sub-themes.

Use of self

Use of self is a core skill in social work practice. G.W.T. demonstrated the importance of use of self in social work by sharing relevant personal examples that elevated students' curiosity to learn skills of incorporating use of self in their assignments. Equally important was demonstrating to adjuncts how to bring the educator's personality into the classroom whilst incorporating their rich practice history into the learning conversation. R.R. reflected not only on the value of being challenged to share relevant personal content but also on the difficulty of managing *when* to share during a packed teaching period with a co-teacher.

Vulnerability

G.W.T.'s casual introduction to students as a gay academic on the first day of class was paramount to reflecting on the role of vulnerability in social work practice. R.R. commented, 'Well chosen' to a photo shared by G.W.T. marching in the Mardi Gras parade representing the university. This provided G.W.T. and R.R. an opportunity to process the art and skill of being a vulnerable academic to model the practice skill for students.

Authenticity

The concept of authenticity was modelled by G.W.T. bringing his real self into the classroom, such as speaking in an accessible manner, which often meant swearing whilst presenting examples, including colourful client conversations to punctuate the often raw realities of social work. D.S.C. found this technique distinctive and shared, 'Initially I was embarrassed with G.W.T.'s swearing. Now I am willing to develop the skill to be authentic. However, I am afraid that students might judge me.'

Empathy

Empathy, an awareness of and the ability to understand other's emotions (Badea and Pana, 2010) was viewed as a foundational skill but seen as even more critical during the COVID pandemic. Whilst a considerable amount of time was spent discussing the role of empathy in social work practice, our team also demonstrated this in our relationship with students. Team reflection allowed us to process how empathy was used in our teaching, particularly the extra demands specific to COVID-19 restrictions. The team noted that typical self-care strategies were expanded such as fostering a more forgiving environment, encouraging group cohesion outside of class and increasing both in-class and personalised instructor check-ins.

Client respect

One of the ways G.W.T. modelled client respect was asking students to address him as Dr. G.W.T. This is an anomaly in Australian university settings where academics are often addressed by their first names. G.W.T. situated his cultural expectations as an academic trained in the USA where using the instructor's surname is the norm. He drew comparisons to checking in with clients on how they wished to be addressed. Drawing these parallels between classroom and fieldwork provided critical modelling opportunities of best teaching practices. For example, using the frequent student missteps in email and face-to-face interactions to process with students what it is like to make a mistake, acknowledge it, make the corrections and then proceed on in the relationship. This was further explored through student names. Having a large cohort of international students meant that some students would commonly adopt Anglified names, providing the team an opportunity to process the importance of attempting to learn and properly pronounce student names.

Boundaries

Maintaining boundaries with clients is indispensable in our relationships as social workers. However, students often bring a rudimentary understanding of professional boundaries which they define as 'no personal disclosure'. In a practice skills course, it is imperative to take time to unpack this complex idea and provide students a more nuanced approach. Whilst G.W.T. shared his professional Facebook Fan page as a teaching tool for student engagement, he clearly explained the boundaries to be maintained in teacher-student relationship.

Taboo/challenging conversations

It is essential for social workers to develop skills to have challenging conversations with the clients in practice. D.S.C. shared that teaching with G.W.T. gave her an opportunity to learn skills and to open up conversations on challenging topics such as termination, spirituality, religion and sexuality. R.R. saw this discussion as a reminder of continual learning, particularly as there is no specific unit focused on sexuality.

Discussion

Social work texts provide a number of approaches to teaching students practice skills (Lister, 2013; Maidment and Egan, 2016). And whilst identifying a uniform set of skills may not be easy, our research is one of the few studies to illuminate the actual skills aligning with the art of social work and more specifically the teaching of these skills. This article contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and expands upon Varghese's (2020) work examining how social work faculty teach practice skills without being taught how. Findings provide social work educators teaching a practice unit/course a sample of essential practice skills that would be of value to students supporting future service users. The findings highlighted the following three key areas.

Theme 1, *teaching best practices*, described practical recommendations (e.g. engagement, tips and tools) noting how the rich, in-the-moment laboratory provided optimal teaching-the-teacher opportunities. Just as clinicians develop their own approach to client interactions, new social work educators must have the opportunity to find their teaching style, or vibe. This is further explicated by Ginott (1993) noting, 'I am the decisive element in the classroom. My personal approach creates the climate' (p. 76).

Theme 2, *teaching role*, identified the nuances of differing adjunct roles providing a foundational home for new educators to situate their teaching in three distinct inter-related roles: (i) content expertise, (ii) pastoral care and (iii) cheerleader. Our findings add to work by Goldingay and colleagues (2017) who noted co-existing roles such as: discipline gatekeeper, enabler, keeper of tradition/status quo, early adopter, the flexible academic, the academic as educator and the 'pracademic'. Content expertise was not only seen in newer educators around *topic* content but also in G.W.T. seeking R.R.'s expertise as a previous Unit Coordinator. Additionally, many new educators may focus on becoming proficient in the unit content, but equally important is the ability to hold space for students supporting a variety of life crises, mental health struggles, housing challenges, financial insecurity and other personal issues outside of the unit material, that became even more relevant

during COVID-19 restrictions. These emotional, social and psychological arenas (e.g. pastoral care) are increasingly an expected part of the educator's role (Todd *et al.*, 2019). A newer adjunct teaching in-class practice skills may have concerns about whether they should wade into these personal matters, may be unsure how to manage boundaries or may feel unqualified.

Perhaps even more compelling were the results for theme 3, *teaching practice skills (the art of social work)*. Palmer (2002) defines this as being in the truth of the moment and intuitively exploring the client work that lies beyond technique and listening to where the client needs you to go. Whilst the overall unit emphasised a collection of practice skills, some seen as more technique or scientific (e.g. conducting a biopsychosocial assessment, identifying proper intervention strategies), other skills that contribute to building rapport and a therapeutic alliance fell more into the art of social work. Next, we discuss the skills we identified as belonging to the art of social work.

Mastering the *use of self* in social work practice and teaching is powerful. Shulman (2016) defines this as a deeply personal interaction of 'making a gift of [the social worker's] feelings to the client' (p. 32). *Use of self* is often misunderstood by both novice and skilled social workers, who dilute the concept to self-disclosure (Dewane, 2006). But the literature and practice wisdom suggest it is much more highlighted by Virginia Satir (Baldwin and Satir, 1987) comparing the use-of-self (in concert with skills and practice wisdom) as becoming magicians.

Further, *vulnerability* can also be seen as challenging for less seasoned educators. As D.S.C. highlighted in the findings, often a new educator like a new practitioner is afraid that they will get it wrong or make a mistake. Rarely is it discussed, but it is important to process how new social work educators will wrestle with vulnerability in their teaching. What is often overlooked is that clients [students] can forgive a mistake more easily than they can deal with the image of a perfect worker [teacher]. However, being vulnerable can be seen as risky for newer social work practitioners as well as newer adjuncts teaching practice skills, which speaks to the need for this concept to be modelled in the learning space. This is especially important since if the worker cannot synthesise a personal and professional approach they will appear as distant, unavailable and mechanical engaging in a double-standard of expecting the client to openly share without any reciprocity (Shulman, 2016).

Findings reflected a key refrain from G.W.T. that social work educators, like social work practitioners, should utilise *authenticity* and model how to bring themselves into the student–educator/client–worker relationship. And, whilst using profanity or humour may seem odd for one instructor, it may be a natural extension of another's personality. Further, it is imperative that adjuncts, especially newer adjuncts teaching in-class practice skills reflect on their skill level and comfort with incorporating

vulnerability in their teaching. This can be counter to the perfectionistic culture within higher learning institutions. Here, a rigid hierarchical model places social work academics in a position that often does not favour the use of emotional intimacy. Overall, these findings reaffirmed that a social work practice skills in-class educator who is not skilled in the *use of self*, *vulnerability* and *authenticity* risks being seen as impossible to relate to by the student (Shulman, 2016).

Integrating *empathy*, *client respect* and *boundaries* speaks to our larger commitment to relationship-based practice (Howe, 2012). It is not surprising that though students understood these concepts in theory, they struggled to fully implement them in practice and often undervalued them for more technique skills, not fully appreciating that these other basic skills (e.g. therapist self-disclosure, questions and psychological assessment) are therapeutically enhanced through empathy (Clark, 2010; Kim and Kim, 2013).

Navigating taboo conversations was evident as G.W.T. introduced expanding the BioPsychoSocial practice lens to embrace both spirituality and sexuality. Whilst it may be argued a natural fit for social workers (Turner, 2020) to address both issues within best practices, adjuncts should be provided time outside of teaching to process their knowledge, skill and comfort with these areas in mentoring sessions. As evidenced by our findings, the skills noted were categorised as more ‘art’, echoing Berzoff and Drisko (2015) who stated that social work practice ‘requires art, heart, and a tolerance for paradox. Professional competence is not solely scientific’ (p. 270).

Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature and no interventions took place. The sample size relied on the experience of only three authors, delivering a unit in Australia, who had an interest in teaching in-class practice skills. Furthermore, both adjuncts were employed as tutors by the unit coordinator. Whilst attempts were made to mitigate the influence of social desirability, peer pressure and response bias, it is difficult to know the extent or the impact of any of these on the co-authors.

Implications for social work education

The idea that new adjuncts in Australian and US educational setting often receive no training to be educators seems absurd, when we recognise newly minted US social workers need a certain amount of clock hours including supervision before being granted an independent practice license. Perhaps a similar strategy should be considered for our social

work adjuncts. At the very least, using identified seasoned social work educators within specific units would capitalise on the expertise of available faculty to usher in a new generation of topic experts. However, what is also needed in university social work programmes is well prepared social work adjuncts; specifically, adjuncts who are teaching in-class practice skills that are familiar with the art of social work practice.

Conclusion

The social work academy is charged with preparing knowledgeable practice-ready social work students to enter the workforce. To fulfil this goal, it requires social work programmes to place more than a strong practitioner in an adjunct role teaching in-class practice skills, but a social worker who is able to provide both practice techniques and model the art of social work practice. This study's findings provide a template to meet both challenges.

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Declaration of interests

The authors have nothing to declare.

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