Online Learning and Liminal Spaces: An Example of Innovation in Social Work Field Education

Dr. Kate Saxton[1], Dr. Sera Harris[2], Dr. Joanne Clarke ⓘ [3], Ms. Jaimie Barry ⓘ [4]* and Dr. Shannon Said[5]

[1]*School of Psychology and Wellbeing, University of Southern Queensland, Ipswich, Queensland 4305, Australia*
[2]*Department of Social Work and Community Welfare, Western Sydney University, Parramatta, NSW 2150, Australia*
[3]*School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland 4000, Australia*
[4]*Faculty of Health, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Northern Territory 0810, Australia*
[5]*School of Social Work, Excelsia College, Sydney, Macquarie Park, NSW 2113, Australia*

*Correspondence to Jaimie Barry, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia. E-mail: jaimiemichellebarry@students.cdu.edu.au

Abstract

Amidst the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, universities grappled with adapting to online service delivery, particularly affecting student placements in programmes requiring practicum experiences. Addressing this, four Australian Universities/Colleges collaboratively initiated the Supporting Placement through online Access and Community Engagement (S.P.A.C.E) Project, a twelve-month research endeavour. This study, based on qualitative data from S.P.A.C.E, reveals that the project's success in delivering quality placement experiences hinged on three key factors: (1) the creation of a liminal (or third) space, (2) a genuine commitment to critical pedagogy and (3) the intentional use of online technology for an authentic learning experience. Significantly, the findings have implications for the field of social work by challenging assumptions about online learning, influencing social work theory through the exploration of a transformative 'third space', enhancing practice through critical pedagogy and suggesting policy directions that support flexible and viable online modalities in social work education. This research

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting online learning as a flexible and effective means for authentic and transformational learning experiences.

Introduction

In the post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) world, universities, like many societal institutions, will never be the same again (Harkavy *et al.*, 2021). The impact of lockdowns around the world forced universities to find alternative ways to continue to deliver high-quality education and training through online platforms (Papouli *et al.*, 2020; Bay *et al.*, 2021). For the first time in contemporary Australian history, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) relaxed more prescriptive placement requirements to enable field education placements to occur irrespective of lockdowns and agency closures (Morley and Clarke, 2020). This led to a surge in innovative, creative and flexible placement modalities with no discernible difference in the capacity of students to meet competency or learning outcomes as compared to traditional in person placement modes (Salter *et al.*, 2020; Lomas *et al.*, 2022). Internationally, accrediting bodies had a similar approach, revising placement guidelines for student social workers to allow for remote field placements, remote supervision and reduced placement hours (Jun *et al.*, 2021; Au *et al.*, 2023; O'Keeffe *et al.*, 2023).

Curiously post-COVID, rather than embrace innovations in online and simulated learning, social work accreditors in Australia have chosen to reinstate previous rules and requirements to placement length, attendance and structure. This may stem from long-standing tensions and ideological debate within Australian social work education that pushes for 'work-ready' graduates who are easily able to fit into the neoliberal workplace context, versus a focus on deeply transformational and deep learning that often requires a level of critical supervision at odds with the workplace demands of many social work agencies (Saxton *et al.*, 2021). Hesitancy and reluctance to embrace online learning is in contrast to the broader global post-COVID paradigm shift regarding the opportunities for online technologies within education (Ossiannilsson, 2020).

This article builds on the work of Morley and Clarke (2020), highlighting the opportunities for transformational placement learning through the re-imagining of traditional placement models to those that embrace online modalities and flexible working arrangements. Through deliberate

engagement with online technology, the Supporting Placement through online Access and Community Engagement (S.P.A.C.E) project sought to enable a virtual learning environment conducive to transformational and highly valued placement outcomes. Ten students residing in Australia, China, Hong Kong and South Korea from four Australian universities and colleges took part in the S.P.A.C.E project in 2021. This provided a unique opportunity to step outside of the dominant clinical model of field education, to those that embrace tenants of community development, research, policy, project-based learning, person-in-environment and advocacy (Morley and Clarke, 2020). By drawing on student narratives of the S.P.A.C.E project, this article explores the concept of liminal space as an opportunity for deep transformational learning. The research shows developing intentional communities of practice and supportive supervision enhances the quality of virtual learning environments in social work programmes. The focus on student voices demonstrates inclusive policy in social work field education which considers the diverse perspectives and needs of social work students. This study's insights on creating virtual learning environments are particularly relevant as adaptability is crucial in aligning social work field education with the changing dynamics of post-COVID social work.

Online learning and social work field education

Social work educators have long claimed that field education placements are the signature pedagogy of the discipline (Boitel and Fromm, 2014). The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) adopted the joint Global Standards for Social Work Educations and Training (2020), which recognises that field education is a core component of a social work qualification and needs to be at least 25 per cent of the programme. Within the Australian context, social work students at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels are required to complete 1,000 hours of supervised placement, generally across two 500-hour placement blocks (AASW, 2020). These placements, sometimes known within the university sector as Work Integrated Learning, are seen as vital to the provision of 'market ready' graduates (Wolf and Archer, 2013).

Despite the significance of placements for student learning, field education within Australia has been in a state of crisis for decades (Egan et al., 2018). For students, unpaid placement experiences have been linked with significant financial burden and hardship (Oke et al., 2022), and negative impacts on their mental well-being and social isolation (Hodge et al., 2021). With a growing number of field education models focusing on managerialist styles of supervision rather than processes that

facilities deep learning (Morley and Dunstan, 2013), and inconsistencies in learning opportunities due to the out-sourced nature of placement within host agencies (Egan *et al.*, 2018), quality of student learning is impaired. From a university management perspective, placements are often viewed as costly and resource intensive (Cleak and Zuchowski, 2020), and are overseen by a mandated set of requirements established by the national accreditation body, the AASW. Despite strong criticism of the national placement requirements for its lack of flexibility and evidence base (Newcomb, 2019), placement processes have remained relatively unchanged bar a brief period in response to COVID-19 (Morley *et al.*, 2023). Notwithstanding promising evidence for quality learning and professional development within 'non-traditional' placements (Lomas *et al.*, 2022), the impetus for agency-based, in person and competency-oriented models of placement learning remains. This highlights a preference for placements that prioritise skill-based and individualised practice over that of the broader socio-political sphere of social work such as research, policy and advocacy, which are equally important skills for social work students to develop (Gredig *et al.*, 2022; Cherry *et al.*, 2023).

In disciplines such as Business and the Health Sciences, the use of online platforms as innovative places to support learning has been embraced for some time (Wolf and Archer, 2013). This correlates to significant uptake and accessibility to information technology since the 1990s and the dominance of asynchronous online or virtual instruction as the preferred means for higher education provision (Lewis and Orton, 2000). Certainly, contemporary social work demands graduates to be proficient in navigating online platforms and electronic systems to thrive in technology-driven practice environments (Mishna *et al.*, 2021). Despite this, Australian social work education has been slow to accept technology in practice, with fears that it may supersede traditional in person classrooms, impacting on student skill development.

The AASW requires all online Australian social work programmes provide a minimum of twenty days of in person student-teacher contact (AASW, 2020). These requirements are congruent with the Global Standards which state that face-to-face spaces are a critical part of social work education (IFSW, 2020). Coupled with concerns from students that online classrooms lack the depth of learning offered by in person engagement (Forgey and Ortega-Williams, 2016), the continued distinctions made between in-person or online contact appear to be reflective of the dominant discourse in social work educational arenas, irrespective of a lack of evidence supporting the premise that in-person learning is a superior pedagogically (Morley *et al.*, 2023). This is important for field education, as many students opt to complete their studies through online learning as they often do not have the time or ability to attend their entire programme in person (Macken *et al.*, 2021). Online learning provides access to education for students in rural areas or students whose learning

and communication styles are better suited to online environments (Jones, 2015). It is well documented that many social work students, particularly those enrolled in post-graduate courses, are mature-aged students who often identify as low-income earners with family responsibilities, international students or students who have paid employment commitments (Hemy *et al.*, 2016; Goldingay *et al.*, 2018). Simultaneously juggling these responsibilities and additional challenges whilst completing extensive placement hours adds to the physical and emotional toll on students (Barry, 2022). Recent publications also highlight the financial burden of lengthy unpaid placements in social work and the ways in which these further impacts upon the well-being of social work students (Gair and Baglow, 2018), particularly those who already face disadvantages due to race, citizenship, work rights, gender, age or other social marginalisation (Baglow and Gair, 2019). These considerations have led to renewed calls to review field education practices within social work (Morley and Clarke, 2020; Saxton *et al.*, 2021), including the use of online spaces and technologies (Smoyer *et al.*, 2020).

Liminal space and transformational learning

The uptake of online learning tools within social work education cannot be overlooked post-COVID-19. The practice of creating online learning spaces to facilitate deep and transformational learning has been building a steady evidence base for some time (Rose *et al.*, 2019). Transformational learning experiences, such as those reported by students during field education experiences, are considered both a hallmark of critical social work pedagogy (Morley *et al.*, 2019) and deeply rooted in student experiences of moving through periods of uncertainty to then reflect on this process critically and how this has transformed, or shifted, their knowledge base and world views. Critically reflective spaces allow students to grapple with ambiguity and have been linked to the concept of liminal or 'third spaces' (Kofke, 2020; O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2020). As defined by Turner (1982), liminality derives from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, and is often considered as the space in between one state and the next (Eklinder Frick *et al.*, 2020). In the context of social work field education, this could be constructed as the transitional space between identifying as a student, learning knowledge for practice and the process of emerging as a professional graduate, able to apply this knowledge to various practice contexts. Liminal spaces require students to enter a space of uncertainty, or unknowingness (Rose *et al.*, 2019), which can be uncomfortable and threatening for learning styles that preference more Eurocentric, positivist and competency-based models of assessment (Moss *et al.*, 2022). However, as ambiguity and uncertainty remain key features of modern globalised life (Shi *et al.*, 2020), the

ability for social workers to navigate uncertainty is paramount. As such, supporting students to move through uncertainty and develop confidence to navigate this process is viewed as a key goal of both field education and social work curricular (IFSW, 2020).

Whether or not liminal spaces occur organically or are deliberately constructed depends on the nature of the learning context. Existing studies suggest active steps can be taken to establish safe learning environments conducive to liminality, enabling students to cross the learning threshold (O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2021). This includes ensuring a sense of shared safety amongst students in which voices and opinions can be shared without fear of judgment, ridicule or criticism (Lee *et al.*, 2021). There is also emphasis on critical reflection and supporting students to unpack their own values, emotional responses and worldviews in their interpretation of experiences (Eklinder Frick *et al.*, 2020). A deep commitment to critical reflection is accepted as vital in social work curriculum and practice (Fook and Gardner, 2012; Morley *et al.*, 2019), particularly approaches where deliberate efforts to raise levels of self-awareness and consciousness for emancipatory aims (Lynch *et al.*, 2019). However, agency-based placements in which the supervisor-supervisory relationship reflects a deep power imbalance and students feel pressure to conform to organisational requirements are unfavourable to transformational outcomes (Saxton *et al.*, 2021). For effective luminal spaces and deep student learning to occur, the role of both the place, or location of learning and that of the field educator or supervisor, appear key (Lee *et al.*, 2021).

Variability amongst the skill level of field educators and the outsourcing from university-employed educators to a reliance on sector volunteers has raised concerns about the consistency and equitability of social work field placement experiences for some time (Wayne *et al.*, 2006). This is despite irrefutable evidence that the nature and quality of the student-supervisor relationship is one of the key precursors to a positive learning and field placement experience (Cleak and Wilson, 2022). Enabling students' access to experienced and skilled supervisors via the provision of online placement learning experiences presents a logical response to some of these challenges. Online learning arenas that transcend a specific geographical location have already been shown as effective mechanisms for transformational learning (Eklinder Frick *et al.*, 2020; Lomas *et al.*, 2022). They also have the capacity to break free of institutional and bureaucratic constraints where power is more evenly distributed (Lee *et al.*, 2021) and students can experiment, take risks and no longer fear failure (Eklinder Frick *et al.*, 2020). Turner (1982) as discussed by Eklinder Frick *et al.* (2018) argues that this antistructure, or third space, creates a sense of equality, fellowship and community. This also aligns with other online spaces that have been successfully used to foster a positive sense of community (Fawns *et al.*, 2019), support the development of interpersonal skills (Lomas *et al.*, 2022) as well

as social work's professional agenda to create a unified global social work identity (Rasell *et al.*, 2019). Community, a sense of safety, trust and belonging are also precursors to students feeling confident to take risks (Moss *et al.*, 2022), the ability to engage in critical reflection (Lynch *et al.*, 2019) and overall student engagement and retention within university contexts (Patterson Silver Wolf *et al.*, 2021). In this article, the symbiotic relationship between luminal space and critical pedagogy is inherently applied.

Research design and project overview

The S.P.A.C.E project enabled the creation of an online, virtual 'community' where students could meet and engage with other students to complete their placements. A purpose-built Microsoft Teams^{TM} site was developed to include resources including relevant readings, communities of practice topics and as a way for students to communicate with each other and their supervisor. Initially, the students completed a two-week intensive orientation, where the group met with their supervisor virtually via Zoom. During the orientation period, the students had a variety of discussions on critical social work, social work values and ethics and spoke with various guest speakers from a diverse range of social work backgrounds. Following the two-week orientation, the students continued to meet regularly for group supervision, student-led communities of practice and project-based learning. These activities increased students' skills in project planning, teamwork, public speaking, the development of interpersonal skills, cross-cultural communication and problem-solving. Students also met with their supervisor individually and were encouraged to complete critical reflections on their experiences and on various social work issues. Students were allocated individual research projects in areas of interest to them, allowing students to further develop their research skills and engage in critical reflections on issues raised in their research. This study received ethics approval from the Charles Darwin Human Research Ethics Committee (H21069).

Recruitment and sampling

The participants were all Master of Social Work students who enrolled in the S.P.A.C.E project for one field placement unit. Students were from four Australian universities: Charles Darwin University, Excelsia College, Queensland University of Technology and the Australian Catholic University. Whilst all students were enrolled in Australian universities, three of these students were participating from overseas due to Australian border closures. These students were in Hong Kong, China and South Korea. Participants were advised that participation in the

evaluation would have no impact on their grades, and that they could decline to participate without prejudice. Participants were also advised that if they withdrew from the project after their interview, their results would not be included in the study and there would be no adverse consequences for doing so. One student declined to participate in the final interview.

Methods

This study is qualitative in design and drew on well-established approaches to qualitative and evaluative research, namely individual interviews, and thematic data analysis. Interviews were selected as this method allows for the participant's experience to be heard (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011). The interviews were conducted via Zoom™ with the students at the conclusion of the project. These interviews were related to the experiences of completing placement online, and the impact and influence of the virtual environment upon their development as emerging social workers. Interviews were conducted by one member of the research team, with each student allocated to a different researcher affiliated from their tertiary institution. Students were given a copy of their recording and were involved in transcribing their own data. As part of the recording function, Zoom™ performs an automatic transcription of the interview. This technology allowed for a faster transcription process, and students then listened to their interviews and were able to correct any errors in the automatic transcription. This was an opportunity for the students to enhance their research skills and ensure they were an active part of the research project. It also provided the students an additional opportunity to refine their interview or withdraw from the study.

Following transcription and prior to coding the interviews, students were given pseudonyms and the interviews were distributed to the researchers for analysis. These interviews were then coded using thematic analysis, with a focus on any emerging patterns or opportunities for future development within online teaching platforms. Thematic analysis is useful in qualitative research to identify and interpret the themes that emerge from the data (Willis, 2019). Similar approaches have been used to evaluate other online field education projects (Whitaker *et al.*, 2022). The authors then divided into pairs to engage in a second round of thematic coding to further tease out the most pertinent sub-themes and their implications for social work practice. Three themes were captured: Liminal Spaces and Grappling with Uncertainty, Transformational Learning for Life and Technology as the Enabler. These themes are discussed below.

.

Findings: Liminal spaces and grappling with uncertainty

The students found their S.P.A.C.E placement as initially difficult to articulate as it did not conform to the direct/indirect binary of past placement experiences. Although it was sometimes difficult for them to manage the expectations of their experience, many felt it was an opportunity to be a part of 'growing something new'. Initial preconceptions about a non-workplace/indirect placement needed to be worked through directly as part of placement learning. Some students share their initial reactions below:

> A lot of people who did indirect placements told horror stories of sitting in, you know, staffrooms reading policy and you know that sort of stuff. And I was like, well, that's not really … it's a waste of my time, basically, whereas I haven't felt like that for even a second in this (Joyce)

> I did feel disappointed before the placement started. Because I've always wanted to work in hospital for my final placement. But after the project started, I changed my thought (Marie)

Students spoke about how their concerns of 'unknowing' were alleviated after the induction period of S.P.A.C.E and the building of intentional communities of practice/learning. International students and students in remote locations stated that their experience of building S.P.A.C.E gave them a sense of social work from a global perspective and resulted in rapid relationship building, stronger accountability and professional identity fostered via online platforms, as some share below:

> So I was able to build a community with S.P.A.C.E and that was like a big thing for me because I work remotely. (Anna)

> We didn't know each other at the beginning of the project, and you know we all come from different country with various culture. But we work together as a team, we must build rapport in a short time so we can collaborate with each other better. So, I think it improves my relationship building skill. (Marie)

Students spoke of how their exposure and creation of liminal space fostered deeper learnings, together with shared dependence upon each other regarding tasks and group outputs/outcomes. The critical social work lens provided through S.P.A.C.E offered some students previously not exposed to critical programmes a new perspective. This, combined with the multi-cultural perspectives provided a rich learning experience, as some explain below:

> We have built a community where we are interested in each other's experience and social work areas, and I think … it gives us the qualities to work in a group and to respect each other deeply (Binsa)

> It was really good having other students and having them as colleagues. I think because there was a lot of learning from each other as well and a

> lot of discussions that I don't think you would get the opportunity to have in some other placements. (Joyce)

> The interaction I have with my supervisor with my colleagues, the sharing of experience. The learning from each other. Making social work a globalised profession. And I am thinking, what am I gonna do when it ends. It has become part of my life (Jules)

Students also spoke of challenges with S.P.A.C.E, such as navigating systems and timeframes and finding mutual times to connect and work together without the structure of a traditional placement. Participants reported that this did take some reflection on incorporating cultural differences, but the results were proportional to the effort and time dedicated to task, as some explain below:

> Coming together is a challenge. Not that it's negative but probably it's for me scheduling when we do our tasks as I use the weekend to do my studies and do my tasks (Jules)

> And then I did a bit more reflection and I was sort of saying I feel like I talk too much in the group or I'm always the one, me and a few others maybe are always the ones giving the answers. Then had a bit of reflection on that and … some of the [students] are not taught the same in their education. You know, it's very different. Like don't speak unless you know the answer. Don't speak unless you ask the question directly, so just learning different communication styles was work … Yeah, so then I found if I individually emailed someone and said hey, would you like to have a chat, it was … "Yep sure no problem. Let's do this," and that's the way around it … Just having to approach things a little differently (Joyce)

Transformational learning for life

The students spoke of the transformational learning they had experienced using critical reflection, both in their professional and personal lives. Through learning positionality and being able to identify assumptions shaped through discourses, the students were able to shape a future professional framework, as one describes below:

> The most interesting thing in this project is that I put that experience to use. I used critical reflection to learn about what I needed to do as a social worker. I reflect on my experience, I reflect on how I do things, I applied this experience to my life (Jules)

The critical approaches to learning also enabled the students to conceptualise social work from a global perspective and identify elements of white, western privilege that they might encounter in their work or future practice.

> I have prepared to presentation for the whole class during the project, which is about the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and also the social work in ancient history and these topics I'm really love to do it and share it with everyone. (Sam)

> What is social work [in Africa] and how it happens, comparing social work in Australia, where you have all the systems that are functional. There was also a comparison about living up on Pacific Region where social work is not a profession, as they say. For e.g., Brazil, Nigeria and places like this.

Students also identified their use of critical reflection learnt through S.P.A.C.E as enabling them to integrate theory and practice; to be utilised in self-care; to improve their practice; navigate ethical dilemmas, which is summarised by one student below:

> Yes, definitely one of the critical skills outlined is critical reflection. So the theory is applied practically. To see the benefits of critical reflection as a social worker, it's huge. When I started my social work placement, I struggled with critical reflection. I didn't want to do it. But then I jumped on it because it supports the learning. And it helped me with the critical incidents that I was living through. So to come into the S.P.A.C.E project for supervision and learn to apply critical reflection meant that I could live an even more deeper critical reflection and that is something that I cherish. No excuses now! Sometimes we do things without knowing why and critical reflection is a way to develop our social work skills that we do every day. To identify my practice framework through the S.P.A.C.E project is so valuable. (Jules)

Supervision was also an issue that all students discussed as being pivotal to their learning and all felt that '*really great supervision*' *(Sam)* was core to the success of S.P.A.C.E and this was enabled via the virtual space in ways that wasn't available in direct placements.

Technology as the 'Enabler'

Overwhelmingly, the students talked about technology as being the enabler of their learning experience. Apart from facilitating students' connection to each other, there was acknowledgment of how important the connection was to their supervisor—comparatively more so than in direct, in-person attendance placement experiences.

The students described the online platform (Teams^{TM}) as both a tool (to complete placement tasks, document storage, etc.) and a space enabling connection with different locations/countries and time zones. Many compared this connection with their experience of in-person contact with peers, as the connection in the online space was purposeful, yet it was not transactional. Students felt a strong sense of connection to the community they formed, fostered by their supervisor and enabled by the virtual platform of Teams. There were structural examples offered by

students as to why this happened (two-week intensive and then booked sessions) as well as workplans.

> I guess I've worked remotely for almost four years now, 3-4 years. [Now] it doesn't feel that I'm working on my own because when I log in everyone is there, everyone is online. I could, I could simply just send an email message, expecting to receive a reply after an hour or so, but not like the next day or late at night when I'm already off work (Anna)

> We exchanged contact details, we got to know each other through phone, WhatsApp. It was online, but it was constant, there hasn't been a week that we haven't seen each other. I think it worked (Carmella)

Students viewed their experiences with S.P.A.C.E as better preparing them for future practice post-COVID. This was not just interpreted as working virtually (digital skills), but also being better able to manage workload independently/flexibly, being self-initiated/directed as a future worker, communicating with a broad range of people through multiple media. This self-learning was more evident to the students in this online placement in comparison to an in-person attendance placement.

> At the very start, I liked the idea of the project, but I was not too excited about the online bit. But I did a placement last year, it was face to face, to be honest I did not build the rapport with other people I have built in this placement, I'm glad that at least we met every week, even if it was online. The fact that we were all students in this project, even though we have different interests, different experiences, and strengths, we all started from the same point. All of us being on the same line, made me identify with everyone, I didn't need to be in the same physical space in order for not to feel isolated. That sense of community, sense of we're all in this together, we're going to work it out together (Carmella)

Discussion

In line with principles of critical pedagogy and critical reflection, key social work education ideas (Johnstone *et al.*, 2016), transformational learning is achieved by being able to critically reflect on key moments of discomfort which in turn provide opportunities for renewed personal or professional growth. This also aligns with the concept of liminal space, with students experiencing uncertainty, but also the opportunity for critical reflection and transformation. Yet merely an online platform in and of itself may not be enough to achieve meaningful learning (Macken *et al.*, 2021). The creation of a community, the establishment of clear tasks and expectations, and a sound supervisory relationship all play an important role in student learning. This supports existing understandings of enablers for good placement learning in other practice contexts such as research, remote and in person (Hill *et al.*, 2021). This suggests that the environment plays a key role in student

placement success as well as being key in building and developing strong interpersonal skills. Notably, this enabling learning environment appears to be replicable in an online environment.

As the students of S.P.A.C.E reflected, their placement certainly did not look, nor feel like the more traditional model of field education set in an agency with service users. However, the development of direct practice skills was never the focus of the S.P.A.C.E, as it was one of two placements students were required to complete. The placement met the standards for field education which acknowledge the broader fields of contemporary social work practice that students must also prepare for which include research, policy and community organising and development work (AASW, 2020). Whilst the placement occurred during COVID-19 restrictions, students expressed their understanding that the placement modality would better prepare them for their future practice in an increasingly technology-driven workplace, where digital skills and the ability to work independently, collaboratively and flexibly are critical.

The results of the S.P.A.C.E project also emphasise the importance of supervision in the proving of placement learning. It highlights the role of supervisors in creating a safe and supportive learning environment, where students feel comfortable taking risks and engaging in critical reflection (Theobold *et al.*, 2017). Although the use of virtual and online platforms may be an attractive cost cutting option for placement facilitation (Meinert *et al.*, 2021), this research suggests that prioritising good quality supervision is linked to positive placement outcomes as it would be in a 'traditional' placement context (Bogo, 2015). Additionally, the experiences of students in the S.P.A.C.E project also highlight the role of technology in enabling positive placement outcomes. It highlights the flexibility and accessibility that online platforms provide, particularly for students with other commitments. This approach could potentially help students manage the ever-increasing pressures of balancing financial obligations or caregiving responsibilities alongside their placement requirements. Exploring virtual placements as a tool to reduce the economic burdens on social work students (Morley *et al.*, 2023) could also help to respond to the growing concerns about the emotional and financial toll placements can create for students (Hodge *et al.*, 2021), that professional bodies such as the AASW need to respond to.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to the field of social work in several ways. The research sheds light on the transformative potential of online learning in field education, challenging preconceived notions and resistance within the social work community of what constitutes placement. By demonstrating that virtual placements can provide a rich and meaningful learning experience, the study addresses concerns about the depth of learning and the

development of practical skills in online environments. Moreover, the emphasis on engaging student voices in discussions about the restructuring of field education underscores the importance of a participatory approach in shaping the future of social work education. This inclusive methodology ensures that the perspectives and experiences of social work students are considered, promoting a student-centred approach to education.

In a post-COVID-19 context, social work can reimagine the possibilities for field education in ways that both acknowledge the opportunities presented by online learning, as well as address the longstanding shortcomings of traditional field education modalities. Although the online space was at times met with uncertainty, it was the creation of this unique online community, or liminal space, that allowed students to lean into the uncertainty as part of an essential element of transformational learning. By creating intentional communities of practice and providing supportive supervision, these findings suggest social work programmes can create a virtual learning environment that is conducive to deep and meaningful learning experiences. The findings of this study further contribute to emerging pedagogical discourse in social work that promotes inclusivity and offers innovative strategies for creating virtual learning environments in social work education. As the field navigates the changing dynamics of education, these insights can inform the development of policies, practices and theories in social work, ensuring the profession remains responsive and adaptive to contemporary challenges.

Disclosure statement

Funding

References

Au, C., Drolet, J. L., Kaushik, V., Charles, G., Franco, M., Henton, J., Hirning, J., McConnell, S., Nicholas, D., Nickerson, A., Ossais, J., Shenton, H., Sussman, T., Verdicchio, G., Walsh, C. A. and Wickman, J. (2023) 'Impact of Covid-19 on social work field education: Perspectives of Canadian social work students', *Journal of Social Work*, **23**(3), pp. 522–47.

Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2020) 'Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards', available online at: https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/6073 (accessed May 27, 2023).

Baglow, L. and Gair, S. (2019) 'Mature-aged social work students: Challenges, study realities, and experiences of poverty', *Australian Social Work*, **72**(1), pp. 91–104.

Barry, J. (2022) 'A student's reflection on participating in a non-traditional social work field placement during the Covid-19 pandemic', *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, **24**(1), pp. 67–71.

Bay, U., Maghidman, M., Waugh, J. and Shlonsky, A. (2021) 'Guidelines for using simulation for online teaching and learning of clinical social work practice in the time of COVID', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, **49**(2), pp. 128–35.

Bogo, M. (2015) 'Field education for clinical social work practice: best practices and contemporary challenges', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, **43**(3), pp. 317–24.

Boitel, C. R. and Fromm, L. R. (2014) 'Defining signature pedagogy in social work education: Learning theory and the learning contract', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **50**(4), pp. 608–22.

Cherry, V., Leotti, S. M., Panichelli, M. and Wahab, S. (2023) 'Pandemic possibilities: Confronting neoliberalism in social work education', *Social Work Education*, **42** (6), pp. 831–46. DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2021.1989397.

Cleak, H. and Wilson, J. (2022) *Making the Most of Field Placement*, 5th edn, Australia, Cengage AU.

Cleak, H. and Zuchowski, I. (2020) 'Mapping social work field education in the 21st Century: A national survey of the Australian context', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **50**(2), pp. 427–46.

Egan, R., Chee, P., Long, N., McLean, S., Parrish, J. and Spencer, A. (2018) 'Field education as a distinctive pedagogy for social work education', *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, **20**(1), pp. 32–46.

Eklinder Frick, J., Fremont, V. H. J., Åge, L. J. and Osarenkhoe, A. (2020) 'Digitalization efforts in liminal space–inter-organizational challenges', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, **35**(1), pp. 150–8.

Fawns, T., Aitken, G. and Jones, D. (2019) 'Online learning as embodied, socially meaningful experience', *Postdigital Science and Education*, **1**(2), pp. 293–7.

Fook, J., and Gardner, F. (eds.) (2012) *Critical Reflection in Context*, Abingdon, Routledge.

Forgey, M. A. and Ortega-Williams, A. (2016) 'Effectively teaching social work practice online: Moving beyond can to how', *Advances in Social Work*, **17**(1), pp. 59–77.

Gair, S. and Baglow, L. (2018) "We barely survived": Social work students' mental health vulnerabilities and implications for educators, universities, and the workforce', *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, **30**(1), pp. 32–44.

Goldingay, S., Epstein, S. and Taylor, D. (2018) 'Simulating social work practice online with digital storytelling: Challenges and opportunities', *Social Work Education*, **37**(6), pp. 790–803.

Gredig, D., Heinsch, M. and Bartelsen-Raemy, A. (2022) 'Exploring social work students' attitudes toward research courses: Comparing students in Australia and Switzerland', *Social Work Education*, **41**(4), pp. 451–71.

Hardwick, L. and Worsley, A. (2011) *Doing Social Work Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE.

Harkavy, I., Bergan, S., Gallagher, T. and Van't Land, H. (2021) Universities must help shape the post-COVID-19 world. *Higher Education's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Building a Sustainable and Democratic Future*, London, Council of Europe, 21–30.

Hemy, M., Boddy, J., Chee, P. and Sauvage, D. (2016) 'Social work students "juggling" field placement', *Social Work Education*, **35**(2), pp. 215–28.

Hill, N., Egan, R., Cleak, H. and Zuchowski, I. (2021) 'Thinking outside the square: The quality and sustainability of placement models', in Egan, R., Hill, N. and Rollins, W. (eds), *Challenges, Opportunities and Innovations in Social Work Field Education*, New York, NY, Taylor and Francis.

Hodge, L., Oke, N., McIntyre, H. and Turner, S. (2021) 'Lengthy unpaid placements in social work: Exploring the impacts on student wellbeing', *Social Work Education*, **40**(6), pp. 787–802.

International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW]. (2020) 'Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training', available online at: https://www.ifsw.org/global-standards-for-social-work-education-and-training/ (accessed January 22, 2024).

Johnstone, L., Noble, C. and Gray, M. (2016) *Critical Supervision for the Human Services: A Social Model to Promote Learning and Value-Based Practice*, London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Jones, S. H. (2015) 'Benefits and challenges of online education for clinical social work: Three examples', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, **43**(2), pp. 225–35.

Jun, J. S., Kremer, K. P., Marseline, D., Lockett, L. and Kurtz, D. L. (2021) 'Effective social work online education in response to Covid-19', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, **41**(5), pp. 520–34.

Kofke, M. (2020) "Society likes to put people into socially constructed boxes": Exploration of the liminal space through undergraduate students' reflections on disability', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, **40**(2). DOI: 10.18061/dsq.v40i2.6592.

Lee, E., Kourgiantakis, T. and Hu, R. (2021) 'Teaching note—teaching socially just culturally competent practice online: Pedagogical challenges and lessons learned during the pandemic', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **57**(1), pp. 58–65.

Lewis, N. J. and Orton, P. (2000) 'The five attributes of innovative e-learning', *Training and Development*, **54**(6), pp. 47–51.

Lomas, G., Gerstenberg, L., Kennedy, E., Fletcher, K., Ivory, N., Whitaker, L., Russ, E., Fitzroy, R. and Short, M. (2022) 'Experiences of social work students undertaking a remote research-based placement during a global pandemic', *Social Work Education*, **42**(8), pp. 1145–62.

Lynch, M. W., Bengtsson, A. R. and Hollertz, K. (2019) 'Applying a 'signature pedagogy' in the teaching of critical social work theory and practice', *Social Work Education*, **38**(3), pp. 289–301.

Macken, C., Hare, J., Souter, K., Macken, C., Hare, J. and Souter, K. (2021) Learning and teaching in higher education. *Seven Radical Ideas for the Future of Higher Education: An Australian Perspective*, Singapore, Springer Nature Singapore, 33–52.

Meinert, E., Eerens, J., Banks, C., Maloney, S., Rivers, G., Ilic, D., Walsh, K., Majeed, A. and Car, J. (2021) 'Exploring the cost of eLearning in health professions education: Scoping review', *JMIR Medical Education*, **7**(1), pp. e13681.

Mishna, F., Milne, E., Bogo, M. and Pereira, L. F. (2021) 'Responding to COVID-19: New trends in social workers' use of information and communication technology', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, **49**(4), pp. 484–94.

Morley, C., Ablett, P. and Macfarlane, S. (2019) *Engaging with Social Work: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Morley, C. and Clarke, J. (2020) 'From crisis to opportunity? Innovations in Australian social work field education during the COVID-19 global pandemic', *Social Work Education*, **39**(8), pp. 1048–57.

Morley, C. and Dunstan, J. (2013) 'Critical reflection: A response to neoliberal challenges to field education', *Social Work Education*, **32**(2), pp. 141–56.

Morley, C., Hodge, L., Clarke, J., McIntyre, H., Mays, J., Briese, J. and Kostecki, T. (2023) 'THIS UNPAID PLACEMENT MAKES YOU POOR': Australian social work students' experiences of the financial burden of field education', *Social Work Education*, 1–19. Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2022.2161507.

Moss, M., Rowen, R. and Lee, A. D. (2022) 'On the other side of the rabbit proof fence: Decolonizing social work education-a framework for change', *Social Work Education*, 1–17. Advance online publication. DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2022.2147157.

Newcomb, M. (2019) 'When teacher becomes student: Unveiling contradictions within Australian social work education', *Social Sciences*, **8**(6), pp. 174–86.

O'Callaghan, A., Wearn, A. and Barrow, M. (2020) 'Providing a liminal space: Threshold concepts for learning in palliative medicine', *Medical Teacher*, **42**(4), pp. 422–8.

Oke, N., Hodge, L., McIntyre, H. and Turner, S. (2022) 'I had to take a casual contract and work one day a week': Students' experiences of lengthy university placements as drivers of precarity', *Work, Employment and Society*, **37**(6), pp. 1664–80.

O'Keeffe, P., Haralambous, B., Egan, R., Heales, E., Baskarathas, S., Thompson, S. and Jerono, C. (2023) 'Reimagining social work placements in the Covid-19 pandemic', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **53**(1), pp. 448–70.

Ossiannilsson, E. (2020) 'Quality models for open, flexible, and online learning', *Journal of Computer Science Research*, **2**(4), pp. 19–31.

Papouli, E., Chatzifotiou, S. and Tsairidis, C. (2020) 'The use of digital technology at home during the COVID-19 outbreak: Views of social work students in Greece', *Social Work Education*, **39**(8), pp. 1107–15.

Patterson Silver Wolf, D. A., Taylor, F., Maguin, E. and Asher Black Deer, A. (2021) 'You are college material -you belong: An underrepresented minority student retention intervention without deception', *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, **23**(3), pp. 507–22.

Rasell, M., Join-Lambert, H., Naumiuk, A., Pinto, C., Uggerhoj, L. and Walker, J. (2019) 'Diversity, dialogue, and identity in designing globally relevant social work education', *Social Work Education*, **38**(6), pp. 675–88.

Rose, A. L., Leisyte, L., Haertel, T. and Terkowsky, C. (2019) 'Emotions and the liminal space in entrepreneurship education', *European Journal of Engineering Education*, **44**(4), pp. 602–15.

Salter, C., Oates, R. K., Swanson, C. and Bourke, L. (2020) 'Working remotely: Innovative allied health placements in response to COVID-19', *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, **21**(5), pp. 587–600.

Saxton, K., Rowbotham, R. and Read, J. (2021) 'Managing or mentoring? Reflections on the role modelling of human rights within Australian social work field education', *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, **7**(2), pp. 202–10.

Smoyer, A. B., O'Brien, K. and Rodriguez-Keyes, E. (2020) 'Lessons learned from COVID-19: Being known in online social work classrooms', *International Social Work*, **63**(5), pp. 651–4.

Shi, Y., Jang, H. S., Keyes, L. and Dicke, L. (2020) 'Nonprofit service continuity and responses in the pandemic: Disruptions, ambiguity, innovation, and challenges', *Public Administration Review*, **80**(5), pp. 874–9.

Theobald, E. J., Eddy, S. L., Grunspan, D. Z., Wiggins, B. L., and Crowe, A. J. (2017) 'Student perception of group dynamics predicts individual performance: Comfort and equity matter', *PloS One*, **12**(7), pp. 1–16.

Turner, V. W. (1982) *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, NY, Performing Arts Journal.

Wayne, J., Bogo, M. and Raskin, M. (2006) 'Field notes: The need for radical change in field education', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **42**(1), pp. 161–9.

Whitaker, L., Russ, E., Petrakis, M., Halton, C., Walters, C., Woolven, M. and Short, M. (2022) Cooperative inquiry online: Investigating innovation in work-integrated learning across four countries, *SAGE Research Methods: Doing Research Online*, Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications Ltd.

Willis, K. (2019) 'Analysing qualitative data', in Walter, M. (ed.), *Social Research Methods*, 4th edn, pp. 41–64, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Wolf, K. and Archer, C. (2013) 'Into the unknown: A critical reflection on a truly global learning experience', *Issues in Educational Research*, **23**(2), pp. 299–314.