



Project Report

# Ecopedagogy in Remote Digitally Facilitated Field Education Experiences: Embedding Ecosocial Work in Practice

Ros Darracott

School of Psychology and Wellbeing, University of Southern Queensland, West St., Toowoomba, QLD 4350, Australia; ros.darracott@unisq.edu.au

**Abstract:** Teaching that centers holistic understandings of humans and the natural environment is relatively new in Australian social work education. This position is purposefully embraced to embed ecological justice as a key consideration in day-to-day practice. Alongside the growing professional awareness of ecological concerns and emerging commitment to ecosocial work practice, field education is evolving and allowing students to engage in remote digitally facilitated field placements. This provides new opportunities for creatively embedding ecological learning and ecosocial work practices into student field education thus promoting incorporation of these into the students' emerging professional practice frameworks. This descriptive article examines the structure and pedagogical approach used in a series of such placements provided in partnership with environmental not-for-profit organizations. These digitally facilitated field education experiences can provide a powerful mechanism for transformational ecosocial learning, particularly when underpinned by Freirean ecopedagogy which resonates with social work's professional values and purpose. Additionally, there is opportunity for mutual benefit when these placements are hosted by environmental not-for-profit organizations.

**Keywords:** ecosocial work; ecopedagogy; online education; field education; social work education; field practicum



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## 1. Introduction

Social work field education in the Australian context typically involves 1000 h of in-person agency-based supervised learning, generally conducted in two 500 h blocks (Australian Association of Social Workers 2020). The Australian public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic challenged this approach to field education, leading to the development of novel approaches that embrace remote online learning in the delivery of field education. While the effectiveness of developing social work skills in an online environment is still contentious (Farrel et al. 2018; Jun et al. 2021; Osburn et al. 2023), well-crafted remote online project field placements have emerged from the pandemic experience to provide successful student learning opportunities (Fronek et al. 2023; Lomas et al. 2022) and an alternative mechanism for achieving deep, transformational learning (Morley and Clarke 2020; Saxton et al. 2024). This paper reports the digitally facilitated pedagogical approach to remote online project placements that has evolved to support transformational learning in the developing space of ecosocial work.

Ecosocial work, also known as green or environmental social work, is an approach to practice that seeks to embrace true holism and address intrinsically linked social and ecological injustices (Boetto 2017, 2018; Boetto et al. 2022). Many social workers are seeking to transform the profession's relationship with the natural environment in response to the climate emergency and the growing recognition that the profession has been entrenched in anthropocentrism and has silently perpetuated this positioning of humans as superior to the rest of nature (Bell 2020; Boetto 2018; Boetto et al. 2022).

Whilst the social injustices experienced globally as a result of environmental degradation and climate change are a dominant concern within the profession, it noted that

this positioning still privileges the needs and concerns of humans over that of non-human beings and nature more broadly (Gray and Coates 2015). A shift to a holistic perspective that is grounded in recognizing and valuing the interdependency of humans and the rest of nature is required (Gray and Coates 2015). Holism moves away from focusing on discrete categories (for example, humans and non-humans) and instead considers the dynamic interaction of the relationships between the multiplicity of parts (Ife et al. 2024). The ability of the profession to truly embrace holism is currently restricted by social work's foundation in modernism and humanism and the entrenched patriarchal power structures and binaries entwined with these (Bell 2020; Boetto 2017, 2018; Gray and Coates 2015). While much work is being conducted exploring and defining ecosocial work and the related practices, success is often limited and reduced to an 'add on' to practice rather than a transformation of the profession as a whole (Bell 2020; Boetto 2017). Progress in the way social work is taught is noted to be less developed than the practices themselves (Bell 2020).

The teaching of social work tends to continue to center Western colonial ways of being in and understanding the world, whilst often simultaneously attempting to engage in critical pedagogies and instill a strong sense of social justice and critical thinking in students (Bell 2020). The inherent incongruencies between ontology and epistemology is what leads to ecological concerns and ecosocial work practice being considered an 'add on' rather than the basis of professional practice (Boetto 2017; Bell 2020). Decolonization and the embracing of a feminist ethics of care is required; where the entangled interdependence of all relationships (human and non-human) is centered (Boulet 2020).

In an effort to progress this transformation of the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of the social work profession, a group of social workers based in the Toowoomba region of Queensland Australia formed a community of practice in 2018 (the Toowoomba EcoSocial Work Group—TESWG). TESWG has used social work field placements since 2020, both online and in-person, as a vehicle to explore ecosocial work in practice, as well as to promote the development of holistic ecological thinking with the students, the community of practice members, and the broader social work community. TESWG's foundation is one of collective learning. Communities of practice, such as TESWG, are suggested by Boetto et al. (2022) as having potential in progressing the transformation of social work. Providing ecosocial work field education opportunities broadens the opportunities for the learning well beyond what the members of TESWG could achieve themselves within the bounds of their day-to-day work. As noted by Saxton et al. (2024), transformational learning is difficult to facilitate or achieve within the confines of the neoliberal and managerialist structures of contemporary human service organizations.

The pedagogical approach of the placements has been iteratively developed over the five years of placement offerings. The placements seek to develop student learning in a manner congruent with Boetto's (2017) transformative ecosocial model and draw on Freirean ecopedagogy to assist in achieving this. A brief summation of Freirean ecopedagogy will first be addressed. The case report will then describe how this pedagogy is employed to develop the elements of Boetto's (2017) transformative ecosocial model in the online learning environment.

## 2. Freirean Ecopedagogy

Social work has long considered the natural and physical environment as simply a backdrop to the social world of people's lives (Zapf 2009). Freirean ecopedagogues recognize that critical pedagogies have done the same, foregrounding human-centric experience (Misiaszek and Torres 2019) and thus perpetuating a disconnect between people and the natural environment. The Freirean ecopedagogical goal of 'de-distancing' the human world from the Earth (Misiaszek 2023) is consistent with the transformational goals of ecosocial work as is its underlying ethical imperative where the interdependence of all humanity on each other for wellbeing is recognized as part of a universal interdependence with the Earth for wellbeing (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). Educational processes encourage reflection on these interdependencies. Freirean ecopedagogy seeks to create a cultural

shift, rather than simply teach about the environment. Its purpose is to create a culture of sustainability through critical problem-posing of the way humans interact with the rest of nature (Antunes et al. 2019).

As a critical pedagogy, the Freirean approach has direct application in social work praxis to address social justice issues (Cowden et al. 2020). Freirean pedagogy seeks to promote critical consciousness of power relations through education, and in doing so, liberate both the oppressor and the oppressed. It challenges 'banking education', where the teacher deposits knowledge for the student to consume. 'Banking education' retains the status quo by teaching about the world as it is constructed by the dominant social classes, thus continuing to perpetuate oppressive power relations (Freire 1970). Core processes of Freirean pedagogy include critical consciousness raising through problem-posing taken-for-granted assumptions regarding how the world 'must be' and learning through collaboration, dialogue, action, and reflection. It is a cyclical process where a problem is posed and students collaboratively take action critically exploring the problem from differing perspectives, and learnings are fostered through dialogue, reflection, and further action. The teacher is not positioned as an 'expert' to deposit knowledge but as a fellow collaborator in a learning process that seeks to transform social relations (Freire 1970).

Freirean ecopedagogy extends this to position the Earth as the oppressed (Antunes et al. 2019) and seeks to develop praxis that will end this oppression through teaching students to critically understand the relationships between human actions, environmental injustices, and social injustices (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). In keeping with the Freirean tradition, viewing oneself and society as unfinished and capable of transformation is essential. An emphasis on the dialectical relationship between local and global contexts is retained (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). Capitalism, neoliberalism, and the related definitions of 'development' are problematized as oppressive forces of the Earth inclusive of humans. The critical skill of reading the politics of human oppression is expanded to include those that perpetuate a separation of the human world from Earth and that consequently oppress the Earth (Misiaszek 2023; Misiaszek and Torres 2019). From this perspective learning is relational and collective (DeWaard and Roberts 2021).

Challenging the fatalism that neoliberal globalization perpetuates—that this is just the way it has to be and there are no viable alternatives—is essential to ceasing the reproduction of the belief systems that oppress the Earth (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). Fatalism is considered by Freire to be a direct result of the internalization of the world view of the oppressors and is replicated in relationships (in this sense between all of nature of which humans are part) and social, political, and economic structures (Cowden et al. 2020). Consequently, people do not see alternative possibilities and accept the status quo perpetuating their own and others' (including the Earth's) oppression (Cowden et al. 2020).

Whilst ecological and social injustices are entwined, the wellbeing of Earth should be a goal in itself and oppressions of the Earth should be taught beyond those immediately tied to human oppression (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). Freirean ecopedagogy teaches the politics of oppressions of humans and the Earth simultaneously—not with the planetary concerns as an 'add on' but as an intrinsically linked phenomenon where environmental harms are both a consequence of and a contributor to human oppressions (Misiaszek and Torres 2019).

Dialogue and problem-posing are core to Freirean pedagogy; the teacher and student engage in genuine dialogue, uncovering new perspectives and understandings of problems together (Cowden et al. 2020). It is collaborative, with the dialogical approach situating the teacher as also learner and the student as also teacher (Misiaszek 2023). This positioning and open dialogue assists in reducing the power differential between the learner and teacher and promotes learning that is relevant to the individual student (DeWaard and Roberts 2021).

Freirean ecopedagogy problem-poses to promote dialogue that contrasts perspectives of human and Earth's needs to de-center human perspectives and enable the centering of a planetary perspective (which would be inclusive of humans but not exclusively so)

(Misiaszek and Torres 2019). Critical consciousness of the processes of oppression is developed through a cycle of reflection and action as problems are posed, deconstructed, and reflected upon through dialogue (Cowden et al. 2020). Freirean pedagogy uncovers the realities of power structures and the subjugation of the oppressed whilst at the same time sustaining a belief and hope in the agency of individuals and the collective to create change when provided with the tools for critical consciousness (Cowden et al. 2020). Freirean ecopedagogy extends this to uncover how societal power structures and hegemony perpetuate the positioning of humans as dominant to the rest of nature (Misiaszek 2023).

Problem-posing questions the social and economic engineering of human 'wants' and the oppressive consequences of having these wants fulfilled (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). Economic, scientific, and technological assumptions and assertions are questioned—technology for whose benefit? At what other costs? Individualism is also problematized (Misiaszek 2023). Students (and educators) are taught to question this orchestrated distancing of humans' relationship with Earth and the dominant constructions of development which lack a commitment to true sustainability (Misiaszek 2023).

Whilst there are many competing discourses regarding sustainable development (Dryzek 2022), Freirean ecopedagogy teaches sustainability as a pathway to planetary balance (Misiaszek and Torres 2019) as opposed to the more capitalist approaches to sustainability that privilege continued economic growth (Dryzek 2022; Ife 2016; Misiaszek 2023). Therefore, questioning who benefits from development, whether badged as 'green' or not, is required as well as determining who should genuinely have a voice in development decisions.

Particular attention is paid to problem-posing globalization and the decisions that are made from afar that impact the lives and wellbeing of the voiceless (both human and non-human), and encouraging planetary citizenship that does not buy into fatalistic hegemony (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). Students must be taught how to critically analyze the dialectical relationship between the local and global and be literate in the social and environmental consequences of globalization. The interconnectedness created by globalization also poses possibilities for positive change. Freirean ecopedagogy seeks to create a positive global citizenship where people feel connected to each other and Earth, where they see each other's needs as intrinsically tied (Misiaszek 2023; Misiaszek and Torres 2019).

Freirean ecopedagogy informs the structure, activities, and supervision processes of the field placements offered by TESWG. Placements are designed to promote collaborative learning amongst the student team and field educators, with learning prompted through problem-posing, exploration, dialogue, and reflection. The positioning of humans and Earth as separate and the accompanying anthropocentrism in dominant Western, modernist epistemology and ontology is problem-posed and explored throughout the placements. Students explore the dialectical relationship between the local and global through the project work and engagement with community activities and are exposed to different disciplinary understandings of environmental issues through their host agencies and the placement tasks. Group and individual supervision processes promote dialogical learning, consciousness-raising, and critical reflection with the explicit goal of assisting students to consider more holistic ways of knowing, being, and doing in social work practice.

### 3. Case Study

#### 3.1. Background

The Toowoomba EcoSocial Work Group (TESWG) is a community of practice, composed of social workers and social work academics, that emerged from an ecosocial work professional development event held in Toowoomba in 2018. Toowoomba is a regional city located on the Great Dividing Range approximately 125 km west of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia and has a population of approximately 173,200 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Toowoomba provides many of the essential social, health, and educational services for the rural and remote communities in the Darling Downs and South-West areas of Queensland.

TESWG was initially inspired by Zapf's (2009) argument that the 'person in environment perspective' should be retired as the foundational metaphor of the social work profession, as it has consistently privileged the socio-cultural environment and excluded the natural environment. Zapf (2009) proposed 'people as place' as a holistic metaphor that could be embraced to guide the future development of social work practice, and this has been adopted by TESWG. Ecosocial work field placements were first offered as a means to progress these ideas in practice by TESWG in early 2020. During the first placement, conducted in a health setting, COVID-19 pandemic precautions forced the transition to a remote online placement. This project produced a literature review regarding the impact of climate change on social work practice in a health setting, which has provided a basis for later projects. Key learnings from this experience included the need to increase opportunities for dialogical learning and the importance of integrating online projects with in-person practice environments. Given the likelihood of ongoing disruptions to in-person placements by COVID-19 public health precautions, fully online project placements seeking to simulate a research-team environment were developed for delivery in semester two of 2020 and have since continued to be offered. Partnerships with health services and local not-for-profit environment organizations have allowed these placements to be integrated with in-person practice environments and have projects align with the needs of host agencies.

Field education experiences have since been offered by TESWG to over twenty social work students, with fourteen of these being remote online project placements. To date, students have primarily come from one regional and one urban university; however, in total, six universities have provided students over the five years. The pedagogy of these placements has been iteratively refined over the period of providing these placements and is a work in progress. This case study focuses on the online student placement experience.

### *3.2. Structure of the Online Project-Based Field Education Placements*

Students are recruited to the placements to form a small virtual research team of two to four members and usually come from at least two universities to enable this size. Three per team is the preferred minimum for stability given that students occasionally have disruptions to placement, which leaves a single remaining student somewhat isolated. As the placement is fully online, the geographical location of the student is not a consideration. Field educators seek to be as flexible as possible with the timing of placement hours to maximize genuine engagement and meet the needs of students with work and caring commitments, whilst also seeking to ensure adequate overlap to engage in team meetings and group supervision.

A dedicated Microsoft Teams site provides an asynchronous platform where orientation materials, student handover documents, project management plans, and other resources are accessible. Resources include reading lists, links to relevant podcasts, blogs, websites, and videos. The Microsoft Teams site allows for students to easily communicate both synchronously and asynchronously. Through this platform, and student contributions to the TESWG website, students share their discoveries with subsequent students on placement.

Student meetings, individual supervision, and group supervision are conducted synchronously via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Students synchronously attend TESWG meetings and relevant host agency and community meetings. They also engage with live-streamed community education or activist events when opportunities arise.

Partnerships have been formed with the Darling Downs Environmental Council (DDEC) and Householders Options for Protecting the Environment—Toowoomba (HOPE), who act as host agency and assist in setting the project priorities with the students. The TESWG field educator meets with the host agency prior to student recruitment to determine the broad focus of the projects. Recent projects have included exploring the potential for human rights legislation to be used to protect the environment; the processes of greenwashing and the intersection with ecosocial justice; and the intersection between heat vulnerability, tree canopy, ecosocial justice and community engagement. Once students commence,

further meetings are conducted with the host agency to refine the project and develop timelines. Alignment with student learning plans is completed in individual professional supervision with the field educator.

The students meet every shared day of placement in the morning to plan their work for the day, share information, frustrations, and support each other's learning. Each afternoon the students meet with the field educator for group supervision. While there is some supporting of task progression during these sessions, the primary focus is on probing student learning and encouraging critical analysis, reflection, and dialogue. Throughout the placements, students are encouraged to consider how their ecosocial learnings can be incorporated into their emerging practice frameworks. Anecdotally, the students have consistently reported that this structure provides much needed support and connection in what could otherwise be quite an isolating experience.

While the placements are conducted online, students are encouraged to engage in some in-person activities in their own localities as part of their placement experience. For example, attending activities hosted by environmental groups in their region, engaging with local First Nations' groups and activities such as the through the Jellurgal Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Gold Coast Queensland, and participating in local environmental activism such as the species extinction rallies in their local areas. Students bring these experiences back to the online student team as experiences to deconstruct and reconstruct with their student peers. Students are also encouraged to simply be outdoors when feasible—taking a walk to relieve computer time, being mindful in the garden, and listening to a relevant podcast whilst in green space.

### 3.3. *The Principles and Pedagogy of the Online Project Placements*

In addition to the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (Australian Association of Social Workers 2020) requirements for field education, the goals, structure, and processes used in the placements are informed by Boetto's (2017) transformative ecosocial model and utilize Freirean ecopedagogy. Boetto's (2017) transformative ecosocial model proposes that transformative change of the profession will require the adoption of a holistic worldview that centers the Earth rather than humans, and active engagement in global citizenship. It also requires a shift in our understanding of wellbeing to move beyond the economic framing dominant in Western neoliberal cultures, and a rejection of this same dominant economic model that views development as the growth of profit rather than genuine ecological sustainability. Finally, transformation requires the inclusion of environmentally focused activities in the day-to-day of social work professionals—at the micro, meso, and macro levels of practice (Boetto 2017, p. 50). To this end, the model includes transformation at the levels of self (being), professional knowledge and values (thinking), and practice strategies (doing) (Boetto 2017).

Boetto's (2017) model has particular utility in the conceptualization of these placements as it aids in the consideration of practice at all levels (micro, meso, macro) for the purposes of the student learning plans and is consistent with the requirements for students' development of their professional practice frameworks (values, skills, and knowledge). The model's goals are also consistent with transitioning from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, as opposed to pursuing an environmental social work that, whilst attempting to address environmental concerns, fails to challenge the underlying modernist assumptions that perpetuate environmental harms (Coates and Gray 2019). The incorporation of learnings from the expanding body of ecosocial work literature is also easily accommodated by the model.

### 3.4. *The Self*

Transforming the self requires the social worker (or student) to develop or strengthen their personal identity as a being interconnected with other humans, non-human animals, and the rest of nature (Boetto 2017). It requires critical examination of personal values, beliefs, and attitudes regarding their entanglement or perceived disconnection with the

Earth. This positioning will be evident in the way practice is then enacted, with holism likely to be more present where it is genuinely embraced by the practitioner (Boetto 2017).

Freirean critical consciousness-raising is used to deconstruct the social and economic forces that perpetuate the disconnection of people from place. Opportunities to prompt this critical analysis and reflection are provided through the online asynchronous materials (such as readings and videos), the project work (for example, exploring the complex relationships between the natural environment and human actions that lead to heat being a major health concern with inequitable impacts), synchronous engagement with community groups (for example, the Keep Toowoomba Cool action group), and participation in TESWG meetings, student team meetings, and supervision. Active in-person engagement with relevant activities and spaces in their own locality is encouraged. Through reflection and dialogue over the course of the placement, students consider their personal values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to the Earth, inclusive of human and non-human species.

Fostering a safe learning environment is essential to the dialogue required for transformative learning (Misiaszek 2023). Students are encouraged to share their emerging understandings, insights, frustrations, disillusionments, and enlightenments in student team meetings and in supervision. The many points of tension in and amongst environmental discourses (Dryzek 2022) provide additional opportunities for deeper critical analysis (Misiaszek 2023) in peer meetings and supervisions. For example, the multiple viewpoints regarding renewable energy infrastructure and the corresponding value positions provides fertile ground for prompting critical reflection on one's own values and behaviors as well as critical policy analysis. The field educator, in addition to problem-posing, share their own new perspectives and wonderings, and in doing so model this process of self-learning and promote critical questioning. Consistent with Freirean pedagogy, students are invited to come to their own conclusions through critical thinking rather than being told what to think, value, or how to 'be' (Misiaszek 2023).

### 3.5. Thinking

Professional knowledge and values must be transformed to include:

- ecological justice (which is more holistic, as opposed to environmental justice which is critiqued for still perpetuating anthropocentrism)
- ecological literacy
- Indigenous perspectives
- ecofeminisms and criticality
- global perspectives
- sustainability and de-growth (Boetto 2017, p. 54).

These areas of knowledge are explored by students through their respective projects, visits/connections with environmental and First Nations organizations within their own localities, and through knowledge sharing with each other in their student research team and group supervision. Core resources on the above topics are included in the students' induction into the placement and they are then encouraged to pursue additional resources to deepen understanding and follow their curiosity. Students also share the resources and knowledges gained with subsequent students and others through a growing resource library housed in the Microsoft Teams site and TESWG website, further promoting collaborative learning. Through interaction with their host agency, and where possible, environment and First Nations groups in their own locales, students are exposed to other disciplinary and Indigenous knowledges that enhance their ecoliteracy.

Through readings, activities, and dialogue, students gain insights into the history of social work and the environment (see for example Zapf 2009), the intersection between environmental and social justice (see for example Dominelli 2012, 2019; Ife et al. 2024), the role of anthropocentrism and modernist views in maintaining the status quo (see for example Bell 2020; Coates and Gray 2019), the potential for learning from Indigenous knowledges (see for example Green 2023; Ife et al. 2024) and key theories such as ecofeminism and deep ecology (see for example Klemmer and McNamara 2020; Ungar 2002). Throughout

the placement students consider how these concepts and ecosocial work approaches can inform their thinking and their practice at micro, meso, and macro levels.

Students are exposed to the varying discourses surrounding sustainability and environmentalism more broadly. Supervision employs problem-posing to examine neoliberal assumptions of the benefits of 'growth' and 'development' and students consider alternatives such as de-growth through readings and shared dialogue. Exploring collectivist approaches, which are important to transforming the value base of the profession (Boetto 2017) and recognizing and questioning individualism is encouraged. Learning activities that increase awareness of how local actions of individuals (for example, through consumption) can perpetuate experiences of oppression on the other side of the world through globalization and related ecological neocolonialism are promoted.

### 3.6. Doing

Practice strategies to 'do' ecosocial work include "personal, individual, group, community and political dimensions of practice" (Boetto 2017, p. 58). It involves a re-thinking of what constitutes wellbeing to include having a clean and healthy natural environment, with the associated resource access requisite to health and wellbeing such as clean air and water. Place-based practices that challenge the dominant binaries of the personal and professional, and the micro and macro are required (Boetto 2017). Boetto (2017, p. 61) includes ecosocial practice strategies such as those that

- occur at the personal level and may involve activities such as changes to household behaviors and volunteering in the environmental space
- reflect a holistic understanding of wellbeing and would see the social worker engaged in activities such as seeking to enhance people's access to green space, or tree canopy, and using ecotherapies in individual and family work
- foster organizational change and create communities of practice
- work in a community-embedded manner to cultivate locally informed activities that lead to more sustainable practices
- engage in social action.

The remote online project placements provide the opportunity to develop skills in community organizing and activism and developing relationships with community and political allies. This has included

- participating in environmentally focused community meetings, such as the Wilderness Society or Keep Toowoomba Cool, via online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams
- presenting their project findings to such meetings to inform activist campaigns
- actively participating in strategy conversations with working groups composed of community leaders, representatives from various fields, and community volunteers
- presenting project findings (via zoom or similar) to inform the broader social work community of environmental issues (this has included local social work meetings as well as conferences)
- observing live streamed community activist events
- engaging in cold-calling community organizations to ask for their support in gathering stories from the community related to environmental wellbeing (for example, their experiences during heat waves).

At the micro level of practice, students have explored how to embed people's experiences of the natural environment into direct practice with individuals and families, through, for example, nature-based therapies and community gardens. At the macro level, students have examined policies and legislation to consider how these help or hinder environmental protections and have made recommendations that have been pursued by TESWG and host agencies. For example, amongst other activities, two students conducted a critical analysis of the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) from an environmental perspective that informed local submissions to the Queensland Government review of this Act. Later students conducted a



policy analysis of a selection of local governments' policies related to tree canopy cover which will inform lobbying for improvements in local policies. Participation in these activities and the associated skill development have provided further provocations for critical deconstruction and consciousness-raising.

#### 4. Discussion

True to the Freirean tradition, the emphasis of ecopedagogy is on praxis—theory in action (Misiaszek and Torres 2019). This resonates with TESWG's purpose of promoting 'people as place' and embedding ecosocial work into day-to-day practice, rather than it being a specialty area or 'add on'. Freirean ecopedagogy is a theoretically congruent approach to working towards social work's transformation, one where humanism and anthropocentrism tenants are decentered and ecosocial work is the new social work, rather than an 'add on' to practice (Bell 2020).

Use of an online teaching environment risks perpetuating what Freire would deem 'banking education' where the educators provide the content and the students simply and uncritically consume; further it potentially dehumanizes the learning experience (Frag et al. 2022). The explicit adoption of a Freirean ecopedagogy with the emphasis on relational, collective, and dialogical learning (DeWaard and Roberts 2021) seeks to avoid this and remain true to the transformational goals of social work field education generally, and more specifically of transforming the profession towards a truly holistic ontology.

Online pedagogy also risks contributing to the separation of humans from the natural environment and it is argued that for a pedagogy to address this separation, it must allow for deep, slow, bodily engagement with nature (Payne and Wattoo 2009). While it is acknowledged that online teaching could easily perpetuate this problem, the placements attempt to counter this through the problem-posing and critically reflective processes, and by encouraging students to engage with the natural environment in their own locale as part of placement activities. These embodied experiences are then also discussed in the peer meetings and supervision sessions. Recent placements have integrated student generated videos/walking tours (Jopp 2019) of their own local natural environments and places of meaning to further encourage an embodied experience and act as locally embedded provocations for critical dialogue (DeWaard and Roberts 2021).

The asynchronous learning resources, project tasks, and communication strategies allow students to have flexibility in when they engage with different aspects of the placement. Asynchronous learning activities also provide opportunities for reflective learning (Farrel et al. 2018) in addition to the reflective dialogue in synchronous peer meetings and supervision. Alongside the completion of the project related tasks, students are supported to follow their curiosities (within the broad scope of ecosocial work) and in doing so further develop their skills for life-long learning (Hase and Blaschke 2022). Students are encouraged to develop their self-knowledge in relation to their strengths and needs in a remote online learning environment. The variety of online resources (for example, literature, podcasts, livestreams, and videos), project tasks, and local in-person engagement seek to assist students in maintaining balance in their day and is congruent with the variety suggested as required to promote engagement in online learning and achieve the desired learning outcomes (Davis et al. 2018).

To transform the social work profession, social work education must foster perspective transformation which entails critiquing dominant perspectives and considering alternatives, with the process of transformation often being "slow and gradual" (Gray and Coates 2015, p. 505). The duration of social work field placements allows for an immersive experience enabling an engagement with these concepts that is difficult to gain in other learning contexts, or mainstream social work employment contexts. Students are encouraged to consider how the new ecosocial perspectives, values, knowledges, and skills gained can be integrated into their emerging professional practice frameworks and embedded in their professional identity. The online project-based ecosocial work placements coupled with the use of Freirean ecopedagogy allow students and field educators to step outside

the confines generated by the neoliberal service delivery context and craft placement experiences, accompanied by the requisite critical supervision (Saxton et al. 2024), that foster transformative learning.

The post-industrial separation of humans from the natural environment is now deeply embedded within societal and professional structures and discourses and as such, is rendered invisible (Boetto 2018; Zapf 2009). Thus, the consciousness-raising embedded in Freirean ecopedagogy is an essential element to the transformation of the profession. A level of discomfort is required for transformational growth (Saxton et al. 2024) and this is often experienced as students (and field educators) come to recognize the extent of the internalization of anthropocentrism and the consequences ecologically and socially. Dominant modernist, linear approaches to environmentalism (Gray and Coates 2015) are challenged by the dialogical approach employed and the fostering of critical thinking that uncovers the myriad of complex, power-laden, and cyclical relationships between local and global actions and consequences. Recognition of the use and abuse of power locally and globally provides another pivotal learning experience.

The creating of a safe, collaborative approach to learning through the virtual student research/project teams supported by critical supervision is consistent with the development of intentional communities of practice found by Saxton et al. (2024) to enhance the student experience and outcomes of virtual learning. In addition, building a learning community is essential to assist students in overcoming some of the challenges to online learning experienced when managing study, work, family commitments, and other potential challenges such as first in family (Davis et al. 2018).

Student relationships are developed through the regular synchronous contact between students which is scaffolded by the field educator, and synchronous and asynchronous collaborative activities. This develops a strong social presence amongst the student group as well as with the field educator. The use of student teams and collaborative work promotes the development of online interpersonal communication (Lomas et al. 2022) and teamwork skills (Farrel et al. 2018) and aligns with what is considered good practice in online teaching (Bentley et al. 2015; Farrel et al. 2018; Jun et al. 2021). Building engagement in online learning environments is noted to take longer than in traditional face-to-face environments (Farrel et al. 2018) and the field educator invests time daily in assisting to nurture this engagement in the early weeks of the placement. The Freirean dialogical approach also assists in building this relationship. It is also suggested in the online learning literature that a sense of connection and social presence with the educator can help alleviate student anxiety (Farrel et al. 2018) which may be a risk with such autonomous and alternative placement formats.

Freirean pedagogy builds and develops the students' ability and awareness of their own agency in learning and does not rely on the educator providing the content for consumption (DeWaard and Roberts 2021). While some content is available to students via the Microsoft Teams site, the primary learning is driven by the project topic that the students independently research. These topics are authentically drawn from the interests and needs of the host agency, enabling students to contribute their learnings to the work of the not-for-profit environmental sector and in doing so, enact ecosocial work. The use of authentic projects is also congruent with the research regarding effective online teaching practices (Jun et al. 2021).

There are significant challenges experienced by many students in maintaining an income and meeting carer commitments whilst committing to 500 h of placement (Gair and Baglow 2017) and remote online placements can offer a level of flexibility that assists in addressing these (Morley and Clarke 2020). There is, however, the need to also balance this with the development of healthy boundaries which is noted as a particular challenge in remote online learning (Jun et al. 2021). In an effort to enact an ethic of care towards the students themselves, the placements seek to be as flexible as possible regarding hours of work and days of attendance, whilst also supporting and problem-solving with students to allow boundaries to be drawn and wellbeing prioritized.

Finally, the placements seek to instill a sense of agency and hope within students regarding their personal and professional capacity to contribute to ecological and social justice. "... Critical pedagogy is a politics of hope." It is a radical hope where "new possibilities for change become immanently present when oppressive relations are named, and interpersonal relations based in dialogue are initiated" (Cowden et al. 2020, p. 128).

## 5. Limitations and Learnings

As with other online project-based field education experiences, online ecosocial work placements offer a novel approach to field education that may be challenging for students, educators, and other providers of field education to see as 'real' social work experiences. This requires active promotion of such approaches to field education to ensure students are open to these placement opportunities and have their learnings and contributions validated by others in the profession. Nurturing the partnerships between TESWG, the universities, and the host agencies has proven essential in ensuring placement vacancies are filled each year and the work of the placements continued.

A key learning from early placements was the importance of creating student teams, preferably with at least three members, to aid in reducing isolation and to foster the collaborative environment. To achieve this, teams are usually composed of students from at least two universities and are often a mix of first and second placements, and bachelor and master (post-qualifying) degrees. This has proven an advantage, with students sharing different perspectives and experiences gained through their studies. Coupled with the diversity of students' life experiences, professional backgrounds, and cultural identities, this provides for rich group supervision conversations.

The relational, collaborative, and dialogical processes used in a Freirean ecopedagogical approach requires substantial investment in time on the field educator's behalf. This can be a barrier to finding willing field education supervisors, especially when it is voluntary. There is the potential with this approach, however, for transformational learning to occur for the field educator as well as the student, which is an aspect worthy of further exploration and promotion. The experiences of students and field educators and the longer-term impacts on social work praxis are yet to be formally evaluated. Such research would provide valuable insights into how to further strengthen these field education placements and their potential contribution to transforming the profession.

## 6. Conclusions

TESWG has sought to progress ecosocial work practice and pedagogy through purposeful facilitation of remote online project placements since semester two, 2020. To achieve this, TESWG has developed mutually beneficial partnerships with local health and environmental not-for-profit organizations. These partnerships have ensured that students engage in authentic projects that further the work of the environmental sector whilst simultaneously progressing ecosocial learning and praxis.

The use of digitally facilitated asynchronous and synchronous resources, activities, and communication allows for geographically dispersed students juggling multiple commitments to engage in relational, collective learning and interact with agencies and disciplines that have not traditionally been engaged in social work education. Boetto's (2017) transformational ecosocial model provides a framework for the areas of learning and development and maintains the focus on the holistic transformation of the self and the social work profession more broadly. Freirean ecopedagogy shares this transformational purpose, using teaching methods that promote the 'de-distancing' of humans from Earth (Misiaszek 2023). The use of Freirean ecopedagogy in the remote online project placements provides opportunities for transformational learning through reflection and action, relational dialogue, problem-posing, and critical consciousness-raising.

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