CASE STUDY

Co-creating a simulation with students as active partners: A social work experience

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ABSTRACT

This case study presents a students-as-partners (SaP) approach to field education in social work. In particular, it describes the co-creation of a simulation-based learning experience co created and delivered by faculty, staff and two students—a student who experiences disability-related barriers and a theatre student. It explores the principles inherent in a student as partners philosophy as well as a universal design approach were used to co-create the simulation scenarios. The study examines the application of a student as partners approach and universal design for learning (UDL) principles in the development of simulation scenarios, both of which emphasize inclusivity, collaboration, and engagement. The case study also highlights how a collaborative, inclusive approach to simulation-based learning enhances student engagement and learning outcomes, particularly for students experiencing barriers. The experience demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary partnerships and offers insights for supporting students with disabilities in social work education, suggesting future directions for the integration of SaP and UDL in academic settings.

KEYWORDS

student as partners, social work, co-creation, simulation-based learning, students experiencing barriers in field education

A central component of social work education is "to integrate theory and practice, enabling students to further develop, refine, and enhance the values, knowledge, and skills reflective of the core learning objectives" (Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE], 2021, p. 12). Social work field education is defined as a signature pedagogy (CASWE, 2021), as it equips social work students with cognitive understanding (habits of the mind), practical skills (habits of the hand), and emotional engagement (habits of the heart)—all of which are essential for a holistic approach to social work practice (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021). In the context of signature pedagogies, there is a cyclical interweaving of theoretical concepts from the classroom into the practical demonstration of professional competencies by students in real-world settings. Subsequently, the observed behaviours in the field are brought back to the classroom for

reflection and processing, creating a reciprocal learning process conducive to professional advancement (Shulman, 2005). The transition to practice requires students to synthesize their learning and constantly engage in reflective processes, by which they contemplate personal and professional challenges that emerge during field education (Boitel & Fromm, 2014).

Simulation-based learning in social work education is increasingly used to facilitate students' transition from theory to practice (Asakura et al., 2023; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019; Sollars & Xenakis, 2021; Tortorelli et al., 2021). However, despite its importance, little is explored on the topic of practicum (Jefferies et al., 2024; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017; Tortorelli et al., 2021;), particularly for students with disability-related barriers (Reeser, 1992; White et al., 2014). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the benefits of co-creating simulation experiences with students experiencing disability-related barriers, offering valuable insights for scholars in various disciplines.

A students-as-partners (SaP) approach was used to co-create two simulation experiences focused on social work skills and on addressing the social work student's unique needs. Students, staff, and faculty worked collaboratively to achieve the team's goal (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). The term "co-creation of the curriculum" is employed to denote activities in which students and staff engage in collaborative efforts, negotiating curriculum decisions to enhance the overall quality of learning and teaching (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). This case study explores the experience of our team that included two faculty members, one who was responsible for overseeing the social work field education program and one with expertise in disability studies, two university staff with expertise in simulations and working with students with disabilities and two students, a social work student involved in the field education course and a theatre student hired as our partner to co-create the simulations. The team aims to share the steps in planning and implementing simulation experiences using the SaP approach and our reflections on how they impacted teaching and learning.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This case study takes place at MacEwan University in Alberta., Canada. MacEwan University is an undergraduate university focused on student centred learning. The School of Social Work emphasizes the interconnectedness of social, environmental, and economic issues within the larger community primarily through field education experiences. In the Bachelor of Social students complete field education courses where students are placed within community organizations for a cumulative 700 hours of field education, constituting a cornerstone for achieving predefined learning outcomes related to social work practice.

In the spring of 2023, a cross-department collaboration began in response to impediments arising from disability-related barriers, hindering a student's complete engagement in a field practicum. The collaborative team comprised a student from social work, another from theatre, social work and human services instructors, and contributors from the Access and Disability Resources (ADR) office and Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Following a series of meetings to determine the most efficacious approach to address the student's needs and the course learning outcomes, we resolved to apply a simulation-based learning experience before the social work student would attend their practicum.

Cultivating a learning experience with students as partners aligns with the foundational values of social work, particularly social justice, by creating fair access and equitable and inclusive learning opportunities. It is possible to break down the traditional power dynamics in higher education, empower students who may have historically been marginalized, and give students voices in curriculum development, teaching practices, and institutional decision-making (Healey et al., 2016). This alignment resonates with the university's strategic vision, wherein undergraduate learning assumes a central role in everything we do (MacEwan University, 2021).

UNFOLDING THE EXPERIENCE

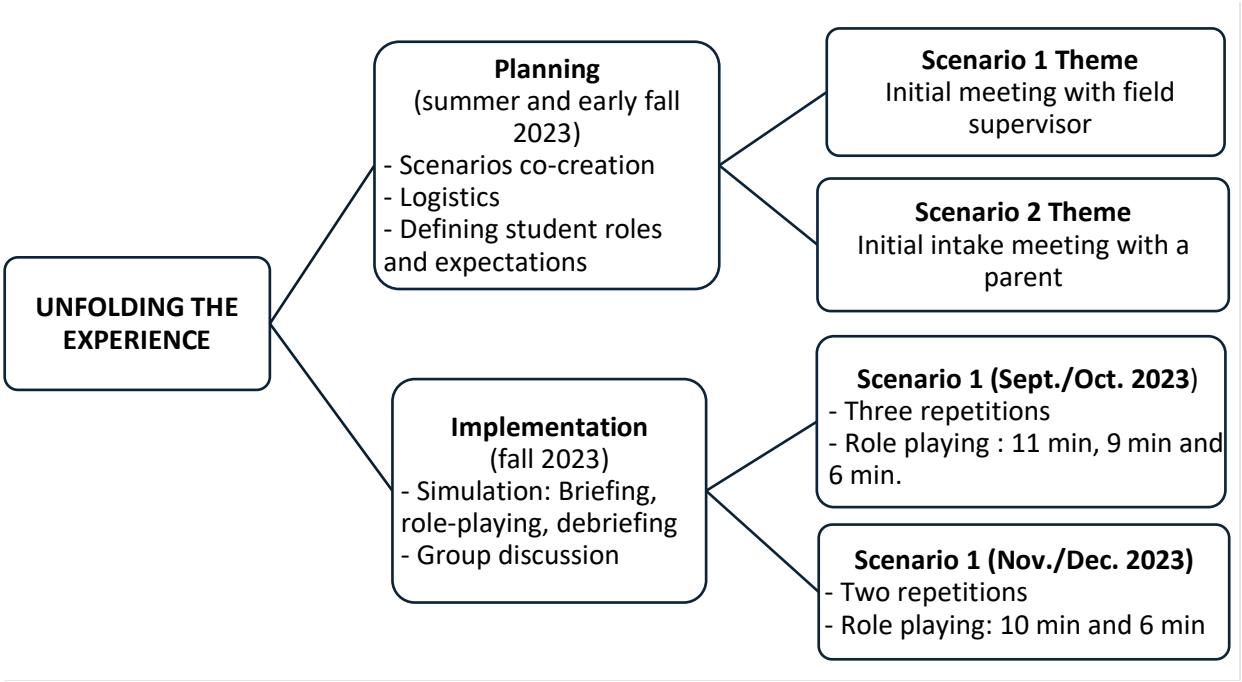
A participatory action research method was used. It is defined as a collaborative, iterative, and open-ended approach which prioritizes the expertise of those directly experiencing a social issue (Kemmis et al., 2014). In participatory action research, a collaborative experience happens between the community with their issue and researchers who contribute with resources and networks (Cornish et al., 2023). It offers a framework for students as partners in academia, empowering them to become active agents in shaping their educational experiences. The participatory action approach enriches the research process by incorporating diverse perspectives and lived experiences, thereby nurturing a culture of inclusivity and equity within educational institutions. The students emerge as co-creators of knowledge, contributing meaningfully to scholarship (Kemmis et al., 2014). In our practice, the participatory action research framework enabled us to initiate and conduct the entire simulation experience according to two primary guidelines: the social work student's academic needs for success and the theatre student's expertise in creating realistic simulations. By the time the experience happened, the social work student was aiming to complete his practicum for the second time.

Student demographics

The social work student was an English-speaking white male between the ages of 18–25, recently diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. He is in his 3rd year of a 4-year degree, which includes two practicums. The theatre student, an English-speaking white male between the ages of 18–25, was in his last year of a 4-year degree, which included experiences with many rehearsals and a public performance at the end of the courses. The social work and human service instructors and contributors from the ADR and CTL offices were all white women, three Canadians and one immigrant with more than 10 years in their respective fields.

The co-creation simulation experience was unfolded in different stages, as represented in the following flowchart.

Figure 1. Flowchart of how the team unfolded the co-creation simulation experience



Planning

The planning process was guided by universal design for learning (UDL) principles and the students-as-partners (SaP) framework, which both share a commitment to enhancing the educational experience by promoting inclusivity, collaboration, and engagement. UDL recognizes that learner variability is the norm and seeks to address this by offering flexible learning pathways. The students-as-partners (SaP) framework advocates for meaningful collaboration between students and educators in the design, delivery, and evaluation of educational experiences. The relationship between UDL and SaP lies in their shared goals of inclusivity, empowerment, and learner-centeredness. When applied together, they can create learning environments that support diverse student needs and actively involve students in shaping their own learning experiences.

At the first meeting, the team, which includes the students, set the expectation that the students would guide the simulation co-creation to reposition the power dynamics between the faculty members and students (Matthews, 2017). An extensive exchange of ideas and perspectives enriched the team experience in a tentative way to transcend the historical power dynamics (Anderson et al., 2023). The student for whom the simulation was designed actively participated in the entire process. The team designed the simulations based on his self-assessment of his learning needs in conjunction with feedback from his earlier field practicum experiences and the practicum learning outcomes. The self-assessment process was scaffolded to support the student in meaningfully engaging in reflection about the disability-related barriers present when engaging with the learning outcomes. The theatre student supported the team with his experience writing scripts and by offering suggestions for each scenario.

How scenarios were developed

Over several weeks during the summer and early fall of 2023, we designed two scenarios, each to be repeated in up to three sessions (Zulkosky et al., 2021). The first scenario focused on the development of foundational learning outcomes required for generalist social work practice, such as verbal and nonverbal communication skills. The second scenario focused on completing an initial intake form during a meeting with a "client" based on the prospective practicum organization's processes. After defining the learning outcomes for the scenarios, the team met to discuss the logistics that would allow the simulations to run smoothly, including (a) the time spent on each simulation, (b) possible topics that would be explored in a simulation, and (c) room layout/any physical needs to run the simulation (i.e., a computer, notepad, desks, information sheet).

Implementation

The implementation took place from September to December 2023. The simulations were designed to follow briefing, role-playing, and debriefing as laid out by the International Nursing Association for Clinical Simulation and Learning (INACSL) Standards Committee (Watts et al., 2021) to provide the student with a learning experience near the real world of his future professional role.

Before every role play, the BSW field education practicum coordinator/assistant professor conducted a briefing. The social work student was reminded of the scenario objectives, and the professor conducted a refresher on theoretical social work content and communication skills essential for the scenarios. The theatre student used a loose script outlining the character he was playing, the circumstances of the situation, and some key scripting considerations he could mention if needed. Both participants were informed that it was a confidential simulated experience in which the safety of all individuals was a priority. The professor explained the resources available in the space and the maximum time for each scenario. In the first briefing, filming was brought up as a tool that could be used to debrief the simulation. The proper protocol was established for these recordings, ensuring confidentiality and privacy were maintained.

The first scenario was role played three times from September to October 2023. The scenario goals were (a) discussing the student's role in the practicum, (b) defining the practicum supervisor's responsibilities and supervision style, and (c) discussing the student's needs and expectations in 15 minutes. In the first session, the student spent 11 minutes before reaching the goals, 9 minutes in the second session, and 6 minutes in the last role play to achieve these goals.

We engaged in a debrief discussion once the simulation had concluded (Eppich & Cheng, 2015). The following step was that the social work field education coordinator and the student watched the video identifying examples when the student met the scenario goals, this strength based approach provided the student with the experiences to build upon. This process helped the student reflect on relevant knowledge and skills during the simulation and how to evolve certain skills. These debriefs played an important role as they often provided the student with goals and objectives to achieve in the next repetition of the scenario. The theatre student often reflected on his impression by sharing what the character was feeling or experiencing during the role-playing.

At the end of the debriefing, the students, social work faculty, and educational developer reflected on what should be changed for the next repetition. The educational developer was

responsible for making notes, which were summarized at the end of each simulation and confirmed with the team members present. Examples of reflections included finding strategies to mitigate the effect of students already knowing each other and identifying skills that the social work student demonstrated and what they can build on to improve their knowledge and skills.

The second scenario surrounded a phone call from a parent seeking support from a community organization (the practicum organization); the maximum length was to be 20 minutes. The learning outcome related to the scenario was to apply basic foundational knowledge and skills required for generalist social work practices. The student aimed to demonstrate empathy, active listening, paraphrasing, and resource sharing. It was enacted two times between November and December 2023. In the second role play, the social work student needed less time to reach the learning outcome, reducing his time from 10 to 6 minutes. Additionally, the complexity of the second scenario was increased, requiring the student to build on the foundational social work skills acquired in the first scenario. The reflection process included all team members during the second endeavour. The same process of collecting data, summary, and confirmation was applied.

RESULTS

While the aim was for the social work student to meet the learning outcomes (Table 1), there were benefits for both students involved in the co creation of and implementation of the simulations, as both students gained valuable experience and skill development. Concerning the social work student experience, reviewing the role-playing and debriefing sessions showed that the time to complete the scenario decreased from the first to the third experience. The social work student shared his reflections about the experience of the learning activity:

> This collaborative experience allowed me to be included in everything. It was good, and I felt valued. I believe the outcome was more positive because I was involved. I am more prepared for my practicum than last year. My involvement in this work made me more aware of how students with disabilities can be supported in university, and the skills and learning can hopefully help other students, too.

After completing the practicum, the social work student reflected on how the simulation helped him to feel more prepared:

> The main thing that the simulations helped me with was being prepared for calls with parents and being prepared for unexpected questions. It allowed me to make mistakes in the simulations and learn from them before the practicum happened. I knew what to expect, and if I made a mistake in the simulation, it allowed me to learn from it rather than make a mistake in the practicum. Similar to how you make a mistake in a training shift at a job instead of a mistake while doing the job. It allowed me to get comfortable with unexpected things.

Table 1. Correlation between the social work field practicum learning outcomes and student-reported outcomes from the simulation

SOCIAL WORK FIELD PRACTICUM LEARNING OUTCOMES	STUDENT-REPORTED OUTCOMES FROM THE SIMULATION
Demonstrate a beginning knowledge of how social work theory is applied in practise with individuals, families, groups and communities.	Transferred knowledge/concepts from the classroom to the practicum setting.
Apply basic foundational knowledge and skills required for generalist social work practice. Identify social work practice which is based upon sound ethical decision making.	Practiced skills in a scenario similar to the real world.
Identify areas for personal and professional growth.	Reviewing work on-camera allowed him to self-critique and receive suggestions from faculty.
Demonstrate the ability to take personal responsibility for developing as a professional social worker.	Received and incorporated feedback from actors (as patients) on interpersonal skills, such as empathy, support, and communication.

The theatre student saw the opportunity to collaborate on creating inclusive learning experiences and applying theatre training skills, which enriched the simulation learning experience with authenticity (Caravaca-Morera et al., 2024). Benefits for the theatre student included:

- Working on roles that require intense emotional commitment and depth.
- Collaborating with content experts to research clients and portray them realistically.
- Acting on-camera and self-assessing their acting skills.
- Blending realism with improvisation to play the given circumstances within a scenario framework.
- Feedback from social work student regarding the authenticity of his acting.

The theatre student also described the interactive process that supported the simulation, providing an insight into from initial meeting until the final simulation:

> I feel so lucky to have been part of this project from the initial meeting to the final simulation. In our early meetings, when we were just beginning to explore what these simulations might look like, I was given the opportunity to express my thoughts and was invited to contribute to many aspects of the project, including the shaping of the script used in the simulations. I was able to use my knowledge of script analysis.

This dynamic yet secure setting enables students to refine professional skills, offering a safe space for learning from mistakes without jeopardizing real community members. Moreover, utilizing theatre students promotes accessible simulation education and fosters interdisciplinary collaboration between healthcare and theatre.

REFLECTIONS ON THE APPROACH

These results prove the benefits of simulation co-creation as a form of student-staff partnership in learning and teaching (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). In light of SaP, each participant contributed a distinct voice and held a significant stake in the development of the experience (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018).

Social work students may experience distress during their practicum impacted by various factors such as student-instructor, student-field supervisor, and student-staff relationships and organizational environment (Bogo, 2021; Litvack et al., 2010; Maidment & Crisp, 2011; Tam et al., 2018). In our experience, compared to the previous year, the sentiment of unpreparedness felt by the social work student transformed into a sense of preparation and awareness for the practicum, indicating that the simulations enhanced the connection between theoretical learning and practical skills application and readiness for the upcoming real-world experience.

Scenario repetition enhances students' self-confidence, knowledge, competence, and critical thinking (Al Gharib et al., 2020; Zulkosky et al., 2021), particularly when they remain in the same role (Zulkosky et al., 2021). Repetitive simulation experiences for students encountering disability barriers can favour social justice by effectively mitigating educational inequalities and fostering equitable learning environments. Such interventions afford students the opportunity to address their unique learning needs and realize their maximum academic potential.

The simulation experience empowered students to partner with professionals to explore different learning activities, opening the door for other faculty members to explore this approach. Having the student as partners in the co-creation can encourage the collaborative development of the curriculum and foster an open discourse on effective and meaningful learning and teaching practices. It redistributes power dynamics, providing students with increased opportunities and added responsibilities to participate actively in curriculum decision-making (Bovill et al., 2016).

Future considerations

The success of this cross-departmental SaP collaboration and the positive outcomes observed in the simulation-based learning experience provide valuable insights for future directions in social work education and interdisciplinary partnerships. Considerations from this study can guide

further exploration and implementation, such as changing scenarios depending on outcomes, use for larger practicum classes, and learning outcomes for both student partners.

The flexibility to adapt and modify scenarios based on observed outcomes is crucial. Continuous feedback and reflection should inform the adjustments to ensure alignment with the learning objectives and the individual needs of the students involved. This dynamic approach can enhance the effectiveness of simulation-based learning experiences and cater to the evolving needs of students throughout their educational journey.

Expanding the application of simulation-based learning to a larger practicum class or seminar setting can further enrich the educational experience for a broader student population. We believe that more students would take advantage of an individualized and supportive learning environment, encouraging peer learning and promoting a shared understanding of diverse perspectives and experiences in social work practice. To overcome potential barriers to expanding the simulation co-creation experience, the team needs to find ways of selecting specific learning outcomes to benefit the entire cohort with different demands. One way of doing this would be organizing the students into groups based on their major learning needs.

Exploring further collaboration with theatre programs can extend the interdisciplinary partnership and enhance the authenticity and richness of simulation scenarios. Theatre students can contribute their expertise in role playing and character development, adding depth and realism to the simulations. Aligning the learning outcomes of both programs can create synergistic learning experiences that benefit students from both disciplines, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and shared learning objectives.

CONCLUSION

Our simulation experience in social work education was innovative and supported individualized learning for students with disability-related barriers to field education. This experience evidenced that an alliance between academic departments and students can yield substantial value to student learning. The students felt like legitimate partners in the collaborative experience, creating a sense of value, autonomy, and positive outcomes.

The lesson from our experience of co-creating simulation-based experiences can be extended to other programs to support students requiring additional learning assistance. Our experience can increase awareness of how to make learning more accessible. Other academic departments can understand the relevance of collaborating with other units to create capacity and support student learning.

This cross-department team will monitor student progress during the practicum, which is essential in gauging the effectiveness of simulation experiences. Additionally, to amplify the dissemination of valuable experiences, efforts have been made to encourage the student partners to share their insights with the academic and student community. In the meantime, this initiative aims to inspire faculty members across various disciplines to explore the potential benefits of incorporating simulation in their respective programs. By incorporating these student-led initiatives into the curriculum, the social work program seeks to enhance practical skills and foster a deeper understanding of real-world scenarios. Finally, the intention is to extend this collaborative learning beyond academic boundaries by sharing these experiences with other professionals, fostering a broader community of practice.

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