Community development and social work teaching and learning in a time of global interruption

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Abstract In a rapidly changing and unpredictable global environment, there is new impetus to draw on community development approaches in the face of complex practice challenges that include the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As social work and community development educators in Ireland and Australia, the question becomes how can we respond in a time of major ‘disruption’ where there are both opportunities and constraints? This paper settles on this pause and uncertainty to seek new approaches to prepare social work students for changing conditions. Long-standing questions re-surface in relation to social, economic, political and environmental structures and conditions that are located in a neoliberal framework. The paper explores challenges and opportunities facing educators and social work students through a core set of principles—critical, relational and connected—that underpin our community development pedagogy. Within these themes, we explore teaching practices which seek to create a ‘Community of Learners’, generate a process of collaborative critical inquiry, engage students in reflective praxis enriched by contemporary theory and research, and foster a deep, connected and adaptive perspective on global and local issues. This stimulates creativity and meets the need for critical and adaptable practitioners capable of practical action through this period of disruption and crises of governance, climate and technologies of the future.

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Introduction

In the contemporary socio-geopolitical environment, there is impetus to innovate and adapt pedagogical practices. Social work educators are seeking to empower a new generation of practitioners who are adaptable to changing conditions and circumstances and are critical thinkers, capable of practical action in disrupted times. This paper focuses on social work knowledge, practice and pedagogies to explore some new spaces, and on opportunities as well as constraints in preparing social work students for the contemporary practice context. The link between social justice and environmental and community sustainability is a central theme and connects to developments in social work education internationally (Beltrán, Hacker and Begun, 2016; Papadopoulos, 2019; Naranjo, 2020; Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi, 2021). We are in an era of geopolitics and currently in the midst of new challenges as we face the repercussions of a global pandemic and an impending climate emergency. Community development writers urge immediate action to respond to these challenges drawing on a community development approach (Ife, 2016; Kenny, 2020; Meade, 2020). Social work academics and educators have long argued that social workers play a crucial role in working with groups and communities using fundamental practice principles of community empowerment and social and environmental justice (Forde and Lynch, 2014, 2015; Bay, 2020).

In the contemporary 'disrupted' conditions, deep concerns such as crises of governance, a changing climate and the use of technologies come to the fore, and these are developing areas for practice, education and research in both social work and community development. As university educators who teach community development on social work programmes in Irish and Australian universities, we draw on these critical themes and our own pedagogical practices developed over many years to advance conversations about community development teaching and learning in the contemporary context. In this paper, we focus on principles and pedagogies that can enable us to attune social work education to this changing practice context. We examine a set of principles that underpins our community development pedagogy and demonstrate how we seek to generate a process of collaborative critical inquiry, engage students in reflective praxis enriched by contemporary theory and research, and facilitate 'going deeper' on global and local issues in a connected and adaptive way. Grounding social work teaching and learning in values such as social justice and human rights, critical thinking and working collectively advances dynamic, innovative forms of practice that can respond to community and societal issues.

The broader context of our paper is a contemporary one: the global pandemic. While we acknowledge the complexity of the global, regional

and local forces that underlie and propel significant practice challenges, our focus is to seek opportunities in this COVID-19 ‘interruption’ to prepare social work students for changing conditions and revisit some long-standing questions that re-surface in these times. Attuning social work education to current conditions begins with key themes that are emerging in contemporary international scholarship around a changing climate, governance (the dominant neoliberal discourse and authoritarian regimes/conflict and intrusions), technologies for the future, the critical circumstances of a global pandemic and the interconnections between these themes. This scholarship articulates urgent and substantial challenges facing both social work and community development (Ife, 2016; Fong *et al.*, 2018; Kenny, 2020).

A ‘perfect storm’: 21st century social work

As we enter a new decade, social work faces a perfect storm of challenges. These wide-ranging issues—socio-economic, political, cultural, environmental, educational and technological—have been discussed at some length in the social work and wider literature. In this section, we seek to identify key aspects of these issues and discuss the social work response.

Socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental challenges

Since the turn of the millennium the world has experienced a set of crises that have threatened social and economic stability. The [World Economic Forum \(2021\)](#) lists the highest impact risks of the next decade as infectious diseases, climate action failure and other environmental risks; livelihood crises, debt crises; weapons of mass destruction and IT infrastructure breakdown. Additional and related challenges include growing gender and racial inequality ([Elliott, 2021](#)).

Social work writers have identified the significance of these entrenched problems for social work policy and practice. [Healy \(2017\)](#) posits that ‘the profession’s engagement in global processes and policy dialogs . . . is essential’ and suggests that social workers should engage both as individuals and via organizations such as the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). [Maglajlic and Ioakimidis \(2020, p. 1941\)](#) stress that the ‘need for social workers who are confident advocates for human rights and social change is becoming even more important’.

In a provocative piece, [Maylea \(2020\)](#) isolates a number of key problems to which social work has to face up. These include historical ‘stains’ (p. 9) from social work’s paternalistic past and a failure to meet ‘contemporary

challenges' (p. 11), including climate change and justice, racism and gender inequality. Maylea calls social work 'paternalistic' due to its historical involvement in racial oppression of First Nations people in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada, and perpetuation of exclusionary treatment of these communities. He argues that 'by staying very still and moving very slowly' (p. 11) social work has failed to make a significant contribution to addressing contemporary challenges like climate change and race and gender inequality. Maylea's ideas have provoked a spirited response in defence of social work (see [Garrett, 2021](#)), and we seek to contest this framing as 'failures' and recast them as future challenges for the profession.

Educational and technological challenges

In an educational context, social work authors note some adverse impacts of neoliberalism on social work university education in Australia and internationally. Neoliberal approaches to education promote individual success in an economy that rewards competition, self-interest and self-reliance, undermining the critical and emancipatory vision of higher education ([Evans, 2020](#)). In Australia, these impacts are evident through the alignment of universities with the national government's performance-based funding model ([Tehan, 2019](#)) and the pursuit of 'employability', 'job-ready graduates' and 'career and future focused' teaching.

Technology is playing a growing role in the social and caring professions ([Salman, 2018](#)). There are emerging concerns about the commercialization of education and the rapid growth of a profitable 'Ed-tech' industry in the COVID-19 situation due to the expeditious transition to online education ([Williamson *et al.*, 2020](#)). These authors highlight the need for a stronger critique and research into 'pandemic pedagogy' so that changes to teaching and learning systems can be located within 'the broader political economy of the COVID pandemic, its antecedents and long-term consequences' (p. 108). Most notably, these changes have occurred in the context of pre-existing digital 'disparities' in access, use and knowledge of information and communication technologies ([Rigney, 2017](#)).

We now turn to examine social work's responses to changing conditions.

Social work responses

[Maylea's \(2020\)](#) assertion that social work has done little to address the long-standing and intractable problems that confront it and that 'the profession of social work has continued to focus on parochial issues of the last century and avoiding the reckoning demanded by this one' (2020, p. 2) is problematic in two principal ways. Firstly, it fails to acknowledge long-standing radical, critical and eco-critical ([Närhi and Matthies, 2016](#); [Maglajlic and Ioakimidis,](#)

2020) perspectives in social work theory and practice that seek to effect social and environmental justice outcomes. Further, Maylea's statement is contradicted by the development within the last 10 years of a number of significant strategies that seek to position social work at the centre of responses to several of the key challenges facing the globe. Let us examine the evidence.

The wicked problems of growing socio-economic inequality and climate change led to the establishment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, but also prompted a response from national and international social work organizations. Prior to the development of the SDGs, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) had already established the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2012). The Global Agenda, which was re-imagined in 2020, seeks to promote global social justice based on social work and social development values. In March 2021, the IFSW and the United Nations Research on Social Development agency (UNRISD) called for a new global social contract based on 'solidarity, social cohesion and the need to work together' (IFSW, 2021, online). Some national social work associations have identified concomitant sets of agendas for the profession. National responses include the 12 'grand challenges' for social work developed by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) (Fong *et al.*, 2018). The challenges span individual and family issues such as promotion of the healthy development of young people and eradication of domestic violence; social and community concerns such as the eradication of social isolation, ending homelessness and creating social responses to a changing environment; and societal challenges including reducing extreme economic inequality and achievement of equal opportunity and justice. National developments elsewhere include the launch in February 2021 of the Irish Association of Social Workers' (IASW) inaugural Social Work Anti-Racism Strategic Plan.

The Global Agenda emphasizes the need for social work practice grounded in the values of social and economic equality, dignity and worth of peoples, environmental sustainability and strengthening human relationships (Truell and Jones, 2015). These values are both universal and holistic and underscore the need for social work ideas and practice that cross local and national boundaries and address issues in a global context. This positioning of social work at the nexus of the local and global is emphasized by Healy (2017), Garrett (2021) and Lombard and Viviers (2020) who point out that social work needs to consider 'its local-global obligation and commitment to people and the planet, towards policy advocacy, development and implementation' (p. 2268).

Rather than privileging macro over micro, the Global Agenda points to the symbiosis between the two. Local actions can have global impact, the experiences of groups or communities in one part of the world can have resonance elsewhere, and many key issues exceed national borders. One of the impacts of this 'glocal' perspective is the deprivileging of previously dominant Western ideas and the indigenization of knowledge and practices. Another is that to be effective social work needs to operate on a glocal basis, taking both local and global circumstances into account and seeking to influence policy in both spheres.

The idea of the 'connectedness' of the local and global leads us to a consideration of the importance of human relationships, which are fundamental to building and maintaining sustainable connections. A theme common to the Global Agenda and much social work literature is the need to place human relationships at the centre of action. As Garrett expresses 'we live in an interconnected world that can only be economically and relationally sustained if we are collectively committed to socialist ethics and values rooted in interdependency, mutual caring and solidarity' (2021, p. 15).

Developing human relationships refers to a number of activities. In the first place, it refers to the interpersonal relationships between workers and service users and between workers themselves. Gillinson (2017) writes about 'incentivising a new balance between risk management and relational support' (no page number) and advocates a focus on preventative, empathetic and creative approaches. Equally important is the reality that meaningful human relationships facilitate social work advocacy and intervention in the policy process. Healy (2017) reminds us that social workers can 'be the bridge' (p. 13) between the individuals and groups with whom they work and decision-makers. In order to occupy this bridge social workers need to engage with communities 'in the initial (re)claiming and (re)framing of problems, rather than during the later policy making stages' (Barretti, 2019, p. 39). Social workers' engagement with policy-making processes needs to be built from the bottom up and not from the top down. It is through connecting with and understanding services users' experiences that social workers can identify and sketch paths to policy engagement and influence, not through identifying policy as something objective, separate and 'other'. This crucial aspect of practice has become apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic when evidence suggests that social and community workers across the globe have worked to develop systems, networks and supports for communities in crisis, prompting the suggestion that social work is 'returning to its community-based roots' (Truell, 2020, online).

Turning now to the educational context, the changing teaching and learning environment has led to a call to reinvigorate critical pedagogy (with its deep roots in critical theory) 'to counter the subordination of social work

education and practice to market demands and public austerity' (Morley *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). As community development educators, we have rich, critical pedagogical traditions to draw on in shaping teaching and learning practices.

Critical, relational and connected: Towards a community development pedagogy

A number of key themes emerge from social work's 'perfect storm' and the contemporary debates about social work and community development. For us, the central question is: what can community development knowledge and ideas bring to these enduring and new challenges facing social work? The contemporary context grounds and advances our thinking as educators, and we now move to discuss a core set of principles and ideas that underpin our community development teaching and learning in social work programs. Firstly, we draw on the groundwork of theorists who articulate critical and eco-critical perspectives in contemporary social work theory and practice. Secondly, we recognize the importance of relational practices with individuals, groups and communities to build purposeful relationships for social change that are mutual and interdependent. Thirdly, we recognize the solidarity that emerges from the 'connectedness' of the local and global.

A critical pedagogy

Internationally, there is renewed focus on critical pedagogies to 'reinvigorate social work education as an emancipatory practice' (Morley *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). At a meta-theoretical level, we lean towards a critical realist perspective because it is community orientated and encompasses a range of transformative theoretical approaches and practices (Forde and Lynch, 2015). We argue that this perspective broadens the scope of practices for transformative social change. It challenges the polemic of ideology versus practice which supports conditions for a reflective praxis, i.e. the integration of theory, research and practice in social work education. It seeks to uncover oppressive structures and fully recognizes the role of critical thinking and purposeful actions to tackle oppression and activate meaningful change with groups and communities. We align with Brookfield's critical pedagogy which is located in the tradition of critical social theory. This approach demonstrates the clear connections between critical theorizing, analysis and critical reflection in teaching and learning which emphasizes human agency and underpins actions for social change (Brookfield, 2005; see Morley, 2020).

Connecting theory, analysis and critical reflection

The role of critical reflection to deconstruct power in practice is crucial and influences our pedagogy. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Bay's (2020) analysis elucidates the place of critical reflection as part of critical situated thinking that can be taught to students to raise their awareness of self and develop others' reference points or frameworks. This is a means to identify dominant discourses in meaning-making, disrupt assumptions, rethink categories of 'identity' and reflect on the ways power is operating (Bay, 2020). Drawing on Arendt, Bay makes the point that 'no-one is tied to their identity in order to be included in politics; rather, political action asks us not "what" we are but "who" we are' (p. 448) in participating and acting collectively. It is a pedagogy that promotes situated critical thinking and political action as a consequence. An example of this is the 'Black Lives Matter' movement where people of all ethnic and racial identities join together to protest injustice in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota (Fisher, 2020).

For us, this critical positioning informs the importance of creating a 'Community of Learners' in the classroom where we work with students to co-construct safe and supported learning spaces. We draw on the idea of co-creating 'brave spaces' which Arao and Clemens (2013) describe as 'intentional places for activating curiosity, critical thinking and pursue "challenging dialogues" about power, oppression, privilege and justice' (p. 149) within the learning environment. Our approach also seeks to empower students to challenge injustices such as racism and sexism in their future practices as social workers. Writing in the context of neoliberal policies and structures in India, Yvas (2021) argues that pedagogies that reignite political analysis are urgently needed to respond to issues facing communities such as poverty, internal displacement and migration. Likewise, we seek to demonstrate how critical and intellectual engagement in the classroom can lead to practical actions for social change (Forde and Lynch, 2015). Methodologies such as political story telling underpinned by a critical pedagogy offer tools for educators (see Bay, 2020; Marlowe and Chubb, 2021).

Methodological tools in the classroom

Here we offer some examples of how we apply these methodologies in the classroom. For example, social work students in one community development course at The University of Queensland use political storytelling drawing on 'Poverty finds a Voice', which is a woman's participatory theatre project in Melbourne in Australia (Landvogt, 2012). The story is about a group of women who perform a series of plays to an audience of bankers

and policy makers about living on low incomes, and of 'not having enough money to live with dignity' (p. 55). The story draws on Paulo Freire's *critical pedagogy* (1972) and Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) to identify and collectively analyse how change to transform relationships of power and oppression can occur. In a group presentation assignment, one social work student group brought this story to life. They engaged the class in an outdoor 'theatre' experience drawing on some of their own experiences of financial struggle in their performance inviting class participation as 'spect-actors' to engage in a critical and collaborative problem-solving process.

Another example of the use of political and cultural methodologies in learning about community development is demonstrated by a group of social work students who engaged in a walking conversation ('Defying Boundaries Walk') which is the walk from Boundary Street in Spring Hill to Boundary Street in West End in Brisbane, Queensland that marks the former borders enforced by policies of exclusion towards Aboriginal Australians that existed until 1967. The students posed the question 'what can we do to contribute to reconciliation on an everyday level?' They aimed to educate and break down barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They walked, conversed with passers-by and captured key words and ideas on a communing board. Touraine's work on social activism reinforces this idea of human agency where civil society actors engage in social change practices which may be cultural rather than overtly political (see Ottman and Noble, 2020). With a focus on climate change, social work students at University College Cork engaged in critical reflection by walking through their neighbourhoods and answering a series of pre-determined questions about what they saw there, in environmental, social and economic terms. In class the students shared their reflections in small groups and explored the implications of climate change for social work practice across the three domains.

We are aware of a geopolitical turn in social work education and the need for urgent responses to a changing climate and the adverse and ongoing devastating impacts of climate change on human well-being and livelihoods in countries throughout the world. These approaches recognize the interconnections between social work and the natural environment in definitions and agendas (see IFSW, 2012; Truell and Jones, 2015) and integrate critical awareness, knowledge and impetus to pursue social and environmental action into social work education. As educators, we are interested in current theoretical developments in social work that seek shifts at the ontological level and are beginning to re-shape fundamental practice understandings. These approaches include Heather Boetto's *transformative ecosocial work model* (2017) and Indigenist ontologies (Martin, 2008) that

are characterized by understandings of the interdependence of humans and the natural world, and community sustainability. We define sustainability in a community development context as working with people at local, regional and global levels to reconnect, restore, repair and regenerate life-sustaining global ecosystems which are vital to support health, well-being, empowerment and the livelihoods of communities (Lynch, 2020). Ecosocial approaches are beginning to influence social work interventions, driven by practitioner awareness and connection to the environment at personal and political levels (Boetto *et al.*, 2020). While actions remain at individual level, this movement foreshadows collective responses to tackle environmental injustices at group, community, structural and policy levels. Aligned with this new emphasis on ecosocial work models and the role of social workers in environmental practices with communities, we incorporate practice scenarios in the classroom. For example, we discuss a scenario where a rural social worker engages with members of the community to explore their deep concerns about changes in the environment. The social worker provides support to a community group formed to research how the biodiversity of their region could be restored (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017). Another contemporary example for use in the classroom is the Australian 'Buy from the Bush' campaign which connects people living in urban and rural communities to support economic sustainability (Buy from the Bush Queensland, 2018). In this way, we aim to pursue a critical pedagogy which draws on contemporary themes and instils collaborative thinking and deep critical inquiry as well as reflective praxis enriched by contemporary research, practice and theory into the social work curriculum.

A relational pedagogy

Processes of collective, critical and reflective analysis can drive practical actions for change. We now move to explicitly recognize the importance of relational practices with individuals, groups and communities to build purposeful relationships for social change that are mutual and interdependent.

Understandings of 'relational'

Our understandings of 'relational' are linked to Samkange's theory of *Ubuntu*, which informs a decolonized pedagogy that resists dominant Western models of education and promotes an African (political) philosophy that is relational: 'we become human through others' (Samkange and Samkange, 1980; Mugumbate, 2020, p. 419). Notably, Ubuntu was the theme of the 2021 World Social Work Day. This idea is expressed more completely as 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti, 1969, p. 106).

The philosophy places value on the principles of collectivity, mutual support and communalism which we seek to reflect in our teaching practice. We also link 'relational' to the Indigenist ontology of 'relatedness' (Martin, 2008) where relatedness does not only refer to people but the relationship between People and Climate, or People and Land and includes accountability within these relationships. Of significance here is that all experiences are tied to relatedness, irrespective of contexts.

We cannot separate the relational and critical so we now move to explore what we term a 'critical-relational' approach. The nexus between the two terms explores how we build purposeful, meaningful and helpful relationships with people, whilst coming from a 'critical' standpoint. Through relational practices and a process of dialogue with groups and communities, trust, mutuality and respect is central to praxis, and oppressive structures and practices in society are critically examined to find more egalitarian, supportive and sustainable alternatives (Freire, 1972; Ledwith, 2011). A critical-relational paradigm insists social workers avoid doing things 'to' community members/citizens, or 'for' them such as when in a service role, but rather works 'with' participants, enabling a journey of community-led support and change. In this regard, social work is a 'bottom-up' practice that is led by the people with whom we are working.

This kind of relational approach is modelled and applied in a university context when drawing on community development approaches. Research reported by Lathouras (2020) sought to investigate if the university context could be a site for developing a sense of 'community' for international students whose well-being, learning outcomes and retention were being compromised by a commodified education system. Using Paulo Freire's (1972) critical consciousness through dialogue approach, students were brought together and exposed to a social learning agenda that enabled them to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and collectively support each other to respond to the issues they were facing. The 2-year action-research project resulted in the creation of a peer support program (called Dialogue Circles) that enabled a community-oriented and inclusive co-learning environment for students in a cross-cultural classroom. The research demonstrated that a university perceived to be more like a 'community' supports students' academic, cultural, emotional and social connectedness needs and translates into positive educational outcomes.

A connected pedagogy

We recognize the solidarity that emerges from in the 'connectedness' of the local and global, and our pedagogy aims to foster student perspectives on local and global issues with an approach that is connected and adaptive.

We support students to be more ‘connected to the world’ and each other as learners and emerging professionals. Here, we link with existing scholarship that positions social work at the nexus of the local and global to expand opportunities for a connected form of practice. We seek to enable students to engage with civil society actors (individuals, groups, communities and organizations) and develop policy responses for social change across local, state, regional and international borders.

Our pedagogy embeds course content that makes significant connection to contemporary or emerging social issues or trends at local and global levels. Ife (2019, p. 9) argues we are living at a time of significant change and multiple crises—ecological, economic, social and political. Globalization and neoliberal ideology have together created a global economy that is inequitable, unsustainable and has created “obscene levels of inequality” (Ife, 2019, p. 9). The current Coronavirus pandemic is a new crisis facing communities and societies, one which is amplifying existing social inequalities (Drane, Vernon and O’Shea, 2020; Kenny, 2020). Moreover, the current context for social work practice, which is ensconced in neoliberalism, is one that emphasizes individualism or individual achievement rather than the social sources of oppression which perpetuate poverty, exclusion and disadvantage (Lathouras, 2016). As social work posits an aim to work for social justice at local and global levels (recognizing these interconnections), it therefore needs to commit to identifying and questioning harmful divisions of unequal power relations (Morley et al., 2014, pp. 2–4).

In relation to the theme of connectedness, using technology for social good is a contemporary challenge. We have discussed the pre-existing digital ‘disparities’ (Rigney, 2017) that have resurfaced during the pandemic for individuals and communities. Working at the meta-level creates opportunities for social workers to forge new alliances, coalitions and networks for broader social change. Information and communication technology (ICT) such as digital media expand spaces for socio-political networking and collective forms of advocacy to respond to issues affecting communities locally, regionally and internationally (see Lynch, 2020). In the classroom, we seek to incorporate examples of social workers undertaking advocacy across international borders on a range of global social issues such as child sex trafficking.

Responding to challenges to connectedness

A contemporary challenge to the principle of connectedness is the widening social and economic disparities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Drane, Vernon and O’Shea, 2020; Kenny, 2020; Meade, 2020). Kenny notes heightened community development activity during the pandemic such

as efforts 'to shore up social connectedness' (p. 1) and renewed value placed on community collaboration and co-operation. However, she also expresses concerns about the immediate shift by community development organizations to a welfare model, that is 'as agents of a "benign" state' (p. 2) and 'othering' through fear and panic directed at people who may pose a threat such as refugees and people experiencing homelessness.

Critical thinking and practice skills can be translated into the university setting and foreground the theme of connectedness. For example, we use The Spiral Model of Community Education (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990) as a pedagogical tool to enhance small group work as a community of learners and to support students' critical thinking skills. This model is used with social work students at the University of the Sunshine Coast to explore contemporary or emerging social issues or trends such as 'Working for Climate Justice'; 'Working for First Nations Justice'; and 'Working for Justice in Welfare and Bureaucratic Contexts'. Contemporary documentaries or fictional movies are used as a 'code' to stimulate dialogue. Freirean 'codes', or what Paulo Freire called 'codification' (1974/2005) are a way to trigger dialogue, supporting emancipatory knowledge development. Any stimulus can be a code—a movie, a poem, a reading, a song, a painting or drawing. An example for the theme of 'Working for First Nations Justice' is the 2019 documentary *In My Blood Runs It Runs*, directed by Maya Newell. It tells the story of an Arrernte/Garrawa boy, Dujun and his family and reveals the challenges Dujun faces both in his school and on the streets of Alice Springs. For the theme of 'Working for Justice in Welfare and Bureaucratic Contexts', the 2016 feature length movie, *I, Daniel Blake*, directed by Ken Loach tells the story of a 59-year-old carpenter who must fight the bureaucracy of the system in order to receive Employment and Support Allowance. Students learn to use The Spiral Model process to develop their own structural analyses about the issues dramatized or presented through the codes, and the deep engagement with the process aims to empower them to use this model with community members in their future work.

Authentic assessment processes

Our community development pedagogy employs authentic assessment processes, thus ensuring that students develop practical skills that they can utilize post-university. Authentic assessment processes ensure students connect theory and practice through presenting them with real-world challenges and standards of performance that professionals typically face in the field. This requires students to demonstrate higher-order thinking and complex problem solving (Koh, 2017). For example, in the community development course at the University of the Sunshine Coast, students undertake

a 'practice review'. Students take a 'first person' stance and write to the community development practitioner/s of a published case study; this helps students to critically reflect on practice with a theory-informed analysis. Another example is an assessment piece called a 'Community Development Process Plan' where students write a plan for a piece of community development work they intend to undertake. Based on the community development theory which takes 'private concerns into public action' (Kelly and Westoby, 2018, p. 90), students identify a personal concern. This could be related to their local neighbourhood or community, or something about the state of the world in general. Using the participatory developmental method (Kelly and Westoby, 2018), they demonstrate their structural analysis of the root causes of the situation and identify with whom they intend to build relationships for collective action. These analyses range from activist type actions such as neighbours banding together to lobby local government for better community infrastructure, to creating their own community infrastructure where none currently exists, such as community gardens or actions to clean up a creek. For other students who develop an analysis about their own sense of 'community' and the impact of declining social capital, their process plan can simply be to connect with their neighbours for a street barbecue or other social event to start the process of building relationships. In many instances, student groups have followed through with these planned activities, supporting the practical action component of the pedagogy.

The power of story: Teaching and learning in a global pandemic

Now we draw on a recent example of critical pedagogy which sought to incorporate the principles of relational practice and connectedness during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the University of the Sunshine Coast, non-traditional social work placements in the form of online student units were set up to provide alternate field education placement opportunities for students. Simultaneously, an action-research project with the placement students as co-researchers was conducted to explore students' learning experiences in student units and how they were developing a social work identity under the new conditions effected by COVID-19. A student unit is defined as a group of supervised students placed at one institution or organization to work collaboratively on a particular task or project. Student units provide students with a network of colleagues through which to engage in collective learning processes (Anand, 2007).

The research employed a collective narrative practice theory called the Double-Story Testimony (Denborough, 2012). Alongside the dominant story of struggle co-exists another story of which the participant may not be con-

scious (Dulwich Centre, 2004). The narrative practice employs a purposeful and contextualized framing of questions which emphasizes one's subjective reality and assists the person to change their viewpoint about the problem or difficulties they have faced (Dulwich Centre, 2004).

The narrative technique enabled the students to relate their own 'first story' of struggle. This included themes about significant stressors during periods of lock-down, and general uncertainty about the virus spreading to communities across the world. More specific stressors included: working from home, responding to home-schooling of their children, loss of income due to loss of work (often in hospitality and tourism industries not allowed to operate during lock-down periods), switching to on-line learning for academic coursework, and increased caring responsibilities of older or extended family members.

The 'second story' elicited significant stories of resistance or sustenance as they responded to their challenges expressed in the 'first story'. Many lessons were learned about how people can cope through times of struggle and themes included the values that students drew from: Hope, Optimism/Positivity, Reciprocity, Gratefulness, Patience, Adaptability and Acceptance. Students were also drawing on critical thinking, especially as so much misinformation about COVID-19 was on social media and which tended to make them feel overwhelmed. They reported that they committed to their own self-care and chose to focus on activities to help sustain their physical, emotional and mental health. They also found a well of support through their cultural or faith communities and drew on faith traditions and other spiritual practices to help get them through this difficult time. Importantly, staying connected to close friends and extended family became vital, especially for international students who were unable to return home with national borders closed. Most significantly, these are stories of connection, cooperation, mutuality and reciprocity despite the COVID-19 circumstances. Employing the biographical double-listening narrative process highlighted how powerful story telling can be when people feel respected and experts in their own lives. It proved its usefulness to elicit stories of resilience during a time of significant challenge, as well as its applicability as a qualitative research tool.

Conclusion

In this paper, we draw on newly emerging as well as enduring challenges for contemporary social work and community development practice in Ireland, Australia and internationally. Dramatically altered practice conditions culminate in what we have described as a 'perfect storm'. We analyse the constellation of factors that intersect to create unpredictable conditions

and acknowledge the complex forces that underlie and propel significant practice challenges for future practitioners in this period of both interruption and disruption.

Our paper draws on critical themes (governance, a changing climate, technology and a global pandemic) and our own pedagogy to advance conversations about community development teaching and learning in the contemporary context. We revisit core principles—critical, relational and connected—that underpin our pedagogies and facilitate us to attune social work education to this challenging practice context. Our examples from the classroom discussed in the paper bring to light a critical pedagogy that engages students in analysis and reflection. However, this is not purely an intellectual exercise, it is a pedagogy that seeks to forge practice understandings and deeply consider what actions are possible in constrained times.

Building on the work of educators before us, and as reflected in this themed section on social work education, our pedagogy aims to reignite analysis, creativity and higher order thinking and learning for practical action in these contemporary conditions. Deepening analysis of the COVID-19 context and critical situated thinking through engaging students in research and praxis strengthens ideas about what is possible and opens up opportunities and avenues previously undiscovered. This provides new confidence, impetus and forward looking future practitioners who can innovate and adapt. Working collectively in the classroom opens up possibilities and supports the development of dynamic and innovative forms of practice alongside groups and communities to respond to the issues that they face in the present context.

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