Standing in Responsibility: Lessons Learned in Developing a Gamified Simulation on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)

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Abstract: What does it take to develop an asynchronous curriculum for social work students, with attention to precision, policy accuracy, and community accountability? We attempt to answer the question by documenting our process of community collaboration and partnership to develop a gamified case study on the Indian Child Welfare Act. The curriculum was developed in one year and is currently being evaluated for efficacy. Lessons learned in the process are consistent with the literature including honoring community timeframes, responsibility, transparency, and openness to change. Future development of similar curricula that incorporates tribal partnerships requires relational accountability with attention to respect and reciprocity.

Keywords: ICWA, Simulation, Community Partnerships, Child Welfare

Introduction

What does it take to develop an asynchronous virtual simulation curriculum for social work students, with attention to precision, policy accuracy, and community accountability? We attempt to answer the question by documenting our process of community collaboration and partnership to develop a gamified case study regarding the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). We begin our manuscript with a brief review of the literature about ICWA, simulation, and community collaboration, followed by a case study of our experience, and conclude with a discussion of lessons learned and reflection.

Literature Review

Social Work and ICWA

There is a long history of the social work profession causing harm to communities of Black, Indigenous, and other Persons of Color (BIPOC) (e.g. Beck, 2019; Halvorsen et al., 2022), including participating in the widespread forced removal of Indigenous children from their homes (Esquao & Strega, 2015). Due to the egregious removal practices specifically targeting Native children, the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), a federal law, was passed in 1978 to keep Native children with Native families. ICWA is a vital piece of Indigenous peoples sovereignty and imperative to the survival of Indigenous families (Brown, 2020), and for these reasons it is important social workers are familiar and child welfare social workers are skilled in understanding and applying its policies and procedures.

ICWA sets forth a number of requirements that must be met in child custody proceedings involving American Indian and Alaska Native children including: a) Tribes must be given notice of all child custody proceedings involving a child who is a member or eligible for membership in a tribe; b) Tribes must be given the opportunity to intervene in these proceedings; c) Tribes must be given preference in placement of Indian children; and d) States must make e active efforts to prevent the removal of Indian children from their families and tribes (The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978). Even today, over four decades later, American Indian and Alaska Native children are four times more likely to be removed by state child welfare systems compared to their non-Native counterparts (NICWA, 2022). Thus, in spite of advances achieved since 1978, widespread non-compliance with ICWA has persisted due to inadequate training, misinterpretations of the law, and lack of data (California ICWA Compliance Task Force, 2016). The state of California is at the epicenter of ICWA appeals, with more cases than any other state (California ICWA Compliance Task Force, 2017). In 2019, over 43% of appeals involving ICWA were due to missteps with inquiry and notice (California Department of Social Services, 2019). The California Dependency Online Guide (2015) reported that in the last six months of 2015, ICWA cases accounted for roughly 30% of all juvenile dependency appeals with approximately 85% of those being related to inquiry and notice. Consequently, California is also a state at the cutting edge of innovation and reform (California ICWA Compliance Task Force, 2017) due to the many lessons learned in the appeals process. For example, California has a vested interest in ensuring that ICWA is implemented effectively as it has the largest Native American population of any state in the country (U.S. Census, 2020).

In spite of some of the darker history of social work with relation to child welfare, there are myriad examples of attempts to ameliorate the harms caused through policy advocacy, practice and education reform. Social work faculty are at the cutting edge of innovation for developing curriculum (Washburn & Zhou, 2018) and other interventions that respond to community gaps and needs. Community collaboration, specifically with tribes/tribal partners, is immeasurably important when developing curriculum (e.g. Shegog et al., 2017) for policy compliance such as with the ICWA.

Simulation

The ongoing impact of the global pandemic has demonstrated that now more than ever there is an urgent and salient need to provide empirically and practice-driven virtual learning opportunities. The use of virtual reality and computer simulations are gaining ground and popularity in social work as viable teaching methods, particularly in preparation for internship and/or work experiences (Wilson et al., 2013). While virtual simulations are becoming increasingly common in the social sciences, a dearth of opportunities have been developed specifically tailored to rural practice (Hutter, & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2019). Integrating this level of technology into the education of our future rural social work workforce has the potential of enhancing learning outcomes and most importantly, the potential for improving client and community organization care (NASW, 2017). This form of education requires participants to engage and draw on intellectual, social and emotional knowledge to navigate this learning tool. Thus, gamified training amplifies real experiences by exposing students to unexpected and realistic situations. Whether education is offered online, Hy-flex, or in person, the one thing that is certain is the need to offer a variety of learning opportunities which simultaneously and proactively prevent any harm from occurring with our clients (Dodds et. al, 2018; Papouli, 2014).

Technology

H5P is a user-friendly online authoring tool for creating interactive learning activities. It is an open-source software already available at our University and is easily integrated into the learning management system and classrooms. H5P software is also mobile device friendly, allowing access to content and feedback on smartphones and tablets. The branching scenario content type within the H5P software enables users to choose their own adventure by answering a series of questions and making choices about the next step. By providing H5P virtual simulation learning opportunities, students have the opportunity to engage in real life scenarios which impact rural and Indigenous populations, as well as engage in the use of technology. Integrating technology with case scenarios into social work education has the potential to create safe, insightful, and engaging opportunities for students to explore possible mistakes in the field, and to test best practice principles.

The instructional strategies and activities utilized in this learning module are designed to promote engagement, active learning, and skill development. Stolovitch and Keeps' (2020) Five-Step Model was used to guide the planning and design of this lesson. The lesson is introduced with a description of the learning objectives and the rationale for successfully completing the objectives. The activities are designed to support the learning objectives, while the learning assessments provide students with confirming or corrective feedback. The branching scenario concludes with a summary of key concepts and common mistakes to reinforce the appropriate scenario responses. Within the gamified simulation reflective prompts are integrated. The debriefing process is critical to social work education. Students participate in a synchronous debriefing discussion with their instructor and peers as well as submit an individual summative reflection journal for the final assessment.

This gamified scenario is designed to help students experience the realities of field work while decreasing potential harm to actual clients. Virtual simulation can also enhance learning outcomes, and most importantly augment the potential for improving client and community care when the student is in the field. Finally, while virtual simulations are becoming increasingly common in the social sciences, a dearth of opportunities have been developed specifically tailored to rural practice (Hutter & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2019). This project sought to address this gap.

Community Collaboration

Collaboration with Indigenous and Tribal communities is a necessary element to preserving Indigenous families, offers a strengths-based approach to decision making and reform, and honors tribal sovereignty and autonomy (Haight et al., 2020). Through collaborative efforts with tribes on projects and training, organizations have the opportunity to ensure needs are met while reducing racial disparities in a way that honors their tribes sovereign rights, culture, and the needs of those they represent. Therefore, when creating gamified simulation trainings pertaining to child welfare in relation to indigenous children, it is imperative to "make strategic decisions to achieve Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) compliance and address AI/AN dis-proportionality through collaboration with tribes and urban Indian communities" (Lidot et al., 2012). Continued collaboration and evaluation with tribes in regard to curriculum fabrication can produce a sense of balance and facilitate the alleviation of bias in training tools. Through collaborative teaming we step away from Western only thinking to explore more relational solutions to bridging the disparity gap that continues to separate indigenous children from their families.

Case Study
Context

Cal Poly Humboldt, located in northern California, enrolls a diverse student population with just under 200 BASW and MSW students combined, who are studying to be social workers with rural and Indigenous communities. With a robust state-wide internship program in social service agencies, our Department has continued to see growth in enrollment in spite of the tumultuous economic and pandemic climate. The Department collaborates with local tribal social service directors and with the county Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) on a regular basis. Our Native Wellness Council, which meets every semester, consists of Department faculty/staff, tribal social service directors, Department alumni, and other rural/tribal service providers. The council regularly expresses the importance of our students being capable of working through the multiple nuances of rural practice, including how to work with and improve the lives of Native American families, children, and communities. This feedback loop offers our Department an opportunity to continue to revitalize our curriculum and community relations, and be held accountable for strengths and concerns related to students in internships and their competency acquisition following graduation.

In 2018, the county DHHS stipulated to a judgment agreeing to corrective actions aimed at reforming the County's handling of reports of child abuse and/or neglect citing the disproportionate number of Native American Children represented in foster care and other child welfare services (Argomaniz & Jones, 2019). While there are several entities addressing ICWA and the Indian Child Protection and Family Violence Prevention Act (25 U.S.C. Sec 201 et seq.), the Department's Native Wellness Council has continually expressed a need for graduates of our program to expand their knowledge around compliance, sovereignty, and family preservation rights. Thus, the goals for our project were to increase and improve social work student rural practice skills, specific to ICWA and the multiple nuances of working and serving in a community with a large population of Native American children in the child welfare system. Through implementation of the virtual simulation, students can continue to learn and practice relational approaches to their work including navigating difficult conversations with Indigenous families and relevant service providers without potentially causing harm. Specifically, we intended to address a relevant application of discussing ICWA with families in practice, facilitate problem-solving around common misunderstanding around ICWA ("I do not want the tribe involved" or "their father is a tribal member but they are not connected to the tribe"), and to reinforce learning around the important legal elements of ICWA. In the long term, we anticipate a positive impact for our Native American families and communities, particularly those involved in the child welfare system.

Credibility Statements

Acknowledging the credibility of the named authors is a form of triangulation and enhancing rigor in the research, and is a responsible and valuable first step for researchers to set aside previous experiences through the use of epoche (bracketing) (Moustakas, 1994) in order to uncover and examine new phenomenon.

Author 1
I have been working for social justice since the early 2000s when I began my first social work endeavor advocating for policy reform in school systems. I earned my BASW, MSW, and PhD in social work and have been committed to high impact teaching practices in the social work curriculum. As a queer identified woman of settler ancestry, advocacy for vulnerable populations is at the forefront of my work. This curriculum and gamified simulation project was an honor and privilege to work on and I continue to be humbled by our community partnerships, local tribal social service providers, and students who are at the front of it all, doing the hard work to improve the health and lives of our community. I stand in responsibility and relationship with my tribal partnerships and to this work. I acknowledge my place of privilege, and recognize this project as an opportunity to expand social work education from a gold standard perspective (i.e. ICWA being the gold standard of child welfare).

Author 2
Author 2 has a diverse social work experience working in rural communities including working as a social worker in the child welfare system. I have been teaching at the University for 15 years and developing a child welfare curriculum for over a decade. A doctorate in social work was earned in 2019 with an emphasis in

teaching social work practice. As a cis-gendered woman with European anestrical history, I am humbled by the collaboration and support local tribes have provided to me and the department in improving our curriculum and professional relationships and opportunities for our students. As a faculty member I have been an active member of the Native Wellness Council. This collaborative relationship, along with the department's commitment to decolonizing social work education and practice, has informed my curriculum. I remain committed to improving my tribal relationships and my knowledge of how to better serve Indigenous students, local Indigenous communities, and social work practice with Indigenous nations.

Author 3

Author 3 has 20 years of professional experience working in the field of higher education, providing services to a diverse population. Author 3 holds a Master of Arts in Education with a concentration in US Education in a Global Context, a Master of Science in Higher Education Administration, and is currently completing a Master of Science in Instructional Science and Technology. For the past nine years, Author 3 has worked as an instructional designer, utilizing technology to develop curriculum across a wide-range of academic disciplines. I understand the importance of creating a classroom that is respectful of learning preferences and inspiring to all students, but I also know that mentorship with faculty is a crucial component in promoting pedagogical diversity and equity in education. I acknowledge that I am a white, cis-gendered woman contributing to the development of curriculum that may impact local Indigenous communities. I am honored and humbled by the privilege extended to me in working on this project.

Process

Through a community-engaged approach, we began our journey by receiving an internal grant in the amount of $21,225 that allowed us to compensate our community and tribal partners and contractors for their time and shared knowledge. As with any community-based project, engaging with the community from start to finish is an iterative process and will continue as we work to improve our curriculum. In our process, we recognized our responsibility to work to dismantle oppression and educate our students to improve their anti-racist, abolitionist, and anti-oppressive practice, particularly in child welfare. With the knowledge that child welfare continues to be a system that has an overrepresentation of Indigenous and BIPOC children who enter protective custody, we intended to begin our process by first seeking guidance from our Tribal social service providers and ICWA case managers. After receiving IRB approval, we held listening circles with local Tribal social service providers and a state-wide tribal families coalition to identify what is working and what is not within ICWA cases in the county. During our meetings, it was important for us to establish our credibility and intentions, particularly as white settler ancestry educators with graduate degrees working to promote Native American family preservation rights. We were very clear that this work could not be done without our collaborative partnerships, particularly the knowledge shared from Tribal partners who are doing the groundwork on behalf of Tribes and Indigenous families and communities.

Following the listening circles, we developed a case study that addressed the needs specifically identified by the participants including directly addressing *Tribal Sovereignty*, demonstrating various forms of *Inquiry* in child welfare cases, and addressing the concept of *Noticing* in a home visit. Additionally there was an emphasis on partnership with the county and the Tribes, policy interpretation and compliance concerns, and addressing the nuances of rural social work practice.

After our case study was developed, we drafted a screenplay using the branching scenario concept where a student could "choose their own adventure" within the simulation. The screenplay was then shared with the same community partners who helped identify the concerns and strengths, and they provided additional feedback. Following this process, we worked with a local casting director and hired actors alongside a cinematographer, sound engineer, and an instructional designer. In the model, there are pathways that are more "ideal" and then others that are less ideal or incorrect and lead the student back to make another/better choice in order to move forward in the simulation. We specifically asked permission to utilize the Native American Student resource center on campus as the filming location so that we could, in part, honor the Indigenous student experience in a unique tribute to the dedicated resources on campus. To be in the space, where there were photos of Indigenous graduates on the wall from decades and more recent past, provided valuable context for the actors and guests who entered the space during our filming process.

Following sound and film edits, the instructional designer placed film clips into the H5P software and developed the branching scenario. We worked collaboratively to identify issues and gaps with the acting (i.e. missing lines, inappropriate body language inconsistent with social work practice). To remedy any potential issues we developed learning pop-ups for students to write down and reflect how they might address specific questions and issues differently than the social worker did on film.

Feedback loop

Our feedback loop offered multiple opportunities from the start to the current form of the curriculum. In these regularly scheduled collaborative meetings we gathered information and then responded to everything from identifying key partners, hiring actors and training them briefly on child welfare practice, ensuring good video sound quality with a professional sound engineer, adjusting specific content within the filmed segments, adding in relevant resources, and piloting the curriculum with expert panel reviews.

Partway through the project, following the filming, we realized that while we included the name of a local tribe due to their best practice model for collaborating with child welfare, we failed to ask their permission to use their name. This became clear to us after bringing an initial draft of the simulation to our tribal partners (not the specific tribe). We immediately moved into action and reached out to the tribe in question and met with a director who both expressed concern for our misstep in this process and also appreciated our attempt to increase compliance with ICWA through this curriculum. This misstep was by far the most valuable lesson learned in our

process. All the while attempting to seek feedback and guidance from tribal partners, we still made mistakes. Of utmost importance for us was and is to stand in responsibility for our actions. To respect the proper process in seeking approval meant that our project timeline needed to shift until the appropriate permissions were obtained. Additional lessons learned in the process included opportunities for university researchers to further promote the development of future university-community collaborations. With these lessons in mind we identified accountability, respect, reciprocity, and adherence to community (not university) timelines.

Implications/Next Steps

Consistent with the literature on collaboration with tribal partners, it is imperative to honor community time-frames (see for example, Straits et al., 2012) while balancing accountability to grant funding. For example, university researchers stayed flexible with dates and availability to meet with tribal partners, particularly during traditional ceremonial times (such as summer). They also met with funding partners to outline the missteps and sought a no-cost extension to allow time for the support and approval of the work. Partnerships with the local tribes and tribal partners helped to ensure that the curriculum was accurate and up-to-date, ensured that the curriculum was relevant to the needs of local Native American children and families, and helped to build trust and relationships between social work faculty and tribes.

We believe the ICWA simulation will offer a safe space to practice and gain proficiency in leading social work conversations in the field with a local context in mind. The initial virtual scenario is intended to help students experience the realities of child welfare work while decreasing potential harm to actual clients.

Partnerships with the local tribes and tribal partners helped to ensure that the curriculum was accurate and up-to-date, ensured that the curriculum was relevant to the needs of local Native American children and families, and helped to build trust and relationships between social work faculty and tribes.

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