# Emotion: The 'e' in engagement in online distance education in social work

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## Abstract

Many social-work students enrolled in a particular Australian university approach the pre-practicum practice skills unit with dread, due to the required role-play exercises. Online distance students could be seen to be challenged even further in their preparation for practicum, due to a perception that they are learning practice skills on their own. A survey of online distance education social-work students who had completed the practice skills course in 2012 showed that a number struggled to remain engaged, and felt isolated. A constructivist pedagogy, involving peer- and self-assessment of practice role plays, was therefore trialled in both 2012 and 2013, alongside the weekly videos produced by the lecturer. The aim was to improve online distance students' opportunity and motivation to practice the required skills before their practicum. Learning management system (LMS) usage data for students in the 2013 cohort showed an increase in the number of times students accessed online readings and used interactive technology. Interestingly, while both cohorts expressed a positive experience in relation to their learning in the end-of-trimester student evaluation survey, and despite both groups being asked the same questions, only the 2013 cohort spontaneously articulated the content of what they actually learnt. These findings suggest that the ongoing peer interaction generated by the new pedagogy resulted in a deeper, enduring learning experience. In addition, data showed that online distance students in the 2013 cohort experienced a feeling of being emotionally connected with the unit and the teaching staff. It is posited that a combination of established video-based content delivery and ongoing formative peer- and self-assessment reduced isolation and alienation and, as a result, had a multi-pronged positive effect on the learning process.

**Keywords:** formative assessment; constructivist pedagogy; peer interaction; social presence; social work; online blended learning; ODL engagement

## Introduction

This paper reports on a section of a study that commenced in late 2012 to investigate the efficacy of online blended learning for social-work students in an undergraduate degree. The study was initiated as a result of a commitment by the authors to ensure the achievement and relevance of learning outcomes for online distance students, and a pervading scepticism on the part of the accrediting body (the Australian Association of Social Workers) about the ability of online learning to prepare students for practice. In the new Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS), 20 days of face-to-face content must be built into all accredited social-work degrees (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2012).

Online, synchronous, and simulation learning modes are not perceived to be meeting the learning objectives in practice skills units (AASW, 2012), the presumption being that these can only be learnt face to face.

In the Bachelor of Social Work, an average of 67% of students are enrolled in online distance mode each year, generally due to their geographic location and other commitments which include paid work and caring responsibilities. At the present time, online students in this course have their learning experience supplemented with face-to-face learning in two 2-day workshops during the degree, making theirs a blended online experience. In a study of a first-year cohort in 2011, 31.8% of students had enrolled under the Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS) due to their mature age, financial disadvantage, or rural and remote situation (Goldingay et al., 2014). Research demonstrates that the ability to study online is inherently inclusive because it enables those who otherwise would be excluded due to such circumstances to engage in higher education (Anderson & Simpson, 2012; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2012). The researchers of the current study anticipated that the increased AASW face-to-face stipulations would lead to greater difficulties in participation—and so attrition and exclusion from education—for a large proportion of potential and current students.

The teaching methods on which this paper reports were underpinned by a constructivist pedagogy, which holds that learning environments need to include a variety of instruction strategies including tasks that have personal relevance for learners (Reeves & Reeves, 2008). Drawing on a sub-set of the data gathered, the focus of this paper is on *how* students experienced the new pedagogy, which comprised small-group formative peer- and self-assessment in an online medium in a pre-practicum practice skills unit. It also reports how students experienced the weekly video 'selfies' uploaded to YouTube by the lecturer. Student experience of social presence as a result of using these tools will be a particular focus for this paper. This focus is important because professional socialisation and professional interaction are key outcomes of professional social-work education.

## Social presence and emotion in distance education

Online learning has traditionally been described as isolating (Robinson, 2012) and students can feel lonely and neglected (Nagel & Kotze, 2010). Isolation is naturally a concern for a discipline such as social work, which puts social interaction at its centre. Such emotions are also likely to impede learning, since learning is more than a cognitive process—it involves the whole person (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). Christie et al. (2008) observed that there is a need to consider the "emotional interaction between the student and the learning environment of the university" (p. 568), in order to overcome a feeling of anonymity.

While it has been observed that emotion is key to the learning experience (McMillan, 2013), the emotional dimensions of learning have not been extensively covered in the literature (Christie et al., 2008). However, a number of writers have discussed the role of student peer relationships in fostering a sense of emotional wellbeing. For example, Shin (2003) notes that student peer relationships have a significant influence on motivation and affect (mood). Because peer relationships influence mood and emotions, it follows that it is important to set up a learning environment that encourages peer-to-peer interaction.

A move to thinking about the role of emotional interaction in student engagement invites a discussion of social and psychological presence in education and, indeed, social work. Rettie notes that a psychological connection is established when users feel they have access to the other person's affect and intentions, and when they believe the other person is "there" (as cited in La Mendola, 2010, p. 111). Online work that creates social presence "translates virtual activities into impressions of 'real' people" (Dixson, 2010, p. 2–3). Thus, while not confined to face-to-face

interaction, psychological or social presence is created only within relationships, or by relating to or being involved with others.

The key to social presence in education, therefore, is for students to feel connected to each other and to their lecturers well as to the content being studied. Educators deploy various strategies to generate feelings of connectedness in both online and face-to-face settings. For instance, group work helps students to develop trust, respect, and belonging (Dixson, 2010; La Mendola, 2010) because they relate, interact, and are involved with each other. Strategies that require students to complete cumulative tasks that are linked to assessment have been used to ensure sustained engagement in online blended social-work education (Maple, Jarrott, & Kuyini, 2013).

## Peer-formative assessment

A number of scholars around the world have been trialling and evaluating innovations such as peer- and self-assessment (e.g., Hodgeson & Pang, 2012; Kearney, 2013; McGarr & Clifford, 2013) and formative assessment that has a participation grade (Hodgeson & Pang, 2012). The benefits of formative assessment for students include increased understanding about what is required in assessment, and a higher level of learning responsibility and ownership of their learning (Hodgeson & Pang, 2012). In addition, the ability to evaluate the quality of one's own work as well as that of one's colleagues is a key professional skill (McGarr & Clifford, 2013) that is also likely to contribute to effective ongoing professional development after graduation. Nagel & Kotze (2010) observed that peer assessment (which in their study was double-blind and summative) improved the "teaching, cognitive and social presences in the class" (p. 45).

The current study adds to this literature, as it reports on how students interacted with an online formative peer- and self-assessment pedagogy that was trialled with a group of second-year social-work students. The current study also compares the difference in learning and engagement observed in the 2013 cohort, when 20% of the overall grade was awarded for participation in the formative peer- and self-assessment. This group was also guided by their lecturer in group bonding and had clear peer- and self-assessment guidelines.

## The interactive intervention

Social-work students learn the values, skills, ethical principles, and behaviour required to practice as social workers with diverse groups of people (Goldingay, 2012). These attributes are fundamental to social-work education. Not only do students have to 'know' things, they need to be able to operationalise procedural knowledge and show they can self-reflect on their performance of procedural skills (Bogo et al., 2013; Goldingay, 2012). It is important for students to attain and/or develop these self-reflection skills so that, as professional social workers, they can evaluate their own practice (Fook, 2012). Such ability does not occur by reading and reciting knowledge. Rather, it develops from practising—from being exposed to a number of practice situations and role-playing how to use the knowledge they gain to work in these situations.

Given these essential features of social-work education, and AASW's stipulation (of 20 days face-to-face content), the first author was prompted to seek ways to ensure online students achieved the necessary interactive experience, social presence and socialisation into the profession in the practice skills unit immediately preceding practicum. Across the two trimesters analysed here, students were randomly assigned to online groups of approximately four students. In 2012, students were *invited* to interact and get feedback from their peers, and to evaluate their own mini role-play practice videos. Students in the cohort of 2013 were *required* to make contact with their group members, and to engage in some online group cohesion exercises using a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous technology. These exercises included sharing photos

and answering a set of questions about themselves (such as what made them decide to study social work, what their hobbies and interests are, and so on).They also posted three videos of their own role-play practice onto their group site to gain feedback from the other members of their group.

Students were then required to write a reflection on their own practice and, with the help of a guided feedback sheet, to provide feedback on the videos posted by their group members (see Appendix). An Illuminate Live (e-Live) room was also made available to each group to meet for informal discussion.

Because they needed to provide a number of role-play videos of themselves and a number of sets of feedback for their team mates before the end of the trimester, students had to engage in the online medium to complete the course requirements. A grade value of 20% was allocated, with 20/20 awarded if students met these requirements, and 0/20 awarded if students did not complete the exercises by the end of the trimester. As well as having access to the online interface, students received print materials and digital resources, including a case-study DVD and a CD of an interview with a practising social worker.

## Video connection with the students

As well as initiating the online groups, the lecturer produced a weekly video 'selfie' that covered unit content, administration, and encouragement for students. Such encouragement was designed to support motivation and engagement. The video was then uploaded to YouTube and an 'unlisted' link placed on the LMS for online students in both the 2012 and the 2013 cohorts' access. The videos were interactive in that, at various points in the video, students were encouraged to press 'pause', engage in an activity relevant to the topic with a neighbour, friend, or family member, and then come back to the video for further discussion. The video included lecturer's vignettes to illustrate the complexity of practice settings and to help students visualise how theories may be applied in practice.

This new way of delivering content resulted from the lecturer's belief that better social presence and emotional connection to the unit's teaching staff could be achieved if students could see the facial expressions and the 'selfhood' of the lecturer. It was thought this it would be more engaging than a narrated PowerPoint or recordings of the on-campus lectures, which were the standard ways of delivering content to online students at the time. Listening to a recording of what happened on campus may inadvertently place online students in a passive observer position, like a fly on the wall. Such passivity is not in keeping with a constructivist view of learning, which holds that students need to be actively engaged in order to learn effectively (Reeves & Reeves, 2008). Making the weekly video also communicated to online students that their learning needs and contexts had been specifically considered, since the video was designed just for them and included content that was relevant to those studying interstate, or even inter-country.

As mentioned earlier, the decision to combine a number of instructional methods (including lecturer video 'selfies', visual resources and vignettes, and formative peer- and self-assessment) was based on the notion that social presence is key to effective learning, and social presence must be experienced with both peers and teaching staff. In keeping with the constructivist approach, using multiple teaching methods that had personal relevance for the learners was seen as the most effective approach to engage students in multiple dimensions, including the emotional. The next section of this paper will detail the process for evaluating the effectiveness of this approach for student learning and engagement.

# Study methodology

Data collection took place during 2012 and 2013. Multiple data sources were used to capture facets of the students' experience. These included new data (online survey and phone interviews with students) and pre-existing data. Ethical approval was obtained for the online survey, the interviews, and the use of pre-existing student evaluation survey results to capture the views and experiences of a wider group of students across both years. A similar method of using formal course evaluations was used by Okech et al. (2012), who also investigated students' experience of online teaching technologies. Exemption from ethical review was obtained for use of non-identifiable statistics downloaded from the LMS, Desire to Learn (D2L).

Students who had completed their first 2 years of study while enrolled in off-campus mode were surveyed after their first practicum which occurred in the first half of Year 3. They were asked about their experience of learning online and if, in hindsight, they felt they were adequately prepared for practicum as a result of their off-campus study. In addition to this, statistics of both the 2012 and 2013 cohorts were downloaded from D2L. These statistics showed the number of times students accessed key online technologies such as e-Live, e-readings, and online teaching videos and lectures.

To find out if the methods employed in the course were optimising the level of engagement needed for deep learning, we used the online survey to present students with a range of types of interaction, and asked them how frequently they experienced these interactions in online study. The first four types of interaction represented various phases of e-learning and engagement (from low level to high level). The suggestion is that that "deeper level learning, knowledge construction and development is occurring in the higher level types of interaction" (Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005, p. 764). "Stimulating discussion", the fifth option, is regarded as a central mechanism for learning, particularly in an online environment (Okech et al., 2012, p. 125). We analysed the open-ended responses in the phone interviews, the online survey, and the student evaluation survey to assess whether students expressed feelings of being connected to the unit, to each other, and to their lecturer.

## Sample

The online survey sample (of the students who completed the practice skills unit in 2012) consisted of ten0 students (eight female and two male), who described themselves as Anglo-Australian. English was the primary language spoken at home for all but one student. Six of the ten volunteered to be interviewed. All had experienced face-to-face learning in another higher education learning institution and three of the ten had prior online learning experience. As a result, three stated they felt very competent, three stated they were not at all competent, and the remainder stated that they were either slightly or somewhat competent with online learning. In one study, it was noted that students' confidence in their own ability did not necessarily match the grade they received for the course (Lawrence & Abel, 2013, p. 769), suggesting that confidence and competence are different.

Of the 52 course completions, 20 were by students in the off-campus cohort (38.46%). In 2013, however, of 56 course completions, 28 students were studying off-campus (50%), so there was a higher proportion of students studying off-campus during 2013. Data was collected with Survey Monkey, and statistics tables were generated from this program. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse the interview and qualitative survey data, and we generated tables to display the quantitative data.

# Findings

Participants in the online survey reported a number of reasons for choosing online study, including geographical location (six students), working commitments (five), parenting or other caring commitments (three), time commitments (one), and lack of transport (one). One stated a preference for the online environment for learning because they did not enjoy face-to-face classroom learning due to a previous negative experience. There were plenty of positives cited about online study, including independence, freedom, and working at their own pace. Students commented that they would be unable to study if the off-campus option was not offered, "[It] allows me to fit my life around study, it is essentially allowing me to improve my life". Students also mentioned that off-campus study had assisted them to up-skill in key technologies that are also required in the workplace, "As a mature age student it's opened up the computer world to me, and I utilise the computer for all things in my case management role at work".

Despite these compelling reasons to study online, the online survey results showed that types and frequency of interaction with peers was not weighted towards the high-level interactions that best promote deep learning. Only four out of eight students in the 2012 cohort had exchanged information and helped each other to understand material every week, while two out of eight engaged in stimulating discussion every week. Three out of eight reported they engaged in stimulating discussion each fortnight, and initiated debates fortnightly. A large proportion (five out of eight) reported they never challenged each other, and three out of eight reported they never exchanged information or initiated debates. In addition, eight out of ten students in the 2012 survey group reported that they felt isolated at times, and eight out of eight reported that loss of face-to-face contact was a disadvantage of taking an online course and that they experienced confusion about what was required. Importantly, seven out of eight reported difficulty in developing a relationship with the lecturer. There therefore appeared to be a significant level of disengagement with the course materials and technologies. One student survey response expressed regret that they had not engaged in the (optional) formative peer- and self-reflective feedback process that the lecturer encouraged:

> I didn't feel totally prepared. Apart from the weekend workshop I had no role-play experience, [lecturer's name] had encouraged us to send in role-plays but I felt too nervous about that so I didn't. (I don't know if many people did.) When I was on placement I wished I had. I felt like a fish out of water on placement. I had the theory (well sort of) but not the confidence. (Survey response)

The online formative peer- and self-assessment did not carry any grading or other incentive in 2012, and it was observed that very few, if any, students participated in the interactive formative assessment groups set up by the lecturer. An interview participant echoed a feeling of lack of preparedness for placement as a result of not having undergone the scenarios on offer in the online space:

> I had a horrible experience [on placement]<laughs> So again, maybe doing group workshops or scenarios to really nut out all the difficult things that could happen on placement. (Interview response)

That the students felt isolated and were not engaged in the online technologies available was a concern. It was also concerning that students did not feel they were adequately prepared for practicum. As mentioned earlier, the lack of use of the online technologies by this 2012 cohort therefore prompted the lecturer to further develop the online group space and to introduce a clear formative peer- and self-assessment process that was designed to improve students' skills, confidence, and interactions.

## Online participation results

This section of the results compares student activity in the online medium across the different cohorts in the different years (see Table 1 below). In 2013, when the guided, graded, formative peer- and self-assessment process was implemented, there was a considerable difference in the number of times some online resources were accessed. For example, only 38% of the total student cohort that completed the unit actually accessed the online readings in 2012, whereas 61% of the student cohort accessed online readings in 2013. (It should be noted that both cohorts also had access to print copies of the readings.) E-Live, a synchronous online interactive tool that enables students to meet in a virtual space in real time, was accessed by 41% in 2013, whereas only 27% of students used it in 2012. This difference may reflect the fact that there was a larger cohort of off-campus students in 2013, and the percentages should be read with this in mind.

However, the research team was surprised by the lack of change in access to course content in the 2013 cohort. In 2012, 53% of students accessed the PowerPoint slide show for the first lecture , whereas 75% accessed it in 2013. But despite the apparent initial flush of interest in this content, there was a similar decline in access of course materials, as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1** Online resource access rates

| Type of online resource | Percentage accessed 2012 | Percentage accessed 2013 |
|---|---|---|
| e-Live | 27 | 41 |
| e-readings | 38 | 61 |
| PowerPoint lecture week 1 | 53 | 75 |
| Video lecture week 2 | 50 | 48 |
| PowerPoint lecture week 5 | 46 | 50 |
| Video lecture week 5 | 40 | 41 |
| PowerPoint lecture week 7 | 44 | 34 |
| Video lecture week 7 | 23 | 21 |
| PowerPoint lecture week 9 | 0 | 23 |

Thus, although there was no significant difference in ongoing access of course materials, there was greater use of interactive technology and use of online readings across the trimester in the year of the interactive intervention.

## Student evaluation survey

Another surprising result was that student evaluation survey results were only slightly quantitatively higher as a result of the guided, graded, formative peer- and self-assessment process. A key marker of satisfaction was whether students felt the online teaching and resources enhanced students' learning experience. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2** Unit satisfaction comments 2013

| The on-line teaching and resources in this unit enhanced my learning experience. | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unit Code | Unit Title | Total Responses | Mean | Std.Dev | % Agree | % Disagree | % Difference |
| HSW212 | SOCIAL WORK PROCESSES AND INTERVENTIONS: SOCIAL WORK THEORY AND PRACTICE E | 14 | 4.57 | 0.65 | 92.9% | 0.0% | 92.9% |

**Table 3** Unit satisfaction comments 2012

| The on-line teaching and resources in this unit enhanced my learning experience. | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Unit Code | Unit Title | Total Responses | Mean | Std.Dev | % Agree | % Disagree | % Difference |
| HSW212 | SOCIAL WORK PROCESSES AND INTERVENTIONS: SOCIAL WORK THEORY AND PRACTICE E | 18 | 4.56 | 0.86 | 88.9% | 5.6% | 83.3% |

These tables show there was only a one point difference between the years (2013 mean 4.57; 2012 mean 4.56), although there was more agreement within the 2013 group that they had a positive learning experience. The lack of significant difference can be explained by the fact that these figures do not indicate the qualitative experience of guided, graded formative peer- and self-assessment, nor do they indicate the quality of the learning. To try to understand the actual experience of the interaction and learning, the authors consulted qualitative comments that were generated each year by the student evaluation survey. Because this paper wishes to explore students' feelings of connectedness, social presence, and emotional affect, the analysis below focuses on words that convey emotion. This analysis of student responses is similar to that carried out by McMillan (2013), who investigated students' emotional experiences in their first-year transition to university.

## 2012 comments from online students

In response to the survey question, "What were the best aspects of your unit?", online students in 2012 responded with, "The YouTube Videos and the [case study] DVDs"; "The amount of effort put in by [lecturer's name]"; "The course material and the YouTube videos" and "[the course was] very relevant". Two online students said the [campus-based] workshop was the best aspect of the course. To the request, "Please provide any comments on the teaching of this unit by this teacher", a number of students commented on the practices the lecturer used to engage students and demonstrate care and concern for them. Words which conveyed such emotion included "care" (used by three different online students), "kind", "helpful", "understanding", "engaging", and "enthusiastic". While it is good to know that students felt understood and cared for in the learning experience, comments about what was actually learnt are noticeably absent.

## 2013 comments from online students

In 2013, when the graded formative peer- and self-assessment with guidance was trialled, there was quite a difference in the comments from students. When they were asked what they liked about the unit, students expressed their sense of connection with the unit and the lecturer (italics added to emphasise emotion phrases):

> Each week [lecturer] did a mini selfie lecture via a YouTube video which was so helpful. As an off-campus student I *felt engaged* by her doing this—*rather than disconnected and out there on my own.*

Other students echoed the connectedness experienced as a result of viewing the YouTube content videos created by the lecturer, and actually addressed the comments to the lecturer (which the previous cohort did not do):

> [lecturer's name], I really appreciated the weekly video posts that you uploaded. It was so *nice* not to just listen to a voice talk at us as it *really felt you were talking to me.*

This statement suggests that the student perceives the lecturer to have a tangible social presence, and that they have an interest in conveying their own presence back to the lecturer. The same student went on to comment:

> You also have such a *pleasant* expression on your face during the video … it just came across as *calm* and *friendly*. It was a *pleasure* to watch.

Another student commented:

I thought the weekly lectures with video were fantastic and *very engaging*".

Students were also explicit about the particular actions by the lecturer that helped them to feel connected to both her and the unit:

[lecturer's name] was always available for further instructions if needed, she always got back to me in a small time frame. Every question was answered with as much help as I could of possible [sic] needed.

Another notable difference in the responses from this cohort is the explicit detail spontaneously given about what they had actually learnt in the unit. For example, additional comments about the best aspects of the unit in the 2013 cohort included: "Putting the theories into practice" and "Using the feedback sheet as it was simple and effective and gave good dot points of what needed to be covered". Interestingly, even the dreaded role-plays that students had to record and share with other students to gain feedback were talked about in glowing terms, and comments clearly reflect how immersed students had become in doing them:

The role plays … I thought that they were the *absolute worst thing* until I did them and *realised the value in them* … so many things I do that I didn't realise until I watched it back.

And from another student:

The role-plays were a great way to really put our learning into practice.

The most compelling quote, showing a developing sense of pride and professional identity from a student was:

It challenged me a lot! In every way—from seriously wondering if I had chosen the wrong career path to being inspired!

## Discussion

The data above demonstrates that the 2013 cohort had a greater sense of social presence and connection with the lecturer and the content. While both cohorts were offered the online 'selfie' videos and were assigned to formative peer-assessment groups, it was the *graded* and *guided* formative peer- and self-assessment cohort in 2013 that really engaged with and benefited from them. These interventions by the lecturer may also have contributed to students' sense of connection and trust in each other, which then enabled them to feel confident to post their own practice videos into the group space for feedback.

Comparing the responses across these two different cohorts shows a tangible difference in students' experience of social presence and emotional connectedness. Students' comments, which explicitly state they felt the lecturer was talking directly to them, and felt they were not on their own, demonstrate a sense of engagement that was not apparent in the online survey or the student evaluation survey administered to the 2012 cohort. The survey results demonstrated that the 2012 cohort had a sense of isolation and lack of confidence. However, the 2013 cohort demonstrated a sense of being in charge of their learning, to the point of being inspired. This suggests the immense value of the formative peer- and self-assessment which was discussed at the beginning of this paper. It also demonstrates the care needed in setting up groups where peer feedback will be given, as a high degree of trust is required to enable people to feel comfortable to evaluate and be evaluated by peers in social-work role-play situations (Goldingay, 2012). The student evaluation survey results also showed a lack of immersion in the unit content in 2012 in comparison to the 2013 cohort. From the difference in results, it also appeared that students took the formative activity seriously as a result of the 20% grading attached to participation.

The fact that students responded and engaged more with readings and online technologies once grades were attached to participation and guidance was given about how to interact in the formative assessment in their groups, also suggests that students were more motivated to learn. Again, this echoes findings in other studies that demonstrate the connection between peer–peer social presence and motivation (Shin, 2003). The surprising finding—that quantitative student evaluation surveys across both years were not overly different—suggests that such evaluations may not capture the subjective, emotional experience which has such an effect on student learning outcomes. In addition, the similar drop-off rates in accessing formal unit content across the two cohorts suggest that students were more attracted to spending their time in the formative peer-assessment space, and a great deal of learning occurred in this space. The video 'selfies' were available to both cohorts but the results from this study suggest that they need to be combined with other interactive methods to engage students in multiple dimensions.

## Conclusion

The data collected for this paper demonstrate how students engaged in their online social-work practice skills course as a result of careful group bonding procedures and clear feedback guidelines set up at the beginning by the lecturer, and grades attached to participation in an online formative peer- and self-assessment process. It also demonstrates the positive effect of video 'selfies', delivered by teaching staff to online distance students, which take the situation of online distance students into account and include encouragement, practice vignettes, and interactive activities for students to participate in in their location. While online students in 2012 reported isolation and lack of engagement in undertaking these units, and struggled to articulate what they have learnt, the 2013 cohort demonstrated the potential of using constructivist pedagogy of active engagement in online learning to facilitate deep learning, and to provide the professional socialisation and social presence required to learn to be a professional social worker. Thus, lecturer's video 'selfies' are not sufficient, on their own, to achieve deep learning or engagement. Rather, they need to be used alongside other interactive activities such as formative peer- and self-assessment, which in turn need to be implemented carefully using guided relationship-forming processes set up by the lecturer.

This short study has demonstrated a sense of emotional connection to the unit, and a mastery and developing sense of professional identity as a result of being immersed in the graded formative peer- and self-assessment process and video 'selfie' programme. Nevertheless, future research is needed to conduct more in-depth data collection with this group (beyond student evaluation surveys) to further explore the findings discussed here. It is unclear whether the grading (to take the activity seriously) or guiding (to support students' sense of trust and confidence) had greater influence on the success of this trial, and future research is needed to gather students' views on this.

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## Acknowledgement

## Biographical notes

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Sophie is a senior lecturer at Deakin University, Geelong, Australia,where she teaches social work. She also a member of the Board of Directors for Barwon Youth, an agency committed to supporting young people to reach their potential. She is the recipient of several teaching awards, including the Vice Chancellor's Award for outstanding contribution to equity and access (2012), a Faculty Commendation for Excellence in Teaching (2012), and a School Award for Excellence in Teaching (2011). Her research interests include the scholarship of teaching, particularly in constructivist approaches to teaching.

### Clare Land

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Dr Clare Land is a research associate at Deakin University. She also provides sessional lecturing to a number of other higher education providers in Victoria. Her research interests include studies in higher education, and critical and postcolonial studies in history and sociology.

## Appendix

**Peer Feedback Sheet HSW212**                         **Date:**

Name of student taking role of practitioner:

Name of social work student providing feedback on role play

## Theory (s) in use observed:

Strengths based approach         Anti-oppressive approach                 Task centred

Systems theory

## Please circle which skills you observed

Listening and attending  responding to feelings    understanding and responding to verbal cues

demonstrating empathy       using open and closed questions          Use of silence

use of immediacy        paraphrasing      using appropriate self-disclosure        reframing

goal setting

appropriate confrontation        assertiveness    clarifying        negotiation      brokerage

prioritising

normalising  universalising            conflict management            boundary setting

**Feedback on where, how was observed (what question, what response, what posture, what use of skill)**

**What was good?**

**What could be improved/how?**

**Feedback  Suggestions**

**Try to**

- Start positive
- Comment on specific aspects
- Move to areas to be improved
- No criticism without recommendation
- Be specific
- Always offer alternatives
- Begin with "…..I wonder if you had tried" ,"….perhaps you could have…." "…sometimes it might be … helpful…."
- Distinguish between the intention and the effect of a comment or behaviour
- Distinguish between the person and the performance ("what you said sounded judgmental"—rather than "You are judgmental")

**Try not to**

- Forget the person's emotional response
- Criticise without recommending
- Comment on personal attributes (that can't be changed)
- Generalise
- Be dishonestly kind – if there was room for improvement be specific and explore alternative approaches
- Forget that your feedback says as much about you as about the person it is directed to

**Receiving feedback**

- Listen to it (rather than prepare your response/defence)
- Ask for it to be repeated if you didn't hear it clearly
- Assume it is constructive until proven otherwise; then consider and use those elements that are constructive
- Pause and think before responding
- Ask for clarification and examples if statements are unclear or unsupported
- Accept it positively (for consideration) rather than dismissively (for self-protection)
- Ask for suggestions of ways you might modify or change your behaviour – opportunity to rehearse
- Respect and thank the person giving feedback