Designing Assessment to Promote Engagement Among First Year Social Work Students

Christine Morley*
School of Public Health and Social Work
Faculty of Health
Queensland University of Technology
Email: c3.morley@qut.edu.au
* Corresponding author

Phillip Ablett
School of Social Science
Faculty of Arts, Business & Law
University of the Sunshine Coast, QLD Australia
E-mail: m.edwards@business.uq.edu.au

Abstract

This paper reports on research that evaluates the potential of assessment to promote students' engagement with their first year social work education; particularly their sense of connection with other students in ways that may contribute to student persistence in the initial stages of their studies. It presents the findings obtained from a qualitative study that explored students' experiences of undertaking a group presentation/performance assessment task in an introductory critical social work course at a regional Australian university. Overall, the results from a survey with course participants suggest that a group presentation/performance assessment fostered collaboration and cooperation among first-year students in a way that enhanced their engagement with each other, course material, and successful learning in this course. Students' responses regarding the assessment task strongly indicate that their engagement was not simply instrumental or formal, but rather ontological, in that the group presentation/performance engages the students' being as reflexive agents of change in the learning and assessment processes.

Keywords: *Engagement; retention; ontological learning; assessment.*

Introduction

This paper presents research findings addressing the question of how performative assessment can be used to foster students' engagement in the earliest phase of their social work education. In particular, it focuses on how assessment can enhance students' sense of connection with each other and course curriculum, in ways that promote persistence and learning. The relationship between assessment and engagement is discussed in relation to the findings obtained from original qualitative research that explored students' experiences of undertaking a presentation/performance assessment task in an introductory critical social work course at a regional university in Australia. The findings, while limited to one course, suggest that assessment can play a major role in fostering a sense of connection and belonging integral to student engagement. However, consistent with Barnett's (2008) notion of ontological learning, the analysis indicates that the assessment tasks most likely to inspire belonging are those that engage a student's whole being, as a self-conscious and collaborative agent of change, rather than those requiring instrumental or formal engagement (Barnett & Coate, 2005).

Background and Literature Review

The concern with student engagement is situated within the broader literature on student progression and retention, which has become an increasingly important issue in higher education in Australia and other parts of the Western world (Moriarty et al., 2009). Retention (often used interchangeably with 'persistence') is most basically defined as students remaining enrolled to successfully complete their educational goals (Tinto, 1993). There is now a significant body of research examining retention at the institutional (Kalsbeek, 2013), degree/ program (Noel-Levitz, 2008) and individual course (Gajewski & Mather, 2015) levels of enrolment. This article discusses some promising findings on student engagement at the individual course level.

The broader research on retention and engagement covers both extra-institutional and intra-institutional factors that hinder student completion. The former pertains to social contextual barriers, such as student poverty, socio-economic status or class, indigeneity, disabilities, location and the increasing costs of higher education (Krause, Vick, Boon, Bland, & Clark, 2009; Rubin, 2012; Universities Australia, 2008), which institutions have limited capacity to address directly apart from bursaries and lobbying government to address social inequality. The latter, intra-institutional factors concern the demands of the curricula, pedagogy, on-campus services, social support and student engagement. While these matters are not unrelated to social context, they are more readily within the capacity of academic communities, teaching staff and learners to address (Tinto, 1993); and they constitute the terrain of student engagement in which this study is situated. There are various understandings about why students leave before completion (Moriarty et al., 2009; Yorke, 2004; Christie, Munro & Fisher, 2004). Some of the most commonly attributed factors include choosing the wrong university or area of study, personal difficulties, and struggling with academic demands of study (Yorke, 2004).

Social Work Students and Engagement

Paralleling these broader societal factors that potentially impact all students, it is argued that social work students may face additional challenges. Many of these students have personally experienced social disadvantage, marginalization, and oppression and/or traumatic life events (see for example Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletcher & Ahmet, 2014). Whilst such factors may be implicated in the decision to study social work in the first place (Rompf & Royse, 1994), they also potentially impact on students' capacity to progress, and ultimately complete, their studies (Fletcher, Bernard, Fairtlough & Ahmet,

2015). At the same time, the research literature in this area also highlights the resilience of many social work students (see for example Grant and Kinman, 2012; Wilks & Spivey, 2010). Recent research also suggests social work education may foster resilience in students (De Las Olas Palma-García & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2014).

The nature of social work education also poses particular challenges for students. For example, social work practice requires high levels of self-awareness in terms of how students relate to others (Gardner, 2001). This may involve critical reflection on experiences of trauma, grief and social disadvantage and their implications for future practice (Dzielgielewski, Roest-Marti & Turnage, 2004), requiring the often unsettling scrutiny of taken-for-granted beliefs, assumptions and values (Fook, 2012). Consequently, a critically reflective pedagogy requires students to question the 'thinking and the framing of assumptions we employ to make judgements,' which is arguably more demanding than 'reproduc[ing] a particular set of facts or techniques"' (Smith, 2011, p. 218).

Compounding the challenges of transformative learning, the requirements for social work students to undertake two in-depth field education placements creates additional strain for engagement, progression and retention. Economic hardship and particular stressors involved in practice-based learning have been identified in the literature (Brough, Correa-Velez, Crane, Johnstone & Marston, 2015; Dzieglielewski et al., 2004) and are exacerbated for the majority of social work students who are female and/or mature-aged and therefore more likely to have caring and parental responsibilities (Moriarty et al., 2012). In fact, field placements seem to intensify the potential difficulties faced by all students in that many juggle increasingly heavy paid-employment demands on top of their study (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Participation and broader learning is also undermined by external pressures placed on contemporary students - many of whom are primarily focused on surviving the formal requirements of assessment (see for example Juwah, Macfarlane-Dick, Matthew, Nicol & Smith, 2004; Race, 2010). This is perhaps why some educational scholars have emphasized the need to design 'assessment for learning' (Juwah et al., 2004) rather than reducing assessment to the measurement 'of learning', which is likely to only foster a minimalist and instrumental 'operational engagement' (Barnett & Coate, 2005). Another important but often neglected feature of engagement that is problematised by critical educators, and particularly relevant for social work education, concerns the question of 'engagement for what?' (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). This question is central for educators whose aim is to facilitate graduates' commitment to social justice, critical analysis of society and a practice framework with tools for advancing emancipatory change (Morley et al., 2014). This pedagogical aim is based on the value-driven nature of social work (Banks, 2012) and an analysis of the context and purposes of higher education and social work in an increasingly divided, neoliberal society (Giroux, 2011). However, many university retention strategies are designed to meet institutional economic needs, rather than pedagogic or socially equitable purposes (Yorke & Longden, 2004; Cuseo, 2008). McMahon and Portelli (2004) argue that this market imperative encourages an empty and superficial understanding of student 'engagement' disconnected from the situated, life-practices of the student and the purpose of the course they are undertaking. Accordingly, we contend that assessments designed with the socially situated purpose of the course in mind are more likely to enhance student engagement in authentic and meaningful ways than those designed simply to meet formal attendance requirements.

Student Connection and Engagement: Framework and Literature

Despite factors that promote attrition, there is considerable literature that points to a student's sense of connection with the university and their classmates as being integral to their progression and completion (e.g. Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005; Tinto, 2007). Engagement is afforded a central place throughout this literature, and it is

widely acknowledged that attention to the engagement of students as active learners in transformative processes will lead to greater retention and academic success because engagement builds a strong, enduring and dynamic interaction between the student and the learning environment (Krause & Coates, 2008; Bovill, Bulley & Morss, 2011). A meta-analysis of 35 studies by Rubin (2012) strongly confirms that a 'sense of belonging' is crucial for retention in higher education, particularly for students from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds.

In this view, engagement must be seen not merely as a formal or purely cognitive activity but rather as involving the whole of a student's socially situated being in the conscious formation of their social, political and professional identity. Barnett's (2008) philosophical distinction between ontological learning (which involves the mode of being of the students, particularly their becoming citizens and, in this case, critical practitioners), and epistemological learning (knowledge and skills), is helpful here in understanding and re-conceptualising the multifaceted and contextual nature of engagement. Packer and Goicoechea (2000) have argued that until recently educational theory has been dominated and impoverished by epistemological approaches to learning (as knowledge acquisition) to the detriment of ontological concerns about changes in the wider being of the learner. The emphasis on the ontological dimensions of learning recalls Heidegger's (1962, p. 384) notion that a person's identity formation or 'becoming' involves 'being with others' in a particular life situation and practice. That is, our learning is always socially situated and this is integral to the learning process and outcomes. Explicating this ontological dimension and distinguishing it from epistemological learning, however, should not be viewed as an oppositional binary. The epistemological dimension of learning presupposes the ontological dimension (Arnd-Caddington & Pozzuto, 2006), but the importance of the latter is often occluded in conventional accounts of learning. A decontextualized emphasis on the epistemological domain, without addressing students' being, risks reducing learning to a superficial recitation of content and techniques rather than a process that facilitates students becoming context responsive, agents of change. Together though, these domains represent a situated and embodied form of deep learning where the focus on 'being' underpins 'knowing' and 'acting', and where 'what is learnt, the way in which it is learnt and the way in which it is retained all have an impact on the "becoming" of the student' (Blackie, Case, & Jawitz, 2010, p. 640).

Zepke and Leach (2010) identify a number of factors that enhance student engagement, which include: teamwork; problem solving; motivation; feelings of responsibility; reflexivity; working autonomously; feeling competent to meet analytical challenges; building constructive relationships with peers, teachers and significant others as supports to learning; engaging in effective dialogue with others. McDonald (2010) likewise identifies that a sense of ownership in the learning process, and a learner's accountability to a group, also enhances student engagement.

In exploring this contention further, an assessment task was selected from a first-year social work course that provided opportunities for students to experience these multiple and situated features of engagement conducive to the formation of critically reflective social work practitioners. In undertaking this research we were interested to see if this assessment task, which takes the form of a group presentation/performance, may enhance students' engagement and sense of connection. The research aimed to test our observations in a more systematic way.

How Can Assessment Foster Learning and Engagement? – The Research Setting

Within a social work program at a regional university in Australia, a piece of assessment was devised in an introductory/first year level course (of which one of the researchers was the coordinator) that aimed to engage and retain students as ontological learners. The university in which this piece of assessment was trialled attracts many students

(50%) who are first in their families to attend university, and largely come from low socio-economic backgrounds (USC Annual Report, 2014). The assessment being discussed in this paper sits within a required introductory course that students typically undertake in their first semester of study. This transitional period is identified by the literature as being a high-risk time for attrition (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). The course is 13 weeks in duration and offered as a one-hour lecture plus two-hour tutorial program weekly. Students commence their work on this piece of assessment during their sixth week of study, and conclude in the final week on the course. Hence it occurs over a seven-week period.

The assessment task requires students to work together during their tutorials in order to contribute to their group's capacity to demonstrate the ability to apply at least three social work specific theories to a practice scenario. Ultimately, this practical application of various theoretical frameworks to the case study culminates in the form of a whole-of-tutorial group presentation/performance to showcase their learning to the entire first year course cohort (usually approximating 200 hundred students) at the conclusion of each semester.

Initially, however, students work together in small groups (i.e. 3-5 students) to devote two weeks of their tutorial class time to research one designated theory. For example, one group may concentrate on psychodynamic theory; one may choose feminism; another may focus on systems or ecological approaches; another may choose postmodernism, or anti-oppressive approaches, and so on, in relation to a particular case scenario, usually designed by the tutorial group. As part of their preparation, students research the theory's strengths, limitations, implications for practice methods and processes in relation to informing how they would respond as practitioners to the case scenario. It is argued that small group work of this nature creates opportunities for cooperative and collaborative learning (e.g. Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Jiao 2009; Vinson et al., 2010), which enables students to share resources, information, insights and ideas (Ortlieb, Biddiz, & Deopker 2010). Depending on the size of the tutorial (maximum 24), this initial small group part of the assessment usually results in no more than five different theories being researched by the tutorial group as a whole. Following this research stage, one, two-hour class is then devoted to presenting each small group's research about their theory (in 20 minute segments) to their tutorial members so that each group can share their understandings on how the theory informs practice with the class as a whole. The sharing of the contrasting theoretical perspectives in relation to the practice scenario enables the tutorial members to develop the multi-perspectival approach required for the total group presentation/performance at the conclusion of semester, which subsequently informs their final essays. Such processes assist students in sharing insights that are collectively beneficial for their learning (Falichikov, 2005) to become critical practitioners in an unjust world. This learning is not simply cognitive but addresses the wider being of the student, and is therefore ontological in nature (Barnett, 2008).

Following the small theory-group presentations, the whole tutorial group then collaborates to devise innovative ways to present their material creatively in order to engage peers from the other tutorials with their ideas. This involves learning the skills of negotiation and conflict resolution regarding which theories they will focus on, brainstorming options to present their ideas, and deciding who will take on which roles within the group to make their presentation/performance a success. Such a process resonates with Britton's (1985, cited in Gardner, 2001, p. 30) concept of the learning community, in which the power of the tutor is decentered to become a less powerful participant in the process of interacting, learning and sharing (Adcroft & Lockwood, 2010; Gardner, 2001). As Gardner (2001, p. 30) explains, in the creation of a learning community: 'The combined knowledge and experiences of the class are then available to be part of the learning process.' Another two tutorial classes are allocated to students to prepare for this purpose.

One, three hour class involving the entire cohort is then devoted to reviewing each tutorials' presentation/performance in which students demonstrate their learning and preparation over the past five weeks. The assessment provides an opportunity for students to dramatize and embody the theory as it relates to practice in a meaningfully situated and potentially transformative way. Given that a case study is used as a foundation for students to compare and contrast competing perspectives, it promotes assessment of the varying ways these theories shape our understandings of particular social phenomena, through a critically reflective lens. This provides strategies for ethical practices that are committed to the goal of social justice. This is consistent with Barnett's (2008) conceptualisation of engagement as involving a student's mode of being as a socially situated agent in the process of consciously forming their social, political and professional identity.

This assessment task is graded in two parts: 70% of the grade is devoted to assessing students' participation and contribution. This component of the grade is allocated to students individually on the basis of their participation and contribution to the group's preparation process during the five tutorials in the weeks that precede the presentation/performance. Given the preparation for group presentation/performance occurs over this period of time, it implicitly requires students' active participation and engagement throughout the semester. This participation component of the grade is also self-assessed and peer-assessed in consultation with other group members' evaluation of the students' contribution, which is moderated by the tutor in the final week of the tutorials; one week after the presentation/performance to the entire cohort has been completed. Educational research indicates that employing strategies of self and peer assessment also enhance students' engagement (Kearney & Perkins, 2011). The remaining 30% of the grade for this assessment item is judged by the quality of the material presented and performed on the day by their group as assessed by the tutors. The requirements to participate in the presentation/performance as negotiated with their group foster a sense of responsibility and accountability on the part of each group member towards the group, capturing the multifaceted, social and contextual nature of engagement, as 'being with others' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 384). Establishing the conditions for cooperative, collaborative teamwork is another key feature of education that can enhance engagement (Hillyard & Gillespie, 2010). It is worth noting that the researchers (including the course coordinator) have observed that the creative element of this assessment may act to engage students in ways not previously anticipated. For example, tutors informed the coordinator that some students who were not particularly engaged by essays and the more traditional forms of assessment suddenly volunteered to take on leadership roles in facilitating their tutorial's performance when this piece of assessment was introduced. This supports research suggesting a range of different types of assessment, eliciting a variety of skills and strengths, may be most beneficial to capture the students' interest and imagination (Brown & Race, 2013).

The Research Design and Procedure

The specific aim of the research was to evaluate the assessment in terms of its capacity to enhance a sense of connection in a systematic manner by exploring students' experiences of participating in the group presentation/performance. The total enrolled population of the course for both semesters combined was 206. The response rate was high, 195 student respondents (95%) for the first questionnaire and 188 respondents (91%), who completed both questionnaires. In particular, the research was designed to explore:

1. *students' sense of belonging and connection with their peers and how this may enhance their learning experience; and*
2. *students' self-evaluations of the performance/presentation assessment task in facilitating group engagement, sense of belonging and connection with their*

peers.

The research was conducted using a two-stage pre-test and post-test questionnaire design, which generated both qualitative open-ended responses and non-parametric ordinal data. Students were invited to complete an initial questionnaire within the second tutorial (week two) of the semester. Questions on the pre-test instrument focussed on students' perception of their sense of connection with other students at the beginning of semester. Specifically, the students were asked: How connected do you currently feel to other students who are studying this course this semester? A Likert scale was used for students to rate their response to this question: 1 = Not at all; 2 = Negligibly connected; 3 = Somewhat connected; 4 = Connected; and 5 = Strongly connected. A second more open-ended question was then asked: 'Do you have ideas about how the teaching team for this course could enhance your sense of connection and belonging with other students?' Space was also provided for students to add qualitative comments. The post-test follow-up questionnaire aimed to elicit students' experiences of participating in the presentation/performance assessment task and the impact this had on their connections with other students and the university. The second questionnaire included new questions that asked participants to comment specifically on their experience of participating in the group presentation/performance. These questions were: Has your level of connection/sense of belonging at university increased as a result of studying this course? This provided for a binary, forced-choice Yes/ No response, followed by an open-ended: 'If yes, how has it changed? A further four, open-ended, qualitative questions were then asked: 1) If you feel more connected with other students studying this course, are there benefits for you personally? What are they? 2) If you feel more connected, what are the factors that have enhanced your sense of connection and belonging with other students? 3) How did you experience the group presentation/performance as a piece of assessment? 4) Are there any other comments you would like to make about this assessment task? Finally, a second Likert scaled question was asked: How would you rate this piece of assessment in terms of enhancing your sense of connection/belonging with other students? The scale provided for responses of 1= No enhancement; 2= Negligible enhancement; 3 Some enhancement; 4 Enhancement and 5 Strong enhancement of connection attributable to the assessment exercise. As this question was retrospective, it did not ask exactly the same ordinal ranking as the first survey and so is not strictly comparable for statistical testing but nevertheless is sensitive to evolving differences in attitudes.

The voluntary and anonymous nature of participation was stressed. Questionnaires were administered during class time by a research assistant who was external to the teaching team ensuring participation was entirely anonymous and voluntary. It was emphasized that students could withdraw at any time without penalty. Ethical approval to undertake this research was gained through the university human research ethics committee. Analysis of the qualitative data was thematic and comparative (see for example Schwandt, 2015). The themes were driven by the research questions and focused on students' sense of connection before and after completing the performance assessment. As with any single course study, the claims derivable from these findings are necessarily very limited, tentative and suggestive rather than definitive. The findings of the research are presented below.

Findings

Enhanced Sense of Connection.
The findings from the students' responses suggest that the presentation/performance assessment strengthened students': sense of connection with each other, motivation to attend, learning, and sense of belonging at university. At the beginning of the semester, the pre-test survey indicated that most students (64% or 127) reported either no connection, negligible connection or merely 'somewhat' connected with each other in the class. This compared with only 36% (or 71) who indicated they felt 'connected' or

'strongly connected'. However, by the end of semester (Week 12), when asked to rate the impact of the performance assessment on their sense of connection/belonging, the majority reported that it either enhanced or strongly enhanced it (71% or 133 of the 188 students completing the second survey. There was one non-response but nobody reported no connection. Moreover, in response to the forced choice question in the second survey the vast majority of students explicitly answered 'Yes' (84.6% or 159) to the question on whether participating in the performance assessment had increased their sense of belonging at the university. As the pre and post test questions were not the same, a statistical test of the variance between ordinal scales would not be valid but a positive difference in sense of connectedness associated with the assessment by the end of the course is clear in these results. What is more important for this qualitative study is the students' understandings of how the assessment strengthened their sense of connection and engagement.

The open-ended responses typically indicated that the assessment had: 'brought everyone closer together'; 'pulled everyone together'; 'helped us to get to know each other'; and 'helped build friendships more than in other classes.' As one student stated: 'The performance assessment was not only where I learnt the most, but where I bonded with my classmates.'

For other students this theme was expressed more implicitly in reference to some of the outcomes that had resulted from the conditions and context that were created by the group presentation/performance. These included reference to: the 'friendly' 'open' and/or 'safe' environment that augmented their study; and the 'trust,' 'friendships,' and 'sense of togetherness' that had developed during the course. The role of the educator was implicated here as students referred explicitly, to 'feeling very supported by my tutors.' Respondents also articulated the importance of studying with students who were in the same or related disciplines. As one student indicated, 'Sharing values and knowledge with peers around social justice was vital for me.' Arguably, Blackie et al's. (2010, p. 640) dynamic notion of 'becoming' or developing of the student identity is evident here.

Evaluation of the Performance Assessment.
When commenting specifically on their experience of participating in the group presentation/performance, the vast majority (92%) of respondents were retrospectively coded as providing positive feedback to the question that asked if they had benefited from the exercise.
The open-ended qualitative responses supported the ordinal data on the enhanced sense of connection in a number of ways, including reflections on their anticipated professional identity. For example:
- 'It made me connect and belong to a group of emerging social workers';
- 'Group work enhanced togetherness and we gained skills that will benefit us when in the workplace and working with others';
- 'Talking about all these ideas! Like theories or social justice stuff. When you do that with others it's gotta be real.'
- 'I loved it! Everyone contributed and it was where I gained the most knowledge about social work';
- 'I had to really hold up my end of the bargain in learning the theories with others. You couldn't fake it'
- 'It was great for building support networks and knowledge about theories'.

Both epistemological and ontological dimensions of learning are arguably evident here. The formation of the 'being' of a critical practitioner, which emerges in collaboration with others, underpins conceptual learning and practice strategies (Blackie et al., 2010). That is, the student's accounts of their collaborative presentations disclose vital social factors such as their sense of connection and belonging that underpin, support and are presupposed in, their efforts to grapple with the intellectual learning materials.

Issues for Consideration

Respondents who were less enthusiastic about the group performance assessment raised a number of issues for us to consider. Qualitative feedback identified the compulsory nature of the performance as problematic. For example, one student stated, 'Many people probably hated the thought of getting up on stage.' Another similarly commented, 'I was nervous. I do not like to act in front of many people.'

This, however, reflects some misunderstanding of the task, and perhaps signals that tutors may need to be more explicit in stating that there are many ways to make a meaningful contribution towards the group presentation/performance without actually taking the stage. For example, the tutors were aware of instances in which students prepared PowerPoint presentations, or coordinated stage props and/or other aspects of the performance behind the scenes. In this way, the assessment task provides opportunities for students to participate in various ways and roles should they negotiate such arrangements with their group.

Another consideration concerning the pre-test data is that students' indication that they had a low sense of connectedness to peers and the university is likely to reflect their unfamiliarity with their new environment. It could be argued then that the increases in their more positive sense of connection and associated with the assessment that were indicated by the post-test data was also influenced due to greater time and exposure to university. However, Rubin (2012) suggests there is nothing natural about engagement with university for working class and/or disadvantaged students and that such engagement has to be deliberately fostered by educators to be effective. The ordinal ranking component of this study was modest in aim. It sought to obtain an indication of students' sense of connection with other students at the beginning of semester, and secondly the meaning of any change following the presentation/performance piece of assessment and completion of the course. The other main concern noted by students was the potential challenges inherent in group work, particularly as one student put it: 'the unequal participation between some group members.' This is typical of the learning that arises from working as part of a group (Knotek, 2003). The results suggest students learned as much about linking theory with practice (which is the aim of the curriculum) as they did about the practice processes of group work. Qualitative data typically emphasized both areas of learning. For example, as these students stated:
- 'I learned about the theories, how they relate to practice and also about how to work in a group';
- 'I learnt group facilitating skills and how to work with a big group—inclusiveness, as well as an in-depth understanding of the connection between theory and practice'.

Despite the challenges associated with the group presentation/performance task, overwhelmingly the group work was seen as a positive experience that provided valuable learning opportunities for the majority of students who participated in this study. The findings suggest that connection with other students provides two main functions: 1) social support and 2) a deeper engagement with their learning. As one student stated: 'When you are connected, you can share difficulties and strengths… On many levels university experience in general can be intimidating and overwhelming but, learning with and from others helps a lot and makes me feel more comfortable and like I can do this.' This supports Rubin's (2012) findings that suggest that a sense of belonging is paramount to successful engagement in higher education.

These findings parallel the data in which students described the actual benefits that they felt they had derived from forming meaningful connection with other students. Interestingly, the sense of connection with other students seemed to span:

development of friendships; feelings of confidence and comfort to participate; motivation to attend; the enjoyment of the university experience; enhancement of learning; and support to continue studying. All of these factors appear to be interrelated and were positively consequential for students' engagement and persistence in this course. As one student attested 'I feel more inclined to attend class if I know people and feel comfortable… I feel more engaged with the course and positive about university and myself as a student.'

The omission of specific demographic data about the participants could be viewed as a limitation of the study, however, anonymity was privileged to protect students' right to participate confidentially. Consistent with enrolment patterns in many social work degrees (Zastrow, 2009), the university in which this study was undertaken has far greater female than male enrolments. Therefore, recording data about gender may have invalidated the anonymity of the participant. Including information about other dimensions of diversity may have similarly compromised the anonymity of participants. As such, this information was not included.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how assessment can be used to promote students' sense of connection and belonging with the other students, and their learning at university. In particular, following Barnett's theory of ontological learning, we proposed that assessments that are mindful of students' whole sense of being within a socially situated purpose, are more likely to enhance meaningful student engagement than those designed simply to meet formal attendance requirements. In the context of this study, the assessment aimed, through performance, to engage students as self-reflexive, collaborate agents of change, developing cognisance of how various approaches theorise and respond to issues related to social justice, inequality, oppression and privilege.

Accordingly, the article has presented findings obtained from original qualitative research that explicated students' experiences of undertaking a group presentation/performance assessment task in an introductory critical social work course at a small regional university. The findings are consistent with literature that suggests designing assessment to promote students' sense of ownership of the learning process and accountability to the group for their actions enhances student engagement (McDonald, 2010). The presentation/performance assessment task involved students dramatizing theory, which necessitates creativity; risk taking, negotiation, spontaneity, open-mindedness, creating new forms and engaging in subversive activity that disrupts conventional patterns of thought, action and being (Gibson, 2010). The findings demonstrate that this assessment task similarly fostered students' ability to explore options, to think critically and be autonomous, which promotes a sense of optimism, persistence, achievement, understanding and problem solving; these are all factors that are generally acknowledged to promote fully engaged learning. The findings also indicate that the assessment task assisted students to develop a dialogical relationship between theory and practice where ideas and theories can be deployed, interrogated and challenged as part of practice. This is an important ingredient, not only for engagement and retention, but also critical pedagogy (McArthur, 2010), which is essential for the learning and teaching of critical social work (de Maria, 1992). Ultimately the presentation/performance assessment required a collaborative effort in which students needed to work together as a cohesive group in order to demonstrate their learning. Collaboration and cooperation are constitutive features of the learning and assessment processes for students studying to be practitioners in a profession such as social work that is concerned with social justice. This directly challenges the neoliberal values of individualism and competition that are so frequently ingrained in our educative practices and society more broadly (Giroux, 2011).

The successful completion of the assessment task described in this paper resulted in

students' active participation, engagement, collaboration and learning. However, the qualitative responses regarding the assessment task strongly indicate that these students' engagement and persistence in this course was not simply instrumental or formal, but rather, ontological. That is, the student's accounts of their collaborative presentations disclose vital extra-cognitive, social factors that underpin, support and are presupposed in, their efforts to grapple with the intellectual learning materials. Chief amongst these factors was the student's sense of connection, and the mutual support this afforded, with their fellow learners. The fact that the students themselves often made a connection between this collaborative experience and their efforts to remain in a very challenging course, support the proposition that assessments promoting ontological rather than instrumental engagement are more likely to foster deep and transformative learning.

References

Adcroft, A., & Lockwood, A. (2010). Enhancing the scholarship of teaching and learning: An organic approach. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(5), 479–491.

Annual Report (2014) University of the Sunshine Coast Annual Report (Text Only Version). Maroochydore Queensland, Australia. Retrieved from http://www.usc.edu.au/explore/reports-and-publications/annual-report/annual-report-2014-text-only-version

Arnd-Caddington, M. & Pozzuto, R. (2006). Truth in our time. *Qualitative Social Work*, 5(4), 423–440.

Banks, S. (2012). *Ethics and values in social work (4th ed*.). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barnett, R. (2008). Knowing and becoming in the higher education curriculum. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(4), 429–440.

Barnett, R., & Coate, K. (2005). Engaging the curriculum in higher education. Maidenhead, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.Bernard, C., Fairtlough, A., Fletcher, J., & Ahmet. A., (2014). A qualitative study of marginalised social work students' views of social work education and learning. British Journal of Social Work, 44(7),1934-1949.

Bernard, C., Fairtlough, A., Fletcher, J., & Ahmet, A. (2014). A qualitative study of marginalised social work students' views of social work education and learning. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), 1934-1949.

Blackie, M. A. L., Case, J. M., & Jawitz, J. (2010). Student-centredness: The link between transforming students and transforming ourselves. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(6), 637–646.

Bovill, C., Bulley, C., & Morss, K. (2011). Engaging and empowering first-year students through curriculum design: Perspectives from the literature. Teaching in Higher Education, 16(2), 197–209.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). Review of Australian higher education. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Brookfield, S. D. (1990). *The skillful teacher*. San Francisco, United States of America: Jossey-Bass.

Brough, M., Correa-Velez, I., Crane, P., Johnstone, E. & Marston., G. (2015). *Balancing the books: An assessment of financial stress associated with social work and human service student placements.* Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.

Brown, S., & Race, P. (2013). Using effective assessment to promote learning. In L. Hunt & D. Chalmers (Eds.), University teaching in focus: A learning-centred approach (pp. 74–91). New York, NY: Routledge.

Campanini, A. & Facchini, C. (2013). Values and motivations in BA Students of Social Work: The Italian Case. *Social Work and Society International Online Journal*, 11 (1) Retrieved fro http://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/358/708

Christie, H., Munro, M., & Fisher, T. (2004). Leaving university early: Exploring the differences between continuing and non-continuing students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(5), 617–636.

Cuseo, J. (2008). Fiscal benefits of student retention and first year retention initiatives. Ohio University. Retrieved from http://www.ohio.edu/fye/upload/retention-fiscal-benefits.pdf.

De Maria, W. (1992). On the trail of a radical pedagogy for social work education. *British Journal of Social Work,* 22(3), 231–252.

De Las Olas Palma-García, M., & Hombrados-Mendieta, I., (2014). The development of resilience in social work students and professionals. *Journal of Social Work*, 14(4), 380-397.

Dziegielewski, S., Roest-Marti, S., & Turnage, B. (2004). Addressing stress with social work students: A controlled evaluation. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 40(1), 105–119.

Falchikov, N. (2007). The place of peers in learning and assessment. In D. Boud, & N. Falchikov (Eds.), Rethinking assessment in higher education: Learning for the longer term (pp. 128–143), Oxford, UK: Routledge.

Fletcher,J., Bernard, C., Fairtlough, A., & Ahmet, A. (2015). Social work education diversity equalities social justice full participation. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(1), 120-137.

Fook, J. (2012). *Social work: Critical theory and practice (2nd ed.*). London, United Kingdom: SAGE Publications.

Freeman, S. J. (2005). *Grief and loss: Understanding the journey*. Australia: Brooks/Cole.

Gajewski, A. & Mather, M. (2015) Remediation strategies for learners at risk of failure: A course based retention model. *College Quarterly*. 18(1) Retrieved from http://collegequarterly.ca/2015-vol18-num01-winter/gajewski-mather.html

Gardner, F. (2001). Social work students and self-awareness: How does it happen? Reflective Practice: *International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 2(1), 27–40.

Gibson, R. (2010). The 'art' of creative teaching: Implications for higher education. Teaching in Higher Education, 15(5), 607–613.

Giroux, H. (2011). On critical pedagogy. New York, NY: Continuum.

Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2012). Enhancing wellbeing in social work students: Building resilience in the next generation. *Social Work Education*, 31(5), 605-621.

Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans). New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Hillyard, C., & Gillespie, D. (2010). University students' attitudes about learning in small groups after frequent participation. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11(1), 9–20.

James, R., Krause, K., & Jennings, C. (2010). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009.* Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.

Johnson, B. (2009, February). Taking student retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college. Keynote speech delivered at the ALTC FYE Curriculum Design Symposium, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

Juwah, C., Macfarlane-Dick, D., Matthew, B., Nicol, D., & Smith, B. (2004). Enhancing student learning though effective formative feedback. The Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/id353_senlef_guide.pdf

Kalsbeek, D. (2013) *Reframing retention strategy for institutional improvement: New diirections for higher education,* Number 161. John Wiley & Sons: San Francisco. USA.

Kearney, S. P., & Perkins, T. (2011, October). Improving engagement: The use of 'authentic self and peer assessment for learning' to enhance the student learning experience. Paper presented at the Academic and Business Research Institute Conference, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Knotek, S. E. (2003). Bias in problem solving and the social process of student study teams: A qualitative investigation of two student study teams. *Journal of Special Education*, 37, 2–14.

Krause, K., & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5), 493-505.

Krause, K., Vick, M., Boon, H., Bland, D., & Clark, J. (2009). A fair go beyond the school gate? Systemic factors affecting participation and attainment in tertiary education by Queensland students from LSES backgrounds. Brisbane: Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts.

Noel-Levitz Retention Codifications. (2008). Student success, retention, and graduation: definitions, theories, practices, patterns, and trends. Retrieved from http://www.stetson.edu/law/conferences/highered/archive/media/Student%20Success,%20Retention,%20and%20Graduation-%20Definitions,%20Theories,%20Practices,%20Patterns,%20and%20Trends.pdf

Maldonado, D. E. Z., Rhoads, R., & Buenavista, T. L. (2005). The student-initiated retention Project: Theoretical contributions and the role of self-empowerment. *American Educational Research Journal,* 42(4), 605–638.

McArthur, J. (2010). Achieving social justice within and through higher education: The challenge for critical pedagogy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(5), 493–504.

McDonald, B. (2010). Improving learning through meta assessment. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11(2), 119–129.

McMahon, B., & Portelli, J. (2004). Engagement for what? Beyond popular discourses of student engagement. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 3(1), 59–76.

Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Chauhan, B., Jones, G., Wenman, H., & Hussein, S. (2009). Hanging on a little thin line: Barriers to progression and retention in social work education. Social Work Education: *The International Journal*, 28(4), 363–379.

Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Hussein, S., Stevens, M., Sharpe, E., McIntyre, G., ... Crisp, B. (2012). The social work bursary in England: Impact of funding arrangements upon social work education and the future workforce. *British Journal of Social Work*. 42(5), 957–973.

Morley, C., Ablett, P. & Macfarlane, S. (2014). *Engaging with Social Work; A Critical Introduction*, South Melbourne: Cambridge.

Onwuegbuzie, A., Collins, K., & Jiao, Q. (2009). Performance of cooperative learning groups in a postgraduate education research methodology course: The role of social interdependence. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 10(3), 265–277.

Ortlieb, A., Biddiz, J., & Deopker, G. (2010). A collaborative approach to higher ducation induction. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11(2), 109–118.

Packer, M., & Goicoechea, J., (2000). Sociocultural and constructivist theories of earning: Ontology, not just epistemology. *Educational Psychologist*. 35(4), 227-241.

Payne, M. (2014). Modern social work theory (4th ed.). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Portelli, J., & McMahon, B. (2004). Why critical-democratic engagement?, *Journal of Maltese Education Research*. 2(2), 39–45.

Race, P. (2010). *Making learning happen (2nd ed*.). London, UK: Sage Publications.

Rompf, E., & Royse, D. (1994). Choice of social work as a career: Possible influences. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 30(2), 163–172.

Rubin, M. (2012) Social class differences in social integration amongst students in higher education: A meta-analysis and the recommendations for future research. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5, 22-38.

Smith, E. (2011). Teaching critical reflection. Teaching in Higher Education, 16(2), 211–223.

Schwandt, T. A., (2015) *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry, (4th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Thomas, M., McCleary, R., & Henry, P. (2004). Effectiveness of admission criteria on student performance in classroom and field instruction. *Advances in Social Work*, 5(1), 33.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes of student attrition*. London, UK: Chicago University Press.

Tinto, V. (2007). Research and practice of student retention: What next?, *Journal of College Student Retention*, 8(1), 1–19.

Universities Australia Equity and Participation Action Plan. (2008). Advancing equity and participation in Australian higher education. Canberra: Universities Australia. Retrieved from https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/news/submissions-and-reports/Advancing-Equity-and-Participation-in-Australian-Higher-Education#.VgEPtWSeAXA Vinson, D., Nixon, S., Walsh, B., Walker, C., Mitchell, E., & Zaitseva, E. (2010). Investigating the relationship between student engagement and transition. Active Learning in Higher Education, 11(2), 131–141.

Wilks, S.E., Spivey, C.A. (2010). Resilience in undergraduate social work students. Social support and adjustment to academic stress. *Social Work Education*, 29(3), 276-288.

Yorke, M. (2004). Retention, persistence and success in on-campus higher education, and their enhancement in open and distance learning. *Open Learning*, 19(1), 19–32.

Yorke, M., & Longden, B. (2004). *Retention and student success in higher education*, Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Zepke, N, & Leach, L. (2010). Beyond hard outcomes: 'Soft' outcomes and engagement as student success. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(6), 661–673.

Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Prebble, T. (2006). Being learner centred: One way to improve student retention?, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(5), 587–600.