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Abstract

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Transformative learning: simulations in social work education

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Transformative learning is fundamental to social work education. This presentation explores transformative learning, teaching strategies and ethical concerns posed by simulations referencing a teaching simulation in inter-professional practice in health and aged care. This simulation concerns long term care needs of two elderly gay men, one with severe dementia and his partner with a right-sided stroke. Students were allocated roles in the hospital team, families, community advocacy groups and the primary health care team.

Simulations provide opportunities for transformative learning at the individual, team, community, organization and social levels combining knowledge, emotions, social interactions and practice. This active learning strategy provides rich opportunities for meaningful learning involving the whole person, drawing on the learner's prior experiences, allowing learners to construct meaning and engage in social interaction facilitating equitable learning experiences. Students enter simulations using past experiences with habitual expectations, largely tacit stereotypes, ideologies, prejudices and attitudes. The simulation allows students to examine these assumptions, explore their impact on resolution of complex practice issues and transform their views.

Simulations challenge facilitators and students. Challenges include simulation design and the extent of students' participation in design, facilitator role/s, assessment, the value of reflection and observation by external learning stakeholders including service providers and users.

Whilst simulations have been used extensively in professional education, social work students have complained about using simulations raising concerns about their discomfort with this method of learning and their perceived lack of informed consent. The challenge to encourage students to explore the practice complexities whilst allowing sufficient safety to encourage discussion, reflection and thoughtful skills remains. Students and educators need approaches that encourage a transformative pedagogy that develops new skills in a safe manner and space.