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Let's talk about sexuality podcasting in social work education: a deeply personal pedagogical approach to explore the deeply personal

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ABSTRACT

Social work, a practice-based profession focused on social justice, is increasingly recognizing sexual wellbeing/health as a practice area that students need to build competence. Yet there remains a paucity of opportunities to do this effectively, ways that are brave, not merely safe, for the student-learner, as well as for the social work educator. To address this need, the authors designed and produced a podcast episode called, 'Episode 13 – Sexual Justice as Social Justice' to support student learning and exploration of sexual health/wellbeing as a key social worker competency. This article examines the use of social work podcasting, a deeply personal pedagogical approach, as an effective method for engaging with the deeply personal in social work education. First, we highlight the need for and importance of greater inclusion of sexual health/wellbeing education for social workers, highlighting scholarship that grounds this topic as being of universal relevance and importance, especially for social work practice. Next, we explore both podcasting as a pedagogical tool for engaging students and implications of social work podcasting. Finally, we offer five student learning outcomes for social work educators to consider in their approach to integrating discussions on sexuality into their teaching using podcast episodes.

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Social work, a practice-based profession focused on social justice, is increasingly recognizing sexual health and wellbeing as a practice area that students need to competently navigate within diverse communities (Giertsen et al., 2021; Turner & Pelts, 2022). More specifically, *sexual justice*, is emerging within the social work scholarship (Turner et al., 2018) as researchers, educators, and practitioners are recognizing the applicability within traditional social justice values. Further, advanced social work practice skills needed to provide sex therapy are also being discussed (Turner, 2021a). Social work students require opportunities to explore challenging topics such as sexuality, as well as gain a richer understanding of social justice as it applies to sexuality. Yet there remains limited opportunities to do this in effective ways, ways that are more than merely safe, but brave spaces (Simon et al., 2022) for the student-learner, as well as for the social work educator.

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After a successful podcast collaboration on *sexual justice* (Turner & Joseph, 2019), we were eager to bridge this gap within social work education by proposing the use of sexuality podcasts as a teaching tool for student engagement and learning. Our aim is to demonstrate the power and the practicality of this pedagogical tool to enhance the social work curricula with a more robust sexuality discourse. Recognizing that podcasts are emerging as an accessible, flexible, and effective method for exploring social work-related topics (Ferrer et al., 2020; Fox et al., 2021; Singer, 2019), we frame this exploration as a deeply personal pedagogical approach to critically examine the deeply personal. This paper contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning and provides social work educators who may be unfamiliar, unskilled, and potentially uncomfortable with sexual wellness a simple and effective pedagogical method to utilize when integrating a sexuality discourse into the preparation of social work students.

The sexuality silence in social work

There has been seemingly a silence around sexuality in social work around the world. However, there are emerging insights from international social work scholars (Areskoug-Josefsson et al., 2019; Baiocco et al., 2022; Giertsen et al., 2021; Kattari et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2018; Turner, North, et al., 2023; Truner, Pelts, et al., 2023; Willis & Hafford-Letchfield, 2022) that resoundingly support greater focus on educating social work students and emerging social work practitioners on sexuality. These researchers particularly highlight the need to support the diverse needs of vulnerable and marginalized community members as well as recognize how both the strengths approach and biopsychosocial model—hallmark social work frameworks—support the sexuality of persons served. Yet, it appears that social work governing agencies around the world are behind the current research in understanding the need for greater inclusion and implementation of sexual health and sexual wellbeing education. This is evidenced by the lack of sexual health/ wellbeing discussion or its explicit importance within key social work documents (e.g. Codes of Ethics; Global Definitions; Accreditation Standards). For example, the Australian Association of Social Workers (2020) do note that, ‘social workers work with, and on behalf of, individuals, families, groups and communities to: enhance their individual and collective wellbeing and social development’ (p. 4), but do not specifically focus on sexual health or sexual wellbeing. In addition, it is apparent that there is no reference to sexual health or sexual wellbeing within the National Association of Social Workers (USA) code of ethics, except to note that social workers, ‘seek to strengthen relationships’ (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021). It is highlighted that a cultural competency commitment be made, whereby ‘social workers should obtain education about and demonstrate understanding of’ sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (NASW, 2021). The International Federation of Social Workers make note that ‘social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing’ (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014), although no reference to sexual health and/or sexual wellbeing is made. Further, although it may be inferred that sexual wellness, access to sex education, and freedom of sexual expression is supported with the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018) of: 1. Inherent dignity of humanity; 2. Promoting human rights; 3. Promoting Social justice; 4. Challenging

Discrimination and Institutional Oppression; and, 5. Respect for Diversity, Challenging Unjust Policies and Practices; there remains no direct reference to sexual health and/or sexual wellbeing. The absence of comprehensive sex education in social work curricula internationally is unsurprising, particularly in Australia, given that the Australian Association of Social Workers does not require accredited social work programs to provide comprehensive sex education in any form. In fact, the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS, 2020), makes only four references to sexuality, emphasizing knowledge and understanding in the areas of sexual abuse and discrimination based on sexual orientation.

If the sexual-relational wellness of service-users is seen as essential to human and community well-being, then arguably, social workers not prepared to utilize a sexual wellness lens in their practice will fall short of fulfilling this purpose. However, talking with social work students about human sexuality can be challenging. This is not surprising given sexuality is often a taboo topic within social work with ‘distorted discourses and deafening silence’ (Turner, 2021b, p. 285). For both students and educators, sexuality can evoke feelings of awkwardness, stir a sense of guilt, and highlight a lack of competency or literacy (Jeyasingham, 2008; Trotter et al., 2006). Alarming, many social work students entering practice are ill-equipped to engage service-users around sexual wellbeing or participate in sexual justice advocacy (Logie et al., 2015).

Podcasting: a deeply personal pedagogical approach

Social work podcasting offers significant utility in education, with the social work podcasting literature available suggesting a primary focus on engaging listeners in: greater social work scholarship (Singer, 2019); social justice through transformative teaching (Ferrer et al., 2020); experiential learning with a novel pedagogical tool (Hitchcock et al., 2021); understanding diversity and marginalized groups (Fox et al., 2021); social work identity development (Fronck et al., 2016); accessible and cost-effective engagement with social work students (Cartney, 2013); social networking and inclusion for social workers (Schembri, 2008); clinical social work environments (Salloum & Smyth, 2013); classroom or workplace instruction methods (Wretman & Macy, 2016). We would add that social work podcasts offer opportunity for social work students and educators to explore deeply personal, intimate, and taboo topics not typically explored in traditional classroom discussions or lectures. A podcast episode positions the listener and the host in a bubble of security and trust that facilitates critical exploration. Not only is this an effective way to engage students but also for educators to introduce and explore a sensitive topic, such as sexuality, that they too may struggle with.

Discussion

While sexuality education is a valuable learning experience for students (Kirby et al., 2007), there is limited scholarship outlining how to introduce sexuality content within social work curricula (Turner & Pelts, 2022). Turner (2020) notes that ‘sexuality literacy will ideally better equip social workers to be sexual health social workers, the front-line experts in facilitating client sexual health, thereby contributing to healthy communities’ (p. 318). It is therefore an imperative to equip social work students with the knowledge

and confidence to address the needs of those they will be working with in community in this integral sphere of their lives. However, as aforementioned, sexuality discourses are often missing from social work curriculums and therefore as a direct result, social work practice competencies. Without inclusion within the classroom, the sexuality aspect of a social work student's potential future client and consumer is more likely to be treated with a continued ignorance, ambivalence, and stigmatization. Recognizing this as an issue for our students as soon-to-be practitioners, we (the authors) designed, produced, and included a sexuality podcast episode (Turner & Joseph, 2019) in our teaching curriculum, which introduces listeners to concepts such as: 'being askable'; sexual justice; a sexual wellness practice lens; and sexual rights and reproductive health rights as key principles to uphold in social work practice. As a result of our experience of including the podcast episode in our pedagogical practice, five student learning outcomes emerged, of which we suggest social work educators might consider as measures of social work practice competency as they continue to develop and integrate much needed sexuality discourses into their pedagogy. These not only serve to ground sexuality podcasts within a social work unit/course but provide educators key *take-aways* to elaborate upon in the lesson. These include: 1. Sexual wellness is social work; 2. Sexual justice; 3. Vulnerability; 4. Being askable; 5. Sensitive topics extended.

Sexual wellness is social work

Fundamentally, we believe sexual wellness is social work; a sexual wellness practice lens is best practice, whereby service-users have a right to sexual health and sexual expression. The strengths perspective, a hallmark social work principle, supports social workers to embrace service-user's sexuality as an asset, to 'discuss sexual concerns, offer [sexuality] resources and referrals to specialized providers, support client [sexual] choices, and honour client self-determination in their fulfillment of who they are as a sexual citizen' (Turner, 2020, p. 309). It has been further argued by Turner (2020) that social workers trained in a biopsychosocial *-sexual* approach favorably positions them to holistically view client sexuality beyond a pathology or medical lens.

Sexual justice

Sexuality has often been used to enforce oppression and marginalization, and unfortunately the social work academy has been complicit in curricula that historically casts service-user sexuality into the shadows where it is systematically 'shamed, segregated and silenced' (Turner & Crane, 2016, p. 2). Turner et al. (2018) have effectively examined *sexual justice* as a pillar of social work alongside human dignity, community and solidarity, rights and responsibilities, priority for the poor and vulnerable, and peace. The intentional inclusion of sexuality and sexual justice as a key determinant of liberation and emancipation found within an anti-oppressive human rights approach to practice, becomes an avenue for educator and student to engage critically on the taboo in the classroom, contributing to the de-mystifying and de-stigmatizing of sex and sexual justice.

Vulnerability

Bringing vulnerability into the social work classroom can be challenging for some educators. Researchers (Turner et al., 2022) have discussed the value of emotional intimacy within the art of social work practice and education. For educators, less comfortable, using these tools within their own lectures, a podcast can bridge the teaching space with vulnerable, lived experiences. Similar to a *fishbowl* class activity, the podcast-listening student is a voyeur to a powerful teaching moment, however, without the public exposure of a classroom.

Being askable

All social workers strive to build service-user rapport and approachability, which translates to ‘askability’. Being ‘askable’ about sexuality means that social workers explicitly create a space for client curiosity and enquiry which is a generalist social work skill relevant across all fields of practice. As noted by Turner (2020), ‘being sexually literate and “askable” provides [social workers] tools to more holistically see [service-users]’ (p. 309).

Sensitive topics extended

Teaching students to lean into the taboo, unspoken, and challenging work in the classroom, prepares students for what they will explore with service-users in practice (e.g. suicidality, mental illness, divorce, financial insecurity, drug use, physical abuse, death). Social workers are not strangers to engaging service-users in otherwise private matters. For us, helping students navigate sensitive topics such as service-users’ sexuality is not only a natural extension of core social work skills but a mandate and desire to support them to be exceptional practitioners.

Implications for social work education

While a dedicated unit/course in human sexuality may be difficult in an already stretched social work program, scaffolding integrated conversations throughout the social work curricula could serve to integrate this valuable and often missing learning within a social work student’s education. Podcasting can provide social work educators in non-sexuality focused courses (e.g. policy) a tool for connecting human sexuality to social work and in particular their unit/course. The conscious act of *pressing play* on a podcast episode enables student listener/s to feel ‘viscerally connected to what they are hearing’ (McHugh, 2022, p. 64) and perhaps more open to learning about deeply personal and often challenging topics.

We want to emphasize that we are suggesting discussions from a holistic sexuality understanding (Turner, 2020) and not merely an end note on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community. For example, challenging students to interrogate what has been historically normalized and/or marginalized regarding sexuality policies can enrich this core social work lesson. Further, extending classroom discussions around decolonizing to sexuality by examining how systems of

oppression privilege sexuality and restrict access to sexual health encourages student learners to find real-world application of social work learning.

Conclusion

By introducing social work students to a sexuality discourse we hope to instill a sexual wellness practice lens and potentially revolutionize their relationship to reproductive health and sexual justice to produce more effective social work practitioners. Social work educators embracing podcasting may be able to transcend the stigmas present when exploring sensitive and taboo topics in social work education. More importantly, podcasting may open pathways for students and educators to explore what is often avoided in the classroom, and yet is being asked of social workers in their communities.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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