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Ideating Innovative Learning Spaces in Social Work Institutions: Reflections of Student Social Workers

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This paper delves into the transformative potential of innovative learning spaces within social work education, focusing on student reflections from the experiential theatre society, Arangu. The study examines the impact on student self-perception, envisions reimagined learning spaces within social work institutions, and underscores the benefits of student co-designing for holistic growth. Through in-depth interviews with seven student social workers, the research explores perceptions of innovative learning spaces and their alignment with professional approaches. Findings reveal a profound evolution in self-perception, highlighting the significance of spaces like Arangu in nurturing hidden talents and fostering a sense of purpose. Students advocate for flexible, inclusive, and dynamic learning environments, challenging traditional structures and emphasizing the need for a personalized, interdisciplinary education. The paper concludes with implications for social work education and practice, advocating for intentional space design to meet the diverse needs of students and foster a socially responsible cohort.

INTRODUCTION

College campuses have long served as focal points for issue-based advocacy, a tradition deeply rooted in history and documented by scholars such as Altbach and Peterson (1971), Rhoads (1998), Boren (2001), Rankin (2005), Pasque and Vargas (2014), Kristof (2015), Howell (2016), and Levin and Wong (2017). Examining contemporary social movements reveals a consistent pattern: young adults leading the charge for social change, whether in addressing climate change, reforming education, advocating for healthcare, or challenging violence and war establishments.

Within the realm of social sciences, social work stands out as a critical discipline, characterised by its multidisciplinary nature (Bronstein, 2003). Despite its significance, the field faces challenges in its teaching methodologies. The imperative to enhance the cultural competencies of student social workers in a global context is increasingly recognised. In a society marked by diverse social, economic, cultural, and political differences, social work institutions in India are urged to adapt and evolve.

This imperative for inclusion-focused empowerment prompts a reconsideration of traditional classroom settings.

Encouraging students to move beyond the conventional mode of learning is crucial. Brooks (2012) emphasises the impact of the learning environment on student behaviour, illustrating that the physical setup conveys implicit messages about the roles of teachers and students. For instance, a lecture theatre setting implies that teachers speak while students listen (Chism, 2006). While teachers may view such configurations as functional based on their experiences, students often perceive these spaces as limiting their potential for imaginative growth (Jessop et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, the literature on intellectually stimulating, student-centred learning spaces (Harrison et al., 2011) in social work classrooms is limited. This research aims to fill this gap by capturing student reflections on co-designing innovative learning spaces that effectively amplify their voices within social work institutions.

Designing Innovative Learning Spaces

Social work, as a multidisciplinary profession encompassing casework, group work, and community development, places a consistent emphasis on the vital skill of reflection. Fostering critical reflection skills in social

work students is integral to their understanding of their roles in various settings and equips them to devise innovative strategies for raising awareness on diverse issues. A crucial aspect of this reflective process is the creation of a space where students feel free to express their thoughts, ideas, uncertainties, fears, and inhibitions without the fear of judgment. Winnicott (1960) aptly termed such a space a "holding environment," analogous to a safe haven where authenticity thrives. In the context of a social work classroom, this translates to a space where students can openly share, while the structure ensures alignment with the overarching goal of personal and professional development (Cait et al., 2021).

Research by Jesup et al. (2017) focuses on the significance of collegial relationships in informal settings for graduate student success. Drawing from Vygotsky's theories, Gredler (2012) and Roth and Lee (2007) advocate for dedicated spaces that encourage students to come together weekly, fostering peer-to-peer and teacher-student relationships. This, in turn, has been linked to overall student success (Cait et al., 2021; Fleck & Mullins, 2012; Harrison et al., 2011).

The assertion by Walz and Uematsu (1997) that "in a pedagogy of creativity, the first step must be to challenge existing educational conventions" (p. 26) aligns with the evolving landscape of social work education (Charfe et al., 2020; Malka, 2022). The profession increasingly embraces neoliberal approaches, including integrating arts into social work education (Carruthers, 2023). This incorporation of 'play' aids in developing students' imagination and critical thinking skills, fostering personal and social transformation. Moreover, Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal & McBride, 2020) exemplifies using performance arts as a tool for eliciting critical knowledge, urging action to challenge the status quo.

The concept of 'built pedagogy,' as coined by Torin Monahan (2002), encapsulates the idea that the design of a space shapes students' learning experiences within that space. Traditional classroom setups, with fixed tables and rows, tend to reinforce a one-way flow of information, akin to the Freirean banking concept of learning. This highlights the need to challenge assumptions about space in higher education, as identified by Chism and Bickford (2003), which often restrict learning to specific times, locations, and configurations.

The impact of space configuration on student learning experiences is well-documented. It affects students' feelings about learning and exerts powerful influences on their skills in knowledge creation, communication, and application of knowledge within the classroom (Scott-Webber, 2004). Therefore, social constructivists advocate for a shift from traditional classrooms to informal and innovative learning spaces. In the absence of such spaces, intentional designs should exhibit flexibility, comfort, sensory stimulation, tech-friendliness, and democratized de-centredness. The co-designing of these intentional spaces with students adds meaning and purpose to their educational experience, enhances their sense of self (Jin et al., 2023; Montero, 2019), and allows them to take ownership of their learning journey (Casanova et al., 2023; Salisbury et al., 2020).

Designing *Arangu*

Arangu (Malayalam for 'a platform for creative expression') emerged from a deliberate need to create a space where social work principles could be actively applied in innovative ways, facilitating the development of growth mindsets among first-year social work undergraduates. To cultivate inclusion and student agency, the initial focus of this learning space involved students collaboratively formulating their own set of rules. This process not only instilled a sense of accountability for their learning but also empowered them to take ownership of the space. The student-generated guidelines included:

- *Flexibility to Exit*: Students were entrusted with the option to step out of sessions if they found them overwhelming or overstimulating.
- *Casual Attire*: The freedom to wear casual clothes instead of uniforms was agreed upon, allowing students to express their individuality.
- *Respectful Engagement*: Students were committed to being mindful and respectful of each other's triggers, creating a supportive environment.
- *Openness to New Experiences*: Emphasising a willingness to embrace new experiences and step out of their comfort zones became a shared commitment.

Setting the tone with this collaborative exercise significantly reduced the educator's role to that of a facilitator, introducing opportunities for students to engage in as well as curate structures to mentor them.

Initially conceived as a minor research project centred on theatre for self-awareness, *Arangu* expanded its scope by

integrating student-led initiatives and providing spaces for students to assume leadership and advocacy roles. Prioritizing student agency in the design of the space led to a lower turnout initially. However, when the activities kicked off and avenues were created for students to lead or organise events under the *Arangu* project, student involvement surged. This was particularly evident in their proactive engagement in issue-based performance activities, such as short films and street plays, which initially drew hesitancy (as detailed in the vignettes section). Some students even discovered hidden talents like acting and emceeing during this learning process. Notably, on International Women's Day, they represented *Arangu* and the institution in a state-level skit competition on gender-based violence, which they co-wrote with the facilitator, securing the first-place position. Such successes served as positive reinforcements, motivating them to persist in exploring their potential further.

The facilitator complemented this journey by addressing students' socio-emotional needs through sessions tailored to their well-being. For instance, a Life Maps Activity prompted students to visually map three significant milestones from their lives, with subsequent sharing sessions conducted in a confidential setting, aligning with the crucial principles of social work. Another impactful activity involved co-designing an inter-collegiate performance poetry event 'Verses' with 35 student leaders. This collaborative effort empowered students to assume responsibilities, be accountable for assigned tasks, and successfully execute the large-scale event, drawing an anticipated audience of 250+.

Exploring Learning Spaces in Social Work Education

The literature highlights the significance of comprehending learning spaces by analyzing users' perceptions, especially those of students (Bligh, 2014; Boys, 2011; Casanova et al., 2018; Goodyear, 2020). Emphasizing collaboration in the design process, involving both students and teachers who inhabit these spaces, is a recurrent theme (Bligh, 2014). Guided by the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of student social workers towards innovative learning spaces?
- How do student social workers think innovative learning spaces can enhance their approach to the profession?

This study seeks to explore and document the personal reflections of students associated with *Arangu*, aiming to unveil their perspectives on the intentional creation of learning spaces. Specifically, the study focuses on *Arangu* to understand how such deliberate design contributes to strengthening critical thinking and advocacy skills among student social workers.

METHOD

A narrative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with seven student social workers associated with *Arangu*. All 58 students affiliated with *Arangu* were invited to express interest in participating, with seven students volunteering and providing consent for the study.

The researcher employed a 20-item self-designed open-ended questionnaire and conducted interviews, with each session lasting an average of 45 minutes. Questions were categorized into four areas:

- **Self-perception:** e.g., What are some key reflections you have had about yourself after joining *Arangu*?
- **Perception of others:** e.g., Did *Arangu* aid you in your relationship with your peers? If yes, how?
- **Institutional perception:** e.g., Do you think spaces like *Arangu* provide students the flexibility to choose how they learn? If yes, how?
- **Societal perception:** e.g., How do spaces like *Arangu* connect to your understanding of social work?

Seven interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and organized for analysis. Thematic analysis involving open coding was used to identify primary codes, which led to the identification of three broad themes:

- Impact of Creative Spaces on Student Perceptions
- Re-imagining Learning Spaces in Social Work Institutions
- Student Social Workers Co-Design Learning Spaces

The subsequent findings section will delve into the insights shared by the student social workers within these identified themes.

FINDINGS

The analysis of student responses revealed striking similarities in their perceptions of how participation in innovative learning spaces, specifically *Arangu*, contributed to an enhanced sense of self. Common themes emerged,

emphasizing the transformative potential of social work institutions actively curating safe and stimulating learning spaces. Furthermore, allowing students to co-design these spaces emerged as a catalyst for fostering a sense of ownership over their learning journey, concurrently developing leadership, collaboration, and advocacy skills.

Impact of Creative Spaces on Student Learning

Student responses revealed similar views on how their self-perception had evolved before and after joining the theatre society. They were able to explicitly identify the specific sessions that pivoted their belief in themselves including recognizing a change in how they approached social work. In their reflections, they shared how creative learning spaces like *Arangu* prompted them to step out of their comfort zones and explore hidden talents.

Expressing profound personal growth, one student shared:

"Before joining this degree, I didn't know much about myself, what I was capable of doing, or even whether social work was for me. While on one hand, the institution helped me identify my future goals, Arangu helped me find myself, especially my talents, some of which surprised me. There are limited spaces that promote learning through art, poetry, or even open discussions on social issues that are around us. Having spaces like Arangu pushed us to think about these issues and find meaning in our profession."

Highlighting the transformative inclusivity of *Arangu*, another student emphasized:

"I was a very active student in my school. Even after coming to college, I was initially quite hands-on with quite a few initiatives. But then, I slowly withdrew into a shell as I felt I was not being recognized for my efforts. And then Arangu was introduced. I never knew drama could be included in our social work education, and the way the space was designed, with an emphasis on encouraging us to be our authentic selves, I just wanted to be a part of it. The best part about it is that it was inclusive; a platform for everyone to express however they want to express themselves without any judgments."

Empowered by specific sessions, a student recounted:

"In school, I was very courageous but clueless about what to do. It was Arangu that made me realize that I can act too. It is different from a traditional classroom experience and inspiring. It encouraged me to challenge myself to try out roles for a skit on anti-dowry as well as a short film on child sexual abuse. The process we underwent was breaking down the theme and the

characters, allowing me to empathize with them and think of a social problem from multiple perspectives. We got the first prize for the skit at the state level, and that has motivated me to keep taking up more performance-based activities in college."

These testimonies highlight the transformative impact of creative learning spaces on student self-perception, revealing hitherto undiscovered talents and fostering a newfound sense of purpose within the field of social work.

Reimagining Learning Spaces in Social Work Institutions

Social work has been considered a helping profession where social workers are trained to do need analysis and think from the purview of the end users of our services. This immersive reflection requires the student social workers to learn about theories, values, principles, competencies, and views of diverse demographics. This complex web of systemic practices and transactional practices can be best embraced through creative methods of inquiry, thereby inspiring student social workers to not only think for themselves but also procure higher-order critical thinking skills in understanding a social problem.

When questioned about how they would modify their learning spaces, student social workers highlighted the need for institutions to adapt to the evolving landscape of social work. Acknowledging the growing prominence of issues like LGBTQI+ rights, disabilities, and the diverse experiences of foreign students in India, respondents emphasized the necessity of creating spaces that pave the way for open discussions without fear of judgment. They stressed upon true inclusion, urging social work institutions to proactively address these underrepresented topics.

"Our profession is all about changing the world. As the world evolves, our thoughts must too. Issues like LGBTQI+ are gaining prominence everywhere and with Kerala having a good background in promoting this community's rights, students of social work must be more vocal too. And yet, very few students engage in discussions about it. Social work institutions need to have more spaces where students can share such topics without feeling scared about coming out. The same goes for students with disabilities and even foreign students studying in India. True inclusion is missing."

Critiquing the existing structures of social work classrooms, both physical and cognitive, students called for a balance between academic rigour and students' diverse interests. They suggested modifications to classroom

layouts, advocating for flexibility in seating arrangements based on the learning mode, mirroring models observed in social work institutions outside India with movable furniture.

"Majority of the social work institutions we know in Kerala focus on structures and discipline. [Although I understand] these things are important, the institutions must strike a balance between academics and interest areas of students."

"…classroom modifications need to be flexible. The seating arrangements could vary based on the mode of learning we are opting for each lecture…seen pictures of social work institutions outside India with movable furniture."

Expressing dissatisfaction with the current lack of flexibility in choosing subjects and the rigid academic structures, students called for a more holistic approach to education. They argued for a balance between discipline and cultivating students' talents, stressing the importance of providing flexibility and guidance in selecting areas of interest. Recognizing the interdisciplinary nature of social work, students asserted that such flexibility would empower them to excel in various settings after graduation.

"Our work is interdisciplinary and we have the scope of working in more than one setting after we graduate so if we are given the choice, flexibility, and guidance to select our areas of interest, we can have a better understanding of what we are good at."

Students expressed a desire for more practical, hands-on sessions to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application. Proposing activities such as role plays and skits, they emphasized the importance of creative reinforcement of classroom learning, especially in casework scenarios. The need for self-based learning and independent research opportunities was highlighted, advocating for a shift away from traditional classroom methods. Students identified the importance of frequent opportunities to practice theories, preparing them for real-world challenges they are likely to encounter in the field.

"[I] would love to receive hands-on sessions… if we do mini sessions such as role plays or skits where we can place ourselves in the shoes of a caseworker and client,… it will help us to handle that situation better in real life."

"[…] some element of self-based learning to be included…students must be guided on how to do independent research and finding our own resources…move away from traditional classroom method."

"…must have frequent opportunities to practice theories after learning them. Student social workers are going to work in the field… so exposure helps."

These insightful narratives collectively advocate for a transformation in social work education, urging institutions to embrace flexibility, inclusivity, and coming up with creative learning spaces like *Arangu* to better prepare student social workers for the dynamic and diverse landscape of their profession.

Student Social Workers Co-Design Learning Spaces

Engaging with student social workers unearthed a continuous stream of insightful suggestions aimed at fostering personal and collective development within their academic environments. They drew attention to students' more proactive involvement in the sessions and spaces offered by their institutions, particularly those akin to *Arangu*. Acknowledging the responsibility of students to utilize available resources effectively, they highlighted the potential of these spaces to enhance interaction, personal growth, and a shift away from perceiving such learning blocks as mere breaks.

"Students must take a more proactive part in the sessions that their institutions do provide. Even when institutions offer spaces like Arangu, some students don't make use of it and think of it as a free period. The onus is also on the students to make use of the available spaces first before seeking others."

Expressing a desire for a vibrant and interactive classroom environment, students visualized spaces where peer and teacher interactions could flourish. They underlined the importance of creative learning spaces in fostering personal growth and making the learning experience more personalized and fulfilling, aligning with the principles of human rights they advocate for in their coursework.

"The course I am studying is all about protecting human rights and their choices. Just like I want my clients to experience their full potential, I want me also to reach mine…I believe having creative learning spaces allows that as more interaction amongst peers and with teachers can change existing structures…makes learning more personal."

Envisioning classrooms as platforms for advocacy, students expressed a desire for spaces where they could openly champion social issues without the fear of being reproached. They gave prominence to addressing social issues within the classroom, creating awareness, and

gradually extending their impact to the broader community, thereby building a spirit of social responsibility and proactive involvement.

"I would like to design a space where I can advocate for the social issues I believe in without the fear of being judged… so that does not get overwhelming later when we start working in the field after graduation."

"A learning space where we can create awareness on various social issues within the classroom and then slowly branch it out…create a ripple effect in our community."

Proposing flexible classroom designs, students aimed for spaces that would expose them to various domains, allowing for integration into their social work practice in ingenious ways. They drew attention to adaptability in learning environments to prepare social work students for the interdisciplinary nature of their profession.

"[would be meaningful if] we can make the classroom flexible in a way that social work students can get exposed to various disciplines and integrate that into our practice in creative and innovative ways."

Recognizing both formal and informal spaces within the institution, students highlighted the role of these spaces in reducing gaps between seniors and juniors, consequently mitigating instances of ragging and bullying. They reinforced their point of having inclusive and informal learning avenues to cater to diverse learning paces and prioritize the mental health of students, fostering a communicative and supportive community.

"We have formal spaces like Swaraj (social workers club) and informal spaces like Arangu and having access to such learning spaces helps reduce the gap between seniors and juniors…reduce instances of ragging and bullying as well."

"…we need to prioritize the mental health of the students…such considerations will automatically encourage the students to speak up…"

These profound insights from student social workers shed a spotlight on co-designing learning spaces, emphasizing not only the utilization of existing resources but also the creation of environments that actively promote engagement, advocacy, flexibility, inclusivity, and mental well-being within the social work educational landscape.

DISCUSSION

The exploration of student reflections on innovative learning spaces, particularly the experiential insights gathered from *Arangu*, opens a rich terrain for discussing the pivotal role such environments play in shaping the way social work institutions function. The narratives shared by student social workers vividly illustrate the transformation in self-perception catalyzed by engagement with creative learning spaces (Jin et al., 2023; Montero, 2019). *Arangu*, characterized by its emphasis on authenticity, inclusivity, and diverse expressive forms, emerges as a stimulus for self-discovery. Students articulate how this immersive experience facilitated a deeper understanding of their capabilities, allowing them to unearth hidden talents and redefine their identities within the context of social work.

The students' reflections pave way for the reimagining of learning spaces within social work institutions (Charfe et al., 2020; Malka, 2022). Traditional classroom structures, characterized by rigidity and a one-size-fits-all approach, face criticism for their limitations in accommodating the diverse needs and interests of students. The call for flexibility in seating arrangements, integration of diverse disciplines, and a balance between academic rigour and personal interests reflects a collective vision for holistic education. Moreover, the emphasis on creating inclusive spaces that address pressing social issues, such as LGBTQI+ rights, disabilities, and global perspectives, highlights a commitment to fostering a socially responsible and empathetic cohort of social work professionals. The students advocate for a shift from conventional learning paradigms towards dynamic, adaptive spaces that mirror the interdisciplinary nature of social work (Bronstein, 2003).

The insights shared by student social workers emphasize the significance of involving students in the co-designing of learning spaces (Casanova et al., 2023; Salisbury et al., 2020). *Arangu* stands as a testament to the benefits of providing students with agency, allowing them to actively shape the spaces that contribute to their academic and personal development. The suggestions put forth by students reflect not only a desire for responsive environments but also a proactive commitment to their growth and the cultivation of a supportive community. Co-designing is positioned as a bridge between formal and informal learning spaces, reducing gaps between seniors and juniors, and fostering a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility. The call for inclusivity and flexible learning spaces aligns with contemporary educational theories, emphasizing student-centred approaches (Harrison et al., 2011) that prioritize individual learning paces and mental well-being.

Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

The findings of this study hold significant implications for the ongoing evolution of social work education and practice. Integrating creative and experiential elements into social work education not only enhances theoretical understanding but also nurtures the skills and attitudes crucial for effective practice in diverse and evolving social landscapes. Moreover, the emphasis on the co-designing of learning spaces invites a paradigm shift in the role of students from passive recipients to active contributors and collaborators in their educational journey. This shift aligns with the principles of empowerment and agency inherent in the social work profession. The call for spaces that facilitate advocacy, open dialogue, and awareness-building points towards a vision of social work professionals who are not only well-versed in theory but are also equipped with the creativity and empathy needed to address complex social challenges.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of student reflections on innovative learning spaces reveals a multifaceted area where transformative experiences intersect with a collective vision for reimagining social work education. *Arangu*, as a creative learning space, serves as a microcosm of the possibilities within social work institutions. The discussion unravels the potential for nurturing holistic growth, empowering student agency, and fostering a socially conscious generation of social work professionals. As the field continues to evolve, the insights from this study advocate for an intentional and responsive approach to the design of learning spaces, ensuring that they align with the dynamic nature of social work education and the ever-changing demands of the profession.

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