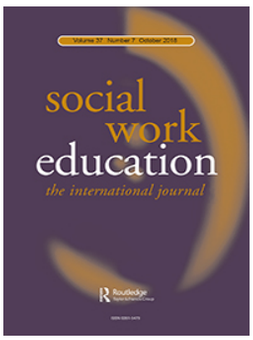

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Reimagining social work case studies: a social work—creative writing collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a joint social work and creative writing project which analysed case studies from textbooks on reading lists for the Bachelor of Social Work course at Edith Cowan University. The textbook case studies were analysed from the perspectives of both social work and literary craft and it was found that they presented simplified scenarios which were limited in terms of diversity and rarely portrayed depth or complexity. The case studies were also often bereft of information about social workers' or service users' human qualities and frequently portrayed service users in terms of the problems they presented to the social worker. The authors argue that depicting social workers and service users in this way can create the impression that social work is a distanced procedural activity and can also serve to distance service users' lives and experiences from social work students. Drawing on research in creative writing craft, as well as analysis of the textbook case studies, principles for writing engaging text-book case studies were developed and the paper concludes by arguing for the use of these principles when crafting social work case studies.

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Introduction

This paper reports on a collaborative project, between social work and creative writing colleagues at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia, which explored case studies in social work textbooks. The paper begins by providing some background to the project before discussing Australian social work education and the use of case studies. It then goes on to explore features and techniques of literary craft that the literature indicates may help facilitate engagement of the reader. Drawing on these discussions, we outline two frameworks for analysing case studies from social work textbooks and describe the processes of analysis we employed. Analysis of the case studies enabled us to identify the breadth and diversity of textbook case studies, as well as features that engaged the reader and portrayed the scenarios and characteristics of key players. The analysis revealed that the vast majority of case studies in social work textbooks provide images of social workers and service users which lack sophistication, depth and diversity, with only a small number conveying meaning and fullness in their descriptions of social workers' practice or service

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users' lives. The paper then goes on to outline 10 general principles for writing social work case studies that were drawn up as a result of conducting this analysis. We conclude by arguing for the use of these principles when preparing social work case studies for textbooks; in particular, that consideration is given to diversity and that techniques of literary craft are employed in order to engage the reader and draw them into the case studies. Adopting these principles can also help to convey the humanity of social workers and service users, and the complexity of their working practices and everyday lives.

Background

The four year full-time Bachelor of Social Work course has been offered on Edith Cowan University's regional campus in Bunbury, Western Australia since 1997. In 2010, the course was offered online for the first time and continues to be available in both modes of delivery at the time of writing. On-campus and online students complete the same assessments and it has been noted anecdotally by social work teaching staff that there is a tendency for online students to be reading and referencing more textbooks than their on-campus counterparts. In view of this, we felt it would be helpful to review the case studies in social work textbooks to get an overall sense of what they convey about social work practice.

In 2015, a University-wide restructure at Edith Cowan University led to Social Work and Arts being placed in the same School of Arts and Humanities. When the new structure was announced at the end of the year, social work and creative arts colleagues, based on the same small regional campus of the University, came together to work on a project exploring case studies in social work textbooks. Though we were keen to identify possible connections and synergies in our work and to learn from each other, we did not have a clear idea about how our collaborative project would progress. One approach to research in the creative arts, including creative writing, is to apply creative knowledge in other areas (for example, Brien & McAllister, 2016; Sword, 2012). The creative writing scholars contributing to this paper—who are practicing writers and academics—built on this tradition; and the social work scholars explored the extent to which the different fields and domains and of social work (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2014) were represented in our sample of case studies.

The first stage in our collaboration was to collate and catalogue the case studies from the textbooks on the Bachelor of Social Work reading lists. Creative writing colleagues then started to examine how the case studies had been written and the extent to which they followed the conventions of literary craft. It should be noted, however, that the authors of social work textbooks did not write their case studies with any kind of literary critique in mind. In view of this, we do not provide a list of the textbooks we analysed. Our concern in this paper is with the patterns revealed by analysis of a large number of case studies, what we can learn from this analysis regarding the overall picture of social work practice conveyed by textbook case studies, and the relevance of the skills and techniques of literary craft to the production of these case studies.

Following the initial examination of the textbook case studies, through a process of meeting and working together, we devised frameworks for analysis from the perspectives of both social work and literary craft. We also developed a collaborative approach to overall analysis of the case studies, and the writing of this paper.

Social work education and case studies

The historical development of social work in Australia can be traced to influences from the social work professions in the UK and North America (Lawrence, 2016), though it has also been argued that Australian social work has its own distinctive activist and social justice antecedents (McMahon, 2003) and contemporary concerns, such as the need for culturally sensitive social work with Indigenous communities (Cunneen & Rowe, 2014; Green & Baldry, 2008; McDonald, Harris, & Wintersteen, 2003). At the same time, social work education can be viewed as an increasingly international phenomenon (Thampi, 2017), and some social work textbooks (for example, Mullaly, 2007; Payne, 2014) can be found on reading lists across a number of different countries, alongside other more local texts. In Australia, for example, Chenowith and McAuliffe's (2014) textbook outlines contemporary fields of practice (aged care, child protection etc.) and domains of practice (work with individuals, work with families, community work etc.), which portray a broad picture of Australian social work and human services.

Australia also has a long history of distance education and was one of the first countries to move to blended or online modes of study (Bell, Bush, Nicholson, O'Brien, & Tran, 2002). In more recent years, several Australian universities have started offering social work education online; though it should be noted that all online social work students are also required to complete a specified number of days of on-campus study in order to meet the accreditation requirements of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2012). Internationally, online social work education is expanding rapidly, with positive evaluations of its comparability to face-to-face teaching (for example, Forgety & Ortega-Williams, 2016; Secret, Bentley, & Kadolph, 2016). Enthusiasm for online teaching is not, however, shared by all social work educators, some of whom have raised concerns about students' preparedness for practice, including their understanding of non-verbal communication (Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, & Fowler, 2015).

Our interest in this paper is in case studies in social work textbooks (for example, Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2014; Payne, 2014) that are used by both on-campus and online students. These are usually short written descriptions of particular scenarios and are sometimes referred to as pen pictures or vignettes rather than case studies. Despite an extensive literature search, we found little discussion of the use of case studies in social work education. There appears to be an assumption that case studies provide access to social work *cases* which can be used to study the contexts, methods and approaches of professional social work practice, though this is rarely stated. The introduction to Cohen, Gimein, Bulin, and Kollar's (2010) Real Cases Project (which provides anonymised case studies of social work in public child welfare contexts in New York) and the preface to LeCroy's (2014) book of case study examples were the only two discussions of case studies in social work education that we could find. Cohen et al. (2010, p. 4) state that case studies 'provide students with a real life example on which to practice their skills of critical analysis and assessment' and allow teaching staff 'to assist students in their application of theory into practice'. Similarly, LeCroy (2014, p. xix) views case studies as 'an action-oriented educational tool', providing realistic depictions of practising social workers which allow the student to 'vicariously participate in social work practice' (p. xx). If case studies are being viewed as a tool for vicarious participation in practice, it is clearly important that the picture of social work practice they provide should be as realistic as possible. The case studies included in Cohen et al. (2010)

and LeCroy (2014) have been selected to provide a careful and balanced depiction of practice; but the picture of social work practice built up by online students using case studies from a variety of social work texts may be quite different. It was the range and depth of this picture from textbooks that we wanted to get a sense of in this research.

The Australian Association of Social Workers does not mention case studies in their guidelines for Higher Education providers (AASW, 2012). Nor do they mention the alternative terms *case material* or *case examples* (Cournoyer, 2016; Knott & Scragg, 2016). The use of 'case' terminology in social work education textbooks perhaps reflects the profession's casework origins or foundations, though these foundations are contentious in areas such as community work, where teaching tends to focus on structural perspectives rather than individual cases (Fook, 2016). Despite these concerns, the term *case study* is in frequent use in Australian community development literature where it has a different meaning: rather than being focussed on individuals or families, a community development case study is much more extensive and takes place at the community level (Yin, 2014). Case studies are also sometimes used in evidence-based evaluation of social work interventions (Lee, Mishna, & Brennenstuhl, 2010).

Although we could find little in the literature about the use of textbook case studies in social work text education, we did locate broader discussion of case studies in professional education. For example, Walker and Gillies (2014) discuss 'Sliding Doors', an interprofessional training workshop for professionals working with older people, where actors perform 'live drama' case studies and workshop participants are enabled to see how decisions they make as professionals can change the outcomes of the case studies portrayed. Goldsmith, Wittenberg-Lyles, Shaunfield, and Sanchez-Reilly (2011) similarly use 'unfolding' case studies to teach medical students about communication in palliative care, and Jenkins and Schwartz (2017) discuss the use of 'dynamic' case studies on a gerontology course, where the family situation students are addressing as part of their group assignment changes over time.

Our interest in this paper, however, is in the short text-based case studies in social work textbooks (for example, Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2014; Payne, 2014). An initial perusal of some of these textbook case studies found that most are very brief, contain little depth in terms of cultural, social or historical context and present information in a largely factual manner, which does little to engage or draw in the reader. We felt it would be helpful, therefore, to undertake wider analysis of the case studies in social work textbooks to see if these initial observations were reflected more generally. Before describing our approach to this analysis we turn first to a discussion of literary craft.

A review of literature regarding literary craft

A broad review of literature pertaining to literary craft displays considerable consistency in what are regarded as the key techniques of effective and engaging writing. The most important aspects, in relation to this research, concern characterisation and language choices that offer relevant and telling details, where skilful selection of detail can encourage readers to empathise with people presented in their authentic contexts. Related aspects of creative writing craft can support effective characterisation, including writing in scenes, and using dialogue that reveals emotion and complexity. These ideas are summed up by Janet Burroway, Stuckey-French, and Stuckey-French (2011) in their respected and comprehensive guide to narrative craft. However, Burroway and her co-writers remind us that: 'No amount of

concrete detail will move us … unless it also implicitly suggests meaning and value' (2011, p. 26). The significance of detail is repeated throughout the literature, especially as it pertains to characterisation. We are reminded that characters must be 'authentic' (Hewson, 2012, p. 8), 'interesting' and 'believable' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 73), and that this is best achieved through showing people in their contexts rather than just delivering facts.

Dialogue brings characters to life because it 'represents an effort … to externalise the internal and to manifest not merely taste or preference but also deliberate thought' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 74). In addition to direct quotation, dialogue may be summarised as part of the narrative, or 'reported in the third person as *indirect speech* so that it carries, without actual quotation, the feel of the exchange' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 74, emphasis in original). Dialogue should also 'suggest image, personality, or emotion' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 76). Descriptions of appearance, clothing and objects can also be used to 'make statements of internal values that are political, religious, social, intellectual and essential' (2011, p. 117). Such direct presentation of characters actively engages readers by allowing them to draw their own conclusions (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 123). Characterisation through authorial interpretation, on the other hand, allows the author to convey more information in a smaller space. However, the disadvantage of this is that 'it distances the reader as all generalisations and abstractions tend to do' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 123).

Characterisation also relates to choices regarding point of view, which determines the presentation of characters' thoughts. Just as with speech, character thought can be offered via summary, indirectly, or directly and like speech, character thought reveals information at the same time as it can 'set mood, reveal or betray desires, develop theme' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 121). Third person point of view offers authorial access to events as well as access to a character's mind; it places a character in context but loses closeness to their inner thoughts and feelings (Hewson, 2012, p. 27), and so 'mimics our individual experience of life … our own inability to penetrate the minds and motivations of others' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 302). First person point of view is a 'very direct and personal way to engage our audience' (Hewson, 2012, p. 19), in which the narrative voice conveys its own knowledge and interpretations.

Good writing structure is generally discussed in terms of the classical beginning, middle and end (Hewson, 2012, p. 96; Neilsen, 2012, p. 136; Wilkins, 2012, p. 47). Burroway and her co-writers deal with structure in terms of 'conflict, crisis and resolution', because 'in literature only trouble is interesting' (2011, p. 249, emphasis in original). Wilkins notes that short fiction can have short endings (2012, p. 48), and Hewson reminds us that open ended conclusions can leave questions unanswered and challenge readers to fill the gaps—'Resolutions tend to be more like the world we know: asymmetrical, awkward, incomplete and occasionally unjust' (Hewson, 2012, p. 217). Writing structure should be presented as a balance of summary and scenes. Scenes—'dialogue and action that take place between two or more characters over a set period of "real" time'—allow the reader to experience the story with the characters (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 210). While scenes depict a moment of change or significance, summary can 'suggest contrast with the past, intensify mood, or delay while creating suspense' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 213). Summary narration 'may give information, fill in a character's background, let us understand a motive, alter pace, create a transition, leap moments or years' (Burroway et al., 2011, p. 209), but should nonetheless use concrete details that are 'vivid and specific' and not a 'general, perfunctory summary' (p. 210).

Language choices are fundamental to all the concerns addressed in this brief literature review, and specific detail is of particular importance. Carlson writes that 'concrete and vivid imagery' is necessary for a story to be 'involving' (2012, p. 13). For Neilsen, 'authenticity' is linked to 'concrete and particular details' (2012, p. 142), where diction should be 'fresh' and include 'juxtapositions' (p. 135). Burroway writes that detail is achieved through appeals to the senses (2011, p. 22), and emotion is best conveyed through 'precise physical sensations experienced by the character' (p. 28). But it is the *selection* of detail that is of utmost importance: less can be more where the detail selected reflects meanings and values, rather than the cold factual detail of demographic information.

Our discussion turns now to methods of collating and analysing the case studies from social work textbooks.

Methods

We began by identifying all 28 teaching units listed in ECU's 2015 Bachelor of Social Work Handbook. Units of study which focus on professional social work practice (for example, placement units, units linking theory and practice), or particular fields of practice (for example, Child Protection or Mental Health), were selected for analysis. Teaching units which had a more general remit (for example, Social Research or Australian Politics and Policy) were excluded. This resulted in a total of 13 selected units of study. Core reading lists for the 13 selected units were then examined and found to contain a total of 110 textbook items (whole texts, chapters or sections). Journal papers and other non-textbook items were not included in our research. There was considerable overlap in the textbooks on the 13 reading lists and once duplicated texts were removed and the remaining books checked to see if they included case studies, we were left with a total of 19 textbooks containing case studies. All 19 books were obtained in hardcopy and all of the case studies contained within these texts were scanned and saved individually with a unique identifier. This process resulted in a total of 362 individual case studies which were available for analysis.

Two research assistants worked on the analysis of the case studies; a social work honours student and an arts researcher with a PhD in creative writing. Each of the research assistants analysed the case studies from the perspective of their own discipline, with guidance from the overall research team (our team comprised three researchers and two research assistants, all of whom are listed as authors of this paper). At the outset, we did not have a clear idea about how the analysis would proceed, but we began by analysing a small number of case studies and meeting as a group to discuss the initial findings. The patterns in the data that were becoming evident in this preliminary analysis convinced us to conduct quantitative analysis of the case studies (numbers of case studies about child protection, numbers written in the first person etc.) as well as more nuanced qualitative analysis. We describe below the frameworks for analysis that were developed by the team.

Framework for analysis—social work

To develop a framework for the social work analysis, we reviewed Chenoweth and McAuliffe's (2014) discussion of the fields and domains of social work and human service practice and began mapping the case studies against these fields and domains (for example, working with individuals, group work, family violence, mental health etc.). As the analysis progressed,

more categories represented in the case studies were added; these included diverse backgrounds and different age groups, as well as contemporary issues in social work practice such as working with refugees and workplace bullying.

Framework for analysis—literary craft

The framework for the literary analysis of the textbook case studies was developed from the review of literary craft above. This resulted in three broad categories of *characterisation*, *structure* and *language*. Within each of these categories, particular questions were raised for the researcher to answer in relation to all 362 case studies:

> Characterisation: Are characters shown in their settings in a revealing way? Are characters engaging, authentically complex individuals, rather than two dimensional clichéd figures? What point of view is used?
>
> Structure: Is there a clear narrative structure of *beginning*, *middle* and *end*? Is there a balance of summary narration (which directs a reader) and direct presentation in scenes (where readers draw their own conclusions)? Does the ending leave questions unanswered?
>
> Language: Does the selection of concrete and vivid detail reveal characters' emotions and values? Is there a title that reveals a layer of meaning?

A data matrix was drawn up within an Excel spreadsheet and analysis of all 362 case studies was conducted from the two different perspectives (social work and literary craft). The research team also met regularly to discuss progress and develop our overall analysis. Following research team discussions, two further categories were added and both research assistants recorded whether or not the service user perspective was reflected in the case study, and whether or not the researcher reading the case study found it engaging. Research team discussions were also audio-recorded, transcribed and incorporated into this paper.

Findings

Taking our sample as a whole, many contemporary issues in Australian social work practice were represented in the case studies in the 19 textbooks. The majority (60%) of the 362 case studies were about social work with individuals and only 8% considered group work; though it should be noted that there were several case studies which covered more than one domain of practice. In total, 63% of the case studies discussed aspects of professional practice, while 9% presented ethical dilemmas. A considerable proportion of the case studies looked at workplace bullying or organisational dynamics (27%). Whilst it is important to prepare students for work in organisations, we felt the large number of examples in this area was at the expense of other issues which could have been explored. For example, only 7% of the case studies were written from service users' perspectives, and more than half of those came from one textbook. Social work increasingly takes place in multicultural societies and educational institutions are now expected to prepare students for work with people from diverse backgrounds (Bo, 2015, p. 562). However, only 14% of the case studies identified people (social workers, service users or others) from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The number of case studies that identified Aboriginal people was even fewer at just 3%, and only 2% were about working with refugees. Twenty-two per cent of the 362 case studies were related to mental health, which reflects contemporary practice in Australia and the AASW-mandated mental health curriculum (Morley & Macfarlane, 2010, p. 47);

though other contemporary issues were less well reflected. For example, few case studies were about poverty (8%), disability (7%), aged care (7%), family violence (5%), grief and loss (4%) or LGBTIQ issues (1%). There were no case studies in our sample of 362 which considered elder abuse.

Overall, the review of the case studies suggested that most (86%) have sufficient scene setting and development but only in rare instances are the scenes set to engage the student in anything other than sterile surroundings. Many of the case studies are laid down in a series of short statements approximating literary parataxis, the effect of which is described by Cudden (1999, p. 638) as 'terseness and compression'. The use of parataxis enables the writer to squeeze the 'necessary' information into a few short sentences, lacking the elements of a story that might appear within a narrative arc. Most of the examples have sufficient 'facts' (name, age, race, gender, marital status, etc.) but are delivered within a paragraph that is stripped of humanness. The vast majority of the case studies (94%) were written in the third person, with only 5% of the total being presented as first person narratives. In 59% of the case studies, there was no clear narrative arc; that is, no discernible beginning, middle or end that might offer character development.

Most of the case studies were presented around a 'problem' and the people in the case studies (social workers and service users) were frequently devoid of personality. In those case studies where the service user's experience or perspective was missing, it was particularly difficult to separate the problem from the person. This is perhaps surprising, given social work education's focus on strengths-based practice (Probst, 2010). The lack of a clear narrative arc also made it difficult to engage fully with the case studies, as they tended to present impersonal information, rather than social workers', service users' or family members' perspectives or experiences. Overall, the case studies failed to draw in their readers, leaving both research assistants unable to identify more than two or three case studies that they found 'engaging'.

Despite these criticisms, a large percentage (86%) of the case studies included relevant or telling detail, with only a small minority lacking sufficient information. We acknowledge that providing such minimal information may prompt students to imagine the detail for themselves, particularly where they are working in groups, and that this may counter-intuitively provide a richer learning experience. It is important to note, however, that online students may have fewer opportunities for the kinds of group discussions where these details can be filled in, and they are likely, therefore, to be more reliant on the learning materials provided (Sawrikar et al., 2015). Moreover, if the selection of detail in case studies primarily aims to deliver demographic markers, the essential qualities that humanise social work's users and practitioners are lost.

In 85% of case studies, there was a lack of emotive language and, of the rest, the emotive language was arguable at best. There was a dearth of passionate speech or depth of feeling. In many of the case studies, the service user was portrayed almost as a prop, or mute puppet. Many of the case study characters (social workers as well as service users) were devoid of the personality essential to the telling of a story; personality that gives a story its strength and vitality and allows the reader to *relate* to its characters and, in effect, to bond. Surprisingly, only 5% of the case studies were felt by researchers to elicit empathy, that element of humanness with which a person identifies themselves with an animate or inanimate object (Cudden, 1999, p. 257).

Building on our analysis of the 362 case studies, we developed 10 principles for writing social work case studies, which we list below.

Principles for writing social work case studies

The first four principles relate to content of the case studies and the remaining six cover issues of style.

(1) *Service user perspectives*—wherever possible, case studies should include service users' perspectives and not just provide the social worker's view of the service user's situation. While the social worker's perspective is invaluable in enabling students to gain an understanding of professional practice, the lack of service user perspectives can disengage students from the reality of service users' lives. It is particularly important to avoid presenting service users as 'problems' that need fixing.
(2) *Diverse backgrounds*—social work case studies should reflect the diversity that is present in contemporary society. This reflection of diversity should extend to representations of social workers within case studies as well as service users, as many social workers are themselves from diverse backgrounds.
(3) *Humanness*—every effort should be made to avoid objectifying the service users and practitioners portrayed in case studies, as this may undermine their humanness. It is also important to avoid setting up a distance between service user and practitioner as this may serve to further objectify service users.
(4) *Challenge/stimulation*—the purpose of case studies as a learning tool should be to challenge and stimulate the student social worker and encourage them as they develop as a professional and manoeuvre their way through the complexities of social work practice. The goal should be to support students to 'think on their feet' and apply learning from case studies to practice in the field.
(5) *Engagement*—it is imperative that the reader is engaged with the case study and the study should be constructed to ensure this. The writer should capture the attention of the reader by creating characters through emotive and complex descriptions of dialogue, appearance, actions and thoughts.
(6) *Characterisation*—characters should be drawn so they reveal authenticity and emotional complexity, therefore avoiding two dimensional and stereotypical depictions. This can be achieved through appropriate selection of detail and language choices.
(7) *Structure*—the case study should be structured to help the student experience the story alongside the characters, as well as leaving space for them to think for themselves. This might be achieved by employing the structural device of writing in scenes, the use of dialogue, and open endings that leave questions unanswered.
(8) *The importance of 'I'*—a first person narrative puts the reader at the forefront in any situation. 'I' is the one most familiar, the most engaging. The student needs to 'feel' the scene and the first person point of view allows for this inclusion.
(9) *Title*—the title should introduce the case study and offer foreknowledge of content by including relevant and telling details, which allow the reader to be engaged from the outset.
(10) *Vibrancy*—language should be used with care to ensure that the case study is lively rather than a monotone grey. To do this, the case study should select concrete,

relevant and telling detail as well as terminology that is innovative, progressive and up-to-date.

Discussion

The 362 textbook case studies reviewed in this research form only a small part of the overall social work curriculum. All of the textbooks reviewed also contain substantial discussion within the book's main text and we are aware, moreover, that social work lecturers supplement textbook case studies with additional teaching and resources in both face-to-face and online classrooms. Busy students may, however, search for a case study related to a specific area of practice, or a particular course assignment. Based on our sample, it would appear that the likelihood of social work students finding a textbook case study in several important areas of contemporary social work practice is very limited, given the low percentages in which they are represented; for example, LGBTIQ issues (1%) and elder abuse (0%). Many of the case studies reviewed employ parataxis, a literary technique that enables the writer to present the 'necessary' information in a few short sentences without the connective tissue that suggests nuanced meanings and relations, which may detract from students' ability to critically appraise the situation and to elicit their own considered response. It may also serve to distance the case study's characters from the reader and detract from their humanness. It is possible, therefore, that from a student's perspective, the case studies may create the impression that real-life service users, like their case study counterparts, are characters who lack emotion or personality; or that real-life social work with service users is a distanced, procedural activity. It is this capacity of textbook case studies to distance their characters (predominantly social workers and service users) that we wish to highlight; along with the potential of the techniques of literary craft to bring characters within case studies closer to their readers. It is important to note, however, that our sample only included case studies from 19 social work textbooks; we cannot therefore generalise our findings to the many other social work texts published internationally.

LeCroy (2014) suggests that a key objective of the use of case studies is to teach students about the processes of social work practice and to enable them to 'vicariously participate' in that practice. Social work students reading 94% of the textbook case studies we reviewed will experience that practice in the third person, which encourages distance from the action rather than encouraging a sense of participation in the case study. Third person writing also serves to distance students from the vicarious learning the case study has to offer. In the hands of a creative writing expert, a reader's experience of engagement and empathy with the people and situations presented can be managed such that the perception of distance is controlled, regardless of the technical point of view employed in the telling. Point of view operates on a sliding scale, based on choices of narrative voice, from third person omniscient, in which the writer has complete authorial access to all events, situations, minds and truths, to the first person perspective that speaks only of 'I'. For writers of case studies, it is enough to know that having an 'I character', whether that person is a service user, social worker, or neighbour observing an interaction, situates the teller's perspective and, importantly, reminds the reader that the case study *has* a perspective, which is, therefore, partial. This is the most important message we wish to convey in this paper but we would encourage

the authors of social work case studies to refer to the ten principles for writing social work case studies outlined above, which can be summarised as follows:

> Wherever possible, the case study should be written in the first person. Its content should incorporate service user perspectives, diverse backgrounds and provide a sense of humanness, whilst at the same time presenting a challenge to the reader. It should be written in a style that engages readers through informal and believable language choices and the presentation of authentic and complex characters and situations.

Creative writing students at ECU have been using the 10 principles above to re-craft existing case studies as engaging stories, with the constraint that no more than the original number of words may be used. Several of these stories illustrate powerfully how much difference writing in the first person can make. We include below an example about an elderly man called Sam. It is important to state that the textbook in which this case study appears also includes additional guidance for students, including diagrams illustrating possible levels of intervention and questions about what the student might do if they were the practitioner responsible for arranging for Sam to leave hospital. We are not, therefore, wishing to criticise the content of this case study, or the skill with which it has been crafted, but rather to attempt to reimagine it using the principles outlined above.

Case study (206 words)

> Sam is an elderly man in his late 70s. Sam was widowed about five years ago and now lives alone in the family home in an ordinary suburb. He and his wife bought the house 50 years before and raised their three children there. Their two sons live in another city and have families of their own. They visit every year for a short stay and ring Sam every week or two to see how he is going. Sam has a daughter, Margaret, who lives two suburbs away. Margaret is divorced and has three children: Mark, 23, and Louise, 21, who are both studying, and Rachel, who is in her final year at high school. Margaret works full-time for a finance company. She has a very busy life yet sees Sam every weekend. Sam recently had a slight stroke that left him paralysed down his left side. He has been in hospital for several weeks and is currently having rehabilitation. The hospital now want to discharge him because they need his bed. Sam had stated firmly that he is not going into a nursing home and will be moving back home. The staff have concerns about how well he will be able to manage without help. (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2014, p. 191)

The style of writing in the case study above—using third person point of view and short sentences that deliver mostly demographic information—is similar to that used in many of the case studies we reviewed and seems to be a standard format in social work textbooks. The following reimagined case study employs first person point of view in which the service user's perspective is central. We hear Sam's voice subtly invest facts with meaning, and the title offers insight that isn't problem-oriented.

Keeping Sam at home (188 words, including title)

> My name's Sam and I'm a healthy seventy-eight-year-old. I lost my beloved wife Trudy five years ago but I still live in the home we shared for fifty years, where we raised our three children. My two sons live quite far away but they visit every year, and they often ring to see how I'm going and to share what's happening in their lives. My daughter Margaret's divorced and lives close by. Even though she works full time and is very busy with three children, all studying, she visits me every weekend. I recently had a slight stroke and now I'm paralysed down my left side. I've spent several tedious weeks in hospital but I've made great progress with my rehabilitation. The hospital wants to discharge me because they need my bed, but I'm not ready to go into a nursing home yet. I'm going to need help to manage but I don't see why I should give up my

home permanently, just because I'm not quite ready to do everything for myself. I hope you can find a solution that works for everyone.

Conclusion

We plan to develop our project further and to obtain funding to work with both social workers and service users to write case studies for social work education using the techniques of literary craft. In this way, we hope to convey social workers' and service users' humanity, as well as some of the complexities of their practice and everyday lives. Humanity and complexity are essential areas of learning for all social work students and should not be minimised or elided, as appears to be the risk with many of the textbook case studies reviewed for this study. Social work educators need to find multiple ways of enabling students to learn about humanity and complexity, whether that learning takes place face-to-face, or (as is increasingly likely) in online settings. Reimagining social work case studies using the techniques of literary craft offers one such way of doing this.

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