Knowledge building for practice: *resilience* in social work student engagement.

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an exploration of building resilience for social work through the design and delivery of first-year university curriculum. Social workers involved in social justice/social change contexts require a high degree of resilience and ingenuity in being able to adapt to the profession's complexities. This is not a definitional or scientific undertaking, but rather a response to both fragility and creativity of human endeavour. In many social work programs there are subject choices that mean little to the incoming student. A first-year enrolment pattern could include a first-level communication subject alongside a second or third-level cross-cultural counselling one. The skills required for such engagement are multi-layered, and similar to a process the authors identify as simultaneous cross-adjustment in 'bouncing back' from adversity. They argue that building knowledge and resilience from first-year 'vulnerability' in the foundation year will foster relevant coping mechanisms despite initial misgivings from both students and educators.

Keywords: human services; social work; resilience; social work education; social work practice; praxis

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The strengths perspective advantages social work educators as it sits closer to the resilience paradigm currently in vogue in all educational and training endeavours. While this perspective credits the students with a sense of recognition of their own personal strengths and assets, it also provides the motivation to signpost their goals (Pulla, 2014; 2012; Saleebey, 2008). In the short term, it assists in teasing out any tensions and problems within the context of university education. The strengths perspective is introduced by the authors, as part of a methodical framework that has the potential to address both fragility (Dominelli, 2011) and creativity in the classroom learning environment to evolve into effective and sustainable practice in the workplace.

This framework includes resiliency development (Pulla, 2013a) within the student in regards to social work, whereby resilience is a tool for maintaining optimum mental and emotional well-being as a result of an individual making meaning following challenges in the context of their social world, for example, as in the context of being a student. Simply put, it relates to the student's ability to 'bounce back' after any adverse experience; even crisis. Inevitably, human life involves stressors, disruptions and adversities which are sometimes out of a person's control (Pulla, 2013b). Any action that a person then takes to alleviate, tolerate, accept or minimize the stressors is what may be defined as a coping strategy and the use of these strategies allows for the building of information and skills to allow for future coping (Pulla, 2013b).

 Resiliency thus in the context of students is, "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar et al, 2000, p. 543). Resiliency is also viewed as being concerned with the otherwise simplistic common processes involved in individuals overcoming significant life challenges like for example, university study for the first time. Resiliency is not a uni dimensional variable; most individuals do not simply fit the categories of being resilient or not resilient; if they are first year students they are most-likely best identified on a continuum of resiliency.

Typical of Australian higher education in 2014, social work and human services students at Charles Sturt University (CSU) come into their first year of study through different transitioning pathways and bases of enrolment. Some can be particularly vulnerable to disappointment and confusion when things are not always as they first appear; their fledgling

passion to enter or build on current practice in the area is tested from the very start. The Australian Association of Social Workers *Supervision Standards* (2014) highlights the need for social workers to start to build a professional practice that has to be able to deal with ambiguities, tensions, and complexities of future work, and these challenges can be addressed through educative and supportive strategies. Therefore, the consideration of pre-emptive and focused intentional engagement in both design and delivery of appropriate curriculum is critical for the development of resilient social worker and social welfare (human services) professionals. Additionally, the challenge of coping successfully with complex enrolment situations throughout a course of study can provide a useful platform for any student success.

This paper is a reflection and critique of teaching practice; an opinion piece that explores the way that teaching delivery and curriculum design helps to build resilience in first-year university students. The ideas relate specifically to social work/social welfare education but with resonance for other disciplines; about the pedagogical approaches used to foster resilience in students as they embark on the journey to becoming professional human services workers. As part of their introduction to working within a social justice and human rights framework, social work/welfare students are advised very early that "they cannot practice unknowingly" (Mlcek, 2013), and yet as university social work educators we often accept students 'knowingly' into a program of study where they might be enrolled in both a first-level communication subject, and a second/third-level cross-cultural competence subject at the same time. This 'knowing' is both intuitive and recognised at the subject level of social work courses/programs. That is, each one of us is endowed with the potential to raise our awareness. Students in general attempt to cultivate awareness over a period of time by wilfully allowing it to flow or work in a specific direction and can thus increase their knowledge of the subject matters of social work.

The undertaking of such subjects together requires gradated levels of sophisticated thinking and action. By the six-month mark of their first year, these students are also well on the way to understanding and embracing the idea of engagement through *praxis*, through intentional practice. Knowing and intent pose different kinds of pedagogical struggles for both students and lecturers because they manifest as quite different forms of practice that can often sit at opposite ends of the learning and teaching spectrum.

When students know what is expected of them at university, this knowledge helps to build a belief in ability and their self-esteem (Hearn et al, 2014), but this 'knowing' does not always easily transfer to intentional engagement that requires the actual mastering of the role of being a student. Collier and Morgan (2008, p. 426) refer to the "implicit expectations" and "tacit

understandings" that are integrated throughout the university study experience. Additionally, Devlin (2011, p. 3) suggests that, "Success at tertiary level depends on understanding these unspoken requirements and being able to perform in ways that meet them". Furthermore, "…the student who better understood the need to respond to the tacit expectations of university staff members would perform better" (Devlin, 2011, p. 3). However, the 'cannot practise unknowingly' does not come from a place of readily accessible knowledge and understanding. Neither should it be acceptable that first-year students begin to master the art of being a successful student through 'trial and error', but be taken to a point of resilience through access and equity of information, that is practised with the intentional participation of student, lecturer/educator and institution all together. Interestingly, Perry (2011) speaks about people not being born with resilience, but having to learn resilience and one of the key requirements for this to happen is through a sense of safety.

The links between vulnerability and resilience. Resilience in social work is not a new consideration. One hundred years ago, Abraham Flexner (1915) praised social workers for their altruism but also noted that their work seemed to be without end. Coping constructively with sometimes-crisis situations requires an ongoing tool-box of ideas and strategies that benefits the practice of resilient workers who are knowledgeable, skilled and both reflective as well as critical thinkers. Close to Flexner's time, another pivotal influence on social work education was making his mark that is still felt today. In *The Meaning of Adult Education*, the author Eduard Lindeman (1926), himself a social worker from the New York School of Social Work, demonstrated his very deep insight into how adults learn; the basis of this came from his practice of *Andragogy* – the science of helping adults to learn. The cornerstones for him and adult learning were that, "the whole of life is learning" (p. 5), and the importance of the context of education acknowledging that, "experience is the adult learner's living textbook" (p. 7). But it is clear that deconstructing the idea of 'the science of helping adults to learn' requires the pedagogical spotlight to be placed firmly on the practice of educators.

Learning and teaching literature abounds with the ideas of the struggle of first-year students at university; depending on their circumstances, they could be, for example, particularly vulnerable to the disappointment and confusion created by early assessment failure (Potter, 2009). At these times, feelings of being inadequate in some way; not being 'smart enough for university' can become overwhelming and in entrenched cases of vulnerability, can lead students to abandon their studies altogether. At the level of subject engagement, "Students negotiate assignment pathways to sustain a sense of control, confidence and connection" (McDowell,

2008, p. 423), and part of this process relies on a commitment to find the best way forward to overcome hurdles; a positioning of oneself within the study context. While resilience comes from intentional engagement in a particular situation, the idea of engagement without the intent is arguably both a contested and contestable concept. Baron and Corbin (2012) for example, have dedicated a whole paper to querying whether the idea of student engagement is both rhetoric and reality. Their reasoning about the "ubiquitous nature" of student engagement at university comes from the rhetoric that student engagement is somehow an indicator of an institute's success, alongside the growing reality of academic staff perception of a "trend towards disengagement amongst the student cohort" (Baron et al, 2012, p. 759). However, there is no doubt that their ideas about an "active participation" being aligned to "student resilience" (Baron et al, 2012, p. 759) is supported by others, especially where this resilience has resonance in promoting lifelong learning (Markwell, 2007; Salamonson et al, 2009).

Resilience is the harnessing of emotions and feelings through the taking of risks and challenges and it is all about the 'bouncing back' (Pulla, 2013a). Both Lawrence (2005) and Devlin (2011) suggest that students be given a chance to take risks and participate in opportunities that will give them both the immediate ammunition to deal with new university study situations, as well as the beginnings of sustained capacity to be part of a new learning community with all its different socio-cultural and discursive expectations, rules and incongruities. From the above ideas, there are at least two relevant notions of building resilience that feed appropriately into this paper; the active agency of the student, and the facilitation of student success through 'being given a chance' in a kind of joined-up responsibility that is more than just partnership-speak. That is, we often hear and read about the need for student responsibilities in higher education courses, particularly around the acquisition of phenomena like academic cultural capital, and literacy and language skills, but what about lecturer/educator responsibilities? The ideas here resonate with those inferred through a science of helping adults to learn.

One such responsibility would be to acknowledge the changing make-up of students today, and the different creative ways that can be designed to encourage their participation. Some sources suggest that students today are not "passive recipients of the middle and upper-class culture and discourse of university" (Devlin, 2011, 7), and are more inclined to be seen as less vulnerable while trying to establish their university and professional identities. However, lecturers/educators can play a big part in this learning transformation for students; in fact research by Luckett and Luckett (2009, p. 476) indicates that facilitating the development of

agency, in student identity development, is of critical importance in higher education. The "finding out journey" particularly in the first year of study, is at least a two-way responsibility between student and educator in order to limit vulnerability – made up potentially of wounded feelings and emotions - whilst building resilience. This first-year of study has to start to equip social work students for at least a 4-year undergraduate degree program which may also be undertaken in some cases, with simultaneous professional practice.

*The effect of heterogeneous enrolment on building student resilience.*The changing nature of student enrolments into higher education means that individual lives could, apart from study in a university degree, involve: bringing up children; working full-time even, and possibly caring for elderly parents or relatives. Australian universities capture data about the bases of enrolment of students that relate to phenomena which could impact and affect the success or otherwise of transition into university study, such as: different socio-economic status, being the first-in-family to come to university, transitioning from a technical college following high school, or being an Indigenous Australian. Depending on circumstances, students could well find themselves also dealing with the negative effects of poverty impacting their university experience. Devereux et al (2004, p. 10) highlight the lack of internet access and essential resources such as textbooks as being two of the main deterrents for students that could last for the whole time that they are undertaking their degree program.

That is, situations do not necessarily get better; continual social barriers, such as income and lack of disposable cash, as well as tertiary literacy development and therefore success in individual subjects, only become entrenched. Students will often try to reduce the negative impacts of the above through the courses they take, and even the enrolment patterns they choose within those courses. However, when students enrol in first-year patterns that seem to not only focus on higher level subjects than those from traditionally first-year levels, but also 'mix' those levels within their program, adequate literacy capacity and development becomes problematic (Mlcek et al, 2013). The taking of risks and challenges becomes finely-balanced with the extent to which vulnerability is managed.

METHODOLOGY – AN OBSERVATION OF PRACTICE

A grounded theory approach of situating practice and theorising (Usher et al, 1989; Charmaz, 2006), with authors-as-participants/observers was utilised to evaluate aspects of curriculum design and delivery, in two Charles Sturt University (CSU) human services subjects: *Communication and human services*, and *Developing cross-cultural competencies*. Their inclusion in a possible suite of first year subjects provided a useful initial context for looking at the complex

nature, not only of enrolment, but of the teaching delivery strategies required to build student resilience.

Qualitative observation was the lens through which an analysis was made about the applicability of the above subjects to engage first-year students in building resilience for future studies. The Introduction and literature review implies a useful analytical framework that includes the following units of analysis: *resilience* developing from vulnerability [emotions and feelings], and *resilience* developing from intentional engagement.

*Evaluation and analysis.*The course architectural context for social work curriculum accommodates the following, as examples, of possible subject combinations of enrolments at this University : HCS102 [communication & human Services], HCS204 [research methods], PSY113 [child & adolescent development], WEL218 [developing cross-cultural competencies]; *or* HCS321 [child welfare practice], HCS406 [human rights]; *or* PSY113 [child and adolescent development], PSY216 [psychology of ageing]; *or* HCS102, HCS204 [research methods]; *or* HCS310 [mental health practice], HCS405 [4th-year theory and practice]; *or* SOC102 [social inequality], SPE211 [foundations in social policy], SWK423 [ethics & social work practices]; *or* HCS102, HCS310, SPE211; *or* HCS406, HCS111 [introduction to social welfare], WEL218, SOC101 [introductory sociology].

A student's *copeability* may attract the following considerations about their choice of enrolment, for example:

1. First Year Enrolment combinations [a full-time load across two semesters/sessions in a year]: HCS102, HCS111, PSY111, SOC101, HCS103, PSY113, SOC102, PSY216.

    o Perceived difficulties: Depending on the student, there could be a serious mismatch of development between discipline subjects. For example, in this pattern, there are just three human services [HCS] subjects, with three psychology subjects across two levels, and two sociology subjects. If not monitored closely, a student could end up 'passing' just two from eight first-year subjects.

    o Assumptions: That everything a student needs to continue through their program will be taught in the first year subject. There is no need to provide further opportunity to: build skills, add to skills, practice skills, or contextualise skills.

2. First Year Enrolment combinations [a part-time load across two semesters/sessions in a year]: HCS102, HCS204, PSY113, WEL218.

- o Perceived difficulties: Many social work educators are not prepared for the connection between multiple literacies that are required to complete this potentially 'difficult' combination of subjects that cover: communication; introduction to research methods; child and adolescent development, and developing cross-cultural competencies.

- o Assumptions: Wherever there is WEL218, many students from different cultures believe this will be 'easy', but in actual fact, this is rarely the case (Mlcek et al, 2013).

Issues can become challenging when students studying in a primarily social work course, must also complete subjects from other 'service' disciplines and those experiences can be more unique, isolated, or 'removed' even, from their program. The delivery of service subjects from other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences: Philosophy; Sociology, and Psychology, compounds both the complexity and range of considerations to ensure students have as consistent an experience as possible. While the overall course architecture operates within a highly professional accreditation environment, as per the Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW] guidelines, the reality is that different disciplines are characterised by different practice philosophies around learning and teaching pedagogies. Also, individual educators are not robotic by nature; they add interesting and creative dimensions to the student experience which is so important for orientation to university study and work in all aspects of the social work profession.

Therefore, the heterogeneity of student enrolment becomes an interesting assessment by the social work educators themselves; the reality is that students quite often have to 'take two bites of the cherry'; to re-do subjects not just once but twice, especially when other service subjects are involved. Transition is about movement from one place to another and also about moving through situations, but where success is not always guaranteed across undertaking three different level subjects, for example, how then does the interruption to movement within the course, impact the resilience of students?

In terms of getting through the first year of study, the resilience of social work students originates from quite a unique place, compared to students in many other university courses. That is, they need to acquire multiple literacies across multiple disciplines, as evidenced by the taking of 'service subjects' from sociology and psychology, which requires the introduction and enculturation into the numerous language and texts of those multiple social sciences and humanities disciplines. In these cases, resilience means being 'buoyant'; of keeping afloat, and at

CSU first-year social work educators are there to maintain an even balance of academic and pastoral care for our first-year students. In this way, to reiterate previous ideas, we are all trying to emulate ways of conceptualising student success (Devlin 2011) through collaborative efforts that depend on the joint acknowledgement of responsibility on the part of all the main players in first-year education; the students, lecturers [and in this instance, social work educators], and the institution.

*Applying 'first year curriculum principles' to promote resilience.*The relevance of integrating first-year principles in order to enhance the first-year experience is worth recounting here; these principles have been part of CSU's 'enhancing the student experience' initiative since 2010. There are arguably six education principles that invite teaching practice to address: transition; diversity; subject delivery; curriculum design; assessment, and evaluation and monitoring (Kift, 2009). Additionally, this kind of initiative is genuinely informed by three overarching pedagogies:

- transition pedagogy

- social inclusion pedagogy

- Andragogy – the science of helping adults to learn.

The interesting thing about *andragogy* is that it is a term that was arguably first-introduced and used by a social worker in the early 1900s – Eduard Lindeman (Brookfield 1987). But at a fundamental level for our social work students and educators, the adoption of first-year principles to enhance the first-year student experience has resonance with the concept and practice of social inclusion. It is that inclusive quality of the first-year experience, regardless of the subjects taken, which help to build resilience.

In the social work degree program at CSU, an interesting first-year subject enrolment pattern discussed in the following case studies includes the combination of studying a first-level human services communication subject alongside a second-level cross-cultural competencies counselling subject. Can different academic level subjects work well together? As authors, lecturers/social work educators and practitioners, we have online cohorts in these subjects of 400 plus students each first session of the year. The teaching task is almost overwhelming at times; do our learning and teaching strategies, especially around ideas of thinking, being and doing, as well as the adoption of first-year principles, successfully accommodate sometimes seemingly quite different strands of learning? The following case studies about our observations of practice address a very important part of higher education, that is, the "capacity to engage in reflection on academic practices" (Kahn et al, 2012).

Case Study 1: Subject – Communication and human services. The first-year principles that best inform the delivery of this subject are transition and curriculum. Despite the multiple entry pathways that students can take to enrol in their degree program, there is very rarely any credit given for this first subject that figures as a core component of every structure of social work or social welfare courses at CSU; it is seen as the anchor for everything that comes afterwards. Even students, who come with other communication degrees or components of previous degrees that relate to communication, would never have completed such a subject. It is intentionally designed around the seamless tri-cyclical model of *thinking, being, doing* which is integrated with the levels of intra-personal, interpersonal, trans-systems and extra-dimensional competence adult communication management layers taken from Kaye (2010). In addressing transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009), students follow a developmental path of learning that is more formative; with an emphasis on process rather than content.

The students complete three assessment items that are heavily supported with quite specific instructions and guidelines. The first (in Weeks 3/4 of a 14-week session) is an 'early-'low stakes'/high feedback online, open-book task that runs over 4 days. The second is a 'high-stakes'/medium feedback virtual presentation to a WIKI online site, and the third is a 'medium stakes'/low-medium feedback critical reflection essay. The students are constantly challenged, via online Forum discussions and Announcements, to adhere to strict process and protocols about communication and task execution, in the same way they would be expected to, in the profession. The emphasis throughout is on critiquing values and working within an ethos of scholarship, as well as with integrity. Who are you? Where do you come from? What is your community? What are your values? These are questions that are constantly being asked of students.

Nearly all students [close to 600 across two sessions in both 2012 and 2013] comment on the useful extent and level to which this first subject challenges ideas about learning and communication which they had never considered beforehand. The use of the online Forum in this case study has a dual role in exercising both disclosure and exposure of information, feelings and vulnerabilities in a public forum. Students model their levels of involvement and participation on the style and tone of communication from their subject coordinator.

First indications in observing the relevance of this first communication subject to help develop resilience from student vulnerability [emotions and feelings], suggest that the deliberate application of challenging questions and activities, has a positive effect in also building resilience through intentional, developmental engagement.

*Case Study 2: Subject – Developing cross-cultural competencies.*Diversity is one of the main first-year principles that figure in the participation and delivery of this subject. The 'basis of enrolment' data for 2012 [m=318], and with similar numbers in 2013, indicated a probable smorgasbord of academic skills, cultural capital, capabilities to engage actively, and also ready capacity for resilience, including: 78.40% [n=69] First Generation social work distance mode students, and 68% [n=138] First Generation social welfare distance mode students; 27.3% [n=24] Low socio-economic status (LSES) social work students from the same cohort, and 28% [n=57] LSES social welfare students.

In this subject, students are introduced to key concepts relating to service provision and service delivery in the context of competencies required for social work and human services when working with a range of culturally diverse communities throughout Australia. The relationship between cultural diversity and policy development as well as its implementation is analysed in the context of the social welfare field; it is a complex field of working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is divided into two modules. The first module deals with what is often called anti-discriminatory practices and looks at the more structural issues of racism, discrimination and policies. The second deals with individual practice issues focusing more on how to work with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The assessments are based on both report and essay-writing media and their aims are essentially to incorporate theory and practice through critical analysis and reflection. Where the subject asks for active engagement in a set of 'generic' skills, these are realised through a typical list of generic graduate attributes which include ideas of aptitude/applying oneself and committing to lifelong learning, developing an ethos of scholarship, collaborating in groups and teams, engaging with information literacy, developing a high level of oral and written skills [through the online Forum and assessments], developing cultural understanding, practising ethical standards, and exploring critical analysis, creativity and reflection. Through engagement on the Forum, students respond to potentially confronting topics such as dealing with racism, policy development that relates to providing access and equity to vulnerable peoples, and the movement and migration of displaced persons in Australia and throughout the world.

Students undertaking this counselling subject are expected to foster the development of at least all the above attributes, and particularly the practice of developing competence in cultural understanding, as well as pragmatic and critical thinking skills right from the start of their professional student life, because these attributes are the ones most needed as a professional worker. One of the main areas of skill achievement, personal reflection, was to provide efficacy

to reduce personal prejudice, and to become aware of its growth in racial and cultural appreciation (Bowman, 2010). Students were provided with tasks that allowed them to comprehensively look at others' perspectives, and understand and see for themselves why it is important to address their own identities in context. There is little doubt that on several levels, students struggle with the, at-times, confronting content and application of information. For example, they are asked to apply the use of a racial-cultural identity model to themselves, as well as to evaluate where they would sit within a worldviews analysis (Sue et al, 2008). Many students give similar feedback through the evaluation process, capturing the same sentiment; they all go 'searching' for their worldview, as well as their racial and cultural identities.

Participation in the level 2/3 counselling subject suggests that students' initial vulnerability in finding a voice to engage on more sophisticated and informed levels about some fairly weighty topics, is slowly replaced by resilience that comes from praxis wisdom; from cultural knowing; from critical reflection about self, other individuals and communities.

DISCUSSION

In regards to the application of first-year principles in teaching, the above case studies emphasise transition and diversity, but they highlight much more. Implicit in transition pedagogy (Kift, 2009) is the imperative that first-year lecturers and institutions need to work towards creating a positive experience for first-year students. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) found that students benefited the most when there was structural diversity present as well as a "pedagogy that facilitates learning in a diverse environment" and "extensive and meaningful informal interracial interaction" (359). Several further studies point to the importance of provisions of sustained and coordinated efforts across the first year experience in order to maximize the benefits of diversity on student development and learning (Gottfredson et al, 2008). This is particularly important in human services and social work; a very high display of intercultural competency is required to participate effectively in our communities and workplaces. At this level, transition appears to work across levels of diverse accommodation.

However, the idea of buoyancy; of keeping afloat whilst trying to acquire multiple literacies to do with different subject languages and texts, is a new addition to transition pedagogy because it highlights not only the presence of emotion and feelings through vulnerability in not being fully aware of what is going on, but also the responsibility of intentional engagement. One of the strategies students use to stay afloat, is through purposeful engagement on the online Forums in the case study subjects highlighted above. Despite a level of anonymity afforded to those who participate online, these interactions are not easy for many

who are struggling to find a voice in their first-year at university. The strategy adopted by the lecturers/social work educators in these cases is to provide intense, side-by-side modeling and monitoring of practice, that may in some situations, require ongoing vigilance that seems to be typical of the shared responsibility required for first year in higher education.

In building the resilience of our first-year students, the terms used in this paper have referred to: inclusiveness; access and equity; social inclusion; agency; facilitation; heterogeneity; knowing and intent, and joined-up responsibility; we revisit this latter idea, because it is the one most pertinent to this discussion. Joined-up responsibility is an important strategy that has been revealed in the building of resilience in first-year students undertaking enrolment combinations of subjects such as those highlighted in this paper, communication in human services and developing cross-cultural competencies in counselling.

The term, joined-up responsibility, is aptly taken from discourse identified in National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER] literacy research projects (see Wickert et al, 2005), in which one of the outcomes identified, is that literacy educators have learned to avoid treating literacy needs in isolation, but rather through cross-sectoral and joined-up (whole-of-government) approaches to situations and solutions. Furthermore, literacy is fundamental to the growth of social capital, not least for skills acquisition through 'built-in' rather than 'bolted-on' methodologies. Therefore, on the one hand, joined-up responsibilities require more than the accepted dichotomy of the student-educator partnership that is shown in the case study subjects around subject learning and teaching, but rather a kind of relationship that is sustainable for the growth of the student beyond the first year of enrolment and right across their whole course.

On the other hand, responsibilities are implicit in building social capital which captures the essence of facilitating inclusiveness; around access and equity, social inclusion, agency, heterogeneity, as well as knowing and intent. The foundations for the above sustainable relationship can be found in timeless theoretical underpinnings about learning that offer useful participation frameworks for students and lecturers. Bourdieu's (1986) framework of social capital provides a useful and relevant basis for impacting the student experience. From a philosophical perspective, critical realism (Archer, 2003) offers an emancipatory and self-transforming opportunity to provide a real account of 'human-being-in-nature' (Hartwig, 2007, p. 104). From an eclectic social sciences stand-point, the reciprocity inherent in Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001) with its linking of activity to the mediation between actors (agency), structure, tools and technology, posits a fundamental view of purposeful activity – intentional activity (praxis) - in a cultural historical context as the fundamental unit for the study of human

behaviour. Furthermore, through a reappraisal of 'attachment' (Ainsworth et al, 1991), there is a strong intuitive legitimacy in saying that students' experience in undertaking the first-level communication, and the second/third level counselling subjects, with a large part of their emphasis on access and equity, trust, and affirmation, provides fertile grounds for the growth of positive feelings and a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

The ideas in this paper set out to critique and reflect on answers about how first-year social work students at university could build resilient engagement to take them into professional practice, when they are trying to cope with contrasting expectations and outcomes of potentially complex subject enrolment patterns; where complexity comes from different levels of required sophistication in thinking and outcomes. The combination of a first-level communication subject, with a second-level counselling one, has the potential hall-marks of rendering students to being vulnerable through possible levels of disclosure and expectations of critical self-reflection, and so the application of joined-up responsibility is not taken lightly, in helping to build resilience.

There is little doubt that structure and agency play a large part in the positive acquisition of resilience, as well as a sense of belonging, but so too does attachment and sentimentality. These characteristics are typical of someone who is vulnerable (Ainsworth et al, 1991). On a pragmatic and immediate level, the above sustainable relationships mentioned can be, and are, fostered through the delivery of subjects flagged in this paper in the first year of study. In every university in the land there are subjects like these, with different level combinations as these, and dedicated first-year lecturers/educators willing to facilitate the building of resilience no matter the challenge; this is an idea that is not exclusive to CSU's social work and social welfare programmes. Building resilience involves: heterogeneous enrolment accessibility; availability and engagement with different discipline languages and texts; exposure to different levels of sophistication and analysis, and participation.

Resilient social work students exhibit flexibility, adaptability, buoyancy in their engagement with first-year university study, and are optimistic. Their situation is helped if there is an element of sentiment and attachment to what they are doing, in order to develop a healthy sense of belonging. Their initial passion towards undertaking human services work is beneficial in this endeavour; they appear more capable of withstanding what many others in different professions might perceive as being 'stressful', because more seems to be at stake.

Resilience refers to the capacity of an individual or community to cope with stress, overcome adversity or adapt positively to change. The ability to bounce back from negative or challenging experiences may reflect innate qualities of individuals or be the result of learning and experience. Regardless of the origin of resilience, there is evidence to suggest that it can be utilised to enhance and promote greater wellbeing and a sense of belonging. In teaching social work subjects together like those that refer to communications and counselling, resilience is not regarded as a quality that is either present or absent in a person or group but rather a *process* which is influenced through a developmental approach to teaching and learning, and therefore may vary across circumstances and time.

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