Reimagining social work case studies: conveying dignity and worth through creative writing

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This presentation 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 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. Depicting social workers and service users in this way can create the impression that social work is a distanced procedural activity and may 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 textbook case studies were developed. At the end of the presentation, these principles will be discussed and further ideas invited from the audience.
Reimagining social work case studies

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Researchers

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Background

• Joint project between creative writing researchers and social work researchers looking at social work textbook case studies

• Textbook case studies are usually short written descriptions of particular scenarios

• Sometimes referred to as pen pictures or vignettes rather than case studies
Case study (206 words – Chenowith & McAuliffe, 2014, p.191)

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.
What we wanted to do

• We were interested in the case studies in social work textbooks and wanted to analyse them from both social work and creative writing perspectives.

• But we weren’t sure how we would do this.
• Reading lists for units in ECU’s Bachelor of Social Work course which focus on professional social work practice were selected for analysis.

• This resulted in a total of 13 units. Core reading lists for these units were examined and found to contain 110 textbook items.

• Duplicated texts were removed and remaining books checked to see if they included case studies – this left a total of 19 textbooks containing case studies.

• The case studies in these 19 texts were scanned and saved individually with a unique identifier.

• Resulted in 362 individual case studies.
We used Chenoweth and McAuliffe’s (2014) fields and domains of social work and human service practice and began mapping the case studies against these (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.
A review of literature relating to literary craft identified key techniques of effective and engaging writing, which we summarised as follows:

- **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?
What did we find? (Social Work)

• 60% of the 362 case studies were about working with individuals

• 8% considered group work

• 27% looked at workplace bullying or organisational dynamics

• 14% of the case studies identified people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

• 7% were written from service users’ perspectives

• Few case studies looked at poverty (8%), disability (7%), aged care (7%), family violence (5%), grief and loss (4%) or LGBTIQ issues (1%)

• No case studies in our sample looked at elder abuse
Most of the case studies had sufficient ‘facts’ (name, age, ethnicity, gender, marital status, etc.) but were delivered within a paragraph that was 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.

The lack of a clear narrative arc 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.

What did we find? (Creative Writing – 1)
Most case studies were presented around a ‘problem’ and the people portrayed (social workers and service users) were frequently devoid of personality.

In those case studies where the service user’s perspective was missing, it was particularly difficult to separate the problem from the person.

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’.

What did we find? (Creative Writing – 2)
The first four principles relate to content of the case studies and the remaining six cover issues of style.

1) Service user perspectives  
2) Diverse backgrounds  
3) Humanness  
4) Challenge/stimulation  
5) Engagement  
6) Characterisation  
7) Structure  
8) The importance of ‘I’  
9) Title  
10) Vibrancy
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.
Case study (206 words – Chenowith & McAuliffe, 2014, p.191)

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.
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.
Conclusions

- The textbook case studies presented simplified scenarios which were limited in terms of diversity and rarely portrayed depth or complexity.
- They were also often bereft of information about social workers’ or service users’ human qualities.
- Humanity and complexity are essential areas of learning for all social work students.
- Social work educators need to find multiple ways of enabling students to learn about humanity and complexity.
- Reimagining social work case studies using the techniques of literary craft offers one such way of doing this.
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