9   The video essay for Social Work education

Visualising knowledge

In this chapter I conclude my work for Social Work by travelling the practice terrain of the visual as a set of reflections. These reflections will, hopefully, illustrate practically and reflectively, as well as pose theoretically, the issues, challenges, and rewards in using the visual in the teaching of Social Work. Jioji and Mick, both colleagues and educators who had been using visual in their education or in work they did not call Social Work, both made visible these practices for you and how they may help yours. They are innovative practitioners. But Dawn River, Rachael Henderson, and all my students who have embraced the challenges I have given them with something new, have likewise been innovative and courageous adventurers in these travels. What follows are my reflections as I have traversed new terrains, much of which has been outside of Social Work. As I returned to Social Work, however, I wanted to be like these colleagues above, and many others before me in Social Work. In an attempt at doing something innovative also, I introduced an assessment called the video essay, something actually very closely related to digital storytelling, which I covered in Chapter 4. The aim in this chapter is to end where I, and all Social Work practitioners, begin; that is, at university learning to be a social worker. The traditional communication formats we were taught about privileged and reproduced ways of knowing (epistemologies) and ways of being (ontologies) that are associated with the European Enlightenment, which favour abstract knowledges and inhibit embodied and experiential modes of knowing. These privileged modes were the written and the oral forms of communication, familiar to all social workers as those in which we became highly skilled and competent. This has made most of us in Social Work fairly ill-prepared for the digital world where visuality reigns; but also, uncritical, unskilled, and unaware of the language of the visual. So, with my introduction of the video essay as an assessment form I tried to upskill Social Work students in an area in which many will have had some exposure outside their professional lives but may not have considered as useful in their professional practice. But I also want social workers to be critically prepared in this area. Creating visual material is imbued with power relations, and I intend to do the following in this chapter: first, tell you about the biggest blunder I have made, the one that made me look more critically, and more closely, at images; then I will follow this up by outlining what the video

essay is, and how it differs from digital storytelling, and its use as a viable form for teaching and learning Social Work; finally, I want to pay homage to a much-forgotten text in Social Work, Hugh England's *Social Work as Art* (1986). Although my work here has been quite different to Hugh's, he tried to make our profession aware of the artfulness that is Social Work, I also hope I do something similar.

Visualising Social Work and social change

After being away from Social Work for over a decade, between 2004–2015, I realised that visual literacy in Social Work education was almost completely lacking. In a world immersed in digital technologies, communicating more and more visually as a result, this seemed to me an insufficiency that others, in other disciplines, were not experiencing. It is an inadequacy, furthermore, that means that social workers will likely be required to work in a new visual world unprepared for the critical and practical skills, and the power relations, that new world expresses and envelops. One example I can give here relates to new ways being devised for teaching at university, where I work. Medicine and health-related professions, such as nursing, are already developing immersive and virtual reality (VR), scenario-driven, content for simulated learning. Developments in hardware such as VR goggles and Immersion laboratories are driving some teaching delivery design into arenas previously unheard of. The visual scenarios that are required for simulation learning in medicine and nursing are considerably different to those that social workers require. One of the most distinct differences between even health-related professions and our work is that content development is largely object-centred, often working with inert objects; ours require scenario-based, and narrative-centred, content and these are much more complex to prepare. A large part of our work in Social Work centres on building relationships with marginalised individuals and communities and the promotion of their interests, as well as facilitating coping. How do we represent this in visual scenarios intended to expose students to the reality of professional experience? In terms of the content, and the power relations involved, our use of images for these purposes requires that we engage with them at a more profound level than the purely instrumental. To date, very little consideration has been given to this in traditional Social Work, and we will fall behind as these technologies end up being imposed on our educators.

My absence from Social Work happened after I had completed my first PhD in Social Work, where I looked at media, policy, and personal responses to refugees and asylum seekers in Australia over the period 2001–2005. This research had led me to conclude that attitudes towards these vulnerable human beings originated with phenomena that went much deeper than any one policy. Indeed, I realised that much policy, something that we social workers had been led to believe was of central importance to our work, was largely reactive and a response to debates and interactions taking place in the public arena. If the majority in this public space does not value diversity, then policies will reflect

that. In Chapter 7, Jioji Ravulo discussed the ways in which screen policies have attempted to take into account current debates on diversity. The challenge for screen producers, however, that Jioji mentioned, has been that unless there are concurrent communal and public acceptance of diversity, and the valuing of diversity, policies that attempt to impose quotas on diversity can only go so far. The same has been said of multicultural policies, introduced in Australia, for example, in the 1970s to counter the narratives of assimilation present until then. These brought in a real awareness and a set of new filters that valued co-existence in a landscape filled with a multiplicity of ethnicities (Lopez 2000; Jupp 2002; Koleth 2010). But the policies could not deal with attitudes that were born of white privilege and racially supremacist views (Hage 1998). Multicul-tural policies thrived for a very short time in Australian history, for just over a decade and a half. White privilege prevailed and made a staunch return in the 1990s; these attitudes dominate currently, and multicultural policies have almost completely disappeared. The interplay between policy and attitudes is a complex one, and this is not the place to make a stand one way or the other. Suffice it to say that I decided in about 2007 that changing attitudes through popular means, and engaging means, was where I would begin to put some of my efforts.

As a result of this thinking, and as I began teaching Media Studies but also continued teaching at the Centre for Human Rights Education, both at Curtin University, Western Australia, I formulated new understandings about the possibilities that popular media had to change attitudes. I started to consider more broadly the possibilities for social change and activism and became very interested in film. As a consequence, in 2007, I helped set up the first Human Rights Film Festival in Perth, Western Australia. I became so deeply interested in film and their impact that I subsequently enrolled and completed a second PhD, this time in Film Studies; those studies culminated in my 2015 book, *Human Rights Film Festivals: Activism in Context*, but also led to my second book, *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject* (2017). Those studies gave me an awareness of the possibilities of visual communication for the aims of social change, but also the critically analytical lens to understand that, as a form that communicates powerfully, it also encodes power.

The power in the visual became apparent to me after that very first festival in which I was involved, in 2007. In that festival I screened a film that subsequently deeply troubled me. It was a film that had been provided for us for free, and I happily screened it without having first curated it. As a film festival running on a non-existent budget, we trusted that the description of the film meant that it was a worthy film. After all, a film that calls itself *The Day After Peace* (2008) and is ostensibly about seeking a day of worldwide peace: what qualms could I pos-sibly have? It was, however, very clear very soon that this was a film about and for the filmmaker alone, Jeremy Gilley. A white, presentable, English male, who manages to enlist a number of celebrities (Angelina Jolie and Jude Law among many others), and to convince corporations such as Coca-Cola to give him lots of money. A film that portrays a phenomenon Nathan Farrell calls 'philanthro-capitalism' (2012), it is filled with the presence and actions of Gilley as the lone

adventurer, who recruits famous people and wealthy organisations to 'his' cause. The film is structured like the proverbial 'hero's journey' (Campbell 1968), which in 'classical Hollywood cinema, the agent embodying the role of "hero" is typically a straight, white man', standing in as the 'universal subject' (Downing and Saxton 2010, p. 17). I think what made me the most uncomfortable was the fact that we were so heavily duped; but not only us, many others too. Marina Hyde, journalist on the *Guardian* newspaper declared in an episode of *Newswipe* (2010) that it is astonishing Gilley succeeded in doing what he did. And yet he did. In the following year the same festival with which I had been involved, used this film as its centrepiece for fundraising, and it was highly successful in doing this, attendees fiercely bidding for the honour to meet the filmmaker. The galvanising power of this film told me as much about the whiteness of the audiences the film was intended for, as about the whiteness of the filmmaker himself.

The power of the visual, especially in the humanitarian realm that we in Social Work operate with, was made very tangible for me with this first encounter with human rights film festivals. And so, I decided upon returning to Social Work that I would share my knowledge, challenges, and thoughts with you, and my students. I did this, partly, by introducing the video essay.

Video essay

The video essay is a form that was first used by cinema commentators to share their thoughts and critical thinking about a film. This meant re-working the film itself into a different sequence, using specific scenes to create an argument/ criticism around it. The form is now used to do similar things to what a regular essay does but with pictures – still and moving – music, and voiceover commentary (Mcwhirter 2015; Aldredge 2016; Fyfe & Ross n.d.). There is, at the production level, often very little difference between digital storytelling, short films, and video essays, each creating a story, or a narrative argument, that uses images and music, and voiceover commentary, to do so. The major and central difference, however, is that the video essay, in distinction from digital storytelling and a short film, will have a very clear analytical point and argument to make. Arielle Bernstein, video essayist, said this about the distinction between films and video essays, in the magazine *Filmmaker*:

> As the video essay continues to emerge as an entirely new form of commentary … [it] is distinct from a film because the work that is being done is about creating this kind of analytic framework for the viewer and reader to re-interpret or re-imagine original images.
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> (Bernstein 2016)

Although this is written for a film-making audience, it alerts us to the fact that the video essay is a design that is intended for commentary and analysis; this is, then, the defining difference with digital storytelling and short film. Although a fairly new form, and associated originally with film criticism or film

commentary, since it was an attempt to use the same form to make comments, it has since come to be used for a variety of different purposes not the least of which is for academic purposes. John Bresland, writing in 2010, said this of its links to academic enquiry:

> In its intent the video essay is no different from its print counterpart, which for thousands of years has been a means for writers to confront hard questions on the page. The essayist pushes toward some insight or some truth. That insight, that truth, tends to be hard won, if at all, for the essay tends to ask more than it answers. That asking – whether inscribed in ancient mud, printed on paper, or streamed thirty frames per second – is central to the essay, is the essay.

With the explosion of images and videos on the internet, essayists using images, however, do need to consider knowledge-making as being quite distinct in the visual mode to the written. The most obvious issue to consider is that the information, opinion, claim, or argument, is being made in a new form, one that is not as precise as language, written or spoken:

> That the image resists the precision of language is indeed a complication for the essayist. Much in the way, I would argue, that pianos complicate singing. That is to say another skill is called for but the payoff can be sublime.

(Bresland 2010)

This has consequences for the conveyance of an argument, cutting off some avenues that have been familiar to us in doing this, but opening up new ones. The new ones have to do with the possibility of creating a product that shows critical and analytical thinking, as well as enables the creativity of the user to emerge: 'That's what makes the video essay such an exciting new form, because now we have to combine the criteria by which we measure good critical thinking with good filmmaking as well' (Bernstein 2016).

The video essay in Social Work education

I first tried to work with video materials as part of Social Work education in 2016, in a unit called Organisations and Social Work Practice, in the students' final year. As I gave the students the option of creating a video to portray their final assessment piece, with the possibility of using varying degrees of creativity, there were many grumblings. The primary one was associated with students' questioning of the place of creativity in Social Work practice; the other major disquiet related to the need to use technologies, which up to that point had not been asked of them in their Social Work degree. The first frustration was aimed at having to adjust their mind-set to the performance of what they understood to be their Social Work selves, to something (fairly) new, a creative dimension; the

second to acquiring skills, or using skills, they had not associated with Social Work. This resulted in some confusion, particularly at a critical moment when they were about to finish and head off into paid practice, and these things had not been asked of them until then. And this was a piece of assessment, a point in their studies when their progression into the paid profession could be halted.

Part of the grumblings took me aback as I returned to Social Work education after the hiatus I mentioned above. It appeared to me that the creativity that had been a part, albeit quite small, of the Social Work I had known, had either disappeared altogether, or was not evident in the context in which I then found myself. Memories of my first PhD recalled the struggles I had encountered when attempting to introduce creative writing into my own work, and then seeking Cultural Studies as my scholarly reference from within which to write that work. These were struggles that are now disappearing for most higher degree students, as they now have the possibility of including creative elements in their work. At that time, in the early 2000s, only in the therapeutic arenas of Social Work had art made any headway, as art therapy, or in Michael White's and David Epston's Narrative Therapy. These two scholars and practitioners had applied Michel Foucault's[1] theorisations about the nature of our selves as storied beings and given birth to a whole new area of therapeutic practice (Foucault 1980; White & Epston 1990).

The 'social' in our name, after all, had to include aspects that valued diverse forms of knowing and being, and doing. In a similar vein to Jioji's exhortations in Chapter 7, calling for a stronger emphasis on diversity, Social Work's frames of practice need to widen, to incorporate a wider variety of epistemologies and ontologies that reflect the multicultural (in the broadest sense of culture, as espoused in Chapter 1) nature of our contemporary worlds. As Social Work recognises its epistemological foundations in Western modernity, and that many of its frames of operating are being, or have been, exported to non-Western traditions, there is also an acknowledgement that the profession at large needs to develop a porousness to working across difference that is more than cross-cultural (Gray et al. 2008, 2013). This broadening of our frames of thinking also helps to further our understanding and connections with those who prefer embodied and experiential forms of communication, or for whom language is difficult. The arts and those activities that promote embodied knowing and creative thinking, and what my students called my 'thinking outside the box', had either disappeared by the time I returned in 2015, or had dwindled beyond recognition. Although in the past there had been some attempts to incorporate creativity, and artistic practices into the overall framework of Social Work (Rapoport 1968; England 1986; Walz & Uematsu 1997; Gray & Webb 2008), most of the education seemed now to centre on a kind of Social Work that favoured instrumentalism (as skills acquisition), and practicalism, as a focus only on that which will take them directly into traditional practice fields, even if the skills and traditional practice fields are associated with a continually-dwindling welfare state.

My students in 2015, I discovered, had already been socialised into forms of professional knowing and being that had been gated, so that knowing (where

learning is located) occurs as disembodied knowing, and being (where practice, expression, and communication are located) also occurs through disembodied, abstracted, means. The formulations of what constitutes valid knowledge and practice go much wider than the professions, of course. Academia as an institution has much to contribute to the discourse of 'valid knowledge', and I have not covered this aspect in this book.

The fact that I had a similar experience in my new lecturing position at a university situated in the largest, most diverse, region in Australia, in which the student cohort is composed of local and international individuals whose backgrounds represent a huge number of different cultures, this did not surprise me. In this new position, teaching in the Master of Social Work (Qualifying), the cultural diversity of the students is remarkable, as well as being students who bring many different disciplinary and professional backgrounds; and yet with these students I had a similar reaction. When this occurred, I understood how global this culturally-specific understanding of what constitutes professional and academic knowledge had become, of which Social Work has been an integral part. Writing was the preferred and familiar mode of communication, and visual communication had been either relegated to a specific area of Social Work or was seen as marginal, or for instrumental (illustrative) purposes alone.

These early reactions forced me to modify my approach to the teaching and learning through visual means, but it did not deter me. I had realised in my early career that, once the opportunity was given to students to open up their creativity, they revelled in it. In the first year I opened up this assessment, it was not compulsory but could be selected as one of a few options; some students engaged with it with more or less success. All those who did submit this way, I recognised as having courage, imagination, and wonder, because it was risky; this was not the usual way of expressing knowledge. All who did submit this way produced material that, in terms of content, produced in the same range of analytical abilities I would encounter in the written essay. One student, who did not have a film-making background, and used her mobile phone to create videos like many other young people, produced a video of such quality – about the impacts of neoliberalism on youth services through privatisation that had left young people in that region bereft of spaces – that I would have had no hesitation in entering it in a competition. She scripted young actors, interviewed people in the field, and crafted it all together so well that I was blown away by it. Such a short film could be used effectively by a youth service; the Social Work student's skills were broadened to a new area of practice and advocacy. In a subsequent year after this example, and after students expressed a similar disquiet about the use of video for assessments, one of the students was so intrigued by the possibility that Social Work could incorporate creative expression that in her following placement, she set out to carry out research on that very topic. These students' creative imagination was sparked, and they sought to expand the retinue of their knowledge and skills beyond the traditional. This took courage, imagination, and wonder.

There has been an illustrious tradition in Social Work's history in which various people have attempted to introduce and include creative dimensions, whether in practical applications or in more philosophical ruminations about the place of the imagination, the immanent, and the aesthetic more generally (England 1986; Gray & Webb 2008; see others above). Hugh England's (1986) book entitled *Social Work as Art*, was possibly the earliest fully-fledged sustained attempt to bring philosophical thinking as well as practical applications of the artistic process to Social Work, in order to define the profession as an art rather than a precise science or as a set of technocratic and bureaucratic procedures.

The art of Social Work

England contended that Social Work's purview is to assist people to cope and to do this by helping them create (new)] meanings, that this process is actually, in kind, closer to the artistic. Now, while I do not want to make this chapter into a philosophical discussion of what is meant by art, or even how the creative dimensions can also exist happily within scientific enquiry, nor, indeed how art(fulness) is part of Social Work's practices, I do want to bring to the reader's attention something most salient to the current discussion from England's book. In trying to justify his argument that social workers operate very closely to the artistic process, he said:

> The social worker, then, like the poet, must bring together disparate elements of the ordinary world, and he [*sic*] too must do so with unusually profound understanding.… It is in this sense that worker is creative; he is not just a critic understanding the meaning and expression of others, but an artist giving expression to his own understanding in a way that others will value.
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> (1986, pp. 106–107)

Some of the artfulness of social workers, he is saying, lies in our ability to bring together the unlikely: disparate aspects of clients' everyday lives that can help us help them make sense, and new sense, of their situation. Although he is focusing almost exclusively on the practitioner's actions and understandings in this quote and does not mention how the client's creative agency in his own life might be enhanced, nor how the worker may help to break down power relations with such artfulness, he helps us see that traditional, individualised case work is replete with the artfulness of the poet; that much of the work in that context involves tasks and thought processes that are akin to those of the artist. What I find interesting in this description and the mildly anxious tone of academic justification in which the book is written, is that the tasks, thoughts, and processes that are involved in being artful, are actually also those involved in being scientific in many ways; and yet he goes to great lengths to separate the two. The curiosity and imagination involved, the need for close enquiry, and the ultimate

creation of new knowledge through careful and creative consideration of new structures, the need for innovative thinking and doing, are also not too far from what scientists working outside institutional confines would say is part of what they do (Le Lionnais 1969; Miller & White 2013). The interest for me in this lies in the fact that England needs to construct such an argument, one that borders on anxiety around the artfulness of social workers and relies on there being a clear distinction between science and art; so much so that, I think, he overstates the clear divisions between their disciplinary borders in order to make his point. Science and art have certainly travelled different paths within modernity, and their specialisations are so entrenched now that we do not readily recognise their overlaps – between the creativity of science and the science of the artistic.

So, although in earlier chapters I railed against the supremacy of scientific rationality and the methodologies to which it gives rise, including what Max Weber called the 'iron cage' of instrumental rationality and the bureaucracies it spawned (Weber 1958), these forms of rationality certainly de-humanise our knowledge-making and ontological norms as helping professionals. But here I want to nuance that discussion, because the scientific and the sciences themselves are not human inclinations that are so far from the artistic; they are, albeit expressed differently, founded on orientations towards exploration, wonder, imagination, and problem-solving. Both the artist and the scientist, philosophically speaking, are thus inclined, even if they decide to express their work differently. Much of the problem that we find ourselves in modernity, as these inclinations become institutionalised, is the disciplinary and professional sequestrations of curiosity, imagination, and wonder. And so, Mel Gray's and Stephen Webb's attempt to revive and extend England's ideas via phenomenological understandings (Gray & Webb 2008), and Karen Healy's rebuttal of their work (Healy 2008) by suggesting that they reify the arts above all other forms of knowledge show these debates need to go further and admit into the arguments the histories and cultural imperialism of ideas (or the power involved in knowledge, including global power) that have positioned these not-dissimilar human inclinations towards knowing and problem-solving, as opposites. Human being is curiosity, imagination, as well as practical survival; to deny one of those parts is to stifle a part of our very humanity; unfortunately, much of the way that professional discourse has developed, does exactly that, veering social workers towards one kind of existence, while denying others.

England's book attempted to sustain the argument that Social Work was more than what the positivist sciences required, as this discursive regime took charge of the professions. One of the more interesting sections of his book for me, is where he uses the metaphor of the 'picture' to elaborate on the artfulness of social workers (1986, p. 107). England uses the metaphor of the picture to describe the process a worker undergoes in gaining an understanding of a client's life, piecing a complete picture, as this 'suggests a visible completeness, sufficient to guide the worker's subsequent action' (1986, p. 107). The 'picture' of her/his client is not only what the worker wants to understand in terms of facts and figures (number of family members, address, crime committed, etc.), but

also that client's understandings of their own situation, all of which will then guide the worker's decisions and immediate behaviours. The picture that the worker obtains needs to be 'an adequate picture … of his client's world', so that she/he can act well for her/his client. Putting aside the fact that England places overemphasis on the worker's actions and not what might be enhanced for the client, he is not describing mere abstracted work, but also that of the body and the experiential:

> The nature of human experience means that the worker's picture, like an image in art, must be not merely 'a unification of disparate ideas' but 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'.… Imagery in some guise is therefore routinely essential in social work, and it becomes clear why vivid images and evocative language are so frequent a characteristic of good descriptions of social work.
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> (1986, p. 107)

What struck me as I re-read this book was that visuality had formed an integral part of England's explanation of the art of Social Work. What is now of significant interest to me is that the visual arts, and visuality more generally, along with evocative language, are used to represent those aspects that he deems to be the art of Social Work. The metaphor of the visual, mental images that form a complete story of a person, enables a more embodied connection between two people who would otherwise not know of, or get to know, each other. Of course, much of England's book is reserved for individualised case work, as this has been central to Social Work practice in the context within which he is writing, even if not exclusively. And the relationship of worker-client that he describes is not equal, nor is England writing about the political possibilities that the artfulness of Social Work poses for its practitioners; this I would seriously critique, as the artfulness of Social Work should not just be confined to individual case work, nor to reside in the social worker alone. Social workers need to consider that part of our mandate includes social change as an integral element of social justice. The artfulness of Social Work is not simply to help individuals' 'coping' as England suggests (1986, p. 15) and to help them re-construct meaning. It is also to read 'the social' in all its elements so that they may operate artfully within it, to stitch together unlikely alliances and as-yet-uncreated synergies and relationships, so that they-we can facilitate social change.

Indeed, Gray and Webb (2008) argue something similar, yet not the same. There they want to expand on England's outline of the artful social worker by positing 'social work as the 'work' of art, which is implicitly a 'non-productivist' endeavour' (2008, p. 182). That is, they suggest that social workers carry out 'the work of the social as art'. I read this as meaning that we social workers traverse the social by becoming intimately and analytically familiar with it, recognising potential connections when others may not have seen them. This reminded me of something I used to say as I was completing my PhD in Social Work in the mid to early 2000s; that is, that the term Social Work placed too

much emphasis on discourses of practicality and application, and reinforced instrumentalist principles rather than the possibility that what we do is to negotiate difficult terrains, and do so gracefully and respectfully, searching for the best opportunities, unlikely opportunities, to further our clients', or vulnerable groups', interests. This was not Social Work, I used to say, it was social art. Part of that art was not simply the artful practitioner in individual case work, or the practitioner using the traditional or institutional, and certainly not the elite, arts; it was a highly skilled and honed individual whose knowledge of the social was intensive and extensive, so that she/he might draw upon that knowledge to create something new, something that would serve to further the interests of those whom the social marginalised. Social Work as art is, to me, the work of social artistry, indefinable, widely encompassing, uncertain, and yet sharply focused and purposeful. It is risky, courageous, imaginative, and full of wonder as we traverse the difficult. It leads to new ways to action.

By way of finishing

Social Work is social artistry to me. It takes courage, imagination, wonder, and action to be a social artist. Our practice is not definable as other professions are because we are so much more than a definition; we are diffuse and should be so because we can operate in many different areas of the social world. That is our beauty and our strength; we need to be proud of that and not shirk and bow because we do not fulfil the terms of a professional discourse others have formulated. The power that the professional discourse has given those who encase themselves with it to the exclusion of other ways of being, often takes from the very people we have sworn to fight with, and for. We work with the marginalised and the voiceless, and that takes courage, imagination, wonder, and action because to change things that have been for so long this way is difficult. We operate in the difficult, where others do not wish to tread. I hope I have given you some new ideas, skills and visions to help you in that practice in the difficult, to tackle it with courage, imagination, wonder, analysis and action. Visual ways of communicating are powerful, and I do hope that they will give you one more way in which you can make a difference.