

Embedding Animal-Inclusive Content into Social Work Education

Teaching Note

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Abstract

This teaching note discusses the progress that has been made from reflecting on innovative social work student placements with animals (see Meadows et al., 2020) to embedding animal-inclusive content into existing social work courses at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) – a tertiary education provider at the top of the South Island in Aotearoa New Zealand. A collaboration between NMIT and The Nelson Ark, where the focus of work is animal assisted intervention (AAI) with youth, has advanced three accumulative animal-inclusive teaching sessions for Bachelor of Social Work students across the final three years of the four-year degree. With this background, the authors acknowledge that the inclusion of animals in social work research and practice is gaining traction. Yet, attention to human–animal relations remains on the periphery of the conventional social work curriculum and student learning experience. By turning our focus to social work placements, we developed a fresh appreciation of human–animal relations, and we propose that both field education and class-based course content about animal-inclusive practice affords valuable pedagogy. Accordingly, this teaching note shares the background, progress and next steps in the development of animal-inclusive course content.

Keywords: *Social work education; Animal-inclusive practice; Human–animal relations*

Background

This teaching note describes the evolution, development and delivery of the first classroom session where social work students were invited to consider the place of animals in social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. While the conventional social work lens has a primary focus on human interactions, there is a growing body of research that acknowledges the role of animals in relation to attachment and wellbeing (Arkow, 2020; Chalmers et al., 2020), family violence (Taylor & Fraser, 2019) and disaster management (Darroch & Adamson, 2016). Concurrently, animal-inclusive social work literature highlights the need for professional development of human services staff and social work educators about the importance of human–animal relationships (Adamson, 2021; Taylor et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2020).

The impetus for proactively embedding animal-inclusive social work content into the classroom emerged from the fieldwork placement context and the task of finding suitable social work student placements. The need to secure suitable quality social work fieldwork placements is a shared challenge for many social work programmes (Hay, 2018), particularly in smaller provincial areas. This challenge evoked seeking new opportunities, which resulted in social work placements and collective reflections on animal-inclusive practice at The Nelson ARK – an Animal Assisted Intervention service that partnered rescue dogs and youth participants (Meadows et al., 2020). More broadly, in Aotearoa New Zealand a key shift in the appreciation of animals was evident in changes to the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) Code of Ethics (2019). Both the sentience and need for the protection of animals in social work practice are acknowledged. Thus, as part of this appreciation of animals, both locally and professionally, the authors sought to shift arbitrary and limited animal-inclusive course content to intentional and structured learning sessions.

The initial scaffolding of animal-inclusive learning involves embedding relevant material into three classes (of three hours duration each) across specific courses in years two, three and four of the four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree. The course and animal-inclusive focus are signposted below:

- Year Two – Applied Professional Practice: *Introduction to animal-inclusive social work practice*
- Year Three – Advanced Social Work Practice: *Ecological framework and/or animal-inclusive ecological practice*
- Year Four – Social Work and Whānau/Family Based Violence: *Animal-inclusive social work practice with a focus on Family Violence*

The following section details the Year Two session. It focuses on an introductory animal-inclusive social work practice. Reflections on the delivery of the session and students' response are included. This is followed by the signposting of anticipated content for the subsequent third- and fourth-year sessions.

Scaffolded Learning Sessions

The concepts of animals in social work practice were introduced to the second year Bachelor of Social Work students in the Applied Professional Practice course, where students “develop their knowledge and skills to analyse the impacts of social, legal, political and economic policies on social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Current and topical issues in social work practice will be explored and analysed” (Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology [NMIT], 2021, p. 3).

At the time of delivery in Semester 2, 2021, NMIT was in Level 3 COVID-19 restrictions (resulting in no on-campus activities) and the scheduled face-to-face class was delivered online via the video conferencing service, Zoom, with further activities accessed via Moodle, an online Learning Platform. At the beginning of class, after an initial welcome, karakia (Māori incantation to open the session) and check-in, students were invited to indicate whether they had a pet or companion animal at home. Online polling facilities were then used to ask students to indicate whether they had a pet, and if so, what type of pet and whether they considered their pet(s) to be a part of their family. The class poll results were then compared to the New Zealand Companion Animals Council (NZCAC) (2020). All class members (n = 5) had at least one pet compared with 64% of households nationally, of whom 75% considered their pets to be family members.

Focus then moved to the ANZASW *Code of Ethics* (2019), which has Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the foundation upholding seven pou or values. Under the pou (values) of “Manaakitanga, social workers recognise and support the mana of others. We act towards others with respect, kindness and compassion. We practice empathic solidarity, ensure safe space, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations” (p. 10) the following sub-section on animals is included: “We recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected” (ANZASW, 2019, p. 11). Students were invited to brainstorm their understanding of the meaning of animal sentience, which was then compared to that of the New Zealand Veterinary Association (2018) which states sentience is:

... the ability to feel, perceive or experience subjectively. (i.e., the animal is not only capable of feeling pain and distress but also can have positive psychological experience, such as comfort, pleasure or interest that are appropriate to its species, environment and circumstances) To state that animals are sentient accepts that they can experience positive and negative emotions.

Having discussed the core requirement of working ethically with animals within our professional code of ethics and what is meant by animal sentience, the focus moved to the Practice note: “Animals in social work practice” (Robertson et al., 2019). This document was developed by Nicole Robertson in tandem with the ANZASW Animal Interest Group, and states “Animals, whether sentient or not...have lives that matter ethically...Therefore social workers should advocate for all creatures to be treated kindly and not harmed, so far as it is possible to do” (Robertson et al., 2019, p. 1). The five domains of animal welfare were discussed with some students highlighting the similarities between these and other holistic social work models.

Students were then invited to consider and respond in the chat facility to the question: “How animals might be considered in our social work practice?” Their responses included being aware of pets and safety on home visits, within therapy and modelling, in a support role in our practice and the Pet Refuge. To investigate this further, the class was split into smaller groups and placed within online breakout rooms to read and discuss the ANZASW’s (2020) Practice note: Animals in social work practice in relation to ecological systems, social work assessment and risk planning, animal assisted activities and the links between family violence and animal cruelty. Students then reported back the themes of their discussion to the wider group, with a summary of each group’s work being uploaded to the class Moodle page as a tangible account for this activity and to allow absent students to reengage with this material.

The class concluded with an individual reading task of Meadows et al.’s (2020) article. Students were asked to identify the key learnings from the social work students’ placement experiences at the Nelson ARK programme and to summarise the discussion section of the article. This reading offered students an introduction to a local Animal Assisted Intervention (AAI), an insight into a prospective placement outside of what they might typically consider, and an outline of a partnership between students, educators and community groups that produced a research outcome. Reflections on the session from the educators’ perspective including student engagement are discussed in the ensuing reflective discussion section.

Subsequent Year 3 and Year 4 sessions and anticipated content

- Year 3 – Advanced Social work Practice: Ecological framework and/or animal-inclusive ecological practice
 - Animals in the ecological systems framework of family work
 - Attachment theory – benefits of the human-animal bonds (HAB)
 - Rapport-building with animal co-workers
 - Inclusion of animals in genograms and ecomaps
 - Animals and wellbeing
- Guest speaker: animal-inclusive practitioner
- Year Four – Social Work and Whānau/Family Based Violence: Animal-inclusive social work practice with a focus on animal cruelty and Family Violence
 - Overview of animal cruelty
 - Links between animal and human cruelty/abuse
 - Importance of human-animal bonds during and in recovery from Family Violence
 - Implications for service delivery
 - Making reports of concern regarding animal maltreatment
 - Memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Women’s Refuge and RSPCA
- Guest speaker(s): representatives from relevant local organisations

Reflective discussion

Reflecting on the delivery of the first session, the first author noted the students were highly engaged and were enthusiastic about the inclusion of the topic of animals in their social work curriculum. They were able to make connections between the content and their own volunteer and work experiences, having seen the vital role animals play in therapy and day-to-day living.

While this class was an initial step at embedding animal-inclusive content into the social work programme, there is scope to broaden other content to include the role of animals and animal welfare disaster management (for example, see Adamson, 2021; Darroch & Adamson, 2016; Squance et al., 2018).

While committed to animal-inclusive social work education, the authors acknowledge the important reciprocal relationships with stakeholder agencies and their actors, whether these are human or non-human animals, and recognise that partnering with experts and agencies for whom this is “core business” is essential to the ethics and quality of social work education. As such, beyond the introductory session, the subsequent sessions partner with guest speakers as a shared educational endeavour.

Conclusion

Attention to animal-inclusive social work practice continues to gain traction. From a social work education perspective, this teaching note provides an account of progress of intentionally developing and embedding animal-inclusive content into the social work programme of NMIT via scaffolded and interactive class sessions. The delivery of the Year 2 introductory session has been described in detail including reflections on session delivery, while subsequent sessions have been outlined. The next steps involve continuing to build on this content and both delivering and evaluating further sessions across Year three and four Bachelor of Social Work programmes.

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