3. Reflecting on reflection, leadership and social work: Social work students as developing leaders

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ABSTRACT
A strong case for including leadership in social work programs has been articulated since the 1980s. Yet specific leadership courses are not commonly included in Australian social work curriculums. It is argued that there is a difference between ‘teaching’ leadership and ‘teaching about’ leadership. Using a critically reflective approach to social work leadership assists students to develop a professional identity that includes future possibilities for leadership in a way that is personally meaningful. This paper reflects on leadership from the perspectives of social work students and educators. A thematic analysis conducted on student reflections completed over one semester and teacher reflections on the findings are presented. A postmodern narrative approach informed the analysis from which three themes, self-transformation, caring for self, and value-based leadership, are discussed. The paper concludes that a critically reflective approach to leadership education in the human services is important to the integration of theoretical knowledge, skill development and individualised contexts.
INTRODUCTION

Leadership is on the agenda both in the broader body politic and in the human services. A case for including leadership in social work programs has been articulated since the 1980s, though the body of literature concerning social work leadership has really only gained momentum in the last decade (Brilliant 1986; Hart 1988; Healy, L., Havens and Pine 1995; Klingbeil 1987; Lawler 2007; Rank and Hutchison 2000; Teare and Sheafor 1995). Yet leadership does not always have a strong focus in undergraduate or postgraduate social work curriculums despite general recognition of its importance (Rank and Hutchison 2000). Social workers need a wide repertoire of skills and knowledge for building services that are informed by social work values and ethics to meet individual and community needs (McDonald and Chenoweth 2009). Leadership is particularly important to social work practice given the economic and political influences on how services in health and welfare are actually delivered (Healy 2002, 2010; Mizrahi and Berger 2005; Rank and Hutchison 2000). It can be argued that in recent decades, social workers have had little effective influence over changes to the welfare state in Australia, indicating a greater need for social work leadership within increasingly market driven and politicised environments.

Though the health and welfare of the overall Australian population is improving, disparities between the most disadvantaged in the population and other Australians is increasing (AIHW 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). As the ethical and moral positioning of social work is towards the inclusion of those people most disadvantaged in society, social workers are obliged to exercise leadership in the arenas where struggles occur. Within organisational contexts, social workers are expected to resolve the tensions between the technical and operational aspects of management and the transformational aspects of leadership (Hughes and Wearing 2007; Mizrahi and Berger 2001) such as using data obtained from management information systems developmentally rather than simply as performance indicators. Pluralistic leadership; collaborative skills that
can engage disparate policy makers, service users and other professionals; and critiques of ideological assumptions have been identified as critical to professional influence in the literature (Bailey 1995; Nixon and Spearmon 1991; Rank and Hutchison 2000).

This paper reflects on leadership from the perspectives of social work students with a burgeoning awareness of their own leadership potential and educators. The formulation of a future leadership identity is a lofty expectation on students who have yet to emerge as practiseing, independent and competent social work practitioners. How students respond to these expectations and how educators can teach leadership in meaningful ways are notions central to this paper. The human services leadership course completed by students at Griffith University is briefly described. A thematic analysis conducted on student reflections completed over one semester and teacher reflections on the findings are presented. A postmodern narrative approach informed the analysis.

**CRITICAL REFLECTION AND LEADERSHIP**

Leadership and management are clearly differentiated in the literature (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Hughes and Wearing 2007). Management is essentially considered task focused, procedural and maintains the status quo. Leadership on the other hand is considered visionary and involves inspiring, motivating, and empowering others. Management and leadership are theorised as distinct yet the reality of human services management is that, in practice, the concepts are not as clearly delineated. Both skill sets are required to get the job done. Organisational requirements must be met while people within organisations require support and resources to work effectively in dynamic and demanding environments. According to Hughes and Wearing (2007, p. 78) leadership can be a ‘messy, unpredictable and chaotic’ affair. Leadership is often but not necessarily associated with holding a formally sanctioned management position. Anyone can exercise leadership regardless of designated roles in organisations or in society. This is particularly notable when grass-roots community leadership is considered (Ingamells et al. 2010; Taylor, Wilkinson and Cheers 2008). These are important
distinctions for students as they challenge commonly held beliefs concerning leadership.

The earliest theoretical model of leadership was the trait approach which implies leadership is an innate characteristic of particularly dynamic and charismatic people (Bryman 1992). In the 1940s, attention began to shift from innate characteristics to leadership training and by the 1960s leadership theories were extended to include the influence of specific contexts on leadership style (Hughes and Wearing 2007). Transactional leadership and transformational leadership came to the fore by the 1980s, focusing on values, the collective good, and fostering individual and organisational improvement through relationships (Bryman 1992; Hughes and Wearing 2007; Manz and Sims 1989). Transactional leadership attends to the immediate needs of employees ensuring organisational cohesion, while transformational leadership develops individual potential in climates of change, a style said to be preferred by women (Bass, 1999). Bass (1999) linked transformational leadership to job satisfaction in increasingly complex environments. Dunoon (2002) argued that management and leadership are distinct and have opposing values yet a balance between the two is desirable. He went on to say that a leadership style that focuses on collective capacity building is more valuable to the public sector while a transformational approach that fosters a learning culture is useful for reasons such as ensuring succession capabilities. Emergent models seek to balance progress and change in complex environments (Attwood et al, 2003). So, contemporary understandings of leadership have moved far from the trait approach. It is now generally accepted that leadership can be taught and has become increasingly important across professional groups.

While there is an emerging focus on leadership within social work, there is no agreement on its definition and whose interests are served by the social work leader (Fook 2002). Fook (2002) identified managerialism, changed funding mechanisms and decreased delineation between professional groups, as contributors to the devaluation of professional knowledge, skills and autonomy. Divergent pressures, dependence on the state and a desire to maintain power have meant a compromise
in practice for many social workers (Fook 2002). These pressures are intensified when social workers move into management roles where multiple perspectives and influences are indeed a reality. Social workers and other human services leaders are in unique positions in that their responsibilities often straddle the concurrent and competing demands of managerial and organisational contexts and the ‘non-rational component of the human condition and the process of caring’ (Harlow 2003, p. 29). As well as meeting organisational requirements, leaders, in order to lead, must meet the needs of front line workers at risk of burnout and compassion fatigue, while at the same time promote socially inclusive environments (Curtis, Moriarty and Netten 2009). These tensions require students to develop an acute sense of self awareness; to understand how leadership skills can be developed in self and others; and to begin to think strategically in response to the multiple demands of local and broader structural contexts.

The capacity to critically reflect on theoretical positioning, current and future skills, self-assessment and professional development, is important, if not central, to the leadership learning process. For students, learning about leadership also involves confronting its difficult aspects such as dealing with interpersonal conflict and decision making. Such potentially difficult interactions are critical or meaningful in some way. Critical (positive or negative) interactions are usually the starting point for reflective exercises. Oterholm (2009, p. 363) described critical reflection as the examination of ‘power relations and hegemonic assumptions guiding one’s actions’ that includes searching for alternative understandings. Tensions can exist between organisational goals and organisational survival and the needs of staff and service users in a climate of managerialism. Negotiating these tensions requires a critical approach and an understanding of both social work and leadership theories, necessary to meet multiple and conflicting obligations. A repertoire of skill sets including critical reflection are necessary to understand complexity, multiple perspectives, dynamics operating within and between organisations and the capacity to deal with the people within them at a range of levels (Tilbury, Osmond and Scott 2010).
Brookfield (2009) distinguished between a reflective process where key assumptions are clarified and questioned and a critical approach where embedded ideologies that lead social workers to unquestioningly further the interests of others are challenged. Embedded ideologies are expressed as practical, that is, by particular behaviours or practices, the expected cultural norms in a particular group; theoretical, by rationalisations and conceptualisations underpinning behaviours and practices such as professional versus non professional identities; and institutional, the systematic organisation of particular rationalisations and conceptualisations (Albury 1976; Fook 2002, p. 57). A critically reflective process that encompasses these concepts is relevant to future leaders. Reflecting on leadership requires the exercise of a high degree of self awareness that includes identifying and challenging: one’s own assumptions about self; the attribution of privilege to the professional position; and the underlying schema of the institutions for whom one works.

Critical reflection as practiced in the Developing Practice and Leadership course utilised a four stage process of reflection and integration: 1) a critical reflection on the leadership literature, its relevance to human service organisations and the student as a developing leader; 2) contradictions and alternate views elucidated in case scenarios and multimedia activities conducted in workshops; 3) the development of strategies for the transfer of alternative views generated in these workshops into practice situations; and 4) an ongoing self-evaluation of leadership actuality and potential that included the formulation of a reflexive, personalised, professional development plan for leadership growth along the professional lifespan.

THE LEADERSHIP COURSE

The aim of the Developing Practice and Leadership course was to develop strategic and critical leadership capacities in emerging social work leaders in the policy, organisational and practice domains of human services work. The course was redesigned based on student feedback to incorporate a stronger practical focus. It used a critically reflective
approach to leadership education. Students were required to engage in four written reflection exercises during the semester and to incorporate their learning and a personalised professional development plan in a final assessment piece. There were a number of challenges relating to creating learning environments conducive to the development of knowledge and skills that could be delivered in a blended learning format for on-campus students and in distance mode. A critical approach that focused on personal leadership development in a way that was meaningful for students from diverse backgrounds and experience was considered essential to student learning.

The course content was delivered in five modules containing a range of topics that included leadership and management theory; power, authority and responsibility; strategic thinking; initiating and working with change; the nature of organisations; organisational climate and culture; teams; community leadership; problem solving; conflict resolution; decision making; performance management; professional development; mentoring; self-awareness; and self-care. The same course content was delivered via two learning modes. The course for on-campus students was in a blended learning format that included a series of on-line lectures, readings and five half day workshops throughout the semester. The on-line lectures, recorded by colleagues in the faculty, had the dual purpose of utilising particular areas of expertise while providing variety to the students. Workshop activities focused on integrating information from lectures and the literature through practical learning activities and use of multimedia such as web-based clips.

A development team assisted in the design of the on-line course in recognition of the importance of expertise and technical support for effective, visually attractive and user-friendly web based material (Freddolino and Knaggs 2005). As stressed by Maidment (2006) the design of web based material is much more than the transfer of hard copy material to an on-line format. Tools such as on-line lectures, ‘coffee shop’ for private student discussions, asynchronistic online discussions, multimedia and other interactive exercises and resource materials were utilised. Teacher involvement in stimulating student engagement and
online activities considered important occurred throughout the semester. Additional student support was available via email and telephone as required. In this particular course, students were relatively technically ‘savvy’ though both on-line and on campus students experienced a number of difficulties with their home based computers during the semester. Previous studies have highlighted the need for student access to technical support (Oterholm 2009) and this support was available through the university help desk. It should be noted that the focus of this paper is not on the course evaluation, but rather on the experience of student reflection on their present and future leadership capacities.

METHOD
Consultation with Griffith University Human Research Ethics and Governance determined that the material collected was for teaching and learning purposes and formal ethics approval was not required. However, consensual participation was considered important. A formal request was sent to students requesting their participation. Students consented in writing and reforwarded their assessment material (which had already been marked and course evaluations completed) as part of that consent. It was made explicit that the focus was not on student marks, rather on their experience of leadership development. Out of sixty-one Masters of Social Work (qualifying) and fourth (final year) undergraduate social work students, seventeen students consented for their work, conducted over one semester, to be analysed and used for this paper. All work and any references to particular organisations or persons were de-identified. Of the seventeen students, eight were external students who completed the course on-line and nine were on-campus students from two campuses. No formal demographic data was taken. However, it was known that one student was male and there was a small cohort of international students and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Participating students ranged from those who commenced university from school to older students aged in their fifties. The external students were geographically dispersed. Most students were working in some capacity and many had multiple demands such as family responsibilities. Some had past or current experience in human
services fields of practice, some held qualifications in other disciplines such as nursing or education, while others had only their field practicum experiences to draw on.

The data corpus was in total five written pieces of work provided by each of the seventeen participating students: four critical reflections on particular aspects of leadership covered during the course and selected as personally meaningful by the student; and an essay that included a self-analysis of the student’s leadership potential and a personalised plan for development as a practice leader. The material was first read and ideas written down. All data was then entered into a QSR Nvivo Program used to facilitate coding and identify systematic relationships in the coding. Reflection on the data occurred during the first reading, data entry, re-reading and line by line coding maintaining a constant relationship with the data. Themes were categorised under nodes until saturation was reached.

A thematic inductive analysis utilising a postmodern narrative approach (Reissman 1993) was conducted on the coded material. The focus was on the narratives students told about themselves in their writing to construct their subjective, present and future leadership selves, and the multiple perspectives and contradictions they came to understand in the reflection process. Reissman (1993) highlighted the importance of subjective realities, the interpretation of past events, and the meaningful connections created between past, present and future truths, that link the personal and political in a re-imagined self. The identification of themes and the analysis were influenced by the motivations of the authors (and teachers of this course) to understand the student experience of learning and an emerging leadership identity. The stories told by students described critical incidents. Critical reflections on these incidents enabled students to transit from past to future identities, connect theory to practice and describe how they came to understand their own personal and professional capacity as leaders. These processes were of particular interest in the analysis and were compared to the literature on critically reflective practice and leadership in the final stages of analysis.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The diversity of student experiences and backgrounds was reflected in their stories. No discernable differences were noted in the work provided by external and on campus students, rather variations were related to specific work and life experiences. Despite differences in experience and perspectives and the small sample size, several themes did emerge. Three of these themes are discussed: self-transformation; caring for self; and value based leadership.

SELF-TRANSFORMATION

The first theme, self-transformation, describes transformational shifts from student self-identities of relative powerlessness where power is possessed by 'someone else' and leadership skills and qualities are attributed to others in organisations, to self identities where enacting power or influence differently was a real possibility. Fook (2002) also described the uncomfortable relationship social workers have with power. There is tendency for social workers to construct themselves as powerless and subject to power that is held by others such as supervisors and bureaucracies. This discomfort was present and posed challenges for students developing a leadership self-identity. The following excerpts describe the starting positions and future possibilities of leadership self identity of two students.

I did not consider myself as a leader until I reflected on the journey...

Developing leadership in my practice is a new concept for me. I have never considered the possibility, until now. The shift has been somewhat exciting and yet full of anxiety and doubt.

Many students did not attribute power to their self concept, as described below.

I am a person who doesn't always feel comfortable with my power...I have tended to stay out of the way...I don't feel I have ever been comfortable in the leadership role...
Shifting an ingrained self perception involved challenging practical ideologies and reconstructing a new understanding that leadership was not necessarily dependent on positional authority. This is described in the following excerpt from another student.

_I have never been a leader, mostly I am quite happy to be a follower, and have often shirked the responsibility that leading entails...However, [reflecting on these issues], I believe that we are all leaders at certain times._

The transformative process for many students was initialised by reflecting on critical events such as conflict situations. Their transformation involved the deconstruction and reconstruction of power interrelationships and the acceptance of new and multiple realities. Dichotomous binaries of the perpetrator/ victim in conflict shifted during a critically reflective process. Conflict situations were described by students as the most difficult to manage, and for some lowered self-esteem and diminished confidence were attributed to unresolved, ongoing conflict situations. Yet it is these critical incidents that initialised a critically reflective process and the emergence of alternative perspectives. Two examples are illustrated below.

_This [reflecting on conflict] was very important to me, as I have often seen conflict as only negative, and never using it to help turn the next conflict into a positive by examining it later on...Although I understand what the level of conflict is to me, I have never really thought about what it was to the other person involved. The person I had conflict with...while we were discussing it, I commented that I found the conflict to be of discomfort, but she found it to be a misunderstanding [referring to levels of conflict as defined by Elder (1994)]. I started to think about this in my future practice, as I find conflict to be at a different level than the other person involved..._

_I believe I was very self-aware when dealing with this person and also made sure I managed the relationship between myself and her, however this took a number of months and several learning curves to be able to do this effectively...I believe that is an on-going experience as your identity changes with the more learning you have...It takes time to get to know somebody and understand what is going on for them, especially when they don't tell you._
I can see what I need to do to manage my relationship with my boss more effectively and allow for this to support the development of my leadership skills however; it is difficult to just change! It is almost as if the leadership skills I asserted with the previous boss need to be re-defined and fine tuned... Through the process of self-awareness I am slowly getting there and I am pulling myself up when I think within the old framework of the previous management and use this time to take a step back and reflect so that I can see what I am doing, what I need to do and implement the changes.

One concerning issue noted in the above excerpts was identified as a common experience during the analysis. With few exceptions, students identified one or a series of negative relationships with supervisors in paid employment, usually in the human services or related fields. Students described how they and/ or their teams at times felt bullied, misunderstood and misrepresented and linked these experiences to burnout. Though students were able to reconstruct the scenarios by ascribing shared power and responsibility in interactions and the realisation of multiple truths, the frequency of these reports in the data was alarming. On reflection, an interpersonal analysis of conflict that focuses on the lack of leadership skills in individual managers and lack of leadership education would explain this phenomenon. An alternative or perhaps concurrent explanation, however, explores the impact of managerialism and the changing and uncertain contexts within which health and welfare is practised. Since the 1980s, reforms in Australian state and federal public sectors known as ‘new public management’, has increased emphases on privatisation, performance and cost cutting measures resulting in initiatives such as salary negotiation, performance-based pay, outsourcing services and downsizing (Di Francesco, 2001; O’Donnell et al, 1999) placing new pressures on managers in both government and non government sectors. In addition to leadership skills, a critically reflective approach that includes a focus on embedded ideologies as described by Brookfield (2009) and Fook (2002) would enable those in management and leadership positions to approach practice differently. Acquiring leadership skills alone is insufficient. It must be combined with a reflexive stance that is critical. It is these
student experiences of conflict and the relationship to their own leadership development that leads to the second theme, caring for self.

CARING FOR SELF

Conflict with superiors was directly linked to psychological and biological stress responses.

The word ‘painfully’ is certainly the feeling I can identify with … recently these effects worsened for me and I realised where the conflict was coming from. The conflict was happening between my boss and myself. The situation worsened so much I had a panic attack…

Other students described the stressful consequences of work based conflict and multiple demands and its relationship to their leadership capacities.

I find working as a community worker very rewarding as I really enjoy helping people yet I have experienced times when I have felt burnt out. The stress I have experienced as a service provider has impacted on my leadership ability. When stressed I struggle to make clear decisions and have not got the energy to be supportive or proactive let alone inspiring.

Although, I was quite conscious of the amount of stress I was putting on myself by trying to do much more than was expected, the pie exercise really opened my eyes as to amount of time I was spending at work to satisfy my clients and the organizational needs… I soon realized how much I was wearing myself down from the high work and study caseload which not always brought the desired outcomes and hence dissatisfaction which rose my stress level. I was slowly starting to lose enthusiasm and that started to reflect on my work environment and in my social and family environment.

Students utilising reflection were able to identify and describe their experiences of stress, ascribe the importance of self-care to leadership, identify concrete strategies that could address their self-care needs in the short and long term, and reported an increased sense of mastery over their situations as a result. These negative experiences also provided a yardstick against which they could measure their future approaches.
to conflict resolution. The experiences of these students are consistent with those described in the literature in relation to organisational contexts, feeling valued, the quality and type of supervisory support and the impact on other aspects of their lives (Beddoe 2010; Lloyd and Chenoweth 2002; McLean and Andrew 2000; Reid et al. 1999). On the other hand, the relationship between stress and social work leadership, in terms of relationship conflict as well as the impact of stress on leaders themselves, has received less attention. Two exceptions are a UK study by McLean and Andrew (2000) that found a high incidence of reported stress by managers and a study by Beddoe (2009) conducted in New Zealand, that reported managers of human services organisations felt the negative effects of bureaucratic processes as much as front line practitioners. Students in contemporary Australia pay fees for tertiary education, are often working, and have multiple family and other responsibilities. In addition, international students, those from diverse backgrounds and those students with young families or elderly parents experience a range of additional pressures. It is concerning that participating students did report high levels of stress. This means graduates may already be experiencing stress or life pressures prior to the commencement of a social work career. How student development plans that included stress management strategies will translate to the reality of organisational contexts and be integrated into self concepts as aspiring leaders in the field is yet to be determined.

Sources of stress for social workers have been attributed to conflicts between values, role expectations and administrators (Lloyd and Chenoweth 2002; McLean and Andrew 2000; Reid et al. 1999). Yet, it is social work values and skills that students conceptualised as appropriate for their future leader-selves despite reported incongruence between core values, organisational constraints on practitioner actions (Gardner 2009), previous negative experiences and uneasy relationships with power.

**VALUE BASED LEADERSHIP**

Students overwhelmingly identified with and aspired to transformational leadership as described by Hughes and Wearing (2007). As shown in the
excerpts below, transformational leadership provided a familiar point of reference that was consistent with student self perception and values found in social work such as social justice, egalitarianism and respect.

* A transformational approach appeals to [me] as it places a strong emphasis on morals and values and emphasises the importance of others… it is further anticipated that the adoption, maintenance and ongoing review of this plan will ultimately facilitate positive changes in line with social work ethics, values and principles to the culture of the organisations and the lives of service users and communities that I work with in the future.

I consider my strong interest in forming relationships and preference to be inclusive within those relationships are innate characteristics I possess. Therefore I am strongly attracted to the transformational leadership process… Cementing my appeal to transactional leadership is that both leader and follower prosper and form strong connections… I am generally more interested in understanding the complexities of people’s roles and how they manage them. I prefer to discuss with people their values, strengths and goals… My style reflects my ease with shared transformational leadership.

Not all students could identify as leaders at this stage of their careers but could identify with certain skills required to lead others. Students understood the practice of transformational leadership as one that involves the utilisation of skills taught in social work programs such as communication, decision making and problem solving. The synergy between social work and transformational leadership was an area where students felt they had achieved certain competence and represented practices they could envisage.

…communication skills are an important part of successful leadership. I’d like to think that I have well developed communication skills, however, there is lots of room for improvement. I have developed skills in being tactful, as well as explaining and teaching something new. I am good at encouraging others as well as motivating them.

Transformational leaders focus on developing positive relationships with others. I believe that I am effective at working with others and have developed
the ability to build trust and rapport with a wide range of people... In addition, I have developed a considerable degree of empathy as a result of the ten years of working... I have also learned the importance of acknowledging the feelings of others... My practice experience has taught me that people need support and want to be recognised for their achievements...

The strong preference for this type of leadership, that is, leadership that is empowering and relational, is not necessarily an idealised view of future self as many students had been employed in the health and welfare sectors and had experienced the pressures of frontline work and different leadership styles first hand. Gellis (2001) found that social workers were more satisfied with and motivated by leaders who displayed transformational leadership behaviours. However, expectations regarding the style of leadership managers should or are expected to exhibit compared to the realities of day to day practice may contribute to the dissatisfaction experienced by workers and conflict situations previously described. However, shifts in the self-transformation domain indicate that some students were able to progress their understanding of difficult working relationships and the power interplays enacted within them differently. In general, students were able to describe a balanced self-analysis, achievable long term plans for their professional development and realistic assessments of the pros and cons of leadership as described in the following excerpt.

Placing value on people rather than treating them as objects fits well with my personal values and leadership style, however this can be a difficult thing to do in practice as there is a need to balance people's desires and opinion with that of the organisational goals. This is an important skill to keep at the forefront of my mind and I think it will take practice for me to fully implement this skill.

For some, a leadership role was beyond what an inexperienced student could envisage, but it was no longer a proposition that was true or false rather one that might be possible in their future professional lives.

I have learnt...that I am a leader who is willing to fight for this profession we call social work. I now see and understand why this course has been made
part of this degree and perhaps despite my inability at present to see myself in a leadership role, after completing this course, my thinking may be different.

The themes of self-transformation, caring for self and value based leadership were not surprising given the learning process was inclusive of literature concerning leadership and social work leadership. What was interesting was the construction of self as a potential leader and how shifts in one domain, such as understanding how a lack of assertiveness may contribute to a difficult situation, triggered a shift within another domain such as self care. What was surprising was the degree of workplace stress reported by students and the importance of sociocultural context and structural conditions within which the narratives were told. It can be inferred that leadership cannot be taught without addressing self care issues. Workload, work relationships and professional development were issues at the forefront and have implications for the learning needs of students and the development of leadership courses. Using critical reflection to develop leadership skills enabled students through narrative to deconstruct ideologies and assumptions and to reconstruct their developing professional identities and leadership potential.

Positive experiences of role models and mentors, not discussed in this paper, balanced challenging and at times negative experiences. Students’ understandings of notions of power, interpersonal differences, appreciation of others’ perspectives, and one’s own contributions to difficult interactions expanded. The importance of professional supervision as a component of personal development plans was important to all participating students.

The aim of the paper was to analyse and present the issues self-selected by students as significant and meaningful and for the authors (and teachers of this course) to understand the student experience of learning and developing an emerging leadership identity. The reflection process and shifts in self-transformation and caring for self domains became clear during the analysis. Personal meaning and an integration into student self identities were apparent in narratives. In contrast, the reflective process was less in depth in relation to the wholesale attraction to transformational leadership. Certainly, transformational leadership is
preferred by women and shares many similarities with a social work approach (Mary 2005). It fits snugly but does this easy fit make its adoption a comfortable process thereby diminishing a critical approach? Other leadership approaches may have value and be useful in practice depending on context while examining conceptual weaknesses of all theoretical perspectives remains important in the reflection process (Yukl 1999). A preference for transformational leadership may still have been the outcome for students following a critical process that can recognise and challenge how power is also enacted in transformational leadership styles and the contested nature of social work itself (Brookfield 2009).

The emphasis is on *after* a critical process.

In our own reflective process as teachers, it is important to consider the possibility that concepts that fit easily into existing ideology may inhibit a reflective process and lead to a ‘confirmation bias’ (Kee and Bickle 2004, p.610; Tilbury, Osmond and Scott 2010, p.44). How do we identify what these issues are and how can we address them differently to ensure reflexivity? Perhaps, by exercising our own reflections as teachers, we raise our awareness of which concepts students might simply adopt because it is easy to do so. In terms of teaching leadership approaches, a greater critical emphasis on *theoretical ideology* (ideas, rationalisations or conceptualisations (Fook 2002)) may be indicated, remembering that ‘social work’ is *not* identical to ‘leadership’. It may not simply be a matter of examining ingrained rationalisations, understanding them and making links to perspectives that fit easily. Rather, assisting students in their struggle with less palatable theoretical approaches and examining the aspects that are not congruent with social work may maintain attention on the critical process and better prepare students for future leadership. The deconstruction of leadership approaches, their reassembling and integration into a changed leadership self-identity may have occurred but this process was not clearly identifiable during the analysis of the students’ work. In fact the self-concept was not changed in this domain, rather it stayed the same or at best attracted ‘add-ons’.

Additional insights into students’ experiences may have been enhanced by approaching the issue as a formal research project, collecting data
from other sources such as interviews with students, using evaluation instruments or measurement tools such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass and Avolio 2000). Research is perhaps the next step to extending understandings about how students incorporate leadership into their professional identities. It could be argued that the material provided by students was constrained by the limits of assignment writing and expectations of the markers. The inclusion of additional data sources such as surveys may have addressed this issue. However, the thinking and writing process is in itself a reflective exercise (Fook 2002) that can be reflected on.

CONCLUSION

From an educator’s perspective, there is a difference between teaching leadership and teaching ‘about’ leadership. A critical approach promoted the former. The most significant challenge was to assist students to see themselves as actual or potential leaders. The integration of practical activities in face-to-face workshops and in distance mode with the literature and personal experiences assisted the student learning and reflection process. The material became meaningful to students as they began to recognise nuances and unpack the processes that contributed to their experiences.

Given the volatile political and changing milieu in which social workers practice, further research on the preparation of social work students for leadership roles in the Australian context is needed. Likewise, a focus on the health of our future social work leaders and practitioners may be an important element to extending the working lifespan of social workers estimated at eight years in the United Kingdom (Curtis, Moriarty and Netten 2009). The challenges of providing learning environments that support emerging professional identities; are conducive to the development of knowledge and skills; and relevant to students from diverse backgrounds and experiences and their future roles; are highlighted. This is of particular importance when delivered in multiple and flexible learning modes. Critical reflection that focuses on personal leadership development in a meaningful way was considered essential
to the integration of theoretical knowledge, skill development, and the individualised contexts of the students described in this paper. Likewise, critically reflecting on how education was delivered and students’ experiences enabled a fresh perspective on the conflation of leadership theory, professional identities and future practices while highlighting the importance of developing leadership capacity within the profession.

REFERENCES


