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AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CLASSROOM IN LAW AND SOCIAL WORK: CAN IT BE DONE?

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I INTRODUCTION

The practice of law frequently overlaps with the practice of social work. Law ‘cuts across’ all areas of social work practice,¹ and for lawyers who work with vulnerable and disadvantaged clients, social work is a necessary part of their legal practice.² Indeed, some have argued that ‘the practice of law is, or ought to be, “social work”’.³

Despite the fact that each discipline has much to offer the other, the study of social work and law remain separate. The literature describes a handful of teaching and learning experiments where academics have attempted to teach students in an interdisciplinary manner.⁴ The designers of such programs have identified myriad barriers to their success. They describe interpersonal barriers associated with professional stereotypes, a lack of understanding about the roles of

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¹ Andrea Saltzman, David M Furman and Kathleen Ohman, *Law in Social Work Practice* (Cengage, 3rd ed, 2015) xi. See also Phillip Swain, ‘Why Social Work and Law?’ in Simon Rice, Andrew Day and Linda Briskman (eds), *Social Work in the Shadow of the Law* (Federation Press, 5th ed, 2018) 2, 5; Phillip Swain ‘Reflections on Teaching Law in Social Work – If Only It Were That Simple’ (1999) 2(2) *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* 124.

² See, eg, Spencer Zifcak, ‘Towards a Reconciliation of Legal and Social Work Practice’ in Simon Rice, Andrew Day and Linda Briskman (eds), *Social Work in the Shadow of the Law* (Federation Press, 2018) 9; Mary Anne Kenny and Lucy Fiske “‘Marriage of Convenience” or a “Match Made in Heaven”: Lawyers and Social Workers Working with Asylum Seekers’ (2004) 10(1) *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 137; Heather B Craig and William G Saur ‘The Contribution of Social Workers to Legal Services Programs’ (1981) 14(13) *Clearinghouse Review* 1267.

³ Jane Aiken and Stephen Wizner, ‘Law as Social Work’ (2003) 11 *Washington University Journal of Law and Policy* 63, 64. See also Ross Hyams, Grace Brown and Richard Foster, ‘The Benefits of Multidisciplinary Learning in Clinical Practice for Law, Finance and Social Work Students: An Australian Experience’ (2013) 33(2) *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 159, 167, 169.

⁴ See, eg, Ross Hyams et al (n 3); José B. Ashford and Husain Lateef, ‘Serving Miller Youth: An Interprofessional Initiative for Educating Law and Social Work Students’ (2019) *Journal of Social Work Education* 1-7; Mary Ann Forgey and Lisa Colarossi, ‘Interdisciplinary Social Work and Law: A Model Domestic Violence Curriculum’ (2003) 39(3) *Journal of Social Work Education* 459.

different professions, and a lack of respect for other professionals.⁵ They also discuss institutional barriers, including problems with scheduling, continuity of staff, and varying levels of school and university commitment to interdisciplinary learning.⁶

Interdisciplinary education ‘involves opportunities for students in two or more professions to learn in ways that will enhance their future collaborations and improve their outcomes’.⁷ We adopt this definition in this paper, whilst noting that others might apply slightly different terminology, including ‘interprofessional education’. We consider that interdisciplinary education brings together people from different disciplines, whilst interprofessional education brings together different professionals, where ‘profession’ is understood to be a ‘calling’ that ‘requires specialist knowledge’.⁸ In a university setting, students are not yet ‘professionals’ but rather are being socialised into their professional roles.⁹ Some law and social work students will not practice as lawyers or social workers, and may take jobs in other settings. Therefore, we use ‘interdisciplinary’ to describe our approach.

By way of background, we originally discussed the possibility of bringing our law and social work students together for some joint learning whilst working together on a research project. Having both had exposure to law and social work courses as students ourselves, we were aware of some of the stereotypes each discipline held of the other. Through our professional practice roles and research, we had learned that social workers and lawyers do not always understand one another’s roles or work effectively with one another in interdisciplinary settings.¹⁰ We observed that our students lacked opportunities for interdisciplinary contact, despite the fact that they were educated on the same campus.

Quite unexpectedly, in semester 1 of 2022, our undergraduate courses in social work and law were scheduled for the same timeslot each week. Due to COVID restrictions, many classes at our university were still being delivered online. This provided us with a unique opportunity to combine our classes for some shared learning activities.

This paper reports on a qualitative scholarship of teaching and learning study into interdisciplinary learning between social work and

⁵ See especially Katherine Lindsay, ‘Teaching Child Law’ (2003) 5(2) *Newcastle Law Review* 1, 4; Kathleen Coulbourn Faller and Frank E Vandervort, ‘Interdisciplinary Clinical Teaching of Child Welfare Practice to Law and Social Work Students: When World Views Collide’ (2007) 41(1) *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 121, 159.

⁶ Ibid. See also Jonathan Dickens, ‘Teaching Child Care Law: Key Principles, New Priorities’ (2004) 23(2) *Social Work Education* 217.

⁷ Ashford and Lateef (n 4) 1. Note that Ashford and Lateef use the term ‘interprofessional’.

⁸ Keli Mu and Charlotte Brasic Royeen, ‘Interprofessional vs Interdisciplinary Services in School-Based Occupational Therapy Practice’ (2004) 11(4) *Occupational Therapy International* 244, 245.

⁹ Denise Jackson, ‘Developing Pre-Professional Identity in Undergraduates Through Work-Integrated Learning’ (2017) 74(5) *Higher Education* 833.

¹⁰ See Tamara Walsh, ‘Lawyers and Social Workers Working Together: Ethic of Care and Feminist Legal Practice in Community Law’ (2012) 21(3) *Griffith Law Review* 752.

law students. In this paper, we report on our analysis of online reflections completed by social work and law students in response to a set of three joint learning activities. We conclude that whilst the interpersonal barriers to interdisciplinary learning seem surmountable, the institutional ones are more difficult to address.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

Interdisciplinary learning is receiving increased attention amongst teaching and learning scholars as demands for ‘job-ready’ graduates increase. The aim of interdisciplinary learning is to produce graduates who are ready for collaborative practice, by providing students from different professions the opportunity to learn ‘with, from, and about each other’.¹¹ In the legal and social welfare sectors, the importance of holistic practice and the need for ‘joined-up’ services continues to be emphasised by practitioners, providing an impetus for social workers and lawyers to work collaboratively.¹² Successful interdisciplinary practice between social workers and lawyers is presented in the literature as important but challenging, which indicates a need for student social workers and law students to be trained to work together, rather than expecting this to come naturally.

Interdisciplinary practice is important because receiving input from both social workers and lawyers can lead to better outcomes for clients. Maylea remarks that ‘[i]nterdisciplinary practice between social workers and lawyers improves both the process of going through the legal system and improving the outcomes [for service users] at the end of the process’.¹³ Vulnerable clients presenting at legal services will often have myriad non-legal issues going on in their lives that intersect with their legal problems. Lawyers find that they are unable to address clients’ legal problems without first addressing the non-legal ones.¹⁴ When they attempt to address the non-legal issues, lawyers recognise the limitations of their training, resources and time.¹⁵ They agree that social work support could assist many of their clients, however they are

¹¹ See, eg, Katrine Lindvig, Catherine Lyall and Laura R Meagher, ‘Creating Interdisciplinary Education within Monodisciplinary Structures: The Art of Managing Interstitiality’ (2019) 44(2) *Studies in Higher Education* 347; Janet Weinstein, ‘Coming of Age: Recognizing the Importance of Interdisciplinary Education in Law Practice’ (1999) 74(2) *Washington Law Review* 319; James Field et al, ‘ADEA-ADEE Shaping the Future of Dental Education III: From Interprofessional Education to Transprofessional Learning’ (2020) 84(1) *Journal of Dental Education* 105.

¹² See especially Liz Curran and Andrew Crockett, ‘Measuring Legal Services: A Practical Methodology for Measuring the Quality and Outcomes of Legal Assistance Services’ (2013) 32(1) *University of Tasmania Law Review* 70; Angela Melville and Karen Laing, ‘Closing the Gate: Family Lawyers as Gatekeepers to a Holistic Service’ (2010) 6(2) *International Journal of Law in Context* 167.

¹³ Chris Maylea, *Social Work and the Law: A Guide for Ethical Practice* (Red Globe Press, 2020) 120. See also Hyams, Brown and Foster (n 3) 160.

¹⁴ Dickens (n 6) 222.

¹⁵ *Ibid*; Zifcak (n 2) 10–11; Walsh (n 10).

often unsure about the bounds of their role, and what social workers have to offer their clients.¹⁶

Social workers and lawyers find themselves working with one another in a range of settings, yet relationships between them are often described as uneasy or even hostile.¹⁷ Sometimes, lawyers and social workers work alongside each other, particularly in community legal settings. However, on many occasions, they will find themselves in an adversarial relationship with one another. For example, in child welfare settings, social workers are often responsible for decisions to remove children and they will find themselves in conflict with parents' legal representatives.

Most lawyers work with clients, and this requires well-developed interpersonal communication skills. Yet it is often observed that legal education 'does almost nothing to prepare prospective lawyers to "relate" to clients'.¹⁸ Many areas of legal practice require an understanding of other disciplines, and the roles that other professionals play in clients' lives.¹⁹ Lawyers who work with vulnerable people and families will need to know about non-legal issues such as substance use and addiction, domestic violence, mental health, housing and financial matters.²⁰ Traditional approaches to legal education tend not to emphasise these 'soft' skills and law schools are under increasing pressure to update their practices to ensure that graduates are job-ready.²¹ There is also a need to align education with the expectations of clients, the profession and students themselves.²²

On the other hand, social workers require an understanding of legal processes as part of their knowledge for practice. The Australian Association of Social Workers' *Practice Standards* require social workers to demonstrate an 'understanding of relevant legislation governing practice and the legal frameworks which inform and mandate practice'.²³ This is because social workers 'operate at the interface between people and their social, cultural and physical environments', which includes the legal system and its parameters.²⁴ The 'actions and options of social workers and their clients are constantly being shaped,

¹⁶ Walsh (n 10).

¹⁷ Jonathon Dickens, 'Care, Control and Change in Child Care Proceedings: Dilemmas for Social Workers, Managers and Lawyers' (2006) 11(1) *Child and Family Social Work* 23; Margaret R Bell and Richard Daly, 'Social Workers and Solicitors: Working Together?' (1992) 22 *Family Law* 257; Swain, 'Why Social Work and Law?' (n 1) 3; Zifcak (n 2) 10.

¹⁸ Nicola Ross, Ann Apps and Sher Campbell, 'Shaping the Future Lawyer: Connecting Students with Clients in First-Year Law' in Caroline Strevens, Richard Grimes and Edward Phillips (eds), *Legal Education: Simulation in Theory and Practice* (Taylor and Francis Group, 2014) 67.

¹⁹ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 121.

²⁰ Susan B Apel, 'No More Casebooks: Using Simulation-Based Learning to Educate Future Family Law Practitioners' (2011) 49(4) *Family Court Review* 700, 706.

²¹ Ibid; Ross, Apps and Campbell (n 18) 67.

²² Apel (n 20) 700; Nicola Ross, Apps and Campbell (n 18) 69; Hyams, Brown and Foster (n 3) 170.

²³ Australian Association of Social Workers, *Practice Standards* (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2013) 12 [4.1.f].

²⁴ Australian Association of Social Workers, *Code of Ethics* (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020) 6 [1.2].

mandated and regulated by law'.²⁵ For example, in child welfare cases, where social workers are charged with gathering evidence and making a legal argument for removal, knowledge of the law and legal processes is critical.

Past research suggests that many lawyers and social workers lack an understanding of what one another does, and what their respective roles are when they share a client.²⁶ Each has misunderstandings of the other. Lawyers and social workers may also have different personality types. Law students tend to be on the 'rigid' end of the perfectionism scale, for example,²⁷ although their confidence has been described as 'fragile'.²⁸ Social work students, on the other hand, tend to be described as altruistic and idealistic.²⁹

Social workers and lawyers operate under different professional rules and ethical obligations. In particular, they have different definitions of 'the client'.³⁰ A lawyer's client is the person they are representing, whereas social workers may view the client more broadly to include the person's family and community.³¹ Social workers work for social change, but lawyers may be suspicious of this as a goal of legal practice because duties to individual clients must take precedence.³² Social workers take a 'systems perspective', seeing the client in the context of their family, community and society, whilst lawyers tend to take a more individualistic, rights-based perspective.³³ Lawyers' goals may be more short-term — for example, winning a case — whilst social workers' focus is likely to be on the long-term interests of those involved.³⁴

Lawyers and social workers approach clients with different languages, approaches and methods.³⁵ They also meet different challenges in their work. Lawyers may not understand the pressures on

²⁵ Lyn Slater and Kara Finck, *Social Work Practice and the Law* (Springer Publishing, 2012) xi. See also Swain, 'Why Social Work and Law?' (n 1) 5.

²⁶ Walsh (n 10); Mary Kay Kisthardt, 'Working in the Best Interest of Children: Facilitating the Collaboration of Lawyers and Social Workers in Abuse and Neglect Cases' (2006–07) 30 *Rutgers Law Record* 1, 24.

²⁷ Elisa G Lewis and Jacqueline M Cardwell, 'The Big Five Personality Traits, Perfectionism and Their Association with Mental Health among UK Students on Professional Degree Programmes' (2020) 8(1) *BMC Psychology* 54; Natalie Skead and Shane L Rogers, 'Stress, Anxiety and Depression in Law Students: How Student Behaviours Affect Student Wellbeing' (2014) 40(2) *Monash University Law Review* 564; Zifcak (n 2) 14.

²⁸ Jane Ching, 'A Large-Scale Simulation, Practitioners, Their Feelings and the *Verfremdungseffekt*' in Caroline Strevens, Richard Grimes and Edward Phillips (eds), *Legal Education: Simulation in Theory and Practice* (Ashgate Publishing, 2014) 107.

²⁹ Kjersti Nesje, 'Personality and Professional Commitment of Students in Nursing, Social Work, and Teaching: A Comparative Survey' (2016) 53 *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 173; Ellen L Csikai and Cindy Rozensky, "'Social Work Idealism" and Students' Perceived Reasons for Entering Social Work' (1997) 33(3) *Journal of Social Work Education* 529.

³⁰ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 143; Hyams, Brown and Foster (n 3) 166; Walsh (n 10).

³¹ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 155.

³² *Ibid* 148, 155.

³³ Kisthardt (n 26) 18; Hyams, Brown and Foster (n 3) 169.

³⁴ Kisthardt (n 26) 32.

³⁵ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 122; *ibid* 4.

social workers, such as high caseloads and worker turnover. In child welfare cases, lawyers will not see the environments in which clients live, so they may not appreciate the risks to children that social workers identify through their assessments.³⁶ In the meantime, parents' problems, and structural issues like poverty and discrimination, will be known to their legal representatives but may not be fully understood by social workers. Social workers may, rightly, feel daunted, challenged and discredited by 'the law' and legal proceedings.³⁷ Lawyers and social workers may view the role of the court differently, particularly in child welfare matters.³⁸ Social workers are likely to view courts as ill-equipped to address complex interpersonal issues, whereas lawyers are likely to value the procedural protections the courtroom offers.³⁹

During the course of their studies, law and social work students acquire very different skill sets. When it comes to interviewing, social work students have much to offer their law student colleagues. Social workers specifically learn interviewing techniques – they are taught that there is a rapport-building stage, an information-gathering stage, a review stage and a closing stage.⁴⁰ Few law courses offer training in interview techniques or counselling. On the other hand, law students are taught to be analytical, rigorous and evidence-based, which they could model to social work students.⁴¹ It must also be acknowledged that social workers and lawyers are socialised differently. The law classroom tends to be more traditional in the sense of being male-led, autocratic, intimidating and passive, whilst the social work classroom is more likely to be female-led, discursive and participatory.⁴² Furthermore, the case law focus of their studies necessarily creates an adversarial mindset in lawyers.

In terms of work experience, social work students will generally have completed professional placements, and therefore bring with them considerable experience.⁴³ Law students' legal practice experience is extremely variable. Whilst some will have worked as paralegals, others will have no practical legal experience at all.⁴⁴

Faller and Vandervort remind us that lawyers and social workers also have different social statuses.⁴⁵ This can become relevant when students come together to learn, and when professionals work together. Past research has indicated that lawyers express disdain for social workers, but this may stem from a lack of understanding about what the role of the social worker is.⁴⁶ Social workers may be viewed as working 'for' the lawyers rather than being members of an equal team.⁴⁷ In child

³⁶ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 141; Kisthardt (n 26) 34.

³⁷ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 150; Kisthardt (n 26) 21.

³⁸ Kisthardt (n 26) 4.

³⁹ Ibid 15; Zifcak (n 2) 13–14.

⁴⁰ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 142.

⁴¹ Hyams, Brown and Foster (n 3) 167.

⁴² Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 145.

⁴³ Lindsay (n 5) 5; Hyams, Brown and Foster (n 3) 163.

⁴⁴ Ching (n 28) 123.

⁴⁵ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 122.

⁴⁶ Walsh (n 10); Kisthardt (n 26) 21.

⁴⁷ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 161.

welfare matters, social workers may conflate their judgements of lawyers and their clients with one another, considering that '[i]f the parent is "bad", then the lawyer is "bad"'.⁴⁸

Neither lawyers nor social workers alone can resolve the 'multifaceted conundrum' that complex cases, and complex clients, present.⁴⁹ Yet, their relationships with one another are fraught with uncertainty, discomfort and even conflict. This has led scholars to consider how their relationships with one another might be improved. Many argue that improving relationships between lawyers and social workers should start in the classroom. However, others doubt whether this is possible. Lindsay found that when educated together, education and social work students felt intimidated by the law students who appeared 'dismissive, patronising and even aggressive'; she found that assessable group projects did not work.⁵⁰

Dickens conducted 54 interviews with child protection lawyers and social workers to discover how the working relationship between them could be improved, and how students could be better prepared for the challenges of interdisciplinary practice.⁵¹ He describes a simulated activity he runs over three weeks with law and social work students where they are provided with a child protection case scenario which they then role-play. Medical students have also been involved, taking the part of the paediatrician or psychiatrist.⁵² Dickens argues that learning through active student involvement in case scenarios and debate helps knowledge to 'stick' because it emphasises understanding rather than content.⁵³

Treuthardt concludes, from her work with law students, that the important thing is to 'create an atmosphere where student input and different viewpoints are welcomed and valued'.⁵⁴ Faller and Vandervort agree, and emphasise the importance of a respectful learning environment to facilitate collaboration.⁵⁵ They suggest that interdisciplinary training should focus on the bounds of, and differences between the roles of each professional group, and that teaching professional skills should be done separately.⁵⁶

We wanted to design a learning activity that addressed these concerns, and built on the learnings of those who attempted law/social work interdisciplinary education before us.

⁴⁸ Kisthardt (n 26) 27.

⁴⁹ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 122.

⁵⁰ Lindsay (n 5) 4. See also Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 159.

⁵¹ Dickens (n 6).

⁵² Ibid 224.

⁵³ Ibid 220.

⁵⁴ Mary Pat Treuthardt, 'A Perspective on Teaching and Learning Family Law' (2007) 75(4) *University of Missouri-Kansas City Law Review* 1047, 1056.

⁵⁵ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 137. See also Hyams, Brown and Foster (n 3).

⁵⁶ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 137, 164.

III METHOD AND APPROACH

A *Joint Learning Activities*

In semester 1 of 2022, our classes — ‘Social Work and the Legal Context’ (a compulsory Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) course) and Children, Young People and the Law (a Bachelor of Laws elective course)⁵⁷ — were scheduled at the same time each week. Given our university’s central timetabling system, this was a remarkable coincidence and not likely to be repeated, so we wanted to take advantage of it. To add to the knowledge base regarding interdisciplinary learning in social work and law, we wanted to be able to publicly report on our findings. Therefore, there were two elements to our approach: the learning part and the study part.

We designed some joint learning activities to be conducted during lecture time, to engage law and social work students in interdisciplinary learning within the course curriculum. Over the course of the 13-week semester, we engaged in four shared activities: one preparatory activity and three joint interdisciplinary learning experiences. A summary of the activities is outlined in Table 1 below.

⁵⁷ UQ course codes SWSP2066 (a core course) and LAWS5224 (an elective course).

Table 1
Joint Learning Activities by Teaching Week

Teaching week	Session Type	Aim of session	Session tasks
Weeks 1-2 (pre-teaching)	Self-directed preparatory activity: 1. Individual student reflections; 2. Separate cohort discussions about student responses; 3. No direct joint activities.	To begin reflecting on the possibilities and challenges of working with social workers/lawyers. To share those reflections with the other discipline in an anonymous format to start building an understanding of the other cohort.	1. Prior to the commencement of teaching, students contributed individually to an online 'Padlet' sharing their views on the possibilities and challenges of interdisciplinary practice between social workers and lawyers. 2. In the first teaching week, lecturers presented the written responses of both professional groups to their cohorts for discussion.
Week 3	Joint interdisciplinary learning activity 1 via Zoom.	To build knowledge of each profession and the roles and contributions they can make in practice.	1. Small group discussions regarding stereotypes and their implications for interdisciplinary practice. 2. Small group discussion regarding a written case example. Students discussed the role of each profession and what each profession could add to the client's case. 3. Session concluded with a reflection on what they learned about the role and contributions of the other profession.
Week 5	Joint interdisciplinary activity 2 via Zoom.	To enhance understanding about: 1. Each profession's role and approach to practice in relation to a shared client; and 2. How each profession could enhance the other's practice and improve outcomes for a client.	1. Students were given information about their role in relation to a particular child protection case. This included information about their employing organisation, role scope and the reason they were engaged. 2. Small group discussion about the key issues in the scenario and matters to be addressed; the role of each profession in the case; intended outcomes for each profession; and the benefits of interdisciplinary practice in this case.

Teaching week	Session Type	Aim of session	Session tasks
Week 12	Joint interdisciplinary activity 3 via Zoom.	To consider how interdisciplinary practice could be taught at university. To encourage students to view effective interdisciplinary practice as a life-long skill and an important aspect of professional development.	Small group discussion & written reflection regarding: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Knowledge and skills students need to learn at university to prepare them for interdisciplinary practice with lawyers/social workers;2. The most effective way to teach/provide students with opportunities to learn more about interdisciplinary practice between lawyers and social workers; and3. Strategies that students could implement post-graduation to continue in their professional development regarding interdisciplinary practice.

B *Study Participants*

All students enrolled in our courses were able to participate in the joint learning activities, however students were given the choice to also opt-in to ‘the study’.

Information about the study was advertised on the respective online course websites prior to the joint sessions, following approval from the relevant university ethics committee.⁵⁸ Students were advised that as part of the three joint learning activities held over the semester, they would be asked to complete an anonymous online survey that included questions about their learnings from the joint activities and reflection tasks. All students were advised that they would be asked to complete the survey as part of the learning activity. All responses would be used within the teaching environment to guide discussions and to inform the design of future group work activities for social work and law students. Students were further advised that they could opt-in to the study by providing their consent to have their anonymous responses included in a research publication reporting on interdisciplinary teaching approaches.

At the start of each joint session, students were provided with a link to an online survey, hosted by the university's online survey platform, and asked to log in. This meant that only students who attended the online joint session could complete the activities and reflection tasks. The first page of the survey was a participant information sheet about the research project and students were presented with two options:

1. ‘I consent to my anonymous responses to the learning activity being used in the research project’; or
2. ‘I do NOT consent to my anonymous responses being used in the research. My responses can only be used for the purpose of the learning activity.’

Students were required to select one of these two options before they could proceed to the questions/activities in the online survey.

Students did not provide blanket consent for the use of their anonymous responses in this research. Instead, students gave consent for each individual survey/reflection at the start of each joint session. More than 85% of students in each session opted into the study (see Table 2 below). Students’ consent was not formally obtained for the preparatory activity in weeks 1–2 (before the joint sessions commenced), so we will not discuss that activity here.

We recognised the power imbalance between teachers and students in this setting. We reassured students that their participation was truly voluntary and that we had no way of knowing which students had responded, or which students had chosen not to opt-in to the study. Students were advised that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to and that all responses were anonymous. We also assured students that their participation or non-participation in

⁵⁸ University of Queensland, Faculty of Business, Economics and Law, Low and Negligible Risk Ethics Committee.

these activities would have no bearing on their marks or our treatment of them generally during the course.

The breakdown of students who consented to their anonymous responses being used for each joint session is outlined in Table 2 below:

Table 2
Number of Students who Opted into the Research Study by Activity

Joint session	Students who submitted reflections as part of the learning activity ONLY	Students who opted into the study	Total student responses completed
1 (week 3)	5	43	48
2 (week 5)	4	31	35
3 (week 12)	3	19	22

C *Limitations*

We did not collect any demographic information about the students, including whether they were social work students or law students. This was to ensure that they felt truly anonymous given that the researchers were also their lecturers, course coordinators and assessors. This could be viewed as a limitation, particularly because this meant we were not able to identify which responses came from social work students and which responses came from law students unless they indicated their discipline in their responses.

The most important limitation of our study is the low attendance, and therefore response rate, of social work students. Our goal was to have close to equal numbers of law and social work students in each of the small groups, however the attendance of the law students significantly exceeded that of the social work students. In most of the discussion groups, there were only one or two social work students, with six to eight law students.

D *Data Collection and Analysis*

Once students had responded to the consent question at the start of the online survey, they were provided with a page of questions with free text boxes for their responses. The questions were linked to the group discussions and activities. Students were asked to respond to the questions and complete the reflection activities as the class progressed. At the end of class, students submitted their responses.

We (the lecturers/researchers) were able to download a spreadsheet of the anonymised student responses from the university's online survey platform. The responses of students who had not opted into the study were removed from the dataset.

We undertook a reflexive thematic analysis of consenting students' responses.⁵⁹ In accordance with Braun and Clarke's methods, we first familiarised ourselves with the qualitative data by reading and re-reading the students' responses to the questions for each joint learning activity.⁶⁰ We each coded the data separately by manually allocating codes to each 'segment' of data. In this case, the segments of data were sentences or phrases, as the students' responses were generally brief or truncated.⁶¹ We then met to discuss our findings and compare our codes. Themes were generated from agreed-upon codes, and then reviewed during the write-up process.⁶² The findings are reported in the next part using participant quotes that are representative of the generated themes.

IV FINDINGS

A *Session 1: Getting to Know Each Other*

In the first joint session, students were asked to discuss stereotypes of each profession, and the implications of these for practice, in small groups. There were three aspects to this activity. First, the students discussed stereotypes of lawyers and social workers and thought about what impact this might have on interdisciplinary practice. Then, the students discussed a fact scenario concerning women's homelessness.⁶³ A homelessness prevention project was described, where the goal was to support women and children who were at risk of homelessness so they could maintain their tenancies and avoid eviction. Students were asked to reflect on what the role of lawyers and social workers might be in this project, and to consider what each professional group could offer the project that the other could not. We concluded the session with a whole-group reflection on what the students learned about the role and contribution of lawyers and social workers during the group work activities.

We received 43 responses to the reflective questions in this session. The main themes we generated from the students' responses were: the power of stereotypes, role confusion/clarification, and the need for more practical skills training.

1 *The Power of Stereotypes*

Similar stereotypes about each of the professions were raised across the dataset, with the professions often discussed as being in a dichotomous relationship:

⁵⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Sage, 2022).

⁶⁰ Ibid 35.

⁶¹ Ibid. That students' responses tended not to be presented as well-written paragraphs was expected because students were completing their responses 'on the run' during class activities.

⁶² Ibid 62.

⁶³ We adapted one of Maylea's case examples: (n 13) 122.

Lawyers are 'black and white' and everything is well defined, where social workers operate in a more undefined 'grey area'.

Comparisons were commonly made about the two professions in relation to their personalities. The students agreed that the stereotype of lawyers was that they were 'intimidating and lack empathy' compared with social workers being 'caring and [having] better interpersonal skills'. Lawyers were described as 'cut-throat' and 'aggressive' whereas social workers were said to be 'warm and fuzzy' and 'there for the mushy stuff'. Distinctions were made between lawyers' and social workers' worldviews and approaches. Lawyers were said to be 'objective' and to reason 'based on precedents', whereas social workers were described as viewing things 'subjective[ly]' and 'on case-by-case basis'. Lawyers were said to approach their work in a 'formulaic and thorough' manner, whereas social workers were considered to be 'disorganised' and 'creative'. Differences were also observed in lawyers' and social workers' approaches to client work. Lawyers were seen as 'caring only for the legal outcome' as opposed to social workers 'taking a holistic approach and caring about well-being'. The incomes of each professional group were also commented on, with lawyers being 'well paid' and social workers being 'underpaid'.

In these comparisons, social work and law were viewed as opposites, something some students saw as a positive:

Subjectivity and objectivity of lawyers and social workers can work well together like a marriage, making sure that nothing is overlooked in terms of 'best interests'.

It seemed that the stereotypes tended to cast the social workers in a positive light. Only a small number of students said that social workers could be the 'bad guy'. The situation they were referring to was where social workers were the statutory child protection officers responsible for the removal of children from their families.

Having said this, some of the students (who were likely law students, given the proportionally lower attendance of the social work students) were shocked at 'how badly lawyers are viewed in the world'. They suggested that social workers' 'strong stereotypes' of lawyers were 'heavily based off tv shows'.

The students noted that if people believed these pervasive stereotypes about the professions, it could hinder the development of effective professional relationships. They particularly highlighted the interrelated issues of power dynamics, a lack of mutual respect and differing communication styles:

Lawyers may be fixated on the details of a case and applying a particular rule/test, while social workers may fail to appreciate the rigour of the law and find the lawyer's approach stifling. The opposite may also be true: the social worker may identify personal preferences, needs and harms suffered by the client, but these factors may be discounted by the formulaic lawyer due to their subjective nature.

Lawyers tend to use social workers and their reports/notes as a means to an end. It either supports their case or it doesn't and in circumstances where

the social worker's findings don't support the argument the lawyer is trying to make, they will try to disprove/discredit the finding in an effort to further their client's case.

In both these cases, lawyers were viewed as the more powerful profession with the ability to 'discount' or 'discredit' the views of a social worker, based on their own agenda.

2 *Role Confusion and Clarification*

When it came to the role social workers and lawyers played in client work, the dominant sub-theme in the students' responses was the scope of social work practice. The dominance of this theme in the dataset may reflect the larger number of law students who attended the session compared to the number of social work students. For example, one of the students, who was obviously a law student, remarked:

I wasn't aware of how broad the spectrum of social work is and on the framework of the job — one of my colleagues highlighted that not all social workers have the power to take children away from a family for example. [T]here is an organisational structure wherein only those of a specific role and expertise have those powers and there are just a lot more moving parts to these matters than I envisioned.

Some noted that the breadth of social work practice could make it 'an extremely difficult job in addressing the many issues a person may face in their lives'. They also observed 'how important it is for social workers to establish trust with their clients', and they noted the various ways in which social workers could provide support, highlighting their ability to 'assist the client from different sides' and to 'approach problems differently and ... refer clients out to different services'. Several students reported being surprised that social work practice was guided by a Code of Ethics and expressed interest in learning more about 'what that code stipulates'.

Another sub-theme in the data related to the role of the legal system in clients' lives, and the impact this had on social workers. They noted that the legal system was 'a crucial part of a social worker's clients' environment' but that 'social workers don't often recognise the other legal barriers facing their clients'.

These observations meant the students became more aware of the benefits of interdisciplinary practice. The students recognised the key role that social workers could play in legal matters involving children and families, and that lawyers could play in the lives of social work clients. They indicated that they were previously unaware of the potential for lawyers and social workers to work together, and they said they had gained insight into how the other profession could complement their own work to enhance outcomes for their future clients:

Overall, I learnt the extent to which the two professions rely [on] and work with each other. I did not fully understand the extent to which lawyers can help my future clients.

... the advantages for lawyers working alongside social workers and obtaining their perspectives, would be incredibly beneficial for the clients, making their experience in such a difficult time better.

3 *The Need for Practical Skills Training*

The need for practical skills training was a minor theme in the data generated from this session. The students who commented on this focused on the amount of practical skills training that social workers receive during their degree, both in-class and on-field placements, compared with law students who receive very little skills-based training. The students highlighted the greater opportunities for learning about communication in the social work program:

Social workers are taught to be a ‘people person’ whereas lawyers are taught what the law is and how to apply it to a client’s set of facts. Social workers tend to be more considerate of things such as where the meeting/consult will take place and where a client would feel more comfortable. Typically, with lawyers, meetings are often always held at their office or over the phone (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic which in itself has made lawyers less personable). Social workers are actually taught how to speak to clients/other professionals whereas lawyers are not. The only opportunity we have at law school is through internal/external competitions, pro bono work, placement or part-time work.

This excerpt draws attention to the view that law students can only develop communication and interpersonal skills if they actively seek opportunities and activities external to the core curriculum offered within the university.

B *Session 2: Fact Scenario – Week 5*

In the second joint session, we provided students with a fact scenario about a child protection matter. The scenario concerned a single parent of two children where the other parent was in prison. The children were at risk of removal by child protection authorities following a visit to a hospital emergency room. Hospital staff had made a notification to the child protection department because they considered the primary parent to have been behaving inappropriately (possibly due to intoxication) and had displayed poor parenting practices (inadequate supervision of one child and minimising the medical symptoms of the other).

The students were given specific roles in relation to the case. The law students’ role was that of the lawyer representing the parent at an upcoming meeting with the child protection authority as part of their firm’s pro bono program. The social work students’ role was that of a social worker employed in a non-government, community-based family support service working with the family as a voluntary client. Students were asked to reflect on what each profession saw as the key issues to be addressed, what outcomes each profession was hoping to achieve, and the potential benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary practice in the scenario.

Thirty-one students provided responses to these questions.

Predictably, the law students considered the key issues to be ‘whether it was legal for the child protection authority to investigate’, ‘addressing legal issues concerning whether the children are at risk of harm’, considering the ‘possibility of orders being made’, and identifying if there was ‘a less invasive intervention that could be accessed’ to address the concerns. One of the students said that lawyers should also consider ‘other rights that may impact the children [including] what cultural factors are at play that may impact the orders’.

This contrasted with the issues that the social work students identified. In line with their training in psychosocial assessment, the social workers identified a broader range of issues that were impacting on the family’s situation and wellbeing. As one law student commented:

The social work students in my group were immediately focused on addressing the parent’s and children’s needs and did not immediately see any legal issues.

Despite their differences, most student responses indicated that through discussion of the social worker’s and lawyer’s roles, a recognition of the importance of shared goals emerged:

Achieving the desired legal outcome will also depend directly on having supports in place and providing non-legal services. This means that interdisciplinary work is essential to achieving the outcome here.

The students recognised the complementarity of social work and legal skills and expertise, and their value in achieving positive outcomes for a shared client. They recognised that ‘[s]ocial workers are able to deal with those underlying issues that lawyers may not be able to deal with’ whilst ‘lawyers tend to know more of the law side and how the courts view child protection.’ One student concluded: ‘they can work together to try and ensure that the needs being met for the parent and child/children align with the court requirements.’

Some students recognised that both professional groups need to understand the boundaries of their role, and be willing to learn from one another:

For lawyers, it is good to learn from social workers what the typical course of action for referrals is (who to refer to and why etc). For social workers, recognising limitations in terms of what they can provide legally, and bridging this gap with a lawyer.

This comment highlights the importance of professional integrity — understanding the limits of one’s own practice and being proactive in identifying other professionals who are better positioned to respond.

Some of the students’ comments indicated that they had reflected on the stereotypes discussed in week 3, and rejected some of their underlying assumptions:

We recognised that the ‘bleeding hearts social worker’ vs ‘hard-hearted lawyer’ hasn’t really been the case in this scenario — the lawyers seemed to want to take the most empathetic route forward to re-unite the family.

Having said this, they could see how conflict might arise between lawyers and social workers, particularly when they are in an adversarial relationship with one another:

In my group we were all on the same page on many issues, but I don't think this would always be the case. I can imagine that when the lawyer was appointed to represent a particular interest that there would be clashes between social workers/the Department.

C Session 3: How to Teach Interdisciplinary Practice – week 12

In the third and final joint session, we asked students to reflect on how universities could better promote interdisciplinary learning, and how they (the students) could continue to develop their skills in interdisciplinary practice after graduation, as professionals.

We received 19 responses to these questions.

The law students identified several gaps in their learning, and they said these gaps had been highlighted to them in their discussions with the social work students. They noted that whilst the social work students had undertaken placements and had been assessed on their practical skills, they (the law students) had been taught only 'analytical approaches'. One simply said: 'Lawyers aren't taught how to talk to clients.'

Six of the responses raised the need for each professional group to understand more about what the 'goals and functions' of the other discipline are. The law students said they wanted to know more about 'what social workers do', 'what they have studied' and their 'day to day tasks'. This, they said, would help them to understand what social workers 'wish to achieve' and provide a 'foundation for how you will work together.'

Several students said they would like to observe lawyers and social workers working together in real-world settings, such as community legal centres, and they suggested that more opportunities should be available for law students to engage in clinical training and pro bono work during their degrees. Nine responses said that more 'joint' or 'intertwined' subjects — 'like this course' — were needed to allow them to interact with students from other disciplines. Some suggested that joint electives be offered. Others suggested that additional opportunities be available for joint role-play and simulation activities — to 'allow each other to see how each approach it' — and two even suggested joint assignments. Four students suggested that interdisciplinary volunteering programs be made available, but one said this would have to be 'within class time' so as not to be overly burdensome.

The law students identified that they needed more instruction and assessment on 'practical skills', particularly communication skills, medication skills and conflict resolution. They suggested the introduction of more 'clinical' and 'practical subjects, including interdisciplinary options'. Some also identified a need for more information on trauma-informed practice and cultural competency.

Some of the law students noted that the social work students undertook some group assessments. Whilst they acknowledged a distaste for group assessments, they also recognised that this could 'teach us to be collaborative' and allow them to develop teamwork skills.

When asked how they could develop their skills in interdisciplinary practice after graduation, seven students identified that pro bono work, particularly volunteering at community legal centres, exposed lawyers to an interdisciplinary environment and provided an opportunity to work alongside social workers. Others suggested attendance at seminars and professional development courses, and 'educating yourself' by reading interdisciplinary literature. Notably, the fact that the law students discussed pro bono and volunteering, rather than working, at community legal centres would suggest that, despite self-selecting into this course, their intentions still are to work in corporate law environments.

V DISCUSSION

Having our social work and law classes scheduled during the same timeslot provided a unique opportunity to engage in a series of joint classroom activities throughout the semester. We ran three activities during the semester (and one pre-teaching activity) that focused on understanding what each discipline was about and the role that each professional could play when working with a shared client. Our aim was to create an interdisciplinary learning experience that allowed law and social work students to better understand one another and appreciate the role that each profession can play in bringing about positive outcomes for clients.

The most significant limitation of our approach was that we could not guarantee student attendance. The law students were being marked on class participation, so their attendance was generally high (apart from week 12). However, the social work students' attendance rate was very low. In week 3, there were fewer than 10 social work students present, and by week 12, only a handful attended, compared with 40 to 50 law students. Uneven attendance meant that we could not deliver on our promise of truly joint learning because the social work students were vastly outnumbered by the law students. One of the students noted that the difference in numbers between social work and law students made the exercises 'a bit clunky' but acknowledged that we were 'certainly on the edge of something good here!', querying if it might have run better 'in person'.

Our experience demonstrated to us that if interdisciplinary learning experiences are to succeed, there needs to be student buy-in as well as academic commitment. We would recommend allocating marks for participation in joint sessions to encourage student attendance and engagement, however we are conscious that not all institutions/schools permit this. Other strategies for managing attendance-related issues may be to link the interdisciplinary activities to assessment tasks, or

alternatively, seek opportunities outside the curriculum such as extra-curricular seminars or joint pro bono projects.

The fact that many more law students attended our joint sessions than did social work students skews our data towards the perspective of law students. This makes the findings about stereotypes even more interesting — it suggests that law students may themselves hold stereotyped views of lawyers, or at least have accepted, or even internalised, perceptions of lawyers within the community. From our own observations as students and teachers, we question the accuracy of the stereotyped views of lawyers as aggressive, critical, competitive and male.⁶⁴ Law degrees are becoming increasingly female-dominated, with enrolments at or exceeding parity in some locations,⁶⁵ and in subjects like family law, child law and human rights law, women self-select more readily than men.⁶⁶ The law course in this study was Children, Young People and The Law, and 75% of students enrolled identified as female. Of course, research confirms that plenty of law students enter into a law degree with the objective of ‘helping people’ and serving the community irrespective of their gender.⁶⁷ Treuthart notes that law schools attract students who prefer structured, organised and predictable teaching,⁶⁸ however this does not exclude the possibility that they are also empathic, self-aware and reflective.⁶⁹ Lawton and colleagues argue that empathic versus rational thinking is a ‘false dichotomy’.⁷⁰

The stereotype of social work students as ‘submissive’, non-judgemental helpers is not necessarily accurate either.⁷¹ Plenty of social work students have had life experiences that have transformed them into passionate — even militant — advocates and activists.⁷² They are also required to receive formal training in a variety of areas including, but not limited to, ethics, research methods, sociological theory, human development, policy design and development, as well as a variety of

⁶⁴ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 144; Zifcak (n 2) 19.

⁶⁵ Deborah Jones Merritt and Kyle McEntee, ‘Gender Equity in Law School Enrollment: An Elusive Goal’ (2019) 69(1) *Journal of Legal Education* 102; Jerome Doraisamy, ‘Female Grads in Firms Outnumber Males 2-to-1’ (7 March 2019) *Lawyers Weekly*. The same is true of legal practice. Overall, in Australia, female solicitors now outnumber male solicitors: Law Society of New South Wales, *2020 Profile of Solicitors* (Law Society of NSW, 2021) 8.

⁶⁶ The reported gender split between students in LAWS5224 during this study was 75% females and 25% males. Note that 71% of solicitors in community legal centres are female: Law Society of New South Wales, *2020 Profile of Solicitors* (Law Society of New South Wales, 2021) 23.

⁶⁷ Walsh (n 10).

⁶⁸ Treuthart (n 54) 1052.

⁶⁹ Amy Lawton, Kathryn Saban and Sadie Whittam, ‘Do We Want a Human First, and a Lawyer Second? Developing Law Student Empathy through Clinical Legal Education’ (2022) 29(1) *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 4, 14.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 144; Zifcak (n 2) 13–14.

⁷² Hank Johnston, ‘The Elephant in the Room: Youth, Cognition and Student Groups in Mass Social Movements’ (2019) 9(3) *Societies* 55. Charter questions the centrality of feminist identity and ideals amongst social work students: Mollie Lazar Charter, ‘Exploring the Importance of Feminist Identity in Social Work Education’ (2021) 41(2) *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 117.

social work methods.⁷³ This challenges the idea that they are not an evidence-based and rigorous profession. Negative stereotypes must be challenged if inter-professional and interdisciplinary respect is to be fostered. Past research has concluded that a lack of knowledge about the roles of other professionals creates barriers to interdisciplinary practice.⁷⁴ If social work students realise that lawyers are not all aggressive and confident, and law students realise that not all social workers are submissive and ‘mushy’, they may be more willing to work with one another as professionals after graduation. In truth, the social workers attracted to work in legal settings, and the lawyers attracted to community legal settings, are likely to have shared traits and values. By realising this, common ground may be established.

To help students establish ‘common ground’, our simulation activity deliberately centred on a scenario where the lawyers and social workers were ‘on the same side’. We did this to promote a shared understanding of each other’s roles, encourage collaboration, and generate interpersonal and interprofessional respect. With more time to build relationships, establish trust and create a safe learning environment, a scenario that placed the students in an adversarial relationship with one another could have been attempted. This would be risky,⁷⁵ but it would also provide an opportunity to role-play strained relationships, model and practise conflict resolution, and prepare students for the fraught relationships they will almost certainly encounter upon graduation. The obvious example is a child welfare scenario, where the social workers represent the statutory child welfare agency, and the lawyers represent the birth parents. We believe this kind of scenario could be set up in a manner that is mutually respectful and where each side’s argument is defensible and worthy of respect. With close supervision and professional debriefing, we believe an exercise of this nature could be valuable for students.

Findings also indicated that law students are eager to develop their communication skills — both with clients and other professionals — and they see this as a gap in current university teaching. Law schools often maintain that the kind of skills-based learning students require is inhibited by large class sizes and is better achieved through work experience.⁷⁶ As such, most of the practical learning that law students do is external to the classroom, through clinical legal education programs which are often elective subjects. For the law curriculum to meet student expectations and produce job-ready graduates, it may be of benefit for law schools to work with their social work colleagues to identify approaches to teaching interpersonal communication skills that may overcome the challenges posed by large class sizes. For example,

⁷³ Australian Association of Social Workers, *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2021).

⁷⁴ Walsh (n 10); Bell and Daly (n 17).

⁷⁵ Ching (n 28).

⁷⁶ Apel (n 20) 700. At time of writing, the Queensland Law Society (with Bond University) is undertaking a research project on the job readiness of law graduates: see Anonymous, ‘Are law graduates ready for the real world?’ 5 October 2021, *Proctor*, Queensland Law Society.

novel online approaches have developed following the pivot to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷⁷

Echoing the views of the students in our study, Harding believes it is important for practical legal skills to be embedded within the curriculum.⁷⁸ The integration of skills development and simulation into law coursework, rather than ad hoc work experience, may enhance graduates' ability to apply their knowledge to real situations, problem-solve and be more prepared for the possible challenges facing their clients.⁷⁹ Given the emotionally charged nature of many legal matters for clients, law graduates could also benefit from learning communication skills that help to deescalate heightened emotions — including their own.

Reilly argues that 'training in emotion' should be a 'curriculum staple'.⁸⁰ However, Treuthart warns that we need to recognise that law students may not have a 'frame of reference for appreciating emotion in personal and professional contexts'.⁸¹ Faller and Vandervort agree, pointing out that talking about personal reactions and feelings is foreign to law students, whereas it is quite common and important in social work studies because there is a recognition that to ignore one's own emotional response is to risk not being as effective a practitioner.⁸² Treuthart concludes that since 'emotions' are the most challenging, and the most important, aspect of family law practice, it would be 'irresponsible' for a law teacher to 'ignore the issue of emotions' when teaching family law.⁸³ As we are all shaped by our own family experiences, students' individual experiences may affect how they relate and react to the material.⁸⁴ It is important that law students recognise this, and are willing to confront difficult subjects and their reactions to them. Whilst social workers are trained to be self-reflective, law students are socialised to leave their feelings at the door — to treat parties as 'cases' and to dehumanise the people that lie behind them.⁸⁵ Challenging this dominant view via teaching innovation may attract some criticism and even pushback from students.⁸⁶ Students' distaste for unfamiliar activities like personal reflection and role-plays can be reflected in their course evaluations. Institutions will need to be mindful

⁷⁷ Gerard Jefferies, Cindy Davis and Jonathan Mason, 'Simulation and Skills Development: Preparing Australian Social Work Education for a Post-COVID Reality' (2022) 75(4) *Australian Social Work* 433.

⁷⁸ Maebh Harding, 'Using Interviewing and Negotiation to Further Critical Understanding of Family and Child Law' in Caroline Strevens, Richard Grimes and Edward Phillips (eds), *Legal Education: Simulation in Theory and Practice* (Ashgate Publishing, 2014) 127.

⁷⁹ Stephanie K Boys et al, 'Social Work and Law Interdisciplinary Service Learning: Increasing Future Lawyers' Interpersonal Skills' (2015) 35(4) *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 410; Weinstein (n 11).

⁸⁰ Peter Reilly, 'Teaching Law Students How to Feel: Using Negotiations Training to Increase Emotional Intelligence' (2005) 21(2) *Negotiation Journal* 301, 302.

⁸¹ Treuthart (n 54) 1063.

⁸² Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 146.

⁸³ Treuthart (n 54) 1057.

⁸⁴ *Ibid* 1062.

⁸⁵ Faller and Vandervort (n 5) 146.

⁸⁶ Treuthart (n 54) 1047.

of this, and support academics in their endeavours to experiment and learn as they go.

VI CONCLUSIONS

This scholarship of teaching and learning project aimed to enhance social work and law students' knowledge and skills for interdisciplinary practice. We were motivated by our recognition that clients have better outcomes when our disciplines work together effectively. As such, we felt an obligation to ensure our students were provided with an opportunity to build interdisciplinary networks and gain foundational understandings of the roles each discipline can play in supporting clients in child and family-related areas of law.

Providing social work and law students with the knowledge and skills required for effective interdisciplinary practice is important for both graduate and client outcomes. Our position is aligned with calls for legal educators to be responsive to the 'shift to less-litigation focused justice' and the need to graduate more empathic lawyers.⁸⁷ Seeking opportunities to collaborate with and learn from social work academics and students may aid in this process.

However, the institutional constraints cannot be ignored. Policies and practices related to curriculum design and assessment may pose challenges to the permanent introduction of teaching innovations such as this. Even apparently small details such as central timetabling can limit opportunities for collaborative teaching and learning. Successful teaching innovations also depend on the support of the learners. Whilst many of our students reported valuing the shared learning experience, we faced challenges regarding student engagement and attendance, and some complaints were raised in our teaching evaluations. If our students are not convinced about the value of interdisciplinary learning, and our institutional practices do not allow for them, then calls for additional interdisciplinary learning opportunities will remain unanswered.

⁸⁷ Zifcak (n 2) 19; Ross, Apps and Campbell (n 18) 70.