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“Its not a book; it’s a Bok”: social work students’ experience of using creative journaling practices as a pedagogical tool to develop transformative learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an international research project designed to explore the relevance and impact of creative journaling as a pedagogical tool during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project involved seven social work and social policy educators from eight countries: namely, Canada, India, Israel, Jersey Island, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and United States of America. Our work comes out of a larger mixed-method project that aimed to understand how creative journaling may help to facilitate transformative learning experiences and professional socialization processes of social work students. The data used for this article explicitly interpret conversations from two transnational focus groups, comprising 15 students from six participating countries (Canada, Spain, Jersey, India, UK, United States of America) in 2020–2021. Five significant themes emerged: Remote Learning during COVID-19, Self-care during COVID-19, Learning through the use of the Bok, Personal and Professional Identities, and Pathways toward Transformative learning. The findings revealed that creative journaling practices were important components of students’ professional development processes. Our intention with this paper is to contribute conceptual and practical insights into the implementation and impact of creative journaling practices.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for people across the globe, reshaping daily life with reduced travel and increased remote work. This is

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especially true for institutions of higher education and its impact on the lives and experiences of students around the world (Aristovnki et al., 2020). Schools, colleges, and universities were forced to shut down for extended periods in many parts of the world, with variations in how quickly different universities transitioned to online modes of teaching. Social work education with its emphasis on supporting and sustaining the well-being of individuals and society is said to play an important role in knowledge development in uncertain times (Afrouz, 2021). The evolving nature of the pandemic created uncertainty for both individuals and institutions requiring adaptation, resilience, and reflexivity (Wallengren-Lynch et al., 2023). The pandemic highlighted how interconnected and interdependent we are, underscoring the need to research social work pedagogy beyond national boundaries (Schrooten, 2021).

Considering the pandemic's emotional and logistical demands on learning, transnational social work education must creatively adapt pedagogies. Social work's relational nature requires innovative approaches to nurture coping, managing, and adapting skills in this transformative era (Morley et al., 2020). In this way, transformative pedagogies are required. Critical pedagogies that foster transformative learning, self-awareness and reflexivity are vital to prepare emerging practitioners to be resilient social workers and meet these challenges while helping others face uncertainty (Morley et al., 2020). It is imperative that pedagogies and practices within social work education attempt to respond to the implications presented by the challenges associated with a post COVID-19 world, as well as recognizing that the processes and practices of studying social work holds its own unique demands and emotional challenges.

Particularly, as social work education often emphasizes the social, emotional, and relational ways in which we engage with and teach others to manage, adapt and cope, our pedagogies too, require that social work educators consider creative, innovative and transformative approaches to facilitate these developmental processes. Consequently, we need to incorporate the concepts of risk and uncertainty effectively into the social work curriculum. This entails developing a dialogic and reflective process, essential for preparing our students to engage in reflexive strategies when confronting uncertainties (Afrouz, 2021). A critically reflective practice approach that enhances students' self-awareness, reflexivity and ethical decision-making is necessary to prepare students for the challenges of contemporary practice.

To explore these issues from a transnational perspective this project brought together an international team of educator-researchers, with social work and social policy backgrounds, from eight countries (Canada, India, Israel, Jersey Island, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America) to explore the relevance and impact of creative journaling as a pedagogical tool during the COVID-19 pandemic. How the use of reflective journaling practices might facilitate transformative learning and professional socialization. More specifically, this research project sought to answer the following questions.

- (1) How might the reflective journaling method with social work students promote transformative learning in the blended and/or online setting during COVID-19?
- (2) In what ways does the practice of reflective journaling help to foster the student's professional identity and development as an emerging practitioner?

- (3) How might reflective journaling help social work students frame their life experiences during COVID-19?

The importance of transformative learning for social work

As a transnational project team, our initial action involved establishing a collective comprehension of transformational learning and the use of reflective journaling approaches in social work by referencing existing literature. The subsequent sections detail our examination of this body of literature.

Transformational learning theory has been credited to Jack Mezirow (Calleja, 2014) for his framework explaining the transformation process that students may experience (Mezirow, 2012). Four key components of transformational learning include: 1) the experience of a disorienting dilemma; 2) critical reflection on assumptions, beliefs, and values; 3) exploration of new ideas and roles; and, 4) building confidence and skills in newly identified roles and relationships while integrating new information into action (Mezirow, 2012). The general idea outlined in Mezirow's framework is that students experience dilemmas when new learnings challenge their old ways of knowing, such as hearing about a particular theory or concept, and the pressure of these tensions causes a reexamination of their internalized assumptions until they can integrate their former and new learnings (Mezirow, 1981). Nogueiras et al. (2019) identifies that the students' transformative process relies on both cognitive and emotional experiences which is one of the differences between Kolb's model of experiential learning and Mezirow's transformational learning.

Several scholars have written about transformative education in social work undergraduate education (e.g. Bay & MacFarlane, 2011; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; Jones, 2009).

Damianakis et al. (2019a, 2019b) investigated Mezirow's transformative learning theory both within the classroom and in the context of field education. Building on their foundational work, the process of student transformation was identified in a previous study (Damianakis et al., 2019a), along with the crucial pedagogical factors that contribute to supporting such transformation in the context of graduate social work education (Damianakis et al., 2019b). Drawing inspiration from these pivotal findings by Damianakis and colleagues (2019a, 2019b), our current study further explores the dimensions of transformational learning.

One might argue that social work education is intended to support student transformation. Throughout social work programs, students are expected to examine their values and beliefs in relation to professional values and principles. Professional Codes of Ethics for social work education further identify critical reflection as essential learning for social work students (CASW, 2014; CSWE, 2015; IASSW, 2014).

Reflective journaling as a pedagogical method: introducing the Bok

The use of journal keeping in higher education has been well documented as a pedagogical tool that promotes critical and reflective thinking, as it helps to provide a record or audit trail of a student's thought process (Stevens & Cooper, 2009).

Sudirman et al. (2021), in an expansive global literature review, affirmed that reflective journal writing triggers transformations, fostering self-discovery, self-inquiry, and

critical ideation. This practice empowers significant changes in various writing facets, encompassing personal idea exploration, creativity, self-organization, and professional growth. Reflective journaling's prowess is multi-dimensional. A chief benefit of employing creative journal writing in social work education resides in its capacity to heighten self-awareness. Through reflective writing, students engage in introspection, probing their values, biases, and emotions (Hubbs & Brand, 2010). This heightened self-awareness empowers students to acknowledge their strengths and limitations, a pivotal facet of effective social work practice. By recognizing personal triggers and emotional responses, students become attuned to their reactions in real-world scenarios, augmenting their aptitude for empathetic and client-centered interventions.

All this is to say that creative journaling stimulates critical thinking and facilitates the exploration of intricate issues. Students are prompted to scrutinize their experiences and observations, melding theoretical concepts with real-life situations. This fusion can nurture a deeper grasp of the subtleties of social issues and the complexities of human behavior. The creation of an artful space challenges conventional boundaries of knowledge and teaching, revitalizing social work education (see for example, Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2020).

Vinjamuri et al. (2015) identified that reflective journaling in social work education aids students in research methods courses. Reflective journaling, often low-stake assignments conducted in safe environments, serves as a means to connect theory and practice while alleviating research-related anxiety.

Research on effective pedagogies for self-care developing practices and reflective journaling in social work remains scarce, especially in the online setting. In one of the few studies identified, Moore et al. (2011) found that journaling aided students in managing stress, and enhancing emotional, physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being, in their student cohort. While the literature on self-care and journaling remains limited, it's crucial to develop pedagogies which promote self-care practices for social work students.

The BoK as a reflective journaling method

The concept of a BoK was initiated by Saddler and Earls Larrison (2021) in the United States. The assignment had been identified as the 'Book of Ken' and was thus nicknamed as Bok, as an easier and more palatable verbiage to consider the reflective journaling approach, rather than as calling it a 'journal'. The word 'ken' is defined as one's range of knowledge or sight; the purpose of the assignment and the task was to facilitate the process of deep and reflective thinking and to help students to grow 'beyond their ken'.

The team adopted the Bok, within our project to facilitate creative journaling practices. The common purpose and task of our reflexive Bok work meant that students were encouraged to experience the process of deep and reflective thinking connected to various learning goals and expected outcomes identified in their courses. Students across different sites worked on their journaling in either a structured or an unstructured way (i.e. varying levels of teacher guidance and input). Yet, in all cases, the task was not simply making entries but involved the students actively processing their course-based learning and their lived experiences. As a pedagogical tool, the Bok intended to foster professional identity development, demonstrate individual participation and engagement with the

course material, and facilitate a critically reflective and creative practice approach. The students were encouraged to use the space of the Bok as they needed, such as using art, writing poetry, and taking photos.

Implementation of the Bok across different research sites

Social work education across the world shares many similarities and differences. However, it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed and nuanced presentation of the similarities and differences between the social work programs from across the participating countries. Suffice it to say, that all countries offer undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programs—the topics in focus range from community development to understanding social work welfare systems.

Implementing a specific pedagogical method across the countries listed was a complex endeavor that required careful consideration, adaptation, and flexibility. To address this challenge, the Bok was implemented uniquely across the research sites to meet the different course structures, institutional norms, and teaching approaches as reflected in Table 1 below.

Students were given a choice of either the hard copy or the digital, except for India, where access to laptops and unstable internet resulted in the students using the hard book

Table 1. Implementation of Bok across sites.

Country/University	Social work course	How was Bok implemented	N	%
Canada /University of Calgary	Professional Use of Self	*Hard copy, Digital	16	6.5
Israel /Sapir college	Mindfulness and social work, The practice of the helping relationship	Hard copy, Digital	16	6.5
Spain /Complutense University, Madrid	Foundations of Social work Social work with families Practicum Mediation as an alternative dispute resolution system	Digital	104	41.9
Sweden /University of Malmö	Social Relationships in local context	*Prompts, Hard copy, Digital	7	2.8
United Kingdom /University of Sussex (including Jersey College)	Context of Social Work	Hard copy, Digital	11	4.4
United States of America /University of Illinois	Introduction to Social Work	Hard copy, Digital, (suggested) Prompts	73	29.4
India /Tata Institute of Social Science, Mumbai	Gender and development	Prompts, Hard copy	21	8.5
			248	100

*Prompts refer to questions or statements the teachers provide students to help them write. These were not obligatory but rather guides.

*Digital refers to the writing of the Bok on a computer or a telephone.

*Hard copy refers to the use of a physical book for writing the Bok.

Table 2. Focus group participants.

	Focus group 1	Focus group 2
Participants	Canada (2) F	India (1) F
Female (F)	USA (3) F	United Kingdom (1) M
Male (M)	Jersey Island (1) F	USA (2) F
	United Kingdom (2) F/M	Spain (1) F
	Spain (2) F	

version only, and in the USA where hardcopies were the expectation. Students were given a choice between hard copy or digital in all other locations. The majority of these students choose digital.

The research team was also acutely aware of the dominant influence of Western social work over the development of the profession in other parts of the world and the importance of decolonizing the research process and the social work curriculum. This was one of the rationales for informing the flexibility in implementing the Bok in local contexts. The team recognized that there are multiple ways to implement a pedagogy and that adaptation and adoption in the context of culture, as well as how each educator made sense of how the Bok fits with their course and teaching style, were important considerations. To honor each instructor's preferred teaching approach and philosophy, it was accepted by the team that slight variations regarding instructions and use of the Bok were likely. For example, each instructor included the Bok as one of the assessment tasks for the course and had the freedom to choose online and paper versions. Another example lies in the course variations (and cultural contexts) themselves. Instructors could continue to teach the content in their unique course while implementing the Bok as one pedagogical tool to support reflective writing. The intrinsic value of creating a space for student reflection was the point of this pedagogy rather than a prescribed methodology about the tool itself.

Some educators encouraged free writing, while others offered prompts, and still, others adopted both practices to guide and facilitate independent, reflective practices. Each approach offered value within the larger goal of promoting critical and reflective thinking, and no one approach was privileged over another. Among all the research sites, the core indicators of consistency and critical thinking were adopted as evaluative criteria. It is also important to note that the cohort from India was composed of students from a social policy course who were not technically social work students. However, they studied subjects such as gender and social policy, which could be found within any social work curriculum or course.

Methodology

This project is informed by a pragmatist epistemology (Hothersall, 2019) that emphasizes understanding the practical impact of interventions. To achieve this, the study used a mixed-methods design that invites various approaches to understand the practical outcomes of beliefs and ideas in everyday life. The larger project utilized a mixed-method design, specifically Sequential Explanatory (Creswell & Clarke, 2018), to gather data in two phases: phase one involved a 60-question learning survey, and phase two utilized focus group interviews. Mixed methods research subscribes to an 'iterative, cyclical approach' (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010, p. 22) whereby deductive and inductive processes inform the research questions and analysis which enables in-depth data integration by providing connectivity and linkages within the findings.

Our learning survey is informed by Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation and based on a model that captures the process of transformation (Damianakis et al., 2019a). This phase aimed to understand the student's perspective on their process of transformation (or not). In practical terms, this meant that the survey data helped us with the planning of the focus group interview guide. Both phases of the project were

performed using online mediums (i.e. Survey Monkey and Zoom). This paper describes our processes and explores the focus group data themes generated from the second phase of our project. The qualitative findings from our study are reported in this paper.

Data collection methods

Two transnational focus group sessions were conducted in January and May 2021. The focus group methodology allowed for collecting a large amount of data in a short period and enabled interaction among participants, providing a detailed description of the data. The focus group approach permitted reflective insight into the students' views on the usefulness (or not) of the Bok in integrating their lived experiences into their social work education.

The transnational focus group was also a unique opportunity for students from participating countries to meet fellow international students engaged in similar pedagogical activities. Focus Group interviews consisted of a semi-structured format (Krueger & Casey, 2000) consisting of open-ended questions and probes about two main topic areas: transformative learning and experiences using the BoK. For example, the students were asked: *How did the Bok help with your self-awareness and emergent personal and professional identities? What aspects of the Bok did you find most impactful?*

The focus groups were conducted by research team members, with support from student research-assistant volunteers for note-taking and post-interview reflections. Each session lasted 45–60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview format consisting of open-ended questions and probes. The interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom, audio/video recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy by the research assistants, who replaced participant names with sequential numbers for confidentiality purposes (FG1, UK; FG2, India etc.).

During the focus groups, the research team worked in tandem, one member facilitating the interview guide and the other facilitating the participants' in-the-moment responses. This iterative approach promoted data consistency within the focus group sessions and allowed the conversation and discussion to flow more naturally (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Sampling and recruitment of students

Students were recruited for the study during the final week of the fall (2020) and spring (2021) terms by instructors who were also members of the research team. They were invited to participate in the study through a project website (<https://bok.uni.mau.se/>) created by undergraduate social work research assistants. Interested students were required to provide informed consent before accessing the survey. They also left their names and contact information on the secure link which were later used by research assistants to send an e-mail invitation to the focus group meetings with the date, time, and Zoom link. Of 55 students who initially expressed interest in participating in the focus group, 15 undergraduate students could attend one of the two scheduled sessions, represented in the [Table 2](#) below

Approach to data analysis

Thematic analysis, via inductive reasoning, was utilized to analyze data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Drawing on the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), the research team members utilized an inductive approach (meaning we developed the codes from the data rather than a preexisting coding frame). We became familiar with the data by reading and rereading the focus group transcripts and coding line by line. An additional layer of analysis was added as codes were organized into categories. N-Vivo 12 was initially used to help organize the data. Four researchers coded the raw data from the two focus groups. The codes were then collected into categories to represent the meaning of the codes and compared for consistency. Together, the research team created five themes from the categories. We illustrate the themes with quotations from participant comments. Multiple meetings with team members allow review of the analysis process, from raw data to codes, categories, and themes.

Furthermore, several strategies were employed toward methodological rigor and ensuring trustworthiness criteria throughout the study. For example, prolonged engagement in data collection over multiple cohorts and participants from different countries; verification of themes during data collection through inter-rater reliability when a research assistant compared themes within and across cases independently to ensure consistency, field notes, audit trail documenting analytic decision-making (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Ethical considerations

Each educator-researcher attained ethical approval at their respective institutions via the formal processes and procedures required at each location. It was crucial for the researchers that information regarding the project was transparent and accessible to the students. To explain the research in clear and concise terms for the students, the research team created a website (blinded for review) that served as an external site portal. When students clicked on the link, they were presented with an information letter in Spanish, Hebrew, Swedish and English, outlining the research aims and seeking their participation. All potential participants from India have English as their language of instruction. Finally, all names have been altered to protect student privacy and confidentiality.

Findings

Five significant themes emerged out of the focus group conversations and were identified across all of the focus groups and represent most participant responses, meaning similar conversations occurred across focus groups: Remote Learning during COVID-19, Self-care during COVID-19, Learning through journaling, Personal and professional identities, and Pathways toward transformative learning.

Remote learning during COVID-19

The online teaching and learning experience is crucial to understanding how students experienced the Bok during their social work and social policy education.

Students shared their experiences of remote learning that occurred during the pandemic. In general, they shared the difficulties that they experienced with online learning. There are three subthemes that comprise this theme: Missing social connection; Diminished concentration and information retention; and, Poor motivation.

Missing social connection

Students shared their experiences of remote learning that initially changed from being welcome and less stressful to being alienating and challenging over time as they had restricted communication with educators and peers. One area highlighted by respondents centers around feeling connected. Turning to remote learning for such an extended time meant that the students had a different social experience than they were used to with face-to-face learning. This participant commented that it felt like that ‘whole social part was missing for me and that, like, took a toll on my learning for a lot of my classes’ (FG1, UK 2). Socialisation is important for the student learning, yet some students were forced to isolate and practice social distancing more than others during the pandemic. As noted by this participant, missing the human connection spilt over into the learning environment online, ‘not having, the social aspect and like the human connection aspect, has been the most difficult part’ (FG4, USA 1).

Some students said that their instructors used breakout rooms to allow them to interact in small groups, and other instructors assigned more individual papers and less online time. Regardless of which approach was used, students expressed missing the peer interactions, ‘it’s difficult to build those relationships when you’re not right next to someone, and you don’t have that small talk . . . I think I really took that for granted and didn’t realize how much we build relationships with that little, small interaction’ (FG1, Canada 2). The relational aspect of learning and connection with educators was also important. Several students discussed missing the group dynamics from interactions ‘with the professors. Also, we missed many of our group dynamics in class’ (FG2, Spain 3).

Diminished concentration and information retention

The issues with the need for more connection to those around them fed into challenges associated with staying focused on academic requirements. Adjusting to the abrupt move to online learning was challenging for students, as we see here, ‘and with the kind of new online schedule, it was very much just it felt like overwhelming all at once’ (FG1, USA, 1). Some students said they were not able to concentrate or retain information in the same way as when they were learning face-to-face, ‘I feel like it’s impacting on my education a little bit, just like the ability to retain information if I find it more difficult online’ (FG2, UK, 3). Most students indicated that they needed something to help them focus and pay attention within the online environment,

... and it's so difficult to have online classes, especially when it's the only thing you have. And I think having this sort of reflection during all the online lessons is even more beneficial because it's really hard to pay attention when you're online. (FG3, Spain 1)

Poor motivation

It was also clear from the students in the focus groups that self-driven motivation waned during the term. This student shared, 'I really struggled with focusing during the last semester that I had and keeping motivated' (FG3, Spain 2). The majority of the students said that they initially enjoyed the idea of not having to leave their homes and travel to school and that, indeed it was fun, 'I think initially I loved it because I didn't have to wake up and get dressed for my lectures and all that, and that was I remember in March like I was taking classes from bed and I was lounging outside. It was like a party' (FG4, USA 1). Overtime students found that over time they were unable to maintain motivation for learning online, 'you would wake up like 10 minutes before and not even turn on your camera like the effort wasn't the same anymore' (FG1, USA 2).

Self-care practices during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted students' mental health and well-being worldwide. While the pandemic has been challenging for students, it has also provided resilience-building opportunities. In FG 1, USA 1 student noted, 'this experience is helping us build resiliency in that way.' For some, it has been an opportunity for growth,

This experience is helping us build resiliency in that way. And we're going to get used to discomfort, which is good because we can grow more in the future. So, although this is kind of like a difficult experience for many, I think it's also good in many ways. (FG1, USA 3)

While the lack of space for differentiation between personal and academic life increased due to working and studying from home, students also seemed to use this compressed time to reflect, process, and slow down.

Some students said that they have found ways to cope with these challenges through self-improvement and other self-care practices. One student from FG 2 from the UK said, 'I think my form of self-care during COVID-19 was to retreat a little bit from everything and just to go kind of do a lot of walks and ... a bit of yoga.' Another student from found that the Bok was helpful for their self-care, saying,

For me, like self-reflecting and healing and like even though I wasn't doing other stuff, like struggling with like mental health and stuff like that, healing that self-care that came from healing with the Bok, helped me like take care of myself and learn and grow and like it just did a lot for me, even though it was draining and stuff. (FG 1, USA 2)

While some students did not find the Bok helpful for self-care, such as this student in Spain, who said, 'I honestly don't think the Bok helped me much with my self-care' (FG2), many students they still recognized the importance of reflection and self-care for their well-being. A student from in India stated that Bok was not so helpful for her self-care but having to reflect was helpful in a more general sense, 'Not so much BOK but

reflections in general help me' (FG3). Similarly, a student from the UK 2 said, 'I'm not sure anyone viewed the Bok as a facilitator of self-care so in that respect, I definitely didn't' (FG2). Based on the students' responses, the Bok did not directly aid in self-care during online learning for some students in the focus groups and did for others. However, the experience of studying from home was viewed as an opportunity for personal growth and resilience-building, as was the act of reflection itself.

Learning through the use of the Bok

Students in each focus group identified that their use of Bok became an important tool to understand and apply the concepts they were learning in their courses. The active participatory process of writing down or drawing to express themselves helped to internalize and validate their learning processes. In this way, the Bok can be seen as a pedagogical tool that accompanies their learning. One student commented,

It helped me to analyse and kind of summarise my thoughts and my experiences related to school and personally because it was just this little book where I could keep my thoughts and map it all out and have it in front of me. And it went along like throughout the year as a journey. So, it was kind of like a linear representation of my experiences. (FG 3, India)

Another student commented,

I saw basically what social work values were like the more I learned about it. And then I was kind of able to embody those values more. And then I saw like as I went on through my Bok, how I was changing personally, but also in alignment with social work values and ideas and concepts to become more empathetic and to become more socially aware not only of society but also my classmates. (FG 1, USA 2)

Furthermore, the focus on reflection and creative practices afforded through the use of the Bok allowed students to further internalize the importance of this skill and skill development as a core feature of critical thinking and internalization of core constructs:

So, I think coming into the course, I didn't see [reflection] as such a central part of social work. And now I think it is pretty much everything. So, I think if you gave it (the Bok) to me now, I would happily use it. And I think I think I use it to write down. I would still use it to write because just because I like writing about it, then I also like drawing. I'm quite visual, and I like my drawing. (FG 2, UK2)

This effect of learning through the use of the Bok, intersected with the following identified the theme of understanding their personal and professional identities as a more integrated whole and not two separate undertakings. For this student,

The BOK really helped me with my academic reflections just to put pen to paper and see my own growth because I do reflect a lot, as I said before, and it's just nice to assign it some more value, I think because I think putting it on in the BOK gives it more value (FG 3, Spain1)

Personal and professional identities

In each focus group session, students explored how the use of the Bok was significant to their identity development and individual journeys in being and becoming social workers. A key theme involved students acknowledging the

intersection between their personal and professional selves, making the process of internalizing expected norms explicit. Students identified this as increased self-awareness describing how constructs related to social work practice became embedded parts of their personhood. In one of the focus group discussions, a student commented,

I think for me, like when I think of personal and professional identity, I think those really intertwine. And I think when you're developing yourself on a personal level, that's going to obviously carry over to your professional identity. (FG 1, USA 1)

Another student articulated how the Bok supported their reflection on this point,

I would say if we looked in terms of developing professionally and in terms of what we've been learning through the course, I think for me, the transformation would be self-care and being more resilient because I'm quite anxious, so that is an aspect that is really important in our course, in social work. So that's how the Bok has helped me with developing my professional identity, become more resilient and more aware of things around. (FG 3USA)

This comment from another student reflects how the Bok created a space for their learning.

Bok gave me the opportunity to place myself at the center of what I'm learning and being able to understand how that applies to specific situations that I face and how to go ahead with it. In terms of professional identity, it's more about finding my space within this confusing space of academia, being able to look at myself with all my anxieties and all my personal circumstances amidst a more formal learning environment. (FG 1, Canada 1)

Finally, a student in India considered that the Bok helped her understand her own learning style.

it helps with stopping procrastinating a little bit because I would use the BOK as an excuse that I'm still studying, but I'm taking some time to do something different and relax a little bit. (FG3)

Pathways towards transformative learning

Two sub-themes make up this theme: Self-reflection and Self-awareness

Self-reflection

Introducing the Bok to the online learning environment was an activity that supported students in the development of their self-reflective skills, as explained by one student, 'It's sort of the overall use of the Bok was sort of like a gateway into like self-reflection and journaling, as those are very important in social work and our professional identity in the future' (FG1, UK 1). The specific activity of self-reflection using the Bok helped the students to identify their bias, a beginning stage of the transformational learning process, 'I think actually that was a moment in my Bok where I reflected on an unconscious bias' (FG2, UK 2).

Self-awareness

The students offered insights into how they reflected on the self. For example, ‘Placing myself at the center of what I’m learning and being able to understand how those apply to specific situations that I face and how to go ahead with it’ (FG2, USA 1). Another student identified their greater awareness and practice of empathy: ‘Empathy like that, has enhanced my life, making me more aware of how I speak to people’ (FG1, Canada 1). The learning process of self-reflection and developing greater awareness allowed students to understand themselves with others. It’s the day-to-day practice of understanding of self about others that allows students to transform into their professional selves, as noted here,

to be able to apply all the things you are learning into your own personal life and professional life . . . to be able to reflect each day and how you are doing things, how can you improve the way you are [interacting with others]. (FG2, Spain 1)

For some students, that meant understanding who they are, their experiences, the context of their experiences, and how all of this helps them to reevaluate self in relation to others.

Discussion

The results of the focus group conversations on the impact of remote learning during COVID-19 and the use of Bok showed several significant themes. The first theme, remote learning during COVID-19, was a disorientating experience itself (Mezirow, 2012) which is crucial to understanding how students experienced the Bok during their social work and social policy education. Students shared their experiences of remote learning that changed from being welcome and less stressful to be alienating and challenging over time as they had restricted communication with educators and peers. Some students were forced to isolate and practice social distancing, depending on the country, more than others during the pandemic, which affected their socialization experience, including with faculty. Several students discussed missing the group dynamics from interactions with the professors and peers, which impacted their learning.

Most students indicated they needed something to help them focus and pay attention within the online environment. Additionally, it was clear that self-driven motivation waned during the term. Sudirman et al. (2021) highlight that integrating creative journal writing into education fosters a supportive learning environment. However, students’ comments also provide insights into the additional challenges posed by the online environment. In other words, the effectiveness of a pedagogy hinges on the educational context in which it is applied.

The second theme, self-care practices during COVID-19, addressed increased stress and anxieties in students during the pandemic context and changes in teaching and learning. Students identified how the Bok experience helped them to develop skills and resilience. The creative dimension of journaling can facilitate individual expression and diverse perspectives. Students are encouraged to utilize various artistic techniques, such as drawings, poems, or multimedia elements, to capture their thoughts. In the realm of social work, where innovative solutions to intricate problems are crucial, this mode of expression holds immense value.

Nevertheless, despite the findings of Moore et al.'s (2011) research, some students did not view the Bok as a space for self-care. However, they did perceive it as a place for developing resilience and resistance. The students' responses suggested that self-care was more dynamic and independent of the Bok.

The third significant theme is learning through the use of the Bok. Vinjamuri et al. (2017) considered it essential that students feel like coauthors in their education processes and the journal can be a safe space with 'low stakes' where that they can take risks and try things out. Students found that using the Bok enabled them to identify their learning styles, practices, new coping behaviors and mechanisms. Sudirman et al. (2021) discovered that integrating creative journal writing into education nurtures a supportive learning community. Sharing journal entries with peers and instructors establishes a platform for dialogue and feedback. This exchange not only fosters collaboration but offers opportunities for validation and constructive critique. As students discuss their journal entries, they gain insights into diverse perspectives, cultivating empathy and open-mindedness—imperative foundations for practising social work within culturally diverse and complex contexts.

In the fourth theme, personal and professional identities, students, as per Hubbs and Brand (2010) findings, discussed how using the Bok helped their journey toward developing their professional identities as social workers. Students recognized the intersection of their personal and professional selves and how constructs related to social work became embedded parts of their personhood. They acknowledged that the Bok helped them become more self-aware and resilient, which they considered crucial to their social work practice. Students found the Bok to be an opportunity to place themselves at the center of their learning and found it to be a helpful tool in understanding their learning style and reducing procrastination.

Introducing the Bok to the online learning environment, despite the obvious and stated challenges, supported students in developing self-reflective skills, as shown in the fifth theme, pathways to transformative learning. The importance of creating artful space (Collins, 2021; Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2020) even in the online world can lead to positive effects. Self-reflection helped students identify their biases and initiate the transformational learning process. This, in turn, led to greater self-awareness, empathy, and understanding of themselves in relation to others. For some students, this meant understanding how their experiences shaped their identity as emerging social workers. According to the students, the transformative learning process involves reflexivity and the day-to-day practice of understanding oneself in relation to others, both personally and professionally.

Critical pedagogies such as creative journal practices are needed to prepare students for a world of future pandemics and to develop critical standpoints. Mainstream educational approaches have played a part by simplifying learning and teaching to mere efficient information transfer, driven by cost-effectiveness. This often falls short of achieving transformative learning outcomes, instead nurturing technically adept practitioners who acquiesce to the status quo despite contradicting the ethical principles defining social work.

Limitations and further research

The main limitation of this study is the risk that we may not have captured a broader range of experiences from social work students, as indicated by the small sample size. A further limitation is the participant's self-selection bias. This means students may have been more likely to give positive answers about their experiences with the Bok than students who did not participate in the study. However, it is important to note that the participants' motivation is unknown. It may very well be that some who participated also wanted researchers to know that they did not find the Bok helpful in all aspects of their online learning experience during the pandemic. In this way, we didn't necessarily capture how all students may experience the Bok.

Another limitation of the study is that the data gathered from the students' does not enable us to answer important questions about the effectiveness of the Bok. For example, it is unclear which aspects of the Bok work best, which do not work as well, and under what conditions it is most effective. To answer these questions, more experimental research studies are needed that could use a control group to provide more specific knowledge about the impact of the Bok on student learning outcomes. It is worth noting that the information provided represents just one facet of a larger research project. Additional data from other phases, particularly focusing on the assessment of Transformation Learning will be accessible in the near future (Corchado Castillo et al., 2023).

It is also important to note that using the Bok as a pedagogical tool may only suit some learning styles. Some of our respondents found the journaling draining and didn't think they would use this approach going forward. This highlights an important challenge. Furthermore, this study did not test one form of journaling over the other, so it is impossible to say that the Bok, in its spirit of encouraging creativity, is any better than other more structured journaling styles.

Several factors contributed to the recruitment and participation efforts, including the variability of when the end of the term took place across participating institutions, spanning six weeks. Additionally, potential participants crossed multiple time zones, spanning a 12-hour time difference, making scheduling a session at a convenient time difficult. Finally, anecdotal evidence suggests that the cumulative effect of remote learning and Zoom fatigue may have contributed to lower participatory interest and motivation.

Conclusion

This research sought to explore how the use of Bok as a creative reflective journaling approach in social work education facilitated transformative learning during COVID-19. Furthermore, we were interested in knowing how reflective journaling helped social work students frame their life experiences during COVID-19. Finally, we sought to understand in what ways does the practice of reflective journaling help to foster the student's professional identity and development as an emerging practitioner.

This project has yielded insightful narratives about the student experience, contributing to a deeper understanding of whether reflective journaling is an effective tool for processing transformative learning experiences and promoting

reflections on professional identity. Our study reveals that the Bok has the potential to be a helpful pedagogy to promote transformative learning, professional socialization and self-care within social work education, yet, its usefulness was dependent on the individual student's needs and preferences. Some students found the Bok to be a valuable resource for self-care and resilience-building, while others were not as engaged with it, nor did they necessarily see it as a tool for self-care.

The research team discussed various aspects of the process, such as whether students' Boks should be in hardcopy or digital form. The data from the focus groups could not determine which format students preferred. However, based on the team's reflections, both formats could work. Flexibility for student choice was important given the students' closer relationship to technology in their everyday lives.

Social work educators are encouraged to continue to explore and evaluate innovative pedagogies that promote transformative learning. The Bok showed to be a helpful pedagogical tool, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when human connections and relationships were limited. However, using the Bok, does not have to be confined to remote learning or pandemic times; social work educators can apply creative journaling approaches to help students to develop self-awareness, gain insight into their emotions and reactions, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Social work students will face many uncertainties in their future practice. It is incumbent upon the profession and its educators to help prepare them for difficult times, via knowledge acquisition, dialogic and reflective processes (Afrouz, 2021).

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