

ARTICLE

Expanding engagement: Infusing creative arts into the asynchronous social work classroom

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Abstract

Asynchronous online education has become a central modality in social work programs, yet instructional design in these courses often relies heavily on discussion boards and written assignments. Although creative arts-based pedagogies are well established in face-to-face social work education, limited research has examined their integration in asynchronous online environments. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore social work faculty experiences incorporating creative arts into asynchronous Master of Social Work (MSW) and Doctor of Social Work (DSW) courses, including perceived benefits, challenges, and implications for student learning. Using purposive and snowball sampling, eight faculty members from accredited online programs participated in semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Four primary themes emerged: creative arts examples, benefits of doing creative assignments, faculty challenges infusing creative arts, and faculty recommendations for meaningful implementation. Faculty described using diverse modalities, including poetry, visual art, multimedia projects, and collaborative digital activities. Reported benefits included enhanced critical thinking, deeper self-awareness, increased empathy, collaboration, and greater engagement compared to traditional discussion boards and assignments. Challenges included resistance to pedagogical change, evaluation complexities, student discomfort with ambiguity, and technology-related considerations. Findings suggest that creative arts-based assignments can be thoughtfully integrated into asynchronous online social work courses and may support experiential, reflective, and competency-based learning. Limitations include the small sample size and lack of institutional context analysis. Further research is needed to examine how institutional support structures influence and sustain the integration of creative arts within asynchronous online social work classrooms.

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Keywords: Creative arts; Online learning; Social work; Asynchronous pedagogy**1. Introduction**

Online education, both synchronous and asynchronous, has become a central component to social work education, expanding access for diverse student populations and reshaping how programs deliver content and engage learners.^{1,2} This transition to online formats has prompted educators to explore teaching strategies that support student engagement, learning, and professional identity formation in virtual learning environments.³ Accreditation standards established by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) require online programs to demonstrate equivalent rigor, learning

outcomes, and competency-based assessment to those of in-person programs. In response, institutions have adopted innovative strategies aimed at fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and skill development in online contexts.⁴ Despite these efforts, asynchronous courses frequently rely on discussion boards and standardized assignments as primary mechanisms for student engagement. While discussion boards can facilitate peer dialogue and demonstrate content comprehension, an overreliance on discussion boards may limit opportunities for embodied learning, creative expression, and deeper forms of critical and reflective thought.

Within social work education, creativity and creative arts pedagogies refer to instructional approaches that incorporate artistic, expressive, and experiential methods to facilitate learning, reflection, and meaning-making. These approaches may include visual art, digital storytelling, poetry, music, photography, collage, role-play, journaling, or other expressive modalities that encourage students to engage cognitively, emotionally, and relationally with course material.^{5–8} Creative pedagogies position students as active participants in their learning experiences, and scholars have argued that “creative approaches have been shown to push the boundaries of social work past the limits set by customary approaches when seeking to promote social justice, development, and liberation.”⁹ Collectively, the literature underscores how creative arts are not just enhancements to social work education but are essential pedagogical tools that support the development of critical consciousness, ethical reasoning, and culturally responsive practice.

Existing literature demonstrates that arts-based pedagogies can strengthen student engagement, emotional processing, self-awareness, and integration of theory with practice. For example, creative assignments have been used in social work courses to facilitate exploration of identity, trauma, oppression, and lived experiences while supporting culturally responsive learning. Studies also suggest that arts-based learning can enhance students’ abilities to tolerate ambiguity of human experience, engage in critical reflection, and develop empathy for marginalized populations.^{5–8} However, much of this literature centers on traditional face-to-face classrooms or synchronous learning environments where immediate interactions are more readily facilitated. Comparatively, little research has examined how social work educators incorporate creative arts into asynchronous online courses, where opportunities for experiential learning are often constrained by limited modes of instructor/student interaction and an overreliance on text-based discussion boards.

Guided by Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory,¹⁰

this study explores social work educators’ experiences integrating creative arts into asynchronous online courses. Kolb conceptualizes learning as a cyclical process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience rather than passive information retention. This theory emphasizes four interconnected learning processes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb’s framework was selected because it directly aligns with the experiential and reflective nature of arts-based pedagogy and offers a practice framework for understanding how students engage with creative assignments in applied disciplines such as social work. While other theoretical frameworks also emphasize experiential meaning-making and reflection, Kolb’s model uniquely centers the role of experience as the foundation for learning and provides a clear framework for examining how creative activities facilitate the integration of theory, reflection, and practice.

Incorporating the creative arts aligns closely with experiential learning theory by providing students with opportunities for embodied learning, emotional reflection, and applied meaning-making. Creative arts empower students to access emotions, cultural narratives, and lived experiences that are often marginalized in traditional pedagogical approaches, thereby supporting culturally responsive analysis and reflection.⁷ When students use creative expression to explore social issues, identity, trauma, and systems of power, they are better positioned to integrate theory with practice and to experiment with empathetic and innovative interventions in real-world settings. In this way, the creative arts operationalize Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory,¹⁰ while advancing social work’s commitment to holistic, anti-oppressive education. Grounded in experiential learning theory, the creative arts function not as supplemental activities but as theoretically informed pedagogical strategies that strengthen integrative learning and prepare students for complex, real-world social work practice.¹¹

1.1. Summary and rationale

A review of the literature reveals that although the use of creative arts in social work education is increasingly recognized as beneficial,^[8,9,12] limited research has examined faculty experiences infusing arts-based assignments in asynchronous online learning environments. This gap restricts understanding of how creative pedagogies can be intentionally implemented in ways that support accessibility, rigor, and competency-based learning outcomes in online social work education. Without empirical insight into faculty experiences, creative arts risk remaining underutilized or relegated to optional enrichment rather than integrated, theory-driven

pedagogy. This absence of evidence limits the field's ability to intentionally align arts-based learning with experiential learning theory while ensuring accessibility, rigor, and competency-based outcomes in online settings. The present study seeks to address this gap by exploring faculty experiences integrating creative arts into asynchronous courses.

The study team, composed of two social work faculty with a combined 25 years of experience delivering online social work courses and one current online asynchronous MSW student, aimed to provide evidence-informed guidance for educators seeking to integrate creative arts strategies into asynchronous online learning environments.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and recruitment

Using a purposive sampling approach, the research team identified potential participants through a publicly accessible list of CSWE accredited online social work programs. A study invitation was emailed to representatives of these programs with a request to forward the invitation to faculty members who met the inclusion criteria for the project: being a social work faculty member who has infused creative arts assignments into online social work courses. Additionally, study invitations were sent to faculty members known by the research team who fit the inclusion criteria. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to forward the study invite to other potential participants, thus utilizing a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. The study was deemed exempt by the University of New England's institutional review board (IRB).

2.2. Data collection

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews over Zoom. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, and questions focused on faculty experiences infusing creative assignments into online courses as well as the perceived impact of using such assignments. Examples of interview questions are as follows:

- What benefits have you observed from the inclusion of creative assignments/learning opportunities? [For students and faculty]
- What challenges have you observed in incorporating creative learning assignments/opportunities? [For students and faculty]
- How might creative learning assignments/opportunities help prepare students to enter the field?

Eight social work faculty members were interviewed. Sample size was determined by saturation, which was reached once concepts converged and recruitment

efforts were unable to identify additional participants.¹³ Participants described their experiences infusing creative arts in at least one online MSW or DSW course. After each interview, a research team member reviewed the transcribed interview to ensure accuracy and redact identifying information. Transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose for analysis. Research team members conducted independent coding of a subset of transcripts and met to review coding decisions and assess the codebook. Subsequently the remaining transcripts were coded, and coding reports were generated. The research team met to discuss the coding reports to identify themes. The research team completed thematic analysis of the transcripts, guided by the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke.¹⁴

3. Results

Thematic analysis revealed four primary themes: *creative arts examples*, *benefits of doing creative assignments*, *faculty challenges infusing creative arts*, and *faculty recommendations for meaningful creative assignments*. Together, these themes demonstrate how faculty conceptualize, implement, and evaluate creative arts within asynchronous online social work education.

Theme 1: Creative arts examples

Interviewees described integrating creative assignments across MSW and DSW courses, including human behavior, clinical practice, and policy. Interviewees emphasized that creative approaches can be incorporated into any course if instructors are willing to think outside of the box, noting that “the sky is the limit” regarding creativity.

Assignment examples spanned multiple mediums and addressed topics such as grief and loss, bias and stigma, anti-racist practice, and advocacy. Interviewee examples included poetry assignments stemming from discussion board posts and other text, community-based depictions of clinical practice using methods such as song or drawing, and a “roots and fruits” policy activity involving a collaborative whiteboard exercise mapping policy causes and consequences.

Additional creative arts examples shared by interviewees included photography, painting, sculpture, collage, dance, animation, mandalas, mask-making, and website design. Interviewees highlighted the flexibility of asynchronous platforms which allow students to upload images or videos of creative work.

Motivations for integration of creative arts included “discussion board fatigue”, exposure to colleagues’ practices, adaptation of in-person assignments, clinical use of expressive arts, and reflection on prior student experiences. Creativity was often described as modification

and adaptation of existing ideas rather than invention. As one interviewee stated:

I have had the pleasure of working with a couple other faculty where this is their sort of passion and niche. And we were thinking about ways that we can do something different. We were talking about how in the asynchronous world for years we've used discussion boards, and I've been on the other end of that as a student and a lot of us have, and none of us like it. But we continue to use it. And so, we thought there's other ways to do this.

I just took something that existed and riffed on it, which is actually what I think the definition of creativity is. You take two problems, and you put them together. And that's the solution.

Theme 2: Benefits of doing creative assignments

Interviewees identified six primary benefits of creative assignments: (i) honoring different learning styles, (ii) engaging multiple parts of the brain, (iii) inspiring critical thinking, (iv) deepening self-awareness, (v) fostering "heart-centered work," and (vi) encouraging collaboration. These benefits were seen as key in helping prepare students for social work practice.

Interviewees also described creative assignments as expanding equitable participation in the class by allowing students to demonstrate understanding through varied modalities. As one interviewee stated, "sometimes writing papers is not somebody's strong suit, and I think it creates a more equitable space for people to use their strengths, and as social workers we're always saying lean into strengths." The infusion of creative arts was seen as a way to honor how students "learn a little different...auditorily, visually, tactilely." Creative assignments were also seen as a means to "tap into the other parts of our brain" prompting different ways of engaging with the content. As one interviewee reflected,

For many years we understood the human brain to have two hemispheres. One was creative, and one was analytical. It's not completely true anymore. What we know from neuroscience is that there are all kinds of connections, and that you can be creative with your analytical mind, and it's not strictly as divided. But let's just say metaphorically, for a minute, if half of our brain is more creative; half of our brain is analytical. Then why are we only using half of our brain?

When making the connection between the creative arts and enhanced critical thinking skills, one interviewee shared:

...this is a great opportunity to think about things a little differently and have students expand the way that they think about things. So really move from I've read about something, and I'm going to regurgitate that information. Moving away from that and more into our critical thinking lens and our reflective lens and reflexive practice lens, and kind of challenging our application of material to practice.

Deepened self-awareness and empathy emerged as significant benefits of using creative assignments. Creative processes were described as pushing students inward and helping them gain a "deeper, different level of empathy" as these assignments increase capacity for understanding how clients make meaning of their lives and experiences. Creative work was also described as activating different cognitive processes, moving students beyond memorization toward thinking consistent with Bloom's taxonomy. Interviewees emphasized that such assignments shift students from "regurgitating" information to applying, synthesizing, and reflecting. Additionally, by engaging in creative arts assignments students gain experiences they can then incorporate into their social work practice:

If we are practicing certain skills in the program, then we're going to be more likely to apply those to our practice. When we have engagement with something and get used to what that's like, we can use that in clinical practice... If they have creative kind of strategies in their toolbox, I feel like they may be more open to thinking about what does my client need from a more diverse perspective. Maybe they're not going to be someone that would really benefit from just sitting and talking, but we actually need to be doing more experiential or creative interventions.

Interviewees also referenced the cultivation of "heart-centered work," noting that creative assignments engage emotional processing alongside intellectual learning and thereby "engag[ing] with heart and soul." Emotional engagement was framed as enhancing compassion, curiosity, and professional formation while resisting the tendency to "hyper-intellectualize." Interviewees pointed to how these characteristics are essential to ethical social work practice:

The arts can convey compassion in a way that a PowerPoint cannot. You want people to feel something. Because if you feel something, then you care about it, and if you care about it, you're going to learn about it. So, I try to get people to feel something and then reflect on "what am I feeling and why?"

Collaboration and community-building were also highlighted, particularly in asynchronous environments

where connection can be more difficult to foster. Co-creation with peers and peer feedback were viewed as mirroring collaborative processes in social work practice with one interviewee stating, “when we collaborate with one another on something like a creative assignment, I think it really gets people kind of used to that process which is [what] we do all the time in social work.”

Interviewees further reported that assessing creative work was more engaging and less monotonous than grading discussion boards. Creative submissions were described as individualized, personal, and emotionally resonant. Interviewees described assessing such assignments with words like “*excitement*,” “*awe*,” and “*inspiring*.” As an example, one interviewee shared,

I’m always just so blown away by what people create. I read it. I have my moment with it. I sit with it, or I look at it, or I listen to it, whatever it might be ... I really think about how it impacts me and what you know from their narrative, what their message is, and trying to kind of sit with it and think about it, how I am interpreting it? So, I think that it has a bigger impact for me than a [discussion board] response. It kind of has an emotional piece to it. It has a connection; I feel connected to students.

The impact of assessing creative assignments was contrasted to experiences grading “tedious” discussion board posts. Several interviewees described how discussion board posts can yield redundancy; as a result, grading can feel more “monotonous” as compared to the originality generated by creative assignments. As one interviewee shared, creative assignments can “feel like they’ve shared a piece of themselves in the work that they’re doing that really brings the work to life.” Another interviewee reflected:

I find discussion boards to be more about I read this article. I’m regurgitating that information. I read similar things from all the students who are writing things on the discussion board. I’m sure the students who are reading them are trying to figure out what to say differently to each of their classmates as are all of us. But I think that the creative assignments are so individualized... whereas I think the discussion boards can be a little more generic, or a little more sort of what they think the instructor wants to hear and the responses. The creative pieces are more personal, and it shows the kind of level of thinking and connection to the material differently.

Lastly, interviewees shared student feedback that included how creative assignments push them to more fully engage with their work. Some of the words students shared about their experiences doing creative assignments

included: *therapeutic*, *rewarding*, *inspiring*, *difficult*, and *emotional*.

Overall, these findings show that integrating creative assignments into asynchronous online social work courses has many benefits and is both meaningful to student learning as well as professionally relevant. Interviewees discussed that they have seen in students expanded critical engagement, increased compassion and empathy, and deeper reflection, all areas that enhance ethical social work practice.

Theme 3: Faculty challenges infusing creative arts

While there are many benefits to the infusion of the creative arts, interviewees identified two primary areas that can create challenges for faculty: the difficulty of change and technology considerations.

Integrating creative assignments often requires shifts in pedagogy, assessment practices, and faculty identity. Interviewees identified that creative assignments may require changes to: (i) how instructors teach and evaluate students, (ii) how people perceive themselves, and (iii) students’ desire to embrace new ways of learning. Interviewees noted resistance to moving beyond discussion boards and essays, as well as skepticism regarding the value of creativity in academic spaces. One interviewee reflected:

Stepping outside of how we’ve done course design for years can be hard. And so, change can be hard... getting everybody on board to like limit discussion boards, or to really think about things in a different manner can be different.... Sometimes people don’t value art and creativity in the same way that maybe traditionally we valued an essay.

Evaluation posed particular challenges. Interviewees described tension between assessing creative assignments and centering process and reflection. For example, one interviewee noted,

It’s really about engaging in the process, which is where you get a little disconnect from faculty of the buy-in to the relevance of the projects because they feel like the end product should demonstrate ‘x’ when really it’s the process for this assignment that’s more important than the end product.

Providing meaningful feedback without appearing to judge artistic ability was identified as complex. Or as one interviewee noted, “I don’t want to judge someone’s creative piece. But I want to share in the moment with them—so trying to figure out how I can share in the moment.” Both instructors and students may perceive themselves as “not an artist,” contributing to anxiety and hesitation. Interviewees shared these experiences, stating:

Creativity scares people. We all had a terrible art teacher or older sibling who told us that we have no talent and that sunk in, and it's in you, and it's in me, and it's in everybody. "I'm not as good of an artist as my brother. I'm not the one who can draw, or I'm not the one who can write."

A lot of people, when you say incorporating expressive arts, they feel like, no, I'm not an artist, my students are not an artist, what are you trying to do here? It's not for me.

Students also sometimes experience discomfort with ambiguity in open-ended assignments:

I hear a lot from students that they're nervous... I hear a lot that students will tell me poetry is not my thing, or I don't remember writing a poem since elementary school or really maybe feeling like they're going to be judged on their artistic ability.

I've definitely been in conversation with other faculty about students, maybe just struggling with wanting to have the right answer, and sometimes creative assignments are so open-ended that students feel uncomfortable with, "What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to interpret this? Am I doing it right?" and that's not necessarily a bad thing. I think it's a good learning experience for everyone, but it can be a bit of a challenge at first.

However, interviewees noted that this discomfort may support growth and better prepare students for practice, where uncertainty is common.

Integration of creative assignments may also challenge instructors as it can require "stepping outside of how we've done course design for years." For example, the more open-ended and flexible approach to creative assignments can change the teacher-student dynamic. Or as an interviewee shared, there is "a shift from me disseminating information and me having that power and the knowledge to give to other people, and more in this being a collaborative scholarly process together." While this shift can be beneficial, it may present challenges as explained by another interviewee,

It's harder to set up scenarios where students can figure things out. We want [the students] to figure this stuff out. And so, it's a little bit of stepping back on the ego. I'm in charge here, and I'm the font of all knowledge and help them figure out what it is that they need to know, and if they can't quite figure it out, then you help.

Technology-related challenges included platform familiarity, economic inequities related to materials or software subscriptions, and concerns about generative AI.

Interviewees noted that asynchronous delivery may shift material costs onto students, raising equity concerns:

If you're in person, you can provide all the supplies and the material. But otherwise, somebody would be on the hook to being able to provide whatever they need for themselves ... you have to think about economic security and equity if we're not going to be buying it and mailing it to each student to complete that project. Like Canva, right? You can have free Canva, or you can pay for the subscription.

Overall, the challenges identified highlight that integrating creative assignments into asynchronous online courses requires intentional shifts in pedagogy, mindset, and infrastructure. Interviewees described navigating discomfort with ambiguity, concerns about evaluation, technology barriers, and resistance rooted in traditional academic norms. The following recommendations reflect strategies interviewees found helpful in addressing these challenges and strengthening implementation.

Theme 4: Faculty recommendations for meaningful creative assignments

Interviewees provided recommendations for effectively using the creative arts in asynchronous online social work courses. These recommendations focused on structuring assignments, evaluating assignments, preparing oneself to offer creative assignments, and addressing hesitation from colleagues.

(A) Structuring assignments

For interviewees, structuring assignments emphasized clearly explaining the purpose of the assignment, providing multiple options for completion, offering assignment alternatives when appropriate, sharing sample completed products, allowing choice in sharing, and requiring structured reflection or debrief.

One interviewee shared how she introduces creative assignments and spoke to her rationale regarding what she allows in creative arts submissions:

We talk about social work and expressive practices, and the importance of the process. Focusing on process and not on outcome and about what kind of comments can people provide to each other so that they will be helpful... Anything to do with how pretty, how wonderful this is, you're so talented are not allowed. And that is because it may not sit well with other people, and it's because we want to encourage people to use creativity as a way of expressing themselves, no matter what the outcome is. So, we're not artists, and so the aesthetic value is not as important as the process and the feelings that are felt while doing it.

Providing choice versus taking a “one-thing-fits-all” approach entailed listing a range of allowable mediums or approaches. One interviewee disclosed that she uses assignment instructions to “give some suggestions, like maybe a poem or a song, or a podcast, or a comic strip... they really have the leeway to do whatever they would like.”

Interviewees shared that students may benefit from being provided examples, and this may help with the ambiguity and discomfort they may feel with the assignment. As one interviewee shared:

Have a couple of examples to show them like, here’s a box... don’t make the boxes be very good. If you have an excellent box, it’s going to scare everybody... if I’m giving you an example, I might give a pretty good one, but then I’ll [give a] not so good one but the person maybe ... had a moment of enlightenment after doing this or a great insight.

Reflection was described as central to the learning process when utilizing creative assignments. This may include reflections regarding the impact of being creative, feelings or insights generated during the creative process, and reflections on lessons learned that serve to prepare students to enter the field. As one interviewee noted, “the debrief is really the essence of the project.”

(B) Evaluating assignments

Interviewees recommended centering grading on engagement, insight, and reflection rather than artistic quality. Interviewees stressed that instructors need to be transparent with their grading approach and reassure students that they will not be judged on artistic abilities. As one interviewee shared, “it’s never about judging [students] on the quality. What we want to hear is, what was the experience like for you? What insights did you gain? How might you use that?” Or as another interviewee commented, “if somebody is not a poet, we’re not going to grade their poetry writing skills, but rather the intention, their participation in it.” Rubrics should align with learning objectives and assess critical thinking and application. One interviewee reflected:

You’re not looking at quality, you’re looking at whether or not they did the thinking about the topic that you asked them to do... It’s about the journey. You have to kind of set up the grading criteria to be aligned with what you’re wanting them to learn. The process of how they get to what they’re learning can be crappy as long as they are talking about the thing that you’re asking them to talk about. Make your rubric or your grading be that.

Meaningful feedback was emphasized, particularly given the personal nature of creative work. Some

interviewees encouraged sharing emotional responses to deepen relational engagement. Recognizing how a student’s work can be “such a personal piece” necessitates feedback going beyond “good job.”

(C) Preparing oneself to offer creative assignments

To prepare oneself for the use of creative assignments, interviewees recommended consulting literature, collaborating with colleagues, inviting student input, and piloting optional assignments. As one interviewee stated:

Ask the students, if you were going to be creative, what would you bring into the course? And play with it a little bit. Talk to your colleagues about it a little bit and maybe try something optional in a class one time to see how that flies.

Openness, curiosity, and willingness to experiment were described as essential dispositions. As one interviewee recommended, it is about “not being afraid to think outside the box.” More specifically:

Higher ed as a whole is really married to writing. ... It’s leaning into their own discomfort or fear around thinking outside of the box, talking with other faculty members, or finding different ways where things can be more creative... It’s being able to move away from traditional approaches and being curious and confident.

Being open also entailed thinking about ways to adapt existing in-person creative assignments and/or develop new ones for online classrooms. For example, one interviewee considered how to incorporate sculpture into her asynchronous course given its success in in-person classrooms:

I don’t know how you could do that in the asynchronous world, but there has to be a way to be creative, right? I think it takes some thought, and I think it will take some sitting with it, but I think it could be done.

Additionally, interviewees recommended instructors sit with their own feelings around the creative arts and acknowledge what feelings arise. Or as one interviewee noted:

It makes me stressed out when somebody says, “here’s a pen, just draw. It doesn’t matter if it’s any good, just do your best.” Right? I’m like, “Okay.” It’s just scary. So that is real. But if somebody says, “act out a scene or sing something”, I’m fine, right? I don’t have a great voice, but it doesn’t bother me, but I can’t draw great, and that does bother me. So, it’s like people have their own little fears and so forcing people to do a creative approach that they don’t love can be really

uncomfortable sometimes we do it, anyway. And we just say “this part might be really uncomfortable for you. Let’s just be uncomfortable and be okay with our work looking terrible.” Or sometimes you can say, “try this other approach that speaks to you.”

Other recommendations included observing how colleagues implement creative assignments in their online courses and schools of social work facilitating “brainstorming sessions” or “working sessions with all faculty” to generate ideas and offer support. Lastly, personally completing assignments was recommended of all faculty in order to clarify instructions and be able to provide more meaningful feedback and support to students.

(D) Addressing hesitation from colleagues

To address skepticism, interviewees suggested demonstrating how creative art assignments align with CSWE competencies, clarifying misconceptions about academic rigor, and articulating the ways in which creative arts can prepare students to go into the field. One interviewee described their strategy to respond to skepticism:

It’s about dispelling misconceptions. I’ve heard the smarmy comments, “Oh, you’re going to have him write a poem,” as if that’s not academically rigorous. But if you could write a poem conveying what relational cultural theory is, using references from the authors, and make the poem make sense and reflect exactly what relational cultural theory is all about, that’s impressive. And that’s just found poetry... You’re creating things– that is academically legit.

Interviewees shared that creative assignments can be academically legitimate when intentionally designed and aligned with competencies. They also stated that it is important to listen to how individuals conceptualize creative assignments and address potential “limited perceptions of what creativity is.”

4. Discussion

Contrary to initial expectations, interviewees did not identify insurmountable barriers to infusing creative assignments in asynchronous courses as long as instructors remain open to trying new ways of engaging students and being creative in their own approaches. For example, interviewees described a range of creative approaches (*i.e.*, sculpture, dance) that could be successfully incorporated when students are allowed to submit work in multiple formats such as audio recordings, videos, photographs, or digital design platforms (*e.g.*, Canva). This suggests that

technological constraints may be less prohibitive than commonly assumed and that creative arts can be integrated into asynchronous learning with relatively accessible tools.

Findings indicate that a benefit of infusing creative assignments is the ability to offset “discussion board fatigue,” a discussion board tendency described as “encourag[ing] superficial responses over meaningful dialogue... incentiviz[ing] conformity, not critical thinking.”¹⁵ Instead, interviewees characterized the potential of creative assignments as inspiring deeper analysis and more authentic engagement. Another critical finding entailed how infusion of the arts can prepare students to be ethical and responsive practitioners, which is a primary aim of social work programs. This finding aligns with Kolb’s experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through the integration of concrete experiences, reflection, conceptual understanding, and application. Within social work education, this process supports the development of ethical practitioners by creating opportunities for students to examine perspectives, reflect on values and assumptions, and consider how knowledge translates into practice decisions. This preparation for ethical practice is honed through opportunities for students to practice collaboration, build connections, and enhance critical thinking and expression. Through Kolb’s cycle of reflective observation and abstract conceptualization, students are encouraged to move beyond content recall toward analysis, interpretation, and application. These critical thinking skills are essential for future social workers, who must evaluate complex situations, integrate multiple sources of knowledge, and respond to diverse client and community needs. Similarly, opportunities for collaboration reflect the interpersonal nature of social work practice, where professionals must engage in shared problem-solving with clients, communities, and interdisciplinary teams.

Engaging with creative processes was also seen as a means to become more comfortable with ambiguity as such assignments require students to engage with open-ended prompts that often have multiple interpretations. This openness to ambiguity reflects Kolb’s process of active experimentation, where learners explore possibilities, adapt their approaches, and develop understanding through experience. Because social workers frequently encounter uncertain circumstances and problems without clearly defined solutions, developing tolerance for ambiguity prepares students to approach practice with flexibility and responsiveness. Given the complex nature of social work practice, where problems rarely have clear-cut solutions, learning to sit with ambiguity is considered an essential skill. Benefits of embracing ambiguity include psychological and cognitive benefits including enhanced mental flexibility,

creativity and cognitive flexibility, psychological resilience as well as adaptability and openness.¹⁶ Lastly, exposure to creative assignments may also provide students with ideas on how to engage their future clients, thus representing a valuable opportunity to practice new strategies to support clients.

Overall, study findings reinforce the idea that creative arts are not merely supplementary to social work education but can serve as essential pedagogical tools to support critical consciousness, ethical reasoning, and culturally responsive practice.¹¹

4.1. Limitations and future directions

Two key limitations should be noted. First, the study utilized a relatively small sample. Although there were only eight interviewees, saturation was achieved where no additional insights were shared. Second, this study did not examine the institutional context and infrastructure necessary to support the development and implementation of creative assignments in asynchronous environments. Future research could explore the role of instructional design teams, learning management systems, and institutional support structures in facilitating the infusion of creative arts into asynchronous courses. Examining which platforms and technological resources, for example, are best suited to creative assignments would further inform best practices for integrating creative arts into asynchronous social work education.

Another potential next step is to examine the use of AI as it pertains to the infusion of creative arts in online learning. While only a few interviewees briefly touched upon AI, the pervasive nature of AI and the associated questions regarding ethical practices requires a deeper exploration. This includes how to construct assignments that establish clear expectations for appropriate AI usage, while also strengthening students' ability to use and critique AI in ways relevant to social work practice.

5. Conclusion

While existing literature affirms the value of incorporating creative arts into social work education, research has largely focused on face-to-face or synchronous online education, with limited attention to asynchronous online learning. The findings of this study align with prior research demonstrating how the pedagogical benefits of creative arts-based assignments extend to asynchronous social work education. Consistent with earlier research highlighting the role of creative arts in fostering core social work values such as empathy,⁸ interviewees described how creative assignments in asynchronous coursework hold the potential to promote critical thinking and self-reflection

while honoring diverse learning styles.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: All authors

Formal analysis: Nancy Shore, Abigail Story

Investigation: All authors

Methodology: Nancy Shore

Writing—original draft: All authors

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of New England. All procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. Written informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants prior to participation in the study.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent to publish was obtained from all participants prior to participation in the study.

Availability of data

Due to the confidential and sensitive nature of qualitative interview data, the dataset is not publicly available.

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