The challenges, triumphs and learning from participating in an Australian social work students’ activist group

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This article traces the emergence of a student activist group called the Social Work Action and Advocacy Network for Students at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia. The article exhibits three founding members’ experiences of working collectively to achieve emancipatory goals: showcasing achievements; grappling with ethical tensions of working within a group; and demonstrating students’ capacity to re-author the identity of social work in a way that positions activism as central.

key words student activism • critical social work • social action

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Introduction

The Social Work Action and Advocacy Network for Students (SWAANS) at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) emerged during an unlikely time in Australian history. Voluntary student unionism had come into affect under the conservative Howard Coalition government in July 2006, which abolished compulsory student union fees and severely undermined students’ capacity for collective self-organisation. This led to the closure of many student services, thousands of job losses and the decimation of student-based organisations and activities across Australian universities. The Gillard Labor government made two unsuccessful attempts (which were blocked by a conservative Senate) before finally restoring compulsory service fees in September 2010. During this time, the Student Guild at USC was inactive and...
there was little evidence of extracurricular, student-based activities on campus, let alone social activism.

The Sunshine Coast is a regional area in South-East Queensland, Australia, in which the natural beauty of the coastline, national parks and sub-tropical terrain mask many social problems. There are high levels of unemployment, homelessness and inadequate public infrastructure to cope with the exploding population. The destructive impacts of rapid urban development on the local environment and community are particularly evident. USC is a relatively new institution, achieving the status of a university in 1998. Many students who study at USC are from low socio-economic backgrounds and the first in their families to attend university.

The social work programme at USC commenced in 2008, which, up until then, had only taught community work within a general social science degree. The first iteration of a social work student group was quite conservative. This was a small, largely inactive group that engaged in debates about whether or not to include ‘non-social work’ students. Meetings discussed how to use meeting time and a key goal of the group was greater connection with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) in attempts to garner professional legitimacy.

Another more radical student group, Agents for Change, also emerged during this time with a more explicitly political agenda. This was a largely social science-based group that included students from other disciplines, including social work, which operated for about three years, and included some of the founding members of SWAANS.

It is difficult to trace the exact origins of SWAANS at USC. There is not one unitary story or singular truth about the establishment of the network. The backdrop of its foundation is a critical social work curriculum that includes dedicated courses on social theory, community development and social action, critical reflection, and anti-racism taught by passionate and experienced educators who draw on critical social science. This conscientises students and the emergence of the network was arguably a convergence of the passion, politicised conversations and spirited debates in which students who were moved by their education to engage in activism took a stand against human rights abuses and sought to find ways to work towards a more democratic and socially just world. Some members were certainly aware of and
inspired by the existence of the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) in the UK, which provided evidence that activist and emancipatory forms of social work were still possible. It is beyond the scope of this article to represent the experiences of every member of SWAANS, but the following article represents three key founding members’ accounts of their experiences with the network.

Erza discusses his journey into social work and initial sense of ‘overwhelm’ in the face of disempowering social structures and power relations. He positions SWAANS as an important adjunct to his critical social work education in a way that provided him with hope and concrete strategies to enact his emancipatory goals in practice.

David writes about the broad range of key social action campaigns that the SWAANS group has enacted – from local issues impacting staff and students on campus, to global human rights issues such as contesting Islamophobia. The campaign about access to car parking on campus was significant because it was one of the first issues to galvanise the SWAANS group into action. This resulted in raising awareness within the university community and extending this consciousness raising through the media, which was very effective in promoting fairer outcomes. The learning gained here was arguably significant in fuelling other action, including the ‘March in March’, which challenged the harsh 2013 Coalition federal government.

Kaila’s contribution captures some of the complexities and challenges of working in a politicised group whose explicit mandate is for social change. It speaks to tensions inherent in working within a collective and negotiating differences creatively to achieve emancipatory outcomes.

Ezra’s narrative

Prior to commencing my social work degree, I studied law and business. Having a passion for justice, a career in law seemed like the ideal path for me. However, over the years, I became disillusioned with the legal system. I learnt that legal justice was not necessarily analogous with social justice. I began to feel like I was setting myself up for a career that would be ethically conflicting. Growing weary of the world around me and sensing that something was not right, I made the decision to study social work instead. I remember feeling inspired in my very first social work lecture. The lecturer asked the students what they thought caused poverty. Students offered various responses like ‘drug addiction’, ‘mental illness’ or ‘unemployment’. However, this was not what the lecturer was looking for. Instead, she started a dialogue that framed capitalism and patriarchy as major contributors to poverty, and so began my critical social work journey.

I believe my mind was already geared to look beyond individualised and pathologising explanations of social problems, but what I could not yet comprehend was why these social problems existed in the first place. I recall reading one of the prescribed articles in my first week and having an epiphany. I realised that society was ultimately designed to preserve an inequitable status quo that functioned to benefit a privileged minority. I now understood that injustice existed not merely due to lack of intelligence, awareness or compassion, but as a result of complex intersections between social, political and economic structures that shape the behaviour and experience of individuals. Critical social work offered me a unique capacity to identify and analyse the structures that are deeply connected to individual freedom from oppression. I learnt to make connections between the personal and the political and developed a
sharp power analysis of socially constructed hierarchies that engrain difference. Yet, this was both a gift and a curse for me. I felt empowered by the awareness offered through new knowledges but the changes I felt needed to occur in society were too big and seemed near impossible to achieve. My response was overwhelmingly characterised by defeatism. I decided to engage with SWAANS to see if there were others that felt the way I did. Through SWAANS, I connected with many people who shared the same concerns as me. It was remarkable to bond with people that held common interests in social justice. I no longer felt alienated. My disenchantment was replaced with belonging and inspiration. I thoroughly enjoyed engaging in lively discussion about social issues. It was exciting! Ultimately, our conversations led to us thinking ‘We need to do something about this!’ and the commencement of the ‘ACTION’ part of the SWAANS acronym.

Once I understood that inequality in our society was not an unsolvable puzzle or natural inevitability, a ‘social work’ that merely assisted people to best cope with the conditions of an unjust society was not enough for me. SWAANS imagined a politically active social work that could disrupt existing power relations, a social work in which social workers would be at the forefront of social change movements. Our resistance would reflect our ethical obligation to the people we claimed to serve and our commitment to social justice. Informed by critical theory, our emerging practice frameworks were largely oriented towards social change, and so began our foray into activism. Since its inception in 2012, SWAANS has had a presence in many protests and rallies, but in 2014, the changing political climate and subsequent release of the new Abbott Liberal Coalition government’s proposed Budget heightened concerns for SWAANS members. A critical analysis recognises that neoliberalism and neo-conservatism increase the burden on the most (structurally) vulnerable people in our communities and exasperate social divisions. Thus, SWAANS attended numerous
protests and rallies to voice our concern about how the proposed policies would affect the people we would soon be working alongside. This represented a unique opportunity to use the critical theory I was learning to engage in political activity. Here are a few examples:

- In the classroom, I learnt about cultural imperialism, colonisation, institutional racism and white privilege (Kowal, 2008; Zufferey, 2012; Bennett, 2013; Bessarab and Crawford, 2013). I came to understand how trauma collapses time and reverberates through generations. This led to my involvement in shutting down the streets in protest against the forced closure of Aboriginal communities when the Prime Minister was in town. We shouted loud enough so that he could hear us while he dined with political elites at a celebratory lunch. I wanted Tony Abbott to understand that his government’s policies increase climates of risk and were very far from reflecting recognition and repatriation for Aboriginal people.
- In one of my assessments, I made a connection between the offshore detention of asylum seekers and neoliberal globalisation, developing a critique of the transnational corporations contracted by government that appeared to be more concerned with profit than care. I understood that our inhumane policy materialised through the populist politics of fear that dehumanised desperate people fleeing persecution. As a response, I hit the pavements of Brisbane City in a mass protest, giant placard in hand, and contributed to collective chants that echoed through the cityscape such that the 9–5 corporates had no choice but to pay attention to our message.
- Through engaging with feminist content in academia, I recognised the negative impact of patriarchy, heteronormativity and outdated religious theology on people with marginalised sexual identities. SWAANS set a precedent on campus for political action by organising a protest and recruitment stall to advocate for marriage equality. I was interviewed by the local newspaper and was able to offer a critique of the now-former Prime Minister’s opinions on same-sex unions. Post-event reflections led to the creation of a social and support group for members of the ‘Queer’ community so that they could engage in their own political endeavours.

I cannot imagine a more complementary form of critical pedagogy than engaging in activism via the SWAANS community. It is so valuable to have my education enhanced through participation in collectivising for social change. Getting involved in activism has been inspiring and empowering for me. When I write my essays, I am now able to write with hope because I have stood in solidarity with a mass of people who recognise injustice and want to create a better world. As social work students, we do not need to wait until we graduate to start ‘doing’ social work; we can start immediately through making unique contributions to various social change movements. For me, one of the greatest benefits of my experiences in activism is that I have been able to replace narratives of despair with more empowering narratives which genuinely believe that change is possible. In my assessments, I am now more interested in exploring themes relating to political resistance. I have recently written a piece about social workers acting as agents for change by adopting a practice framework that uses social work artistry to subvert neoliberal ideology and another piece on how community organisations can simultaneously resist and comply with government
funding agreements by constructing an organisational ‘theatre of compliance’. I am
not certain I would have followed this same trajectory if not for my involvement in
SWAANS. It has shaped the future practitioner that I will become.

David’s narrative

I am grateful to all of the SWAANS members I have met. I have gained invaluable
insights that were, at times, confronting for a white privileged male, but that evoked
my praxis potential and enhanced my ability as a critically reflective practitioner. We
had robust debates and often disagreed on courses of action; however, we always
couraged each other in our endeavours and social justice always remained the
main tenet of the group.

Growing up in a working-class area in Dublin, I have vivid memories of my mother
arguing with my father about bringing the workers out on strike, ‘again’. Coming
from a politicised family, I was naturally drawn to the critical social work degree at
USC and the opportunities for activism associated with SWAANS.

The events that hold particular significance for me during my time at SWAANS are
the parking issues on campus, the March in March and the counter-protest supporting
the right to build a Mosque on the Sunshine Coast. The parking issue arose when
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The university management decided to introduce paid parking. Many students had issues with paid parking because the university had recently abolished parking in unmarked bays, which had previously been plentiful, and now expected students to pay for what was effectively a non-existent service – the right to 'hunt' for a space, rather than a guaranteed car park. During peak times, students (and staff) would scour the campus looking for car parks, resulting in many students being extremely late for lectures and tutorials. Some students became so frustrated that they left the campus – a privilege they were expected to pay for! To add to students' and the surrounding residential population's frustrations, the university continued to increase student numbers without appropriate infrastructure, while simultaneously reducing parking spaces. Students often parked where they could, resulting in large fines.

SWANNS decided to raise students' concerns and take action by starting a petition. Students spoke of having no food as a consequence of paying parking fines or being reprimanded at work because of delays due to parking off campus. SWAANS collected hundreds of signatures and stories and asked for a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor in order to relay students' concerns.

SWAANS was promised meetings on three separate occasions; each time, the meeting was cancelled 'due to unforeseen circumstances'. It was agreed by SWAANS members that other tactics should be deployed to attract the university's attention, so local print and television media were contacted. During a joint radio interview, a representative for the Vice-Chancellor admitted having no idea how many students accessed 'disabled' parking or if the current number of parks were appropriate. The presenter replied: 'don't you think it would be a good idea to find out?'

Soon after, the university's management decided to meet SWAANS. Many students voiced their frustrations. The university management's standard response referred to a free car park 20 minutes away. SWAANS stated that the car park was unsafe for students and staff at night, with inadequate lighting, no emergency points and students having to pass dense bushland. Many students with significant health problems who did not meet the strict criteria for disability parking found it difficult to walk 20 minutes while carrying heavy textbooks.

As a direct result of our agitation, most of the car parking-related issues were resolved. This was a significant victory for SWAANS as we spoke truth to power and expedited the university's response. Had I not undertaken a critical social work degree, I may have accepted the status quo or felt the task insurmountable.

The March in March was an organic movement that was born from the growing frustration with the Abbott government’s extremist right-wing political agenda and the lack of action from the traditional left. Many people felt angered at: the treatment of asylum seekers; the lack of climate change policy; the privatisation of public assets; higher university fees; the erosion of workers' benefits and industrial relations laws; and the lack of movement on marriage equality.

Marches were held in major cities across Australia in March 2014. SWAANS organised transport for the march in Brisbane so that members could stand in solidarity with other concerned individuals and groups. The Abbott government’s attack upon an already-tenacious democracy for capitalist gains galvanised people from diverse backgrounds. I remember standing in Queens Park in Brisbane and looking at the thousands of protesters, among them large numbers of SWAANS members who had made the 100 km trip from the coast to the city. At that moment, I had an enormous sense of fulfilment and felt connected to something bigger than myself.
Many social commentators said that the marches achieved nothing (Copland, 2014). However, I disagree. Seeing people from such diverse backgrounds coming together for common causes gave me the determination to continue to strive for social justice.

Social justice was also the reason SWAANS members attended a protest at the site of a proposed Mosque on the Sunshine Coast. SWAANS, along with other groups, decided to have a counter-protest in the name of acceptance and respect for religious freedom. At the site, we were vastly outnumbered. Hundreds of men and women (largely bussed in from Melbourne) waved Australian flags and chanted ‘No Mosque here!’ Speakers riled the crowd up with stories of invasion (ironic as we live in a colonised country) by Islamic extremists. When the speakers finished, the crowd turned towards our group, which was peacefully assembled across the road. A police line separated the groups. During this time, a man shouted in my face: ‘Why don’t you just fuck off?’ I smiled at the man as a police officer pushed him back. I felt pity for him, for, underneath it all, I could see that he was afraid. I felt immense sadness when I saw children in the anti-Mosque crowd. The shouts became louder from both sides. I realised that it was futile competing in a shouting match as we were greatly outnumbered. Critical perspectives gave us the incentive to mobilise; however, postmodernism allowed us to see beyond dichotomous constructs such as them and us. I decided to use humour to diffuse the situation and show how ridiculous their argument was. I shouted slogans such as ‘I like hummus’ and ‘What’s falafels got to do with it?’ Many people, including the police, started laughing and people started chanting their own nonsensical slogans, which left the anti-Mosque protesters bewildered and unsure of how to proceed.

When people saw the images in the media, they asked me why I was advocating for the Muslim faith. I replied that as a non-believer, I am not supporting Muslims per se; rather, I am supporting freedom of religion, tolerance and a just society. In order to achieve this, people need to organise and resist the current neoliberal agenda, which seeks to divide, rather than unite, us.

Kaila’s narrative

The foundations of the social work degree at USC are strongly grounded within a critical framework for practice. My personal experience of this has been extremely liberating and one of the benefits was conscientisation, whereby we engage in a process of becoming critically aware of the structural forces of power that impact our lives. For many of us, this has ultimately led to the desire to become agents of change (Ledwith, 2011). One of the ways I chose to express this was through my participation in SWAANS. Critical awareness ignites a desire to change the world: to change policy and rage against sites of sexism, racism and oppression in our global and local communities. So, a few years ago, when two fellow social work students approached me and asked if I would be interested in connecting with social work students using a ‘bottom-up’ developmental approach, I was extremely excited to be involved. The thought of bringing socially aware students together around the possibility of collective activism was just the vehicle I was looking for to enact my newfound desire to change the world! The three of us booked a communal space on campus and issued an open invitation to students to join our conversations.

On reflection, I could never have expected the outcome of that dialogue would be SWAANS as we know it today. Along the way, I have learnt a number of
important lessons about the complexities of working in groups that espouse authentic, ‘bottom-up’, critical developmental practices. For example, in the early stages of the development of SWAANS, it was collectively decided that we needed to articulate our vision. We agreed on the following:

This group is a safe space for fellow social work students to join, share, announce, question and update others on anything to do with social work, justice, study, jobs, events, uni, and related material, etc.

The vision of SWAANS@USC is to be an active, collective and representative voice for the USC Social Work student body based on principles of social justice and privileging a ‘bottom up’ social work, community development process for the group’s direction. Our core goals include:

a) To support and network with past and present USC social work students

b) To advance and advocate social work and social justice issues on campus, and in the community.

We endeavor to achieve this by fostering a collective and critical social work student community and by building collaborative networks and partnerships with community stakeholders.

At the forefront of what we were trying to achieve was a group in which members felt that they could connect with people (in solidarity) while maintaining a sense of individual autonomy. However, balancing these two positions has not always been straightforward and continues to provide challenges for SWAANS members. For example, the SWAANS group decided that we would actively reject the conservative hierarchical structure that traditionally governs groups (ie president, secretary and treasurer). This decision aimed to challenge traditional power relations and,
instead, create a structure in which members could make decisions collectively and autonomously.

However, we soon encountered difficulties when trying to affiliate with the university student guild in order to access funding because our structure did not fit the formal committee requirements, as defined by the university’s management. SWAANS does not have a designated ‘leader’; therefore, we needed to be creative in our affiliation. This involved an informal, collectively agreed arrangement whereby two students were nominated to be our ‘president’ and ‘vice-president’ on paper. This informal arrangement of nominal position allocation continues each year in order to meet the affiliation requirements, but the reality is that we operate as a collective. We have now become affiliated for four consecutive years, received grants and are one of the largest student groups at USC.

The rejection of a formal hierarchical structure aligns with critical community development principles that aim to remove inequitable power dynamics and foster democratic dialogue (Lathouras, 2010; Ife, 2013). However, this goal is difficult to achieve in practice. To make SWAANS work, there has consistently been a revolving ‘core’ group of people who have been more visible or active, and I question how this might have affected the group’s dynamic. For example, some voices carried more weight than others. This partly occurred as a function of people’s varying levels of participation, but it does represent a tension between our espoused democratic ideals and actual practice.

Another example of the tensions between collectivity and individual autonomy occurred during the university’s orientation week for new students. SWAANS offered a stall to meet new members and raise visibility around what we do and why. A few students suggested that we create some placards and write political messages that we deemed pertinent to what we were studying at the time. We felt this action aligned with our core goal of ‘advancing and advocating social work and social justice issues on campus’. I had personally just finished an assignment highlighting the barriers for women in our local and state community regarding reproductive choices, or lack thereof. This was an issue that I, and a number of other feminist women in the collective, wanted to advance on campus. I painted a sign with a political message that was deemed offensive by some and met with resistance from campus security. This did not surprise me; however, I was shocked that my actions had offended some fellow SWAANS members, who were upset at how I had represented SWAANS on campus. I had not questioned how exercising individual autonomy fitted with the notion of democratic accountability. Reflecting on my experience, I acknowledge that political resistance is an extremely contested space, as it should be. We often see heated debates and disagreements scrolling down the SWAANS Facebook group page. I believe that it is these discussions and conflicts that ultimately strengthen SWAANS and our commitments to social justice and a democratic process. Members of SWAANS come from a diversity of backgrounds, beliefs and values, which brings a unique intersectionality to the group. Therefore, respectful engagement with our differences can create greater progressive unity to resist sites of social and political injustice in our society.
Conclusion

Overall, we have no doubt that many of the friendships we forged through SWAANS will last a lifetime. The critical social work degree that we studied at USC has given us the ability to articulate how social problems are created structurally. Our education has instilled in us that, ethically and morally, we have a duty as social workers to challenge unjust policies and institutions. Our experiences of activism within SWAANS have crystallised our belief that a small group of people can effect change.

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