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Utilising H5P Simulations to Enhance Social Work Education

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Abstract: Higher education is tasked with the challenge of producing graduate-ready professionals. Thus, alternative learning and assessment activities are needed to provide students with real-life complex experiences, particularly in fields like social work. This quasi-experimental design study explored the effectiveness of H5P virtual simulation to teach assessment and direct practice skills to social work students (n = 80). Mixed-methods data based on the pre/post outcomes of skill development were analysed using descriptive and bi-variate analysis as well as thematic analysis for qualitative data. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test reveals significant outcomes in assessment and practice skills between pre- and post-measures. The qualitative findings include three key themes: (1) realism, (2) engagement, and (3) practice skills. This study provides evidence and highlights the importance of using virtual simulation to help students develop skills to manage complex real-world problems.

Keywords: simulation; social work; education; technology; practice skills

1. Introduction

Social workers support people who are often marginalised and experiencing complex scenarios, including mental health, substance use, and childhood trauma. These scenarios call upon social workers to utilise skills in assessing risk while surrounded by heightened emotions and triggering disclosures. It is the ethical responsibility of the social work profession to ensure these vulnerable people are supported by competent and capable social workers. Therefore, the responsibility of social work education is to ensure students are prepared and capable for these scenarios upon graduation. Social work education has historically depended on in-person practical field placements and learning in the classroom. Social work education socialises students to practice through field education. This requirement within the educational experience allows students to observe and practice skill development in preparation for practice post-graduation (Wolf and Archer 2013). Quality placement opportunities provide students with an opportunity to debrief skills under supported supervision and then practice these skills with real people accessing services in complex areas of practice.

With the recent global pandemic and increase in online learning, there is a significant increase in social work programs providing the option of online degree programs. With growing numbers of students and restrictions to placement providers in recent years (Harris and Newcomb 2023), quality field education experiences with well-supported learning environments are decreasing, creating significant tensions for field education in social work (Egan et al. 2018). Higher education providers have developed strategies to address inequity in field education, where many students are not afforded direct client-facing placements with the opportunity to practice in critical and important parts of social work practice (Lomas et al. 2023; Salter et al. 2020). The fundamental aim of field education is to provide students with an opportunity to integrate theoretical learning from the classroom with practice to develop professional skills and confidence in their practice (Bragg et al. 2021; Wayne et al. 2010). However, this is challenging when placement opportunities in high-risk contexts, such as those involving suicidal clients, sexual abuse, family and domestic violence, or clients in the criminal justice system. Social work educators have

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an ethical responsibility to ensure that all students are equipped with the skills to work with complex and vulnerable populations and are prepared for the complexities of practice. It is imperative that social work prepares students, particularly in the context of the limited availability and diversity of placement opportunities, to respond appropriately and with confidence.

According to Sweller's (1988) cognitive load theory, working memory has a limited capacity that affects how we learn. Therefore, educators should allow complex learning to take place in environments that reduce distractions and involve tasks to help students develop their skills. The application of cognitive load theory to student learning ensures that students will have a secure setting in which to manage cognitive overload (Martin 2016). Many fields of study have employed cognitive learning theory with simulations, especially in the health sciences (Fraser et al. 2015; Young et al. 2016). This approach has potential for social work education because of the rigorous training needed prior to field education internships and the complexity of issues faced by the individuals that social workers support, especially in situations that are very emotional with high-risk outcomes (Jefferies et al. 2023). High-risk situations can be replicated by virtual simulation, providing students with the opportunity to practice navigating complex client interactions and decision-making processes without the fear of consequences with real clients.

Pryor et al. (2023) noted that suicide is a major public health issue with social workers on the front line of navigating the complexities of high-risk clients. However, the field placement setting should not be the first time that students face this type of situation. Simulation allows the opportunity for students to fail safely in an authentic and supported environment. This is especially important in social work practice, whereby failing in direct practice can have significant consequences. Students have the chance to practice skills in a highly realistic way and receive immediate feedback by interacting with authentic client scenarios through virtual simulations (Baker and Jenney 2022; Kourgiantakis and Lee 2022). Through well-structured simulations developed in collaboration with local professionals, social work education can address the disparity of inequity in learning experiences. Jefferies et al. (2023) add that simulation should be seen as a valuable addition to practical learning within field education rather than a substitute.

Research has shown that social work students can enhance their direct practice skills and develop the connection between their theoretical understanding and application in practice using simulations (Jefferies et al. 2023; Huttar and BrintzenhofeSzoc 2020; Kourgiantakis et al. 2020a, 2020b; Lee et al. 2020; Meredith et al. 2021). Lanzieri et al. (2021) noted students found the authenticity of the simulation important in engaging and developing deeper learning. Practising skills via simulation has been found to increase students' confidence when starting placements, and anxiety will be more controllable for students who are confident and well-prepared for seeing clients in the field (Bragg et al. 2021). It also provides students with the opportunity to explore issues of cultural diversity within a safe and controlled environment (Clary et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2021). Meredith et al. (2021) noted that social work students value the opportunity offered to experience emotional reactions and learn from mistakes without adverse consequences through their engagement in simulation activities.

HTML 5 Package (H5P) is a free interactive package that educators can use to develop educational activities, including virtual content that can be integrated into various types of platforms (Jacob and Centofanti 2024). One of the benefits of H5P is its ability to include interactive presentations or video content, which lets students test their comprehension of the material by answering questions that the instructor may embed after the student has engaged in the video content. For example, students are provided instant feedback that explains a specific concept if they answer a question incorrectly during the simulation activity. Another advantage of H5P is the ability to embed authentic practice scenarios with prompt feedback to enhance skill development, critical thinking, and decision-making abilities in a safe and controlled setting. Jacob and Centofanti (2024) noted that H5P allows for a personalised educational experience that can be integrated into most learning

management systems (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, etc.). H5P gives educators the chance to improve student engagement by creating an engaging, dynamic learning environment that provides fast feedback. The immediate feedback provided by H5P activities enables students to assess their understanding and correct misconceptions promptly, fostering a more effective learning process (Jacob and Centofanti 2024).

A crucial goal of modern social work education is to enhance the assimilation of knowledge, ensuring that students are adequately prepared to proficiently use their knowledge, theory, and practical skills. This paper explores the use of H5P in developing student practice skills. The research questions for this study were as follows: (1) Does H5P change student perceptions of their use of micro skills? (2) Does H5P change student perceptions of their assessment skills? The study hypotheses were as follows: (1) The H5P simulation activity will support the development of student confidence in the use of micro skills, and (2) The H5P simulation activity will support student confidence in assessment skills.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

This study was a mixed-method, one-group, pre–post quasi-experimental design with 80 students aged between 19 and 56, with the majority under the age of 30 (53%). The students were studying towards a Bachelor of Social Work (n = 64) or a Master of Social Work (qualifying) (n = 16), of which some (n = 7) identified as international students. Students reported their average daily technology use as follows: 1% with less than an hour, 25% between one and three hours, 40% between three and five hours, and 34% with more than five hours. Students were asked to identify their years of prior relevant work experience (see Table 1).

Table 1. Students' prior work experience.

Previous Work Experience Students		Percent
No work experience	31	38.8
0 to 1 year	22	27.5
More than 1 but less than 3 years	10	12.5
More than 3 years	17	21.3
Total	80	100.0

The H5P simulation risk assessment activity was based on a mental health scenario of a rural farmer, Paul, who is experiencing financial hardship and a marital breakdown. The activity was designed as follows: students are briefed on their role and the case through a referral letter outlining the client's details and presenting the issues. Students then engage with the H5P interactive learning materials, which provide further background information on Paul. After students read the referral and background information, the activity asks students to assess the dynamic and static risk factors present in the referral material by presenting a list of risk factors. Students are asked to tick the factors from the list that they assess as present in the case. Students are then provided instant feedback on which factors are relevant and correct. Students are then provided with four videos showcasing Paul in various settings, interacting with different people. These settings are in the pub, in his home, on the phone with his daughter, and at the shops. Following engagement with each video, students are asked to assess the 'level of concern' based on the video. The videos provide students with the opportunity to view Paul in unique settings, engaging with different people and an opportunity to see how a client may present differently in each setting. The videos do not showcase therapeutic sessions. Following engagement in the interactive activity, students engage in a group debrief of the scenario and factors assessed before compiling a risk assessment and proposing a plan to support Paul.

The outcome variable was the students' perceptions of their micro skills and assessment skills. This was assessed by a self-reported, 10-item pre- and post-questionnaires on the students' perceptions of their skill development when working with clients using a 5-point Likert scale from not confident at all to completely confident. Although the students did not demonstrate all the skills in the pre- and post-questionnaires, for example, "I am able to initiate a conversation with a client"; "I am able to build rapport with a client"; "I am able to successfully interview a client struggling with mental health issues", these questions were included to assess if reflecting on these skills after observing the simulation would alter students' perceptions of their own ability to do this in practice. The questions are included in Table 2.

Table 2. Pre- and post-Likert questions.

I am able to initiate a conversation with a client
I am able to build rapport with a client
I am able to analyse what the client has said
I am able to analyse situations, responses and problems relating to the client
I am able to identify "static" risk factors
I am able to identify "dynamic" risk factors
I am able to identify protective factors of the client
I am able to gather the necessary information from an interview
I am able to successfully interview a client struggling with mental health issues
I am able to develop an appropriate plan of action to support the client

Post-activity, students were provided with qualitative questions to better understand their perceptions of their practice skills following their engagement in the H5P activity. These questions are included in Table 3.

Table 3. Post-activity qualitative questions.

How did the simulation/module influence your clinical practice skills?
Please describe the aspects of this module that has been the most useful in developing your skills
Please describe the aspects of this module that has been the least useful in developing your skills

2.2. Procedures

This research was undertaken within a regional university social work program. The task was conducted in an intensive hurdle subject undertaken prior to students' professional placements as part of both the Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work (Qualifying). As a hurdle subject, students were required to pass the subject before proceeding to placements. The subject was designed and delivered to prepare students for the common practice elements associated with professional practice and likely to be faced on placements. Students were invited to have their data included in the study. During the intensive subject, students participated in a simulated case study activity and completed a pre- and post-surveys hosted in Qualtrics between February 2022 and July 2023. The activity was embedded in the same subject and run twice a year. This means all students were at the same point in their degree program when undertaking the subject. Participation in the simulation activity took about an hour, which included the completion of the pre- and post-surveys. All data were collected anonymously, and consent was obtained in the surveys. The author was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the activity and data collection for all students. Ethics approval for this study was provided by the University of the Sunshine Coast (Ethics #S191324).

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted using SPSS (Version 29). Using $\alpha = 0.05$, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicates that the students' self-rated ability to work with clients (from initiating conversations and building rapport to identifying risk and protective factors) was significantly higher after they completed the H5P virtual simulation exercises than before.

Notably, 68% of the students indicated some increase in the level of confidence in their ability to identify dynamic risk factors, and 61% of the students indicated some increase in the level of confidence in their ability to identify static risk factors after completing the H5P virtual simulation activities.

Of the 17 students who indicated they had more than 3 years of relevant work experience (see Table 4), the two factors where more than 50% of these students reported some increase in their confidence level after completing the H5P virtual simulation exercises was in their 'ability to develop an appropriate plan of action to support the client' and their 'ability to identify dynamic risk factors'. This was 10 and 9 students, respectively. Except for the level of work experience, there was no other correlation between the characteristics of the students and the impact of the H5P visual stimulation.

Table 4. Hypothesis test summary of Wilcoxon signed-rank test for related samples. $n = 80$, $\alpha = 0.05$.

Null Hypothesis The Median Differences Between Pre- and Post-Survey Questions Equal 0	Z	Sig.
I am able to initiate a conversation with a client	−3.210	0.001
I am able to build rapport with a client	−3.000	0.003
I am able to analyse what the client has said	−3.426	<0.001
I am able to analyse situations, responses and problems relating to the client	−4.338	<0.001
I am able to identify "static" risk factors	−5.204	<0.001
I am able to identify "dynamic" risk factors	−5.649	<0.001
I am able to identify protective factors of the client	−4.610	<0.001
I am able to gather the necessary information from an interview	−4.664	<0.001
I am to successfully interview a client struggling with mental health issues	−4.448	<0.001
I am able to develop an appropriate plan of action to support the client	−5.058	<0.001

3.2. Qualitative Analysis

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken using the six phases of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three overarching themes were identified—(1) realism, (2) engagement, (3) practice skills—and seven subthemes (see Figure 1).

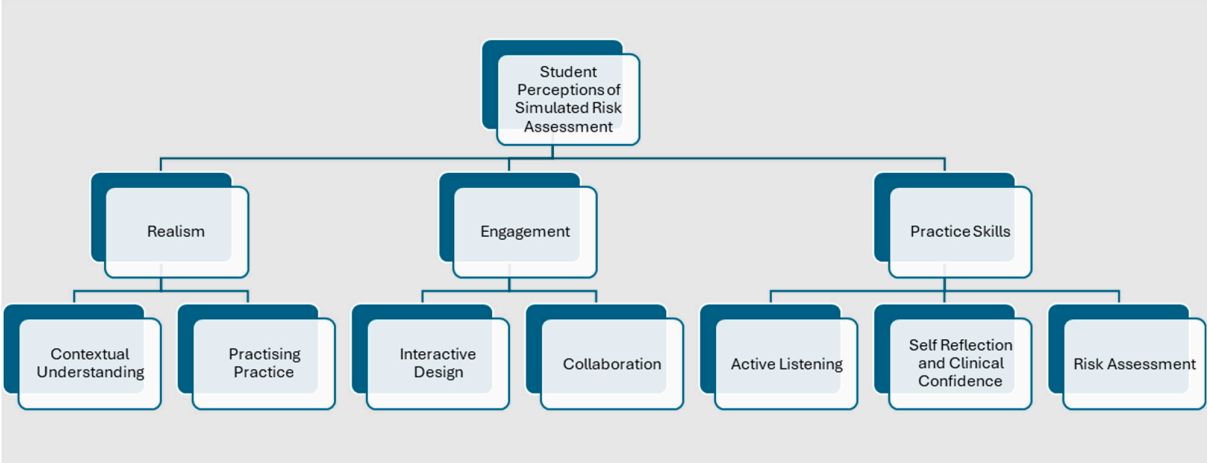

Figure 1. Student perceptions of simulated risk assessment: qualitative themes and subthemes.

3.2.1. Theme 1: Realism

Contextual Understanding

The realism of the simulated task meant that students felt exposed to 'real-world' social work practice situations. Students spoke of "getting a look at what it will be like to practice" (S79) and "view (client work) within a hands-on practical lens" (S71). This 'hands on' learning was perceived as helpful for many students as it went beyond traditional teaching application and provided "...a real-life experience to discuss...not just talking about things but using an example to teach" (S6).

Students noted the realistic case study as useful for their learning and contributing to their effective application of knowledge and skills to the client's circumstances, as this student described: "It felt like a realistic situation which was good to do the questionnaire and assessment on" (S12). A realistic case study that presented multiple stakeholder inputs assisted the students with understanding the complexity of the client's circumstances and seeing the 'big picture', as this student explained: "it was great hearing the different (stakeholder) points of view. Conversations with a friend at the pub, with (client's) daughter, with (client's) friend give a more complete picture" (S7). Client complexity provided "a lot of depth" (S2) and allowed students to see a professional situation "...unfold through the different stages" (S72) and gain "an expanded look at (client's) current circumstances" (S10).

Simulating Practice

Students acknowledged the advantages of the simulation as being reflective of 'real-life' practice, where the speech, body language, and environmental surroundings of the client could be incorporated into their professional opinions and responses. "Seeing the simulation instead of just reading it" (S61) was beneficial and provided students with a depth of client experience that extended beyond traditional written case studies. As this student described, "It was good to get a more interactive approach as you can see the body language and tone used between different interactions" (S80).

Whilst many students described the benefits of practising their skills in a simulated environment, a minority of students expressed uncertainty about how these skills might transfer to their future practice, as this student explained: "I have not got to do this in real life practice...(it's) easy to assume within a class setting, but putting into practice is different." (S52).

3.2.2. Theme 2: Engagement

Interactive Design

Engagement was a benefit noted by many students, who described the simulation activity as an effective learning tool, which was interactive and accessible. Students appreciated the scaffolded design of the simulated case study, finding that this aided in learning and applying complex knowledge and skills, as this student described: "...the slow-paced video (helped). It was a complex (client) situation but set out to easily understand" (S13). The interactive nature of the simulation encouraged students to actively participate, as this student noted: "the engaging aspects help me focus and retain more information" (S24).

Whilst most students reported enjoying the interactive design, others indicated that they wanted clearer scaffolding and struggled with the 'live' nature of the activity as they could not rely on closed captioning or ask the client clarifying questions to confirm their professional opinions or shape their responses. This uncertainty resulted in a navigation of 'grey areas' that was challenging and uncomfortable as students sought "more specifics about risk factors" (P45) and critiqued "the lack of in-depth answers to questions" (S63). Ultimately, some students wanted "information on why an answer was wrong" (S17), indicating a desire for certainty when assessing client risk.

Collaboration

Students particularly enjoyed learning from peers and gauging their social work assessment and intervention ideas against those of other students. Discussing and analysing

client circumstances with peers was useful, as this student described: "The energy of connecting with other students and tutors and being able to have these conversations in person with people who are also enthusiastic about the content always helps me learn" (S9). Discussing differences in the assessment of risk was found to be a helpful act of critical reflection and active learning as students navigated applying their knowledge and skills to client situations. This collective approach to "discussing and actual 'doing'" (S8) helped students to feel comfortable to make attempts and experiment with their assessments and responses, as this student described: "...using the simulator (I) can learn a lot through getting things wrong and this seems a safe way to experiment with making different choices." (S9).

3.2.3. Theme 3: Practice Skills

Practice skills were both practised and reflected upon by students, who found the simulation activity to be useful for active listening, reflection, risk assessment skill building, and professional confidence and an opportunity for "testing my knowledge in real time" (S3).

Active Listening

Active listening skills were noted by the majority of students to be central skills that were demonstrated during the simulation. In response to the audio and visual stimuli of the simulation, students could practise and hone their listening skills in a way that expands on the skills used for responding to a written case study. As these students described, the simulated case study "forced me to listen carefully" (S22) and "practise reflective listening skills" (S5).

Self-Reflection and Professional Confidence

Many of the students described increased knowledge and confidence in their practice skills as a result of the simulation activity, as these students noted: "I have grown in confidence, developed knowledge and skills" (S27) and "It's given me insight into how to react and respond to clients in practice" (S45). Gaining confidence in how they might respond to clients in practice was connected to a sense of knowing "what to do" (S25) when faced with complex client situations. When expressing the perceived barriers of learning about risk assessment in the simulation activity, students described feeling uncomfortable with the uncertainty of professional assessment and sought concrete answers to the client's situation. Despite increased knowledge of the specific risk factors, some students described ongoing "...concern about what to decide (and) what action to do" (S10) and spoke of apprehension about "the grey area of what answers can look like" (S24) as causing confusion.

Reflection was noted by students as a skill that was applied both to the case study, as this student noted it as "...an area of improvement for me... sometimes I underestimate risk level" (S25), and, in some cases, to their own circumstances, as this student described:

> I found it very triggering due to (my)father dying by suicide. I am unsure how I will be able to respond within my future clinical practice. This is something that I am aware of and would like to learn how to cope with and manage in practice. (S23)

Risk Assessment

The primary skill development that students noted was in risk assessment, the identification of static and dynamic risk factors, and the ability to gauge the level of concern for the client's circumstances. Using an evidence-based approach to consider risk "improved ... ability to measure level of concern and convey professional judgement behind decision (making)" (S25) and was found to be "a great way to improve skills...and (learn) how to respond" (S12). Students responded positively to the variety of client circumstances and enjoyed "...having different situations to analyse for risk factors...it helped with my learning" (S6). The development of risk assessment skills demonstrated the application

of theoretical knowledge to practice, as this student explained: "(simulation) gave me an opportunity to apply what this course has taught me into a practice scenario" (S71). This active learning of applying theory to practice was useful for students who described being able to "...visualise the theory being used in a practice setting" (S27) and explained that "the practical way gives me a better understanding about theories" (S15).

Students indicated that their awareness of risk factors and ability to identify them in a client context was developed through the simulation activity, as this student described: "(simulation) taught me the difference between static and dynamic risk factors" (S14). This understanding of different risk factors could then inform and guide professional opinions and practice responses to enable "a more informed practitioner with credible knowledge (and) understanding (of) static and dynamic risk factors" (S24).

4. Discussion

Quantitative analysis finds an increase in the level of student confidence, most notably in the ability to identify dynamic risk factors and static risk factors after engaging in the H5P simulation activity. This highlights the role relevant work experience can play in supporting students' ability to develop confidence through the use of simulation activities like H5P. The participants' engagement with the simulation activity and appreciation of authenticity reflects the findings of Lanzieri et al. (2021). The simulation supports cognitive load theory by providing a controlled learning environment with limited environmental distractions, allowing students to focus on developing complex practice skills. Furthermore, this allows students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-life examples using interactive and immersive simulations to reinforce the skills needed in practice.

Analysis of the qualitative data reveals the key theme of realism, which students felt enhanced their learning experience and development of knowledge and skills. The realistic nature of the simulation provided the students with a contextual depth that expanded on that of a traditional written case study to provide additional oral and body language observational hints. The students' engagement with the simulation activity and appreciation of its authenticity reflect the findings of Lanzieri et al. (2021), who noted similar responses from social work students engaged in simulated client learning experiences.

Engagement with peers through debriefing and discussion was another key factor identified in the data analysis. Students spoke of peer collaboration as central to the effectiveness of an engaging simulation experience. Peer discussion and debriefing were found to solidify learning, challenge decision-making, and unpack the complexity of the client's case and possible professional impressions and responses. This finding reflects previous work by Kourgiantakis et al. (2019), who found that timely and constructive peer feedback aided students learning in a simulation activity context. Students attributed the collaborative and interactive nature of the simulation task to their maintained interest in the activity, ability to learn risk and protective factors, and sustained knowledge that could be carried over into practice. The findings of this study add some nuanced understanding to the argument of Jefferies et al. (2024), and Kolb (2014), who propose that active engagement in learning and activity design that considers cognitive load can enhance skill development and information retention.

Whilst most students responded positively to the design of the activity, a small number of students expressed uncertainty with regards to navigating the grey areas of professional practice and described wanting more detailed, specific, and 'right or wrong' information that could support their decision-making processes. This discomfort had a pedagogic intention, however, with the design aiming to encourage deeper thinking and the generation of ideas without easy or straightforward 'rights' and 'wrongs'. This finding has implications for social work education, as it indicates that students seek reassurance in professional decision-making and can feel uncertain and under-skilled when they are not able to find the 'right' answer to a client's problem. Students noted that there was a lack of opportunity to ask clarifying questions, which impacted their perceived ability to make informed and evidence-based decisions. Recommendations for the future design of similar activities

include increased and purposeful scaffolding that clearly explains the learning objectives of the task and the desired goals on completion of the activity. Future research in this area should allow for more detailed feedback and evaluation of critical decision-making in relation to professional skill development.

Whilst many students voiced a perception of increased professional confidence in identifying risk and responding to client circumstances, others identified challenges with professional confidence and expressed uncertainty about what action to take as a social work practitioner. This finding reflects those of Tufford et al. (2022), who noted that social work students could experience uncertainty and a perceived lack of skills and knowledge when attempting to respond to complex practice case studies. Tufford et al. (2022) found that students relied on strategies for overcoming feelings of uncertainty, namely, a realisation that they did not need to know the 'answers' and shifting focus from advice-giving and expertise to valuing clients' emotions and applying generalist social work skills.

Practice skills were a key focus for the students, who described the simulation activity as encouraging active listening, reflection, professional confidence, and risk assessment knowledge and assessment skill. This finding is encouraging and supports the expansion of simulated learning approaches in social work education. Essentially, the simulated learning environment provided a safe place for students to practice skills, test knowledge and make mistakes without the risks associated with 'real' client work; a finding that reflects that of (Jefferies et al. 2023), who note the benefits of a safe place to learn complex skills.

5. Conclusions

The findings of this study support the call for social work education to embrace technology and provide justification for activities like H5P as a successful tool for facilitation of simulated learning. Other disciplines have been quick to uptake the digital interventions. H5P holds significant promise for promoting engaging and interactive educational experiences in social work education. Further research and development of resources utilising H5P will support the potential benefits and address existing challenges. This paper is a starting point on the potential benefit. As interactive educational programs like H5P evolve and gain credibility in social work, the application of this resource is likely to expand in the various components of social work education fostering more contemporary and effective learning environments for students.

As digital technology advances, this paper recommends that the ability to allow students the opportunity to ask the client clarifying questions and gain further details will advance the authentic experience. Further research in this field could include empirical studies on the impact and effectiveness of H5P on social work practice skill development, e.g., case management, ethical decision-making, and cultural competency; qualitative studies exploring student and faculty perspectives; the development of best practice for the design and integration of interactive digital technologies, like H5P, in social work curriculum; and exploring the use of H5P for online educational experiences. Focusing on these areas, social work educators will be able to harness the full potential of interactive learning environments, like H5P, to ultimately better prepare more ethical, engaged, and skilled social work professionals.

Limitations

Whilst contributing interesting mixed-method results about the use of simulation for risk assessment training, this study is not without limitations. This study did not measure actual skill development and is limited to the perceived benefits and barriers of the students. As the sample was limited to students at one university, the results cannot be generalised beyond the sample. It is also important to note that the effectiveness of utilising H5P simulations largely depends on the integration and scaffolding within a well-structured curriculum. Jacob and Centofanti (2024) highlight a concern for the development of interpersonal skills with an over-reliance on technology without consideration of adequate face-to-face interaction and supervision.

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Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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