Rethinking Reliance Upon Written Assignments: Students Reimagining Rigor in Social Work Education

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Abstract: *Written assignments in social work education are often relied upon as tools to demonstrate knowledge gained in coursework, although evidence of their effectiveness is inconsistent. While more institutional effort and resources are being poured into detecting plagiarism on written assignments, especially in the era of artificial intelligence like ChatGPT, educators could consider whether there are alternative assignments that could be more meaningful in preparing social work students for practice. In this conceptual paper, a collective of social work students and an educator from a Human Behavior in the Social Environment BSW course share their experiences with switching from written to alternative assignments during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—a change made from necessity and curiosity. Reflections about the meaning of alternative assignments are discussed from a student and educator standpoint. Topics addressed include: 1) promoting creativity as self-care in potentially triggering educational environments, 2) redefining rigor, 3) promoting social justice, and 4) increasing relevance with implications for the field of social work education.*

Keywords: *Social work education, alterative assignments, ChatGPT, AI*

Written assignments in social work education often are relied upon to demonstrate knowledge acquisition, although a range of other assessments are used, such as exams, portfolios, and group presentations (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Crisp & Lister, 2002). Educators and students are invested in the outcomes of written assignments. Educators want to know if students have increased skills, gained knowledge, expanded their confidence, and met competencies. Students want to achieve high grades and know if they are prepared to make a difference (Murphy, 2022). Academic writing proficiency can operate as a gatekeeper, impeding the professional advancement of some students while privileging others (Crisp & Lister, 2002). Moreover, very little is known in social work education about how meaningful written assignments are to students, personally and professionally, and evidence of the effectiveness of written assignments is inconsistent (Cotton et al., 2023; Crisp & Lister, 2002; King & ChatGPT, 2023). Increasingly, entire student essays have been discovered to be products of artificial intelligence (AI) chat programs, such as Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (ChatGPT), which are capable of producing high-quality writing and research (Cotton et al., 2023; King & ChatGPT,

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2023). While more institutional effort and resources are being used to detect plagiarism on AI-written assignments, educators and students could question first, are the assignments meaningful? What does the format offer to them as whole people and professionals in our times? How helpful are written assignments for them as learners with varying levels of exposure to and preparation for academic writing? Does performance on written assignments equate to strength of social work practice? Are there alternative assignments that could be more generative for their learning styles?

In this conceptual paper, a collective of social work students and an educator from a Human Behavior in the Social Environment course share their reflections on the meaning of written and alternative assignments implemented at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflections about the meaning of alternative assignments will be discussed, specifically from a student and educator standpoint. Topics addressed include: 1) promoting creativity as self-care in potentially triggering educational environments, 2) redefining rigor, 3) promoting social justice, and 4) increasing relevance.

Positionality

We, the authors of this article, are deeply invested and anchored in hope for social work education. We worked on this article in between classwork, over the summer, in the evenings, on weekends, and across time zones. We represent the spectrum of social work education—BSW and MSW students, future doctoral students, recent graduates, and social work faculty. We are rooted in our identities, which hail from the margins of many stories that require centering when exploring social work education. We are Pakistani, Muslim, Caribbean, Black, Latine, White, straight, bisexual, and queer. We are immigrants and are born and raised in the United States. We have grown up with different access, privileges, and barriers to our education—some with roots in historical oppression, xenophobia, and erasure in our educational experiences. Some of us are neurodivergent and navigate disabilities, while others of us benefit from unearned advantages in educational systems built for our particular learning styles.

We intimately know the barriers intrinsic to our educational systems, while also being committed to envisioning what an equitable, just, and healing experience social work education can be. We write this paper from our lived experiences with alternative assignments, written papers, and other forms of assessment. It is through the lens of these embodied experiences, tensions, and strategies that we unpack the possibilities of alternative assignments in social work education.

Literature Review

Creativity, Health, and Social Work Education

Social work education prompts students to think deeply about topics that may be triggering (Carello & Butler, 2015). For example, in the past two decades, research has shown that students' exposure to traumatic material is associated with higher rates of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Bride, 2007). Social work students bear a

double burden while they attempt to address the institutional impacts on client well-being, change unjust policies, unpack difficult family situations, and challenge oppressive social dynamics faced by communities because some simultaneously experience similar stressors in their own lives (Carello & Butler, 2015; Gelman et al., 2024). Using educational methods that are trauma informed can support growth, joy, and self-expression (Cramer, 2018). For example, emphasizing self-care, self-reflection, and mental health support in social work education helps students navigate the emotional toll that may arise in their work (Holley et al., 2024). Students, when encouraged to prioritize their wellness through their education, can gain a deeper understanding of their emotional responses. This approach strengthens students' ability to effectively engage and empathize with clients facing similar challenges (Holley et al., 2024). When we think of wellness, what typically might come to mind is diet or exercise. However, if we look at health from a bigger-picture perspective, the multidimensionality of human beings demands far more to live healthy lives and thrive in this world.

Creativity has the potential to transform health and well-being. For example, one study assessed the role of creative expression in the areas of music, movement, expressive writing, and visual arts in the healing processes of adults eighteen years or older dealing with various chronic illnesses and trauma (Stuckey et al., 2010). The effects of each form of creative expression on psychological and medical outcomes all revealed improved mood, decreased levels of stress hormones, and improved blood pressure (Stuckey et al., 2010). Results from this study suggest that incorporating creativity in social work education—in the form of alternative assignments as compared to written assignments—could promote healing within students' learning experiences as they are exposed to potentially triggering topics.

Every individual possesses the capacity to be creative; encouraging creativity holds space for one to realize their true potential. The Theory of Transformative Coping (TTC) describes a mechanism where the use of creativity and spirituality provides individuals with amplified mental health benefits (Correy et al., 2014) associated with positive transformation and effective long-term coping. TTC defines creative expression as a transformative coping strategy that can be implemented across various populations throughout the lifespan (Correy et al., 2014). Furthermore, this study found that creativity and spirituality were correlated with strengthening resilience, reducing stress in managing difficult emotions, promoting health and well-being, and fostering personal growth (Correy et al., 2014). In the context of creativity, the way an individual approaches current life challenges enables them to cope with changes and negative emotions they may encounter in the future. For example, a significant benefit has been found for students who learn from educators utilizing creative strategies in the classroom, in particular those dealing with traumatic stress due to domestic violence, unstable living environments, or adverse childhood experiences (Chafouleas et al., 2021; Corcoran et al., 2018; Cramer, 2018). Engaging with students through art has served as a familiar and safe medium where students can build critical thinking skills as well as confidence in educational settings (Corcoran et al., 2018; Cramer, 2018). Therefore, including creativity within social work education could support coping during the educational process, while offering an opportunity for students to practice self-care—a concept that is heavily reinforced within

social work (Lamb & Peterson, 2024; Mirick, 2022; Nicotera et al., 2023). Additionally, a shift towards creativity also creates a foundation for understanding the importance of trauma-informed practice in educational settings (Nicotera et al., 2023). Therefore, for the authors, there is an anticipation that the flexible learning environments offered by alternative assignments may provide a positive message about the importance of maintaining health and well-being as students, while acknowledging the impact of students' real-life situations on their educational experiences.

Moreover, incorporating creativity is a powerful tool to engage students impacted by chronic stress due to various traumatic events. In her classroom, Cramer utilizes arts-related strategies to enhance creative thinking, along with other research-based approaches, to teach students impacted by the chronic stress of poverty (Cramer, 2018). Incorporating creativity in social work education offers students flexibility in how they participate and meet curriculum requirements and could promote positive self-care habits. There are gaps in research on creativity's role in social work education and how methods of creative expression can be incorporated into curricula to cultivate a way of learning that is both healthful and trauma-informed. Presenting students with creative options for how they express their understanding of various social work topics is supportive of both positive self-care habits and overall health and could make a profound difference as they move through their social work education.

Lastly, in embracing different thought processes in the classroom, students and instructors can fully capture the power of creativity. Collard and colleagues (2014) examined creativity in education and found that creativity itself was thought of as a fixed trait and a sign of giftedness. However, researchers now believe that every individual is in fact capable of being creative (Collard et al., 2014). Additionally, Gardner's (2008) concept of multiple intelligences challenges the idea that intelligence is simply a set cognitive capacity within an individual. Instead, Gardner (2008) claims that intelligence is unique to each individual, and its forms include linguistic, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and interpersonal intelligences. Alternative assignments could be supportive of diversity in learning styles, intelligences, and abilities (Patterson & Perlstein, 2011). The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework emphasizes that not all learners are the same and highlights the need for educators to provide multiple ways for students to engage with content that showcase their strengths (Lowenthal et al., 2020). Offering various assignment formats could allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the material in a way that feels authentic to them, regardless of their different strengths and abilities. This approach can promote a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students (Lowenthal et al., 2020). By using formats like art, poetry, infographics, and voice recordings, students could not only convey their understanding of various topics, but could channel their own unique creative identity in a way that is nourishing to them, as well.

Redefining Rigor through Alternative Assignments

Alternative Assignments as Catalysts for Critical Thinking

In social work education, especially in courses like Human Behavior in the Social Environment where theories undergirding interventions are examined, critical thinking is essential. At the core of social work education, as an applied science field, students are being prepared to make assessments and interpret complex dynamics to better intervene at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels in their workplaces. We train students to use approaches informed by ecological, intersectional, and trauma-informed practice perspectives to be responsive social workers. Alternative assignments act as catalysts for critical thinking amongst students because they have fewer constraints and more opportunities for expression. Students, therefore, could have more options for choosing how they would like to apply what they have learned in class to tackle problems in the assignment, find innovative solutions, and establish their own ideas and perspectives. Students can demonstrate what they have learned and can be challenged to go the extra mile and think deeper—even when difficulties arise because students may be uncomfortable with being presented with more options or being in active learning environments (Cohen et al., 2019).

Gambrill (2013) addressed the topic of critical thinking in her book *Social Work Practice: A Critical Thinker's Guide.* She described the characteristics of critical thinking as “self-assessing” and “self-improving” and how a critical thinker can critically examine their own thoughts (Gambrill, 2013, p. 95). Alternative assignments, unlike written papers, do not have to come with a list of rules and instructions, such as the American Psychological Association’s style formatting. Given the nature of alternative assignments, educators could forgo word limits, page length requirements, citations, or thesis statements. Therefore, students could have the space to create in any format they desire and the chance to explore different parts of their brains to come up with their response to the assignment. The types of dilemmas and restraints that social workers ally with their clients to resolve often require nimbleness as well as strategic and creative thinking. Assignments offering practice in this type of thinking could be supportive of social work graduates.

Written tasks, on the other hand, generally do not promote originality due to their more restrictive formatting style. Gambrill emphasizes how critical thinking forces us to pay attention to how we think, "...not only the product of that process” (Gambrill, 2013, p. 96). Alternative assignments provide opportunities for learners to showcase their talents and demonstrate creative and logical thinking. Furthermore, these assignments can be used as a self-discovery technique, assisting students in understanding their own inclinations that they might not have previously recognized. The approach a student takes to an alternative assignment might provide important information about their cognitive preferences and abilities. Lastly, alternative assignments can help students practice real-world skills. When students complete their education and enter the workforce, the goal is that they have already honed their critical thinking skills and are better equipped to generate novel ideas, hypotheses, and projects.

Social Work Education Amidst Chatbot Fears

In social work education, there are multiple ways to assess learning and determine preparedness. Assignments such as case studies, process recordings, community assessments, group proposals, research papers, and written essays are some of the most common tools (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Crisp & Lister, 2002). Over the years, social work educators have also re-imagined how assignments are designed, especially given fears about online learning of practice skills (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016) and the influence of artificial intelligence (AI), such as ChatGPT (King & ChatGPT, 2023). The focus within higher education on AI and plagiarism appears recent; however, AI and programs using virtual reality have been incorporated into social work education, medical training, and other social services for decades (Adamopolou & Moussiades, 2020; King & ChatGPT, 2023; Roswell et al., 2020). In higher education, AI has also been seen as one component in an overall push for greater digital literacy among students and faculty, in which all begin to understand how to use computers, including software and hardware for personal, academic, and professional advancement (Quaishi et al., 2024; Romero-Hall & Cherrez, 2023). Internet-supported technology, such as AI, has been lauded in some contexts as advancing new opportunities for student advancement and relevance (King & ChatGPT, 2023). AI programs such as ChatGPT evolved as entrepreneurial tools in the service industry to mimic human conversation while providing digital assistance to multiple users simultaneously (Adamopolou & Moussiades, 2020). ChatGPT can sort through voluminous sources of information to rapidly produce text-based answers with citations for users, mimicking human writing (King & ChatGPT, 2023). Therefore, what might have taken social work students weeks to envision, outline, draft, and revise could take seconds with AI, even though at times there are inaccuracies and limitations in the information that may be more or less apparent (Ciampa et al., 2023; King & ChatGPT, 2023).

Social work educators, as well as instructors across higher education, have expressed concern about the threats of artificial intelligence and are exploring strategies to deter plagiarism (King & ChatGPT, 2023). What if our redesign of educational processes in response to ChatGPT was not aimed at defeating plagiarism but at shifting the conditions compelling plagiarism? We assert that rigor could look differently if preparedness for social work practice was not determined by assessment strategies that de-prioritize students' whole selves (Brock-Petroshius et al., 2023; Park, 2023). What if colonial paradigms and white supremacist canons were not the dominant foundation of social work education, but instead offered assignments that embrace multiple histories and cultural wisdom (Ortega-Williams & McLane-Davison, 2021)? What if we decreased our emphasis on written assignments and instead, created an educational process allowing for co-design, creativity, critical thinking, and well-being? If working to keep ChatGPT plagiarism out of written assignments is our best fight for increasing rigor and preparedness in social work education, then we might be missing an essential aspect of what is possible in our classrooms. Perhaps we can reconsider expending so much effort trying to outsmart ChatGPT and instead examine the nature of our educational reliance on written assignments and how rigor is measured (Whitaker, 2016).

Alternative assignments may give us an opportunity to deepen learning in social work education. In Bloom's taxonomy of learning (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956), the lowest level of learning is knowledge memorization. A social work educator's hope in assigning students essays to write is that students will demonstrate higher levels of learning, such as comprehension, evaluation, interrogation, and critical thinking (Aviles, 1999; Bloom, 1974), which are essential in social work practice at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. However, when there are obstacles to expressing the depth of what one understands because writing cogent outlines is difficult, what is actually being measured? Alternative assignments to written essays could employ widely available creative formats and internet-supported technologies that support learning which are part of students' everyday lives. For example, free software applications and mobile apps that create infographics and podcasts can be utilized to mobilize their strengths and assets on platforms that can have a broad reach (Ciampa et al., 2023). Alternative assignments have the potential to make social work education assessment more accessible to students and more reliable as a measure for educators.

Essays, Accessibility, and Disability Justice

Educational outcomes reflect more than student preparedness. For example, bias within the learning environment has been linked to performance disparities between students (McNair et al., 2020; Shedd, 2015). Test-taking and essay writing, which are typically used as indicators of students' learning, have come under fire for essentially capturing students' memorization of material rather than their actual knowledge of the subject matter (Au, 2022; Tannenbaum, 1996). This issue is consistent with larger conversations in the field of educational research that draw attention to the shortcomings of conventional evaluation techniques. For example, in a systematic review by Baird and colleagues (2017), evaluations that gave priority to deeper understanding and application of knowledge above rote memorization were found to be more impactful. Moreover, Black and Wiliam (1998) contend that by emphasizing skill development and feedback rather than just memory, formative assessment techniques can measure student learning more accurately.

Criticism is a part of a wider continuous discussion on educational assessment. The need for ongoing assessment to reflect real learning outcomes more accurately is highlighted by the differences in assessment techniques and their efficacy within disciplines (Pellegrino et al., 2016). Although some students do well with written formats, other students might be unable to reflect their understanding of a topic that way. For example, students may struggle to find the correct words to articulate their knowledge or feel pressured by restrictions and time limits.

Students have different learning styles that help them comfortably absorb and comprehend new concepts—including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning (Oluremi, 2015). Several studies have attempted to understand which curricular changes, based on learning styles, could be effective. The results have been mixed. For example, Massa and Mayer (2006) conducted a study with 175 participants to examine the effects of different multimedia instruction on individuals with visual or verbal learning styles. They found that

both verbal and visual learners performed well using tech-based options within alternative assignments (Massa & Mayer, 2006). Findings such as this might be interpreted as evidence suggesting that changes in instructional methods are not needed. Some may argue that the current system has resulted in countless passing grades despite not aligning with diverse learning styles—so why would there be a need to change it (Pashler et al., 2008)?

Emerging evidence from Oweini and Daouk (2016) in examining the effects of learning styles on students' academic performance and attitudes towards school found patterns countering Massa and Mayer's (2006) findings. In this study, educators who accommodated students' learning styles found an increase in academic performance and positive attitudes towards education and school (Oweini & Daouk, 2016). Additionally, in a study by Pološki and Aleksić (2020) of 99 Generation Y graduate students in a human management course, students with a creative learning style were found to have a higher correlation with learning from active teaching methods. These findings suggest that allowing students to learn in ways that makes them feel comfortable and creative may support them in thriving academically, enjoying their college experience, and possibly benefitting their mental health and motivation.

In addition to differences in learning styles, students who come from educational experiences lacking sufficient resources could face barriers adhering to rigid requirements that come with written assignments within a higher education setting. Due to unequal resources, there are gaps in literacy and education, which disproportionately impact communities of Color and those with learning disabilities across schooling levels (Bell, 2021; Shedd, 2015); therefore, there is an urgent need for change. Schools with more funding have access to resources that better prepare students for higher education (Lombardo, 2019). For example, students coming from schools with limited funding have less access to qualified teachers, higher-level courses, and advanced placement classes (The Commonwealth Institute, 2021). Due to this inequity, students are not acquiring the skills needed for higher education and may struggle to meet the demands of their college coursework, requiring them to work harder to reach the equivalence of peers coming from schools that had more funding, quality education, and academic support. Students might feel disempowered using APA style and other traditional academic writing formats that are expected in college because of the lack of support in learning this skill. There are programs that teach these formats and help students throughout the process, but not all students have access to these resources or the extra time to dedicate to learning them. Grammar, punctuation, and formatting are important for professional writing, and should be practiced by students to prepare them for their careers. However, students should not be penalized for mistakes, but instead given more opportunities to improve. Additionally, students are expected to focus on writing in a specific academic format rather than learning how to write documents that are required of them when they enter the professional world—perhaps the focus needs to be reevaluated. Rather than rigid, and sometimes outdated forms of assessment, alternative assignments, with more relevancy to daily practice in social work can be implemented.

Lastly, many students with disabilities face barriers to securing the accommodations needed to thrive under the same conditions as nondisabled students (McNamara, 2019). Accommodations can include taking extra time on assignments or making audio recordings

of lectures (Stefanakos, 2023). Accommodations do not compromise critical thinking or content knowledge, yet students are required to go through extensive paperwork with documentation from physicians and psychologists to prove their disability in exchange for accessible education (McNamara, 2019). One reason for this hurdle is the stereotype of "the disability con"—an assumption that people fake disabilities to receive benefits (Dorfman, 2019). Furthermore, some view accommodations for education accessibility as an unfair advantage that a select number of people receive. In reality, accommodations are not meant to create an unfair advantage, but rather to create equal opportunities for success (Lombardo, 2019).

Alternative assignments allow students to be held accountable for their work, while also being given the opportunity to show their values beyond submission of assignments. Rather than worrying about "the disability con" and creating more barriers for students with disabilities, adjusting the curriculum to accommodate all students could be impactful. Instead of strict page limits and formats—which can be a barrier that further promotes ableism (Eisenmenger, 2019)—students could be assessed on the quality of their work. Assessing quality can include whether they are able to take away what they learn and integrate it into the real world. Imagine if social work students were evaluated not just by successful completion of written formats but also how inspired they were by their work. What could be possible for innovation in social work practice if imagination and creativity were measured as often as APA formatting? In the authors' experience, evaluation of alternative assignments has included rubrics related to theory application and one-page reflections (without suggested formatting), prompting students to consider takeaways that bridge learning from the assignment to their internships, social service jobs, or interests.

Adding alternative assignments does not mean eliminating written assignments—there are many students who prefer this form of evaluation and removing that option would restrict them. Instead, students should have a choice depending on their individual needs (Och & Patterson, 2022). In choice architecture literature, providing choices when centering what is known about learners can encourage curiosity and inform decisions, while not burdening actual decision making (Johnson et al., 2012). For social work educators, incorporating alternative assignments offers choices to students to support their full potential to maximize upon their different abilities, learning styles, and educational backgrounds. It could level the playing field for everyone to benefit while also challenging them in a creative way. Alternative assignments can be beneficial within social work education, creating an opportunity for students to enjoy themselves as they incorporate creativity and passion into their work. This could be a source of motivation as they progress along their academic and professional journeys.

Our Testimonies

Alternative assignments could increase the relevance of student work in society by promoting self-exploration. Students are supported in experimentation with creative resources, particularly internet-supported and multimedia technologies, when given alternative assignments. These assignments could provide the opportunity for students to explore what they can do and how they can stretch—while also evaluating their knowledge. Consequently, students can become more creative and better situated to generate new perspectives and ideas and raise questions relevant to resolving social issues (Fredagsvik, 2023). Scan the QR code for examples of alternative internet-based assignments used in our social work classroom. In this section, each author shares their personal experience with alternative assignments in a Human Behavior and Social Environment Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) class. We present our testimonies to further exemplify the opportunities for students and educators made available through alternative assignments.

Link Tree, n.d.

> Linden: *Completing my blog allowed me to explore avenues to help end HIV stigmatization. I wrote an advocacy letter to Congressman Hakeem Jeffries requesting support for the REPEAL HIV Discrimination Act. Alternative assignments allow students to apply skills learned in the classroom to other endeavors, such as promoting social exploration. Exploration initiatives enable students to pursue endeavors with societal relevance since they aim to address social issues. In this case, I utilized artwork by Keith Haring to highlight the need to increase awareness of HIV stigmatization. Exploration of my knowledge of the HIV pandemic helped to sensitize community members to the need for increased awareness to manage the impact on society. Students, like me, can pursue what they can do to address social problems using alternative assignments, which increases the relevance of our contribution to academia and society-at-large.*

Alternative assignments can promote a sense of safety among students while providing scaffolding for exploration and integration into society. This could help to enhance their enthusiasm for collaborating with instructors and developing projects with social relevance (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021). In addition, alternative assignments provide scaffolding for learning objectives as students interact with professionals to seek support. For example, in my blog, I shared how I collaborated with the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) to promote positive living among youths diagnosed with HIV. The collaboration enabled me to explore my values and perspectives on positive living in society. In the blog, I explained my struggle with sexual identity and relationships after being diagnosed, leading to self-stigmatization. My blog also elaborates on the importance of National Youth HIV/AIDS Awareness Day (NYHAAD), my participation, and how effective collaboration is essential for success. My example demonstrates the power of students seeking collaboration with professionals through alternative assignments and how it can increase participation, socially.

> Valerie: *The alternative assignment held space for me to create something purposeful. Building on an existing passion, I created an infographic of a "survival guide" for students with disabilities transitioning from high school to post-secondary education. This process deepened my awareness of ableism, the prejudice many members of this population experience, and potential barriers for students in securing services and accommodations during this transition. I entered my current internship working with students with autism with new insights I gained through creating the guide. Ultimately, the alternative assignment not only nourished my interest in addressing disability justice but opened my eyes to the power of incorporating creativity in social work education*.

During finals, I saw using my creativity to complete an assignment for HBSE as a form of self-care amidst rigid assignments that my other courses required. I vividly remember Professor Ortega-Williams encouraging our class to choose the alternative assignment as a way to demonstrate our "brilliance" in a way that a paper might not. Even though I chose the alternative assignment, I was doubtful about my creative abilities. Through the process, I experienced the power of my own creative outlet, which indeed is within all of us. I also recognized how expressing our brilliance in a way that is authentic can be a form of self-care, a topic which has been emphasized greatly in all my social work classes.

> Sebastian: *I found a lot of joy and passion in my experience with alternative assignments. My facility with writing and with words is something I take a lot of pride in, and I do find joy in writing, but formal, academic writing was never just about the writing. I had to contend with aspects of academic paper-writing concerning word choice—specifically formality, tone, and formatting. Writing and reading are effective and important, to be sure, but alternative assignments opened a new world for me, a new way to synthesize knowledge, and how to interact with and engage myself and the clients I worked with in my internships.*

The creative impulse is something we all have, and it proved to be an invaluable tool for reaching out to clients who *did* feel like artistic or creative pursuits were more accessible for them. Creativity was a means of communicating insight, self-knowledge, and other embodied information that they did not feel capable of communicating through words alone.

> Saadia: *The concept of alternative assignments within social work education was new to me. Throughout my educational journey, I rigorously submitted countless essays, PowerPoint slides, and exams every semester as a testament to the knowledge I gained. I enjoyed intertwining my creativity into my work because it made learning more enjoyable—but I did not have many opportunities to do this. Over time, I lost my sense of creativity and love of learning. Instead, it became something I dreaded. With the pandemic, the transition into online learning was difficult for students and educators—but it was an opportunity to question what needs to change about the norms within academia. Alternative assignments allowed me to realize my full potential as a student and created space for me to consider the kind of social worker I desire to be.*

Some may see alternative assignments as an easy way to receive a passing grade, but I saw it as an opportunity to challenge myself. I wanted to incorporate something I love and present it in a way that forced me to work on my weaknesses. I collaborated with a colleague to create a podcast where we looked at the novel *It Ends with Us,* by Colleen Hoover, through a social work lens. We analyzed the traumatic experiences of the characters and how they carried that impact with them into adulthood. We looked at research that explained differences in behaviors and compared it to the stigma around trauma within our own culture that needs to be addressed. The entire process of making this was so enjoyable and memorable that we *wanted* to go above and beyond!

Alternative assignments can be both enjoyable and challenging. Education should not feel like a chore for students and should not be something they dread. There are countless ways to cater to the needs of students and clients. It is our duty as social workers—and educators—to find and implement those methods. Individuals should not be forced to lose their identity to conform to rigid systems—systems need to change to better support them.

> Zainab: *The alternative assignment presented a creative opportunity that pushed the boundaries of my thinking. It provided a platform to hone skills that might have remained dormant, otherwise. This project held a deep personal significance, as it involved collaborating on a podcast with a close friend from my class. Together, we delved into a book she had gifted me during our first encounter—an act that became the foundation of our friendship and our shared passion for literature.*

This unique bond, built around our mutual love for books, is something truly special and not easily understood by everyone. Working on an assignment that showcased our skills and understanding and connecting it to ourselves in such a personal way, we were able to create something very special. It felt like the best way to express our learning and individual thoughts.

> Anna: *My approach as a social work educator is rooted in a Black, queer, womanist, pedagogical standpoint. As a social work educator, this means I want to create an educational context in which students support themselves and each other in healing, learning, and applying their education to real-life dilemmas, struggles, and joys. My hope is to prepare social work students to be allies in the communities in which they will work. My standpoint shapes my responsibility to marginalized learning styles and academic needs. It requires that I explore my own socialization and biases as an educator and take responsibility for them in my curricular design. For example, I wrestle with the traditional canon of Human Behavior in the Social Environment as I seek to acknowledge the many roots of social work practice. Therefore, when instructing on development across the lifespan, my curriculum includes not only Erik Erikson (Hutchinson, 2019), but also Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (1998) to address intergenerational harm and healing.*

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, my students and I struggled with diagnoses, grief from loved ones dying from the illness, and other stressors. Several students remarked that the assignments in my curriculum were too overwhelming and hard to accomplish, given all that was happening. Cognitively, some described feeling too blocked to assemble

strong essays, but they still wanted to demonstrate how deeply engaged they were in the readings and discussions. Creating alternative assignments meant that we all had a fighting chance at succeeding in the learning process; we failed and won together as we remixed assignments. For example, one assignment that I originally designed as a paper, I revised to include a podcast, blog, or infographic. I needed to creatively maintain and revise grading criteria to assess learning using these new approaches. For some students, the change of assignment style was a relief. For others, alternative assignments posed new challenges. We engaged in several meetings to consider together how to translate their learning from class readings and discussions into an alternative format. Additionally, we ran into technical obstacles on digital platforms, which were difficult to untangle at times. I managed these challenges by giving students additional time for assignments and encouraging mutual aid among students during class time. I also offered extensive feedback and gave students the opportunity to incorporate it before I finalized their grades. My approach to grading included giving a rubric in advance, reviewing student's material, making suggestions for improvement, offering students 5-points for completing reflections on an assignment to consider how learning was integrated. Grading included points for creativity, critical thinking, effort to integrate feedback, as well as content. Formatting held less overall points for the mid-term and final, so judging students' skills and knowledge was less about the format compared to the content. Students expressed how helpful my flexibility was in accomplishing their assignments and achieving their goals within our class. Overall, it was a learning experience for all of us that continues to shape my approach to co-designing transformative education.

Conclusion

Alternative assignments could redefine rigor by creating a space where students can apply critical thinking to demonstrate their knowledge by enabling new ideas, perspectives, and solutions without the barriers embedded in written assignments. In our experience, alternatives to written assignments offered fresh options to promote a higher level of learning that prepared the students and educator alike with new, beneficial skills. We believe research on alternative assignments could provide useful information to educators committed to promoting disability justice. Equipped with a better understanding of which assignments are meaningful to students and support multiple learning styles educators could reimagine the possibilities for effective social work education. Additionally, the data could be used to improve the relevance of assignments in the 21st century as preparation for the workforce in a society that is increasingly more reliant upon digital tools for practice. Educators willing to partner with students in this research could fill the gap between academic content, assessment, and students' real-world preparation for the social work profession. It is possible for educators to improve social work education by embracing alternative assignments that are student-driven to increase the impact of their students' work, thereby better equipping them for success in a field that is constantly evolving. We believe, given our research and lived experience with alternative assignments, that this might be a powerful way forward.

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