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Title	Mad Zine pedagogy: using zines in critical mental health learning and education
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/id/eprint/54738/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2469586
Date	2025
Citation	Anderson, Jill and Spandler, Hel (2025) Mad Zine pedagogy: using zines in critical mental health learning and education. Social Work Education. ISSN 0261-5479
Creators	Anderson, Jill and Spandler, Hel

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2469586>

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To cite this article: Jill Anderson & Hel Spandler (25 Feb 2025): Mad Zine pedagogy: using zines in critical mental health learning and education, Social Work Education, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2025.2469586](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2469586)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2469586>



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Published online: 25 Feb 2025.



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Mad Zine pedagogy: using zines in critical mental health learning and education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how zines might be used as a medium for generating and communicating alternative forms of Mad-centered knowledge in diverse learning contexts. It draws on our research project about ‘madzines’ which involved identifying madzines; ‘being with’ them; sharing examples with others, and facilitating madzine workshops across both formal and informal settings. Here, we use these activities to reflect on the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of using these informal DIY publications as a form of critical mental health learning, focusing on social work education. Drawing on Alison Piepmeier’s idea of zines as pedagogies of hope, we explore how using madzines in teaching might help: enable learners to: process alternative knowledge and understanding; actively critique existing services and the policy that informs them; and imagine alternatives. We also identify several limitations to be aware of when introducing zines in formal educational settings: decontextualisation, unethical sharing, the othering of madness; and instrumentalising zines. We suggest that our reflections have wider applications across professional, and indeed nonprofessional, settings.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 April 2024

Accepted 12 February 2025

KEYWORDS

Zines; mad studies; mental health; creativity; social work; coproduction

Introduction

Mental health knowledge, practice and policy is contested, challenging and uncertain. A recent scoping review concluded that service users experience ‘a wide range of avoidable social and psychological harms at relational, systemic and cultural levels (Carr et al., 2023, p. 1317). These harms derive from multiple and intersecting factors including poor relationships, inadequate communication, coercive responses, impoverished ideas about support, inflexible and bureaucratic systems, fragmented services and cultures of discrimination. This ‘Crisis of Care’ has been deemed by Nancy Fraser to be ‘every bit as serious and systemic as the current ecological crisis, with which it is, in any case, intertwined’ (2016, p. 31).

It is against this undoubtedly challenging backdrop that Social Work educators, and others teaching about mental health, are tasked with supporting the learning of new entrants to the profession and the continuing professional development of existing staff.

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Recognizing some synergies between social work values and those of the psychiatric survivor movement (Ameil, 2013), some educators—ourselves included—draw actively on survivor perspectives and experiences to inculcate a more critical approach to mainstream psychiatric service responses. Yet it has long been recognized that students can both struggle to develop those understandings and to draw upon them, let alone to articulate a clear alternative social work identity, once they enter practice (F. L. Smith et al., 2022).

Higher Education institutions can be profoundly challenging environments too, where students and educators can struggle to articulate their ideas and emotions and may feel constrained by, sometimes unfamiliar, academic conventions (Bengtson & Barnett, 2017). Yet Universities, like health and social care agencies, are ‘imaginary spaces as well as lived and experienced ones’ (Clegg, 2008, p. 339). How, in these contexts, can social work educators and students be supported to stay hopeful, think critically and reflectively and imagine how things could be otherwise?

There have been many attempts to answer those questions, including here in the pages of *Social Work Education*. Firstly, co-production has been widely promoted as a means of ensuring that professional education is grounded in the direct experience of those on the receiving end of services, or who have failed to gain access to the help they need (McLaughlin et al., 2019) and service user involvement is mandated both by *Social Work England* and in the *Global Standards for Education and Training in Social Work*. Secondly, creative approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, have been promoted; including, for example, photovoice (Dedotsi & Cabiati, 2023), poetry (Gold, 2012), expressive arts (River et al., 2017; Walton, 2012), graphic novels (Domyancich-Lee et al., 2022) and comics (Akesson & Oba, 2017). Thirdly, there have been calls for diversifying and radicalizing the knowledge base and, through drawing on Mad Studies scholarship, for the ‘maddening’ of social work—akin to the ‘queering’ of health and social care which challenges accepted understandings of normality, mental health and distress (Cranford & LeFrançois, 2022).

There is evidence of dialogue between these approaches; not least in critiques, from a Mad Studies perspective, of existing service user involvement initiatives, on the grounds that they lack diversity, are insufficiently context focused and/or apolitical (Kalocsai et al., 2023; Sapouna, 2021; Voronka & Grant, 2022). Service user and carer involvement, creative approaches, and Mad Studies, have distinctive contributions to make to effective learning and teaching about mental health (Beresford & Russo, 2021; M. Jones & Kafai, 2024; Le François et al., 2013; LeFrançois et al., 2016; ; Lewis et al., 2024; P. Smith, 2024). Madzine pedagogy—a channel through which all three can flow—has, we would argue, particular gifts to bestow, which this article seeks to unwrap.

Madzines research project

For the past four years, we have been working on a Wellcome funded research study, exploring the role of zines in contesting knowledge about mental health theory and practice (www.madzines.org). Drawing on a Mad Studies framing, we have been guided by the idea of ‘being with’ zines, rather than analyzing them as objects of study, mirroring what many psychiatric survivors say that they want from, and beyond, mental health services: to be accompanied by people who can

get alongside them and their distress, without pre-judgment and without unwanted or coercive interventions (Anderson & Spandler 2021). In the course of the research, we have identified and acquired madzines, spent time with them, swapped and shared them with others, made our own zines and facilitated madzine workshops in various contexts (involving sharing examples of madzines and introducing simple zine-making techniques).

We offer some reflections from this research about how zines might be used as a form of critical mental health pedagogy. We explore what it means to learn from zines, what we ourselves have learned about the possibilities and limitations of using zines in learning contexts, and what our zine-centric approach might offer to social work educators—including survivor educators—who seek to develop critical understandings about mental health. We have drawn insights from our madzines blog,¹ which we created to provide a space for ourselves, our project collaborators, and people who have participated in our research, to reflect on our individual and collective learning.

We hope to contribute to the currently limited, but growing, knowledge about zine pedagogy—both in social work education (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014) and in the field of mental health more broadly (Batey, 2020; Batey & Verstappen, 2023; Chenevey, 2021; Eisenhauer, 2010; K. D. Jones & Granello, 2008). Whilst we concentrate on social work education, much of the learning can be applied to other professional mental health education. Similarly, although we concentrate on more formal educational settings, and some of the limitations we highlight relate specifically to those, much will be applicable to informal learning contexts too.

We draw on zine scholarship, notably Alison Piepmeier's (2009) work on feminist zines as a 'pedagogy of hope', as a way to explore the potential of zines in these contexts. Before turning to that, however, we want to recognize the tension induced by trying to write an academic article about zines, a challenge illustrated for us by our project collaborator, Jac Batey [Figure 1].



Figure 1. "If this article were a zine" [Jac Batey].

Defining zines and Madzines

It is not easy to write about zines, let alone define them. However, zines can be described as DIY, low budget, not-for-profit, self-published, often handcrafted booklets. They are associated with a set of subcultures that share a vocabulary: ‘zinester’ (a person who makes, circulates and reads zines), for example, or ‘perzine’ (a personal experience zine). They share a set of practices too; including those associated with distribution and archiving, through zine ‘distros’, online marketplaces such as Etsy, zine swaps, zine fairs and libraries. There is no hard distinction between a zine writer and a zine reader—emulation is a key aspect of zine culture, where one person’s zine can inspire someone else’s, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of exchange (Duncombe, 1997).

As a *crafted* object, a zine can be simply or intricately folded, from a single sheet of paper or more than one. It may be glued or stitched or stapled. A zine can contain text and/or images, encompassing highly complex drawings or stick figures, cartoon panels, photographs or collage. Contrasting with the seamlessness of formal published outputs, zines are often characterized by their lack of polish, that is by their ‘seamfulness’ (Cameron, 2012).

Historically, zines have enabled people to speak from the margins, bringing unheard and silenced voices to the fore (Duncombe, 1997; Licon, 2012). They are thus one way of illuminating power dynamics that can otherwise remain obscure. Our own interest in zines began through our involvement in *Asylum: the radical mental health magazine* (Spandler, 2021) which, although not strictly speaking a zine as it is an edited magazine, shares many features with zines. We frequently use *Asylum* in our teaching, learning and research and were keen to explore and expand our use of other alternative material like zines. *Asylum* aligns with, and draws upon, a rich tradition of zines crafted by oppressed people and activists, including pamphlets produced within the mental health survivor movement and feminist Grrl zines (Piepmeier, 2009). Indeed, zines, like other creative media, might be seen as part of the repertoire of the psychiatric survivor movement (Spandler, 2020).

A zine can be about absolutely anything, but many draw on experiences, and generate insights, of direct relevance to social work: health, care, distress, oppression, madness, poverty, disability, abuse, survival, expropriation, and identity (Cook & Vigour, 2018). Zines can offer space for individuals and groups—whether in formal or informal learning contexts—to excavate, process, develop and share grassroots knowledge about experiences, conditions and identities that have been marginalized, stigmatized or pathologised. Recent years have seen the emergence of a rich array of Queer, Trans and Neurodiversity related zines, as well as health and disability-related zines. Many of these are what we refer to as ‘madzines’.

In our project, we define madzines as zines that ‘craft contention’ about madness and distress, and how such experiences are lived with, understood and responded to. Madzines are usually created and read by people with lived experience of mental ill-health, neurodiversity, psychosocial disability and/or other conditions that have been psychiatrized. They question accepted understandings of mental health and associated practices, policies and politics, and we use a Mad Studies lens to bring them into view. Madzines include personal zines (‘perzines’) as well as collaborative zines and zine series, that enable access not only to the

individual, but also collective, wisdom of mental health survivors as ‘organic intellectuals’ (Cresswell & Spandler, 2013). Piepmeier builds on Freire’s notion of a ‘hopeful pedagogy’ (Freire, 1994), as expanded by bell Hooks (2004), to ask what kinds of interventions zines can make; that is, what zines can *do*.

Madzines as a pedagogy of hope

Zines function, Piepmeier suggests, in three interlinking ways, through pedagogies of process, active criticism and imagination. Firstly, zines often highlight means as well as ends; that is, making *process* – not just product—visible. By contrast with a more ‘seamless’ form of production (a textbook or journal article, for example) a zine will often have its seams showing (Cameron, 2012; Duncombe, 1997). We can often see and feel—by means of stitches, lines or wrinkles—how a zine was crafted. Through reading and handling a zine we can grasp, in a literally tactile as well as intellectual way, how we might begin to craft our own and that creates a sense of agency. By contrast with materials conventionally drawn upon in professional education, a zine is free of ‘formal’ expectations. It can consist of just words or pictures only or a mixture of the two. There is no expectation of originality, perfection or even of completion—some pages may even be blank. In other words, a zine is very different from this article, *about* zines, and it is a challenge to describe zines in this primarily text-based medium.

A zine can emphasize process in another sense too: by acting as a space that can ‘contain’ difficult thoughts and emotions (Spurling, 2004), so they can be expressed, processed or worked through. For example, in a perzine (or personal zine) a zinester can trace experiences of harm or can map their own, or a collective, healing or learning process. A zine can act as a holding environment in contexts where containment may be sorely needed—a mental health unit or a higher education classroom, for example.

The second way in which a zine can act is through embodying *active criticism*, furnishing us with the creative tools to critique the social world. Critiquing the status quo can be a challenge, both for beginning professionals—who may lack confidence—and for those who have become inculcated into a system beyond the bounds of which it now seems hard to see. A zine can provide some critical distance and can—through the use of humor and subversion, for example—model explicit strategies for change.

Critiquing the status quo, or having tools for challenge, is of limited use; however, without the capacity to imagine how things might be otherwise. Therefore, the third way in which a zine can act is as ‘a crafting tool’ to make dreams visible. That is, a zine can both incubate and can communicate new *imaginings*. That is particularly important in contexts that feel constrained and where, trapped under the weight of the way things are and have always been, a sense of hopelessness may have taken hold.

Informed by Piepmeier’s framework, the following sections draw directly on the voices of contributors to our madzines research to explore how, through sharing and co-producing madzines, participants have been able to process experience, critique the status quo, engage imaginatively with non-mainstream understandings and begin to envision alternative approaches to the provision of support.

Madzining: processing experience

Making zines can involve sketching, writing, cutting, tearing, sticking, folding, collaging, printing, photographing, defacing, cartooning, stitching and binding. Through some of these means, participants can explore and express their own experience and trace connections with others' lives.

For example, Suzannah Scott-Moncrieff attended a workshop that we ran at a creative research methods conference (Moncrieff, 2023). She set out to craft a mini-zine about her great-great-grandmother, Jeannie, whose incarceration in the Aberdeen Lunatic Asylum a century ago she has been researching [Figure 2](#). Envisaging her zine in advance, Suzannah anticipated a collection of blank pages reflecting the gaps in her knowledge. In the event, her zine—with every page completed—pulled out clear threads of connection between her own lived experience and that of her ancestor.

Suzannah reflected on the experience of making her zine, how protective she felt about Jeannie's life and also her sense of shame at revealing so much about herself. Her dynamic account conveys how self-knowledge was generated through the zine making process, not in isolation but in community.

Inspired by a fellow participant at my table, I glue some doors onto the back of my Zine, covering up Jeannie's and my own vulnerability. On the doors I write 'lock it up,' 'close the door,' 'don't mention it!', 'no!' As I do that, I clearly recognise the parallels: she was physically locked up, and I have, in a way, 'locked up' my own brushes with madness over my lifetime. (ibid)

It is not hard to see, from the above example, how zine making might prove helpful in contexts where beginning practitioners are learning how to draw on their own



Figure 2. I, Jeannie, was born [Suzannah Scott-Moncrieff]. insert [Figures 2 1](#) and [2.2](#)

experience, whilst connecting with and supporting others. In the context of new managerialism, and an increasing obsession with outcomes and outputs, both the *process* of zine making (the state of flow it can induce) and the *processing* that zine making enables can be understood as hopeful interventions. Crafting zines, alone or in company, can start to erode the barriers that often form between workers and people using services, between students and teachers. It can build a sense of solidarity, mutual understanding and appreciation.

We encountered something akin to that when facilitating a zine-making session for students studying a degree in Health and Social Care (Anderson & Spandler, 2022). Our suggestion—that the students draw a self—portrait with both hands simultaneously (an exercise devised by Lynda Barry, 2019) was met with bemusement by at least one student. ‘Why do that?’ she asked us. In response, Jill shared a zine that incorporated her own attempts at the exercise [Figure 3].

Two versions of herself had emerged, she said: one cool and collected, how she might wish to appear to students; the other shaky and distinctly underconfident. The discussion that followed considered both how people who appear to be ‘together’ on the outside may not feel so, and also how those whom society deems to be shaky or chaotic may feel strong inside. Not only did the initially skeptical student go on to attempt the exercise herself—in the zine spirit of ‘emulation’ (Duncombe, 1997)—but she developed her own drawings further, flipping them over to annotate, with ‘hidden’ feelings, the reverse side.

Zine-making can be a means of addressing one’s own perfectionism, as an educator, student or practitioner. Embracing imperfection in one’s own creative output can be liberating. This exercise had taken Jill one step further: into sharing with the students, in a contained way, aspects of herself they could not otherwise have seen. And, in a zine-ic

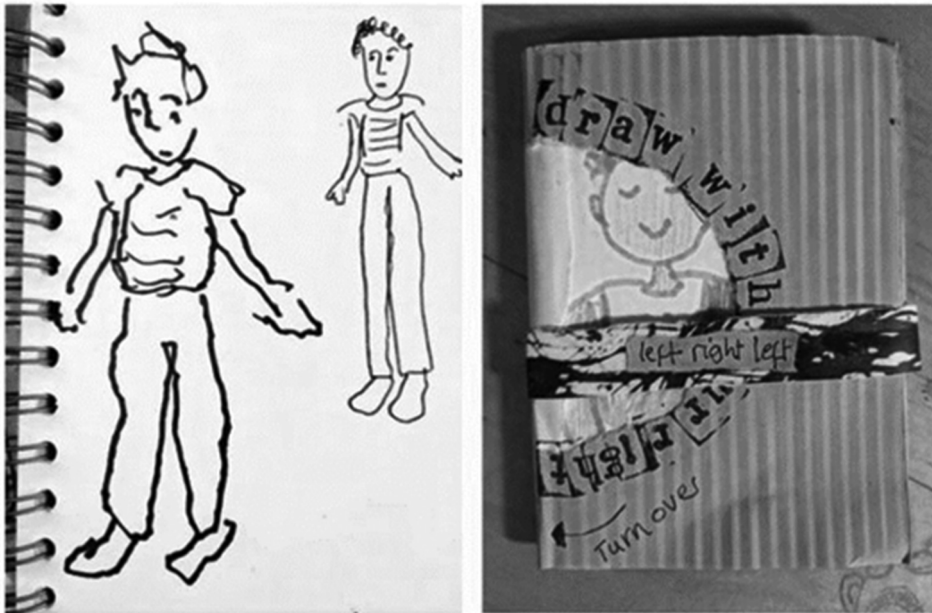


Figure 3. Drawing with the left and right hand [Jill Anderson].

spirit, of exchange and emulation, that had been offered back (Anderson & Spandler, 2022).

Zine making can, then, function both as a powerful tool for learning about the connections between ourselves and others, and as a form of alliance building. That latter quality was captured by Lisa Archibald during a mad-zine workshop we facilitated with students on the Mad Studies MSc program at Queen Margaret University:

Something I very much appreciated was that everyone, including the facilitators got stuck in and participated in creating their own zines alongside us. As we sat around the table together politely sharing scissors and glue sticks, I felt calm and connected. These days I find myself mostly in mad activist spaces that feel filled with anger, conflict and tension. I somehow, in recent years, forgot that solidarity can also be found whilst sitting together silently reflecting on each carefully considered word we put onto paper. (Archibald, 2022)

Lisa found, in zine making, a refuge from the pressures of more explicitly activist spaces. Though she doesn't say so, we imagine that some of those are online spaces, where quick-fire responses can dominate. Those social work students who are themselves activists may similarly appreciate that restorative qualities of zine making. For others, less familiar with activist ideas and ideals, encounters with zines may operate more as an initial introduction to them.

Madzines: engaging with active criticism

Professional education has been criticized for introducing service user perspectives in isolation, in the form of individual(ised) stories that are then 'interpreted and reduced to static representations of a collective generalizable and knowable body' (Voronka & Grant, 2022, p. 987). Through collaborative zines, social work educators can go some way to address that, and to center 'diverse collective service user epistemologies' as Kalocsai et al. (2023) challenge us to do. Some madzines are explicitly activist, exemplifying how survivors engage critically with prevailing ideas and practices, such as neoliberal versions of recovery. They can be a creative way of introducing students to the values and achievements of the mental health survivor movement. For instance, Health and Social Care students found the satirical critiques of Neoliberal recovery in the 'Recovery in the Bin' zine especially engaging and relatable (RITB, 2020); notably more so than more academic critiques [Figure 4].

Other zines—some perzines for example—model and encourage an activist sensibility in gentler ways and could be understood as expressions of 'quiet activism' (Pottinger, 2017). There is something about the *slightness* combined with the 'seamfulness' of a zine that means that it rarely claims to have the all the answers, introducing students to survivors' experiences and perspectives in subtler ways. Given their statutory role, social workers need to develop, not just an intellectual, but an *embodied* understanding of what it is like to be a social work service user, which often involves both monitoring and direct observation. Given recent survivor critiques of service developments and technologies like SIM and Oxevision,² social workers need to understand such experiences in a broader policy and practice context too. A lived experience practitioner, who came to one of our workshops, went on to make a zine that conveyed a visceral sense of her experience, as an in-patient, of being observed (Patton-Lyons, 2023) [Figure 5].



Figure 4. Engaging with the Recovery in the Bin zine.

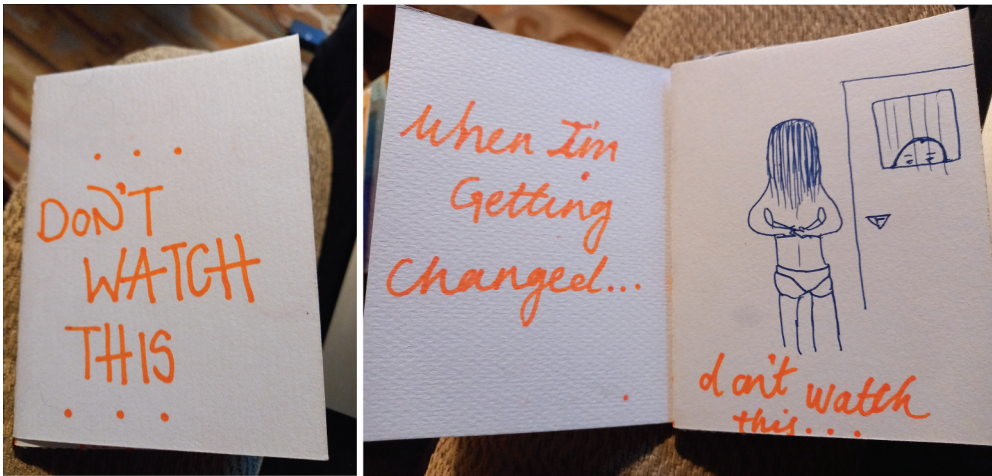


Figure 5. Don't Watch This [Anon].

Through reading, making and sharing zines, students can come to value both service users and themselves as knowledge producers—an essential first step toward activist intervention and critique.

Madzines and the pedagogy of imagination: envisioning alternatives

Social workers need to develop alternative ways not only of processing and actively critiquing mental health experiences and practices, but also of *imagining* and providing

(access to) alternatives. And finding alternatives to mainstream mental health care implies an opening up not only to new narratives but to new ways of understanding what a story *is*, or can be.

A powerful example of this kind of insight is provided by Lea Cooper's *Take It Back* project,³ that explicitly sought to overturn conventional ideas about what a mental health narrative should be (Cooper, 2021). Drawing on their experience as a mental health system survivor, zinester, zine librarian and artist, Cooper ran zine making workshops to encourage survivors to 'take back' their own narratives from mental health services, and to convey their experience in their own way. It was in zines that Cooper found a 'space for plurality' where they could explore the 'complicated, nuanced, non-linear and situated experiences of madness, mental health services and "recovery"', embrace conflicting memories and express the different ways in which they tell their story in differing contexts.

Zines can, then, enable people to imagine different kinds of tellings, beyond the classic, linear recovery narratives that they might otherwise encounter (Woods et al., 2022). Tamsin Walker, the PhD student on the Madzines project, has described how a zine can convey complex experiences, like dissociation, 'from the inside' (Walker, 2023). Zines 'from inside the experience' do something that textbooks rarely do, she argues. They stay close to the quality of mad experience.

If we rewrite our experiences as logical and rational, or if we suggest that we were just remembering something instead of (re)experiencing it then we may misrepresent our experience. If we translate our experiences to fit into linear temporal forms or try to make rational logical links, the quality of the experience can get lost (Walker, 2023).

That is really important in mental health services where professionals often misunderstand and misinterpret service users' behaviors. For example, if workers can't understand the experience of dissociation, they can end up assuming that all services users have a conventionally linear experience of time, leading to profound misunderstandings and exacerbating distress (Aves, 2021). Tamsin's zine, *Superpower*, shows how dissociating can prove functional for some people and how reducing or eliminating it might, at times, compromise a person's ability to function in the world. Through crafting techniques and novel materials—translucent paper, for example—she has been able to convey how she experiences connection and disconnection at the same time [Figure 6].

Zines about dissociation can do more than introduce the idea of dissociation, and how it can be used as a coping mechanism, however. They can also help to highlight how a misunderstanding of dissociation can result in services labeling people as manipulative or 'personality disordered', or even accusing them of lying. Such zines can enable students to envisage how some service responses might be experienced as retraumatising, and to imagine alternative responses. This has potentially profound implications for social work students' ability to connect, both with themselves, their own stories, and with those people they are seeking to support.

The 'dangers of the single story' (TED, 2009) have been much discussed with reference to service user involvement in education (see for example Sapouna, 2021). Social work students need to develop the capacity to live with uncertainty (Fook, 2013) and through zine making, we can ensure that we enable access to a diverse

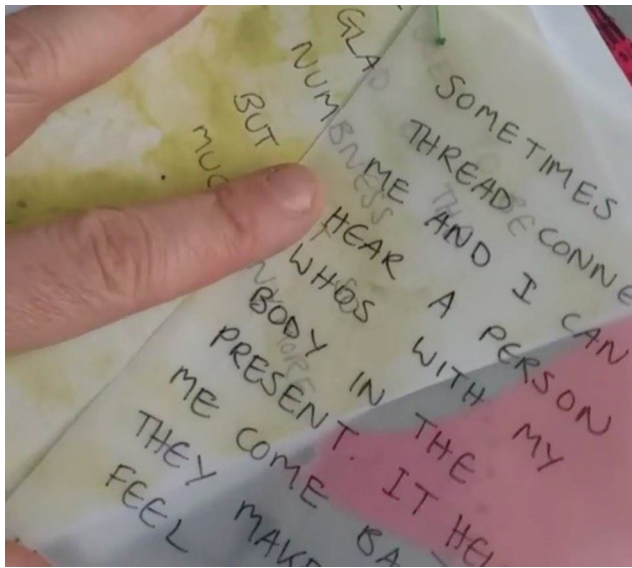


Figure 6. Dissociation Zine [Tamsin Walker].

range of experiences, including stories that have no resolved form. At the very least, encounters with zines can prepare students for the complex stories they will encounter when they enter practice.

Madzines in social work education

Despite these possibilities, there has been remarkably little written about using zines in social work education. In an article published in *Social Work Education* ten years ago, Desyllas and Sinclair recount how zines were introduced, in a US graduate level social work course, ‘as a pedagogical tool for raising self-awareness, education, empowerment and transformation’ (2014: 296). They suggested that, as well as broadening learners’ understanding of how power operates, classroom-based zine making exercises served to challenge power hierarchies among teacher and students.

We suggest that zines might offer mental health/social work education a *pedagogy of hope*: enabling students to process knowledge and understanding, actively critique existing services and imagine genuine alternatives. Through these hopeful pedagogies—of process, active criticism and imagination—zines might help to address some pressing issues faced by social work educators and their students. For example,

- how to access, contain and process one’s own thoughts and emotions.
- how to understand the depth and diversity of service user perspectives, experiences and stories.
- how to reflect on and actively critique practices and policies and
- how to, and help others to, imagine alternatives—both alternative ways of envisioning/describing madness and distress and the alternatives to mainstream services that could be built upon such understandings.

In practical terms, there are at least three, interconnecting, ways in which zines can be used as pedagogical tools:

- (1) Sharing already existing zines with students—reading zines
- (2) Valuing madzines and mad knowledge—referencing zines
- (3) Supporting students to craft their own zines—making zines

Taken together, these can constitute a powerful way for students to gain insights into the experiences and strategies of people on the receiving end of social work services and to process and reflect on their own learning (gained through personal and/or educational and/or professional experiences). Such learning can impact how students go on to work with service users and with colleagues, including how they are placed to support collective action, knowledge building and peer support.

Therefore, we think there is a strong case for introducing madzines as a form of critical pedagogy in social work education, as a means of supporting, valuing and integrating grassroots bottom-up experiential knowledge. This, in turn, might help to re-connect with the profession's more radical and critical potential. In the context of calls for 'maddening' the social work curriculum (LeFrançois et al., 2016; Macdonald et al., 2018; Snyder et al., 2019), zines represent both an important resource for and output of Mad Studies, and a means of building bridges between it and critical social work. Developing a madzine pedagogy could help to build on social work students productive encounters with Mad Studies (MacPhee & Wilson Norrad, 2022; Newman et al., 2019). It could also complement the rise of student zines as a form of alternative counter knowledge, notably the Mad Students' zines that have emerged in North America to challenge sanist and disablist educational practices (De Bie, 2014, Mad Students Zine Team, 2022).

Madzine pedagogy: some limitations

Thus far, we have explored how zines might be useful critical teaching and learning resources. However, introducing zine pedagogy in the increasingly corporatised university is not without its pitfalls. Related barriers can be encountered where other pedagogical innovations are introduced, such as co-production with people with lived experience, creative arts-based approaches or the introduction of Mad Studies programs (the fate of one of these has been debated by Archibald 2023 and Macintosh, 2023, Macintosh, 2024). There are, however, some potential pitfalls that are specific to zine pedagogy. Whilst our list is by no means exhaustive, we introduce four here, along with some ideas about how each might be addressed.

The first potential pitfall arises where zines are used in teaching in a decontextualized way. After all, zines have deep roots within particular cultures, values and experiences. It is possible that some social work educators and students will already be acquainted with, or even embedded in, zine culture, but many won't be. Whilst *immersion* in zine communities is absolutely not, in our view, a precondition for teaching using zines, a *sensitivity* to zine culture—a zine-ic sensibility (Su, 2012)—unarguably is. Social work educators and students need some grasp of the values and ethos surrounding grassroots DIY cultures in general, and zine communities in particular, in order to really appreciate what they offer. Fortunately, the recent flourishing of local zine fairs and festivals, zine

related websites and accessible books about zines (see, for example, Duncombe, 1997; Wrek, 2014) can support this kind of learning and inquiry.

The second pitfall relates to the ethics around sharing zines. A particular zine may be written with a view to educating, informing or inspiring others to take action—it may even be specifically targeted at mental health professionals. But a zine may have been written for a host of other reasons too. It may, for example, have been made to be gifted to a friend, or to be shared within a particular community at a specific point in time. Educators need to be aware of the context of zine's production and try to communicate and honor this. If invited into a university classroom, such zines need to be handled with the care that would be afforded to any other personal or private artifact (a letter or a diary, for example). Therein lies one of the *challenges* of zine pedagogy, and also one of the learning *opportunities* that it presents—if we are able to openly reflect on these issues, preferably with students. Fortunately, there is much to learn from the wider zine community here. For example, zine librarians and archivists have produced their own 'code of ethics' (Zine Librarians Interest Group, 2015), to guide the archiving and storage of zines. Their insights into the ethics of zine acquisition and sharing prove highly adaptable, if not straightforwardly transferable, to learning and teaching contexts. We have certainly found them a useful resource for our own research.

There is a third potential pitfall, one that zine pedagogy shares with other instances of coproduction in teaching: the danger of 'othering' Mad people. Zines can, as we have seen, evoke profound empathy and connection. However, a zine can be as susceptible as any other kind of story to being used as a vehicle for voyeurism or clinical interpretation. For example, imbued with dominant biomedical approaches to understanding mental ill-health students, and indeed, teachers might be tempted to speculate about, or 'diagnose' the condition or experience a person is conveying in a zine. In our own research, we have found Arthur Frank's work on 'letting stories breathe' (2010) profoundly useful here—for encouraging one another, and our students, to move away from interrogating a zine for its underlying meaning, toward a curiosity about what a zine can *do*. As with all of the dangers we are addressing in this section, the lessons learned go far beyond zines, to the root of how students relate more sensitively to any story they are told, including those they tell about themselves.

We have argued that zines provide an important means by which personal experience can be recognized as a knowledge resource. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that students could 'cite' zines, alongside more scholarly research-based publications, in their assignments. Barnard Zine Library has produced a handy 'Cite this Zine' guide (Gentile, 2009)—and increasingly libraries are developing guidance of their own. Often rich, colorful and insightful, zines seem actively to resist the term 'grey literature'. As a fun, creative format, free of any expectations regarding form or content, a zine might enable diverse learners to express themselves openly and in authentic ways. Because of that, it can be tempting to suggest that students produce a zine in lieu of some other form of assessment, such as an academic essay or presentation.

However, that brings us to our fourth and final pitfall: the dangers of instrumentalising zines. It is not straightforward to 'assess' a student's zine without destroying one essential quality—that a zine can follow its creator's *own* rules (Gibb, 2013). We're not saying that it can't, or shouldn't, be done—indeed it is important to create alternative and more creative forms of assessment (Kent 2020).

However, there is a need, in so doing, to understand and to care about what zines are, and the values they embody. There is an emerging body of literature about teaching using zines which can help to reflect on these issues further (DeGravelles, 2011; Scheper, 2023). It is worth noting that this concern with instrumentalising zines mimics some of the issues that Mad identified students have raised about Mad Studies programs, and their location in university settings that privilege individualized forms of assessment, rather than collective forms of knowledge production (Archibald, 2024).

All of these pitfalls raise important issues that can be turned into potential learning opportunities, not least because there are parallel dangers in practice contexts. For example, zinesters have often described the powerfully therapeutic nature of zine making and some people who have engaged with our project—peer support workers and lived experience practitioners—have started to use zines in their own practice (Patton-Lyons, 2024). There is a problematic history of mental health services taking survivors' ideas and mis-aligning them with existing practices, and practitioners need to be very cautious not to co-opt or appropriate zines in a similar way. Social Workers have a statutory role in relation to service users, which creates an imbalance of power. They, in particular, need to be cautious about incorporating zine-making with service users within structures often experienced as coercive or constraining, or in the context of 'assessment' or 'treatment' processes. For example, practitioners need to be attuned to the danger of instrumentalising zines as 'therapy' or as a tokenistic means to address wider issues of consultation, or coproduction in services.

We have one final caveat. Whilst we have suggested that zines can be one way of introducing more *critical* ideas into the curriculum, challenging preconceived and more mainstream understandings about madness and distress, zines can also *channel*, rather than contest, mainstream messages. An encounter with a zine may result in the discovery of new insights, but equally can simply reinforce old prejudices and half-truths. In an effort to avoid this, we may, as educators, be tempted to 'cherry pick' those zines we feel will illustrate a learning point; but, in so doing, lose the opportunity that zine pedagogy offers to shift power dynamics in the classroom. Ways of safeguarding against this include introducing a multiplicity of zines, referencing collective and collaborative zines and encouraging students not only to use zines to critique ideas that they encounter in mainstream literature, but also to turn their critical thinking skills back on the zines themselves. Introducing zines into mental health and social work education can be immensely rewarding. However, taken together, the pitfalls we have identified here demonstrate how it is a far from straightforward pedagogical innovation requiring, rather, careful thought and reflection.

Although we think we have made a compelling case for using zines as a form of critical pedagogy, we have also identified several pitfalls to be alert to when introducing zines in teaching: decontextualizing zines, unethical sharing, the othering of madness and instrumentalising zines (for example, in assessment contexts). We also recognize the possibility that zine pedagogy, as any other innovation in an educational or practice context, could be picked up, embraced enthusiastically for a short time, promoted in the hope that it will transform teaching and learning without much effort, then either used uncritically, or abandoned when another new idea comes around the corner.

Concluding thoughts

Like any new method, the benefits of a madzine pedagogy will depend on the spirit and context in which it is introduced. In a pedagogic context—given an appropriate understanding of their origins and of the values of zine culture, zines can help us move not only into some new ways of thinking, but also into new ways of relating, being and thinking *together*. ‘In the end’, as Harney and Moten suggest, ‘it’s the new way of being together and thinking together that is important, and not the tool, not the prop. Or the prop is important only insofar as it allows you to enter; but once you’re there, it’s the relation and the activity that’s really what you want to emphasize’ (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 106). These words speak powerfully to our experience within the Madzines project. What one can learn from ‘being with’ zines—as a researcher, a student, a service user/survivor or practitioner—can have powerful resonance, beyond the making, reading or sharing of the zines themselves.

Notes

1. www.madzines.org/blog
2. STOPSIM—Mental Health Is Not A Crime; Stop Oxevision.
3. <https://takeitbackzine.com/library>

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who has engaged in our madzines research, attended our workshops and written blog posts for our website www.madzines.org/blog. In particular, we wish to thank Tamsin Walker (PhD student on the madzines research project); Jac Batey (project illustrator); Tam Martin Fowles and Che McGarvey-Gill.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Wellcome Trust. Grant number: 219843/Z/19/Z “Crafting Contention: The role of zines in contesting mental health, knowledge and practice.”.

Author Contribution

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