CONTENTS

5  Editorial – Online and blended social work education: Outcomes, successes and risks
   – Sophie Goldingay, David Hodgson, Jennifer Boddy, Sharlene Nipperess & Lynelle Watts

Editors' Choice

8  Centring aboriginal epistemologies: Development of a 3D simulation for social work education
   – Amy Cleland & Shepard Masocha

Articles

22  Online and Blended Methods for Teaching Interpersonal Skills and Teaching Professional
Online Interpersonal Skills in Social Work – Ann M. Carrington

36  At the Heart of Social Work: Best Practice for Managing Emotion in the Technology-
enhanced, Practice-based Learning Classroom – Jane Cowie & Renae Summers

50  Teaching a Mental Health Diagnosis Course Online: Lessons Learned from a Case Study
   – Caitlin Elsaesser & Angela Bellas

62  Online and Blended Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia:
Negotiating the Tensions
   – Sophie Goldingay, David Hodgson, Jennifer Boddy, Sharlene Nipperess & Lynelle Watts

75  Using ICT to teach clinical social work skills in New Zealand academic reflections
   – Nicky Stanley-Clarke

90  Social media and social work education curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand: An integrated
framework – Deb Stanfield

107  Online social work education and the disinhibition effect
   – Rachel Schwartz, Laura Curran & Marian Diksies

123  “I feel like I know you” Using Flipgrid in online social work education
   – Julia Kleinschmit & Elizabeth Rembold

Book Reviews

128  BOOK REVIEW by Sevi Vassos
Review of ‘Teaching Social Work with Digital Technology’ by Laurel Iverson Hitchcock,
Melanie Sage, & Nancy Smyth
Guest Editors For This Issue:
Associate Professor Sophie Goldingay, School of Health & Social Development, Deakin University, Australia

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Aims and Scope
The journal aims to showcase material that is of particular relevance to social work, welfare and community development educators in Australia and New Zealand. Articles that present innovative or challenging approaches to current educational philosophy and methodology are particularly encouraged. The material should be original and professionally presented.

A diversity of styles is welcomed, and reports on research from a variety of perspectives and research designs are particularly sought. Guidelines are available from the editor.

Editorial Correspondence
Dr Mim Fox: mfox@uow.edu.au
Online and blended social work education: Outcomes, successes and risks

Sophie Goldingay, David Hodgson, Jennifer Boddy, Sharlene Nipperess and Lynelle Watts

This special issue was designed to add to the evidence base regarding the role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the delivery of social work and welfare education. The reason for this was two-fold. First, to support the generation of ideas for those social work educators who have a commitment to removing barriers to achieving a social work qualification through online education. Second, to provide a medium for social work educators to demonstrate the impact online and blended social work has for social work students, their teachers, and the profession. This aim is set against a backdrop of concerns amongst practitioners and educators as to how well technology can address the education needs of social work and welfare professions for the future.

Our special edition has some commonalities with previous special issues about online and distance education. For example, like the volume edited by Sarah Vicary, Jeanette Copperman and Alison Higgs in the United Kingdom (2018), we were amazed at the large number of abstracts following our call for papers that were submitted from around the world describing an enormous range of innovations in the social work education online space. Similar to the Australian Social Work special issue e-Professionalism and the ethical use of technology in social work edited by Donna McAuliffe and Sharlene Nipperess (2017), our papers reflect the ongoing contestation and challenge for social work of moving beyond previous notions of social work only being “real” when taught and practised face-to-face, and the importance of recognising that a virtual space requires careful consideration of issues such as equity, ethics and resourcing. The papers in this special issue, like those in previous special issues about the use of technology in social work, highlight the need for consideration of students’ emotional wellbeing and development of resilience in the new online environment. This is particularly the case due to the disinhibiting effect of online technologies on students’ communication styles often learnt through their use of other social media platforms.

Unique to this current special issue is a focus on some of the unanticipated outcomes and successes discovered by authors who are active in the online social work education space, alongside some of the risks. A scoping paper written by the editors draws attention to some of the key tensions and opportunities afforded by technology in social work education in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. This is followed by a paper by Amy Cleland and
Shepard Masocha who foreground Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. In their paper, they explore the use of 3D avatar technology to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives and epistemologies. Created at the University of South Australia social work program, the simulation is designed to invite students to think critically about culturally responsive practice involving self-harm and suicidal ideation. As the authors note, the teaching innovation they describe raises many important questions about the ethics and politics of Aboriginal representation in social work education generally, especially in relation to digital learning tools and techniques. The authors reflect on this issue and their learning with an Indigenous advisory group on the 3D simulated learning project, highlighting several complexities that need careful consideration.

Ann Carrington then introduces her practice reflections from teaching a social work skills course online within an Australian Bachelor of Social Work course, where she highlights the beneficial aspects of both online and face-to-face learning modes for preparing graduates for 21st Century practice. For example, modern practice demands the ability to interact and collaborate professionally online. She observes student discomfort and concern with change despite understandings that the use of technology forms part of a professional skills toolkit. Issues to consider, however, concern whether or not students studying in flexible mode (combination of on- and off-campus) are at a disadvantage by not being able to practise their skills over time rather than in a four-day intensive. Furthermore, her reflections show that using technology is an integral part of social work skills and is not a means of cost cutting, due to the additional work and commitment required of social work academics to teach in the online environment.

Renae Summers and Jane Cowie, in their review of scholarly literature and practice reflection, highlight the value of technology-enhanced, practice-based learning in social work education when educators pay attention to the myriad of student emotions experienced during this form of learning. They argue that high-quality online education attends to the emotional components of learning. It is student-centred, where facilitators apply their social work skills to engage students in online learning and facilitate online groups in order to support learning, manage group dynamics, and promote critical reflection. Importantly, they bring to the fore the often-controversial and potentially risky technique of inviting students to bring their own personal experiences into practice interviews and explain their methods for managing this in safe ways.

Turning now to a field of practice very important to social work, a paper written by Caitlin Elsaesser and Angela Bellas in the United States covers the use of online technologies for specific knowledge and competence in a range of fields of practice, including mental health diagnosis. Her conceptual paper provides critical reflection on the pedagogical lessons learned from teaching an asynchronous, online, mental health diagnosis course that is part of the foundational curriculum for a Master of Social Work degree at a public university in the United States. Elsaesser and Bellas conclude that mental health diagnosis may be taught effectively online but this is greatly facilitated by the use of a community of inquiry framework. It is worth noting the different roles and terminologies used across countries since, in Australia, social workers might not be involved in diagnosis in clinical settings but would be more likely to perform mental health assessments.
Social work educators in Aotearoa New Zealand highlighted further unanticipated outcomes in studies described in this special edition. For example, contrary to some oft-cited assumptions about experienced social work educators, the participants in Nicky Stanley-Clarke's Aotearoa New Zealand study described a creative use of ICT and embraced the possibilities and potential as technology continued to develop – especially as ICT was seen as enhancing, not replacing, other teaching methods. In another Aotearoa New Zealand study, Deb Stanfield’s exploration of the use of social media in social work education highlights how this pedagogy aligns with the participatory, democratic promise of social media and how this has been adopted by social work educators. Her paper contributes important guidance on what social workers should be taught about social media, its ideology, cultural discourses, and meaning for citizens. In contrast, Rachel Schwartz and colleagues’ paper highlights some of the risks inherent in the use of social media in social work education, as highlighted by some poignant composite examples of Facebook posts. She coins the term disinhibition effect to describe the lack of courtesy and increasing conflict that can be generated in the absence of the ability to read the mood of a virtual space or room.

As an antidote to the disinhibition effect from asynchronous discussion boards and text-based feedback, Julia Kleinschmit and Liz Rembold, also in the United States, write about the Flipgrid system, which is designed to reduce social distance through using an interactive video discussion platform with both undergraduate and postgraduate social work cohorts. The authors note that students appeared to prefer Flipgrid because facial expression, body language, and vocal intonation made it easier to understand communication intent. Students reported being excited when receiving notifications of new videos posted in the grid, similar to interacting with other forms of social media.

In addition to these papers, the groundbreaking book by Laurel Iverson Hitchcock, Melanie Sage and Nancy Smyth, Teaching Social Work with Digital Technology (2019) was published during the year of preparation for this special issue and we are fortunate to be able to also include a review of this work by Sevi Vassos in this special issue. Vassos highlights the way in which the digital practices of the authors fed into the collection of papers about the topic suggesting it is a great resource for social work educators on how to use technology in ways that incorporate social work values.

We would like to acknowledge the 30 authors who submitted abstracts that were not included in this volume and to thank everyone for their interest in, and enthusiasm for, the production of this special issue.

References


Centring Aboriginal Epistemologies: Development of a 3D Simulation for Social Work Education

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ABSTRACT
This paper derives from a presentation delivered at the 2018 ANZSWWER Symposium New Technology: Disrupting Social Work Practice and Perceptions. The authors discuss the experiences and challenges of developing a 3D simulation involving an Aboriginal client presenting with suicidal ideation and indicators of self-harm. When completed, the 3D simulation will be used as a key teaching tool in the social work program at the University of South Australia (UniSA). Based on relationships with the Centre for Child Protection at the University of Kent, the simulation evolved into this context for Australian-based social work education and the need to prepare practitioners to develop the knowledge, values and skills for culturally responsive practice when working with Aboriginal Australians. An opportunity presented itself to develop a simulation for teaching that would allow for the development of knowledge and competencies in a digital environment. This simulated environment will afford a safe space within which students will explore themselves in relation to Aboriginal epistemologies and provide opportunities to contextualise that knowledge to fields of practice. The development of this teaching tool has presented a range of unforeseen considerations concerning the politics of representation when utilising new technologies in Aboriginal contexts, which the authors reflect on in this paper.

Keywords: Aboriginal knowledges; Social work education; Teaching and learning; Digital learning; Intentional self-harm
Acknowledgements
The activity described in this paper would not have been possible without the benevolence of people we refer to throughout as the “Steering Group”. Consisting of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, the generosity inherent in Indigenous ways of being and doing are strongly reflected in this project and the authors would like to acknowledge those members.

INTRODUCTION
Australian social work education and practice predominantly operates from Western, Eurocentric worldviews and perpetuates the colonisation of Aboriginal Knowledges and Peoples (Joseph, 2015; Midgley, 2008; Pease, 2010). The need to disrupt existing approaches to social work teaching and learning, and move towards new ways that centre Aboriginal Knowledges, Aboriginal epistemologies and representation, has been more than sufficiently argued (Dudgeon & Fielder, 2006; Martin, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Watson, 2014). Throughout the paper, we will use the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interchangeably with Indigenous Australian, to reflect the nomenclatures familiar to most readers. In addition to this, the people involved in the project that will be discussed in this paper represent both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Nations therefore it is appropriate to name as both. The term Aboriginal is also used to respect the decision of local Aboriginal people whom we work with, who request the term Aboriginal be used in this context. The authors not only appreciate, but live the experience of the diversity of Indigenous people in Australia, and acknowledge that the language used in this paper cannot do justice to that diversity. Limiting our language use also ensures confidentiality which is an important consideration underpinning the development of the project.

Within Australia, the imperatives for a nuanced understanding of Aboriginal worldviews is underscored by the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in social and health statistics including those related to suicide and intentional self-harm. Despite constituting only 3% of Australia’s total population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disproportionately overrepresented within national statistics of deaths where suicide is attributed, along with reported incidences of intentional self-harm. The Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that in the period 2011–2015, intentional self-harm was the leading cause of death among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the 15–24 year age group. In 2017, suicide remained the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged between the ages of 5 and 17 years, with suicide accounting for 40% of all Indigenous child deaths (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged between 15 and 24 years old are over five times more likely to take their lives compared to non-Indigenous peers (Dudgeon, Calma, & Holland, 2017). This equates to 9.3 per 100,000 deaths compared to 1.8 per 100,000 deaths for non-Indigenous persons (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). Research studies have suggested that available statistics underestimate the actual numbers of suicides amongst the Indigenous population (passim: Elliott-Farrelly, 2004; McHugh, Campbell, Chapman, & Balaratnasingam, 2016). Among other reasons, this might be due to under-reporting of suicide as a cause of death, inadequate data covering all cases of suicide attempts and
self-harming behaviours, and inaccurate details of Indigenous status on death certificates (Elliott-Farrelly, 2004).

The causes associated with the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in suicide statistics are multi-layered, complex and interconnected. A comprehensive understanding of these causes should consider the underlying historical, cultural and socio-economic factors; how these factors interact, structure and cumulatively impact on the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; the specific vulnerabilities and risk factors at the individual level; as well as the availability and accessibility of prevention and intervention services (Dudgeon, Calma, & Holland, 2017; Hunter & Milroy, 2006; Tätz, 2001; Westerman, 2004).

The capacity for social work graduates to work effectively with Indigenous people in a range of contexts across social work continually poses as a challenge (Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011; Cleland, 2010; Cleland, Fredericks, & Watson, 2012; Green & Baldry, 2008; Harms et al., 2011). Within social work education, there have been numerous attempts directed towards finding innovative and effective ways of foregrounding Aboriginal epistemologies with a particular focus on curriculum development and field placements (Bennett, Redfern, & Zubrzycki, 2018; Duthie, King, & Mays, 2013; Hendrick, 2015). Significant questions remain on how universities can better engage learners and prepare social work students for the work they will be doing with the First Nations of Australia (Cleland, 2015). Given the depth and complexity of health and social disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal Australians, and the nature of colonialism largely unaddressed in the country, there is much work to be done. Disruption to the present ways of teaching and learning is crucial (Dumbrill & Green, 2008; Fejo-King & Briskman, 2009) as is innovation. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) have established positive foundations for the types of curriculum development needed across the discipline and the modes through which that education is delivered have immense scope. Through the education and accreditation standards for preparing practitioners in Australia, and the ethical code that guides practice (AASW, 2010, 2012), educators can engage with the perspectives of Aboriginal practitioners to inform developments in their teaching and learning.

This paper discusses the authors’ experiences and challenges of developing an innovative virtual 3D simulation involving an Aboriginal client presenting with suicidal ideation and indicators of self-harm. The paper illuminates the specific ways in which methodologies and processes for developing 3D virtual simulations can be adapted in ways that foreground Aboriginal epistemologies, world views, and practice wisdom thus providing a unique innovative teaching and learning tool. We reflect on the journey undertaken in developing this simulation paying attention to the unforeseen range of considerations encountered. In particular, the politics of representations when utilising new technologies in Aboriginal contexts. The approach in this paper is to reflect upon the why and how we have done this process in order to centre Aboriginal epistemologies. Over the course of developing the project, there have been learnings that could inform the ways in which others might engage with this technology. Virtual simulations present a range of possibilities that positively disrupt both the research and teaching and learning spaces in relation to Aboriginal content.
PRESENT TEACHING OF ABORIGINAL CONTENT IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The teaching and research work surrounding Aboriginal content in the social work programs at the authors’ university, has centred around the question of what is needed to prepare practitioners to work effectively with Indigenous Australian people (Cleland, 2015). Models of cultural competency development are presently used as they are translated in real life terms when contextualised for working with Indigenous People of Australia. The social work courses are informed by Aboriginal literature, lived experience and practice wisdom. Yet the main components of Aboriginal content are not so much learning about Aboriginal Peoples cultures and cultural practices, but about understanding self and the social work profession in relation to Indigenous Australian people. Students start their lifelong journeys of learning in that space which operates chiefly from that understanding. The teaching is aimed at a predominantly non-Indigenous cohort of students yet is inclusive of ensuring the cultural safety of Indigenous students. The development of this simulation builds upon the existing approach to teaching Aboriginal epistemologies in the social work programs at the authors’ university, in both content and pedagogy, yet within a new platform of interactive engagement.

SIMULATIONS IN SOCIAL WORK TEACHING AND LEARNING

A simulation can be defined as a pedagogic tool that uses “a real world problem in a realistic environment to promote critical thinking, problem solving, and learning” (Nimmagadda & Murphy, 2014, p. 540). Social work has a long history of using simulated practice environments as teaching and learning tools. This is evidenced by the widespread use of paper-based case studies, role plays (Kane, 2003; Moss, 2000), standardised actors (Koprowska, 2003; Logie, Bogo, Regehr, & Regehr, 2013; Mole, Scarlett, Campbell, & Themessl-Huber, 2006; Petracchi & Collins, 2006; Robins et al., 2008; Sunarich & Rowan, 2017) and skills laboratories (Dodds, Heslop, & Meredith, 2018; Zufferey & King, 2016).

Advances in gaming technologies are enabling the development of cost-effective, immersive, virtual, social work simulations which offer higher levels of fidelity, authenticity and interactivity. For instance, an immersive 2D virtual simulation (Rosie 2) has been developed by the University of Kent’s Centre for Child Protection to simulate a child protection environment and provides opportunities to undertake a virtual home visit to a family where there are significant concerns in relation to child neglect (Reeves, Drew, Shemmings, & Ferguson, 2015). There is emerging evidence of how Second Life, an open-access platform which enables users to create their own virtual worlds where they can interact with other users, can be used to create 3D simulations. Wilson, Brown, Wood, and Farkas (2013) discuss how the development of a virtual 3D simulation of a home visit in Second Life enhanced the capacity within an MSW program to teach and learn practice skills. Tandy, Vernon, and Lynch (2017) report how students were able to interact with a virtual client on Second Life as part of exercises aimed at developing interviewing skills. In the area of mental health, a virtual simulation has been developed which enables students to undertake an assessment of a virtual patient and is reported to be improving students’ clinical interviewing skills and diagnostic accuracy (Washburn, Bordnick, & Rizzo, 2016).
The use of 2D and 3D simulations in teaching and learning social work is underpinned by learning theories. For adults, learning is most meaningful when it takes place in contexts that provide opportunities for concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation—people learn best by doing, reflecting, thinking, and re-doing (Kolb, 1984). Within 2D and 3D simulations, students are provided with authentic practice tasks which require them to translate their knowledge, theories and skills into practice. As they simulate the real world of social work practice, 2D and 3D simulations provide a number of new opportunities to teaching and learning social work. They are immersive due to the engaging storylines of the simulations. Students can actually see themselves as part of the story and being involved in the conversations taking place. This can evoke strong emotions from students (Tandy et al., 2017). They are interactive and provide students with opportunities to take control of how the storyline develops and students can make decisions without harming anyone. As such, students can take risks to see how different decisions play out. Simulations also offer opportunities for students to pause and reflect on their practice, and can re-practise and try different styles of communication, for example, resulting in different outcomes. In this sense, simulations provide students with opportunities for experiential learning which can help to integrate theory and practice in an applied way.

Within Australia, there is very little evidence of a widespread use of immersive, virtual simulations in teaching and learning social work. It is also noteworthy that the immersive 2D and 3D simulations that have been discussed thus far focus on mainstream clients with little or no attention on Aboriginal client groups, yet this is a particularly challenging area of practice. Our project sought to represent part of this neglected practice context and its unique challenges.

KIRRA: A 3D SUICIDE RISK SIMULATION

Kirra is a 3D simulation in the final stages of development. It was funded by an internal teaching and learning grant from the authors’ university as well as significant in-kind support from an IT industry partner. The simulation is centred on the main character, Kirra, who is a 14-year-old girl identified as Aboriginal. She has come from a remote Aboriginal community to board and study at a private school in a metropolitan city. She has prior known episodes of intentional self-harm and is presenting particular concerning factors that suggest she is again at risk of suicide. The simulation therefore aims to present this case in a range of ways that students need to detect and note. There are physical aspects about Kirra, words she says, and other peripheral factors to assess including reports written about Kirra, referral notes, et cetera. The main focus of the simulation that has derived from its development are the critical reflection and learning points for students to discuss what the simulation brings up for them and their knowledge and social positioning, their own values and beliefs in relation to Aboriginal people and so-called “issues”. The simulation draws on gaming conventions but is strongly underpinned by Aboriginal knowledges and worldviews, extensive research, social work theories and practice wisdom derived from an interprofessional steering group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In later sections, we reflect on how we sought to centre Aboriginal epistemologies and worldviews in relation to the design and process of developing the simulation.
IMPORTANT ACKNOWLEDGMENTS WHEN EXPLORING ABORIGINAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

In the Australian context, there are a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars who have taken up the responsibility and challenge of translating the terrain between non-Aboriginal and Indigenous or Aboriginal Knowledges (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2008; Nakata, 1998; Watson, 1998). Attempts to educate others about Aboriginal epistemologies are complex and the limitations of any attempts to do so are highlighted in the literature—there are important acknowledgements to be made here and how this discussion relates to this project.

Foley (2003) discusses the paradigm of the late Professor Japanangka errol West. West describes the foundations of epistemology as a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, methods and limits of human knowledge (p. 47) and that, whilst Aboriginal Australians know the origin, nature, methods and limits of their knowledge systems they are all equally diverse. This is reflected in the multiplicity of First Nations in Australia and is explored in the literature, but this is also just a common understanding amongst Aboriginal people generally. The academics referred to earlier, and others, have carved the space to preserve and develop our respective Indigenous epistemological positions (Foley, 2003, p. 50) yet the diversity of those positions is often the challenge for Western engagement, or at the interface, with Indigenous Knowledges (Nakata, 1998). It is the aim, with this simulation then, to reflect those diverse epistemological understandings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people directly involved in the project with a focus on the knowledge areas related to social work and welfare education. This project subscribes to the understanding of the complexities and limitations and the position we take is well described by Marie Battiste and James Youngblood Henderson:

We are not creating a grand theory or a universal conceptualisation of Indigenous knowledge or heritage. We are intimately aware that each Indigenous regime is characteristic of the creative adaptation of a people to an ecological order. Given the ecological diversity, a corresponding diversity of Indigenous languages, knowledge, and heritage exists. For any research to seek to give a comprehensive definition of Indigenous knowledge and heritage in any language system would be a massive undertaking, which would probably be misleading. (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, pp. 40–41)

There are limits to how far Aboriginal epistemologies can be comprehended from a Eurocentric point of view (Battiste, 1998) including points of view derived through the use of the English language. The ways this project reflects understanding of this is engaging with the structures underlying Aboriginal epistemologies with respect to how knowledge is transmitted; through Aboriginal languages, oral and symbolic, through modelling, experience and practice.

Therefore, what this simulation ultimately intends to do is start the conversation amongst Aboriginal people about the ability (or otherwise) to transfer and represent Aboriginal epistemologies in new technologies. It is not intended to be, and cannot be representative of, an all-encompassing Aboriginal world view nor of privileging one Nation’s Knowledges.
over another. Are there safe ways of conveying Aboriginality using new technologies? What can we discuss? What can’t we discuss?

What has evolved from starting this conversation, and probably most importantly, was the significance of drawing in opportunities for students to analyse the range of perspectives and experiences that non-Aboriginal people bring to conversations about Aboriginality, and ways to explore any misconceptions about Aboriginal epistemologies. We have done this through the methodology deployed, and the methods used, both of which have ultimately enabled the design of the simulation to reflect content that is relevant and considered vital for a predominantly non-Aboriginal audience.

METHODOLOGY

The narrative that accompanies the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander statistics maintains that, whilst young Indigenous Australians are more likely than non-Indigenous young people to suicide and self-harm, we know very little from research and literature about Aboriginal understandings of suicide, intervention and treatment (Elliott-Farrelly, 2004) although the tide is changing (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project, 2016; Westerman, 2010). This project acknowledges this and, in its design, has consciously acted to articulate and convey the practice wisdom and lived experience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are leading this simulation. This has enabled the simulation to become representative of the known experiences of suicide and intentional self-harm, not contextually specific, and will be presented as such in the final product. It is not intended to be, or reflect, an exhaustive representation of Aboriginal suicidology across Australia, as that is an impossibility given the specificity of experiences according to regions and localities that are reflected in the literature, and as outlined in the preceding section in relation to epistemologies. This simulation intended to start an exploration amongst technology and Aboriginal places and spaces. The process of doing this, however, has understandably raised the need to examine our responsibilities regarding representation and questions about the compatibility of technology with Aboriginality.

Development of the Steering Group

The aim of this project was to explore the role of simulations in social work education in Australia particularly, utilising the 3D interface in an Aboriginal context. Aboriginal research requires a research design that allows for time to invest in relationships, ownership of Aboriginal peoples in the design and production of the research, and flexibility in the ways that research grants are administered (AIATSIS, 2012; Brady, 1992; Smith, 1999). These are not investments that mainstream research traditionally allows for, however, they have been pertinent in the conduct of this research.

For the process and intent of the simulation, it was vital that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were central to the research team and were a majority representation in the project overall. There are five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the research team and three non-Aboriginal people. The Steering Group advises on all aspects of the content development, story and characters, and would reach any consensus required with respect to final decisions about the simulation. This would ensure that Aboriginal
epistemologies were at the centre of everything that was done within the simulation. The Steering Group is made up of senior practitioners with experience in Aboriginal mental health work, who also hold Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities. The Steering Group is the place where all consultation about the simulation occurred and key decisions were made in relation to the key components of the simulation such the identification of its learning outcomes, intent, script development, the client/avatar, the workplace environment, and the approach to the client. Discussions with the Steering Group brought about the practice wisdom to inform the composite character and “case” that is being presented in the simulation, as well as ideas about how to show Aboriginal epistemologies in the simulation. The Steering Group allowed the rhetoric to become reality for articulating what are Aboriginal epistemologies that are relevant to non-Aboriginal practitioners.

**Representing the misrepresented**

In developing a 3D representation of a young Aboriginal person and two Aboriginal practitioners, a realistic appraisal of the stereotypes that exist about Aboriginal people was needed. Uncomfortable as this conversation may be for some, it is essential in being able to ascertain and more importantly, avoid perpetuating misrepresentations of Aboriginal people. While the research team consists of members who reflect both light- and dark-skinned people, the conversation about likeness in the simulation continues to be a sensitive yet powerful discussion and raises questions about authenticity in the digital learning environment. Upon reflection, however, this conversation flowed quite easily for Aboriginal members of the research team yet it may be a consideration for others who want to embark on this work.

The simulation required development of a number of Aboriginal avatars; the figures that would represent the people in the simulation. Firstly, that of “the client”, a 14-year-old Aboriginal girl, along with two Aboriginal mental health practitioners, both male, both middle aged. Conversations about the nomenclatures and appropriate terms of reference for Indigenous Australian people were needed, which required exploration of the diversity of Indigenous Australian peoples and what we were specifically trying to represent in this simulation. Again, in not wanting to represent cases from specific places and times, the simulation is designed to be representative of the cumulative factors and experiences that the research team have encountered in their areas of practice. This intends to ensure anonymity in the simulation but also authenticity.

**Challenges: conveying Aboriginality in technology**

When working across disciplines and across fields with varying degrees of cultural knowledge and competencies working with Aboriginal people, the challenges are quite surmountable. With the addition of exploring new technologies, the challenges again multiply. This is said in the context of experience, in working with an interface that appears incompatible with Aboriginal existence. An interface of both people and technology that is challenged to grasp what an Aboriginal person looks like and what an Aboriginal person sounds like, and what an Aboriginal person experiences in life; individually and collectively. The project was to create people and places that would not be offensive, and people and places that could not be identified discretely, yet have a likeness. How does one do this particularly in circumstances where technical partners have very little knowledge about Aboriginal people and have no experience working with Aboriginal people?
What we found quickly is that the presently available technology does not provide for Aboriginal avatars. Further to that, technical partners bring a myriad of their own pre-conceived notions about Aboriginal people. This was detected early in the development of this simulation and a challenge that needed to be addressed at every step of the project. For example, if the scenario was one of a non-Aboriginal client, there exists a wide-ranging scope of available avatars with depictions across gender and age groups that can be selected. In the Aboriginal context, there were none. We had to invent our own. Technical partners need to be invested from initial iterations through to a final product and two years on, we are only now finalising the composite characters. We have found that, even our advanced drafts of the characters still produced stereotypes, and even failed entirely to reflect reality for example, dark skin colours. This raises the question of technology's compatibility with Aboriginality itself; the focus for another project entirely.

It is important for anyone embarking on work in the 3D space to not compromise on any limitations imposed by technology or technical partners and to maintain emphasis on the discipline knowledge being depicted with authenticity. The authors have needed to actively challenge each phase of developing the simulation to ensure the programmers are not only aware of, but also respect the sensitivities and complexities of Aboriginal representation and the content being presented. Their understanding and respect therefore, should be reflected in the products they create.

Despite these challenges, the project is pedagogically strategic through the design of the avatars, particularly of Kirra and, upon reflection, the absence of existing Aboriginal avatars enabled this project to explore the possibilities. The development of Kirra as a character in both story and in appearance is designed to spark discussion about how the students engage with notions of Aboriginality, what constitutes an Aboriginal person, and to explore their own beliefs, values and attitudes about Aboriginal people. This is the dialogue that is encouraged through the design of the avatar relative to skin colour, facial features, hairstyle and overall presentation, including clothing. Through the avatar and the composite case and characters, there are a number of opportunities to teach students about various aspects that are relevant to working with young Aboriginal people and Aboriginal practitioners in relation to suicide.

**What this simulation aims to teach**

It is impossible to know all things about all people and, with the diversity amongst Aboriginal people and communities, educating in such a way would be inept. How are Aboriginal epistemologies being defined? What aspects of Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2003) could be reflected in this simulation? The work of the Steering Group has been the means of providing answers to those questions and it is their expertise and practice wisdom that has guided the storyline, actions of the client, Kirra, and the processes of the mental health practitioners who receive Kirra's referral. The Steering Group has allowed the composite characters and story to reflect real-life experiences of living and working amongst the epidemic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide. By depicting this, the simulation aims to teach students about those lived experiences and furthermore, the aspects they need to explore in preparing them for the work they might do in this context.
Through the contextual background of the scenario, through Kirra’s story and the development of the practitioner’s journey in the case, the simulation aims to teach and explore a number of themes and specific content. The design of this simulation intends to evoke the same types of issues that come up for students in the current ways that the course is taught; presently face-to-face and online modes structured around weekly lectures and workshops, which bring up questions for students about how they view and respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The question is, how can we do that in ways that are respectful and do not perpetuate or generate new stereotypes and misrepresentations about Aboriginal people? Our interactions with the technology through dialogue, visuals and interactions attempt to approach these issues sensitively and, as mentioned earlier, to purposely draw out discussion for students about representation.

The topic areas that this simulation addresses include historical and contemporary contexts across a variety of themes. Historically, the simulation exposes students to colonialism and some of the legislation and practices of Assimilation, Segregation and Protection. This knowledge is brought in through the story of Kirra’s home community in the present day with a description of how it was a church-operated mission as part of the practices of colonialism. The simulation does not, however, identify a particular community in real life and instead is a composite of a number of remote Aboriginal communities.

The simulation addresses how education has been used to assimilate Aboriginal people into white Australian values, ideals and practices and to explore Kirra’s experience in contemporary times as an extension of those ideas and practices. Students can see the pressures on young Aboriginal people of living between and amongst two worlds, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds, and how this impacts on Kirra as she is away from her community at the boarding school (Mattingley, 1998). Kirra’s home community provides her with a solid basis of family, kinship, community, culture and country. The simulation situates Kirra in a private boarding school in a metropolitan city, reflecting a common experience for young Aboriginal people, and one which forms the basis of other learnings about the factors impacting on Kirra’s presenting factors that are of concern including isolation, racism and discrimination.

The simulation provides students with resources to understand the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in order to comprehend that cultural competencies are required across a diverse range of Nation groups, regions and localities. It is intended that students will explore the diverse terms of reference used in Indigenous contexts and how the naming of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as “Indigenous”, as “Aboriginal” et cetera, have been imposed identities through the processes of colonialism. Without identifying a particular Nation group in terms of Kirra’s identity, using background reading and other resources to spark visual cues, students will gain the knowledge required to apply in real-life situations and will be able to understand the research and lines of enquiry they are expected to undertake each and every time they work with a new Aboriginal people or community. Practitioners who do so are better able to identify the appropriate terminology, culture, historical and contemporary experiences of clients they will encounter and will avoid some common mistakes that are seen in practice settings.
The simulation aims to provide a space to challenge stereotypes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; young people and practitioners. Again, being pedagogically strategic, the composite of Kirra herself is designed to challenge pre-conceived ideas about young Aboriginal people that the Steering Group collectively knows exist. Therefore, Kirra’s skin colour, the way she dresses, the fact that she is a high-performing student according to mainstream definitions, and is well spoken, aims to challenge any pre-conceived notions students might bring to the idea of an “Aboriginal young person”. The intent behind this discussion has been developed by honest discussions about how Aboriginal young people experience prejudice, essentialism, racism and discrimination and the need to address this amongst non-Aboriginal people who are training for social work.

The simulation loosely addresses gender considerations as they relate to both mainstream and Aboriginal practice ideas; loosely, in that the need to avoid stereotypes became evident and also to avoid appropriation of Aboriginal Knowledge. Kirra is a young Aboriginal girl from a remote Aboriginal community and the two mental health practitioners are both male and Aboriginal. This discussion is designed to spark thinking about gender and practice, and to open students’ understanding of the complexities. However, it is not intended to teach students about Aboriginal cultural practices pertaining to gender that are not to be shared with non-Aboriginal people. It is a matter of being aware of them. Students will explore gender through both a culturally specific and social work lens which will enable students to understand what they, as professionals, may need to consider in practice.

Through the immersive and engaging storyline of the simulation, Aboriginal relationality and ways of working are depicted. The experiences of practitioners engaging young Aboriginal people in talking about mental health, from their positions as Aboriginal people, is perhaps being recorded for the first time in this simulation and are discussed as vital in a process described by Westerman (2010). For example, in the script when the worker meets Kirra, he connects himself through kinship by talking about his identity and discusses his knowledge of Kirra’s home community. The worker talks about the importance of the country on which he is meeting with Kirra, inviting her into the local community networks that are available to her and that are missing since she is living away from her home community—an understood fundamental to Aboriginal health and wellbeing. There are differences in the ways that Aboriginal practitioners can and cannot engage young Aboriginal people compared to non-Aboriginal practitioners. There is a need to record and further understand, furthermore respect, what those differences are. The idea of who is best placed to work with Aboriginal people is an ongoing discussion and we draw upon Joyleen Koolmatrie’s honest assessment of this idea (Koolmatrie & Williams, 2000).

CONCLUSION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are increasingly facing circumstances that ultimately lead to lives lost. The need to explore any and all opportunities to address the statistics is crucial, particularly with regard to preparing practitioners to adequately respond. Social work has a role to play in improving responses to Aboriginal child suicide and self-harm and this project sought to explore the possibilities of representing Aboriginal epistemologies in new technology for teaching.
This paper reflects a work in progress on the development of a 3D, interactive simulation about Aboriginal suicide. The simulation is designed to be a teaching tool in the social work programs at the University of South Australia (UniSA) yet the applications are proving to be broader in scope. Embarking on the project, the process and challenges were undefined simply through the nature of its innovation and the desire to walk the talk when it comes to developing curriculum and teaching materials that relate to representing Aboriginal epistemologies.

The formulation of a Steering Group comprising only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are practitioners with a history of research and practice with young Aboriginal people in mental health was not only necessary, it was essential. The Steering Group as the researchers brings authenticity to all facets of work in developing the simulation and, without it, would continue the reproduction of non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal Knowledges. When everything is in place, we hope this will be a template for others. We hope that the benefits of using new technologies in social work and welfare education are realised and visible, through actively engaging students in their studies.

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Online and Blended Methods for Teaching Interpersonal Skills and Teaching Professional Online Interpersonal Skills in Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal skills are one of eight aspects of practice identified by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) as required to achieve competency. Face-to-face has been the preferred method for teaching these skills, yet the shift to online and blended learning models in higher education has encouraged social work educators to teach interpersonal skills online, resulting in rigorous debate within the discipline about the effectiveness of such an approach. Additional motives to teach these skills online include access, inclusivity and development of authentic professional skills and assessment. In this context, the author redeveloped the core interpersonal skills subject, within a BSW course, to facilitate the development of students’ interpersonal skills online. As a result of introducing the blended and online teaching methods, new content was included to teach students professional online interpersonal skills. This paper presents the author’s reflections on the process of design, implementation and evaluation of the project. The reflections explore strategies and areas for consideration useful to others wanting to engage in online teaching or teaching online interpersonal skills. The author argues for the need to shift focus from debates about online teaching methods to developing best practice for teaching social work students professional online interpersonal skills.

Keywords: Online skills development; Online interpersonal skills; Blended learning; Online assessment
INTRODUCTION

Teaching, learning and skills development in the online environment is gaining increased attention in social work (Dombo, Kays, & Weller, 2014; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017). The higher education sector is increasingly moving online to cut cost and stay competitive (Jones, 2015; Smith & Jeffery, 2013) but this move has caused some tensions with subjects focused on teaching skills development, such as interpersonal and counselling skills. The development of interpersonal skills is one of eight aspects of practice identified as required to be a social worker (AASW, 2013). Face-to-face has traditionally been the preferred method for teaching interpersonal skills and there are concerns that online and blended teaching methods do not provide adequate opportunity for quality skills development (Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016; Jones, 2015). However, there are examples of online and blended methods proving to be successful in the development of interpersonal skills (Goldingay & Land, 2014; Jerry & Collins, 2005; Maple, Jarrott, & Kuyini, 2013; Ouellette, Westhuis, Marshall, & Chang, 2006; Wilke, King, Ashmore, & Stanley, 2016). For example, Ouellette et al. (2006) found that, when comparing results from two groups of undergraduate students, (one group taught online and the other taught in the classroom) there was no significant difference in the development of interviewing skills as assessed by an independent expert evaluator.

The shift to online and blended learning models in the higher education sector places further pressure on social work academics to teach interpersonal skills online. This paper results from such pressures and presents the author’s reflections on the process of design, delivery and evaluation of a small project that redeveloped the core interpersonal skills subjects, within a BSW course, to facilitate the development of students’ interpersonal skills using online and blended methods. The project developed and utilised online assessment and online and blended learning teaching methods. To support these teaching methods, new content was incorporated into the curriculum to support the students to engage with the technology and to learn appropriate online interpersonal social work skills. The author concludes that social work should be encouraged to move beyond the debate regarding whether interpersonal skills can, or should, be taught online to arguing that in the current practice context, where social workers are now required to work online using a range of technologies (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017), it is necessary to teach students professional online skills using online technology to ensure authentic development and assessment of skills.

Before exploring each aspect of the project in more detail, the current context regarding online and blended teaching methods will be explored, specifically in relation to teaching interpersonal skills. The background of the project will then be presented before examining the aspects of design, implementation and evaluation. Implications for practice will then be reviewed before discussing the author’s experience within the broader context, followed by final concluding thoughts.

CURRENT CONTEXT

The shift to online and blended learning models in the higher education sector has encouraged social work educators to look to teaching interpersonal skills online. Moving
teaching and learning online, with reduced student contact hours, has caused some tensions between the AASW and the social work education sector, particularly in the context of skills development (Goldingay & Land, 2014). Concerns regarding the quality and efficacy of online training in skills development have been noted, while Gates and Dauenhauer (2016) and Jones (2015) and others have argued that teaching skills online can be effective, and have highlighted other reasons to consider moving to online teaching, including access, inclusivity and development of authentic practice skills and assessment (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017).

The move to online and blended learning environments has perhaps not always been informed by pedagogy but rather the neoliberal managerialist university system that requires a more cost-effective and efficient business model (Jones, 2015; Smith & Jeffery, 2013). This move to online has been seen as a cost-saving process reducing teaching contact hours in workload while creating a set of new, invisible work and administrative tasks not captured in workload models (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). Regardless of one's ideas of time and cost, the push within the higher education sector to move to online and blended teaching methods, to be accessible and responsive to a diverse and changing student market, is a driving force (Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016).

In contrast to the pressure to move online by the university sector, social work’s accrediting body (AASW) is holding firm on requirements of a minimum of 20 days face-to-face hours by students to ensure students have the opportunity to interact with their peers and other experienced practitioners (AASW, 2015). The online, synchronous, and simulation learning modes are not perceived by the AASW as meeting the learning objectives of practice skills subjects, with the presumption that this can only occur face-to-face (Goldingay & Land, 2014). Within this context, then, it may be that social work academics are placed under additional pressure with workload by trying to meet two opposing agendas.

Mock counselling sessions, role plays and real time supervision are traditional face-to-face strategies which have now been adapted for an online blended learning environment (Cicco, 2011; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009). Examples such as these demonstrate that, with advances in technology, the gaps between traditional ways (face-to-face) and new ways (online/blended) are closing. Further, the theoretical principles underpinning blended courses and approaches to teaching remain unchanged from traditional courses (Jerry & Collins, 2005; Levin, Whitsett, & Wood, 2013).

It is suggested that blended and online learning can present issues in the areas of engagement and participation, learning activities, technological challenges, socialisation, etiquette, ethics and nonverbal cues, across the semester (Levin et al., 2013). Whilst some of these may be specific to online learning environments, the author argues that many are also experienced as barriers in face-to-face teaching. The author supports Levin et al. (2013) in acknowledging that online and blended options can be better in some areas, such as privacy and easy management of online breakout rooms (Levin et al., 2013). Privacy here means that practice sessions cannot be overheard by other students, as would be possible in a traditional classroom, as conversations occurring in breakout rooms cannot be heard by others. In this case, even the teacher has to be in the actual breakout room to hear the
conversation. This allows students to engage with their peers as they would face-to-face but with the additional level of privacy created in the breakout rooms.

One important difference Levin et al. (2013) highlighted was the issue of managing student expectations regarding the requirements of online learning. The online option is often seen by students as the easy option that requires less engagement. This perspective is frequently mirrored institutionally where the online option is often seen by management as a cost-saving method of delivery requiring fewer contact hours (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Jones, 2015). However, this is proving to be inaccurate.

Beyond the argument as to if online and blended methods are effective in teaching interpersonal skills is the argument that online interpersonal skills need to be developed and taught. This aligns with a pedagogy of authentic skills development and recognises that the teaching and practising of skills in online environments provides students opportunities for authentic skills development (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017). The additional skills development relating to the use of technologies, and the adaptation of interpersonal skills to online environments, is essential training (Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017) as social workers are increasingly expected to work in the online environment in the field (Humphries & Camilleri, 2002), to address such issues as access and inclusion. This proposition is supported by Baker, Warburton, Hodgkin, and Pascal (2014), Boddy and Dominelli (2017) and McAuliffe and Nipperess (2017) who assert the need to train students in online skills.

**PROJECT BACKGROUND**

This project aimed to implement online and blended learning methods and technology-supported experiential strategies with a focus on assessment to enhance the learning experience of students. The subject was delivered in blended mode with a combination of online content and a compulsory, on-campus workshop. Additionally, there were a number of fully online activities, including skills practice, peer review, online recording of interviews and online submission of assessment tasks. The project offered opportunities to explore and develop online approaches to support students to acquire the necessary communication and interpersonal skills they need to participate in the emerging technological welfare sector.

Traditionally, the interpersonal skills subject was taught internally or in blended mode (online content with a compulsory on-campus workshop). Reflecting on teaching of this subject in these two modes over a two-year period, the author considered if the blended mode students were at a disadvantage by not being able to practise their skills over time and having practice confined to a four-day, on-campus workshop. Previous experience and the literature (Goldingay & Land, 2014; Jerry & Collins, 2005; Maple, Jarrott, & Kuyini, 2013; Ouellette et al., 2006; Wilke et al., 2016) supported the idea of using online platforms for blended mode students to simulate the on-campus practice experience across the duration of the semester. Consequently, an internal University Teaching and Learning grant, to design and implement changes to the subject with a specific focus on technology-enabled assessment, was secured. After the grant project had been conceptualised, the BSW course underwent a process of restructuring in relation to modes of teaching across all subjects. As a result of these changes, the internal offering of the interpersonal skills
subject was no longer available and all students were required to study interpersonal skills in blended mode. Moving forward, this meant that changes made to simulate the on-campus experience using technology would be important as all students were now required to complete the subject via blended mode.

**Design**

The design of content and assessment tasks based around online interpersonal skills combines professional skills with pedagogically sound practice in providing authentic practice and assessment tasks (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Herrington & Herrington, 2006). The project, to redesign the skills subjects in the BSW, required consideration of how to balance the competing agendas of the AASW, the university and the author’s agenda as an inclusive social work educator with a desire to prepare students for contemporary practice.

The initial process of design included reflecting on assessing current experience and skill level in relation to online and blended learning. The author had some years of experience using a range of online and blended learning methods. Additionally, the literature was consulted for guidance on best practice in online and blended learning approaches in general and what others were doing regarding skills development. Rockinson-Szapkiw and Walker (2009) provided a thorough overview of second-generation, online methods and platforms and also provided a practical list of things to consider in general and specifically relating to teaching skills online. Second-generation methods ranged from basic tools such as discussion threads, wikis, vodcasts, podcasts and collaborative conferencing, etc., facilitated through a central management system, such as Blackboard, to more sophisticated options, such as 3D virtual worlds and simulations.

The university’s educational designer, academic developer, learning system and media management teams were recruited to assist in exploring what was possible within the institution’s platforms and context. The educational designer and academic developer assisted in ensuring that there was alignment within the subject and that the assessment tasks were authentic and relevant to the learning outcomes of the subject. The learning system and media management teams were pivotal in identifying what could realistically be done within the institution’s platforms and areas where there may be a need to go outside. They were also instrumental in developing resources to guide students in the use of the technologies that would be required to complete the subject. This included how to use and record in Zoom, guides on making a Google account and making and submitting YouTube videos.

The new focus on the use of technology and the application of interpersonal skills in an online environment also required that the curriculum content be extended to include the use of technology and online interpersonal skills. As the text for the subject did not cover this topic (although it now does) journal articles were selected to supplement the text (Geldard & Geldard, 2012). The AASW (2016) Ethical Guidelines on Social Media, information and communication technology, parts one, two and three, were included to supplement the content and to establish professional relevance. The topic was introduced in the compulsory on-campus workshop and included group activities requiring students to think critically about their interpersonal skills and how these could be transferred from face-to-face to screen-to-screen modes.
Assessment tasks were redesigned to support the development of online interpersonal skills and online submission (previously recordings of interviews were submitted on USBs). Three assessment tasks were developed that included three levels of review and feedback. At the first assessment students received formative feedback from staff, the second assessment they received peer review and the final assessment required that they engage in critical reflection with summative feedback from staff. The first assessment was a traditional face-to-face interview that was then required to be submitted online using platforms such as YouTube. The second assessment task required the students to practise their interpersonal skills online via Zoom, to provide feedback on their partners’ interviewing skills and to reflect on the feedback they received from their partner. The practice interviews (recorded in Zoom and uploaded to YouTube) and the peer review and self-reflection templates were then submitted online. The final assessment piece required that the students conduct a full interview online in Zoom demonstrating the full set of skills covered in the content of the subject. They were then required to write a piece critically reflecting on their skills’ development in this interview and then across the semesters. All interviews were done in assessment pairs with students from the same class (although pairs did change between assessment 1 and assessments 2/3).

Implementation
Re-designing the assessment and content was straightforward but the implementation provided some challenges. The first obstacle in the implementation of the newly designed subject was the resistance of some students to the study mode itself. As mentioned earlier, changes were made to the mode of delivery at the same time as the online technologies were being included in the subject. Whilst the teaching team saw this as a strength, some of the students, who typically elected to attend subjects taught internally, did not. There was resistance to the move to blended mode and this was compounded by the increased requirements to engage in technology. Therefore, the first level of implementation was to manage student expectations, as cautioned by Levin et al. (2013).

Managing student expectations included dispelling myths and fears about the use of technology and providing a strong rationale for the inclusion of technology and online interpersonal skills development that was strongly linked to practice. For example, when students expressed concerns about their technological skills, teaching staff would respond by acknowledging their fear and reassuring that this subject would provide them with the opportunity to develop these skills. Further, staff would highlight that such skills are necessary to social work practice in the contemporary context. The use of the AASW (2016) ethical guidelines on social media, information and communication technologies assisted with this process.

The inclusion of developing technological skills, and the online interpersonal skills within the learning outcomes for the subject, also assisted in this process. By having these points clearly articulated in the learning outcomes, and included in marking criteria for assessments, it was clear to the students that this was an integral part of the content in this subject and not just a cost-cutting measure, as some students may have perceived it to be. For example, there was a subject learning outcome that included “collaboratively and effectively use audio-visual and online technologies to demonstrate appropriate
interpersonal skills”, marking criteria that examined the “adaption of skills to screen-to-screen interaction” and marking criteria that required students to “critically reflect on the use of interpersonal skill across mediums (e.g. face-to-face and screen-to-screen)”.

Conversely, there was a need to manage student expectations relating to the new level of work and engagement in this subject that previously, when taught in blended mode, did not require engagement outside of the four-day, on-campus workshop. On the one hand, we had internal students feeling they had lost time and engagement and, on the other, there were external students disgruntled at having to engage so much in a blended mode subject. However, there were fewer disgruntled external students than internal students and they seemed to adapt more quickly to the changes with some expressing they appreciated the feeling of connection the online methods provide as traditionally as external students they have felt isolated.

A technique to assist in achieving student “buy-in” was to involve the students in identifying the importance and relevance of online interpersonal skills and technological skills. This was achieved via an in-class exercise during the on-campus workshop. The class activity required students to brainstorm what they would need to consider for interviewing online, what skills would be transferrable to this technology and what other skills they might need to include in specific to screen-to-screen communication. This was a successful exercise as it allowed them to experience its importance, rather than being told of it. More importantly, ideas about transferable skills and new considerations were accrued in individual groups and then shared across the cohort. A broad range of innovative and astute strategies and considerations were shared by the students, such as: the importance of lighting and how this can change your facial expressions; how to position the camera; how much of the self to include in the screen view; and strategies for assisting the interviewee to access the online meeting room. The considerations were insightful and demonstrated, not only a strong understanding of interpersonal skills, but an ability to think critically and laterally and to apply this to the online environment.

In addition to the instructional guides and video, the technology was modelled within the compulsory on-campus workshop. This was done to help allay fears, as many still experienced concern about the use of technology, even with the instructional resources. Typically, this demonstration did not go smoothly (as it had in previous practice sessions) and there were difficulties in sharing the Zoom meeting invitation and accessing the Zoom meeting room. However, the author believes having to troubleshoot in the moment, in the classroom, helped to model problem solving and collegiality, two components considered essential when engaging with technology.

As suggested by Siebert and Spaulding-Givens (2006), actively fostering a collegial environment was core to implementation and meant that “we were in it together” and that we could all call on each other for support, as demonstrated by the author calling on the student to assist in troubleshooting the Zoom demonstration. It was recognised and acknowledged that people within the cohort had a broad range of skills and comfort when it came to using technology and everyone was encouraged to be non-judgmental and supportive. During the on-campus workshop, these attributes were witnessed repeatedly in ways such as
questions to each other and students staying behind to assist other students, even when they were not their assessment partner. With permission not to know everything, people were free to seek help and those that did have the technological skills and capacity were more than willing to share their expertise.

Evaluation
The evaluation presented here is a combination of informal feedback from students, the author's reflections of this feedback and the author's own reflection on practice, including reflection on conversations with the teaching team, colleagues and on formal student feedback.

Reflection—what students expressed
This section presents reflections on the student experiences as expressed by students through the semester. It is acknowledged that this is informal and anecdotal evidence which would need to be formalised in future research.

Although there was some initial resistance and fear around the use of technology and the development of online interpersonal skills, some students expressed that, once they could see the relevance to practice, they were happy to move into the online environment. They saw this as relevant to their development as professionals and were willing to move beyond their own comfort zone to gain online skills relevant to their practice as social workers.

In relation to the task of online practice sessions, some students reflected that it was easier and more convenient to meet with their assessment partners online, as they were able to be more blended around other time commitments, e.g., work and family. This was true, not just for those students who were at a distance, but for students who lived locally to each other. One student explained that it meant she or he could do the practice sessions at night, once the children were in bed, with no need for babysitters, for instance.

A common reflection was of the difficulties with online connections, the quality of the internet service and the subsequent impact on the quality of the connection and communication. While this caused a level of frustration, inspiring the students spoke of plans and solutions to manage this aspect of online communication. It was heartening to see that, rather than making complaints to teaching staff about the task and the barriers in achieving the tasks, students used their critical thinking and problem-solving skills to respond to the situation. One such solution was communication with each other prior to the online interview with contingency plans outlined and guides for best access.

Many students expressed a sense of developing new skills in technology both practically and interpersonally. There was a recognition that people were developing skills in the use of technology previously not familiar to them. There was also acknowledgement that working online helped to develop interpersonal skills in general and specifically to online communication. An example of this was one student explaining the helpfulness of instant feedback through the ability to see their own facial expression and body language on the screen at the same time as the person they were interviewing. This meant they were not only able to adjust their response as deemed necessary but it was important learning they
could then transfer to their face-to-face communications. However, it should be noted that not all students felt that working online assisted in their skills development and there were some who expressed that it was unhelpful and that communication online was disjointed and distancing, with the screen creating a tangible barrier to communication and their ability to be natural and authentic in their communications.

Such reflections from students helped to establish that the students were able to identify differences between face-to-face and screen-to-screen skills. In addition to the normal interpersonal skills, students considered aspects specific to the online environment, such as: “should I look directly in the camera”; “where should the camera be located”; “how do I demonstrate active listening if there is lag?”; “if I can’t pass tissues or reach out, how do I respond to crying or other emotions?”; and “what happens if we are disconnected?”. The students engaged with the online environment differently, with some seeing the differences positively and others seeing them as negative and a barrier to communication.

Reflection on practice
Reflecting on the project with the teaching team and colleagues, the author found that, although different members of the teaching team had different levels of comfort with online teaching technology, overall there was agreement that teaching online, and teaching students interpersonal skills for working in the online environment, was important. Conversations with the teaching team and colleagues mirrored the range of positions present in the literature and included acknowledgment of both the positive and the challenges of online teaching methods (Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016; Goldingay & Land, 2014; Jerry & Collins, 2005; Jones, 2015; Ouellette et al., 2006; Wilke et al., 2016). However, the majority of the team held that an element of face-to-face was still important to allow for practice and assessment of skills specific to face-to-face communication. The combination of online and face-to-face through the blended mode seemed to be an acceptable compromise. It was also acknowledged that skills were potentially improved by drawing on the experiences of both methods.

Reflection on the changes implemented, identified that teaching online interpersonal skills was more than just a part of the move to online and blended learning. Teaching professional online interpersonal skills was seen by members of the teaching team as an essential part of the curriculum to ensure social work students are prepared for work as professionals where practice in online environments is increasingly common (both with clients and with colleagues and other professionals) (Humphries & Camilleri, 2002). These reflections are supported in the literature with scholars beginning to acknowledge the importance of teaching students practical skills and consideration of ethical concerns within the online environment (Baker et al., 2014; Boddy & Dominelli, 2017; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017).

Reflecting on the implementation of the changes across campuses and teaching teams it was apparent that staff who were not keen on, or resistant to, the use of technology influenced how students responded to the mode of delivery and the associated tasks. This also seemed to influence decisions to exempt some students from the use of technology in assessment and online submissions. Therefore, moving forward, attention is required in upskilling the staff associated with the subject and working with the team to establish a shared understanding regarding the pedagogy of teaching online interpersonal skills to ensure student engagement.
and a consistent learning and teaching experience across student cohorts (Jones, 2015; Levin et al., 2013; Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006).

As mentioned in the implementation section, management of expectations and providing a rationale for including online skills development were important. This assisted in achieving buy-in from the students and they were then able to take ownership of the process and commit to engaging in the skills development. Positioning the use of technology and skills development as professional skills, and including authentic assessment tasks, further supported the students’ engagement. The engagement with the peer-review process exceeded expectations and facilitated further reflection and development of skills. The author believes that the students’ commitment to these tasks demonstrated that the rationale provided and management of expectations were successful.

As previously mentioned, some students complained that there was too much assessment and practice, while others complained there was not enough opportunity to practice. It is suspected that this division was indicative of the expectations of the internal and external cohorts that were now being brought together in the delivery of the subject as limited mode only. For the internal student this mode made them feel they were receiving less contact and time to practise while, for the external student, the changes to the blended mode of delivery to include a stronger focus on blended learning required them to engage more and spend more time in contact with other students. The importance of managing student expectations during the time of transition was clear (Levin et al., 2013).

As with the students, the author was somewhat surprised at the difference between face-to-face and screen-to-screen communication. Whilst the basics of interpersonal skills are transferrable, it became increasingly apparent that there are skills specific to the online environment. This is an area that requires greater exploration within social work to help support practice. Further to those discussed, other specific areas for consideration discussed throughout the semester included: the use of silence; personal space; lag; eye contact; privacy; and the physical environment. For example, if using silence, how do you do it in a way the person does not become concerned there is a connection issue? Or, in regard to physical environment, students were encouraged to think about what aspects of their physical environment are visible online with consideration to making the space welcoming, consideration to creating a professional space but also with consideration to safety and privacy. The experience of teaching online, and the discussion with students, has expanded the content covered in relation to working in the online environment. However, there is limited literature to draw from to support the development of this curriculum and the author has used the experiences and reflections of students to help develop this content.

Reflecting on student feedback surveys, it was clear that most students felt the changes made within the subject prepared them to use interpersonal skills both in face-to-face and screen-to-screen modes and that practising online helped to prepare them for working as professionals in the future. This initial student feedback supports a continuation of the approach outlined here, however, this must be considered in light of the tensions discussed earlier and issues such as how to manage workload issues (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Jones, 2015).
Implications for practice

After engaging in the individual- and the peer-reflection processes, the author recognised that there are a number of areas which could improve the design and implementation of this subject in the future. Although holding online practice off until after the on-campus workshop worked well in terms of managing concerns about the use of technology, it did restrict the duration of contact over the semester. Therefore, to address the concerns of those who felt they required more contact and more opportunities for formative feedback, consideration to introducing the online practice sessions earlier in the semester is warranted. Additionally, consideration to conducting Collaborate Sessions (an online teaching space that allows for synchronous engagement between staff and student) throughout the semester with practice sessions occurring in breakout rooms in which staff are able to observe and provide feedback, is planned for future iterations of the subject.

Regarding the use of technology, review of the platforms available through the university to see if recordings could be conducted and managed via internal systems will be explored. If this is not possible, it is deemed important that additional guides be provided for students on how to remove the YouTube videos and how to delete Google accounts, as some students expressed concerns about their online footprint. An extension of this would be to provide clearer guidelines about the length of time the recordings must remain available to staff for marking and moderation purposes.

It is believed that, as a result of this project, both staff and students have developed knowledge and skills that would benefit others in teaching and learning regarding online teaching methods and teaching online interpersonal skills. Therefore, looking forward, it is important that further evaluation of projects such as this via structured research, is required to continue the discussion and development of the discipline’s knowledge base in this area.

DISCUSSION

With the increased attention and move to online teaching and learning and social work practice, including online and social media (Baker et al., 2014; Boddy & Dominelli 2017; Dombo et al., 2014; Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016; Jones, 2015), this project supports the need for increased training of students in technologies and the development of online interpersonal skills (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017). As a lecturer teaching online interpersonal skills development, the author has realised that there is a greater need than anticipated. This was supported by the students’ engagement and feedback. The inclusion of blended approaches to learning in teaching interpersonal skills, therefore, is not simply a response to the higher education sectors’ (Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016; Smith & Jeffery, 2013) push to move online or based purely on pedagogy but is essential in the development of professional skills, assessed authentically.

In regard to the tensions between the AASWs face-to-face requirements and online teaching pedagogies (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Goldingay & Land, 2014), the author would argue that there is room for further consideration by the AASW regarding the utility of such an approach when it comes to preparing students for professional practice. While the author would argue for the inclusion of a blended approach to facilitate the authentic development
of online screen-to-screen interpersonal skills, the need for support for a level of face-to-face to facilitate the authentic development of face-to-face interpersonal skill, is recognised. With skills developed online transferring to enhance face-to-face skills, the combination appears to assist with the development of skills in general.

At this stage, the subject is taught in blended mode, with online content and a four-day, on-campus workshop, with compulsory attendance. However, at times attendance can be a barrier for some students and inclusive practice (Goldingay & Land, 2014) would perhaps suggest that special circumstances would merit consideration of alternatives to face-to-face attendance. Reflection supports the possibility of extending the online practice and participation required in such cases, rather than being restricted by unproven concerns regarding teaching of interpersonal skills entirely online (Gates & Dauenhauer, 2016).

As suggested by the literature (Cicco, 2011; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009), drawing from a broad range of online and blended learning methods can enhance the student experience. In the context of skills development, the use of platforms that allow for collaboration, practising of skills and provision of formative feedback throughout the semester, is an important inclusion (Cicco, 2011; Kozlowski & Holmes, 2017; Levin et al., 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw & Walker, 2009). The author found that the use of practical guides, links to professional guidelines (AASW, 2016), but, more importantly, the commitment and attitude of the teaching staff to the use of technology, was paramount to student engagement (Cicco, 2011). Similar to Jones (2015) and Levin et al. (2013), it was found that management of student expectations was important, but management of institutional expectations and allocation of appropriate hours in workload documents is an area that requires further attention. If the higher education sector is to continue to push for online teaching, disciplines such as social work will need to push back, not through rejecting online and blended approaches to teaching but by ensuring the true cost of teaching in this way is captured and adequately accounted for within workloads. Considering the opposing demands of the university sector and the AASW and the experience with this context of enhanced skills development when taught in face-to-face and screen-to-screen modes, the author believes there is now a need to adopt both methods, rather than replace one with the other, placing further demands on social work academics.

CONCLUSION

Development of interpersonal skills are a requirement of the AASW for graduating social work students and, while traditionally the preferred method has been face-to-face, there is evidence that online and blended methods can be effective. In the current context there is a further argument that online methods are relevant and necessary for teaching interpersonal screen-to-screen and other online skills relevant to current practice. It is argued here that a combination of both enhances the learning experience and skills development in general with both interpersonal and technological skills then being transferable. Such an approach balances tensions between AASW requirements and the push by the university sector to online and blended teaching methods, and allows pedagogical integrity to be maintained.
References


At the Heart of Social Work:
Best Practice for Managing Emotion in
the Technology-enhanced, Practice-based
Learning Classroom

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ABSTRACT
In this article we argue that the ethical use of technology-enhanced, practice-based learning requires teachers to attend to the affective aspects of teaching and learning. This is important in social work education as social work is inherently emotional and we have a responsibility to prepare students for professional practice. We reflect on our experiences of teaching a subject on interviewing skills, across face-to-face and blended modes, and explore strategies for managing emotion in technology-enhanced, practice-based learning.

Keywords: Technology-enhanced, practice-based learning; Affective learning; Teaching social work skills; Simulation; Emotion; Interviewing skills; Experiential learning
INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, practice-based learning is being enhanced by technology. This is the case both in the classroom, with practice skills being taught in purpose-built learning spaces in which technology is used to simulate realistic situations, and online, with a growing number of practice skills subjects being delivered in a blended learning mode or entirely online (Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). At the same time, practice-based learning has been found to be emotive for both students and teachers (Askeland, 2003; Barlow & Hall, 2007; Cartney, 2006). While practice-based learning has both affective and cognitive components, teaching has predominantly focused on cognitive learning (Barlow & Hall, 2007, p. 399). We argue that teachers must attend to the affective aspects of teaching and learning (Bowen, 2014; Taxer & Frenzel, 2015, p. 79). While this argument is not new (i.e., Brown, 1971; Castillo, 1974; Hubbard, 1972) it is still relevant as the affective aspects of teaching and learning have continued to be largely ignored, potentially due to the influence of rationalism in higher education (Campbell, as cited in Barlow & Hall, 2007, pp. 399–400). The affective aspects of teaching and learning occur between students and teachers and, as has been cautioned by Phelan (2015, p. 260), it is crucial that the use of technology in teaching social work skills does not overshadow the importance of “human connection” underpinning the profession. Paying attention to the affective aspects of teaching and learning is particularly relevant in social work education as social work practice is complex, relational and requires the use of self, making it inherently emotional (Prosser, Tuckey, & Wendt, 2013, p. 319).

This article contains descriptions of, and reflections upon, our experiences of teaching using technology-enhanced, practice-based learning. The authors co-taught a second-year subject on interviewing skills in technology enhanced learning spaces known as “social work studios”. In this subject, as a part of their assessment, students video-record an interview with another student, focusing on a low-key, real-life issue. While we have found that technology-enhanced, practice-based learning can be emotive for students and teachers, we argue that this is necessary as emotion is at the heart of social work and we have a responsibility to prepare students for professional practice (Gair, 2011). This article explores strategies for managing emotion in this form of learning; these include using a student-centred approach, acknowledging emotion, establishing group norms, managing group dynamics, supporting critical reflection, encouraging mindfulness and self-care and providing support. Such strategies enable students to develop the skills in emotion management, which are essential for professional practice.

Practice-based learning in social work education and affect

Experiential learning has been central to social work and welfare education for decades (Washburn & Zhou, 2018, p. 2). Experiential learning focuses on “learning by doing” (Dewey, 1913). Practice-based learning is a form of experiential learning (University of South Australia, n.d.), focussing on preparing students for professional practice (Higgs, 2012). Practice-based learning emphasises the application of theory to practice (University of South Australia, n.d.) and the development and demonstration of professional “capabilities” (Higgs, 2012, p. 4) and skills. Practice-based learning is often “situated” in the workplace (Hodge et al., 2011; Rovio-Johansson, 2018), for example, during field education place-
ments; however, it can also involve simulating a work environment to enable students to develop skills for professional practice (University of South Australia, n.d.). Washburn and Zhou (2018, p. 2) note that “simulations can be simple, such as peer-to-peer role playing in the classroom, or quite complex, such as standard patient simulations using actors to portray clients in a specific practice context.” Simulations offer students, both in the classroom and online, opportunities to develop essential practice skills (Washburn & Zhou, 2018, p. 2).

We are focusing on practice-based learning rather than simulation-based learning in this article as, although the concepts overlap, simulation-based learning “utilizes actors portraying simulated clients in scenarios designed to emulate social work practice” (Kourgiantakis, Sewell, Hu, Logan, & Bogo, 2019, p. 2) and the use of actors was not considered in the subject we are discussing here. Additionally, the importance of practice-based learning in social work education has been recognised at both national and international levels (Campbell, 2012; Cartney, 2006; Harawood, Parmanand, & Wilde, 2011).

Increasingly, practice-based learning is enhanced by technology. Technology-enhanced learning has been defined as “any learning that occurs through the application of electronic communications and computer-based educational technology, combined with pedagogical principles and practices that are applicable to and tailored for this purpose” (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, technology-enhanced, practice-based learning is understood here as experiential learning focused on preparing students for professional practice that utilises educational technology. For example, simulated work environments, such as interview rooms and offices, in which students practise interviewing or group work skills, may be fitted with audio- and video-recording equipment, video-conferencing facilities, one-way mirrors and microphones which allow students and staff to observe simulations and give input or feedback during and after simulations.

A further example of technology enhanced practice-based learning is provided by Ross, Lathouras, Riddell, Buchanan, and Puccio (2017, p. 76), who experimented with using “spatially immersive technologies” to simulate a real life, community-based scenario. They utilised an “immersive space”; “a large, windowless room with minimal furniture, where three of the four walls could display projected images, videos, text and other context-creating materials” (Ross et al., 2017, p. 81), which facilitated both cognitive and affective engagement. The space was also used for “communication with other real people in real time”, including a community leader, and students experienced “acting on the world” (Ross et al., 2017, p. 81).

Simulations are used in both face-to-face and online teaching (Ross et al., 2017, p. 80). Goldingay and Land (2014, p. 59) used “small-group formative peer- and self-assessment” in teaching a pre-placement subject online. Students “posted three videos of their own role-play practice onto their group site to gain feedback from the other members of their group” (Goldingay & Land 2014, p. 61).

The use of digital storytelling in practice-based learning is also increasing (Crisp, 2018; Goldingay, Epstein, & Taylor, 2018; Hafford-Letchfield, Dayananda, & Collins, 2018; Vicary, Copperman, & Higgs, 2018). Digital storytelling places a “strong emphasis on... first-person narrative” (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018, p. 805). Hafford-Letchfield et al.
Advances in Social Work & Welfare Education

(2018, p. 805) state that “the use of multimedia such as photographs, video, animation, sound, music or text”, which are often utilised in digital storytelling, has been “shown to be effective in health and social care education”. Goldingay et al. (2018, p. 790) reported using digital storytelling in creating an online case study: a “form of practice simulation”. The case study was “based around a fictitious service user” (Crisp, 2018, p. 724). In addition, Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2018) utilised digital storytelling in an interprofessional practice subject: “students created digital stories as a part of their assessment” (p. 804).

In order to discuss the affective aspects of this kind of learning, an understanding of affect is required. While the theoretical concept of affect is contested, it is understood here as the experience or expression of emotion (Burton, Westen, & Kowalski, 2012, p. 401) which occurs “between human beings” (Massumias, cited in Prosser, Tuckey, & Wendt, 2013, pp. 323–324). The experience or expression of emotion relies on cognition; therefore, affect is more than our emotions and also relates to our thoughts and values (King & Sawyer, 2013).

The affective aspects of practice-based learning, and teaching and learning more generally, have not been adequately researched (Goldingay & Land, 2014). While there has been some recent research on emotion in teaching and learning (Taxer & Frenzel, 2015), this has mostly focused on primary and high school education, rather than on higher education (Bowen, 2014). In addition, this work has primarily focused on the experience or expression of emotion by teachers (King & Sawyer, 2013; Taxer & Frenzel, 2015, p. 79). Only a handful of studies have considered the expression of emotion by students or the interactions between teachers and students in social work education (Askeland, 2003; Barlow & Hall, 2007; Cartney, 2006; Goldingay & Land, 2014; Harrawood, Paramanand, & Wilde, 2011; Oehlers & Shortland-Jones, 2016).

The lack of research in this area may be because “the affective nature of experiential education” is “potentially inconsistent” with “the rationalist nature of most Western educational methods” (Campbell, as cited in Barlow & Hall, 2007, pp. 399–400). However, due to the silence on this topic, “academic programs often neglect to support students with the affective aspects of learning” (Campbell, as cited in Barlow & Hall 2007, pp. 399–400). Instead, cognitive and skill development are emphasised (Barlow & Hall, 2007, p. 399).

Teaching interviewing skills

Interviews are an essential tool in social work practice (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997, p. 3). A well-conducted interview allows us to gain an understanding of the client’s situation and facilitates the identification of core issues, client goals and strategies for achieving them. Learning about the skills required to interview people is important. However, in order to competently and confidently apply these skills in practice, students must have the opportunity to develop them as a part of their education and training (Askeland, 2003; Cartney, 2006).

The authors co-taught a large, second-year subject on interviewing skills. The subject is offered both internally and externally. The internal offering is taught across a metropolitan campus and two regional campuses. Blended learning has been implemented in the internal offering, which includes a combination of face-to-face teaching and online activities.
Teaching and learning activities include weekly online lectures and face-to-face workshops in the social work studios, in which students practise and develop their interviewing skills. The social work studios are further described below.

In line with the requirements of the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2015), students enrolled externally participate in a compulsory two-day workshop; hence, the external offering is also taught in a blended modality. Teaching and learning activities in the external offering also include weekly online lectures and online activities, which help students to prepare and practise prior to the two-day workshop and assessment.

The social work studios were purpose-built in 2011 to bridge a gap between theory and practice that was identified by students, who were seeking more “real life” experiences throughout their degree (Campbell, 2012). The studios enable students to practise their skills in a simulated work environment. Each studio consists of one or two small interview rooms which adjoin a classroom. The interview rooms and classrooms are fitted with audio- and video-recording equipment and are joined by one-way mirrors and microphones, which allow observation and feedback during teaching and learning activities. Videos can also be reviewed in the classroom using audio-visual equipment. A small computer laboratory adjoins the studios which can also be used by students to review videos.

In the subject we are discussing here, as a part of their assessment, students conduct a 15-minute interview with another student, focusing on a low-key, real-life issue personally experienced by the interviewee. The use of personal experiences is further discussed below. The interview is video-recorded. Students also undertake a critical reflection on the interview. The interview and critical reflection are equally weighted. Similar models and methods of assessment are employed in other countries (Cartney, 2006).

The significance of experiential learning in developing interviewing skills

This model is congruent with Knowles’ (1984) theory of andragogy which stipulates that adult education must incorporate several features in order to effectively engage learners; these include articulating the relevance of learning, experiential learning, problem-solving and the learning being of “immediate value” to the student. Culatta (2013) suggests that methods such as simulations, role plays, case studies and self-reflective activities are effective in achieving the above. As highlighted by Campbell (2012, p. 775), “when students are exposed to real or realistic situations their learning is more effective”.

Applying knowledge to practice enhances student learning and results in a rich and holistic understanding as opposed to a more superficial understanding gained from simply restating learnt facts (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Although slightly more controversial, the use of low-key, real-life issues has been identified as being more beneficial than conducting role plays with other students (Askeland, 2003, p. 366). According to Askeland (2003), the use of real-life experiences assists students to respond genuinely and empathically and increases their agency which, in turn, enhances their motivation to learn and consequent interest in the topic. Additionally, it enables students to gain a deeper understanding of the content being taught, which results in greater knowledge retention (Felder & Brent, as cited in Roberts & Smith, 2002).
Interviewing each other using low key, real-life issues requires students to think critically and aligns with Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory. For example, students are immersing themselves in the experience of practising their interviewing skills, which is described by Kolb (1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) as having a “concrete experience”. Students also engage in “reflective observation” (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) by critically reflecting upon their video-recorded interviews, to identify and discuss strengths and areas for improvement. This also encourages learning at the “abstract conceptualisation” level (Kolb, 1984) as students are required to critique their work according to relevant theory. This then engages the student in the “active experimentation” level of Kolb’s (1984) theory, as they identify ways to improve their practice, leading to experimentation.

When learning interviewing skills, it is important that students have the opportunity to practise conducting interviews. There is a distinction between knowing theoretically how to conduct an interview and actually doing it (Askeland, 2003; Cartney, 2006). This gap between the theoretical knowledge taught at university and the “real-world competencies” required for practice has also been identified in the literature (Llewellyn & Frame, 2013). Practising interviewing skills with peers provides students with hands-on experience in applying their knowledge of the interview process and social work theories to practice (Askeland, 2003). It provides them with invaluable practice experience and the opportunity for self-reflection as well as tutor and peer feedback on their skills (Cartney, 2006, p. 829), which then increases their competence and confidence in their ability to conduct a human service interview (Askeland, 2003). Video-recorded interviews are an effective method of learning and assessing communication skills, with students, teachers and researchers reporting the benefit of students’ practising their skills and observing and critiquing video-recorded interviews (Cartney, 2006, p. 829).

It must be acknowledged that conducting an interview in a simulated and technology-enhanced environment can seem artificial. As highlighted by Cartney (2006, pp. 837–838), “there is not a ‘perfect fit’ between the skills laboratory and the world of practice”. Nonetheless, this method of teaching and learning is “closer to the real thing than sitting down [and] writing a [response to a] case study” (Cartney, 2006, pp. 837–838). This argument is strengthened by Harrawood et al. (2011, p. 203) who draw attention to the importance of students developing empathic understanding and confidence in their interviewing skills, both of which increase through practice-based learning. This is imperative as essential, interpersonal communication skills and qualities such as body language, tone of voice, facial expressions and empathy are vital components of communication that are not easily developed or assessed in more traditional assessment methods such as essays (Cartney, 2006, p. 830).

**Student emotion in learning interviewing skills**

Through our teaching, we have found that students experience a range of emotions when practising interviewing, particularly when they are being observed by others or video-recorded for assessment purposes. Other authors (Askeland 2003; Cartney 2006; Harrawood et al., 2011) also report this to be the case, although Harrawood et al. (2011, p. 198) note that the “literature does not identify the range of emotion experienced by students”.

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**Volume 21, No.2, 2020 / p41**
When in the interviewer role, it is not uncommon for students to feel overwhelmed and anxious. This is as a result of multiple factors including a sense of responsibility to do no harm and to care for their peers; a perception of being underprepared or incompetent; and fears about being video-recorded. Hafford-Letchfield, Dayananda, & Collins (2018, pp. 808–809) note that the use of technology can be anxiety provoking.

Practising their interviewing skills in class is, for many students, their first exposure to the reality of social work and the emotions and sense of responsibility that accompany professional practice. Furthermore, although students are strictly instructed to discuss low-key topics only, being genuinely listened to can lead to further self-disclosure than originally intended. This can bring up current or previous personal experiences of trauma and pain or intense emotions in response to their peers’ lived experiences. Although the use of real-life situations to practise in the classroom could be perceived as risky, Askeland (2003) puts forward a strong case for this model of learning stating:

Social workers deal with users and their own feelings all the time… If students do not learn during their professional training to open up their own feelings, to set their own limits for self-disclosure, and to contain feelings from others, this might limit their competence when working with people. An educational setting should be a safe framework for testing oneself out. (p. 376)

Students’ first exposure to the realities of practice often occurs during field education (Campbell, 2012). Practice-based learning prepares students for their first placement by exposing them to some of the emotions that accompany social work practice. In their research on Canadian social work students’ experiences of field education, Barlow and Hall (2007, p. 399) found that students experienced “intense emotionality”. Rompf et al. (as cited in Barlow & Hall, 2007, p. 400) likewise found that students experienced high levels of anxiety in preparing for field education. Students reported worrying about their competency and experienced “feelings of inadequacy” due to a “lack of experience” (Barlow & Hall, 2007, p. 402). They reported having strong emotional reactions to clients’ stories, either because they were reminded of their own traumatic experiences or because they had not been exposed to such experiences previously (Barlow & Hall, 2007, pp. 402–403). Therefore, we argue that it is essential that social work students are provided with opportunities for learning how to manage their own and others’ emotions in a safe environment prior to undertaking their first field education placement (Askeland, 2003; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018). Similarly, Goldingay et al. (2018, p. 790) found that practice simulation utilising an online case study “meant students developed ways to self-manage and reflect on their emotional reactions to confronting and overwhelming situations without harming real clients”.

In our experience, and as also reported by Harrawood et al. (2011), although student anxiety and fear was high during their first experience in the role of interviewer, their fear decreased and confidence grew throughout the semester. In the subject we are discussing here, external students, in particular, are often anxious at the beginning of the two-day workshop; however, their competence and confidence grows exponentially over the two days.
Students also described feeling comforted by the fact that they were practising their skills with peers (Harrawood et al., 2011). Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2018, p. 809) comment that learning a new skill “seemed to stimulate increased expressions of peer support”. Whilst there is a level of discomfort that accompanies this method of teaching and learning, and it can be confronting and anxiety provoking (Askeland, 2003; Cartney, 2006, p. 837), these emotions also enhance student attention and motivation and create “valuable learning experiences” (Bowen, 2014; Harrawood et al., 2011, p. 203). However, due to the emotional component of this type of learning, it requires careful scaffolding across subjects (Bowen, 2014).

The importance of emotion in learning is not a new concept, as is evident in early writings on confluent learning theory such as Brown (1971), Hubbard (1972) and Castillo (1974). Confluent learning theory initially targeted primary school education but has since been applied to a range of learning and higher education environments (i.e., Loon & Nichol, 2015; Misch & Peloquin, 2005; Ward & Shortt, 2012). In the words of Brown (1971), confluent learning is a “philosophy and a process of teaching and learning in which the affective domain and the cognitive domain flow together, like two streams merging into one river”. Confluent education theory draws attention to the need for education to incorporate both the “cognitive and affective domains” and focuses on the development of both “emotional abilities” and “intellectual abilities” simultaneously (Castillo, 1974, p. viii). This has been identified as a valuable tool in the development and expression of empathy and self-awareness (Misch & Peloquin, 2005). Given the nature of our profession and the necessity of empathy and self-awareness, the deliberate integration of affective and cognitive learning in social work education is particularly important. Oehlers and Shortland-Jones (2016, p. 8) likewise argue that “emotional learning leads to a deepening of the reflective process which contributes to the development of emotionally literate social work practitioners”. As stated by Oehlers and Shortland-Jones (2016, p. 10):

> It is a necessity for future social workers to have confronted, head-on, the power of potentially destabilising emotions whilst in their undergraduate courses so as to minimise risk to themselves and future clients. We must then, as educators, be mindful of how we ask students to personally reflect and consider how we can become a “safety net” should emotions arise that are previously hidden or dormant.

As highlighted by Askeland (2003), social work professionals are required to identify and manage their own emotions so that they can focus upon and assist clients without being overwhelmed by their feelings. In summary, practice-based learning can assist students to develop skills in emotional engagement and management.

**Learning practice skills online**

There has been extensive debate about the use of online learning in social work education (Crisp, 2018; Goldingay et al., 2018; Jones, 2014; Levin, Fulginiti, & Moore, 2018; Miles, Mensinga, & Zuchowski, 2018; Vicary, Copperman, & Higgs, 2018). In the Australian context, distance and online learning have broadened access to social work education (Crisp, 2018, p. 719), making social work education accessible to students living in regional and remote areas, as well as those excluded “by health issues or social and economic disadvantage” (Miles et al., 2018, pp. 705–706). Emerging research on online social work education
demonstrates its effectiveness as well as student satisfaction (Levin et al., 2018, p. 775; Miles et al., 2018, p. 706). At the same time, there is significant concern amongst academics about whether online social work education can “prepare social work students for the realities of practice” (Goldingay et al., 2018, p. 790; Levin et al., 2018). Levin et al. (2018, p. 775) note that “perceptions of effectiveness are lowest for practice-oriented competencies”. Concerns focus on the capacity to form student–teacher relationships as well as students’ capacity to develop practice skills (Smith, 2014, p. 236), in particular, “relationship-based skills” (Miles et al., 2018, p. 706; Vicary et al., 2018, p. 686).

Another consideration here is the emotional component of learning, particularly when teaching practice skills such as interviewing. There has been limited research on the emotional effects of studying social work online (Goldingay & Land, 2014). It is important to consider the social needs of online students, since online learning can be isolating (Jones, 2014, p. 227; Miles et al., 2018, p. 706; Phelan, 2015, p. 261). In short, the use of technology must not compromise relationship as this is central to the social work profession (Phelan, 2015, pp. 260–261).

Online social work education also presents many opportunities (Phelan, 2015, p. 257). Technology has expanded our options with regard to how we teach social work practice skills to students. This is improving as technology advances, with the use of online virtual worlds, realistic simulations, virtual classrooms and video-conferencing, which provide students with the opportunity to apply knowledge to practice and build their skills in an online environment (Washburn & Zhou, 2018). Affordances in technology “allow synchronous albeit virtual, face-to-face participation” (Vicary et al., 2018, p. 685). The use of digital storytelling was discussed earlier (Goldingay et al., 2018; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2018). Digital simulations with realistic settings and interactive characters also provide students with experiential learning opportunities in the online environment (Llewellyn & Frame, 2013, p. 16).

Given the potential of technology to enhance social work education, combined with the concern amongst social work academics about online learning, particularly in teaching practice-based skills, it is not surprising that blended learning has received much attention (Ayala, 2009, pp. 281–282; Miles et al., 2018, p. 706). Blended learning “provides us instead with new options and opportunities to purposefully use and combine the best of both approaches (face-to-face and online learning) to suit particular educational goals” (Ayala, 2009, pp. 281–282). Several authors have highlighted the utility of blended learning in teaching practice-based skills, such as interviewing skills (Ayala, 2009; Jones, 2014; Miles et al., 2018; Phelan, 2015). While it is beyond the scope of this article to thoroughly engage in the debate about the use of online learning in social work education, a blended modality has been adopted in the interviewing skills subject we are discussing here, which arguably combines the affordances of technology with face-to-face teaching (Ayala, 2009) addressing concerns about the lack of student–teacher relationship (Smith, 2014) and the development of relationship-based skills in online learning (Miles et al., 2018; Vicary et al., 2018).

So far, we have discussed the role and value of technology-enhanced, practice-based learning in social work education, focussing particularly on interviewing skills. We have also
drawn attention to the numerous and varied emotions experienced by students during this learning. We have argued that the emotions experienced play a crucial role in the learning process, and also prepare students for professional social work practice, which is inherently emotional. The debate about online social work education and affordances in technology have been briefly discussed. We will now move on to focus on ways to acknowledge and manage student emotion in technology-enhanced, practice-based learning.

Attending to the affective aspects of teaching and learning
In order to attend to the affective aspects of teaching and learning, pedagogy and teaching practices must be student centred. This includes ensuring that teaching and learning activities are matched to students’ learning needs and capabilities. For example, learning in the social work studios is scaffolded across the degree; in their first year, students are exposed to the studios but do not undertake assessment in this space; in the second year, students engage in the learning described in this article; and in the third year they build on this in an advanced practice subject.

A student-centred approach entails focusing on students’ learning experiences (Roberts & Smith, 2002), including the emotional components of learning. In the subject we are discussing, we attend to the affective aspects of teaching and learning by regularly acknowledging common emotional responses, which helps to normalise students’ feelings. This includes acknowledging that demonstrating interviewing skills can be uncomfortable and emotive. It also includes acknowledging that technology-enhanced learning can seem artificial.

Student-centred learning emphasises that teaching and learning activities must be relevant. In this subject, we take time to explain the purpose and benefit of teaching and learning activities, such as video-recording and reviewing an interview, highlighting the importance of “pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone” in order to increase skills and confidence in conducting a social work interview. We also emphasise benefits such as increased competence upon commencing field education placements.

Smith (2014, p. 239) argues that, since social work is relational, teaching practices should also “reflect this orientation”. We have a responsibility to manage group dynamics, establish professional boundaries around relationships and create a “safe space” for learning (Gair, 2011). Furthermore, because of the potential risks when using real-life situations, it is imperative that students are sufficiently supported whilst developing their skills. We put a number of strategies in place to minimise the risk of emotional trauma to students in both the interviewer and interviewee roles. These include the formation of group norms; incrementally building knowledge and skills across subjects; ensuring that students select low-level topics; and an emphasis on mindfulness, self-care and reflection. Each of these strategies will be discussed in more depth below.

At the beginning of the subject, we take time to negotiate expectations or “group norms” with students. We then refer to these throughout the semester. For example, “group norms” might relate to respect, confidentiality, self-disclosure and giving constructive feedback. We facilitate this activity online for both internal and external students using a platform called Padlet. Padlet is a secure online notice board that can be embedded into websites and allows
students and teaching staff to brainstorm and share links and pictures. Each class has their own online Padlet board that only students in that class can view and contribute to. This provides a central location for students in each class to interact, contribute to and revisit group norms.

The subject is structured so that students engage in a variety of activities which incrementally build upon their knowledge, skills and confidence prior to interviewing their peers. We focus initially on creating an empathic collaborative partnership and gradually introducing each micro-skill and stage of the interview process; the provision of videos and teacher demonstrations of interviewing skills; and the use of group activities and case-study examples prior to having students interview each other. This ensures that they have sufficient knowledge, skills and understanding of certain professional standards and boundaries prior to interviewing each other.

To ensure that students choose low-level topics for their interviews, students are asked to brainstorm appropriate topics in an early workshop activity. Students are also provided with a list of suggested topics, such as work–life balance, time management and career aspirations. It is also highlighted that the topic must be negotiated between the interviewer and interviewee, and both must be comfortable with the topic. They must then have their intended topic approved by their tutor prior to conducting their assessment. Students are also encouraged to speak to their tutor and access the student counsellors should their interview bring up strong feelings or current or past experiences.

Furthermore, we encourage the use of mindfulness and include an online five-minute mindfulness video each week. Mindfulness activities have not only been identified as assisting student counsellors to develop a therapeutic presence (McCollum & Gehart, 2010) and greater counselling self-efficacy (Greason & Cashwell, 2009), but also as enhancing self-regulation in the presence of difficult emotions (Donald, Atkins, Parker, Christie, & Ryan, 2016); developing self-compassion (Coaston & Lawrence (2019); promoting job satisfaction and preventing burnout by mediating the effects of emotional exhaustion often experienced by counsellors (Hulsheger, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013).

We also attend to the affective aspects of teaching and learning by supporting critical reflection, which is emphasised in both the literature on adult learning and social work education. We endeavour to make space for “mistakes” and reflective improvement, emphasising that there is no such thing as a “perfect” interview and placing value on the lessons learnt through practice. Askeland (2003, p. 372) stresses that, when facilitating practice-based learning, “time for reflection is essential to make the approach educational and not a happening, to prevent reflection from disappearing for the benefit of the emotional experience.” The subject is intentionally designed to do this by incorporating peer feedback, weekly reflective journaling questions, and a critical reflection assessment.

In addition, we highlight the importance of self-care as a necessity in social work. A lecture on self-care has been included in the curriculum. We also facilitate an online activity on self-care using Padlet. The activity requires that all students post a self-care activity idea that they could do after a stressful day, in five minutes and in one hour. Students then choose
one of the activities on the board to try during that week. This activity was well received by students and again, because it was online, was equally accessible to all students regardless of their modality of study. Our role as teachers also includes providing support to students and making referrals to the student counsellors when necessary.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, the ethical use of technology-enhanced, practice-based learning requires teachers to attend to the emotional components of learning. This involves taking a student-centred approach, acknowledging emotion, establishing group norms, managing group dynamics, supporting critical reflection, encouraging mindfulness and self-care and providing support. Using a range of technologies, such strategies can be creatively incorporated into courses to enable students to develop the skills in emotion management which are essential for professional practice, since social work is inherently emotional and relational.

References


Teaching Diagnosis Online

Teaching a Mental Health Diagnosis Course Online: Lessons Learned from a Case Study

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ABSTRACT
In the last 10 years there has been a dramatic expansion of social work courses offered online. Concurrently, there is skepticism as to whether it is possible for online social work classes to be of high quality, particularly classes covering practice skills. There is a gap in the social work literature examining theoretically informed, high-quality pedagogical strategies to teach social work practice skills online. This conceptual paper provides critical reflection on the pedagogical lessons learned from teaching an asynchronous, online, mental health diagnosis course that is part of the foundational curriculum for a Master of Social Work degree at a public university in the United States (US). Our reflections on the strengths and limitations of teaching social work practice skills online are guided by the Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) community of inquiry framework for online learning environments which emphasises that three intersecting processes – the social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence – are critical to the online educational experience. Integrating our experience teaching an asynchronous mental health diagnosis class and the community of inquiry framework, we reflect on three lessons learned. First, we suggest that, when well designed, an online course offers strong opportunities for students to apply personal experiences to practice knowledge. We further find that the online setting offered instructors the opportunity to closely monitor student practice skills. Finally, we reflect that ethical dilemmas related to diagnosis can be addressed in online courses, but require a strong teaching presence. We propose that high-quality teaching of mental health diagnosis can occur in online platforms, but would benefit from guidance from the community of inquiry framework.

Keywords:
Online education; Teaching; Clinical skills; MSW students
INTRODUCTION
The rapid growth of online social work courses and programs continues to reshape how social work students are prepared for 21st century practice. While only 11% of social work programs in the US reported distance education offerings 20 years ago, 76% of Master of Social Work (MSW) graduate programs and 49% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) undergraduate programs currently offer (or intend to offer) online courses in the near future (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; East, LaMendola, & Alter, 2014; Levin, Fulginiti, & Moore, 2018). Between 2013 and 2015 the percentage of US social work institutions offering fully online MSW programs more than doubled (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; Levin et al., 2018). Today, the US Council on Social Work Education reports 27 BSW and 80 MSW online or distance education programs online through accredited social work programs in the US (CSWE, 2019).

EFFICACY OF ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE CLASSES
The expansion of online learning in social work remains contentious among social work scholars in part because of the intrinsic nature of social work as a theoretically informed, practice-oriented discipline (Levin et al., 2018). The proliferation of online social work education has resulted in a growing volume of literature examining both the efficacy and challenges of online and hybrid course delivery. Critics of online social work education note concerns with the capacity to effectively teach clinical practice skills through online course delivery. More specifically, critics of online social work education question whether online courses provide adequate space for students and faculty to develop interpersonal relationships (Jones, 2015; Levin et al., 2018), allow for the authentic use of self in the online classroom (Levin et al., 2018), and can ensure academic honesty and integrity (Reamer, 2013).

Despite persistent concerns, a growing number of studies have found no significant differences between the efficacy of online and face-to-face social work classes. Wretman and Macy (2016) conducted a systematic review of 38 studies focused on technology-based instruction in social work education across the US; the review included 18 studies involving web-based technology, 12 studies involving interactive television-based technology (also referred to as distance education), with the remaining studies employing variations of both delivery systems. Web-based technology included both synchronous course delivery such as interactive video chatrooms where faculty and students meet in real time, and asynchronous course delivery involving online modules and discussion threads that students can participate in within a designated time period. Wretman and Macy (2016) found that 84.2% of published studies identified that technology-based courses produced equivalent or better academic outcomes (predominantly defined as grades or test scores) than their traditional face-to-face counterparts.

A growing number of studies have specifically examined the effectiveness of teaching social work clinical practice skills online. Siebert,Siebert, and Spaulding-Givens (2006) conducted a quasi-experimental study comparing student outcomes and satisfaction in online and traditional face-to-face sections of a course focused on knowledge and skill development in crisis assessment, brief treatment, and evaluation. A mental health professional (affiliated with the university in which the study was conducted) observed students performing role plays to assess the application of core skills learned over the semester. While there were no
significant differences between online and face-to-face student outcomes in skill development, students were more satisfied with their face-to-face experiences (Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). A similar study found no significant difference between interviewing skills in students in an online versus face-to-face class (Ouellette, Westhuis, Marshall, & Chang, 2006).

Numerous scholars have conducted studies resulting in similar findings over the past decade, providing more robust data in support of the efficacy of online education in teaching social work clinical practice skills. Cummings, Chaffin, and Cockerham (2015) compared the educational outcomes of online and traditional face-to-face MSW programs (N = 345), measuring knowledge, skill, and satisfaction outcomes for students. Field instructors evaluated student progress in eight core competencies (assessment, intervention, policy practice, leadership, ethics, evaluation, advocacy and professional development) using a 5-point Likert scale. Online students received higher ratings in seven out of eight competencies (Cummings et al., 2015). This study also assessed student confidence in their ability to effectively use core practice skills; there were no significant differences detected between online and face-to-face student scores. Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016) also examined differences in student learning between online and face-to-face sections of a generalist practice with an Individuals, Groups and Families course by comparing student self-report scores on learning objectives. No significant differences were detected between online and face-to-face student scores in eight learning objectives including assessment, goal development, understanding of diversity, and application of strength-based concepts. Wilke, King, Ashmore, and Stanley (2016) compared the development of clinical assessment and intervention skills between students enrolled in face-to-face (N = 74) and online asynchronous (N = 78) sections of a crisis-intervention course. Student outcomes included both crisis-intervention knowledge and skills, assessed via a digitally recorded role play of an assigned crisis case scenario. Role plays were evaluated by the same doctoral student; there were no significant differences in scores between online and face-to-face students (Wilke et al., 2016).

These studies represent a handful of studies conducted in the last 15 years examining the efficacy of online learning to teach clinical and generalist social work practice skills with individuals, groups and families. The greater volume of data available is consonant with the findings presented and suggests that social work scholars have consistently found no significant differences in the efficacy of teaching practice skills between online and face-to-face course delivery systems (Cummings et al., 2015; Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016; Levin et al., 2018; Moore, 2005; Phelan, 2015; Siebert et al., 2006; Wretman & Macy, 2016).

**SOCIAL WORK FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

Interestingly, social work faculty remain skeptical about the effectiveness of online education despite a growing body of research demonstrating no significant differences in effectiveness or student satisfaction between online and face-to-face social work classes. Levin et al. (2018) surveyed BSW and MSW faculty (N = 376) about their perceptions of the effectiveness of both fully online and face-to-face education to teach students nine core social work competency domains determined by the CSWE, the sole national accrediting
agency for social work education in the US. Conducting a series of paired t-tests, researchers found that faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of teaching online was significantly lower than perceptions of face-to-face effectiveness across all nine competencies (ethics, diversity, social and economic justice, research, policy, practice engagement, practice assessment, practice intervention, and practice evaluation). Similar to previous findings, faculty perceived online education to be less effective in teaching practice skills (Levin et al., 2018; Moore, 2005).

There is some evidence that, as social work educators gain experience in teaching online, their perception of the efficacy of teaching social work classes online increases. In the study mentioned earlier (Levin et al., 2018), a regression analysis of factors associated with perception of online teaching efficacy found that previous online teaching experience and technological preparedness were positively associated with perceptions of effectiveness of online education. These results are informative as schools of social work continue to seek to expand online learning opportunities.

Faculty have articulated a number of specific issues regarding the effectiveness and ethics of teaching social work practice competencies through online course delivery. Faculty questions regarding how to effectively teach “use of self”, to build empathy among students, to teach holistic assessment skills, and to develop authentic interpersonal relationships online have triggered important debates within the field of social work education. Faculty also express consistent concerns about appropriate compensation (Levin et al., 2018), potential impact on faculty workload (East et al., 2014), and a general lack of interest or lack of perceived self-efficacy in using evolving technology (Levin et al., 2018).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Numerous studies have explored whether social work clinical practice classes are effective online, an important area of inquiry. However, given that evidence is accumulating that social work classes can be effectively taught online, but that social work educator skepticism remains high, alongside these efficacy studies we see a need for additional case studies detailing the development of theoretically informed, high-quality social work clinical practice courses online. The community of inquiry framework is one such framework that can guide high-quality social work teaching online.

The community of inquiry framework emphasises three interdependent domains of teaching and learning in online environments: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence reflects the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally indicated by open communication, emotional expression, and group cohesion (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Social presence is conceptualised as foundational for cognitive presence, or the ability of learners to construct meaning through reflection and discourse (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Finally, teaching presence is defined as the “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes” for the purpose of learning outcomes (Anderson, Liam, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5). Teaching presence includes instructional design (i.e., the structure of the course), facilitation (i.e., connecting ideas, asking for clarification, and diagnosing misconceptions), and direct instruction (i.e., presenting content, assessment and feedback) of both cognitive and social processes.
Critically, it is the integration of the three domains of the community of inquiry framework that leads to a strong student learning experience in online environments. Although the social presence is necessary for high-quality cognitive processes in online learning environments, social interactions need to be designed and facilitated in specific direction – thus the need for a teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2010).

Scholars have argued that the community of inquiry framework is a helpful model for describing, explaining, and improving online educational experiences (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009) – in line with the goals of this conceptual paper. This framework has been widely used to examine the educational experience of learners in online learning, although it has received limited attention in the social work discipline. In this conceptual paper, we chose the community of inquiry framework to guide our reflections on what worked well in teaching mental health diagnosis in an online course given that it offers a well-rounded foundation for teaching in online environments.

**AIMS OF THIS CONCEPTUAL PAPER**

While the available literature supports the efficacy of online education for the delivery of clinical practice skills, social work educators remain skeptical about the efficacy of online social work programs, particularly as it relates to teaching practice skills. Scholars have argued that additional research is needed to understand the teaching strategies that contribute to student mastery of social work clinical practice skills taught in online environments (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). Scholarship reflecting on the specific strategies in online learning environments that support student learning of social work clinical practice skills is important – given that many educators are faced with the daunting task of designing online social work clinical practice courses for the first time.

The purpose of this conceptual paper, therefore, is to reflect on lessons learned about teaching effectively from a fully online, asynchronous course on mental health diagnosis, guided by the community of inquiry framework. We hope this conceptual piece provides strategies that foster high-quality teaching of social work clinical practice skills.

**COURSE CONTEXT**

This course is part of a larger program of study for the Master’s degree in Social Work (MSW) School of Social Work at the University of Connecticut, a large public university located on the East Coast of the United States. Clinical Conditions with Children and Adolescents is a required course for all MSW students in the Individuals, Groups and Families method at the School of Social Work. The School of Social Work offers the course in both face-to-face and online formats for its MSW students. In this case, we present the version of Clinical Conditions with Children and Adolescents developed to be fully online and asynchronous, where students can access the course modules at any time, without any pre-determined, synchronous online meetings with other students and the instructor. In the online format, the three-unit course consists of 14 different modules made up of short, pre-produced video lectures, and a range of online activities for students to complete.
CORE LESSONS LEARNED

In this section, we reflect on three core lessons learned from teaching social work practice skills online in an asynchronous, fully online, mental health diagnosis course: the use of self in teaching practice skills; assessment and provision of feedback of clinical diagnostic skills; and ethical issues in social work practice. We ground our reflections in the community of inquiry framework.

Social presence: The use of self in teaching practice skills

A perceived challenge relating to the development of social work practice skills in online classes involves the barriers to developing interpersonal relationships in online settings (Jones, 2015). In the broader literature on online education, a common concern is the loss of connectedness and community when moving from the face-to-face classroom experience to online learning settings (So & Brush, 2008). Aware of these challenges, we designed the course material to be grounded in strong social connections in several ways. First, the course was created to set a warm environment that inspired robust student participation. In the course orientation, the instructor includes a short video providing her own background as a social worker and encouraged students to reach out to her when questions arise. Students, at start, were invited to introduce themselves in a discussion board forum and share their own social work practice experience.

Further, a core strategy we used to encourage collaboration among students was small group online discussions. Each student was assigned to a small (i.e., three to four students) group for weekly online discussion topics; the small group remained the same for the entirety of the semester. In online small group discussions, in addition to the initial post mid-week, students were required to respond online to at least two other students throughout the week. The discussion questions provided space for students to engage in both academic and social topics — for example, in the unit reviewing eating disorders, students were asked to reflect on their own background relating to eating and sleeping, and how they would handle situations when clients had different views. Topics with room for personal reflection provided a space where students might form more personal connections. The discussion board posts were evaluated not just for the number of posts, but the quality of posts and interaction between students — an expectation communicated to students through the posting of a discussion board rubric at the start of the course.

In addition to the small, online group discussions, the course was designed to include multiple small group tasks that required students to work collaboratively online. For example, in one task, small groups were required to assess the level of suicidality of several case studies. The small groups — collaborating on a Google document, a web-based application in which documents can be created, edited and stored online — were tasked with applying various risk indicators to each case study and coming to agreement on a level of risk as a small group. The presence of a clear, focused task that engaged learners in content was designed to maximise student collaboration.

Over the course of the term, we observed a high degree of engagement and student disclosure within their groups. For example, within the context of a unit focusing on the stigma surrounding diagnosis, students were asked to reflect their own relevant experience...
professional or personal. Numerous students chose to discuss their own experience with a mental health diagnosis; what followed was an engaged and highly revealing discussion relating to vulnerability, mental health needs, and stigma.

Our experience of observing strong student application of the use of self to clinical skills is in line with the community of inquiry framework emphasis on the integration of social presence and cognitive presence. Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) argue that social presence is a foundation for cognitive presence. In most effective learning environments, social presence, according to Garrison and Arbaugh (2007), starts out as online acquaintance, shifts to feeling part of a community through the thoughtful exchange of ideas, and finally leads to camaraderie after the long-term and intense exchange of ideas. As noted above, we designed the course to encourage student belonging by assigning students to the same weekly small-group discussions (students were placed in groups of three to four for the duration of the semester), which focused on specific questions related to the mental health diagnosis. We observed the evolution of social presence and its connection to cognitive presence: over the course of the semester, we noted increasing levels of comfort among the students applying their personal experiences to the small-group discussion questions, which resulted in responses with greater analytic depth.

Specific to social work, the ability to cultivate a social environment online where students feel comfortable to bring themselves to their reflections has important cognitive value. Social work scholars have noted that the presence of the self inevitably shapes clinical decision making and perception (Reupert, 2006). Being open to the self encourages students to both be aware of the self they bring to their practice, but also consider their unique strengths in social work practice and how to bring this to their work (Reupert, 2009).

The use of self-disclosure between students in this class has implications for teaching social work practice online. Beyond simply suggesting that it is possible to build strong social connections in an asynchronous fully online course focused on diagnosis, we saw there were unique strengths to social connection through conducting the course in the online learning environment. Reviews of the literature have noted that online communication may lead to increased comfort and self-disclosure (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, & Prinstein, 2018). We have taught this class in person and held discussions on the same topic, and have not observed a similar level of personal disclosure and connection. In line with the community inquiry framework, we suggest that the combination of consistent small groups and the ease of discussing sensitive topics online appeared to facilitate meaningful social connection to peers in this course and, in turn, the course materials. While it is not possible to conclude based on this case that such connections to self are because of the online course setting, we contend that students’ likely increased comfort to self-disclose in online spaces may be a support to developing social work practice skills in online courses.

Teaching presence: Assessment and provision of feedback of clinical diagnostic skills
An additional concern regarding teaching social work practice online relates to the barriers to assessing clinical skill development in the absence of face-to-face interactions between instructor and students. We shared this concern in our online course; given that our diagnosis course was offered in a fully online, asynchronous format, we were unable personally observe
students’ interpersonal skills with respect to clinical interviewing and assessment. While face-to-face assessment was not possible, we found that the online format of the course offered ample opportunity to provide formative assessment and feedback of written diagnostic skills. We designed the online course to provide frequent, immediate, explanatory feedback of the written diagnostic skills for each student throughout the course.

Specifically, with each diagnosis covered, we included a case video in which students were required to identify the appropriate diagnosis and justify this choice by applying the diagnostic standards and evidence from the video. For example, in the unit introducing disruptive disorders (i.e., conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder), a brief video lecture provided an overview of the diagnostic criteria of these disorders. Students were then asked to watch a video of a diagnostic interview with a client who had one of these disorders and make an argument for which diagnosis was most appropriate, applying the diagnostic criteria to evidence from the video vignette.

Critically, for each of these written essays, we designed the course to provide prompt, personalised, explanatory feedback, drawing on a three specific strategies. First, the expectation was set at the start of the semester that the instructor would provide feedback on assignments within one week. This task was potentially daunting, given that each unit includes two to three assignments. To manage this time commitment, the instructor set aside specific blocks of time each week to prioritise providing timely feedback on students’ written clinical diagnosis.

Additionally, the instructor communicated the expectation for diagnostic assessment skills through rubrics that included detailed descriptions for the quality of posts. The rubric included criteria such as application of the diagnostic criteria, evidence from the case study, and depth of analysis, with detailed descriptions of the levels of achievement for each category. To encourage students to adhere to these high expectations, the instructor shared model assignments from previous students (with their permission) throughout the course. Finally, in the cases where students’ written diagnostic skills fell below expectations, the instructor immediately reached out to the student and raised concerns.

While face-to-face classrooms offer the advantage of observing student clinical skills, in such settings it is not always feasible to individually monitor and assess student skills and abilities for each activity. By providing timely, regular and substantive feedback on students’ diagnostic skills – and drawing on the earlier-mentioned instructor strategies to manage the feedback process – we found that an advantage of teaching clinical skills in this online class was the ability to frequently monitor and assess the written clinical skills of each student.

Our observation of the strong role of feedback for learners in the online learning environment is in line with the community of inquiry’s emphasis on direct instruction (one of the three dimensions of teaching presence). In outlining the role of direct instruction, Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) suggest that explanatory feedback from a subject matter expert is crucial to the learner experience, and specifically, that the communication of feedback must be perceived to have a high level of social presence and instructor immediacy to be effective. We reflect that a critical dimension of student learning of diagnostic skills was
through providing personalised instructor feedback on written diagnoses. By responding in a timely fashion, and specifically to what the student demonstrated, students had the opportunity to reflect and refine their skills as the course progressed.

**Integration of social, cognitive and teaching presence: ethical issues in social work practice**

Scholars have noted that it remains an open question as to whether social and ethical values can be transmitted in online education (Brey, 2006; Zidan, 2015). Specific to social work, there are concerns about whether it is possible to teach social work values, which often involves difficult and complex discussions. Concurrently, social work scholars have underscored that it is critical that online courses have assignments specifically directed at ethical dilemmas (Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006).

Aware of the importance of addressing ethical issues surrounding mental health diagnosis, we included a special focus on this topic. For example, in our course, drawing on a written case study as a prompt, we asked students in discussion board posts to reflect on the ethical issues surrounding the diagnosis of a youth who would likely meet the criteria for a mental health diagnosis, but whose aspirations would likely be negatively impacted by such a diagnosis. We set clear expectations for the discussion board posts through the use of rubrics, which detailed what constitutes high-quality posts, including wielding evidence from the case, depth of analysis, and thoughtful responses to peers. Students worked through the discussion topic in the small groups they had been assigned at the start of the term, peers with whom they already had some social connection. In responses to the discussion prompt, students engaged in a lively discussion around the ethical concerns relating to diagnosis. The instructor was actively present in the discussion and encouraged students to respectfully disagree. When students struggled to provide thoughtful responses to peers, the instructor followed up with the student with some specific tips for engaging in thoughtful response posts in discussion forums. We were pleased to see that students raised a range of ethical issues, and when students brushed aside ethical concerns, their peers gently disagreed.

Our experience facilitating high-level thinking about ethical issues in mental health diagnosis reflects Garrison and Arbough's (2007) assertion that cognitive presence is complemented by social and teaching presence. Garrison and Arbough (2007) define cognitive presence as a cycle of inquiry that starts with a triggering event (here, a case study dilemma identified for further inquiry), continues with student exploration, and leads to integration – where learners construct meaning based on ideas started in exploration. Critically, moving through the cycle of inquiry to integration depends on both teaching presence and social presence. Garrison and Arbough (2007) note that cognitive integration typically requires enhanced teaching presence in two ways. Discussion prompts that are case based with clear expectations – as was the case in our discussion related to the ethics of diagnosis – are more likely to progress to the integration phase. Further, during discussions, learners are more likely to move to higher-level thinking when the instructor probes for ideas, as the instructor did in this discussion. Throughout this process, the social presence – in this case, supported by students consistently connecting in their small groups – provides the groundwork for students to honestly respond and respectfully challenge each other in discussions. In our experience facilitating the cycle of inquiry around the ethical issues surrounding mental health diagnosis, we observed that instructor feedback successively shaped students' case study reflections and discussion responses.
health diagnosis, we saw evidence that ethical issues can be addressed online. However, doing so, as Garrison and Arbough (2007) suggest, requires thoughtful prompts addressing ethical dilemmas, active instructor presence in the discussion, and the facilitation of strong social connections among students so they are more likely to engage with each other when opinions differ.

CONCLUSION
Adding to the literature highlighting specific practices that produce effective online courses (Goldingay, Epstein, & Taylor, 2018; Levin & Fulginiti, 2017), and grounded in Garrison et al.’s community of inquiry framework for online teaching, in this paper, we reflect on three pedagogical lessons learned from teaching a fully online, asynchronous, MSW practice course on mental health diagnosis. The community of inquiry framework underscores that effective educational experience in online learning environments must be supported through the complementary domains of social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. We suggest that teaching a mental health diagnosis class in the online environment offers strong opportunities for students to apply personal experiences to social work practice, facilitated by cultivating a strong social presence among the students. Further, we reflect that, through carefully designed tasks and timely personalised feedback – in other words, teaching presence – the online learning environment offers ample opportunity for students to improve their written mental health diagnostic skills. Finally, we suggest that facilitating high-level thinking about ethical challenges related to mental health diagnosis is possible in the online learning environment (akin to cognitive presence), but requires active instructor facilitation (teaching presence) and a class culture of open peer communication (social presence).

As is the case with in-person classes, just because a course can be taught well online does not mean it always is; the quality of course design and instruction are equally critical (Wilke et al., 2016). We echo Forgey and Ortega-Williams’ (2016) call to move beyond whether social work classes can be taught online, to how they can be taught online. We commend the accumulating scholarship documenting approaches to effective teaching of social work in online learning environments, including the use of digital storytelling to examine issues in social work practice (Goldingay et al., 2018), the use of film to teach about death and grief (Head & Smith, 2016), and the use of specific simulation tools to teach social work practice skills (Washburn & Zhou, 2018). This article aims to contribute to this area of the literature by providing detail on the construction of a high-quality online social work diagnosis class drawing on the community of inquiry framework. Based on this case, we suggest that high-quality teaching of mental health diagnosis can be designed in online platforms, but – like any face-to-face course – requires careful consideration of student learning.

References


Online and Blended Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia: Negotiating the Tensions

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ABSTRACT

Online and digital learning is rapidly expanding and driving demand for digital innovation in social work education in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Internal and external accreditation standards are grappling with what this means for social work education. In addition, educators are experimenting with innovative online methods with promising results, including online skills education and placement preparation. This has called on social work educators to design and develop online and digital curricula pedagogies and innovations, which are responsive to internal and external drivers that are evidence-based, and which are underpinned by social justice principles of access and equity. Nevertheless, the digital divide may compromise important principles such as access and equity. This paper explores some of the current debates and tensions within social work online education in Australia and New Zealand and makes suggestions for the profession moving forward.

Keywords: Social work education; Online learning; Social work skills; Field education; Digital divide
THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL AND ONLINE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA AND AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

A perennial problem for practice educators in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in social work is how to prepare students to be competent, ethical, critical and yet flexible professionals (Agllias, 2010; Beddoe, 2018; Beddoe, Hay, Maidment, Ballantyne, & Walker, 2018; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The increasing complexity of social work practice, coupled with diminishing resources worldwide in social service delivery, has meant that social service agencies’ active involvement in ensuring social work students’ competency gaps are addressed is unsustainable (Phillips et al., 2018). Consequently, digital technologies have contributed to the preparation for social work practice using practice simulations (Vandsburger, Duncan-Daston, Akerson, & Dillon, 2010) and digital storytelling (Christiansen, 2011; Goldingay, Epstein, & Taylor, 2018), building on other disciplines such as nursing and medicine (see for example, Hogg & Miller, 2016; Dickinson, Hopton, & Pilling, 2016). Nevertheless, an ongoing problem is how to define and regulate quality and standards of social work education by the many providers operating in this space. This is particularly so due to ongoing debates about what preparation means, with ongoing tensions between employers’ expectations and social work academics’ values about what should be prioritised in social work education (Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Alongside these tensions, both in Australia and New Zealand, is the digital divide which limits access to digital technologies.

Social work and social work education do not have a lengthy history in Australia or New Zealand. In Australia, it was not until 1940 that university social work education commenced with the establishment of the social work program at the University of Sydney (Agbim & Ozanne, 2007). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) was established in 1946, which originally included all states except Tasmania (AASW, 2019b). There are now 30 providers of qualifying social work programs across Australia—29 public universities and one private provider, with the Australian Catholic University offering programs in three separate states. Courses range from four-year bachelor programs to a diverse range of double degrees, through to two-year master’s qualifying programs.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, 17 providers of social work education were registered in 2015 (Beddoe et al., 2018). Social work education in the university setting in New Zealand began in 1947 at Victoria University in Wellington, reproducing the British model of casework and social administration. The New Zealand Association of Social Workers (NZASW) was established in 1964. Between 1973 and 1986, further programs were established, and the New Zealand Social Work Training Council set basic minimum accreditation standards, although these caused controversy amongst stakeholders (Nash & Munford, 2001). In addition, relations between universities and employers weakened due to questions about the goodness of fit between what employers and agencies wanted social workers to be trained in and what was taught at university (Nash & Munford, 2001). Nevertheless, New Zealand has been successful in instigating registration of social workers via the Social Work Registration Act (2003), with mandatory registration and protection of title coming into force in 2018 (Beddoe et al., 2018). Furthermore, social work education in New Zealand is underpinned by a bi-cultural approach that recognises the history and impact of Western colonisation and includes the voices and experiences of Māori people and Indigenous knowledges in informing health and social welfare policies and practices (Beddoe, 2018).
Thus, in both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, historically and today, tensions have been high in relation to how to produce graduates who can cope with the real world. At the heart of the tensions are questions regarding the real world from whose perspective? The local or the global? Individual or societal? Agency mandate or social work values? In New Zealand, the Social Work Registration Act (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2019), aimed to improve accountability and therefore the standing of the social work profession following pervasive critique of social workers (Beddoe, 2018; Hunt, 2017; Hunt, Staniforth, & Beddoe, 2019), and defined the minimum qualifications for social work practice. Registration for all practising social workers is expected to be mandatory by 2020, but questions remain whether this will strengthen the professionalisation of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand to better meet community needs (Hunt et al., 2019). In response to contestation around what preparation means, a three-year project was launched entitled Enhancing Readiness to Practice. This project included a taxonomy of terms in social work education, curriculum mapping, surveys and focus groups with supervisors and providers of qualifying social work degrees, and production of a Professional Capabilities Framework. Findings included students’ varying feelings of confidence or self-doubt, and practitioners’ observation that graduates perceived their confidence dropped after a couple of years in practice due to the climate and resourcing in agencies and the complexity of challenges facing client groups (Beddoe et al., 2018). Practitioners and students did not raise the issue of how confidence related to competence, however, nor was it explored in relation to the impact of this on their clients’ and their own wellbeing.

Similarly, in Australia, social work education has experienced significant change over recent years reflecting broader changes in the tertiary education sector. Student numbers have increased and there has been a significant increase in international students (Cooper, 2007; Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018). Globalisation and internationalisation have seen universities extending their reach beyond Australia, and increasingly, Australian social work is being taught in a range of international contexts. Higher education is changing to respond to these and other imperatives and questions about the content and purpose of social work curriculum become even more salient in preparing graduates for social work practice in international contexts, posing dilemmas for those tasked with regulating social work curriculum standards.

Despite these complexities and competing forces, moves to register the social work profession have not been supported in Australia. Instead, the AASW formulated a set of guidelines for the purposes of conducting accreditation reviews, generally on a five-yearly basis. These guidelines are outlined in the Australian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) (AASW, 2012). The ASWEAS traditionally undergo regular review via consultation processes conducted by the AASW with stakeholders including employers and students. At the time of writing, the results of the most recent review were rejected by the Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW) and the accreditation standards reverted back to the 2012/2015 standards. The ACHSSW has put forward to the AASW that they were in the best position to guide the standards due to their expertise although, at the time of writing, it is not clear if this was agreed upon. As agreement on the best way forward has been stalled, the most current standards utilised for accreditation are those from 2012, revised in 2015 (AASW, 2019a), thus now being out of date and potentially out of step with the thinking of educators and practising social workers and their employers.
One of the tensions arising from this debate over accreditation standards, which has led to this impasse, is the general movement away from an input model of accreditation (what programs must provide to students) to one that focuses on outcomes for graduates and an emphasis on learning outcomes (PhillipsKPA, 2017). Professional accreditation bodies in other disciplines have moved away from a focus on curriculum content, staff–student ratios and library resources and instead have turned their attention to learning outcomes and the knowledge and skills graduates should be able to demonstrate (PhillipsKPA, 2017). The ASWEAS process has been slow to engage with this paradigm shift as the current requirements still emphasise an input and resources model. This has meant that the profession has been slow to engage with the trend of digital technology within higher education generally. Further, this emphasis on content and resources has hampered programs from innovating in blended, online and distance education. At the same time, universities, other HEP institutions and other allied health disciplines are moving swiftly to capitalise on new digital communications technology. Nowhere in Australia is this tension between inputs versus learning outcomes been more evident than in debates about face-to-face requirements for social work programs providing distance education.

Currently in Australia, ASWEAS dictate that social work courses must provide the input of face-to-face interaction within their flexible or off-campus delivery options. A similar situation occurs in New Zealand with the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) mandating distance programs to also deliver compulsory in-person, face-to-face content. Both the SWRB and the ASWEAS specify and define what is considered face-to-face (compulsory classroom teaching where students are present in person) and how much time programs are required to deliver to students. Furthermore, the ASWEAS suggest that the purpose of this face-to-face component should be for the instruction of social work skill development.

Despite the AASW mandating face-to-face, in-person attendance in social work education, one of the key changes that has occurred in the last decade is the significant increase in off-campus study. While many would think of higher education as primarily on-campus and face-to-face in a classroom, Australia has a long history of offering programs off-campus. The University of Queensland, for example, established a Department of Correspondence in 1911 (Latchem, 2018) demonstrating that off-campus study has been a feature of higher education for some time. Alongside this, the delivery of online and technology enhanced or mediated higher education courses, including social work, has increased dramatically around the world (Davis, Greenaway, Moore, & Cooper, 2019; Levin, Fulginiti, & Moore, 2018; Reamer, 2019). The rapid adoption of online studies is relatively recent due to improved educational technology via the internet and the increase in demand for postgraduate study from students who often have significant work, family or other responsibilities (Cooper, 2007; Norton et al., 2018). Changes in prioritising access to education in the name of equity and inclusion have also been influential.

According to Norton et al. (2018) approximately 20% of domestic students in Australia now study off-campus in online format, which is a marked increase from approximately 12% in 1989. Mature-age students and postgraduate students prefer off-campus study while school leavers overwhelmingly prefer on-campus study. At the same time, multimodal study (a mix of online and on-campus) has rapidly increased from approximately
2% in 1989 to 13% in 2016. Combined, a third of students have a significant proportion of their study away from their campus (Norton et al., 2018).

Of the 30 providers of social work education in Australia, 12 offer *distance education*, the descriptor used by the AASW to describe programs that offer social work programs that are offered off-campus essentially online (AASW, 2019a). Some of these providers have a long history of distance education (see Crisp, 2018), others are relatively new to online delivery. But, as Fiona McDermott (2019, p. 1) saliently notes in her introduction to the themed issue of *Australian Social Work* on social work education, “diverse teaching approaches—online, on-campus, distance—are the norm rather than the exception”. In New Zealand, there are two main providers of distance education—Massey University and the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand—although a small number offer units or year levels in online modes. Massey University is the only university in New Zealand offering a degree by distance education and is the longest-serving four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree in New Zealand (Massey University, 2019).

**TEACHING CORE SOCIAL WORK SKILLS ONLINE**

One of the vexed issues in social work distance education is how to teach core social work skills online, particularly communication, interactive and assessment skills. It should be pointed out, however, that the notion of skills goes much broader to also include critical thinking, judgement, decision-making and emotional awareness and use of self, among others. Critics of online delivery argue that these skills are best taught, developed and assessed in traditional face-to-face settings (Groshong et al., 2013). Others argue that core social work skills can be taught online effectively, providing certain conditions of best practice online curriculum design and teaching and learning are met (Cummings, Chaffin, & Milam, 2019; Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Goldingay, Epstein, & Taylor, 2018; Goldingay & Land, 2014; Phillips et al., 2018; Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). Relatedly, several social service providers now deliver counselling online, further justifying the use of digital technologies to enable students to practise in effective and ethical ways (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Hunt, 2002; Reamer, 2019).

Jones (2015) reports that foundational communication, intervention and assessment skills can be taught online, but teaching therapeutic and counselling skills is more challenging. This contrasts with Phillips’ 2018 study that found students who learnt skills online performed better than those taught face-to-face across a wide range of competencies including cultural competency, evidence-based practice, professionalism, ethics, thinking and judgement and practice skills to name a few (Phillips et al., 2018). However, as Jones notes, the curriculum and use of technology to teach skills online must be rigorous and carefully designed to maximise the effective use of technology, a point also illustrated by Siebert and Spaulding-Givens in their detailed exposition of an online skills unit (2006).

The debates, challenges and potentials of teaching social work skills online have begun to be systematically examined in the research literature in the context of broader research into the effectiveness of online social work education more generally. There is a substantial body of research comparing educational outcomes of online and traditional face-to-face social
work education finding no significant difference between them (e.g., Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Wretman & Macy, 2016). While much social work skills education in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere still relies on a face-to-face learning environment to teach social work skills, there is an emergence of evidence-based examples of social work skills taught wholly online. A systematic review of the evidence into the effectiveness or otherwise of online social work education in the United States concluded that “the findings overwhelmingly support the hypothesis that technology-based methods yield outcomes on par with those found among traditional, classroom-based lecture methods” (Wretman & Macy, 2016, p. 415). Moreover, a very recent study comparing online to face-to-face social work learning outcomes in the United States compared skills outcomes (as measured by field evaluation) and knowledge (as measured by exam scores) and found that those that studied online had higher skills scores but those who studied face-to-face had higher knowledge scores. They also found that those who studied online reported higher rates of preparedness for practice (Cummings et al., 2019).

Despite this, there are still concerns about quality, academic integrity and digital privacy that warrant attention (Reamer, 2013a, 2019). Furthermore, student isolation and disconnection amidst competing demands on time such as paid employment present a persistent challenge for distance educators (Hemy, McAuliffe, & Fowler, 2018). As pointed out by Crisp (2018), it is too simplistic to generalise from the evidence that all online modes of delivery are equivalent to face-to-face environments. Like most things, it turns on the quality and development of the online offering to meet pedagogical goals in a planned and systematic way.

For example, some innovations in social work have begun to make use of video case studies and interactive multi-media. Pack (2016) reports on a series of multi-media child-protection case studies involving paid actors used to develop and assess student’s discretionary decision-making skills in child protection. Similarly, Goldingay, Epstein et al. (2018) developed and filmed a digital story and acted case study that students interact with online by demonstrating the application of theory and assessment skills. Elsewhere, Washburn and Zhou (2018) reviewed and evaluated two popular simulated learning tools for enhancing online social work skills education: Virtual Patient, and Second Life. Both simulation tools utilise 3D avatar technology to teach social work skills and the development of values and emotional awareness. Like the work by Pack (2016) and Goldingay Epstein and Taylor, these simulation tools allow for repeated exposure, safe experimentation, convenient access, and experiences that may not be provided by classroom or placement experiences (Washburn & Zhou, 2018).

Although there is evidence of new digital approaches in online teaching and learning, numerous complicating factors warrant attention. Levin et al. (2018) point out that, although there is an extensive research demonstrating the effectiveness and student satisfaction of online and distance social work education, many educators remain sceptical and frequently judge online and distance delivery of social work education as inferior to face-to-face and traditional delivery modes (see for example, Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, & Fowler, 2015). The reasons behind this judgement are many and varied, but educator perceptions of online teaching can be negatively influenced by: a lack of leadership and stakeholder engagement in curriculum development; workload concerns; a lack of interest and preparedness for
online teaching and learning; and, concerns about the way technology mediates relationship building (Levin et al., 2018). These issues are not insurmountable, and can be ameliorated by: supporting academic staff with developing technical and online teaching competence; creating an engaging pedagogy that supports students to feel socially and intellectually connected; judicious and planned use of technology within a coherent curriculum; a supportive and technologically agile institutional context (Davis et al., 2019); adequate workload with small and manageable online class sizes (Pelech et al., 2013); and, a team and collaborative approach to curriculum development (Maple, Jarrott, & Kuyini, 2013).

In summary, although still a contested debate, the literature reports good evidence for the effectiveness and benefits of online social work education, and there are emerging examples of innovations that showcase approaches to methods that contribute to online social work skills education. In the United States, accrediting bodies set clear guidelines to ensure online education is achieving its aims of preparing social workers for practice in the digital age (Reamer, 2019). As pointed out, these innovations and the rigour and quality needed for online social work education cannot occur in a vacuum. A broader context that supports a planned, coherent and thoughtful use of technology is necessary to ensure that the learning outcomes and goals of social work education are met.

USING ONLINE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES TO PREPARE FOR FIELD EDUCATION

While much of the discussion so far has been around substituting classroom face-to-face instruction with online learning experiences, social work in Australia and New Zealand still require a significant number of hours of unpaid placement experiences in agency settings as part of their training. Field education is essentially a face-to-face learning environment. The notion of safe and repeated experimentation and exposure is an important process in learning to be a social worker. This is important due to the potential for harm—to both students and to service users during this training. Being exposed gradually to practice may help avoid triggering mental health problems such as anxiety (Philips et al., 2018), depression or PTSD, or setting in motion resulting cognitive challenges from these conditions.

In addition, a further unexplored aspect of field education training is exposure to harmful power dynamics occurring in placement workspaces. The deleterious effects of workplace bullying on health and mental health have been well documented but the impact on students has not received as much attention. Nevertheless, a recent study of Australian nursing students showed 50.1% had been bullied while on placement (Budden, Birks, Cant, Bagley, & Park, 2017), while a large study of radiography students showed 62.9% of students had been bullied on placement (Society of Radiographers, 2016). Issues such as occupational violence from colleagues and service users are particularly salient for social work students, due to their relatively powerless positioning in being a student coupled with the sometimes-marginalised role of social work in multidisciplinary teams (van Heughten, 2009). Thus, Virtual Clinics and other immersive simulation programs can enable students to obtain skills in recognising and managing these challenging workplace situations before placement, to prepare for and prevent harm that may arise in placement settings.
Service users may also be prevented from harm when students in training are using simulations or virtual learning experiences. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users and communities. For example, the impact of colonialism, including genocide and the Stolen Generation in Australia, has meant it is more difficult for social work students to have an opportunity to be immersed in the cultural practices of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nation or be assessed on their ability to work in culturally safe and appropriate ways. Recent studies have demonstrated the enormous detrimental impact that placing Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal families can have. One of the reasons identified by Government departments for not placing Aboriginal children with kin is inconsistent involvement of, and support for, Aboriginal people and organisations in child protection decision-making (Arney, Iannos, Chong, McDougall, & Parkinson, 2015). Contributing to this is a poor identification and assessment of carers, due to inconsistencies in practitioners’ knowledge and skill and a need for a shift in attitudes and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family structures and worldviews (Arney et al., 2015). Thus, many social workers and social work students may not follow their own agency’s policy guidelines, causing further harm to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities (Arney et al., 2015). This may be because new and experienced social work practitioners are underprepared for culturally competent practice.

To work towards addressing this, Goldingay, Satour et al. (2018) created a virtual learning space alongside Traditional Custodians and digital designers, which gives an insight into the importance of culture and connection to land and family for Aboriginal children and their families. Students are placed in the role of social worker and are assessed on their ability to follow guidelines such as the complete DHHS procedures in decolonising ways that maximise self-determination for Aboriginal children, their families and communities (Goldingay, Satour, et al., 2018).

The most recent innovation in online interactive learning experiences in social work are virtual clinics and immersive simulations. While still in their infancy in social work, similar developments have occurred in professions such as nursing (Botma, 2014) occupational therapy (Imms et al., 2017) and psychology (Graj, Sheen, Dudley, Sutherland-Smith, & McGillivray, 2018) where there are immersive simulation experiences as part of the curriculum that enable exposure to complex and emotionally taxing practice situations. Similarly, other disciplines have explored the use of virtual reality to develop empathy in students (Bertrand, Guegan, Robieux, McCall, & Zenasni, 2018). These new developments pave the way for further thinking about how to prepare students for practicum and early graduate practice in ways that have previously not been possible.

**THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

Twenty-first century learning technologies developed in other disciplines have the potential to address the gap in social work and support students to receive graduated exposure through immersive and simulated learning. Virtual experiences can occur in classroom situations or in cloud/online situations (with support built around it, such as supervision). These examples and the evidence behind them offer promising directions in teaching social work skills online. However, such technological innovations need to be situated in a supportive
context. Creating the conditions for effective design and delivery of online social work education is essential, and this means moving beyond individual interest and competence in online teaching.

One of the most important considerations in expanding the use of technology in training of social workers is to recognise that not everyone has equal access to technology, whether due to generational factors, income, location or time. The digital divide traditionally refers to inequalities in access to, and use of, the internet and information and communication technologies. Over time, the definition of the digital divide has widened to recognise that it not only refers to a lack of access to technology, but also a lack of skills needed to use technology, as well as limited insight into the outcomes or benefits of technology use (Scheerder, van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2017). Thus, the digital divide now also includes recognition of “digital capability” (Attewell, 2001), “digital outcomes” (Wei, Teo, Chan, & Tan, 2011), and “digital disengagement” (Olphert & Damodaran, 2013). Sociodemographic, economic and geographic factors—such as poverty, lower education levels, older age, unemployment, poor broadband speeds, and to a lesser extent gender and ethnicity—commonly influence the digital divide (Serrano-Cinca, Muñoz Soro, & Brusca, 2018). Such a divide can lead to, inter alia, social exclusion (see for example, Alam & Imran, 2015), affecting people’s access to and maintenance of job opportunities (Krueger, Stone, & Lukaszewski, 2018), eHealth literacy (Neter & Brainin, 2012), and access to education (Hill & Lawton, 2018).

Universities are in a unique position to counter the impacts of the digital divide. According to Hill and Lawton (2018), “the impact [of the digital divide] on access and formal learning provides both an opportunity and a moral obligation for universities” (p. 603). Consequently, many universities have focused on enhancing access to, and the quality of, online education. This has meant that universities have expected to see enrolment growth, improved learning and teaching outcomes and processes, wider access to university, and lower costs for delivering and undertaking education (Garrett, 2017). However, there is considerable debate as to whether these expectations have been fulfilled. Online learning is often understood as being flexible (Parker & Wassef, 2010). It can help prepare graduates for emerging digital practice (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017) and it can be tailored to promote specific skill development (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). However, the move to online and blended learning has not been without criticism. Some have argued that it has moved away from a learner-centred approach, overlooking the importance of the process of learning (Sawrikar et al., 2015) and instead focusing on efficiency and economic benefits (Boisselle, 2014; Smith & Jeffery, 2013).

These debates extend to social work and human services education. It is commonly acknowledged that online education increases access and opportunities for education for students living in remote areas and that students can engage in education irrespective of their ability to physically attend a university campus or ability to learn in face-to-face group settings (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Kurzman, 2013; Pelech et al., 2013). It may also help women who are undertaking care work in the home and people who are not currently in education, employment or training, all of whom are frequent users of the internet, to complete tertiary study (Serrano-Cinca et al., 2018). This is important if social work
educators are to fulfil their commitment to social justice (Reamer, 2013b). Further, as Sawrikar et al. (2015) have noted, “good social workers come from all walks of life including working families, single parents, remote dwellers and others, and so all should have the opportunity to participate” (p. 345). However, access to the internet and reasonable broadband speeds is not universal (Riddlesden & Singleton, 2014), thus disadvantaging those most affected by the digital divide (Reamer, 2013b).

Consequently, universities—along with schools of social work and human services—need to implement strategies to overcome the digital divide and ensure that access to education is available for all. Strategies must focus on promoting people’s digital capabilities, engagement, and benefits, so that students not only have the necessary skills to use the digital learning tools effectively, but also are engaged and see the benefits of doing so (Scheerder et al., 2017). Social work educators need to be mindful of the existing digital divide while at the same time harnessing strategies to promote digital inclusion so that those who may have difficulty attending a university can still participate in education.

CONCLUSION

Many longstanding tensions in social work are influencing important debates and decisions around the governance of social work education in Australia and New Zealand. Despite this, efforts have been made by members in the profession to continue to improve students’ experience of social work education. These include efforts to improve readiness to practice and improve access to a range of digital learning mediums, through efforts in innovation and research, and ongoing advocacy within institutions. This has called on social work educators to design and develop online and digital curricula pedagogies and innovations that are responsive to internal and external drivers, are evidence-based, and are underpinned by social justice principles of access and equity. It would be useful for social work educators to continue to offer and evaluate innovative approaches to education, including online mediums, for both skills-development and placement preparation, and minimising of risk to students and service users, while also being mindful of the digital divide which may compromise access and equity for some students. It is also important for accrediting or registration bodies in Australia and New Zealand to remain up to date with the latest research and developments, including international trends towards graduate outcomes as opposed to program inputs. This will help the profession to keep across the rapid improvements in online education and reflect this in accreditation and registration standards. As the twenty-first century advances, openness to work with, accept, respect, and negotiate within the unavoidable tensions for the various educational perspectives is key to moving forward in a way that benefits the profession, students and service users and their communities.

References


Using ICT to Teach Clinical Social Work Skills in New Zealand Academic Reflections

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ABSTRACT
This article explores New Zealand social work educators’ experiences of using information and communication technologies (ICT) to teach clinical social work skills. The development of new digital technologies, blended learning approaches and a desire to engage with social work students has prompted social work educators to consider the role of ICT in the delivery of clinical social work courses. The research was an exploratory study utilising semi-structured, qualitative interviews with seven social work educators from New Zealand tertiary providers. The aim of this research was to understand New Zealand social work educators’ views on ICT. This included how well existing ICT works as well as the challenges and future possibilities of using ICT in teaching clinical social work. The results of the study confirmed that social work educators across New Zealand utilise a variety of ICT platforms including Zoom, Skype, Adobe Connect, Moodle and Blackboard, amongst others. These tools have been employed asynchronously to create a blended learning environment with discussion forums and to deliver course materials including written documents and podcasts. Social work educators also adapted the ICT to support synchronous educational opportunities enabling their students to be present in virtual classrooms to learn, engage and practise the use of interpersonal clinical social work skills. The results from this study support that existing ICT offers the opportunity to engage face-to-face with social work students outside of the physical classroom and can be utilised to support the incremental development of clinical skills. The use of ICT to teach clinical social work skills is consequently redefining the nature of face-to-face contact. This challenges social work educators and regulators to consider what face-to-face means for meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration.

Keywords: Information communication technology; E-learning; Social work education; Online learning platforms
INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are opening doors in social work education, challenging social work educators to think about how ICT can support the delivery and development of clinical social work skills (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Phillips et al., 2018; Stanley-Clarke, English, & Yeung, 2018; Washburn & Zhou, 2018). The opportunities for engaging with students and having the digital technologies to ensure successful integration and development of knowledge creates possibilities beyond traditional face-to-face methods of teaching. Social work educators are currently experimenting and adopting new on-line mechanisms for the delivery of social work education with the possibilities including asynchronous, synchronous or blended learning. Asynchronous learning enables students to access online resources at a time that suits them. Synchronous learning involves the educator and student being present at the same time. Blended learning involves a combination of asynchronous and synchronous approaches.

This article presents the findings of a study exploring New Zealand social work educators’ perspectives of the use of ICT in teaching clinical social work skills. It details the experiences of seven New Zealand educators using ICT, including how well existing tools work, the opportunities and the challenges of using ICT in the delivery of clinical social work courses. In particular, the study highlights the creativity of social work educators, and how they maximise the opportunities for engagement as well as supporting the development of clinical skills.

BACKGROUND

The New Zealand Social Work Registration Board (SWRB) is the regulatory body in New Zealand responsible for the registration of social workers (Social Workers Registration Act, 2003). As part of the SWRB’s mandate, they have the authority to recognise programmes and set standards for social work education that fit with the goals of the Social Workers Registration Act 2003. The SWRB assesses New Zealand social work programmes against these predetermined programme recognition requirements, ensuring that social work education providers meet the standards of social work education required for practising social work in New Zealand (SWRB, 2018).

According to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2019), a central government agency, the demand for social workers in New Zealand is rising. In 2017 there were 17 recognised social work education providers offered by a variety of institution including universities, polytechnics, wānanga (Māori higher education), and one private training establishment (Beddoe, Hay, Maidment, Ballantyne, & Walker, 2018). In 2017, there were 3310 students enrolled in recognised social work programmes (SWRB, 2017). Courses are taught both face-to-face and via distance utilising a variety of approaches.

In most undergraduate, face-to-face Bachelor of Social Work programmes in New Zealand, students attend weekly laboratories where they learn clinical skills and develop confidence in applying social work models. In contrast, distance students rely on face-to-face attendance at contact workshops. The SWRB (2018) requires all distance social work programmes to have a minimum of 20 days’ face-to-face social work skills teaching across the programme.
The face-to-face contact days offered by New Zealand social work programmes generally include a laboratory component where students can practise their clinical skills. However, the current system of engaging with distance students via contact workshops is compressed and does not provide for the same weekly progression of skills achieved by students attending face-to-face classes across a semester.

Social work literature is full of articles questioning the validity and use of ICT in teaching clinical social work skills (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018; Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Levin, Witsett, & Wood, 2013). In particular, social work educators are concerned that the skills learnt in the online environment do not capture the nuances and intricacies of interpersonal interaction including body language or facial cues (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018; Farrel et al., 2018; Wilson, Brown, Wood, & Farkas, 2013). In line with the findings of Washburn and Zhou (2018), social work programmes within New Zealand struggle to find ways for students to practise and develop their clinical skills outside the face-to-face classroom and field education experiences.

The development and use of ICT in social work education has reduced the barriers for many students engaging in social work education (Farrel et al., 2018). Up until the early 2000s, institutional pressure and student demand were the primary drivers for the use of ICT by social work educators (Farrel et al., 2018). These tools focused primarily on asynchronous learning through platforms including Moodle and Blackboard, the inclusion of podcasts, audio recordings, online readings as well as discussion forums. The use of asynchronous ICT does have benefits in terms of being easily accessible, reducing barriers to education, enabling students to learn at their own pace in their own timeframes, as well as creating space for reflection and critical analysis (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018; Farrel et al., 2018; Desai, Hart, & Richards, 2008; Parker-Oliver & Demiris, 2006; Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008). Making social work education more accessible and supporting students to have flexibility in their engagement has enabled many students to study by distance while undertaking paid employment and managing the demands of family life (Fitch, Canada, Cary, & Freese, 2016; Washburn & Zhou, 2018). Additionally, Washburn and Zhou (2018) discuss how the introduction and flexibility of using ICT within a social work programme has supported the recruitment of social workers in areas of skill shortage to work with the most vulnerable populations in society.

Most ICT requires adaptation, and social work educators are challenged to think creatively about the possibilities for use within their courses. A central concern of New Zealand social work educators is the lack of an effective online platform in which to teach and practise clinical skills. Up until this point it has been the scope and technological parameters of the ICT that have driven how social work educators use these tools within their courses. As ICT has developed and social work educators become more accustomed to using these tools, their potential within social work education for engagement, retention and relationship building is being further explored (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Farrel et al., 2018; Iverson Hitchcock & Young, 2016; Phillips et al., 2018). However, none of these ICT tools is fit for purpose and social work educators have been told to adopt tools under the guise of embracing teaching within the modern paradigm (Farrel et al., 2018).
Research is beginning to explore some of the benefits of synchronous technology for example webinars and the use of breakout rooms using online conferencing platforms such as Zoom. Fitch et al. (2016) found that, despite the differences between the virtual and face-to-face environment, the online environment still enabled reading of non-verbal communication. While confidence with the technology is an important variable in its successful adoption, Farrel et al. (2018) found there were higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction in courses where ICT was used. They noted that Zoom was an especially effective platform that is free, easy to use and the user-interface preserves the one-on-one experience (Farrel et al., 2018). Their research found that the online role play room created intimacy and reduced performance anxiety for students who felt intimidated practising in a face-to-face classroom environment (Farrel et al., 2018). Additionally, a study by Phillips et al. (2018) found that using ICT to support the development of core social work competencies before, and alongside, fieldwork experiences provided benefits to the fieldwork agency and supported students in developing confidence in using core clinical skills. Yet, as with all teaching, it is about balancing student needs and satisfaction. While some students embrace and enjoy the online experience, others find this distancing and prefer face-to-face engagement (Farrel et al., 2018; Fitch et al., 2016).

**METHOD**

The aim of this research was to understand New Zealand social work educators’ views on ICT. This included how well existing ICT works, as well as the challenges and future possibilities of using ICT in teaching clinical social work. The research was an exploratory study utilising semi-structured qualitative interviews with social work educators from four New Zealand tertiary providers. The choice of a qualitative methodology supported an in-depth exploration of participants’ perspectives and experiences of using ICT in their teaching. The research received ethical approval from the university’s Human Ethics Committee.

Interviews were undertaken with seven educators from four tertiary providers. Three of the institutions offered distance learning programmes and one only offered a face-to-face programme. Participants were key informants, identified using purposeful sampling. This sampling technique enabled participants to be strategically selected to ensure they had knowledge and experience of using ICT and could contribute a variety of perspectives (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Patton, 2015).

The researcher sent an email to eight potential participants at five social work tertiary education providers inviting them to participate. The email included an information sheet with detail related to the project’s goals, participants’ rights as well as the anticipated time commitment. While the researcher knew all the participants as peers prior to the research, there was no other relationship. All the participants responded positively to the initial invitation. Seven participants agreed to be interviewed, the eighth indicated they were too busy to participate at that time.

Interviews were undertaken at times convenient to the participants. Five of the interviews were undertaken on-line using Zoom, a video conferencing tool. The other two interviews were conducted face-to-face. An interview guide provided a framework for the interviews.
The use of an interview guide ensured consistency of the core topics explored with each participant and acted as a checklist for the researcher to ensure these topics were covered (Patton, 2015). The use of this method enabled the researcher to use open-ended questions and prompts to generate a conversation with the participants about the use of ICT in clinical social work programmes. Topics covered in the interviews included participants’ experiences and reflections of using ICT; their successes; and challenges and visions for the future use of ICT.

The interviews were undertaken between August and November 2018. Interviews were approximately an hour long. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed by a paid transcriber. All participants were offered the opportunity to check and correct their interview transcripts; these were returned to those who requested. Two participants amended their transcripts to ensure accuracy of their data. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were allocated pseudonyms and any identifiable information was anonymised or removed.

The researcher thematically analysed the data. Thematic analysis involves the process of identifying patterns and/or themes within data, ascribing meaning to the themes and then reporting on the key findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2015). The nature of thematic analysis is driven by the research, its specific focus including any research questions. The process of data analysis began during data collection as the researcher made field notes following each interview reflecting on the nature of the interview, key points and trends across the interviews. To support the process of data analysis the following questions were asked of the data:

• How is ICT utilised in the delivery of clinical social work programmes?

• How effective are the current tools including strengths and challenges?

• What are the possibilities for utilising ICT?

Each transcript was read, and key points noted in relation to the above research questions. As this was an inductive study there were no pre-existing frameworks that shaped the identification of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Similarities, points of difference and items of interest were noted and checked in a recursive process across all the transcripts. The themes were allocated relative importance based on their frequency across the data and their ability to generate knowledge in relation to the research questions. Data were triangulated across the interviews, with the field notes and further analysed in relation to literature available on the topic.

Trustworthiness is an important criterion of qualitative research. Trustworthiness requires that the researcher has taken steps to ensure participants’ perspectives are reflective of their reality and are accurately interpreted relative to the study’s findings (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). One potential limitation on a study’s trustworthiness is the researcher’s own subjectivity. The researcher in this study was aware of her own insider role as an educator in a social work programme within New Zealand. The researcher engaged in reflexivity across the research process, being careful not to impose any preconceived impressions or inter-
pretations on the data and the perspectives of participants. Further, the nature of the study’s method supported the trustworthiness of the data and research findings.

The use of semi-structured interviews as part of a qualitative study enabled the researcher to gain unique insights into the participants’ experiences. The use of this method meant that data collection focused on a portion of views from selected participants. Four of the participants were lecturers and three were professional clinicians/research fellows. All except one participant was female. While not generalisable, the findings from this study have proximal similarity, meaning that they may be transferable across similar populations (Lietz & Zayas, 2010; Patton, 2015). Additionally, the findings from the study may contribute to theory building and form a foundation of knowledge for future research, including evaluative research with students.

RESULTS
The results of the study explore participants’ current experiences of using ICT alongside their impressions of the validity of using ICT in their teaching. The results also detail the challenges posed by a lack of fit between existing ICT platforms and current delivery mechanisms, requiring participants to be creative and adapt existing technology to fit the needs of the learning environment. Lastly, this section reflects on the future implications of using ICT for social work education.

Current experience of ICT
All the tertiary institutions involved in this study utilised an online learning platform—the most common were variations of Moodle and Blackboard although there were other bespoke platforms. The platforms were used for sharing information, discussion, as well as submitting and returning assignments. Some institutions utilised other online conferencing software including Adobe connect, Zoom and Skype to support the delivery of their courses. For most of the participants, ICT was primarily used to support asynchronous learning, as Mandy explained:

…the on-campus students tend to use [the platform], just as a repository for the link to their readings, and the weekly lecture slides, that’s what the on-campus students need that for. They can, however, get into the recordings of lectures if they want to. The distance students get that plus, in the discussion board is where all the distance tutorials are usually run, and if there has been a recording of some kind, then they will see that.

Mandy tailored her use of ICT to suit her audience, but found benefits for both face-to-face and distance students. She explained that, for her, the main benefits of using ICT were in relationship building:

I quite like that idea that you must have social presence with your distance students, and how you go about creating that in this environment where they are not seeing you every day. What do you do that makes it easy for them to contact you when they need to, in the same way as students in the class, and say hey, I’m a bit unsure about “x”…So that’s why I [use ICT and] send a few meaningless emails through that semester to try and build that sense of social relationship.
Discussion forums and posting online lectures and/or podcasts were the most common use of ICT. Participants found value in using these tools, as they enabled their students to reflect on their answers and consider the implications of the topic for their clinical social work practice. Karen linked her lectures and other course resources to topics discussed in the online forums:

…to engage [students] more with the chat forum… I said watch all of these, what do you think of them, how did you feel when you were watching them, how does this impact on how you might like to practice. You know, that real reflective stuff.

Sophia adopted a similar approach to her discussion forums by using: “questions, reflections, getting them to try and engage with each other. Or what each other’s written and making comments.”

Participants found that they were initially very cautious about using ICT with most having had limited experience with using the tools prior to being asked to deliver courses that required ICT. Linda’s experience was typical of many, she described ICT as being a “brave new world”, where she found herself having to use and adapt ICT without any prior knowledge as to how to do so:

It’s quite interesting when you are a teacher because there is that expectation that you will know what you are doing. So, it’s tricky if you don’t... It’s a credibility issue, you don’t want to be seen as a fraud… The thing is that you are just left to your own devices, you just do your best. (Linda)

Once the participants had experience in using new tools and developed confidence in using ICT in their teaching delivery, they seemed to embrace the tools which then became a standard part of their teaching toolkit. Sophia explained that she “was initially really nervous about teaching distance, but … found [using ICT] a really rewarding way of teaching, and really interesting way of teaching”.

Even those participants involved in teaching only face-to-face classes, where there was not such a need to engage through an online platform, as they saw the students in classrooms each week, found value in using ICT. Olivia, who taught in a face-to-face programme, explained that they still had instances where ICT broke down barriers for students, stating: “some people have used things like Google docs to do group assignments, and assessments in groups, and some people are using [online] quizzes to try to get people to do reading”. Adam explained that students, like educators, were initially apprehensive of using any ICT, stating they: “always find it incredibly challenging at the beginning and then, by the [end], most say it’s the best thing since sliced bread” (Adam).

**Creative uses of ICT**

All the participants found that they had to be creative in how they adapted ICT for use with their social work students. Ruth explained: “it’s kind of work with what [ICT] you have got, and then try and develop it more to fit in with today’s practice. Then sit with that for a bit”. Mandy found that ICT offered new possibilities, especially if you were
willing to learn and explore using the tools she said: “I am playing around with methods … part of it is to do with us having the attitude of being open to having new developments and trying things out.”

Several of the participants had tried using ICT synchronously with students using Zoom, Skype or Adobe Connect. These tools had been variously employed to deliver synchronous question-and-answer sessions for all students and to support students to virtually “attend” face-to-face lectures. Olivia and Linda had supported students to join their classes using Skype and Zoom. For Olivia, the students had met all the face-to-face requirements of the programme but were doing fieldwork overseas. In these instances, students had used Skype to enable themselves to participate alongside their classmates in the classroom. Olivia explained: “we currently have students doing placements in England and Ireland, and so they Skype into classes”. Olivia outlined that, while this was an effective use of ICT, time differences and the use of Skype was reliant on other students providing the technology to support those overseas to join the class:

…it sort of relies on one of their colleagues who’s their friend, saying yes, I’m happy for you to come in on my computer through the class, and then just bring them in really, and they engage in conversations and in small group work, and they listen to the lectures, and occasionally we ask them questions on the computer, and we remember that they are there (Olivia).

Linda found the experience of using Zoom to join students together reduced the financial barriers for students who needed to attend a compulsory contact workshop. She was initially wary of using ICT in this way, but found the experience worked well, noting:

…I am going to have to do that again next year …. That was great …. From a social work perspective, it’s glorious because people with disability, or compromised by distance, they don’t need to be disadvantaged. So, it’s gold. Especially for post-grads, they just love that chance of sharing their practice wisdom and the reflection, so that they can be involved in that even if they can’t make the course (Linda).

Other ICT tools for engaging distance students including synchronous lectures and tutorials. Sophia explained:

…when I teach, I usually have a fortnightly Zoom session with them, where we will go over the lectures for the past two weeks - check any questions, go over the readings. And then we spend the second hour doing role plays. So I put them in rooms on Zoom and we do role plays that way.

Mandy also delivered lectures to her distance students in a two-hour block online each week. She began the week by using the online discussion forum:

…every Monday I post what I call a curious question. So that’s a single question I get them to prepare for the Friday [online] lecture. So, on Monday they are supposed to log in, look at the curious minds question, which inevitably leads to some reading for
the Friday lecture. So, then they post a reply on anything at all, then on the Friday morning, I give the lecture via Zoom. I begin the lecture by discussing their responses to the curious minds question. I do that quite purposefully to make them realise that I do actually read those (Mandy).

Sophia and Ruth had created virtual classrooms to learn, engage and practise the use of inter-personal clinical social work skills across the semester. This process was undertaken using the Zoom breakout rooms function. Sophia and Ruth both stated that they felt this was very similar to practising role plays with students in a face-to-face classroom except in the online environment. Sophia explained how this worked:

…there’s a function on Zoom—I think it is called break-out rooms, and you just [allocate the students to the rooms], and then you can just come into each grouping that you have made. So I can come in, observe how they are going, provide feedback and that sort of thing. So yeah, that does seem to work really well.

Sophia and Ruth had both found this to be a very successful mechanism for students to practice and incrementally develop their clinical skills in a similar way to face-to-face teaching. Ruth commented:

…I do think that Zoom does work really well when they engage in it. It’s a really good method of teaching distance, because it’s interactive, it’s face to face, it’s got that ability for them to do small group work, so often they won’t speak in the bigger groups, but maybe I will send them away… if I ask them the same question, say go away, have a chat, and then bring them back, same as you would with a group that wasn’t speaking on campus, it works in a similar way. They would have then generated some ideas, generated their own thinking and then can come back with some words for me to work with.

Sophia concurred saying that she was initially very apprehensive of using the technology but:

…I having that interaction with the students, and being able to observe them in their role plays and providing that feedback has been really important … I was really nervous about how it was going to work, the role plays. I was pleasantly surprised around that.

Ruth had also received positive feedback from students saying that they had appreciated ICT being used in this way. Ruth also found that the Zoom sessions supported peer development and relationship building. She noted that learning by distance was essentially a very lonely process and that, at the Zoom sessions, the students “will be talking about how they are getting on as well… linking them up,” providing opportunities for the students to connect and get to know one another.

**Challenges in using ICT**

All participants experienced frustration around how to ensure all students engaged with ICT. Karen explained that her approaches to engaging students differed according to whether students were face-to-face or distance: “Well even though I pretty much offer them the same material, they seem to be quite different in how you engage with the students, and
things like that.” Her experience was that distance students were much more likely to engage with ICT as this was their primary method for receiving information about the course. Whereas she explained that: “the internal students don’t use [ICT] as much. I guess there is less of a reliance on it because they can see it face-to-face” (Karen).

For distance students, attending synchronous lectures and tutorials as well as participating in the online Zoom sessions were in addition to contact workshops creating an additional study/workload burden, hence attendance and participation varied according to whether these sessions were compulsory. Mandy explained commitment dwindled as the teaching semester wore on: “We are only four weeks in. At the first one we had about 15 turn up out of 23. At the second one and the third one we had about 5 or 6 out of 23.” Ruth related the lack of attendance with the time commitment involved, but she felt this was generally an excuse and that those students who were really engaged in their study made the effort, noting: “Given that it was only 4 times for the semester … if you really want to and you are organised, you can say to [your employer], look I have got this thing for two hours, you can do it”.

Most participants noted that the easiest way to ensure participation with an online activity was to make it compulsory and/or attach an assessment component to the activity. Adam explained that if students knew they were being observed and assessed, the students made the most of the ICT opportunities. His experience was that, in embedding reflection and self-assessment into the exercise students, did “interact... which is very good actually”. Olivia’s experience was similar:

…students are wary of doing things that aren’t given marks, and so we have certainly found that, and the thing that we want them to undertake, we usually have to build in some assessment component into it, so things like making the comment on a noticeboard, we may assign participation marks for those sorts of things.

Karen felt that being creative with ICT was challenging and often not recognised within the context of an academic role that prioritised publications:

…I love being creative and doing new things, but managing the technology sometimes and the time and energy that goes with it means you are putting a lot of attention to that stuff, whereas sometimes that it not as valued in your practice, in terms of things like publications.

Mandy concurred, stating that limited time availability and workload implications created barriers to being able to spend time using ICT creatively, “I think we have too much on our plates. We are expected to be experts in everything … keeping up with [what’s] new, also takes time and energy.”

The time and workload implications were often highlighted when technology did not work as it should. Karen had spent time and energy on recording podcasts only to find out they had not recorded. Adam had found that, in one instance, students’ role plays which they had recorded and uploaded had simply disappeared, describing it as: “just a nightmare”. Sophia and Ruth had spent hours attempting to download material from their online
platform, Ruth stated that this was: “not smooth sailing”. Additional resourcing was seen to be the answer with research fellows, tutors and ICT experts being employed at some institutions to support the development and use of ICT.

**Future possibilities and implications**

As previously noted, all the participants had been creative in their use of ICT in teaching clinical social work. They all also believed that there were real possibilities and potential as ICT continued to develop. Mandy believed that, since her confidence using ICT had increased, she would consider other possibilities such as streaming her face-to-face lectures directly to distance students or doing a “live tutorial.” Sophia felt that if she had additional training she was sure she would uncover “what’s possible, not just what we are doing, but what are the possibilities”. Adam saw potential in using ICT “to actually practise skills in a simulated context that might work” and was also currently experimenting with a tool that enabled video annotations, Adam explained how this worked:

...the tutor can comment on something they have noticed [in the recorded role play] at that point in time. What the students get back is the video in one corner, and then a list of comments on the right-hand side.

Olivia summed up the feeling across all participants that the use of ICT had possibility and was about “enhancing, rather than replacing” current teaching methods. All participants acknowledged that being creative with ICT required additional support and resources. Sophia stated it was important to have “some expertise out there that can say, oh look, we have discovered this new technology that’s working really well. Have you heard about this? This is how it works for us.” Adam summed this up by saying:

...in other words, this technology affords certain actions, it allows certain things to happen, and what is important is to think, from a teaching and learning point of view, what are we trying to do here and how will this technology help us to achieve that outcome.

All the programmes met their obligations to the SWRB through 20 face-to-face contact days with most programmes far exceeding that number. The requirement for students to engage in online activities, especially synchronous activities, is currently not counted as part of the face-to-face contact days. There was debate amongst participants who felt that a portion of the synchronous activities should be counted, Olivia noted:

The interesting thing is that if the student is coming into the classroom on Skype, are they actually in the classroom? I think that I would be prepared to argue that they are in the classroom if they are attending lectures through Skype.

Participants felt that the ongoing advances and creative use of ICT were changing the nature of online engagement both in social work education as well as in some fields of practice. Participants discussed that, despite the creative ways in which they used ICT and the possibilities for the future for a few students, this did not replace the face-to-face experience for some students. Sophia summed this up:
I think that despite the fact that the general feedback is that Zoom works well, people prefer the face to face… And I guess that whole thing around it’s not face to face, so [some] people not feeling that same level of connection and the same interaction with other staff.

Sophia equated this with some students’ fears around using technology rather than any fault of the ICT. Despite this, a number of the participants felt it was time for the profession to begin thinking about what constitutes in-person or face-to-face contact in relation to meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration. The views of participants also highlight the need for further evaluative research capturing the student perspective of using online platforms.

DISCUSSION
This article details the ICT experiences of seven social work educators from New Zealand. The findings of the study highlight these educators’ current experiences with ICT, the creative ways in which they utilise the tools as well as the opportunities and challenges. The results support that, in addition to breaking down distance barriers to social work education, existing ICT offers the opportunity to engage face-to-face with social work students outside of the physical classroom and can be utilised to support the incremental development of clinical skills over time.

Sun et al. (2008) report that the effectiveness of using ICT is dependent on the motivation of the educator to embrace and use the tools. In their study, they found a relationship between the educator’s attitude to e-learning and student satisfaction and performance in the course (Sun et al., 2008). A few of the participants in this study had been reluctant engagers with ICT and needed time to develop confidence. Yet, all the participants utilised ICT in their teaching of clinical social work skills. In a similar vein to Farrel et al. (2018), participants in this study found that they had to adapt their learning platforms to suit their students and used online conferencing tools creatively to support student learning. The participants had all experimented and adapted ICT to maximise student engagement, relationship building as well as critical reflection. The example of Olivia enabling students to Skype into a class in a programme that was not set up to support distance students, is an example of the creative ways participants utilised the tools.

A central concern for educators related to the use of ICT is the time involved in developing and delivering courses, including workload implications. University management often assumes distance study requires less resourcing; that using an online platform to deliver courses will free staff up from the physical classroom creating space to focus on other projects (Desai et al., 2008, Ferrera, Ostrander, & Crabtree-Nelson, 2013, Levin et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2008; Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Minke, & Frantz Adkins, 2009). However, in accordance with findings of Stanley-Clarke et al. (2018), workload and resourcing implications were the biggest barriers to the educators being able to further explore and utilise ICT.
As ICT develops, the possibilities for using these tools to practise clinical social work tools is exciting. Washburn and Zhou (2018) discuss the possibilities presented by the development of simulation technologies. Basic simulations are already in existence as decision trees, where students are required to answer questions from a list of predetermined responses (Washburn & Zhou, 2018). Washburn and Zhou (2018) highlight the emergence of research within medical education that supports similar results for students’ learning using virtual simulation with the added benefit that, in a simulation, students can repeat the activity to evaluate different choices of action. Farrel et al. (2018) found that avatars provided social work students with the ability to engage but noted that the technology was still underdeveloped. Not waiting for technology to catch up, Mandy and Ruth had adapted Zoom to create a virtual platform for practising clinical social work skills. This experience they felt mirrored the face-to-face classroom process and, in accordance with other research, found that the use of the online platform reduced anxiety amongst some participants and increased participation, as well as relationship building, across their distance cohort (Farrel et al., 2018; Fitch et al., 2016).

Keeping students engaged is a significant challenge across all forms of social work education. Keeping students engaged in the online classroom takes more time and effort and educators need to be more creative (Farrel et al., 2018; Stanley-Clarke et al., 2018). The participants in this study faced many of the same challenges as do social work educators around the globe. Many felt that providing incentives to attend and participate such as making participation in the online environment part of the requirements for the course or allocating assessment marks to the activity were the most effective mechanisms for ensuring attendance; but this did not necessarily equate with engagement.

While acknowledging that the use of ICT is still in its infancy in New Zealand, it has benefits as a supplement to the face-to-face experience. In all the New Zealand programmes involved with this study, students’ clinical skills were assessed by completing face-to-face skills tests and by submitting recorded role plays with written reflections. Synchronous, online, role-playing activity was seen as a supplement to contact workshops which occurred once or twice during the course. The benefits of the synchronous role play experience included the ability for students to practise and incrementally develop skills over time with the input of a social work educator in the same way they do in the face-to-face classroom. However, the requirement to participate in ICT activities, especially synchronous activities, places an additional workload burden on students over and above the required 20 face-to-face contact hours that are required by the SWRB. Currently, online engagement is not considered to be equivalent to the face-to-face experience despite promising evidence showing equivalence in outcomes and benefits for students (McAllister, 2013; Pelech et al., 2013). The findings of this study challenge social work educators and regulators, including the SWRB and the Council of Social Work Educators Aotearoa New Zealand (CSWEANZ), to consider what face-to-face means for meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration and asks, at what point does the profession broaden the definition to include synchronous ICT activities?
CONCLUSION
The aim of this research was to understand New Zealand social work educators’ views on ICT. This included how well existing ICT works alongside the challenges and future possibilities of using ICT in teaching clinical social work. The results of this study highlight the willingness of social work educators to embrace ICT and to be creative in its utilisation. The use of breakout rooms in Zoom were found to be particularly effective for students to practise role plays, with participants seeing little difference between the online and face-to-face environment in relation to skill development and the student experience. In accordance with other research, this study found student engagement and workload implications for both students and educators to be the biggest challenge when using ICT. As ICT continues to develop, the possibilities for creating virtual worlds with avatars and simulations offer further opportunities to consider how ICT can be employed within social work programmes. The success and benefits of using ICT to deliver social work education does challenge the profession to begin thinking about what constitutes face-to-face engagement, particularly in meeting the standards for professional recognition and registration.

References


Social Media and Social Work Education Curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand: An Integrated Framework

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ABSTRACT

This article offers selected findings of a mixed methods research project carried out in Aotearoa New Zealand which asked broad questions about how social workers in this country use social media professionally, and for their opinions about its importance to social work. Prevalent in the findings were themes about the place of professional identity and knowledge in the use of social media, a call for leadership, and ideas about what social workers should know or learn about social media. The focus of this article is on this last theme; findings were selected based on their contribution to the realm of social work education and professional learning about social media. For example, focus group participants discussed what social workers need to know about social media and how they can best learn about it, and highlight the role of academia in this learning; those who contributed to an online survey supported the imperative of learning about social media as a priority; and key informants considered ways forward for social work education and the profession generally. Through these combined voices, together with a review of current academic writing, a vision is created of social work graduates suited to practise in a digital society. The findings of this study are explored within a framework which recommends a holistic integration of social media learning across four main areas of social work curriculum and concludes with some broad findings from the study pertinent to the delivery of social work education.

Keywords: Social work education; Social media; Technology; E-professionalism; Digital competence
INTRODUCTION
For most of us, the reality of social media merges into our daily lives as an inevitable necessity; we are more likely to be affected by the absence of social media than its presence. We communicate using social media, share and access knowledge via social media, are inundated with a plethora of emerging applications, or social networking sites that allow us to use social media in increasingly nuanced and complex ways. As social media becomes less dispensable, more woven into our personal and public lives, as its novelty wears off, we are less likely to notice in an acute way the ongoing impact social media has on our world (boyd, 2011; Fuchs, 2017). The more we become inducted into its use, bedazzled by what it can do, the harder it becomes to see clearly where it can and does go wrong – where it becomes exploitative, dangerous and dark (Bartlett, 2014; Csíernik, Furze, Dromgole, & Rishchynski, 2006).

The people of Aotearoa were sadly and sharply reminded of this reality by the tragic terrorist attacks on Muslim worshippers in Christchurch in March 2019. The terrorist was dependent on social media to disseminate footage of the shootings, and the global impact of this was swift and devastating. The pervasiveness of social media, together with an ignorance and apparent naivety of its power, signals the need for the social work profession to keep its eyes wide open to its implications for society and to its impact on the lives of people it serves. Social workers are thus challenged to be fully informed, and urgent in their practice responses.

The view is put forward overwhelmingly in the social work literature that the profession should engage with internet technology and social media on all levels (Bullock & Colvin, 2015; Giffords, 2009; Perron, Taylor, Glass, & Margerum-Leys, 2010; Schembri, 2008; SCIE, 2019; Taylor, 2017; Turner, 2016). There is a repeated message that social workers cannot choose to ignore technology but rather be critical of its significant role in society (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010). For example, social workers must advocate on behalf of those who experience disparity in accessing the internet and provide an educative role in the safe use of social media. They are required to be prepared for unanticipated practice challenges and ethical dilemmas: should Facebook be used to monitor the activities of young people or families (Cooner, Beddoe, Ferguson, & Joy, 2019), or social media platforms to advertise for foster carers (Walters, 2018)? The ethical implications for social workers using social media are multi-dimensional, raising issues related to privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries and dual relationships, and the implications for record-keeping and documentation (Barsky, 2017; Reamer, 2017).

Related to this, social workers are obliged to understand the place of big data in society, the reality of surveillance and the use of algorithms to predict risk, and the many implications these practices have for social work (Gillingham & Graham, 2017; Kedell, 2015; Lupton & Williamson, 2017). There is also a key requirement for social workers to understand the risks and benefits of social media use by young people (Chan & Holosko, 2016; O’Carroll, 2013a). From a macro perspective, social workers are challenged to take advantage of “every advocacy tactic available to the greatest extent possible to ensure timely policy change for vulnerable populations” (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010, p. 220).

The practice of social work is therefore firmly located in what has become a social media world and social work education has cautiously responded to this reality. The following is a
review of social work literature focussed on social media in the context of social work education, and a description of a mixed methods research project conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand which explored social work attitudes, opinions and behaviour regarding professional use of social media (Stanfield, 2019). Rationalised by the literature and supported by the views of participants in this study about what social workers should know about social media, a framework for social work education curriculum is proposed. This framework recommends a holistic integration of social media learning across four main areas of social work curriculum and concludes with some broad findings from the study pertinent to the delivery of social work education.

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE LITERATURE

This article relies on the widely used definition of social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). There are various “types” of social media including collaborative projects (like Wikipedia), blogs (personal web pages), content communities (Flickr, YouTube), and Virtual Game Worlds/Social Worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There are also a growing number of collaborative workspaces (Basecamp, Slack). The most commonly used form of social media are social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook or Twitter, which are defined as:

…web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

Social media is a means to interactively communicate with individuals and communities using digital technology, and social work education has responded with ideas about: 1. how social media can be used to deliver learning programmes; and 2. what social work students need to learn about social media to practise effectively and ethically in contemporary society.

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS LEARNING DELIVERY SYSTEMS

Writing and research focussed on social work education constitutes a substantial portion of the general international literature about social work and social media. The value of technology in higher education to advance learning is generally acknowledged and encouraged (Megele, 2014; Wretman & Macy, 2016). A range of knowledge is offered about how social media and technology can be incorporated as tools to facilitate learning, and how pedagogical approaches are applied or developed to underpin this practice (Kellsey & Taylor, 2016). There is ongoing recognition of the impact of social media on the future of social work education, its pedagogy and course formats (Hitchcock & Young, 2016; McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017; Robbins, Coe Regan, Williams, Smyth, & Bogo, 2016; Waldman & Rafferty, 2008).

Social work education occurs in the context of the wider tertiary education environment which is active in incorporating a range of new teaching theory and practices in response to, and in collaboration with, social media technologies (Westwood, 2014). Blended learning
and technology-enhanced learning are commonplace, and existing pedagogies have found their place in the new learning environments. The community of learning/inquiry approach is applied favourably to online social work education and professional development (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015; LaMendola, Ballantyne, & Daly, 2009; Zorn & Seelmeyer, 2017). There are numerous examples of specific social media activities being “embedded” into learning programmes (Anthony & Jewell, 2017; Hitchcock & Young, 2016; Jones, Sage, & Hitchcock, 2019; Martin, 2017; Megele, 2014; Teixeira & Hash, 2017).

A recently published book adds to this collection, providing social work educators with pragmatic and creative applications of technology relevant to the social work classroom (Hitchcock, Sage, & Smyth, 2019). It is apparent that social work educators have an increasingly rich resource to draw on for designing and delivering programmes using technology and social media; however, there remains a guarded confidence that digital professionalism has progressed sufficiently in this regard (Taylor, 2017). Cautious optimism is also expressed about the suitability of contemporary neoliberal tertiary institutions to adopt technology most suited to social work education (Ballantyne, Wong, & Morgan, 2017).

LEARNING ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

The value of technology in social work education is generally acknowledged (Megele, 2014); however, there is a perceived “disjointedness” between the technology needed for learning and for practice (Taylor, 2017), and a need to differentiate between the two so that social work educators are prepared to support students to become “fit for virtual practice” (Rafferty & Waldman, 2006, p. 19). It is important to guard assumptions about the extent to which online learning leads to digital literacy, for example, “using a learning management system (e.g., Blackboard) doesn’t mean students are learning to navigate the digital world beyond those cloistered environments” (Robbins et al., 2016, p. 391). This is evidenced by the number of practitioners being called to account for failing to demonstrate professional online behaviour (Ryan & Garrett, 2017; Taylor, 2017). Recognition of this reality has led to increasingly strong arguments for the inclusion of the study of social media in social work education as a core subject (Hill & Shaw, 2011; Watling & Rogers, 2012; Wolf & Goldkind, 2016).

As examples, Chan and Holosko (2016) propose a social work practice framework for social media use based on a case study undertaken of a social media youth outreach project; Curington and Hitchcock (2017) offer a practice-focused social media guide for social work field educators designed to assist social work students achieve the competencies required of them regarding use of technology in social work practice. Response to the need for new practice skills (for example, online counselling, chat and email communications, online advocacy) has emerged in social work textbooks (Beddoe, 2015; Dunlop & Holosko, 2013; Watling & Rogers, 2012).

In summary, it is clear from the literature that tertiary learning about social media can occur (and is currently occurring) for social work students. Pedagogy aligned with the participatory, democratic promise of social media has been adopted by social work educators (Hitchcock et al., 2019; Wretman & Macy, 2016); it features collaborative
learning principles, community of enquiry, and blended delivery designs (Kellsey & Taylor, 2017; LaMendola et al., 2009; Westwood, 2014). What is less apparent in the literature is guidance on what social workers should be taught about social media, its ideology, cultural discourses, and meaning for citizens. Given how quickly technology changes, and its frequently unknown implications, social workers must be prepared to seek a deeper analysis of its relevance, both globally and within local, unique practice environments.

LEARNING ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA: THE STUDY

The following selected findings were generated from a wider mixed methods study about the professional use of social media by social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand and, in particular, were drawn from a key theme in the findings related to what participants felt was important to know about social media (Stanfield, 2019). Three data sets were analysed in this study: 1. An online survey which collected both quantitative and qualitative data from 342 social workers; 2. qualitative interviews of 12 key informants (social workers); and 3. two social work focus groups. Survey and focus group participants were drawn from the membership of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW), and the key informants were generated via the researcher’s networks, chosen for their expertise as social media users and/or for their positions of leadership in the social work community.

The analyses were carried out both concurrently and sequentially; that is, the data from the survey and the interviews were generated concurrently, analysed separately, and then interpreted jointly for meta-themes; these themes led in a sequential manner to the formation of new and revised questions and to the use of focus groups to answer these questions. The focus groups findings were then juxtaposed with the initial meta-themes, so that all findings could be “in conversation with one another and appear to weave a richer and more complex story” (Hesse-Biber, 2010, p. 67).

This was practically achieved by creatively comparing the themes from each phase of the study aided by mind-maps representing themes and sub-themes. The themes were interrogated for where they diverged and converged with each other and “joint” or “enriched” themes were developed. Finally, themes most worthy of further exploration were chosen depending on their strength and relevance to the research questions and to the research participants, and are as follows:

- Social work identity and social media use
- The place of social work knowledge in social media practice
- What and how to learn about social media
- Leadership and ways forward for the profession

The writing of this article is primarily inspired by the findings related to the meta-theme, what and how to learn about social media. This theme focuses on what participants offered the study about professional development and social work education. For example, the key informants who contributed to this study strongly argued the professional relevance of
social media for social workers. Social workers who participated in the survey agreed that learning about its use (ethical and potential) should be undertaken by social workers, and that development of this knowledge is important for the profession. The findings from the first phase of this project therefore emphasised the need to develop good strategies and leadership in this regard and, as one key informant stated: “To open up social media as an area where social workers can see themselves legitimately doing social work, being social workers.” The second phase of this project, which employed the use of focus groups, further explored what social workers already knew about social media, asked questions about what further knowledge was required, and how this knowledge would be best acquired.

This study received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC) on two occasions. The first approval was granted to carry out the survey and key informant interviews and the second approval was granted to conduct the focus groups.

FINDINGS: TOWARDS AN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

The participants in this study brought a distinctly local flavour to this topic, highlighting the reality that, although social media is a global phenomenon, it is experienced and used in many culturally diverse and personal ways. This article now draws threads through what was found in the social work education literature, and the voices of the participants. It will first make a case for the integration of social media learning into the general social work curriculum, and then offer a framework comprised of the following four headings: professional practice, social work principles, social work practice, theories and knowledge.

SOCIAL MEDIA LEARNING – AN HOLISTIC, INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

As argued above, social media intersects with social work practice at multiple practice points — at both micro and macro levels (Berzin, Singer, & Chan, 2015; Reamer, 2017; Wolf & Goldkind, 2016). It is rationalised, therefore, that social media learning be integrated into all aspects of social work education, rather than be offered as a segregated lesson, or discrete area of study (Curington & Hitchcock, 2017; Watling & Rogers, 2012). This is not a new concept and picks up on work already done in this regard (i.e., Zorn & Seelmeyer, 2017). This aim of this article is to extend and deepen this work by offering the wisdom of the participants in this project which represented a grassroots, cultural and social-work-led exploration into professional relationships with social media.

The framework presented in Figure 1, which will be used to structure this discussion, was constructed in the first instance by consulting the New Zealand Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) programme recognition standards (SWRB, 2017), and the Core Competence Standards (SWRB, 2016) to establish the four basic areas of the curriculum. The international definition of social work was also consulted and led to inclusion of the main principles and areas of knowledge foundational to social work (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* principles promoted focus on notions of bicultural practice using social media, the use and impact of social media on Māori and how social work can both learn from and respond to this. This deductive and iterative exercise
generated a map into which areas of social media learning raised in the literature, and by
the participants in this research project, were then incorporated.

**Figure 1.** Social work curriculum with integration of social media learning.

**Professional practice**
The first curriculum area is that of professional practice, or *e-professionalism*, which focusses
on the development of professional and cultural identities, ethical guidelines and policies,
and the management of professional relationships using social media. This area of learning
is served particularly well by applying social media as a learning delivery method because
it offers social work students a practical and powerful opportunity to develop “real-time”
understanding of its realities (Cooner, 2013; Hitchcock & Young, 2016; McKendrick,
2014). This is complex task, however, involving more than prescriptive guidelines, as
expressed in the following comment by a key informant in this research:

> I think it will require multiple different ways of learning. It’s not just upskilling. I think it’s
> more than just knowing how to do things, I think it’s also thinking through the issues.
> And having some ethical principles that are consistent with the code of ethics.

A lack of guidance in this regard was generally expressed by participants in this study,
key informant participants called for leadership, and the focus groups, regardless of their
confidence that the profession could generate its own knowledge about the ethics of social
media use, expressed curiosity about who was “in charge” of social media in Aotearoa. The
focus group comment below refers to the concept of *tikanga* (custom or correct practice)
and *tika* (acting in the right way) and is seeking someone to act as *kaitiaki*, or guardian of
this practice:
So what is the tikanga, what is the tika about social media? Who enforces that? It comes from the home and the norms within the home or the norms within the school of social work or within what's modelled through ANZASW rightly or wrongly, or SWRB. Who's the kaitiaki of social media? (focus group participant)

A focus on cultural concepts introduced by the participants in this project provides a point of reflection on the ethical use of social media by social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. As with research, social media is a repository for knowledge; it is a place where knowledge is both communicated, stored and interpreted. Participants in this research expressed concern about how social workers conduct themselves ethically on social media, how they communicate and respect what is communicated to them. One focus group for example, conversed about the need for care in how we relate to the words of others on social media, how we must deliberately retain our cultural obligations to those we speak with in the same way we do when meeting face to face. They expressed a wish to “keep those [obligations] alive in the way we type words out, or post, or like, because whatever we say we’re held accountable ….”

The competence to practise bi-culturally in Aotearoa New Zealand is a requirement of the SWRB and the ANZASW and, as such, is an intrinsic aspect of the graduate profile of social work education programmes in Aotearoa and of practice in this country. Biculturalism is defined as the reciprocal learning, sharing and supporting of cultural values – this is achieved by a requirement that social workers educate themselves with the “knowledge and understanding of their own ethnicity and the Tangata Whenua and Tauiwi histories of Aotearoa New Zealand” (ANZASW, 2019, p. 6). Social work educators in Aotearoa have responded to the need for this development by incorporating relevant pedagogy and content (for example, Tsuruda & Shepherd, 2016).

Technology is not “values-free” (Csiernik et al., 2006), and it is suggested social work students be supported to critically reflect on how their cultural selves and bicultural principles are showcased in their behaviour in social media environments, how tikanga is demonstrated. For example, there are studies about how whakawhanaungatanga (making connections) is enacted in social media interactions (O’Carroll, 2013b). This is a customary practice used by Māori in Aotearoa through which relational ties are formally acknowledged, and relationships forged, and it is necessary for social work students in Aotearoa to develop cultural knowledge and develop the skill of applying this respectfully across all aspects of professional communication, including how identities and relationships are formed on social media.

It widely accepted that a specific focus on the ethical use of social media must be included in social work education (Chan, 2016). The professional organisation and registration bodies for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand have produced social media guidelines and amended ethics to respond to the social media reality; however, these are currently inadequate, and it is still necessary to look to other jurisdictions (for example the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) in America) (ASWB International Technology Task Force, 2015) for examples of more robust guidelines to inform the content of social work education programmes (McAuliffe & Nipperess, 2017).
There is some agreement in the literature that ethical issues are manageable with close attention to existing social work ethics and codes of conduct (Beaumont, Chester, & Rideout, 2017; Kimball & Kim, 2013; Reamer, 2017; Sage & Sage, 2015), and these can be taught as content and applied in the social work classroom. However, it is argued that the increased complexity of ethical decision-making as applied to social media use calls for a more sophisticated, creative interpretation of current professional ethics than has historically been the case. “Social workers have core values and principles related to human rights, social justice, integrity, competence, and respect to deploy in online space, but this alone is insufficient” (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017, p. 181).

This sentiment is extended by the participants in this study who highlight the culturally diverse nature of professional relationships, and the need to attend ethically to the many enactments of these on social media. It is also reflected in the new ANZASW Code of Ethics (2019), which is based on seven core cultural values and their corresponding ethical principles and therefore firmly located in the cultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand. It is an expectation for example, that the value of manaakitanga (translated directly to mean respect, generosity and care for others) be applied intentionally and creatively to all professional relationships, including those on social media.

In summary, given the complexity of professional boundaries introduced by the presence of social media, and the reality of culturally difference, it is suggested that the teaching of social work ethics goes beyond the learning of text book ethics, and into the realm of everyday ethics which “encourages greater reflexivity and a move beyond simple models of ethics as individual decision-making or external regulation” (Banks, 2016, p. 46). This approach to ethical practice aligns with the findings of this study, where focus group participants exercised their ethical thinking in a way that considers “a broader social, political and cultural context and sees responsibility in a wider, more relational sense, beyond the isolated individual decision-maker” (Banks, 2016, p. 36).

**Social work principles**

The second proposed curriculum area considers the place of social work principles in social media use, further promoting the development of social work identity and ethical behaviour, and the role of social media in the pursuit of social justice, human rights, collectivity and democracy (IFSW, 2014). Although strongly linked to the previous discussion about professional ethics and cultural identity, it is further argued here that a distinct focus on the relationship between professional principles and social media further challenges the profession to align its mandate and obligations with the realities of a networked society.

For example, social media provides a new platform for the pursuit of social justice via social action and other collective activities that challenge structural inequalities. The study reported in this article found that less than half of social workers surveyed used social media for professional reasons, and of those who did, the activity they were least likely to use it for was to advocate for clients or for the profession (Stanfield, 2019, p. 70). Both focus groups were critical of their profession for not embracing social media to promote social change, however, they also discussed the challenges faced in doing so, including the management of online safety and lack of knowledge about social media as a political space. It is also possible
that the dissatisfaction felt by participants was linked to a more general need for renewed knowledge about macro social work practice (Mattocks, 2018), and further promotion of the critical or radical approach to social work necessary for effective collective social action (Morley, 2016). Social media holds promise as an accessible, democratic space for social change activities; however, its application is deceivingly complex, and relies explicitly on knowledge both about effective collective action, and social media as a political space.

It is also necessary for social workers to be critically aware of the multiple ways in which social justice is impacted by social media. For example, the global “digital divide” describes not only unequal access to the internet, but also unequal opportunity to become culturally and socially competent in its use (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009). It is imperative that students are supported to analyse social media according to social justice, human rights, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles, and be guided in the formation of relevant practice responses (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Perron et al., 2010; Schembri, 2008; Steyaert & Gould, 2009; Voshel & Wesala, 2015).

**Social work skills**

The third curriculum area proposed in this framework addresses social work practice skills, including the skills related to the use and management of technology (digital literacy), and the use of social media in assessment and intervention (e-social work). The following participant summarises the challenges faced in this regard, and queries the extent to which social work graduates are prepared for practice in a digital world:

… they know how to work with families, engage and use these particular skills but I don’t get a sense that they come out thinking, “right, I know all about the risks of social media and how to ensure that the families that I work with are kept safe.”

(key informant)

There is argument that the emergence of social media has created a new field of online specialisation for social work, or e-social work which requires the technical skills to design new programs specific to the needs of social work (López Peláez, Pérez García, & Aguilar-Tablada Massó, 2017). Whether the future sees social workers gaining additional skills to contribute in this way, it is clear all social workers require at least a baseline of expertise as is highlighted again in the following participant comment and the need to be “technologically fluid”:

I think that’s the ongoing challenge, understanding how to use the media to start with, the social media, and what it actually does and being aware of the various settings and the changes of settings and how things can change overnight. I think that’s probably the biggest challenge, the awareness of the implications of the digital age and also your digital device in your hand. (key informant)

The use of social media skills in practice as described above can be further understood by the concept of **digital literacy**, which refers to how internet communication technology is used both confidently and critically (Hall, Nix, & Baker, 2013). This includes the technical skills of creating content using various types of media for professional purposes, in addition to being reflective and analytical about how these promote professional goals (Robbins et
al., 2016). Media literacy similarly refers to cultural competencies and social skills, including the understanding of the participatory culture of social media (Jenkins et al., 2009). Social media and its platforms change quickly, therefore social workers are urged to develop an enduring and conceptual, rather than a prescriptive, understanding of it (Chan & Holosko, 2016). An example of digital or media literacy in social work practice is illustrated in the following comment, in which the participant was discussing the types of clinical discussions that took place in their agency related to social media:

All of the difficulties were blamed on social media, rather than understanding what the social interactions were, how social media facilitated those, what other things might have been going on that may actually have mitigated the problems that are also an aspect of social media. (key informant)

Repeated throughout the data in this study was a recognition of the clear relevance of social media to social work. One participant described it succinctly as “being about people and their lives, understanding the person and their environment, a new social setting, a new social environment”. Related to developing digital literacy as described earlier, it is argued social work students are supported to understand this relationship. The inclusion of online worlds as a legitimate aspect of the “person in environment” assessment for example, is widely recognised as essential for social work practice (Baker, Warburton, Hodgkin, & Pascal, 2014; Belluomini, 2013; Simpson, 2017). There is an agreed educative role for social workers in helping clients to be internet savvy; to educate about the dangers of the internet (for example, cyber bullying and mis-use of technology), to provide education and lead development of well-informed social media safety plans (Giffords, 2009; Taylor, 2017).

It has been evident for some time that use of technology to engage younger generations is increasingly necessary (Schembri, 2008), and this trend continues as cyber-communication or ICT is recognised as an essential tool for “administrative and therapeutic exchanges” with this group of citizens (Mishna, Bogo, Root, & Fantus, 2014, p. 179). Further examples include challenges in understanding the role of social media in violent extremism (Alava, Frau-Meigs, & Hassar, 2017), the recruitment of young people to gangs (Owen, 2019), and children’s rights regarding gathering and storage of their digital data on social media (Lupton & Williamson, 2017).

The use of mobile technology has been studied to explore how it can foster effective professional relationships across all age groups (Simpson, 2017), and there are examples of how social media can augment and enhance traditional, face-to-face engagement (Turner, 2016). Research is emerging about social media use in diverse fields of practice, from client-centred child protection social work (Dodsworth, Bailey, Schofield, Cooper, Fleming & Young, 2013; Ryan & Garrett, 2017; Sage & Sage, 2015; Tregagle, 2016), to community-based and macro social work (Gelman & Tose, 2010; Hill & Ferguson, 2014; LaMendola, 2019; Shevell, 2017), health social work (Dombo et al., 2014), adoption social work (Howard, 2012) and advocacy practice (Edwards & Hoefer, 2010; Sitter & Curnew, 2016). The relationship between social media and social work practice is rapidly developing and open to a plethora of possibilities as comprehensively cited here:
... to communicate with clients, track progress, help families stay connected across distance, create psychoeducational resources, empower clients, engage agency stakeholders, develop virtual communities, support neighborhoods, enhance team collaboration, create new programs with crowd funding, organize social action, advocate for policy change, or engage in ongoing professional development. (Robbins et al., 2016, p. 391)

Theory and knowledge
This last curriculum area advocates a critical eye on social media and the application of theory and indigenous knowledge to deepen social work analysis of the place of social media in society. The following comment summarises the key relationship between social work knowledge and social media, wherein the focus group participant refers to the kete, a traditional Māori symbol of “important stories, principles and practices that can guide us in our mahi and in our lives” (Eruera, 2012, p. 12):

I think we can rely on our social work knowledge, the methods that we use, the philosophy and the practice, so we can go back to our social work theories and think about working with person-centred approach or think about strengths-based social work and apply that to our social media. … We have those tools there in our kete already, it’s how we apply them, I guess, into a new way of working, to social media. (focus group)

There is a growing collection of Aotearoa New Zealand writing about social media from an indigenous perspective. There is exploration, for example, into how the identity of New Zealand Māori is affected by use of social networking sites, the role social media plays in the development of cultural identity (Muhamad-Brandner, 2010) and research about how rangatahi Māori (adolescent Māori) use social media (O’Carroll, 2013a). A further study by the same author examines the effectiveness of using social media to facilitate whānau (family) connections and communication. This study found that using social media for this purpose contributes to overall whānau well-being and simultaneously highlighted the complexity of online relationships and the skill needed to safely negotiate social networking sites. It also found that Māori use social media for a variety of different reasons, including to connect with other indigenous people around the world, to engage in kaupapa whanaungatanga (translated directly to mean connectedness around a common purpose) (O’Carroll, 2013b). Given social work’s reliance on indigenous knowledge to inform practice in Aotearoa New Zealand, this is a limited but important contribution to social work education, and signals a fundamental responsibility for educators to promote learning about the unique approaches to social media by local and global indigenous populations (Toth, Smith, & Giroux, 2018).

Social media as a concept is a complex term with many layers of meaning. It is the subject of academic analysis, debate and scrutiny across disciplines, the outcomes of which are at times contested, depending on how both the terms social and media are defined and understood (Fuchs, 2017). There are many ways to be social, or to define sociality, and there are many forms of media. “Understanding social media critically means, among other things, to engage with the different forms of sociality on the Internet in the context of society” (Fuchs, 2017, p. 7). This has resulted in the development of various interpretive frameworks (boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2011), and a varied analysis of social media; for example,
that which promotes its democratic and collaborative features (Jenkins et al., 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and that which critiques the exploitive impact of major social media platforms, encompassing the concept of “digital capitalism” (Fuchs, 2017), and “communicative capitalism” (Dean, 2010).

The use of Castell’s theory of the network society, for example, and related understandings of the power inherent in communication networks has been put forward as a way of guiding social workers in their critique of social media and technology, and in their relationship with it across all aspects of practice (Baker et al., 2014). Latour’s Actor Network Theory has been applied to analyse the complex experience of engaging in online social networking (Ballantyne, 2015; McKendrick, 2014). Psychoanalytic theory has also been used to theorise the binary aspects of social media, using the concept of “splitting” to explain how social workers become vilified for their use of social media (Turner, 2016).

In addition, the concept of community of learning has been combined with that of social presence, a concept used to describe how genuine and immediate we are in our relationship with others when using mediated communication like online technology. It is suggested that the extent to which people achieve social presence influences the quality of human relationships (LaMendola, 2010; LaMendola et al., 2009). Bourdieu’s field theory and its concepts of social capital and habitus have been applied to social media (Willig, Waltorp, & Hartley, 2015). The brief scholarship listed here is an example of how social work educators can encourage students to join their profession in analysing practice and applying cultural knowledge relevant to the ever-changing digital age, thus contributing to a much-needed social work perspective on the phenomenon.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Social media has imposed a significant task on the profession of social work; that is to “launch a conceptual re-evaluation of how the essential values of social work operate in a world where individuals and their environments have been reshaped by the live presence of technology” (Wolf & Goldkind, 2016, p. 3). The four intersecting curriculum areas in the earlier described framework, which largely represents the existing social work education curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand, (SWRB, 2016), appear to provide reasonable scope for this re-evaluation; that is, learning about social media can be incorporated into already existing social work practice values, principles and theoretical frameworks.

The framework proposed in this article is very much limited by the unknown and is yet to be tested. Research which analyses the reality of introducing or reinforcing the curriculum content suggested earlier would offer insight into the benefits and challenges of doing so, as would further research about the impact this learning has on future practice. It is argued that, in a world infused with the transformative, turbulent effects of internet technology and social media, and characterised by “the rapidity of innovation, adoption, adaptation, and obsolescence” (Dean, 2010, p. 1), a much stronger social work kete (toolkit) is required, one which is woven by social workers with a keen critical eye, a strong sense of professional identity, and equipped with a full set of technical, interpersonal and ethical skills related to social media use.
References


Online Social Work Education and the Disinhibition Effect

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, theoretically anchored composite case examples will be presented from a mid-sized, fully online MSW program to illustrate the disinhibition effect and how it impacts on classroom and program dynamics. Classroom communications (discussion boards and emails) as well as program communications (social media postings) will be analysed to better understand the conditions under which disinhibition can occur and exacerbating factors unique to the social work curriculum. An examination of effective classroom and program management strategies (i.e., articulation of communication standards and expectations, student and faculty training), as well as a consideration of the productive pedagogical uses of disinhibition will be included.

Keywords: Online education; Social work education; Disinhibition; Online communication
With the rise of varying forms of virtual communication and social media, popular media and academic literature has increasingly documented accounts of toxic interchange—from online bullying to the phenomena of “trolling” and “haters”. This paper examines how potentially toxic forms of communication manifest in an online MSW program. Grounded within the larger theoretical construct of “online disinhibition,” composite case examples illustrate the factors contributing to disinhibition in the virtual social work classroom and how they impact on classroom and program dynamics. A discussion of effective classroom and program management strategies follows. Given the growth of online social work education and the lack of pedagogical social work literature addressing this issue, this paper fills a gap in our current knowledge base.

**BACKGROUND: WHAT IS ONLINE DISINHIBITION?**

Scholars examining virtual communication have identified a phenomenon termed the “online disinhibition effect” (Roed, 2003; Suler, 2004a). According to this concept, individuals communicating online may feel anonymous, invisible, and more comfortable disclosing or confronting issues in a virtual setting, due to the often less immediate or depersonalised nature of the online environment (Neff & Donaldson, 2013; Roed, 2003; Suler, 2004a). Research in this area does differentiate between benign and toxic disinhibition; with benign disinhibition seen as promoting positive dialogue and social connection (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). While online communications may encourage those who otherwise feel uncomfortable sharing their viewpoints in a different setting, toxic disinhibition can be seen when communications become aggressive, particularly when sharing personal opinions or responding to criticism, in a way that would not occur in a face-to-face context (Suler, 2004a). Common manifestations of toxic disinhibition include online harassment that may result in flaming behaviour, e.g., insulting or offensive comments, swearing, using all caps, threats, or aggressive language and punctuation (Wu, Lin, & Shih, 2017). In their report on online harassment, the Pew Research Center (2017) defines online harassment as including any of the following behaviours: offensive name-calling; purposeful embarrassment; stalking; physical threats; harassment over a sustained period of time; and sexual harassment. Online harassment may be achieved by “hacking” (illegally accessing someone’s personal information/impersonating someone); “trolling” (intentionally provoking or upsetting people online); “doxing” (posting someone’s information without their consent); and “swatting” (alerting police of a fake emergency) (Duggan, 2017). These behaviours contribute to the contemporary prevalence of cyber-bullying (Rainie, Anderson, & Albright, 2017).

When examined in an online educational setting, initial research suggests that disinhibition may result in desensitisation and, potentially, conflict within both student and faculty interactions, disrupting the learning environment as well as the relationships between students, faculty and program administrators (Rawlins, 2017; Xie, Miller, & Allison, 2013). For instance, educational research has examined how the disinhibition effect can result in student interactions that include incivility and hostile debate as well as the over-disclosure of personal information (Kim, 2018; Suler, 2004b; Wahler & Badger, 2016). In Suler’s (2004b) study of online discussion boards, he notes that the effects of disinhibition can be benign, in that students may be more likely to engage in debate and ask questions, yet adverse or insensitive comments may also surface, thus creating toxic effects.
Suler (2004a, 2004b), the most oft-cited scholar on online disinhibition, identifies six factors that contribute to this effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimisation of authority. When considered in a higher education context, these factors may manifest in online education settings. Dissociative anonymity tends to be the most cited in studies on disinhibition, as individuals can assume an anonymous or quasi-anonymous identity online, allowing behaviours to be hidden behind a virtual self who is “less known” by fellow students and faculty. For instance, many visible and social characteristics including, but not limited to age, race, gender, and disability status, may not be known in an online environment. Invisibility, like anonymity, allows individuals to do things online that they may not do in person, as they are not seen or heard, and identities are not clearly known. Invisibility may encourage individuals to be overly confident and assertive in their opinions as they do not have to worry about a physical and visual reaction. Asynchronicity is typically present, as many online education programs have asynchronous elements, including email or discussion boards. The asynchronous nature of these formats allows information to sit, which can positively allow time for reflection before response, but it can also create delays in feedback. This can become problematic in an online class if a concerning discussion post is not addressed in a timely manner or email communication not responded to. Solipsistic introjection refers to how one interprets online text communication, assigning imagined traits or characteristics to the person who created the communication. For instance, a student can project a tone while reading an online post and hence misinterpret the writer’s intent. Suler’s (2004a) concept of dissociative imagination describes the ways in which people may dissociate the virtual world from the “real world” and establish different norms and behaviours, thereby feeling less responsible for their virtual interactions. Finally, minimisation of status and authority can be experienced in an online environment and relates to online education where students may feel no one is “watching” them. Students may be more likely to question and speak out against online professors who may appear to possess lower levels of status and power in the online environment (Suler, 2004a, 2004b; Wu et al., 2017).

Empirical research has examined Suler’s factors to explore their impact on toxic disinhibition within online learning environments. Lack of eye contact, as well as an overall “online sense of unidentifiability” in online environments has been linked to increased flaming behaviours (Lapidot-Leifer & Barak, 2012). Wu et al. (2017) similarly found that dissociative anonymity, moderated through deindividuation or feeling as if one’s identity can be hidden online, increased disinhibited behaviour. In considering how social conflict may arise in an online educational setting, Xie et al. (2013) discuss factors that make online learning more susceptible to social conflict, such as lack of visual or audio cues that may help one sense the tone of the room/conversation. Relatedly, research has also shown that the asynchronous nature of online environments, including online course discussion boards, also correlates to toxic disinhibition and can disrupt the learning environment (Wu et al., 2017; Xi et al., 2013). Xie et al. (2013) provide a model of social conflict evolution, examining the following phases: 1) Cultural Initiation; 2) Social Harmonisation Cycle: disinhibition, tension and normalization; 3) Escalation of Conflict; 4) Intervention and Stabilisation; and 5) Adjourning. During phase 2, Social Harmonisation, online disinhibition was both benign and toxic, with students acknowledging that they were more vocal online than they would have been.
in person. While this communication began as benign, toxic disinhibition manifested in “chastising” comments made about other students’ level of participation or ability and then escalated to greater tension between students. Here, toxic disinhibition was found to reduce the level of learning interactions and student engagement (Xie et al., 2013). The extent and/or frequency of disinhibited communication in online educational programs is unclear and is yet to be explored in empirical research. Nevertheless, given the growing attention from educators and scholars to this issue and its potential impact on the learning environment, it warrants further investigation.

**Incivility**

Scholarship concerning online disinhibition relates to another emerging body of literature addressing incivility in higher education settings. Incivility in the academic environment has been defined as “rude or disruptive behaviors which often result in psychological or physiological distress for the people involved” (Clark, Farnsworth, & Landrum, 2009, p. 7). Incivility is often described in in-person classrooms as behaviours that are disruptive to the class, such as arriving late, eating during class, talking to others, texting, and being generally loud and disruptive (Knepp, 2012; Wahler & Badger, 2016). Studies looking at student perceptions of uncivil behaviours in classrooms show that students now expect a certain level of disruptive behaviour to be present (Bjorklund & Rehling, 2010). In online classroom environments, uncivil student behaviours include challenging instructor authority or credibility, consumer mentality, missing deadlines, making rude, harassing, hostile, vulgar or offensive comments, academic dishonesty, and sending inappropriate emails or other communications to the instructor or other students (Clark, Werth, & Ahten, 2012; Galbraith & Jones, 2010). Scholarship concerning incivility considers student behaviour with faculty and peers, although some research looks at faculty incivility (Clark et al., 2012; Knepp, 2012). Both students and faculty are impacted by incivility in the classroom as behaviours take a toll on all, ultimately impacting on the delivery and receipt of education.

Some scholarship on incivility which, while not specifically addressing disinhibition, reveals a connection between aspects of virtual communication and incivility. Research findings in this area tend to mirror the aforementioned findings on disinhibition, suggesting online communications can encourage incivility given that interactions have greater anonymity, lack physical cues (i.e., eye contact, or body language), and are prone to misinterpretation (Clark et al., 2012; Galbraith & Jones, 2010). For instance, Clark et al. (2012) examined faculty and student perceptions of incivility in the “Incivility in Online Learning Environment (IOLE)” survey. While incivility was found to be considered only a mild to moderate problem, the identified student behaviours defined by faculty as uncivil included “name calling; making verbal insults or rude comments (83.3%); making belittling comments to others about a faculty member (83.3%); making racial, ethnic, sexual or religious slurs (83.3%); and criticizing nontraditional subcultures as avatars or vamps (82.4%)” (p. 151). The anonymity of the virtual classroom environment was found to impact the perception of how uncivil behaviours may manifest (Clark et al., 2012). More recently, McNeill, Dunemn, Einhellig, and Clukey (2017) used the IOLE to identify factors contributing to incivility in the online classroom. They included lack of connection to students and time-related dynamics, such as the desire for more immediate responses or the impact of delayed responses by instructors (McNeill et al., 2017). Similar research indicates that the
asynchronous nature of online interactions may result in a higher level of disconnect between faculty and students, allowing uncivil attacks to take place (Wildermuth & Davis, 2012).

**DISINHIBITION IN THE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION CONTEXT**

Social work classes often require students to confront emotionally and psychologically taxing issues, self-reflect, divulge personal experience, and engage in politically charged discussions (Cless & Goff, 2017; Fang, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014; Lee, Brown, & Bertera, 2010). In this sense, the nature of the social work curriculum can implicitly encourage some forms of disinhibition. Self-disclosures about mental health are common in courses that focus on mental health content and psychotherapeutic interventions (Wood, Bolner, & Gauthier, 2014). Disclosures may relate to mental health concerns or diagnoses the students themselves are dealing with, or that a friend or family member may have gone through. Similarly, trauma, substance use, child abuse and other emotionally complex topics are commonplace in a social work curriculum. Opportunities for self-disclosure may occur during class discussions or as part of assignments where students are encouraged to share personal experiences or self-reflect on interactions with clients (Wood et al., 2014). Emotionally demanding topics may “trigger students” (Cless & Goff, 2017), resulting in an emotional response that can contribute to oversharing, classroom conflict or other forms of disinhibited behaviour (Robbins, 2018). The social work curriculum typically includes social welfare policy issues that are controversial in nature as well as courses addressing various forms of diversity, structural inequalities, and privilege (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Keller, Whittaker, & Burke, 2001). This highly charged social and political content in a hyper-partisan era can potentially contribute to uncivil and disinhibited behaviours (Greenfield, Atteberry Ash, & Plassmeyer, 2018). For example, Kim (2018) looked at online incivility and group dynamics within an online discussion board where individuals read an article on abortion and associated comments from different partisanship groups. Results found that diversity and differing opinions were associated with higher levels of perceived incivility (Kim, 2018). This literature collectively suggests that the potentially triggering and controversial content in the social work curriculum may fuel the disinhibition effect.

**Case examples: Online disinhibition**

The composite case examples introduced later illustrate disinhibition dynamics experienced by students, faculty, and administrators in a mid-sized (i.e., approximately 300 students), fully online MSW program at a state university in the eastern United States. This fully online program is asynchronous, with students responsible for reviewing audio and written lectures and readings and participating in discussion boards and smaller assignments each week. Larger assignments throughout the semester may include group work, exams, and papers. Students are responsible for meeting deadlines each week with interactions with other students primarily occurring through asynchronous threaded discussions. Faculty interact with students through discussion boards, course announcements, and individual and group feedback on assignments. Outside of the classroom, students have opportunities to engage with each other through synchronous program-led meetings/webinars, orientations, and a social media page. In the excerpts that follow, we highlight the components of disinhibition emerging in the virtual dialogue. The authors developed the composite examples.
based on their collective experiences administering the program (having cumulatively taught over 35 online courses). These particular issues were chosen based upon situations or dynamics that the authors identified as particularly challenging from their own teaching experiences in social work classes, as well as from feedback received from other faculty teaching in the online MSW program. The Rutgers Institutional Review Board determined ethical review was not required for this project (Study ID PRO2019002732).

Social media example
Commonly used in US online programs, social media brings students together to network with one another and create a sense of community. In the below example of a program Facebook page, students can get immediate responses from cohort classmates about general questions, and can also share resources with one another. Program administrators can also answer questions, post announcements, resources and encouraging notes to students in a less formal environment. While the social media page is set up as a positive space for students, they may also go to social media to post negative comments about the program, classes, and instructors.

*Student A:* Anyone else have Professor Jones? He is the worst [*incivility; invisibility*] – I’ve sent 5 emails in the past 24 hours and still no response! **THIS PROGRAM IS TERRIBLE. I can’t believe I’m spending so much money and no one responds to me or provides any feedback. Is anyone else experiencing this?** (Monday, 10:52pm)

*Student B:* Ugh. I’m experiencing the same thing! It’s been 3 days and still no response. How am I supposed to get anything done if I can’t get a clear answer?! I am really thinking of withdrawing. (Monday, 10:52pm)

*Student A:* You are? I am too. I’ve already been in touch with other schools who actually respond to me and I really think I want to transfer. *I deserve a response from this idiot [*incivility; solipsistic introjection*] who thinks he is such a great professor.* (Monday, 10:53pm)

*Student C:* Hey, be careful with your complaints, faculty might be reading this! (Monday, 11:00pm)

*Student A:* *I’m just blowing off steam on the social media page, [*dissociative imagination*] *it’s not a real thing!* (Monday, 11:02pm)

*Student D:* Oh, Professor Jones?! I’m so sorry—never take him! I can’t believe they keep hiring him back. He is just making our lives miserable! This is an online program, we are working adults and chose this program for flexibility. It is ridiculous to have so much work due each week and not feel support from our professors. (Monday, 11:10pm)

*Student E:* That totally stinks—I’ve had a very positive experience in the program so far and my instructors and advisor have been very attentive to my emails. (Tuesday, 3:00am)
Student F: I agree with Student E— I’ve been lucky I guess! Have you tried to reach out to your professor in other ways, like the virtual office, instead of email? (Tuesday, 6:00am)

Student A: It doesn’t matter; it’s clear he doesn’t want to answer me. [Solipsistic introjection; minimisation of status and authority] No one cares about us in this program, you really have to advocate for yourself, there is no support. (Tuesday, 5:00pm)

Program Director: Hi everyone, I’m sorry to those who have been feeling upset regarding particular professors or courses. I would encourage you to reach out to me directly to discuss so we can be sure to address any ongoing concerns. Your feedback is very important to me, so please send me an email to discuss further. (Tuesday, 9:30am [asynchronicity])

Student B: Sorry professor, we got a little carried away here (Tuesday, 10:00am).

Threaded discussion example
As discussed, threaded discussions are primary learning and engagement tools in asynchronic virtual classrooms. Conflict-fed instances of disinhibition can easily emerge as students examine controversial topics. In the following composite example, students in an online policy class discuss issues related to fraud in safety-net programs.

Student 1: I know there are people working hard to better themselves [solipsistic introjection] but a lot of these people are just gaming the system.

Student 2: Yes. Tell me about it. Like my cousin. She is so lazy and keeps having kids! Too many. Four kids when you don’t have a degree, different dads….

Student 1: Ugh…people in my old neighborhood. They knew how to work it… all the stuff, food stamps, vouchers their apartments. And they lie about how much money they’ve got.

Instructor: Does anyone want to chime in here? What do we know about benefit levels and “fraud” based on this week’s readings?

Student 3: I wouldn’t say this in my in-person classes [dissociative anonymity] because everyone is so PC in social work, but it seems like many of these people behave in certain ways that make their circumstances worse. They don’t believe in honest work.

Instructor: You’re bringing up a lot of issues here. Let’s break them down a bit. [minimisation of status and authority] What does the literature tell us about program fraud? Other students?

(silence for 24 hours [asynchronicity])

Student 2: Prof, you’re wrong. Believe me. My cousin gives her kids SS number to her boyfriend so they can claim stuff, get tax money. She runs a racket.
Instructor: Hold on all, we’re making a lot of assumptions based on anecdotes. I’m not trying to negate your experience, but what does the data say? Can I hear from some others about what the readings addressed this week?

Student 3: Well, the studies show that the rates of fraud in means tested programs are really low.

Student 1: No way, no way! You’re wrong YOU’RE WRONG! [incivility]. I’m telling you I know people who cheat!

Instructor: Ok, your experience is important, but let’s go back to the readings again. What does the data say?

Student 3: Well they also talked about how sometimes people worked off the books and didn’t report it, but that was generally because they were struggling to make ends meet, not get rich.

Student 4: Well, my family got assistance while I was growing up and I hate the way people are talking about this [emotionally/politically charged topic]. My mom is a totally honest person who had a lot of hardship. This is a really awful way to speak about the people we are supposed to be helping.

Instructor: I know this is an emotionally charged topic and it impacts all of us—some more personally than others. Let’s all take a deep breath, remember netiquette and how to talk to one another and continue this conversation in a respectful way.

Class email example
Email is often a primary means of communication in online learning environments, providing an outlet for students and faculty to interact with each other privately or in a group. In the following composite example, a student reaches out via email to their professor to discuss dissatisfaction with the course grade.

Initial email sent Tuesday, 10:00pm

Hey Professor,

I saw you finally posted our final grades for the class. I worked very hard all semester and for what? A grade of B? This is completely lowering my perfect GPA and is unfair. On the final paper you took off 5 points for formatting!! This is ridiculous [incivility; minimisation of status and authority]. I don’t even know why I lost any further points on the assignment and why you gave me such a low grade.

Student X
Email follow-up sent Wednesday, 10:00pm

Professor,

*Are you going to respond to my message??*[asynchronicity, incivility]

Student X

Email response sent Thursday, 9:00am

Dear Student X,

Thank you for your email and expressing your dissatisfaction with your final grade. Have you been able to take some time to review the detailed feedback I provided you on your assignment? While you covered many of the areas asked, your paper was missing a few content areas, and did not adhere to formatting. I posted instructional videos about the use of APA and the requirements in the announcements to help all students understand the structure of this assignment, and provided clear guidelines in the rubric.

If you would like to set up a time to talk further to go over your grades, please let me know.

Sincerely,
Your Professor

Email response sent Thursday, 9:05am

Professor,

*It’s clear you don’t care about students learning, just formatting*[incivility; solipsistic introjection]. You’ll find out from your boss if I decide to take any further action.

I can’t wait to graduate and be done with this program.

Student X

**DISCUSSION**

Each of these case examples illustrates some aspect of online disinhibition, including Suler’s (2004a) constructs, incivility within a virtual context, and emotionally and politically charged dialogue.

*Dissociative anonymity*: An educational setting may not afford the same level of anonymity as a general online forum where participants may not encounter one another repetitively. However, in the example of the classroom discussion board, a student recognises that they may be more protected in an online discussion than in an in-person interaction. She writes, “I wouldn’t say this in my in-person class because everyone is so PC in social work…” This comment suggests that the student is more inclined to express a controversial viewpoint on
welfare use in the online forum where they experience dissociative anonymity or feel less “known”.

Invisibility: Dynamics related to invisibility emerge in the social media scenario as students express some level of anger and dissatisfaction with the program, course content, or faculty role in a relatively unconstrained manner. The text-only environment contributes to a sense of invisibility, absent visual/audio cues and immediate feedback in response to their negative communication.

Asynchronicity: All three case examples occur in an asynchronous environment. By their very nature, asynchronous communications contribute to the disinhibition effect. As students may express dissatisfaction with some component of the course or program, the timeliness of response and instructor presence is essential. The social media example shows a few dissatisfied students engaging quickly with one another and escalating their complaints as they agree about concerns. While just a few hours later other students attempt to challenge the students with accounts of their positive experiences, and a program administrator intervenes within 24 hours, the tone has already been set. A similar pattern emerges in the discussion thread where a few students monopolise the discourse with controversial and politically charged viewpoints. The instructor attempts to redirect and manage the conversation, but other students fail to respond. While the reasons for their silence are unclear, this may be less likely to occur in a synchronous setting, where the instructor could intervene with all students at the same “live” moment and more immediately manage the tone and dynamics. Finally, in the email example, as time passes between responses, the student becomes more agitated at their professor, thus impacting the overall conversation. Here, asynchronicity contributes to negative emotions and disinhibition.

Solipsistic introjection: As discussed, solipsistic introjection refers to the traits or tone one may assign to others in an online environment that is devoid of physical cues. In the social media case, as the primary student starts complaining about the program and their professor, other students begin to express agreement and fuel unsubstantiated beliefs or potential projections about the particular professor “…who thinks he is such a great professor”. In this same example, the program director also attempts to intervene in what is meant to be a neutral, or supportive manner. Yet the angry student is not able to recognise this overture, as evidenced by their further comments that “no one care about us in this program”.

Dissociative imagination: The social media dialogue illustrates how dissociative imagination may function. Here, a student cautions another student about how their comments might be interpreted if a faculty member reads their post, but the student dismisses this, indicating that the social media forum is not a “real thing”. This virtual reality provides opportunities for students to “dissociate” from the real world, where limited responsibility is held.

Minimisation of authority: In an in-person classroom, the professor’s role and authority is reinforced, as they conduct the class from the front of the room, often standing, demonstrating a level of intellectual command and physical control over the classroom. Suler (2004a) argues that in an online environment, authority figures—in this case, faculty and administrators—are often “behind the scenes” and without a physical presence. Due to this,
minimisation of their authority is prone to occur as participants speak their mind and fail to acknowledge typical classroom limits. In the class discussion board example, a student outright ignores the professor’s attempts at redirecting the conversation and challenges the instructor’s knowledge base (“Prof, you’re wrong”). Similarly, in the email example, the student demonstrates disrespect in communicating with the professor and challenges their authority, even going so far as saying they will be contacting “their boss”.

*Incivility:* As discussed, incivility relates to disinhibition through negative behaviours that manifest in the online classroom such as challenging instructor authority, making rude or offensive comments, and by displaying a consumer mentality. Each of the case examples exhibits a level of disinhibition driven by incivility of students. In the social media case, the first post illustrates consumer mentality (i.e., “I’m paying for this, so deserve a certain standard”—even if unrealistic), yelling of offensive comments about the program (through the use of all caps) and name-calling. In the class discussion board, the instructor’s authority is challenged as noted above by the disregard of her follow-up questions. The email example also demonstrates incivility with the student challenging the professor’s authority in a chain of inappropriate communications.

*Emotionally/politically charged topics:* The emotionally, politically charged, and often personal content discussed within social work courses can lead to intense and passionate discussion. While in some situations, the online environment may allow students to feel more comfortable discussing difficult topics, it can also quickly become heated. The discussion board exemplifies this dynamic, as students debate the “deservingness” of individuals receiving welfare, disclose personal information, and appear to be offended by one another.

*Best practices for managing disinhibition*  
Literature on online higher education identifies a series of best practices that can be used for addressing disinhibition and incivility in online programs. In each of the above cases, the elements of disinhibition and incivility are displayed. Key elements to problem-solving include instructor presence and orienting students to netiquette/appropriate online communication techniques. Within the online social work classroom, faculty should maintain a strong instructor presence, reinforcing and modeling positive communication with students. Xie et al.’s (2013) study discussed earlier found that conflict decreased when faculty promoted a positive social climate. The case studies demonstrate instructor involvement at varying points of interaction with students. In the social media example, the program administrator makes presence known by acknowledging the concerned student within 24 hours of the initial post and provides an outlet for further discussion. In the discussion board, the instructor is regularly communicating with students, attempting to redirect the conversation back to the posed question. In the email example, the professor ultimately responds to the student, but had they responded in a timelier manner (i.e., within 24 hours), the student may have not further escalated in anger for not feeling “heard”. Research stresses the importance of instructor presence in managing disinhibition and recommends faculty regularly review postings, particularly close to the due date when more activity may take place (Suler, 2004b).
Establishing clear roles, responsibilities and communication expectations of those teaching an online course will help support students so that they do not become frustrated or inappropriate in their communications. Doing so also establishes the authority of the instructor. For example, letting students know when the course instructor will provide feedback, how the instructor will participate within discussion boards, preferred methods of communication between student and instructor (e.g., email vs. virtual office), and opportunities for synchronous communication may all alleviate student anxiety (Neff & Donaldson, 2013). In the email example, the instructor redirects the student back to feedback provided, and offers different opportunities to discuss the students concerns in a more productive manner. In the discussion board the instructor is regularly involved in the discussion, attempting to promote additional student response and focusing the questions/conversation. The instructor recognises different viewpoints, but also clearly articulates that the discussion should be based on evidence from the readings, not on opinion. When a new student speaks up about how the comments previously made are offensive to them, the instructor effectively intervenes by acknowledging the impact of this discussion and reminding students about netiquette guidelines (that were likely shared at the start of the course) and how to move forward with a respectful dialogue. In the social media example, while the program administrator attempts to address the communications, the angry student disregards this, even posting that “no one cares about us,” indicating that the authority of the administrator is continually being challenged. However, the presence, or authority of the administrator is felt by one of the other students who apologises for how they got “carried away,” showing that instructor presence is important to maintaining the overall community of the online space.

The case examples highlight the importance of ensuring students receive information on netiquette and civil online communication during program orientations and as a regular component of each course. Doing so provides clear messaging about the communication standards of the program that can be reiterated as needed (Hopkins et al., 2017; Suler, 2004b). For example, the program director models professional communication by recognising student concerns but seeks to address them in a more productive manner outside of the public forum. This is also seen in the email example as the instructor acknowledges the students’ concern about their grade, but asks clarifying questions and redirects the student’s focus prior to further conversation. Orienting students from the start of the program on strategies for managing their feelings related to less than optimal grades or critical feedback is essential.

Social media presents several considerations for how to most effectively communicate with students and manage disinhibition and incivility in online communications. The literature suggests that social media can be used to develop community among online students and provides a space to support social presence of students (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018). The immediacy with which students can receive a response from classmates or others managing a page can be satisfying to students and can help to supplement the social aspect of an asynchronous program. In the social media case example, other students may be the best mediators in this situation if they are educated from the start of the program about netiquette, how to address problems productively, and how to share their own experiences in a positive way. However, if students are not oriented in this manner, the social media
page can quickly escalate into a negative forum where the purpose of engagement is not met. Programs that seek to incorporate social media as a programmatic or course element should consider the development of clear guidelines and expectations for participation in the social media application, as well as standards for administrators or faculty who monitor and respond to the posts (Ackaoglu & Lee, 2018). Policies should address social media use within the program, but also consider the impact outside of the program, including the professional, legal, ethical and practical impact of inappropriate comments (Fang et al., 2014; Karpman & Drisko, 2016).

Faculty also need to be well-trained on managing difficult and emotionally charged conversations in an online space. While there is a large pedagogical literature addressing this issue in the traditional face-to-face classroom (e.g., managing conversations around race, trauma, etc.) (Flaherty, Ely, Meyer-Adams, Baer, & Sutphen, 2013; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009), the literature on virtual classrooms is limited. In a course that may actively prompt student disclosures, guidelines about how to share and respond to disclosures, as well as resources for self-care should be provided at the start of the course. Consideration should be had to the productive pedagogical uses of disinhibition, as students are encouraged to share differing opinions, yet this must be done in an inclusive and civil manner. For example, the discussion board case demonstrates disinhibition as students discuss opinions not based on the research presented in the course and react negatively to the instructor redirecting the conversation through flaming and inappropriate text communications.

On a broader level, research suggests that the development of effective classroom and program management strategies for managing disinhibition within online classrooms is essential (Eskey, Taylor, & Eskey, 2014; Hopkins et al., 2017; Suler, 2004b). Schools of social work should thus consider the development of institutional policies to address expectations for virtual communications both in and outside of the online classroom. Policies may include a student code of conduct, incivility policy or rules of netiquette for engaging with students and faculty online. Current policies should be reviewed and revised as needed to include uncivil behaviours unique to the online learning environment, such as cyber-bullying (Eskey et al., 2014; Hopkins et al., 2017).

Finally, as we consider social work education and the professional and ethical responsibilities of the profession, expectations within online programs should align with the professional codes of ethics and rules of professional behavior (Reamer, 2013). Disinhibition in online education can raise ethical issues, in so far as disinhibited behaviours may violate professional ethical codes. In the US, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA) have developed “Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice,” with a section dedicated to educational standards around the use of technology. These standards delineate responsibilities for social work educators within social work online and distance education, including the role of facilitating and monitoring the appropriate and professional interaction among students and maintaining clear boundaries with online communication (in the classroom and via social media). Social work educators should not only model appropriate communications with students, but also continuously
educate students about the ethical implications of unprofessional communications, including respectful language, personal disclosure, client confidentiality issues, online dual relationships on social media and other virtual platforms (NASW, ASWB, CSWE & CSWA, 2017). Clear expectations around use of technology outside of the classroom, whether at field agencies, employment settings, or on the personal level, should be addressed. Ensuring students understand how their virtual presence in their personal lives links to their professional identity as a social worker is necessary (Karpman & Drisko, 2016).

**CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD**

This case study adds to the literature concerning disinhibition in online learning environments. It offers one of the first examinations of this issue in the social work education literature. As schools of social work increasingly offer online course and programs (the US-based Council on Social Work Education reports 81 online MSW programs), faculty, students and administrators need to be educated about the effects of disinhibition in the online classroom (CSWE, 2019). As discussed, multiple aspects of online communications in social work programs contribute to the disinhibition effect and must be addressed for programs to be successful.

Areas for future research are considerable. Empirical research is needed to examine the specific dynamics of disinhibition in social work education and effective management practices. There is significant potential for research in this area, given the amount of existing classroom and program data. This vein of research could build a body of empirical evidence supporting best practices in the virtual social work classroom, including increasingly refined protocols and intervention templates. Relatedly, research should more closely examine the concept of benign disinhibition and the positive impact it may have on online communications, particularly in courses that include politically or emotionally charged topics. Exploring how online courses and program dynamics may contribute to benign disinhibition and encourage the appropriate sharing of diverse opinions is another needed area of research. The future of social work education largely involves online contexts and, as social work educators, we are ethically obligated to build effective, productive, and inclusive virtual classrooms.

**References**


“I Feel Like I Know you”: Using Flipgrid in Online Social Work Education

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ABSTRACT

Online social work educators need tools to reduce social distance between students and instructors. This practice reflection describes the use of Flipgrid, an interactive social learning platform utilising video-based discussion, in online BSW and MSW programs. Instructors of two disparate courses (one focused on research practice and the other focused on discrimination, oppression, and diversity) found that Flipgrid shows promise in creating a dialogical learning environment and reducing social distance in the online space. Authors detail both how they used Flipgrid and student responses to the tool. The authors share lessons learned from using Flipgrid, and make recommendations for other teaching applications.

Keywords: Flipgrid; Video discussion; Online education; Research; Diversity; Social justice
INTRODUCTION

Much of the online education environment consists of didactic interactions such as webinars and recorded lectures (Militello, Tredway, & Jones, 2018). Integrating dialogical learning is crucial for students to co-create knowledge with peers and others, and decrease social distance (Garavan, 2013). Online educators often use text-based discussions to this end. However, text-based discussions are time consuming for instructors and students, can feel less authentic, and may not challenge students to use higher-order thinking (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). Further, misunderstandings in text-based discussions can result in damage to social cohesion (Clark, Strudler, & Grove, 2015).

Flipgrid (www.flipgrid.com), an interactive video discussion platform, offers promise in advancing dialogical learning goals and decreasing social distance. Video-enabled discussions allow students to see each other as classmates rather than text writers within an online discussion, increasing social presence and making collaboration easier and more productive (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015). The platform has also been shown to increase teaching presence and help students see instructors as real people (West, Jay, Armstrong, & Borup, 2017).

Flipgrid description

Flipgrid, developed in 2012, is used in more than 20,000 classrooms and in 100-plus countries. In Flipgrid, educators create a classroom or “grid” and, within this, create topics. Social work educators have used Flipgrid to encourage students to reflect on reading, provide peer-to-peer feedback and demonstrate skills (Sage, 2018). Students respond to topics by completing video-recordings between 15 seconds and five minutes long (limit set by instructor). Students record within Flipgrid using a simple web or app-based interface on computers, tablets, or smartphones. They record and erase videos until satisfied with one they want to post to the grid. Students watch each other’s video posts and respond with more. Students can apply digital “stickers” to videos, providing fun feedback and building relationships. Educators can limit access to grids to just their students or make them accessible to anyone who has a passcode so that students can interact with people from outside the course.

Briar Cliff University BSW Program: Flipgrid and Social Work Research Methods

Briar Cliff University offers a part-time, online BSW degree-completion program. All courses are asynchronous, although practice and research courses require synchronous consultation with instructors using Zoom videoconferencing (www.Zoom.us). Students take the “Social Work Research Methods” course the semester before they begin practicum, working with identified agencies to develop research questions and proposals. Students frequently report anxiety about taking a research class and about successfully completing research proposals. Structured assignments prepare students for each section of the research proposal (Harder, 2010) and Zoom sessions with the instructor help build skills and confidence.

In the past, instructors had utilised text-based discussions to encourage students to apply content and facilitate student feedback on research questions and projects. In August 2018, Flipgrid replaced text-based discussions. Each week, students responded to up to four Flipgrid prompts posted by the instructor and responded to at least four other students’ recordings.
The instructor designed prompts to be responded to within 90 seconds. Examples of instructor prompts include:

- Discuss your understanding of the concepts of reliability and validity.
- Review the informed consent section of the NASW Code of Ethics. How does this section apply to you as a researcher?

The instructor watched all recordings and then posted praise, correction or further probes to assist students. Using an assessment tool developed by the instructor, students graded themselves on their Flipgrid participation, providing self-ratings on degree of participation and quality of post. Students also graded themselves on the level of professionalism evident in the Flipgrid post/response, which included: respectful consideration of others’ opinions; the video was recorded in a professional setting (not on bed or in public/noisy setting); and that student hair/hygiene/clothing was appropriate for a social work practice setting.

Of the 14 students in the course, two had initial technical struggles solved by a brief phone call with the instructor. One student reported spending more time practising her recording than necessary because of nerves but said she preferred Flipgrid to text-based discussions. Two students appreciated being able to record Flipgrid posts on smartphones. One student found it helpful to re-watch posts from classmates and the instructor. The average time spent by each student engaging with Flipgrid was 1.5 hours/week. Views for topics ranged from 128–476, averaging 208 views/topic.

The University of Iowa MSW Program: Flipgrid and Discrimination, Oppression, and Diversity

The University of Iowa offers an online, part-time, MSW program featuring asynchronous and synchronous courses. Students without undergraduate social work degrees must take “Discrimination, Oppression, and Diversity” (DOD), a course examining privilege and oppression and addressing institutional racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism and other topics.

Students develop awareness of their biased thoughts and actions, see how they have benefited from (or have been harmed by) privilege and oppression, and understand how, as social workers, they can and must work to address their biases and challenge structural oppression. This requires creation of a “brave space” (Arao & Clemens, 2013) because content is charged, students are actively and uncomfortably growing, and emotions run high. Flipgrid was a tool to create brave space.

Of the 17 DOD students in August 2018, three identified as male, 13 as women, one as gender-fluid. Two identified as queer, one as African-American, and one as American-Indian/Alaska Native. Five identified having a disability, and two were veterans. Ages ranged from 22–44, Median = 33.05. Students responded to Flipgrid prompts from the instructor each week and then to at least two other students to earn full discussion points. The time limit for posting and responding was five minutes; prompts were such as:
• What evidence of Christian privilege do you see in your life day-to-day?
  What benefits and costs do you see for yourself? For others?

• What do you think the role of social work is when it comes to religious privilege and oppression?

Students needed to post before they could see others’ videos. Each week, the instructor watched all recordings and posted her own, reflecting on what students shared, guiding them through normal and difficult feelings and previewing upcoming work.

At first, students reluctantly recorded, uncomfortable being on camera and fearful of offending someone. They also were ashamed that they held biases. Before long, they were more open with ideas, experiences and emotions, and asked classmates questions about their lives and thoughts. Sometimes they gave others feedback. One student, regarding terminology, said, “I’m pushing back with love, but we don’t say ‘homosexual.’ Please call me gay.”

When the instructor asked for feedback on Flipgrid, students said they liked it and felt it was helping to build relationships. As one said about her classmates, “I feel like I know you.” They reported initial stumbles in learning to use Flipgrid, challenges in editing comments to fit time limits, and technical difficulties requiring re-recording. A few students asked to alternate Flipgrid with text-based discussions because they felt writing allowed for careful construction and editing of thoughts before sharing with others. Others preferred Flipgrid because facial expression, body language, and vocal intonation made it easier to understand communication intent. Students reported being excited when receiving notifications of new videos posted in the grid, similar to interacting with other forms of social media. The average time spent by each student engaging with Flipgrid was 2.1 hours/week. Topic views ranged from 188–714, averaging 413 views/topic.

DISCUSSION

Our experiences with Flipgrid were positive. We offer lessons learned and future teaching applications.

Lessons learned

Provide clear directions for an easy start.
From the beginning, provide step-by-step directions on posting and using the mobile application. Have students create a no-stakes introductory video first. Flipgrid offers prompts such as “share something that makes you smile,” or instructors could ask students to identify something they want to learn in the course.

Determine need for passcode protection.
Flipgrid offers a setting requiring a passcode each time a user views or posts. Without requiring a passcode, anyone who opens the app can enter the grid. Passcode inconvenience may be appropriate in courses such as DOD where students could share confidential information. We advise making the code simple and part of initial Flipgrid directions.
Err on the side of short videos.
The DOD instructor used Flipgrid prompts from prior, text-based discussions. They were too complex for students to address in five minutes and took the instructor three-plus hours to review the videos each week. Additionally, longer video time pressured students to script remarks, rather than informally exchange ideas.

Flipgrid in future teaching
Both instructors will use Flipgrid for purposes described here, and in the future, to engage guests outside the classroom. The research instructor will invite researchers and practitioners to engage with students about the value and use of social work research. The DOD instructor will recruit people from the community to share lived experiences. Because Flipgrid allows for ongoing conversation, interaction with outside speakers may be richer than typical, one-time “guest speaker” experiences.

The instructors plan to use Flipgrid in other courses, especially to practise presentation skills. For example, in an organisation and community practice course, students will post two-minute “elevator pitch” videos on Flipgrid and give others feedback.

CONCLUSION
Effectively teaching social work online has moved beyond “can” to “how” (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). Tools like Flipgrid can enhance dialogical education and build community, reduce social distance and elevate student engagement and learning – all necessary ingredients of effective social work education.

References


BOOK REVIEW

Teaching Social Work with Digital Technology

Laurel Iverson Hitchcock, Melanie Sage, and Nancy Smyth

At first glance, this weighty tome might be anxiety-provoking for social work educators juggling a myriad of teaching, research and service responsibilities. Yet a preliminary scan of the contents reveals that this is an accessible and engaging book that can be easily read from cover to cover, or read in a more targeted way to support specific aspects of curriculum development. In a nutshell, this publication offers social work educators new ways of thinking about digitally enabled teaching and also illustrates how to optimise the pedagogical value of digital technology across all learning environments. In this regard, the book challenges narratives underpinned by unhelpful binaries such as “people-focus versus technology-focus” and “classroom versus online”. It also draws comprehensively on theoretical and research literature to dispel pervasive myths about the superior quality of teaching and learning in traditional bricks-and-mortar classrooms.

The book builds a compelling case for a fundamental shift in our thinking about digital technology in social work education. It supports the reader to critically reflect on their own assumptions about technology and social work education and demonstrates how digitally enabled teaching can be used differentially across the learning continuum in all social work courses. Authors Hitchcock, Sage, and Smyth (2019) ultimately advocate for the purposeful infusion of digital technology in social work teaching with a sharp focus on supporting students to evolve as competent, ethical social workers for contemporary times.

The 713 pages that make up this book can be divided into four discrete, albeit interlocking, parts. Each part serves as a source of inspiration and knowledge for social work educators who are tasked with continually developing their teaching practices in ways that: maximise the students’ learning experience; and support students to develop into practice-ready graduates for the contemporary context.

The first section (chapters 1-3) introduces the socio-political, pedagogical and ethical imperatives of teaching social work with digital technology. It is important to highlight at this point that the book is specifically focused on the United States (US herewith) context. As such, references to statistical data, particular education policies and curriculum standards
are not immediately relevant to readers outside the US. However, the concepts and overarching themes emerging from the text translate well to the Australian and New Zealand contexts. Chapter 1 establishes the need for a scholarly focus on digital technology in social work education and the importance of considering its use across the various learning environments. Chapter 2 examines the concept of digital literacy and its application to social work education and practice. Chapter 3 discusses how learning theories inform the use of digital technology in social work education.

Building on the threshold concepts introduced in chapters 1-3, the second part (chapters 4-7) offers useful insights into digitally enabled teaching and assessment practices across various learning environments. Chapter 4 explores the use of digital technology in the traditional face-to-face learning environment, termed the “seated classroom” by Hitchcock et al. (2019). The online classroom is the focus of chapter 5. This chapter tackles the important issue of converting a seated classroom curriculum to the online space and is particularly relevant to educators involved in delivering classes across online synchronous, online asynchronous and seated classroom environments. The focus of chapter 6 is on teaching social work in a fully online environment and discusses some the pedagogical and administrative considerations when operating at this end of a technology continuum. Chapter 7 is dedicated to the use of technology at the nexus of classroom and workplace learning – the field education space. The chapter explores the challenges and opportunities in using technology to both manage and teach in field education programs. It articulates the differences between campus and distance field education programs and outlines the technology skills that multiple stakeholder groups require in order to capitalise on the opportunities that technology provides.

The third part (chapters 8-9) explores the ethical concerns and professional development of social work educators in the digital age. Chapter 8 unpacks the issues of privacy and confidentiality, professional boundaries and academic integrity in digital learning environments, while chapter 9 offers readers a framework for reflecting on their own development needs and strategies that might be helpful in meeting these needs.

The fourth part of the book is presented as a set of appendices containing useful resources for teaching social work with technology. These resources come together to form what can be described as a toolkit for social work educators in the digital age. The toolkit contains learning activities, assessment tasks, reflective questions for educators, a survey for programs to test their readiness for online learning and even a glossary of relevant terms. The names and contact details for authors involved in the development of these tools are also noted, affording readers the opportunity for follow-up. In this sense, the book unlocks opportunities for cross-institutional and cross-jurisdictional collaboration.

While engaging with this book, or with some of its parts, it is imperative that readers do not overlook the preface and acknowledgements, as these contain useful information about how this book came into being. The backstory of the book is just as pertinent to grasping the possibilities that digital technology affords social work educators as all the other parts of the publication. Three social work academics, at different levels in the academic pecking order, joined together as equal partners in a virtual community of practice, and then
expanded the reach of their collaboration to include many other social work academics who contributed the ideas and practices that make up this comprehensive book. Hitchcock et al. (2019) identify themselves as a “three-woman team” who took “a leap of faith” (p. vii). The book collaboration was sparked by Twitter feeds, fuelled by GoToMeeting live video calls and underpinned by age-old social work principles and practices. To this end, the book is the culmination of a technologically mediated endeavour to draw together contemporary thinking and praxis in social work education. Ultimately, this is an invaluable reference book that doubles as an instructive case study of how social work educators can use technology to translate ideas into action in ways that reinforce the core values of social work.

Reference

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