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Distance Education in Social Work: A Review of the Literature

Hamilton, Brown, and Rogers

Abstract

The growth of online technologies in higher education has presented new challenges for the field of social work education. Some have questioned whether this human interaction-dependent profession can be ethically delivered online. Technology also poses special challenges for social work education and practice in the areas of confidentiality and professional boundaries. These ethical questions have resulted in a lag for research in the area of online social work education when compared to other fields. This review of the relevant literature attempts to discover the current state of knowledge for social work education technologies. Findings indicate that barriers to human interaction and technical glitches are common concerns for educators. However, there is evidence that online social work students have statistically similar outcomes in comparison to traditional students and that technology presents new opportunities to the field if properly utilized.

Distance Education in Social Work: A Review of the Literature

Education has continually changed and evolved to meet the needs of the next generation of students. With current students living in a world that is predominantly driven by technology, it is not surprising that education has been impacted by this emerging trend as well. Shifting away from the traditional face-to-face classroom setting, distance education has become the fastest growing form of instruction worldwide (Tracey & Richey, 2005). The field of social work education has similarly seen a great amount of change in the past decade. However, many social work educators have been reluctant to introduce technological barriers to a profession committed to human relationships. This reluctance has resulted in a relatively limited body of outcomes-based research for online social work education and even less understanding of best practices. As an important starting place, the research described here seeks to discover the current state of knowledge in the field of online social work education.

Literature Review

Distance education is most traditionally defined as an educational program in which the students and instructor are separated by location, and it can take on many forms. Video conferencing, online discussion boards, and virtual simulations are all examples of how instruction can be delivered in a distance education program without the need for face-to-face interaction (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014; Tham & Werner, 2004).

The shift seen in the delivery method of education has been felt in all disciplines, and the field of social work is no exception. What began in the 1950s as “audiovisual technology,” consisting of film and wire recordings used to train students, today’s social work distance education has evolved to encompass many more forms of instruction (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). Examples include programs specifically designed for learning outside of the classroom, such as SecondLife, Adobe Connect, and WebCT. The field of social work has also made use of virtual world experiences to simulate client interactions (Reinsmith-Jones, Kibbe, Crayton, & Campbell, 2015). However, the opportunities do not stop there. International experiences have also been made possible by the use of distance education, as demonstrated by the research of Reinsmith-Jones, Kibbe, Crayton, and Campbell,. (2015), which described the interaction of American and South African students as they collaborated on a social work project via online media.

The shift in social work education has not

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taken place without raising some questions along the way, however. For example, there is still debate regarding whether it is ethical to teach a human-based profession without face to face interaction (Collins, Coleman, Ing, & Gabor, 2002). While faculty debate the use of technology, students and their future client populations are likely to both be more comfortable with technology and expect it to play a role in their daily life, making practitioner competence an additional important challenge facing social work education (Reamer, 2013). For example, the use of digital technology for social work practice poses issues of confidentiality and privacy (Reamer, 2013). A social worker that communicates with clients over email or video counseling must be cognizant of potential hacking of an unauthorized third party. In order to prevent this breach in confidentiality and privacy, the social worker would need to have an understanding of modern security practices.

Further, social workers can often run into issues regarding boundaries between themselves and clients if they are using digital technology as their main form of communication. For example, social networking sites like Facebook allow users to view, contact, or request to be "friends" with one another. This can lead to boundary confusions between social workers and their clients and can compromise the privacy and confidentiality of the client (Reamer, 2013). This also holds true for relationships and boundaries between students and their instructors. However, technically adept professors offering online instruction have the opportunity to model professional boundaries in a digital age. Finally, social workers who choose to use digital or online forms of service are challenged with the possibility that the current system they are using for communication may become obsolete within a few years, requiring social workers to be adept at incorporating new technologies.

Outside of the ethical issues involved with the ever-increasing use of digital technology to deliver social work services and education, there has been a noted change in student demographics in all higher education institutions, requiring a reexamination of delivery methods. Typically defined as 24 years of age, working full time, and often having dependents to support, non-traditional students are returning to college at an exponential rate (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010). As student populations continue to evolve, it is necessary for colleges and universities to accommodate their learning styles and needs. Distance education offers an enticing method of instruction for non-traditional students whose schedules may not be as flexible as the younger traditional student. Therefore, the need to serve non-traditional student populations requires the investigation of quality online teaching pedagogies.

Higher education is evolving and changing to meet the needs of current students, and social work education is no exception. With the trend of educational delivery quickly shifting towards online pedagogies and the field of social work following in its footsteps, there is a need for continued analysis of online education to evaluate outcomes and discover best practices. Still, with relatively limited empirical research, there is little consensus as to the current state of social work distance education. Therefore, this research seeks to discover the current state of knowledge in online social work education via a review of the recent literature.

Methodology

We employed five search engines (Proquest Education, Proquest Social Sciences, Academic One File, JSTOR, Academic Search Complete) in order to locate peer-reviewed, empirical articles meeting one of the following search terms:

1. "social work" and "distance education"
2. "social work" and "virtual"
3. "social work" and "hybrid"
4. "social work" and "online" and "education"
5. "social work" and "distance learning"

In order to investigate the current status of online education, we filtered out articles written prior to 2010, as technology in the area of higher education has advanced rapidly in the past 5 years. We also removed articles who met these search terms but were not directly analyzing online or hybrid social work education. The 40

articles meeting these criteria are identified in Appendix A.

The remaining articles were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet which included descriptive statistics such as course model (hybrid, 100% online, web elements in traditional class), N, research design, object of measurement (student satisfaction, learning outcomes, etc.), whether the course was BSW or MSW, country location of the university, setting (particular course or entire program), and particular technology identified, if any (Blackboard, Second Life, etc.).

Finally, the general conclusions of each article were coded for themes via qualitative content analysis (Hsiu-Fang Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) within a constructivist (Rodwell, 1998) framework. This constructivist worldview acknowledges that researcher lens will unavoidably influence the research process, even when explicitly attempting to avoid bias. For example, as researchers interested in online social work education, it is likely that this bias influenced coding and made us potentially more likely to focus on the positive aspects of the pedagogy. Still, to address this bias to the extent possible and better triangulate data (Charmaz, 2006), two researchers independently employed open coding (Berg & Lune, 2011). These themes were then discussed and negotiated to improve inter-rater reliability. Finally, larger themes were identified via axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Quantitative Results

Prior to discussing emergent themes, it is valuable to describe some important similarities and differences in the articles' methodologies. Regarding the course under examination, four (10%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Deglau et al., 2014; Kilpeläinen, Päykkönen, & Sankala, 2011) analyzed a hybrid course, nine (22.5%) articles (Coccoma, Peppers, & Molhoek, 2012; Dedman & Palmer, 2011; Douville, 2013; East, LaMendola, & Alter, 2014; Johnson, 2013; Larsen, Visser-Rotgans, & Hole, 2011; Levine & Adams, 2013; Noble & Russell, 2013; Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman, & Cross-Denny, 2012) analyzed a fully online course, and nine (22.5%) articles (Domakin, 2013; Elliott, Choi, & Friedline, 2013; Forgey, Loughran, & Hansen, 2013; Gursansky, Quinn, & Le Sueur, 2010; Kayser, Bowers, Jiang, & Bussey, 2013; Mishna, Tufford, Cook, & Bogo, 2013; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015; Williams-Gray, 2014) analyzed the use of virtual tools in a traditional classroom setting. Finally, 18 (45%) articles (Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Cummings et al., 2013; Forte & Root, 2011; Hash & Tower, 2010; Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Lee, Brown, & Bertera, 2010; Marson, Wei, & Marson, 2010; Mason, Helton, & Dziegielewski, 2010; McAllister, 2013; Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2014; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Stotzer, Fujikawa, Sur, & Arnsberger, 2013; Webber, Currin, Groves, Hay, & Fernando, 2010) compared an online to a face-to-face classroom model.

Regarding sample size, 16 (40%) articles (Coccoma et al., 2012; Domakin, 2013; Douville, 2013; Elliott et al., 2013; Forgey et al., 2013; Gursansky et al., 2010; Larsen et al., 2011; Lee, 2014; Levine & Adams, 2013; Marson et al., 2010; Mishna et al., 2013; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Pardasani et al., 2012; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Webber et al., 2010; Williams-Gray, 2014) had a subject population of 50 or below, and 20 (50%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Cummings et al., 2015; Cummings et al., 2013; Dedman & Palmer, 2011; Deglau et al., 2014; East et al., 2014; Forte & Root, 2011; Hash & Tower, 2010; Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Kayser et al. 2013; Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Lee et al., 2010; Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011; Mason et al., 2010; Noble & Russell, 2013; Okech et al., 2014; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015) had a subject population above 50.

In terms of research design, seven (17.5%) articles (Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Coccoma et al., 2012; Cummings et al., 2015; Douville, 2013; Marson et al., 2010; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Stotzer et al., 2013) used a comparative design (online versus face to face, for example),

seven (17.5%) articles (Cummings et al., 2013; Forte & Root, 2011; Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Kayser et al., 2013; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Levine & Adams, 2013) used a pre- and post-data analysis design, and 28 (70%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Cummings et al., 2013; Dedman & Palmer, 2011; Deglau et al., 2014; Domakin, 2013; East et al., 2014; Elliott et al., 2013; Forgey et al., 2013; Hash & Tower, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Larsen et al., 2011; Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Margaryan et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2010; McAllister, 2013; Mishna et al., 2013; Noble & Russell, 2013; Okech et al., 2014; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Pardasani et al., 2012; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015; Webber et al., 2010; Williams-Gray, 2014) utilized a survey and/or questionnaire design.

Regarding the object of measurement, 12 (30%) articles (Cummings et al., 2015; Cummings et al., 2013; Douville, 2013; Forte & Root, 2011; Kayser et al., 2013; Larsen et al., 2011; Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Levine & Adams, 2013; Mishna et al., 2013; Webber et al., 2010) measured students' social work skills and knowledge, five (12.5%) articles (Coccoma et al., 2012; Forte & Root, 2011; Marson et al., 2010; McAllister, 2013; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014) measured students' grades, and 29 (72.5%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Cummings et al., 2015; Deglau et al., 2014; Domakin, 2013; Douville, 2013; Elliott et al., 2013; Forgey et al., 2013; Forte & Root, 2011; Gursansky et al., 2010; Hash & Tower, 2010; Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Johnson, 2013; Kayser et al., 2013; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; Larsen et al., 2011; Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Mason et al., 2010; McAllister, 2013; Mishna et al., 2013; Noble & Russell, 2013; Okech et al., 2014; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Pardasani et al., 2012; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015; Williams-Gray, 2014) measured student satisfaction or perception of course work.

Ten (25%) articles (Domakin, 2013; Gursansky et al., 2010; Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Levine & Adams, 2013; Margaryan et al., 2011; Marson et al., 2010; McAllister, 2013; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012) analyzed a course or program at the bachelor level while 22 (55%) articles (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Coccoma et al., 2012; Cummings et al., 2015; Cummings et al., 2013; Deglau et al., 2014; Douville, 2013; East et al., 2014; Elliott et al., 2013; Forgey et al., 2013; Kayser et al., 2013; Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Mason et al., 2010; Mishna et al., 2013; Noble & Russell, 2013; Okech et al. 2014; Pardasani et al., 2012; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015; Stotzer et al., 2013; Webber et al., 2010; Williams-Gray, 2014) evaluated a course or program at the masters level and six (15%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Dedman & Palmer, 2011; Forte & Root, 2011; Hash & Tower, 2010; Larsen et al., 2011) analyzed courses at both the bachelors and masters level.

The majority of articles (29; 72.5%) (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Coccoma et al., 2012; Cummings et al., 2015; Cummings et al., 2013; Dedman & Palmer, 2011; Deglau et al., 2014; Douville, 2013; East et al., 2014; Elliott et al., 2013; Forgey et al., 2013; Forte & Root, 2011; Hash & Tower, 2010; Kayser et al., 2013; Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Lee, 2014; Lee et al., 2010; Levine & Adams, 2013; Marson et al., 2010; Mason et al., 2010; McAllister, 2013; Noble & Russell, 2013; Okech et al., 2014; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Pardasani et al., 2012; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015; Stotzer et al., 2013; Williams-Gray, 2014) discussed research that was conducted in the United States, while four (10%) articles (Forgey et al., 2013; Johnson, 2013; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; Larsen et al., 2011) discussed research conducted in Europe. More specifically, three (7.5%) articles (Domakin, 2013; Margaryan et al., 2011; Webber et al., 2010) discussed research conducted in the United Kingdom. Five (12.5%; Gursansky et al., 2010; Huerta-Wong & Schoech, 2010; Mishna et al., 2013; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012) additional articles represented research from Australia, Canada,

Mexico, and South Africa, respectively.

Regarding the research setting, seven (17.5%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Elliott et al., 2013; Kayser et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2010; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Webber et al., 2010) focused their analysis on a social work research course, six (15%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Forte & Root, 2011; Hash & Tower, 2010; Lee, 2014; Mason et al., 2010; McAllister, 2013) analyzed a human behavior and social environment course, three (7.5%) articles (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; McAllister, 2013; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015) analyzed an introduction to social work or an introduction to social welfare course, seven (17.5%) articles (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Cummings et al., 2013; Deglau et al., 2014; Forgey et al., 2013; Gursansky et al., 2010; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; Okech et al., 2014) analyzed a social work practice course, and three (7.5%) articles (Deglau et al., 2014; Mason et al., 2010; McAllister, 2013) focused their research on a social work policy course. Finally, six (15%) articles (Cummings et al., 2015; Dedman & Palmer, 2011; East et al., 2014; Noble & Russell, 2013; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Stotzer et al., 2013) chose to analyze the entire social work program of an institution, as opposed to one single course within the program.

Some authors identified a specific form of technology utilized in their research. PowerPoint (Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Pardasani et al., 2012), SecondLife (Levine & Adams, 2013; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015), WebCT (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011; Webber et al., 2010), and Adobe Connect (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012) were each discussed in two (5%) articles. Most commonly used in this case was Blackboard, with seven (17.5%) authors reporting use (Marson et al., 2010; Cummings et al., 2013; Elliott et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2010; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Pardasani et al., 2012; Williams-Gray, 2014). Four authors (10%) reported using Google Sites (Coccoma et al., 2012; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; Larsen et al., 2011; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014), 3 (7.5%) used discussion boards (Douville, 2013; Larsen et al., 2011; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014), and seven (17.5%) described some other method (Coccoma et al., 2012; Elliott et al., 2013; Forte & Root, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Lee, 2014; Okech et al., 2014; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012)

Qualitative Results

Several qualitative themes emerged from these articles. The first of these is a focus upon the role of human interaction. McAllister (2013), Coccoma, Peppers, and Molhoek (2012), Johnson (2013), and Mishna, Tufford, Cook, and Bogo (2013) all reported that online students felt less socially connected to their classmates and instructor. Interestingly, Mason, Helton, and Dziegielewski (2010) found that older students were more likely to feel socially isolated by online courses than their younger classmates. Conversely, some authors (Noble & Russell, 2013; Okech et al., 2014) argue that the online setting can actually improve opportunities for communication and connection among students that might not otherwise be vocal in a traditional classroom setting.

> One faculty member was overwrought when a single reading generated 140 postings from 15 students. He explained to the students that they could continue to chat about the matter, but he was exiting the discussion. It has become clear from our experience that all online students tend to participate much more in discussions than do their on-campus counterparts, where it is easier for a few vocal students to dominate discussions. (Noble & Russell, 2013, p. 500)

Kilpeläinen, Päykkönen, and Sankala (2011) found this improvement in discussion to be especially true for geographically isolated students.

Other authors were able to find innovative ways to create connection in an online format. For example, Cappiccie and Desrosiers (2011) reported that online students preferred the live interactions provided by a synchronous software (Adobe Connect) to non-synchronous options such as a discussion board. The use of avatars (Lee, 2014), virtual role play (Levine & Adams, 2013), and Second Life (Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015) were all successfully employed to improve interpersonal communication among students and to practice social work skills.

A second important theme arising from the literature was that of outcomes when comparing

face-to-face and online courses. Nine articles reported no statistical differences in outcomes for face to face and online/hybrid students (Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Cummings et al., 2015; Cummings et al., 2013; Forte & Root, 2011; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; McAllister, 2013; Okech et al., 2014; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; Webber et al., 2010), measured in a variety of ways including knowledge, grades, student retention, and student satisfaction. Interestingly, Huerta-Wong and Schoech (2010) found that face-to-face outcomes only surpassed online learning when experiential learning techniques were included. While not comparing with face-to-face sections, Deglau et al. (2014) and Johnson (2013) also described generally positive outcomes for online students.

However, two outlying articles reported less favorable results for online students in the areas of confidence (Lawrence & Abel, 2013) and the ability to apply abstract ethical concepts (Marson et al., 2010). The Lawrence and Abel (2013) findings are notable because although online (and mostly non-traditional) students had lower confidence in their abilities, they actually earned higher grades than their on-campus (and largely traditional aged) peers. These gaps might then be skewed by generational and/or age differences.

While a seemingly minor issue pedagogically, the interference of technical difficulties in an online class arose for several authors (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; McAllister, 2013; Okech et al., 2014; Pardasani et al., 2012). Interestingly, Kilpeläinen et al. (2011) note that technical difficulties may be a bigger problem for faculty than students:

> In general, students are capable and motivated users of the new technology… A large majority of teachers have sufficient skills for everyday and routine working practices, but many of them still have difficulties in finding meaningful pedagogical uses for technology. (p. 9)

These generational differences may be due to what Kilpeläinen et al. (2011) describe as a "digital gap in education" (p. 9). While technical glitches and comfort with the meaningful use of technology may be separate issues, we hypothesize that some difficulties might be more seamlessly overcome by the digitally native.

Another important theme arising from this research was the appreciation among students for the convenience of online courses (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; McAllister, 2013; Noble & Russell, 2013; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010), many of whom were non-traditional students unable to attend face to face classes due to work and family duties (Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). However, two authors noted that working from home can often present distractions for students and make it difficult to fully focus, especially during synchronous web sessions (Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; McAllister, 2013).

Finally, even when fully online courses are not feasible or desirable, many authors mentioned the advantages of incorporating web-enhanced elements in a traditional course. These elements include online tutorials to support classroom content (Elliott et al., 2013; Hash & Tower, 2010; Kayser et al., 2013), video conferencing with social work students in another country (Forgey et al., 2013; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012), online journaling (Gursansky et al., 2010), online discussion forums (Lee et al., 2010), and virtual role plays (Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015; Williams -Gray, 2014).

Discussion

As constructivist researchers, we must acknowledge the limitations of human interpretation. It is possible that another set of researchers would discover other important themes emerging from this research. However, the detailed methodological description supplied here should ease future replication. For our purposes, the most pressing issues facing online social work education are the importance of continued human relationships, technical interruptions, the appreciation among students for the convenience of distance education, and the potential enhancement of traditional classes through technology. Most importantly, there appears to be growing evidence that outcomes for students are often similar for online students when compared to those in the traditional classroom.

While the preeminence of human relationships in social work practice will not likely be diminished in the future, some social work educators appear to be successfully adapting technology to facilitate rather than interrupt these interactions through the use of synchronous discussion and virtual world technologies. Further, it is possible that technical glitches may improve over time as technology improves and students and faculty become more comfortable with it. While social workers must continue to think critically about what elements of our education can be done online while retaining quality, we must also properly prepare our students for a future of practice which will inevitably require a comfort and competence with technology. Finally, we can embrace exciting new possibilities for social work education through technology such as international video conferencing or reaching new cohorts of students who have previously been unable to mold their professional and personal lives to the traditional educational model.

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Appendix A

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