Continuing Social Work Education in an Electronic Age: The Opportunities and Challenges Facing Social Work Education in Ghana

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Introduction

Over the past few years, social work has expanded to virtually every corner of the world. Factors such as the fall of communism in the Soviet Union (Hokenstad & Kendall, 1992), the emergence of democratic institutions in Africa, and the impact of the technological revolution have all contributed to the globalization of social work.

In Africa, a number of factors played an influential role in facilitating the emergence of social work. The activities of missionaries from Europe and other parts of the world, African mutual aid societies, and the colonization of the continent by external powers all contributed to social work development on the continent. The missionaries preceded the colonizers. Even though their primary role focused on addressing the religious and spiritual needs of Africans, by establishing schools, vocational training, and engaging in almsgiving and community work, the missionaries functioned as informal social workers.

Tribal and mutual aid societies have always existed in Africa. Prior to the development of statutory welfare systems, different types of mutual aid societies across the continent provided assistance to family members. Some were family or kin-based (the largest category); others were cultural- and/or religious-based (such as rotating credit societies, funeral societies, and informal saving societies) (Midgely, 1997). The African extended family, for example, has always operated as a social welfare system (Apt & Grieco, 1994), and they continue to address the social welfare needs of a sizeable number of Africans who lack any form of social protection.

Social Work Education in Ghana

Social work education in Ghana is undergoing major restructuring. Historically, foreign traditions and models have influenced social work in Ghana (like other social work programs in Africa). In order to understand social work education in this country, one must understand the colonial legacy and the impact it had on indigenous institutions. Because the colonialists were interested in training people to serve or support the colonial administration, the nature of the training strongly reflected social work education in the metropolitan country. Ghana was strongly influenced by the British welfare system during the 108 years of British colonization. Thus, the evolution of social work education and training was based on British principles and values. Moreover, the British were mainly interested in supporting the welfare of those who were of crucial importance to the goals of furthering the colonization of the country (i.e., the civil service). As a result, social work education was oriented towards addressing the needs of those working in the formal sector. To date, the colonial influence still shapes social work training even though the country is experiencing a trend toward the localization of social work education. More specifically, the programs are evolving to become more relevant to the needs and concerns of the Ghanaian people.

Currently, the Social Work Unit at the University of Ghana is the only institution offering a Diploma and a Bachelor's degree in Social Work in the West African subregion. The Unit is involved in training the staff of the Social Welfare Department to occupy junior and senior positions in the Ghana civil service. Currently, the Unit has numerous collaborative exchanges with a number of educational institutions in Europe and North America. Institutions such as the London School of Economics, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor,

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School of Social Work, and the North Texas Department of Sociology and Social Work continue to collaborate with the Unit in exchanging faculty and undertaking joint research projects. The Unit receives a number of Fulbright scholars who have collaborated with faculty on various teaching and research projects.

Thus, the Unit is strategically positioned to embrace emerging technology to enhance faculty skill development, increase scholarly research, broaden opportunities for global collaboration, and extend involvement of programs to underserved communities.

The Need for Technology-Based Education in Social Work

A vast number of the country's people need access to education, but due to resource limitations cannot gain the access they need. The universities are constrained by space, time, and money. Yet, they have a responsibility to meet social work needs. This set of circumstances makes the issue of distance education very relevant to social work education in Ghana. Distance education holds much promise for breaking down the traditional barriers that have limited access by Ghana's institutions to external resources.

A technology-based education will address some of the challenges inherent in educating social workers. Using interactive distance learning strategies as well as traditional instructional methodologies to facilitate and enhance pedagogical, curricular, research, and instructional development could help provide access to social work education to the countless number of Ghanaians who are seeking to enter the profession. If this approach to educational development is used judiciously, it will open up new frontiers to higher learning, enrich social work education and training in the country, and equip students, faculty, and administrators with tools and resources that would enable them better to prepare for academic challenges of the 21st century.

Relevance of Distance Education to Social Work Training in Ghana

The number of virtual on-line universities has been growing and will continue to grow over the next few years. As the vast web of global and local information networks grows, creating new definitions for education and literacy, it has become essential for teachers and students who want to reap the full benefits of the communications age. The increasing use of computers in educational fields has made it possible for new teaching and learning practices to evolve as supplements and alternatives to the traditional classroom, lecture style learning. Emerging ICT could be used to facilitate frequent on-going contact with participating faculty as a way of comparing notes and promoting their research. Electronic mail, audio- and where necessary and appropriate, videoconference techniques, could be employed to ensure that there is ongoing contact among participating institutions.

Technology-Based Educational Initiatives in Ghana

It is significant that steps are being taken by identifiable organizations in Ghana and other parts of the continent to enhance technology-based education in the country. While these initiatives are not specific to social work training, they are expected to influence the adoption of instructional technology in training future social workers in Ghana.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Pan African Development Information Systems (PADIS) Initiative, aims to establish low cost and self-sustained nodes to provide access to electronic mail in 24 African countries, including Ghana. This will go a long way to support the telecommunication infrastructure needed for launching a successful distance education program. Another initiative, by the African Information Society, aims to address the infrastructural problem in the country. Similarly, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Leland Initiative's School-to-School Partnership, Program aims to promote joint projects between primary and

secondary institutions in 20 African countries (including Ghana). The project introduces participants to educational technologies and student and faculty skill enhancement, and enriches African resources on the Internet. It will create awareness about the uses of the Internet for academic purposes (www.info.usaid.gov/regions/afr/leland/s2s-info.html). In addition, the program will provide assistance with materials, expertise, training, and free Internet access for a limited period.

The Addis-Ababa based UN Economic Commission for Africa has been playing a leading role in the campaign to promote electronic networking for development and to bring a number of African countries (including Ghana) on to the Information Highway.

In 1997, the government of Ghana commissioned a 15-member National Distance Education Council to promote distance and collaborative learning in the country. Also, the British High Commission is supporting the University College of Education at Winneba to provide a distance education outreach to train teachers for a basic education thrust in Ghana. Programs such as USAID and the Leland Initiative, to harness the powerful information and communication tools of the Internet, aim to ensure that vital educational institutions in Ghana make optimum use of current and emerging global technologies. Currently, Ghana Telecommunication is building an Integrated System Development Network (ISDN) to be launched during 1999.

The African Internet Forum has been working to increase connections in Ghana in places where there are digital automatic exchange and proper outside plants. The African Virtual University (AVU) Project, the most ambitious of all the technology-based educational initiatives in the country (and other parts of Africa), is continent-wide and one of the pioneer satellite-based initiatives to harness the power of information technologies to deliver university education in the disciplines of science and engineering, non-credit continuing edu-

cation, and remedial instruction, to students in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the words of Baranshamaje (1996), "They represent the quintessential instruments for sharing resources at affordable prices to large numbers of people" (p. 3). The AVU will deliver instructional programs, strengthen the capacity in African partner institutions, consolidate a network infrastructure, and implement a digital library program. Additionally, the AVU will: a) train a large number of African scientists, technicians, engineers, business managers, and employees; b) encourage and further develop existing and newly educated scientists; and c) provide an academic environment for the effective participation of African institutions, faculty, and students in the worldwide community of learning, research, and dissemination of knowledge (Baranshamaje, 1996). About five Anglophone and five Francophone African countries are participating in the initial pilot phase.

At the University of Ghana, plans are underway to develop the information infrastructure on campus. USAID provided a server to the university and is currently supporting a cyber cafe. Within the Social Work School, the Center for Social Policy Studies is equipped with state of the art computers to assist the training of faculty and staff in information technology. These initiatives could be the catalyst for the application of ICT in educating and training social workers across the country. Through emerging communication technology, effective computer delivered coursework could be developed.

Social Work and Distance Education Technologies

Among the pedagogical strategies that fall under the rubric of distance education are: a) correspondence courses (through regular or snail mail); b) television courses (usually through public broadcasting stations); c) audio-conferencing (conference telephoning); d) video-conferencing (where a visual element is added to the audio-conferencing, allowing face-to-face meetings to be held without traveling); e) computer conference (where instruc-

tors provide credit courses on floppy disks for home computers); and f) web-based computer technology (Dixon, 1996; Witherspoon, 1996). Of all the delivery modes, the web is currently the fastest growing medium for distance education. Instructors have used the WWW (the Internet) for both distributed learning (such as making course notes and syllabi available on-line) and for complete distance learning (using WWW pages for actual instruction). Over the past few years, the World Wide Web (WWW) or Information Superhighway, has developed as a very important innovative instructional medium for educating social workers. The promise of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in promoting and enhancing educational development is enormous.

In Ghana, like other African countries, the use of electronic networks and information technology is in its infancy. Computers have yet to penetrate most educational institutions. Efforts to bring computer technology and to apply distance learning technologies have just begun, and there is much yet to be learned. Ghana and other African countries trail the rest of the world in the use of distance learning technologies in educating social workers. To date, there are no specific applications of distance learning technologies to the education and training of social workers in the country. The same can be said for the education of social workers on the whole African continent. Even though countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Egypt have made significant progress in employing technology in education, social work is yet to benefit from this paradigm shift in education. For example, four of the tertiary institutions in South Africa provide distance education courses: the University of South Africa, Technikon SA, the Technical College of South Africa, and Vista University. These schools enroll over 225,000 students annually (Butcher, 1998). Due to the limited use of ICT in educating and training social workers in Ghana, the rest of this article will describe the challenges, potentials, opportunities and benefits in using ICT to educate and train social workers in Ghana.

Challenges Confronting Social Work Education in Ghana

With an average population growth rate of 2.6%, the number of students seeking admission to social work education, and higher education in general, is expected to increase over the next couple of years. Already, social work educators in Ghana are confronted with numerous challenges — outmoded study materials, lack of well-trained faculty, limited space, etc. The lack of well-trained faculty who can address the changing social work landscape and educate students for the challenge is especially critical.

Another challenge involves resource limitations and budgetary constraints. This makes it difficulty to provide admission to all students who qualify for entry into the universities to pursue higher education in social work. Given contemporary and emerging challenges confronting the country, relying on the traditional campus-based university model to meet the educational needs of the continent may prove to be inadequate and unreliable. This calls for a fundamental restructuring of social work education and training and an alternative delivery model for meeting the educational needs of Africans.

Opportunities Presented by Distance Education for Social Work Education in Ghana

Distance education presents ample opportunities to enhance social work education in Ghana and other parts of Africa. Due to its ability to reach non-traditional students, who because of obligations such as work, family, and distance, find it almost impossible to enroll as regular students, distance education will open a new frontier in higher education. If this approach to educational development is used judiciously, it will equip faculty and students with tools that would enable them to engage successfully the academic world of the 21st century.

Social work educators in Ghana should endeavor to promote electronic-based education as a complementary delivery system to enabling students to take advantage of traditional instructional methods

as well as interactive distance learning technologies. Information technology is bound to reshape our institutions. Today, we have the technology to provide education to a countless number of people who would otherwise have gone without it. Information technology gives us the capability to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at a very rapid speed. This could go a long way to facilitate and enhance pedagogical, curricular, research, and instructional development in the universities. The country stands to benefit if social work education and training are based on the strategic use of information and communication technologies.

Strategies for Incorporating Information Technology in Social Work Education in Ghana

In positioning social work education for the next century, we make several recommendations on how best social work education and training in Ghana could benefit from emerging communications technologies.

Partnership Formation

In the interest of quality and excellence in social work education, there is the need for all institutions responsible for the education and training of social workers in the country to form partnerships with business, industry, and government, to help promote distance education. These bodies will be very crucial in helping to advance the development of social work through distance education. The private sector will help develop the technology for the delivery of distance education; the government will help formulate national policies to promote distance education; and academicians will help develop locally based social work content. Also, the need for social work educators to develop alliances with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to enable them to benefit from electronic connections cannot be overemphasized. Without such an alliance with ISPs, gaining access to the web will be a crucial challenge.

Linkages with Foreign Partners

Collaboration between Ghanaian institutions responsible for educating and training social workers and foreign partners who are pioneers in applying distance education to social work education is of great importance. Even though the application of distance learning technologies among schools of social work is still emerging, a number of schools in the United States and other Western countries have developed fairly sophisticated on-line courses. Linkage programs will offer social work students in Ghana the opportunity to take courses on-line, without leaving the country.

Promotion of Distance Education

The full value of distance education can only be realized if it is brought forcefully into the educational mainstream and has powerful academic support. There is the need for social work educators in Ghana to help shape national policies in the area of distance education. To facilitate this process, an administrative body needs to be created within the university system and in relevant government ministries to encourage and promote distance education. Additional efforts could be made to explore the establishing of proper infrastructure to support the delivery of distance education courses outside the boundaries of the universities.

Faculty Skill Development

The effective use of distance learning technology demands that faculty be properly trained in using distance education as a delivery mode. To date, few social work faculty have been trained to apply distance education in the classroom. The need for faculty training is essential if Ghana is to make a significant headway in applying distance education technologies to social work education. Faculty training could be done in conjunction with private information technology institutions and relevant academic departments with expertise in these areas. Experts in both the public and private sector who have distinguished themselves in the use of emerging communications technologies could offer the training.

Conclusion

The world is witnessing a rapid expansion of distance education, with the advent of the information age. The task of building an information society in Ghana and other parts of Africa is monumental. Distance education has the potential to expand the frontiers of learning for countless number of Ghanaians who have limited access to higher education. Measures should be taken to advance and support the use of distance education in the country and in other parts of the continent. Social work educators in Ghana (and other parts of Africa) should recognize the catalytic power of ready access to information technology and its ability to transform our educational institutions. This should be seen as an act of strategic necessity that touches on the future of social work and higher education in Ghana and other parts of the continent. The educational challenges confronting Ghana today demands that the country explores new ways of providing education to countless number of people who lack it. The present educational system, based on traditional methods of teaching and learning, has shown to be inadequate in extending the reach of education to the majority of people who need it. The use of distance learning technologies has the potential for widening learning opportunities beyond the conventional delivery system; it offers new opportunities for collaboration and learning, and it has the potential of placing knowledge within the reach of many. It is important that the issue of distance education is not seen as a one-way street. The Ghanaian educational experience and worldview must also be given a voice through the use of distance education. To date, the concept of distance education has been developed, shaped, and tested outside the African continent. Traditional Ghanaian values could be infused into the area of social work to generate new knowledge and provide a different way of viewing the discipline. New research questions could be generated by the infusion of Ghanaian ways of knowing, if the Ghanaian

scholar re-orients his work to address the deficiencies of the Eurocentric ideology instilled in the discipline of social work. The African Virtual University model should be expanded to embrace the humanities and social sciences, since all disciplines stand to benefit from the use of technology in education.

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