

Online and blended social work education: Outcomes, successes and risks

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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.

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