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. .

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 as the preferred model 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 inter-personal 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 environ-ments, 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 experi-ence 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 inter-personal 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, inspiringly 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 response 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 inter-personal 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.

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