

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Teaching Social Work with Digital Technology**

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

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

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

The first section (chapters 1-3) introduces the socio-political, pedagogical and ethical imperatives of teaching social work with digital technology. It is important to highlight at this point that the book is specifically focused on the United States (US herewith) context. As such, references to statistical data, particular education policies and curriculum standards

are not immediately relevant to readers outside the US. However, the concepts and overarching themes emerging from the text translate well to the Australian and New Zealand contexts. Chapter 1 establishes the need for a scholarly focus on digital technology in social work education and the importance of considering its use across the various learning environments. Chapter 2 examines the concept of digital literacy and its application to social work education and practice. Chapter 3 discusses how learning theories inform the use of digital technology in social work education.

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

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

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

While engaging with this book, or with some of its parts, it is imperative that readers do not overlook the preface and acknowledgements, as these contain useful information about how this book came into being. The backstory of the book is just as pertinent to grasping the possibilities that digital technology affords social work educators as all the other parts of the publication. Three social work academics, at different levels in the academic pecking order, joined together as equal partners in a virtual community of practice, and then

expanded the reach of their collaboration to include many other social work academics who contributed the ideas and practices that make up this comprehensive book. Hitchcock et al. (2019) identify themselves as a “three-woman team” who took “a leap of faith” (p. vii). The book collaboration was sparked by Twitter feeds, fuelled by GoToMeeting live video calls and underpinned by age-old social work principles and practices. To this end, the book is the culmination of a technologically mediated endeavour to draw together contemporary thinking and praxis in social work education. Ultimately, this is an invaluable reference book that doubles as an instructive case study of how social work educators can use technology to translate ideas into action in ways that reinforce the core values of social work.

## Reference

Hitchcock, L. I., Sage, M., & Smyth, N. J. (2019). *Teaching social work with digital technology*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education Press.

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