Leadership and Social Work Education in the Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

Australian universities have been offering qualifying degrees in social work to students at a distance for almost three decades. While proponents have argued that this has increased access to higher education, there remains strong opposition within sections of the social work community. Reflecting on her experiences of providing social work education at a distance over the past two decades, the author argues that some of the critiques offered are based on outdated understandings as to what distance education can be, particularly utilising online technologies. It is also noted that many traditional on-campus programs are introducing online technologies into their teaching, and that previous distinctions between distance education and on-campus education are increasingly blurred. Rather than accepting the suggestion that leadership in social work education means actively proscribing online learning, particularly in the area of teaching interpersonal skills, it is proposed that leadership in social work education involves ensuring learning outcomes are not compromised and that graduates are prepared for practice in the digital era.

Keywords: *Social work education; Online education; Distance education; Pedagogy; Accreditation standards; Australia*

BACKGROUND

Social work education commenced in Australia in Melbourne and Sydney in 1929 (Martin, 1983) and, by the mid-1970s, there were 13 programs, almost all based in state capitals (Puckett & Jones, 1979). By the late 1980s and, with no new programs established, the need to broaden the reach for social work education was recognised. Some universities received funding to run social work programs in regional cities for cohorts of students. However, these were short-term programs, typically with a local coordinator and fly-in/fly-out staff, who would visit a remote site. While such programs established a demand for social work education in rural communities, the sustainability of the model was limited (Condliffe, 1991).

The 1990s not only saw the emergence of several new schools of social work, but also establishment of a number of programs that sought to provide a professional social work education, primarily using distance education methods which enabled students to undertake much of their learning using materials delivered to their home with relatively minimal requirements for on-campus attendance (Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). As distance education had been well established in higher education in Australia since the 1970s (Stacey, 2005), it could not be said that social work was an early adopter. Furthermore, despite several universities having considerable expertise in providing a range of courses to students at a distance, there was much scepticism, if not outright hostility, within the social work community, to the idea that social work could be taught to students at a distance (Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). Many of the submissions made to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) in its 2016 review of the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards* (ASWEAS) were firmly of the view that social work must be taught face to face (AASW, 2016). As a long-standing member, and former member of the executive of the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW), from my perspective the issue of whether, and if so how much, time distance students should spend on campus has arguably been the most divisive issue amongst members of the council in recent years. In the ACHSSW's own submission to the ASWEAS review (ACHSSW, 2016), one member university not only declined to endorse the council's proposal which called for no change to the attendance requirements for distance students but proposed that on-campus attendance requirements should be increased from a minimum of 20 to 30 days (University of Queensland Social Work Program, 2016).

As someone who has been involved in distance education since the mid-1990s, I am acutely aware that, for both students and educators, distance education today is only faintly recognisable to those early efforts two decades ago. Distance students in the 1990s would typically receive printed course materials at the commencement of a semester, and be required to post their assignments to the university by the due date. Print materials were supplemented for some units by the inclusion of audio and video tapes, and requirements that students attend campus for a number of days, particularly for the teaching of skills units. My own university used to spend considerable sums on producing learning materials which had the production quality of commercial textbooks, but then expected these to be used for multiple years without being revised. In addition to these textbook-quality study guides, students might also receive bound volumes of readings, as well as being able to request the university library to post them further books and articles as they required.

Looking back, I recognise that the print materials were a decidedly static medium, and as such provided justification for those who critically argue that social work education must be highly interactive. However, while distance education has changed immensely over the last two decades, many of the criticisms seem out of touch with current practices and underestimate the possibilities that have enabled distance education to respond to the need for interactivity (see also Maidment, 2005).

From Distance Education to Online Education

As possibilities for online connectivity evolved, distance education (which frequently required students to attend a physical classroom in their own locality), involved transmitting lectures from one site to another, sometimes with the capability of students at multiple sites being able to ask questions of the lecturer. While potentially more interactive than print, poor connections and limited available time meant that many students remained little more than observers (Horvath & Mills, 2011). Hence, when discussing online education, I am referring to programs that not only provide content online but also utilise "Web 2.0 interactive technology to engage students in learning activities that enable users to create and share information with each other and interact in real time" (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017, p. 209) from wherever they have an internet connection.

Although initially developed in 1995 as a way of distributing content online (University of British Columbia, 2004), it was not until the early years of the 21st century that online learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle and Desire 2 Learn, sometimes renamed by learning institutions with their own moniker (Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke, & Adkins, 2009) became commonplace in Australian universities. When I arrived in my current university in 2005, the social work program remained primarily as a print-based course, with relatively minimal use of the learning management systems. The development of web conferencing software such as Blackboard Collaborate (previously known as Elluminate Live) (Blackboard, 2017), along with increased access to the internet by Australian households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016) and increasing speeds to download and upload materials (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017) have combined to enable online social work education to realise possibilities far beyond what my colleagues and I had considered possible even a decade ago. Online students in my university now have access to online synchronous tutorials in which they can speak both with staff and other students in a live forum. Also, only a few years ago, most of our students had insufficient bandwidth to upload a video of themselves engaged in a roleplay, but now students do this routinely and provide feedback to each other on their work (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017).

While distance education providers clearly had potential for making distance education much more interactive, many campus-based learning programs also began experimenting with online learning management systems, adding functionality over time (Ayala, 2009). It is not uncommon for campus-based students to now find basic information about their courses including seminar guides and information about assessment tasks online rather than in handouts provided in class. Discussion boards enable students to ask questions of each other and of staff at any time in the week, and not just in class. In terms of assessments, online submission of assignments has proved beneficial to both students and staff who may not be on campus on the due date for submission, and disputes as to the exact time an

assignment was submitted have almost disappeared. The use of software to screen written assignments for plagiarism, such as Turnitin (Turnitin, 2017) is now routine in many institutions, and can be set to run automatically when students submit work for assessment.

Campus-based students in many institutions now expect to find additional teaching materials online such as copies of their lecture notes or Powerpoint™ slides, or links to readings, podcasts and other materials (Zuber, 2016). As libraries are increasingly subscribing to online rather than print journals, and purchasing online copies of books, online links to readings are frequently provided to students. Online technologies have enabled teaching staff to move beyond reading matter in their provision of materials to students with many putting up recordings of their lectures (Wivell & Day, 2015). In my university, recording of lectures and linking them to the online learning systems has become automated. For students juggling work, family and other commitments, there may be little incentive to attend classes which they can now watch in a time and place of their own choosing. Given the findings of a recent survey of Australian social work students which found 34% reporting that they skip classes due to the need to attend paid work (James Cook University & Australian Association of Social Workers, 2016), the availability of some online classes is also proving crucial to many supposedly *on-campus* students. My own experience is that user tracking facilities which are part of online learning platforms do, in fact, provide the evidence that many students not physically present are nevertheless accessing some classroom teaching. Indeed a study of online participation in group activities conducted in two Australian universities found that most students not only completed tasks which had been set for them, but many exceeded the course requirements concerning their participation (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017).

Lecturing tends to result in passive classroom learning experiences, so if lectures can be delivered as effectively online, then classroom time can be used for more interactive learning activities (Moulding, 2010). Hence, pedagogical models such as the "flipped classroom" (Zuber, 2016) are being advocated as an effective way of using online technologies to enhance classroom learning. Other ways in which technology is being used to enhance campus-based teaching include online systems for providing feedback for presentations or role plays, simulations which have online components (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017), and study skills programs which enable students to test their learning in private before being required to demonstrate their learning in the more public space which is the classroom (Smart Sparrow, 2017).

Just as online technologies have resulted in major changes in campus-based teaching, there have also been major changes in distance education (Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). Rather than receiving a pack of information which has been mailed prior to the commencement of a semester, input can be provided regularly. Conferencing software allows for real-time seminars with students speaking with each other and the teaching staff much as they would in a classroom on campus. Discussion boards also encourage vigorous debate among the student cohort. As on a physical campus, students may engage in discussions and debates when teaching staff are present, or do so without staff participation. Pedagogies involving group work (Wivell & Day, 2015) and problem-based learning (Wheeler, 2006), once thought of as only possible for campus-based students, are just some of the many possibilities which online educators utilise.

Contemporary Practice

In 2017, it does not seem sensible to be debating whether social work education should exist in the online environment. It would be surprising if there was any Australian social work program which did not use online technologies in some way in the delivery or administration of educational programs. Typically, some use of an online learning environment is mandated by university administrations and not something social work program directors have any say about.

Rather than a dichotomy between on-campus and distance education providers, we now have a continuum in which providers vary in their use of online technologies from very limited to extensive content being offered online. While the current terminology of "blended learning" (Ayala, 2009; Wivell & Day, 2015) is itself not unproblematic, it is perhaps a more realistic descriptor than the dichotomous campus-located versus off-campus or online learning descriptors currently recognised by the AASW in its accreditation of Australian social work degrees (AASW, 2012).

Within social work education, the requirement that learning activities, including assessment tasks, should be both relevant and authentic to what students will experience in professional practice is widely accepted (Thomas & Quinney, 2011). This includes the learning context as academic staff from one online provider of social work education noted more than a decade ago:

Participants … can replace the time they would devote to on-campus travel and teaching sessions with an immersion in the social contexts that resemble their future workplace: remote rural properties, home towns or neighbourhoods. (De Warren & Mensinga, 2004, p. 46)

The varying use of online technologies for learning and teaching also reflects varying practice contexts which employ social workers. It is almost inevitable that today's social work students will, to some degree, find themselves working online and need to be prepared for this:

Distance education and online learning have proliferated in recent years as social work has started to explore their potential for meeting the needs of a changing student population and an increasingly technological society. Whereas there is arguably still much scepticism and fear in social work about the need or appropriateness of using technology and distance education, there seems to be an increasing acknowledgment that social work needs to adapt and evolve in order to survive and to thrive as a profession in the new millennium. Thus, it is critical that our profession continues to explore and evaluate new ways to effectively deliver social work education in a changing world. (Ayala, 2009, p. 284)

Online case management systems have long been the norm, particularly in large organisations such as government departments (Hough, 1994). However, but although digital literacy is now an expectation of social workers, many lack the degree of e-professionalism required for the "management of professional identity, confidentiality, and the creation of digital footprints" (Beaumont, Chester, & Rideout, 2017, p. 222). Such knowledge is required whether participating in online forums or even in one-to-one online communications for administrative purposes. Online learning spaces which provide discussion boards, create

opportunities for students to develop these skills in safe contexts where good practice can be modelled and feedback provided about communications which are unprofessional in online environment (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many of the social workers in Centrelink, one of the largest employers of social workers in Australia, have been based in call centres and do much of their work with clients online rather than face to face (Humphries & Camilleri, 2002). Online learning environments have been able to respond to such innovations by providing opportunities for students to gain practice in providing social work services to people at a distance utilising conferencing software which enables role plays to be enacted and feedback provided in real time (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017). However, despite providers of services in rural and remote areas having long acknowledged the advantages for some clients in working online (Hunt, 2002), many social workers have had little or no training in providing services in the online environment and are unaware as to the potential for communication technologies to enhance their practice (Warburton, Cowan, Winterton, & Hodgkins, 2014).

There is also an increasing recognition that use of online information and communication technologies also have a place in face-to-face social work practice. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to encourage service users to use equipment such as iPads or smartphones to chronicle situations of concern, for example, by collecting digital photographs or sound recordings. Such artefacts might not only assist individuals to better explain their situation to those professionals they are working with, but provide evidence of need and/or outcomes. Applications have also been developed for iPads and smartphones which enable individuals to overcome social isolation due to illness or infirmity (Baker, Warburton, Hodgkin, & Pascal, 2014).

A further way in which components of online education contribute to the development of social work is to prepare graduates for active participation in continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Many CPD opportunities, including some offered to Australian social workers by the AASW (2017) are offered online. Such opportunities are particularly important for social workers who are unable to attend more traditional CPD activities offered face to face. However, social workers with little or no experience of online learning technologies may not be equipped to take full advantage of online CPD offerings (Warburton et al., 2013).

Challenges for Leaders in Social Work Education

Social work education and social work practice in the online environment are a reality in the 21st century. Yet it remains subject to intense scrutiny and criticism, predominantly on ideological grounds, and often based on 20th century notions of distance education, uninformed by understandings of what is actually possible using the latest technologies. Of course online teaching can be done poorly, but so can face-to-face teaching in a classroom. While very little has been published comparing educational outcomes of social work students who have studied at a distance or online to those who have studied in a conventional classroom, the data that are available suggest similar levels of attainment. Comparisons of learning outcomes between students taught on campus by experienced classroom teachers and students taught

by novices in the online environment may slightly favour on-campus teaching but such differences may disappear when all students are taught by teachers proficient in their teaching environments (Okech, Barner, Segoshi, & Carney, 2014). Furthermore, any reduction in attainment may be a reflection of online students having more caring or employment responsibilities and having less time to devote to their studies rather than being directly attributable to the mode of delivery (Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). Therefore, as leaders in social work education, we need to move beyond asking simplistic questions as to whether campus-based or online teaching is better (Ayala, 2009; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). Rather, we need to be able to identify and recognise the strengths and limitations of different approaches. This includes understanding who benefits and who is disenfranchised by different teaching modalities. Focusing on learning outcomes (rather than mode of delivery) is likely to advance social work education in the contemporary environment.

In Australia, which is geographically the sixth largest country on this planet but with a relatively small population, various modes of distance education have long enabled geographically isolated Australians to gain educational qualifications rather than forego learning (Stacey, 2005). Recently I was present when an international colleague expressed the opinion that online education in social work was so abhorrent that leaders in social work education should not even be discussing this. This assertion failed to recognise that the geography and needs of different countries vary considerably and that not everyone lives in a country where few residents would live more than an hour or two away from the nearest university. It also suggests that online learning is inherently second-best or inferior to campus-based delivery. I was reminded of a story of a dinner party held in England early in the 20th century hosted by the Australian author Ethel Richardson (better known by her pseudonym, Henry Handel Richardson), and her husband. The guests included Agatha Christie, H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw. At one point, they found themselves discussing Ethel's newly published book set in rural Victoria, unaware that she was the author:

Shaw said that he had found a mistake in the book where the author had said that it had not rained for five years. He said that there was no place in the world where it did not rain every three weeks. H.G. Wells found a mistake as well. The author had said that it was forty miles to the nearest doctor. This was absurd. He could imagine, it seemed, both a time machine and an invasion from Mars but he couldn't conceive of a world where there wasn't a village every two or three miles. (McGirr, 2004, p. 219)

In earlier eras when many of the leaders of social work education in Australia came from other countries importing foreign models of social work education without adapting them to the local needs and conditions was, at times, problematic (Miller, 2016; Puckett & Jones, 1979). Online education clearly suits and enhances student opportunities in countries such as Australia. At the same time, countries slow to adopt new technologies may find themselves left behind as students look to more innovative delivery of social work programs.

Perhaps inevitably those providing leadership in social work education will best respond to the needs of local and national stakeholders including employers and service users. It is nevertheless clear that some employers, at least in Australia, are offering positions to untrained staff because they cannot recruit qualified social workers. Online social work

education can play an important part in addressing workforce shortages, particularly in regional and remote areas.

As a social worker, abiding by the *Code of Ethics* I am expected to:

… respect diversity and use anti-oppressive practice principles, seeking to prevent and eliminate negative discrimination and oppression based on grounds such as: national origin, ethnicity, culture, appearance, language, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation or preference, ability, age, place of residence, religion, spirituality, political affiliation and social, economic, health/ genetic, immigration or relationship status. (AASW, 2010, p. 19)

Hence, I would argue that developing access to online programs in social work education could be considered as being an ethical imperative and part of the social work profession's duty to provide effective services for the most vulnerable groups in our society (Horvath & Mills, 2011; Reamer, 2013). Online programs also respond to other ethical imperatives. It is not just access to social work education for people living in rural and remote areas who have benefitted from the advent of various modes of distance education. Historically social work students in Australia disproportionately came from privileged backgrounds (Martin, 1983) whereas distance education has enabled a much broader spectrum of society to be represented in social work (Oliaro & Trotter, 2010). At a time when there is increased recognition that traditional learning environments have not always met the needs of people living with a disability (Macaulay, Deppeler, & Agbenyega, 2016), online education has been seen as a solution to meeting the educational needs of this group, although poor design can render online learning resources inaccessible to people with sensory or motor disabilities (Littlefield, Rubenstein, & Pittman, 2015).

Despite the potential to attract a broader spectrum of society into social work education, this does not mean that every provider of social work education needs to have online offerings, and on-campus programs will continue to be relevant to many students (Wivell & Gay, 2015). We not only need to remember that students have different learning styles and learning needs, but also that not all institutions have the capacity or expertise to provide courses to both online and on-campus cohorts (Thomas & Quinney, 2011). However, irrespective of mode of provision, all education providers have a duty to their students as well as to the wider social work community, including service users, to ensure graduates have the appropriate skills, knowledge and aptitude for professional practice (Vernon et al., 2009).

In Australia, the costs of providing social work education are not recognised by the model of funding from the Commonwealth Government (AASW, 2014). Unlike in the UK, where a number of social work programs have closed since the commencement of the 21st century (Walton, 2016), no Australian university has divested itself of social work education in recent times. Nevertheless, the financial viability of retaining social work is an issue in some universities (AASW, 2014) and the search for cost-effective means of delivery is resulting in more universities exploring the online option (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Horvath & Mills, 2011). However, there are some cautions that need to be heeded as high-quality online education provision is not a cheap alternative (Littlefield, Rubinstein, & Pittman, 2015). Cheap online courses may be little more than lists of readings, and a recording of

a lecture offered on campus. By comparison, high-quality online delivery is resource-intensive, both in the creation of learning resources and in providing support to students (Wivell & Day, 2015). Moreover, substantially online education requires a whole of institution response. It is not sufficient for a program to opt for online development if the university infrastructure of support services (such as study skills advisors, student counsellors, the library and so on) are only available to students who can attend these on campus. For leaders of social work programs planning to expand their online teaching, ensuring sufficient resources in terms of both academic staff and technical support is essential (Horvath & Mills, 2011). It also takes considerable time to design a program of instructional materials, even if the topics have previously been taught in a conventional classroom (Wivell & Day, 2015). As Thomas and Quinney found:

Writing for the screen required a different mindset/skillset which had to be quickly learned. Our familiar day-to-day tools as educators and authors were the spoken and written word but writing for the screen required condensed ideas, limited words, visual impact, often a nonlinear format. (Thomas & Quinney, 2011, p. 79)

As educators who have moved into the online environment, my colleagues and I have had to rethink how we teach and recognise that retention of learning outcomes should have precedence over maintenance of a method of teaching (Maidment, 2005). Had we been too fixed in our ideas as to how learning is best facilitated, we could have easily found that our online courses to be "pale imitations of what is taught to on campus students" (Crisp, 1999, p. 34), rather than being a legitimate and high-quality alternative (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Social work education and social work practice are occurring in the online environment, and will continue to do so, providing leadership opportunities within the academy and the social work profession more broadly. Rather than reacting, we need to be setting the agenda (Reamer, 2017) in ways that advance the discipline. While one approach to this has been to delineate what *can* from what *should not* be taught online, there is little agreement, particularly in relation to practice skills. Some have argued on ideological grounds that it is not appropriate to teach interpersonal skills in an online environment (Vernon et al., 2009) while others have argued that emerging technologies not only make this possible but that students learn just as effectively (Goldingay & Land, 2014). Providing disciplinary leadership the Council for Social Work Education in the United States, has for some years accredited fully online social work degrees provided they can demonstrate the same learning requirements as expected of any social work program (Vernon et al., 2009). This is an important example of a system that focuses on learning outcomes regardless of the mode of delivery. Blakely's proposal some 25 years ago as to what was critical for a social work program taught at a distance is just as relevant today in respect of online social work education:

The objectives of a distance education program should not vary from the objectives of a face-to-face program. Rather, in the planning of distance education the program should simulate the regular program. In addition, the school's mission would be the same; the organization of the school in terms of its particular curriculum or tracks would be unaltered. Likewise, the admissions process, course requirements, and faculty would remain the same. (Blakely, 1992, p. 215)

While the graduate outcomes for online programs should not be compromised by the delivery of learning online rather than in a traditional classroom, online courses which seek to merely emulate their on campus equivalents are likely to result in poorer learning outcomes for students. However, adept use of the functionalities offered by online teaching platforms can result in students rating the quality of the learning equivalent, if not higher than their on-campus counterparts (Koszalka & Ganesan, 2004).

In terms of technology and what is possible, the online world is changing rapidly, and it seems unlikely that the social work community will readily come to a consensus as to what is "best practice" or even what are the minimal requirements that should be met when teaching social work in the online environment. Leaders of social work education are charged by the profession with safeguarding the educational standards. That responsibility however, does not mean holding onto methods of delivering social work education just because historically they have served us well, or at least adequately, in previous eras (Goldingay & Land, 2014). Rather, it requires leaders to continually push the boundaries of innovation while at the same time support the best learning outcomes for students of social work education.

Finally, it is important that debates about the relative merits of distance or online education do not obscure appropriate responses by educators to:

The relatively recent emergence of new clinical tools and other technologically-driven options [which] has added a new set of essential competencies for social workers who choose to incorporate them in their work. Use of this technology requires a great deal of technical mastery in addition to awareness of, and compliance with, rapidly developing standards of care and ethical guidelines. (Reamer, 2017, p. 153)

It is now recognised that all providers of social work education will need to address, not only digital literacy, but also enable graduates to engage with the emerging new ethical issues associated with social work in the digital age (Beaumont et al., 2017; Reamer, 2017). These include grappling with issues of confidentiality and informed consent, for example, which may be less straightforward in a digital environment than they might be face to face. There is also the growing realisation that every new technological innovation which finds its way into social work practice is accompanied by ethical considerations which must be acknowledged (for further details see Reamer, 2017; see also Beaumont et al., 2017 for guidelines relating to ethical social work practice involving social media sites). While those of us who teach online are being forced to grapple with such realities, the issue becomes, not whether it is unethical to teach social work online, but whether we are doing enough to prepare students for 21st century practice if they have little or no exposure to learning contexts which prepare them for working online.

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