

# **Co-Constructing Crises – To what extent does digitalization contribute to a professionalization of social, person-related services?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the impact of experiences with digital teaching and digital advising processes in social, person-centered studies courses and fields of work such as Early Childhood Education, Social Work and Nursing. The central point of reference is the fact, that social, person-centered services are very young professions, characterized by specific professional criteria that are closely linked to personal negotiation and communication processes between professionals and clients. By taking a closer look at the effects of online teaching and learning and the need to establish alternative exchange formats in the fields of work, the question is addressed to which competencies students at universities should be taught in the future in order to be able to meet the challenges and changes in their fields of work as professionals.

## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic, as well as climate changes, the war in Ukraine and the waves of refugees influence and renew societies in the 21st century. Social Work, Early Childhood Education and Nursing – work fields that had long been neglected within the theory of professionalism (Weimann-Sandig/Prescher 2021) – seem to be much-valued because of their systemic importance, nevertheless there are still less debates on needed future skills. In fact, the recent challenges of societies highlight the importance of social services and enforce their responsibility to cope with those increasing problems. The Corona pandemic, or rather the accompanying contact restrictions, have acted as a burning glass for these professional fields in particular, but also for the corresponding courses of study. In fact, the contact restrictions have undermined the professional self-image and the strong focus on personal contacts and personal interaction settings. Instead, in professional practice, as well as at universities, there was a need to switch to other forms of communication. Consequently, the virtual space became a space of exchange and encounter for students and teachers on the one hand, and for professionals and clients on the other. What makes it special is that there will also be no return to a time before COVID-19. The developments and changes are profound and permanent, we have to face this fact. Above all, we must consider this as an opportunity. However, this can only be achieved if, in the sense of critical thinking, we question the changes that have occurred in our study programs, but also in the work fields of social,

person-related services. The following text aims to stimulate this critical reflection through three questions:

Firstly, the question is pursued which changes we could notice in the course of remote emergency teaching among students of social, person-related study programs and to what extent these changes could have a positive or negative effect on the acquisition of professional competencies.

Secondly, it is to be questioned to what extent the central professional concepts of social, person-related services have been shaken by the lack of opportunities for personal encounters, or whether it is not precisely the need to expand these concepts that has driven the professionalization of these fields of work.

Third, we need to conclude by considering what impact the experiences of students, faculty as well as professionals, should have on the design of teaching in social, person-related degree programs in the future.

### **Social, person-related professions**

Discussions about social, person-related services do not have a long tradition within a sociology of professions or research on professions (Weimann-Sandig/Prescher 2021). Thus, it seems important to clarify an understanding, suitable for social, person-related professions. In general, we understand professions as social institutions that emerge in response to social problems and are characterized not only by a vocationalization but a great interpretative authority of these professional groups (Schmidt 2008: 837f.). However, social, person-related services take on a special role: over a long period of time they have been performed in voluntary capacity, what means that their professional development is of quite young date. For a long time, they were dismissed as women's occupations, and even today they are considered to be little differentiated occupational fields in terms of career and salary opportunities (Weimann-Sandig 2019; Reerich 2010; Feldhoff 2006)

*Early Childhood Education, for example, was not the focus of public interest for a long time and was rather ridiculed as a professional field, until a clear shift in family and labor market policy: at that time people realized that the educational efforts and educational investments of females were on hold with the beginning of motherhood (Frodermann/Müller/Abraham 2013). In order to ensure their continuous labor market integration, German politicians realized that the working capacities and employability of mothers could only be guaranteed by providing high-quality childcare solutions. As mothers, or parents in general, needed flexible as well as all-day care arrangements, the debates on the expansion of child care arrangements in Germany were intensified in 2008. Correspondingly, the professionalization of work arrangements in the field of child care has been driven in a variety of ways: the expansion of day care services for children by providing new*

*forms of qualification (Schoyerer/Weimann-Sandig 2015), academization in the field of Early Childhood Education as well as professional developments by implementing tandem executives (Weimann-Sandig 2017) or specialist careers (Weimann-Sandig 2019).*

Accordingly, the increasing social relevancy of social services leads to an increasing demand of professionalization characterized by a continuous differentiation of knowledge and knowledge-structures (Schütz/Luckmann 1979). In difference to criteria of traditional professions (Mieg 2005), such as autonomy or power of knowledge (especially used in the anglo-american profession debates), social, person-related services are characterized by own criteria that concentrate on the specific process of knowledge creation. Interactive working concepts (Dunkel/Weihrich 2012) as well as co-creative or co-constructive concepts (Fthenakis/Textor 2000) emphasize the specific dynamics of social services as new professions. All approaches focus on the interaction between professionals and clients and consider it constitutive for the development of professional knowledge. In contrast to traditional professions such as medicine or law, the knowledge process is therefore not characterized as a theoretical knowledge gaining but as a practical negotiation process. This perspective on the formation of social professions is quite presuppositional, because it requires a trusting relationship between professionals and clients and, what is even more important, the professional competencies to establish and create those relationships.

This is now where higher education comes in. It is our duty to prepare students in the best possible way for co-constructive work settings in order to advance their professionalization in this way. Accordingly, we need to consider which forms and formats of knowledge transfer at universities are best suited to equip our students with the necessary competencies. Since in Germany online teaching in higher education has been of limited impact at most universities until COVID-19, the pandemic times helped us to develop a new understanding of teaching and learning.

### **Social Cocooning and its impact on students and prospective professionals in the field of social, person-centered services**

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified a social phenomenon, called “Social Cocooning”. Social Cocooning is often described as a new way of living, following the trends of “Hygge” or “Jomo”, what means that individuals are more likely to stay at home, invest into cozy homestyles and try to separate themselves from the restless society outside. From a wider and more differentiated context, Social Cocooning has to be analyzed as a symptom of an overwhelmed society. Overwhelmed by the relentless crises’ scenarios. Covid-19 is one of those. Social Cocooning therefore should not only be discussed as a modern lifestyle, but as a negative result of social distancing. While the world is shaking and breaking, people seem to get more and more used to social distancing. What is especially surprising: not only the elder ones

prefer to stay at home but also a lot of young people (Bohl et al 2022; Mannheimer Corona Studie 2020<sup>2</sup>).

When analyzing social professions one can say that social distancing is a serious threat. On the one hand, many professions within the social, person-centered services are dealing with the negative outcomes of social distancing for their clients or patients. On the other, professionals also show severe problems of stepping back into close personal contacts. Especially new or prospective professionals like students are extremely suffering from social distancing as they are lacking of work experience and experiential knowledge that might help to understand the importance of personal interactions. In fact, the digital teaching might have been a blessing to continue studying. But honestly spoken, the universities were not prepared for long-term digital teaching and the necessity to provide the same professional development possibilities as in times of classroom teaching.

A questionnaire analyzing the positive or negative results of emergency remote teaching at the University of Applied Sciences for Social Work, Education and Nursing Dresden asked students about the positive outcomes of e-learning. A majority named the possibility to attend lessons from bed without dressing up or sitting in their own, cozy apartments without the need of travelling and meeting foreign people as real advantages. What sounds funny at first sight should be alarming on the second. We are talking of students, studying in the field of social services, namely Social Work, Early Childhood Education and Nursing. These professional fields are characterized by high social interactions (Böhle/Wehrich 2020). Furthermore, work in the social services is characterized by an individual case management (Monzer 2018) what includes an intensive theoretical and practical knowledge transfer (Weimann-Sandig/Prescher 2021). Accordingly, the transition to online teaching raised the question of the extent to which digital skills might become future skills for students in social, person-related study programs. Therefore, different strategies have been developed from 2020 to 2022. One very interesting strategy was the use of Virtual Reality (VR) or Augmented Reality (Ar) at Universities of Applied Sciences in the field of social services. By providing virtual client trainings<sup>3</sup> these universities tried to close the gap between missing digital competencies and interactive work. Although these universities report huge efforts by using these training methods and the students seem to be fascinated, one of the VR instructors of a university in Switzerland described the following experiences in an expert interview:

*“The students love our VR- trainings. We have a virtual meeting room, where they - as professionals - can meet their clients. They can choose between different characters. An aggressive client, for example, or an anxious female or a foreign with a different cultural background. The training efforts were impressive. Then we switched to personal trainings. What has*

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<sup>2</sup> [10-07-2020 Mannheimer Corona-Studie - Bericht zur Lage in den Tagen 20 Mrz-09 Jul 2020.pdf \(uni-mannheim.de\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tagblatt.ch/leben/digital/bei-games-und-filmen-gehört-sie-langst-dazu-nun-halt-die-virtual-reality-einzug-ins-studium-ld.1427026>

*been trained so well in VR was totally lost in personal interactions. It was not about talking, it was about reacting properly, showing non-verbal signs of empathy. Most of the students had no idea how to behave in a professional way. Eye-contact was also a major problem. So we could see: virtual reality helps us to train but professional skills in social services need personal trainings. There is no replacement.”*

This small example illustrates that we have to initiate discussions about a better coordination of digital and personal learning at universities to establish professionalized work fields (Weimann-Sandig/Seymer/Kleppsch 2022). In fact, an overarching concept of digital literacy is necessary to create awareness among teachers and students of the limits and possibilities of virtual space. Online teaching as a substitute for personal interactions is unthinkable for the professionalization of social, person-centered services. But relying on only one component might be also a threat for a professional development. While the remote teaching at universities tried to provide students the best possible teachings within the COVID-crisis, the negative outcomes for professional development haven't been discussed so far. In fact, a huge number of students at universities – not only in Germany but all over the world – felt unable to step back into real social interactions at the beginning of summer term 2022. At the end of a questionnaire, one student wrote for example:

*“I have to confess that stepping back into normal lessons is inconceivable. Sitting together with more than thirty other students, talking in front of them, giving personal talks to professors – I am crying when I'm thinking of all of this.”*

Other students asked to do oral presentations online, because they couldn't imagine presenting in front of real audience. What seemed to be single cases at first, turned out to be a cross-university, international problem at the end (Guidry et al 2022).

A sociology of professions has to critically discuss the impacts of social cocooning or social distancing on the professional social interactions of prospective professionals in the field of social services and the real advantages of digital teaching. Therefore, online teaching should provide added value but not replace the need to expand personal interactions. This is necessary, because the drop outs of students seem to have increased between 2021 and 2022. Additionally, more students decided to take a semester off (Stud.diColl 2021<sup>4</sup>) because bridging the gap between digital distance learning and the need of close personal contacts in their prospective work fields seemed impossible. The general shortage of skilled professionals in the social services in Germany is worsening this situation (Seyda et al. 2021)

Discussing what to do to avoid producing a “lost generation” of skilled workers in the fields of social services is not easy. But it is mandatory. We might have to realize

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<sup>4</sup> [2021\\_07\\_01\\_hiaz-sowi-sop-kochskaemper-corona-stu.diColl\\_studie-onlinesemester-digitaler\\_studienalltag.pdf](https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/studienalltag/2021-07-01-hiaz-sowi-sop-kochskaemper-corona-stu.diColl-studie-onlinesemester-digitaler-studienalltag.pdf)  
([uni-hildesheim.de](https://www.uni-hildesheim.de))

that the academization of social services – which is important for the professionalization of these work fields – needs more dual system study programs. These ensure a continuous work integration of students and help to better reflect the professional requirements, especially in times of crises. It generally might need a more praxelological approach in teaching and learning (Weimann-Sandig/Prescher 2021) as social challenges are reflected by changes in practice. When switching on the organizational level we could observe situations in our research that stress these recommendations, as e.g. the KonFa-study shows (Weimann-Sandig et al. 2022).

### **Establishing trust in times of social distancing – the professional development of social, person-centered services during COVID-19**

We have to come to terms with the fact that crises do not only have negative effects, but also act as a motor for new developments and changes. COVID-19 has influenced the working conditions within the different social services so intensely as if seen through a magnifying glass. While the Corona pandemic has clearly highlighted structural deficits, at the level of individual, professional action, it has literally forced professionals to adopt even more co-constructivist or co-creative approaches to action. Interestingly, these could be overserved both in digital space and in presence, always depending from the framework and negotiation conditions between professionals and clients. Let me give two examples:

*The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that parental work in Early Childhood Education had to date been part of theoretical educational plans of the individual federal states, but has been strategically anchored very little in the reality of child care institutions. Parental work was mainly focused on the daily drop-off and pick-up situations. Thus, as soon as hygienic regulations denied parents access to kindergartens, this parental work came to a complete halt (Weimann-Sandig/Hamacher/Belenkji 2021). The institutions that had staff with digital skills or professionals who were enthusiastic about digital formats were able to establish contact with the families much more quickly and effectively. Parents and children felt less abandoned and less alone as a result of these digital parenting formats (Weimann-Sandig/Schneiderat/Völlger 2023).*

Besides the fact, that the digital infrastructure of social services in Germany is far below other countries, especially in the field of Early Childhood Education, we should consider that many of the current professionals have not acquired such digital skills in training. If we see from empirical research that it can be valuable to consider such digital competencies as investments in so-called future skills (Stifterverband 2021), then we have to ask ourselves, especially at Universities of Applied Sciences, how we integrate them into our courses.

On the other hand, our research also allowed us to find numerous examples where digital formats were not at all successful in maintaining an ongoing connection between professionals and clients. A social worker describes the following situation:

*“I’m working with young people coming from instable families. Poverty, domestic violence... you know. As the youth center had to be closed because of COVID the kids had no possibilities to break out from their homes. And I had no possibility to meet them and to care for them. So I decided to call them by using Face-Time, I also tried Zoom Meetings. A horrible decision. Wherever I called it was noisy as the flats are mostly very small and many people were inside. I could not understand a single word although the kids desperately tried to tell me what happens to them. They became so desperate and hopeless that they hung up. Only one boy told me: sorry but calling me is no good idea. Are you not interested in seeing me? Why don’t we go for a walk, just the two of us. And I realized that he had constructed a sphere where meeting was possible. Furthermore, from a professional point of view I have to admit that going for a walk offers a lot of advantages that have already been examined in many studies. But it didn’t come to my mind. But to his. What shall I say, I have been walking a lot since this time and I have experienced a new and appropriate form of communication and counseling.” (Weimann-Sandig et al 2022).*

Both examples, as different as they are, have one thing in common: professionals are showing openness to reshaping the person-centered approach and creating or testing fallback options for themselves and their clients. At the same time, they pay attention to the feedback, reflect on the added value of the newly created formats together with their clients and make the decision to continue or discontinue the new format based on this reflection. The second example goes even further. It is synonymous with the co-constructivist approach, which makes no distinction between the expertise of the professional and the client. The suggestion to try the new format of the joint walk does not come from the professional, but from the client. The professional competence lies in the recognition that the client has worked out an evasion strategy for himself, which must be supported at all costs. In the sense of praxelological professionalization strategy, the professional then applies this new format to other clients. Other examples of co-constructive coping strategies could be found in Early Childhood Education where children encouraged the professionals to play “message in a bottle” in order to overcome the missing personal communication with children from other groups. Or single mothers who encouraged social workers to establish regular zoom-based cooking events in order to overcome the loneliness of single parents in times of prohibited personal contacts (Weimann-Sandig et al 2022).

## **Conclusion**

What can we learn from these examples? From my point of view, that interactive and co-constructivist work concepts can by no means only take place in presence, but that they are also not always transferable to the digital space. The analysis of the examples shows the strong dependence of interactive or co-constructivist concepts on the available structures that professionals and clients can fall back on, as well as on the protective spaces that clients depend on. Professionals of the present

and future need the competence to engage in co-constructivist formats. At the same time, however, they also need the competence to recognize when digital formats can offer added value and how they can be implemented and designed in terms of professional relationship building.

The challenge for our universities will be to combine these competencies. This can only succeed if we abandon the attitude that it is enough to be able to handle digital platforms or to know digital tools. This is not compatible with the professionalization of social, person-related services and is diametrically opposed to the positive development thrusts of these fields of work. We can only achieve real further development, if we increasingly devote ourselves to the aspect of future skills and anchor digital literacy as a component in all social, person-related courses of study - and not as an optional extra, but as a mandatory module in the curriculum. Digital literacy means precisely the connection between the recognition of an added value of digitality, a critical reflection where digitality makes the professional criteria of social, personal services ad absurdum, as well as the ethically and legally legitimized use of digital tools. In addition, the praxeological approach to knowledge acquisition as well as knowledge verification must become more prominent. We need practice research as well as feedback from practice sites in order to discuss future skills for our students and to make them fit for professional action in their fields of activity.

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