

BOOK REVIEW

Social Media in Social Work Education

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Critical Publishing Ltd, Northwich, United Kingdom 2014
ISBN 978-1909682-57-3, pp.91, Paperback. AUD\$35.00

There is no shortage of information about the growing global use of internet technologies. The International Communication Union (ITU) for example, predicted that, by the end of 2014, three billion people would be using the internet, up from 2.7 billion in 2013. In its tracking of 166 countries and their development of internet technologies, ITU ranks Australia and New Zealand in the top 30. These numbers sit alongside another reality: 4.3 billion people globally do not have access to the internet, and 90% of these people live in the developing world (ITU, 2014). Such figures demand the attention of social workers; those in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia need both to understand the dynamics of this growing use, and to develop a response to the global digital divide, elements of which are also found in every country.

Given its timeliness and the relevance of social media to the social work profession, it is surprising the book is so small – a fatter version is likely in the works. Regardless, its six chapters are rich and diverse; contributors have either an established social work presence in social media, or show an admirable entrepreneurial spirit in its use as social work educators. True to the nature of social media, the authors met via Twitter and the culmination of the research projects and teaching strategies gathered in this text was sparked by this relationship.

Given the embryonic nature of social media in the field of social work, many of us have yet to develop confident expertise in its use and will appreciate the pragmatic and friendly encouragement offered by the editor. That established, the book is boldly introduced as one that will encourage readers to appreciate the value of social media in social work education, with some intelligent reflection on its challenges. In six chapters we are generously offered a range of social media “how-to” learning strategies with strong threads of theoretical and pedagogical rationale throughout.

Social media is a phenomenon of only the last decade and the first chapter applies theories of change to the way we have responded to it, helping readers to understand more deeply the cited obstacles to its use – worries about privacy and professional identity, for example –

or the need for technological skills. An example is given of involvement in a Twitter support network for PhD students, suggesting that the best advocate of social media use is one who has experienced its benefits and worked through its pitfalls.

Involving students in debate on key social work issues is offered in the next chapter as another example of the use of Twitter: an activity which also aids in the development of professional identity and critical thinking skills. Twitter is also used to supplement learning generated from the pioneering Social Work Book Club (Chapter 4), and blended and enquiry-based learning principles are applied (Chapter 3) to the use of a Facebook forum where students engaged in discussions about the realities of social media use in society, gaining creative digital and research skills. Similarly (in Chapter 5), the use of blogging is demonstrated as a way of enhancing critical thinking and written communication skills, and a variety of theories are applied to explain the complex notions of public identity and online relationships. The final chapter is a thoughtful narrative about the use of Twitter as a source of significant support for a doctoral student.

This book is fresh and useful, and grapples with the key issues acknowledged by social workers in their relationship with social media, for the most part suggesting that engagement in social networking sites is a powerful way to overcome obstacles. The editor acknowledges the need for much more research, especially to generate knowledge of how social media is used in practice by service users. Research has been emerging in this practice area for some years, however, it is now gaining noticeable momentum and will be further informed by those social workers who were equipped as students with confidence and expertise as social media users.

There is much at stake here for the social work profession; the need for social work competence with social media is robustly established in this text. The contributors are humble in their expertise, and, congruent with the etiquette of social media, the book is invitational, offering a gentle challenge to social work educators and practitioners to be adventurous. There is plenty of inspiration and academic rigour to support those interested in the reflexive role social networking services can play in the development of new social workers.

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