Adaptations for teaching social work with groups in the age of technology

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Abstract: *This practice-based paper will describe experiences teaching social work with groups using technological enhancements. Examples from undergraduate social work education will be used to describe approaches employed in two courses in social groupwork; one which is conducted fully online and the second which employs a multi-modal format, conducted primarily online but with a required in-class component. Recommendations for teaching groupwork practice using online technology will be presented.*

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Introduction

In recent years social work education has been challenged to find creative solutions to educating students in general and specifically those not able to access traditional forms of face-to-face in-class education. This has led to delivery of teaching methods that meet the needs of students who live at a distance from teaching centres and cannot relocate; students who cannot attend full-time or in person due to primary care giving roles in the family and students who must continue to work while pursuing education (Mason, Helton & Dziegielewski, 2010; Wolfson, Marsom & Magnuson, 2005; Frey, Yankelov & Faul, 2003; Conklin & Osterndorf, 1997). Innovative responses to these challenges have included evening classes, weekend classes and, simultaneous with the development and growth of technology in society, web-based courses (Mason, Helton & Dziegielewski, 2010; York, 2005).

There has been enormous growth in the use of web-based instruction throughout higher education as well as specifically in social work instruction (Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, Bakia & Jones, 2010; Gillingham, 2009; Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; MacFadden, Moore, Herie & Schoech, 2005; Petracchi, 2000). Web-based education may occur on its own or in combination with traditional methods. Web-based teaching has been used for a variety of social work courses, including research (Faul, Frey & Barber, 2004), policy (Moore, 2005), diversity (Lee, Brown & Bertera, 2010) and has now expanded to include direct practice courses (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Ouelette & Chang, 2004). In response to the growth in web-based instruction, the accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education now include standards specific to distance education courses (*www.cswe.org*).

This paper will describe the authors' experiences developing and teaching two courses in social work with groups using web-enhanced, non-traditional formats in a Canadian undergraduate program. One course was delivered fully online and the second combined online and in-class teaching. The content of the courses, process of delivery and feedback from students will be compared. The strengths and drawbacks of each approach will also be presented, along with recommendations for educators considering teaching groupwork online.

Use of technology in higher education and in teaching social work practice with groups

Social work education has long valued the student-instructor and student-student relationships that develop in traditional classrooms (Frey, et al., 2003) as well as the socialization and mutual aid that happens in class groups (Wilke, Randolph & Vinton, 2009; Shulman, 1987). The teaching of social work with groups has particularly relied on classroom interaction as either an important content element per se, or as a means of teaching through small group discussion and role-playing. In considering the learning process in a classroom, there is evidence in the literature that social groupwork skills can contribute to effective teaching and that the teaching of social groupwork is enhanced through student interaction (Getzel, Kurland & Salmon, 1987; Shulman, 1987, 1973, 1970; Birnbaum, 1984; Schwartz, 1980, 1960; Somers, 1971).

The use of web-based technology is changing the face of both social work practice and education (Sandell & Hayes, 2002). Online courses are proliferating in social work education. A recent study of North American MSW programs found that 15% offered at least one course online (Wilke & Vinton, 2006). In the practice of social work with groups, web-based online services are proliferating, with practitioners developing sophisticated approaches to conducting virtual social groupwork (Dergal, Serafini, Damianakis & Marziali, 2007; Abell & Galinsky, 2002; Sandell & Hayes, 2002).

While student learning in web-based courses has been shown to be at least as successful as in traditional courses (Wilke & Vinton, 2006; York, 2005), studies on student satisfaction with the method have been more mixed. An early study of one social work program, found lower satisfaction scores for skills-based or clinical courses taught online (Ligon, Markward & Yegidis, 1999). A recent large-scale U.S.-based systematic search and meta-analysis of research studies examining the effectiveness of online learning, and contrasting online and face-to-face instruction, found that on its own, online learning seems to be as effective as face-to-face classroom instruction, but not more so. The study also found that blending online and face-to-face instruction is more effective than face-to-face instruction on its own (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). Despite these findings, U.S.-based university and college instructors are not as uniformly positive about

online teaching. A survey of post-secondary educators from a wide range of programs reveals that, for them, online instruction is more costly to develop, requires more time to teach, is best suited for students with a high degree of academic discipline and is less effective in meeting learning objectives (Shieh, 2009). Finally, although research on web-based teaching has shown overall promise for the approach, it is not yet known exactly what combination of web-based and traditional teaching methods is most effective and which courses are most amenable to online teaching (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; York, 2005; Faul, et al., 2004).

To date, there has been a paucity of information on teaching groupwork using web-based formats. Fisher, Phelps and Ellis (2000) described an undergraduate course on group process for social science students taught fully online. The authors discussed a number of challenges in using a fully online approach, including a requirement to think 'out-of-the-box' when developing the course, numerous problems with students' and instructors' technological skills, a significant increase in required instructor time and challenges in creating virtual group experiences. O'Halloran and McCartney (2004) described a course in group counselling blending online didactic components with traditional face-to-face skills training and supervision. Notably, students in the course found face-to-face activities to be the strongest course components, as the activities brought the material presented online to life. A careful search of the social work literature, using 'Scholars Portal' and 'Social Work' databases, and key words: online, social work, education, teaching and groups revealed no information on teaching social work with groups using online formats.

Case examples of two courses in social work practice with groups using fully online and blended formats

Two examples of courses in social work with groups, one delivered fully online and the second delivered as a blended model, will be described. The courses were developed for a baccalaureate social work program in a university college situated within a large Canadian university. The university's extended learning (EL) program was founded in 1968. The

college, which houses the social work program as well as other programs in the humanities and social sciences, is recognized for its distance education program whereby students may complete an undergraduate degree entirely online. The post-B.A. BSW program, which is not available fully online, requires completion of specific foundational social work courses prior to entry to the program. Along with the expectation that all BSW programs are established to prepare direct service practitioners, this program offers a number of direct practice courses at introductory and advanced levels. The program offers both full and part-time studies, to increase access to professional education for non-traditional learners.

Groupwork is valued as an essential component of BSW education at the college, therefore two social groupwork courses are required; one as an undergraduate prerequisite and the other as an advanced level course within the BSW program.

The prerequisite course in social groupwork is offered on campus in a face-to-face format or as an online option for students who live at a distance, part-time students or those who simply want to take the course online. The advanced level course was developed around the same time, in response to the need to teach advanced groupwork skills within a generalist social work undergraduate program. The course was designed for delivery in a blended format, with material presented and discussed primarily online, but with a required on-campus session.

Case example 1: Prerequisite course in social groupwork

Course purpose

The purpose of the prerequisite course in social groupwork is to provide an overview of the history of groupwork, the basics of group leadership, group stages, and the application of groupwork within a variety of social work settings. Students are expected to understand several theoretical frameworks underlying groupwork. While this course focuses primarily on understanding groupwork theory and principles rather than on acquiring group leadership skills, group processes and dynamics are explored in both formats through group activities carried out in the class, either face-to-face or online. In order to address group dynamics, students are encouraged to examine their unique styles of

group participation and potential group leadership while participating in the course activities.

Course development

This course was first designed to be delivered fully face-to-face. However a distance education version of the course was developed in response to the growth of distance education within the university. The original version of the extended learning (EL) course employed audio taped lectures, a text, and exercises to be completed by each student on their own. The course was managed by a marker, rather than an instructor. With the exception of offering feedback on assignments, the marker had little to no contact with students, and students had no contact with each other.

Recent university-wide strategic planning called for revisions of all courses and enhancements in online course delivery. This led to a complete review of the content and delivery of this course. Changes included an update of materials; a more interactive, participatory approach to learning, and the active participation of an online instructor, rather than the oversight of a course 'marker', who previously was neither readily visible nor available to students. The online course design process was enhanced by liaison with university administrators, program consultants and staff from the university's well-regarded Extended Learning Service, notably, experts in web-design and online instructional design.

The online course was intended to mirror the updated face-to-face on-campus version. The on-campus course was being taught at the time of the development of the online version, allowing the design team to audio-tape the face-to-face class. Audio content was extracted from the tapes, with the voices of students excluded from the recording, and used as the basis of course lectures.

The course's web-site includes a wealth of information provided by the university's distance education department. This information focuses on how to navigate the site, offers rules for on-line etiquette, and provides links to technical assistance.

The course is comprised of twelve weekly units. Each unit contains a lecture, approximately 20-30 minutes in length. The audio mentioned above is supplemented by written information presented with colourful graphics, illustrations, diagrams and photos. There are text book and article-based readings assigned for each week. Students participate as

members of 'pods', small groups of 5-6 students randomly assigned by computer, for group exercises and discussions. Communication between students in the pods is carried out through e-mails, stored on the course web-site. Communication is carried out strictly through the written word. The pod members have discussions on their own, without the participation of the instructor. The instructor reads the postings on a regular basis and adds a comment if an issue arises that requires facilitation or clarification.

The thirty students generally enrolled in the fully online pre-BSW course come from a wide geographic area, from coast to coast in Canada as well as from international locations. Students represent a wide range of ages and cultural diversity.

Course structure

The course requirements include two written assignments, a quiz and a final examination. The assignments are completed individually by students and submitted to the instructor. They include a group analysis, comprised of examining and analysing a group experience, focusing on at least two areas of importance (that is, composition, leadership, stages, diversity, etc.), making links between observations, course readings and online material. The second assignment is the creation of a reflective journal, intended to stimulate students to reflect on and analyse group activities carried out within the pods, integrating material from class readings and online material.

Group exercises are assigned to be carried out within the pods. While the activities themselves are not graded, participation is essential for completion of the reflective journal. The activities are created to provide students with an experience of working as a group, mirroring group stages and offering experiential examples of the course material. A leader is selected by each pod for each activity, with an expectation that leadership will be rotated. The role of the activity leader is to ensure all contributions are collected and recorded and a summary of the pod's decisions or products is forwarded to a whole-class discussion board. Exercises include 1) individual introductions; 2) setting of norms for the pod; 3) reflections on their own and others' leadership skills; 4) engagement in discussion of a highly charged issue, designed to elicit varying viewpoints and to simulate conflict and 5) searching for and sharing group activities suited to group endings.

Students' experiences with the course

While there has not been a formal evaluation of the course, students were encouraged to provide feedback to the instructor and the college throughout the course as well as in the reflective journals and in the course evaluation completed at the course's end. The following information was gleaned from the instructor's observations and the students' feedback.

Keen students often log in before the start of the course. Similar to experiences described by Fisher, et al. (2000) a number of students begin the course discussing difficulties navigating the technological features. Interestingly there has been evidence of mutual aid occurring among students from the outset. Students who have previously taken online courses have assisted others with navigating the web-site. It is important to note that while the instructor has taught groupwork many times in a face-to-face classroom environment, this course was her first experience with online instruction. The instructor shared her own inexperience with online education in an early post to the class, placing herself 'in the same boat' as the students.

Students' reflective journals have indicated that they experience feelings similar to those typically experienced by members at the beginning stages of a group. These include uncertainty about other members, caution in disclosing too much information too soon, but excitement to get started.

A number of students in the course live at a distance from the campus in locations in different time zones, some are working during the daytime and some are raising families. An advantage of online distance education is that school work can be done at any hour and in any location that is convenient for students (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). Thus, communication in the course is almost always asynchronous, with posts occurring at various times of the day or night. This has presented challenges for completion of activities within pods. Additionally, there are some students who participate in activities immediately, some who wait until the last minute, while others take vacations, have illnesses or life crises, any of which can impact the timing and completion of exercises. This has led to frustration, anger and resentment in some students. The instructor may not know about these concerns at the time; however students often disclose these feelings to the instructor at some point before the end of the course,

when it is too late to effectively deal with them. Conflicts in pods are also rarely raised or addressed among pod members, perhaps due to a lack of tangible reward placed by the instructor on addressing group process within the expectations of the course (i.e. no mark given for dealing with group process). When conflicts have arisen in relation to pod activities, students have tended to forge ahead with completion of assignments and have left processing of conflicts to the reflective journals. As the journals are the final assignments and handed in after completion of the course, it is not feasible to assist students to resolve the conflicts. The only option has been for the instructor to offer feedback to individual students through responses to their journals. It has been our experience that difficulties dealing with conflicts in groupwork courses are not unique to online courses and also occur frequently in face-to-face courses.

Students note that they typically only become acquainted with those in their pod, rather than with members of the class as a whole. They also note that they miss the opportunity to participate as part of a larger student cohort. A number of students commented that while the course teaches them about many forms of groupwork, their group experience was only in the virtual realm. Some students were grateful to take the course from a distance but would have preferred to attend a typical face-to-face groupwork class. Students also reported that they appreciated the opportunity for a non-traditional approach to learning, interaction with members of their pods, user-friendliness of the material and the helpfulness of the reflective journal to consolidate learning.

Instructor experiences with the course

The primary relationship that exists between online students and educators is very different from traditional student-teacher relationships. The online educator only 'meets' the student through monitoring activities, responding to student questions or marking assignments. This relationship is sufficient when all is going well. It can be problematic if a student struggles with course content or assignments. Despite offers of availability to all students in the course, this instructor only received e-mails from struggling students who needed extra help. This can be challenging without the usual acquaintance that happens in a face-to-face classroom.

For this particular instructor, it is more difficult to remember details

about students who participate online than in face-to-face classes. The relationships formed online are experienced as more superficial, lacking the rich visual and contextual information that comes with meeting students face-to-face. Additionally in face-to-face classes students and instructors are present in the same room; participate in activities together; experience communications, including conflicts in real-time; and engage in lively discussions. In this course, the instructor is less actively involved in pod activities and is a more passive participant.

As previously discussed, communication between students in the pods is carried out through e-mails, stored on the course web-site. The pod members have discussions on their own, without the participation of the instructor. This can present a problem when a group experiences conflict but does not alert the instructor. While the instructor reads the postings on a regular basis, students' discussions have already happened. It is almost impossible for the instructor to intercede proactively.

As communication in this course is carried out strictly through the written word, there are no other cues to rely on to understand what students are thinking, feeling or struggling with in relation to the course. The lack of visual input from facial expressions and body language is sorely missed, especially when dealing with a social work course that emphasizes the importance of these cues when taught in a traditional, in-class setting (Kurland & Salmon, 1998). This presents a dilemma in attempting to teach students about the importance of visually scanning a group, constantly assessing members' progress and feelings and clarifying thoughts and feelings. While the use of 'emoticons', small computer icons with expressions of emotions on faces, is increasing, they are not a full substitute for human nonverbal communication. The sole use of written language also acts as a communications barrier between the instructor and students who struggle with literacy issues such as writing or reading.

As mentioned by Fisher, et al. (2000), the course instructor in an online teaching format must spend considerable time monitoring the course. It is important to log on frequently, to monitor work within the pods and to respond to the many questions posed by students in relation to assignments and course material. Questions posed by one student often result in a series of questions from other students. If not answered quickly, a contagion of worry can develop among students that requires further attention.

Finally, a phenomenon known as 'Online disinhibition effect' (Suler, 2004) has arisen in this course. Without the physical presence and responses of others, students have poured out their inner-most thoughts, feelings and personal histories onto the web. It has been challenging to prevent this from happening, as the information is only apparent after it has already been written. It is also a challenge to assist students with online etiquette (also known as 'netiquette', Suler, 2004), which encompasses what is appropriate and not appropriate to share with virtual classmates. In the online course, there have been students who freely related detailed histories of emotional problems; stories of serous family problems and current turmoil at home or work. This happens much less frequently in face-to-face classes where the instructor is present to guide discussions toward information suited to an educational setting and re-focus students if needed. While the topic of boundaries in groupwork is conveyed in the online course material, an instructor would likely only become aware of netiquette violations after they already occur either in a pod or during direct communication between the students and the instructor. Students within pods may become confused about how much personal information to share, especially if one member takes a lead in pouring out personal history to the group and the instructor does not intervene swiftly or effectively.

Case example 2: Advanced social groupwork course

Course purpose

The purpose of the advanced social groupwork course is to develop students' knowledge of different approaches to social groupwork practice, and the ways in which specialized knowledge of clients' life conditions, life circumstances, and significant life events informs social work practice with groups within a generalist framework. Emphasis is placed upon conceptualizing and analysing group work skills and the capacity for self-directed practice with groups. As well, the course emphasizes how evidence-based group work is an essential part of ethical practice. The course is taught within a humanistic group work approach (Glassman, 2009) and the focus is on the worker role across group type and settings.

Course development

This course is designed to be offered non-traditionally for part-time students through a blended, multi-modal format, primarily delivered online, but with a required on-campus full-day session (comprising two course modules). The course was developed by two experienced educators with the technical assistance of the university Extended Learning (EL) department. Neither educator had developed or taught a course online prior to this, therefore the learning curve regarding the translation of traditional course content to multi-media was steep.

The didactic material was contributed by both instructors and audio recorded specifically for each module. Graphics, course notes and video clips were added by the technicians from the EL department. As well, guest speakers in the on-campus course were videotaped and provided consent to use the tapes for the online course. The course design allows for students to be randomly assigned to small groups for group assignments. Expectations for the on-campus component are included in the online material, along with the details of the date and location of the face-to-face session.

Course structure

The course is designed to include a series of modules, with learning objectives and teaching resources attached to each module, including lecture, discussion, group simulation of practice, role playing, and other learning exercises. This is achieved online through assigned task groups, with each group required to plan and present (on campus) a workshop covering some of the course material. The groups meet to plan, discuss and finalize their projects via e-mail. Student participation in the course activities is required in order to maintain a helpful and positive active learning environment for the entire class.

Assignments include a group project and individual written assessment, a mid-term paper, and a final exam. For the group project, the class is randomly divided into five task groups at the beginning of the semester by the instructor. The technical designers created a platform which allows the groups to meet and communicate online and facilitates monitoring of the group discussions by the instructor. Creative and experiential methods for the on-campus presentations are required, including using resources such as guest speakers, video tapes, case vignettes, group exercises, and a role play. Task groups

are responsible for identifying and assigning two articles/chapters for the class to read prior to their presentation. The group presentations are given by averaging the grades assigned by the students and the instructor. Individual grades are based on a written analysis of their task group completed by each student.

The mid-term assignment is focused on developing skills for evidence-based groupwork (EBGW) practice. EBGW is defined as 'the judicious and skilful application in groupwork of the best evidence, based on research merit, clinical impact, and applicability, using evaluation to ensure desired results are achieved' (Macgowan, 2008, p. 3). Students are encouraged to utilize their experiences from practice for this assignment. Students must formulate an answerable practice question, search for evidence, and undertake a critical review of the evidence from one journal article or one relevant section from a book.

The third element of evaluation is a final examination, completed online within a specific time frame.

Experiences with the advanced social groupwork multi-modal course

This course is facilitated by an experienced social work educator who has been teaching social work with groups for several years. There are variations in terms of the students' experiences in working with groups and in their foundational background. Because of the flexibility of the part-time BSW program, students may enter courses at any time during the program, therefore while all students will have had a minimum of three years work experience, not all students are in field placements or are working with groups. Discussion is encouraged as is sharing of field and work/volunteer experiences pertaining to work with groups. Peer consultation becomes evident in the latter part of the semester, as some students are in the planning stages for future work with groups, some students are trying to find their way as leaders or co-leaders of groups either in their work place or field practicum, and some bring considerable groupwork experience.

The greatest struggle for the students is working together in task groups. In their individual analyses, students describe their group processes over time during the planning, presentation and evaluation phases of their task groups. Some discussed their lack of productivity during the early part of their online discussions, the last minute scramble to accomplish work, and the avoidance of conflict in online interactions. Asynchronous timing, missed postings, and lack of

initiative to clarify misunderstandings contributed to frustration and anxiety, particularly as deadlines approached.

The required individual group analysis gives students time to reflect on their process, on their own participation in the task group, and on the actual presentation during the on-campus day. The majority of students conclude that in considering their work as a task group and the subsequent learning, they appreciate the opportunity to reflect on their learning and on the impact of working together online. The educational intent is to help students begin to integrate theory with their personal style of working in groups, and to 'evaluate student performance and to individualize learning to each student's particular background and learning pattern' (Getzel, Kurland & Salmon 1987, p. 50). As well, students do develop a deeper appreciation of the challenges presented by working together online and of the issues they will face should they be facilitating groups online in the future. This is particularly evident in the required course evaluations completed by students at the end of the course.

Experiences with the intensive on-campus experience

The students composing this course often create an interesting classroom dynamic. Many of the students already know one another from the program, while others meet for the first time online and in person during the on-campus component. In addition, the intensity of the on-campus format quickly brings the students together as a group in a different way from their online meetings. The group presentations are the culmination of a semester of working together online and experiencing their first opportunity in the course to apply theory to practice within the workshop. As one of the requirements of the assignment is for each group to structure a role play, students have opportunities to try out new skills and to have fun in the process. The on-campus time is also valuable for the instructors to get to know the students and to help mediate conflicts that were not dealt with online. This does not always happen, but when it does it has the potential to have a significant impact on the students' learning. Feedback from the students has consistently affirmed that the on-campus component was the most interesting and exciting part of the course, yet many also acknowledge that they recognize that it may not have been feasible for them to take the course entirely on-campus due to heavy work schedules and other responsibilities.

Some of the same teaching challenges of the foundations groupwork course occur in the advanced course. While most students are generally familiar with the technology of online course delivery, 'glitches' early on in the course tend to result in frustration for students and for the instructor and time is lost negotiating and correcting technical problems. For groups that experience conflict and do not consult with the instructor, negativity towards groupwork may persist and a valuable 'teaching moment' is lost. The instructor has some opportunities online to post questions and themes occurring with individual emails from students and this models groupwork skills and ways of interacting with groups online. In the most recent delivery of the updated online course the new EBGW assignment generated extensive email interaction between the students and instructor. The instructor posted the questions to the entire class to encourage collegial consultation and to demonstrate similar themes arising from individual communications. This facilitated greater mutual aid amongst the students.

Discussion

The two courses highlight the university's approach to creatively designing courses using current technology to address universal accessibility of education. The issues for the delivery of social work education raise many dilemmas for educators who have a dual purpose: to educate future practitioners (knowledge, values and skills) and to act as the first gatekeepers to the profession.

In the foundation groupwork course, online learning provided students with the basics of social groupwork theory and a specific type of online educational group experience. The course did not claim to teach groupwork skills but rather groupwork knowledge. The difficulty is that traditional groupwork education has been designed to combine educational material with a group experience. In this version of online groupwork education, the instructor is present but invisible and communication is asynchronous. The students interact with one another in cyberspace and as long as the interaction occurs without conflict or negativity, the instructor's role can be one of observation and monitoring. However, in an asynchronous online course, written communication is visible on the screen to the instructor and students

when they log on. Any negative or harmful communication has already occurred which leaves the instructor in a position to do damage control rather than intervening immediately to shape the group experience. Modeling of appropriate communication is a key aspect of groupwork communication and would be a basic component of face-to-face classroom instruction. This difficulty could be addressed by insisting on synchronous interaction. However this would be unrealistic for most students and the manner in which they are able to be present online. In order to meet the needs of a diverse student population, asynchronous online work will likely remain the norm. With this in mind, course designers in groupwork will have to pay close attention to guidelines for assignments and web-based discussions, in order to deal with the 'interactivity and responsivity integral to e-learning' (Madoc-Jones & Parrot, 2005, p. 766).

In the advanced groupwork course, the multi-modal format provided a blend of online and face-to-face learning, a model that seems to hold significant promise for course delivery. Some of the same issues arise in relation to asynchronous communication, but the on-campus component provides an impetus for the students to deal with some of their issues prior to the on-campus meeting. Some groups also choose to meet the day before the on-campus modules for further preparation. Feedback from the students, verbally and through course evaluations, indicates that these meetings proved to be excellent cohesion-builders for the small groups.

In today's technologically enhanced environment, online groupwork is becoming a much more common modality (Rains & Young, 2009; Barak, Boniel-Nissim & Suler, 2008; Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo & Stern, 2004). This calls for the enhancement of knowledge about online group processes as well as for the training of competent group leaders. Because there is a growing availability of groups online, social work educators and practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that groupwork practice is happening in an ethical and responsible way, with experienced leadership. Mandatory standards of online groupwork practice must include informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and a duty to protect and monitor clients (Dergal, Serafini, Damianakis & Marziali, 2007). It is also important to build in the development of specific norms for online discussions. The norms should reflect Standards for Social Groupwork practice, such as those developed by

AASWG (2006). These would include:

- Explicit and clear expectations about the purpose and use of online discussions
- The development of explicit group norms: Agreements on content and timing of postings
- The development of norms around interpersonal safety: Details about what is considered to be appropriate online disclosure ('Netiquette' and online disinhibition effect)
- Attention to confidentiality
- Attention to group stages: proper introductions, development of norms, monitoring of conflict and preparation for endings
- Enhancement of the development of mutual aid
- Instructor (leader) involvement in monitoring and leading group discussions
- Attendance standards

Educators need to adapt the teaching of groupwork practice to address the special issues that emerge from online groups. An online groupwork course has the potential to better model online group practice and to prepare students to work with online groups. It is incumbent upon educators to evaluate all models of teaching to improve curriculum and curriculum design and to create ways of teaching a new form of groupwork.

Whether face-to-face or online, the instructor has the ability to work with small groups and facilitate interaction and problem-solving. A combination of in-class and online teaching could be seen as encompassing key aspects of both approaches. Computers and web-assisted technologies have added new elements to in-class teaching. Distinctions '…between distance learning and traditional courses is rapidly diminishing because most 'traditional' courses now utilize computer technology to some extent' (Frey, Faul & Yankelov, 2003, p. 444). The challenge is to ensure that in professional programs such as social work, we do not completely lose the experience of face-to-face human contact.

The literature reflects some concerns that universities are pushing online course delivery as it is perceived to be less expensive and more efficient than traditional in-class teaching. Our experience is that there

is a significant learning curve for faculty to learn how to develop course content and to use the various technological methodologies available to achieve the course objectives. In particular, to address the needs of all types of learners requires a different conceptualisation of experiential learning. Creative enrichment materials such as structured online group discussions, videos clips, specially developed role plays, and links to other sites are all enormously time-consuming and require expertise to develop. Universities need to support online teaching with specialized technical expertise in course design, adaptation of technologies to achieve learning objectives, and on-going trouble shooting during the course delivery. As well, the time commitment for faculty for development and delivery need to be recognized.

Summary

Challenges of today's social work education call for flexibility in how social work courses are delivered. While there may be advantages and disadvantages to face-to-face, fully online and combination approaches, we believe that the combination of online with some face-to-face opportunities is the optimal approach to teaching social groupwork for today's realities. With the growth of online group practice, there is increasing urgency for social work students to become familiar with computer and internet technology and with the experience of learning and receiving support online.

Those teaching courses in social work with groups must also become familiar and comfortable with online formats. There is a need to better understand how practice principles play out in online settings. However, as the majority of social groupwork practice is still occurring face-to-face, educating social work students to lead groups requires programs to take the best of traditional teaching and enhance on-campus learning with technology. Technology should not be seen as the preferred method of course delivery simply because of cost and perceived convenience.

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