

Teaching Social Work Online: Dilemmas and Debates

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The stampede towards delivering tertiary education on-line has been well documented in the academic literature and newspaper media. A great deal of this writing has been characterised by an acute division between those who support and those who deplore this paradigm shift in the way education is offered to students. Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, social work as a discipline has yet to fully engage in this debate, watching, as emerging technologies radically change the way education and social services are delivered. This article provides an overview of the literature related to online learning in social work. In particular the global context influencing the delivery of education is investigated; the major themes emerging from the literature are highlighted; the opportunities and obstacles for teaching and learning social work online are examined, and finally questions relating to the cultural implications for delivering social work education online are identified using a constructivist framework.

Keywords: Online; education; student; constructivist; cultural

Introduction

There is no shortage of grand statements in the literature about the benefits of online teaching and learning. It has been hailed as the means to deliver education in any place, at any time (Sandell & Hayes, 2002), taking ‘the university and corporate sector by storm’ (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002: 3). Elsewhere, it is argued that online delivery of education has been a costly failure, eroding the culture of intellectual transformation that occurs in traditional classroom and tutorial teaching (Brabazon, 2002). Although it is unfashionable to be equivocal I will argue in this article that the truth about online teaching and learning lies somewhere between these dichotomous positions. As educators we need to learn how to marshal the potential offered through online delivery of education, while guarding against its tacit disempowering features. Managing a dilemma such as this is not new to social work.

Juggling tensions lies at the heart of this discipline, as evidenced in the ongoing debates about social workers facilitating care or control, intervening at micro or macro levels, and grappling with questions of ethics. Striking the balance between

harnessing the promise offered by online delivery of education, while ensuring students are not disadvantaged though this method of learning has now emerged as a further dilemma for social work educators to negotiate. To manage this tension it is necessary for educators to be informed about the benefits and pitfalls related the delivery of education online . It is argued elsewhere however that social work as a discipline has not kept apace with these pedagogical and technological developments, or considered the impact of technology on pedagogy and service delivery (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000). In order to understand the role of e-learning in social work it is first necessary to examine the delivery of online education within the current social, and economic context.

E-learning in Context.

The current context for e-learning is characterised by a number of features. These include a reduction in government funding for education (Brabazon, 2002), strident competition between Universities for the student dollar (Marginson & Considine, 2000), and continuing interest in life long learning (Schoech, 2000). The nature of the student 'profile' and identity is changing in terms of culture, background, and age, where students see themselves in the role of consumers rather than an apprentice/pupil relationship (Wilkinson, 1999). Quite apart from these changes in the educational sector, emerging technologies have impacted on how we communicate with others, shop, bank, do business and deliver welfare services (Rafferty, 1997: 960). Together these macro socio-economic dynamics form the potent contemporary context in which we teach and learn about social work. This context is characterised by rapid change, uncertainty and hostility (Ife, 1999), where students are buffeted

directly by the consequences of economic rationalism. In response, students now more than ever before, are juggling the multiple responsibilities of study, working in paid employment and providing child and/or parental care (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). As such, pedagogical strategies are required to address the rapidly changing demographics and conditions under which students now engage in academic learning. Within this context the pressure is on tertiary institutions to provide 'just in time' learning opportunities to student and corporate customers (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002: 8).

Elsewhere it is argued that the 'best' or most desirable education is still based on the Oxbridge system of personal tutors and intense immersion in an intellectually transforming context (Brabazon, 2002). Nevertheless, the numbers of students able to engage in this type of learning is becoming increasingly limited. The amount of time tertiary students actually spend on-campus has diminished radically in recent years (McInnis, et al. 2000), while the constituency for students is no longer drawn from just the local or even national population base, but extends to the global market (Wilkinson, 1999).

The implications of these developments for social work practice and education are wide ranging. Most importantly educators need to ensure that students are equipped to practice in this environment. At a micro level this includes having the technical and critical skills associated with digital communication, assessment and analysis of digital information (Giffords, 1998; Faux & Hughes, 2000). Without such preparation students will be disadvantaged in the work place (Rafferty, 2000). This means from the outset that students require induction, ongoing instruction and guidance about

using the net with discernment (Wernet, Olliges & Delicath, 2000). 'Information literacy' refers to the cluster of skills associated with using the net in a critical yet productive fashion where students learn to evaluate and judge the veracity of material on the web (Fitzgerald & McNutt, 1999). For students to gain information literacy, familiarity, and proficiency in using electronic resources, it is critical that differing modes of e-learning are integrated throughout the social work curriculum and not simply treated as an add on to current course content. At the same time it is vital that technology-based learning is not adopted in an uncritical fashion, and that both students and educators are aware of the debates and tensions that arise from this form of learning and service delivery. These debates feature as significant themes in the current literature on e-learning.

Themes in the Literature

The notion of the digital divide is well documented in the literature (Adegoke, 2002; DeOllos & Morris, 2002; Kenny, 2003). This divide refers to those who have access to the resources associated with online technology, and those who do not. The 'divide' has been identified as existing on many levels, but in particular between social work educators and practitioners (Sandell & Hayes, 2002; Morgan, 1996), and more worryingly between those living in westernised nations and those in third world countries (Cotton, 2001; Rafferty, 1997). Level of income has been identified as the most significant indicator of access to technology (Cotton, 2001), underscoring yet again the inherent power differential between those who do, and those who do not have access to education. This knowledge raises a serious ethical tension for social work educators, in terms of striking the balance between educating students for practice in the contemporary context, while at the same time contributing to the

perpetuation of disempowerment amongst those already most disadvantaged. This nexus between teaching social work online while at the same time promoting notions of anti-oppressive practice is a conundrum in itself. As a discipline social work has yet to debate its position in this dilemma.

The issue of student and faculty resistance to engaging with online learning is also well canvassed in the literature (Burton & Seabury 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Being 'coerced' into using online technologies while being unfamiliar with the technical skills associated with online delivery exacerbates student and faculty feelings of powerlessness. A number of studies have identified however, that students experience increased confidence and satisfaction with online delivery once they have engaged fully with this type of learning over the course of a semester (Cauble & Thurston, 2000; Morgan 1996). Not surprisingly having hands on experience using the different tools, and opportunity to learn the 'language' of the computer mediated environment, results in students feeling more confident in their use of technology.

Although little has been noted in the social work literature about the language related to online learning, references to hypertext, computer mediated learning, bulletin boards and hypertechnology abound. Giffords provides a helpful translation of these terms, along with an explanation of the shorthand symbols used online to convey human expressions, such as laughing, and smiling (Giffords, 1998: 243-251). The need to have some interpretation of the language associated with working online once again raises the question of power in the teaching and learning environment. Without the knowledge and contextual understanding of what the techno-language means, students can become isolated and lost in what is essentially a foreign culture. As

educators we need to consider what students might need to become familiar with the culture of technology-based learning. Directing students to helpful guides, a glossary of terms, site maps, relevant URLs, along with planning curriculum activities in a way that introduces new tools to students in an incremental way, all help to familiarize new comers with online learning techniques and process.

A further dilemma relating to the use of on-line technology and the notion of empowerment has been identified in the literature. Without doubt increased access to information online can be empowering (Cotton, 2001). Now more than ever before students and consumers of social services can access vast amounts of resources, information, educational, and treatment options. Others however have argued that the plethora of choices can make people feel confused and overloaded with information (Sandell & Hayes, 2002). Information overload and lack of face-to-face contact can further isolate students (Lynch, 1999), where learners feel confined to interacting with electrons on a screen. Addressing the risk of student isolation in online learning has led to the development of constructivist pedagogy, giving emphasis to a more democratic, collaborative learning ethos than most students will have experienced in the traditional classroom teaching. This pedagogical development remains to date one of the most exciting opportunities for education to emerge from online delivery.

Opportunities and Obstacles to Teaching Social Work Online

Facilitating learning online requires both students and educators to develop new roles in the teaching and learning transaction. The online medium is a potent environment for promoting interactivity between peers, where collaborative learning and

promoting a sense of community is the means for fostering the development of new knowledge, critical thinking skills and the capacity to reflect on practice (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Palloff & Pratt refer to the notion of 'electronic pedagogy' (1999: 173), where successful teaching online is characterised by a facilitative process. This interaction requires the lecturer to relinquish 'control' of all 'classroom' transactions, where students become the authors of their own learning. This is certainly possible where the medium of asynchronistic discussion (communication which is posted online over a period of time) allows for multiple exchanges between students where ideas can be 'hatched' reflected upon, and subjected to critical debate (Hamilton & Zimmerman, 2002: 265). Being part of such a process allows the time and space for students to become creators and authors of knowledge, rather than passive recipients of information.

While this process of learning is potentially very empowering in that it removes the traditional student/ lecturer hierarchical relationship, it requires a change of role for both parties. For students, learning emerges from the feedback they give and receive from each other, the diverse range of practice/theory examples introduced by peers into the 'classroom', along with the capacity to control the pace of their own learning (Hamilton & Zimmerman, 2002). In this way the learning transaction is not limited to hearing the views of the dominant few in the classroom, or confined to attending a lecture at a set time on a set day.

Not surprisingly e-learning for social work cannot be achieved successfully by just placing lecture notes and tutorial materials on the web. This wholesale dumping of written material online in the guise of education generates feelings of anger and

resentment amongst students (Sims, 2001). Simply transferring classroom teaching material to an online platform constitutes a lazy approach to delivering education, and fails to capture and maximise the great potential offered by e-learning to engender peer collaboration, learning and support (Haythornwaite, 2000), facilitate the development of critical thinking skills (Crane & Markowitz, 1994), and apply theoretical perspectives to real world situations (Hamilton & Zimmerman, 2002).

There are plenty of examples in the literature of specific social work subjects that have been delivered via the web (Cooper, 2001; Faux & Hughes 2000; Cauble & Thurston, 2000; Van Soest, 2000; Canon & Grant, 2000). This material can provide clues about how educators have already approached integrating technology based learning into the social work curriculum, as well as identifying some of the advantages and pitfalls encountered in the process.

Many of the principles that social work as a discipline aspires to, such as striving for empowerment, fighting for social justice and making the links between personal difficulties and structural inequality can be given overt expression using online educational delivery. There is no shortage of examples where the web has been used to conduct social activism (Postnes & Bunsting, 2002; Friess, 1999), and as such students can analyse and participate in these activities as part of the learning curriculum. The net has also become a meeting place for consumer rights groups, and those interested in self-help and developing further support mechanisms (Russell, Glasgow, McKay, Boles & Feil, 2002; Finn, 1999). Sites abound dedicated to addressing specific issues related to health and disability, gay and lesbian rights, interests of older people and even self-help for children. These sites provide powerful

examples of consumer self-advocacy, client knowledge, and expertise in a wide range of areas.

Given the diversity of issues, forums and resources that can be found on the net, online delivery can facilitate very immediate learning opportunities, where contemporary global issues can be incorporated into the curriculum as they arise. Nevertheless, educators and students have also identified a range of significant obstacles and shortfalls associated with this form of delivery, and a review of online learning for social work would be incomplete without raising these issues. A number of the difficulties are associated with technical problems and these include students experiencing frustration with poor internet connections, closed or moved sites (Kieran, 2002), absence or shortage of technical help and support for staff and students (Wilkinson, 1999), and the financial outlay required for computer upgrades to access online learning in an environment of rapidly changing technology (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000). Further criticisms have been of a more pedagogical nature, with some arguing that effective educational design for online learning has yet to be developed, with rigorous evaluation of online delivery still being largely untested (McNaught, Burd, Whithear, Prescott & Browning, 2003). Other concerns highlight the potential for technology to limit the social work process to data entry and analysis (Sapey, 1997), and note the lack of clarity around issues of ethics, confidentiality, and ownership of material online (Agger-Gupta, 2002; Burton & Seabury, 1999). In a more general context, the highly publicised sinister aspects of using the internet have captured the interest of the public, including growing awareness of internet addiction (Morgan, 1996), along with charitable scams, medical and legal misinformation,

stalking, and fraud online (Mintz, 2002) and the problem of users falling prey to fatal internet love deception (Juris & Fernandez, 2002).

In response to these criticisms, Hick argues that historically all major paradigm shifts effecting the way society communicates and operates are met with both ‘strong resistance and resolute advocacy’ (Hick, 1999: 67). Hick is one of the few social work educators who has examined the development of online learning within a framework that both acknowledges the revolutionary impact of the internet on daily living and education, while seeking to also contextualise and understand the stridently dichotomous responses to delivering education online. He argues for a ‘middle position’ where research, critical examination, and practice are used in the first instance to understand both the benefits and pitfalls encountered in e-learning (Hick, 1999).

For social work, this critical examination necessitates an analysis of the nexus between delivering education online, and fostering principles of anti-oppressive practice. While it is argued elsewhere that online technologies have proved empowering for some marginalised groups in the community (Finn, 1999), the broad ethical and cultural implications for delivering social work education on line have yet to be investigated in depth.

Cultural Considerations

The cultural implications of teaching on-line have been examined to some extent in the distance learning literature (Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez & Mason, 2001; Bates, 2001, Wilson 2001). However, social work educators have yet to engage in this

investigation. This lack of inquiry into the cultural implications of online delivery is perhaps ironic, given the shared international understanding of social work being a profession concerned with upholding social justice, human rights and supporting anti-oppressive ideals. (IFSW, 2003). The current context of education delivery outlined above, highlights the economic imperatives for capturing the student dollar and the subsequent exponential development of e-learning. However, we are warned that ‘financial opportunity for e-universities will not automatically translate into educational opportunity for the global student’ (Goodfellow et al. 2001:66).

As educators, facilitating inclusive, effective learning strategies in both the virtual and real time classroom is of primary concern. Nevertheless, without considering the issues of online delivery from a critical perspective, we run the risk of supporting and contributing to a regime of pedagogical imperialism in social work education. To address issues of equity in online delivery we first need to understand the barriers to effective global online education. The literature on web based design have identified these barriers as being:

- Problems of culture and environment
- Teaching style differences
- Problems relating to different educational values and cultures
- Problems of language and semantics
- Technical problems relating to platforms, operating systems and lack of standard interfaces (Collis, Parisi & Ligorio cited in McLoughlin, 2001:9)

This list would be incomplete without acknowledging also the disparity of access to online technology brought about by differences in income, age geography and

ethnicity (New Media Age, Feb 28. 2002; Holloway, 2002). With the exception of addressing the practical technical mismatch created by using a range of systems, each of the above factors necessitates understanding notions of pedagogical, linguistic, moral, socio-economic and cultural difference. The interplay between these dimensions is complex, and forever changing due to the ongoing globalisation of production and exchange. Nevertheless, making the connections between these dimensions, and translating this understanding into practical strategies that will facilitate inclusivity in online learning, is a contemporary challenge for social work educators to acknowledge and debate.

Addressing these dimensions is central to the design and delivery of anti-oppressive online social work education. One of the most practical considerations for those involved in global social work education and web design is finding ways to accommodate the use of diverse languages within a set curriculum. While there are examples in the literature that address this issue through having local indigenous speaking tutors available for students to access (Bates, 2001), this is by no means the norm. Instead, the trend is for English to be used for online delivery, signalling the marginalisation of local indigenous languages (Goodfellow et al, 2001). For social work educators to uphold the foundation principles of anti-oppressive practice while delivering education on a global scale, consideration needs to be given to curriculum design that does not disadvantage individuals or specific groups of students. Much thought and planning has already been dedicated to ensuring inclusive face-to-face curriculum design in social work education (Smith, Gabriel, Lott & Hirano, 2000). This work however needs to be revisited and reconceptualized to take account of the

online learning environment, where the student constituency is no longer simply local or national, but of a global order.

Constructivism

Pedagogically, the notion of constructivism provides a framework for facilitating inclusive educational design. Acknowledging and working with multiple ways of constructing knowledge is central to this approach. This recognition goes well beyond understanding students differing learning styles, and requires us as educators to reappraise the theoretical framework used to underpin our teaching. Given the current context of education being accessed by a much larger and diverse global audience it is hardly surprising to note the emergence of constructivism as a paradigm to guide teaching.

Kunkel explains “ Constructivism focuses on the learners’ ability to build their own conceptualisations and solutions to problems through working with objects and events.” (Kunkel, 2000:101). In this way students bring to the ‘classroom’ their own interpretations and set of understandings related to the subject in hand. They work collaboratively and in partnership with the educator, and through ‘conversation’ and activities develop their own unique knowledge discourse. A constructivist approach to teaching and learning therefore allows for the diverse perspectives of all contributors to be considered in the knowledge creating process. This educational framework is based on notions of reciprocity and situating learning within a context that is personally meaningful to the student. Clearly this approach entails the educator changing their role from that of ‘didactic dispenser’ of knowledge (Wilson, 2001: 82), to facilitating and mediating learning.

The development of constructivist pedagogy has greatly fostered the notion of collaborative peer learning, and inclusive inquiry into the education sector (Jonassen & Peck, 1999; McLoughlan, 2001). As educators it is timely to consider how this pedagogy might be also used to enhance participatory educational inquiry online. If this can be done, and the jury is still out on this question, (Taylor & Maor, 2000), the internet may also be used as a tool for advancing anti-oppressive practice in social work education.

The challenge ahead for educators is to address areas of disadvantage such as disparity of student access to computer hardware and software, and language barriers, while also avoiding the risk of cultural colonisation online. The development of culturally sensitive curriculum and web-based design that supports local and indigenous communities drawn from a global constituency is integral to delivering social work education from an anti-oppressive perspective.

Conclusion

This current examination of the literature suggests that as a discipline social work is just coming to terms with how hypertechnology might influence and be used in practice and education. Much of the material about using technology in social work to date has been confined to canvassing the dichotomous views of those who are either for or against the ever-emerging technological paradigm. However literature is beginning to appear on how the internet and other technologies have been incorporated into the teaching of specific core curriculum subjects. The question of how social work will address the cultural considerations of delivering education

online to a global student constituency has yet to be considered. A predictable tension lies ahead within the discipline, with academics already yielding to the pressure to boost student numbers through online global delivery of education, while attempting to maintain an anti-oppressive philosophy in practice and education. It is possible that out of this tension new ways may for social work to promote inclusivity in education. A positive outcome will require both critical consideration and creative lateral responses from both the national social work associations and the tertiary education providers. Let the debate begin!

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