

## Supporting Child Welfare Traineeship Students through an Online Peer Network

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**Abstract:** *This article describes the implementation of an online peer network for social work traineeship students pursuing or continuing careers in child welfare. Literature on best principles and practices for facilitating an online community is reviewed, and an explanation of how these best practices were used is provided. Initial program design and program developments, which took place over four years, are described. An overview of the evaluation data and how the program evaluation was carried out is presented. The article concludes with a discussion about successes and challenges experienced in building the peer network and further research needed to understand benefits of the use of online communities and social media in social work education.*

**Keywords:** *Online communities, social media, traineeship, evaluation, social work education*

Increasingly, social media and online communities are being used in social work practice, administration, research, and education: to facilitate inter- and intra- agency collaboration and build communities of practice or professional networks (Greenhow & Robelia, 2010); in professional practice with clients (Giffords, 2009; Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2012); to disseminate information (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013); to support social work education and continuous learning (Davis & Goodman, 2014; Dunworth, 2009; Kilpeläinen, Pyykkönen, & Sankala, 2011; Moore, 2008; Quinney, 2005); to help bridge research and practice (Lewis, Koston, Quartley, & Adsit, 2010); and in community organizing and advocacy (Edwards & Hoefler, 2010; Parrott & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Young & Delves, 2009).

Online community platforms used in social work include wikis (Kilpeläinen et al., 2011), blog sites (Hickson, 2012; Young & Delves, 2009), email list serves (Murty, Gilmore, Richards, & Altilio, 2012), discussion forums/boards (Quinney, 2005), and Ning sites (Davis & Goodman, 2014). Social media used in social work includes LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013). Online communities now offer many of the same features as social media and vice versa. For example, many community

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platforms offer friending, following, and commenting features while social media channels allows for the creation of private groups, document sharing, and email lists. The differences between community platforms and social media are lessening while interfaces and sharing of content across platforms (e.g., “share on Twitter”) is increasing.

Despite increasing use of online community platforms and social media in social work, concerns remain that social workers are not being adequately prepared to use technology (Giffords, 2009; Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011; Parrott & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Perron, Taylor, Glass, & Margerum-Leys, 2010; Young & Delves, 2009) and that social work organizations are underutilizing these online tools (Baker, Warburton, Hodgkin, & Pascal, 2014; Edwards & Hofer, 2010). Social work programs play an important role in introducing to students how they can use social media and online communities in their professional work and in instructing students in the use of these technologies. There are a variety of ways in which social work educators and schools can integrate social media and/or online communities into courses or programs. For example, course instructors might require students to enroll in an online community for students in the course or integrate blogging into course assignments. Programs might require students to develop professional profiles on LinkedIn or create an online portfolio.

This article examines the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute’s (NCWWI) development of an online peer network to support BSW- and MSW-level students participating in child welfare traineeship program. It details the establishment, development, and growth of an online peer network that utilized two popular online platforms (Ning and Facebook) and presents results from the program evaluation.

### **Online Peer Networks and Communities of Practice in Social Work**

Due to the stressful nature of their work, social workers and social work students may greatly benefit from the support and camaraderie of a peer network (Bergart & Simon, 2005). While in-person networking may be preferable, it is not always a realistic option for social workers who have major constraints on their time, work in rural areas, and/or have few on-site professional development opportunities (Bergart & Simon, 2005). Online communities offer professionals and students more options for networking and may better meet their professional, social, and practical needs (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011). Students or professionals of color and those in rural areas may particularly benefit from online communities which can connect them with professionals from different backgrounds and introduce them to a wider array of professional opportunities (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & González Canché, 2012; Davis & Goodman, 2014).

Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) view technology and community as interactive; in their view, the right platform can contribute to a community’s sustainability and help a community build a sense of identity and purpose. Selecting a platform or social media site that best meets potential members’ needs is important. Organizations or instructors may want to survey potential members during the selection process.

## **Literature Review - Principles and Practices for Building Effective Online Communities**

An art and science to building effective online communities has emerged. Prior to developing an online community for the traineeship students, NCWWI staff reviewed the literature on best practices and principles for building successful online communities. Online communities must be *well facilitated* (Berlanga, Rusman, Bitter-Rijkema, & Sloep, 2009; Charalambos, Michalinos, & Chamberlain, 2004; Wenger, MacDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Simply making a community available does not mean people will join or actively participate. A facilitator must understand how to build a strong and sustainable community (Backer, 2008; Fayard & DeSanctis, 2005; Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald, & Varonis, 2006), set the stage for positive member interaction by modeling a friendly conversational rhythm (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2005), guide the group in resolving and negotiating conflicts (Berlanga et al., 2009; Charalambos et al., 2004; Olofsson, 2007), seek feedback from members on the strengths and challenges of the community, and direct solution-focused discussions around identified challenges.

Community facilitators should understand how to *motivate* members to participate. Cultivating a dedicated core group of members who consistently contribute to the community and model active participation is one tool for increasing motivation (Wenger et al., 2002). A facilitator also should create a *safe space* for members to interact (Backer, 2008; Charalambos et al., 2004; Gerard, 2012). One option is to offer varying levels of privacy within the site (e.g., only friended profiles can see certain posts) (Berlanga et al., 2009).

Facilitators must also learn how to increase member commitment. They should limit the size of a community and narrow its focus (Backer, 2008; Kraut, Resnick, & Kiesler, 2012). They should create opportunities for members to shape the structure, function, content, policies, and operations of the community (Berlanga et al., 2009). Encouraging social and professional interaction (Backer, 2008; Dunworth, 2009) may also increase commitment. Social presence theory suggests members will feel more satisfied and connected to their community (Ho, Quinton, Zia, Laubach, & Bittner, 2012) when they sense other members are real people and when they are able to express their thoughts and feelings authentically (Lowenthal, 2010).

### **NCWWI Student Traineeship Peer Network: Program Description**

Over the last decade, attention to the recruitment and retention of competent child welfare staff has become a priority in the field (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). Schools of social work have responded to this challenge with educational programs designed not only for currently employed child welfare staff returning for graduate degrees but also for preparing social work students at both the BSW and MSW levels for child welfare practice (Zlotnik & Pryce, 2013).

It is within this context that two federal initiatives emerged which supported child welfare traineeship programs at schools of social work. One was the NCWWI, which from 2008-2013 focused on building the capacity of the nation's child welfare workforce and supporting the development of skilled child welfare leaders. Twelve traineeship programs

prepared a diverse group of BSW and MSW students for client-centered practice informed by child welfare and leadership competencies. A second federal initiative started in 2008 also supported traineeship students through five Child Welfare Comprehensive Workforce projects.

The NCWWI student peer network supported BSW and MSW students from 17 traineeship programs. The student peer network coordinator (“the coordinator”), in partnership with NCWWI staff and traineeship program faculty, was responsible for the network’s development and implementation. The three main goals of the peer network were to offer students opportunities for professional and leadership development, professional and social networking, and peer support for improved practice. The central components of the peer network were two online communities and a webinar series.

#### *Online platform*

The team chose Ning after considering a number of platforms including LinkedIn, an email listserv, Google group, and Wikispace. Ning sites are customizable for private groups and offered a wider variety of features than other platforms. The Ning site included personalized member profile pages, a chat room, private messaging, a discussion forum, blog space, photo and video sharing, closed and open groups, content pages, event calendar, and an option to add external apps. The Ning site was easy to set up and customize. An informal survey was sent to new traineeship students each fall to gather information about their interests to generate useful content for the site early on.

Ning allowed for *social and professional interaction* in a *safe space*. Only traineeship students were invited to join the site, and the coordinator and several other staff members were the only non-student members of the site. Discussion forums (see Figure 1), groups, the blog space, and an event calendar offered space for professional networking while photo-sharing and private messaging offered space for social interaction as well.

The peer network was marketed through a flyer, a letter from the coordinator to new traineeship students, presentations by staff during student orientations (either virtual or in-person), and by faculty. At the beginning of the first year of the program, all traineeship students who provided a valid email address were invited to join the site. Upon joining, new site members were required to answer several profile questions including year in the program, program name, and fieldwork site. They could include more detail in their profile by answering optional questions related to their professional experience and career goals.

#### *Webinars*

All traineeship students, including site members, were invited to participate in professional development webinars. Initial webinar topics were selected based on an informal poll of peer network members. Webinar topics included how to achieve quality, commitment, and competence in the child welfare workforce; secondary traumatic stress; systems of care; and career development. Professionals from the field as well as seven students were presenters. Webinars were recorded and archived on the Ning site for later viewing.

Figure 1: Ning Site Discussion Forum

The screenshot displays a Ning site discussion forum with the following details:

Discussions	Replies	Latest Activity
<p><b>Choosing the right position</b>            What concerns do you have about choosing the right position? What advice are you seeking?            Started by you in Career</p>	8	Apr 16 Reply by [redacted]
<p><b>Evidence Based Practice in Child Welfare</b>            Has your agency implemented EBP practice? What kind? What challenges were encountered? How successful has it been? What advice do you have...            Started by you in Child Welfare in the U.S.</p>	1	Apr 14 Reply by [redacted]
<p><b>From Place to Place</b>            Hi Everyone! I am posting a link to a 2009/10 documentary that follows six adults whom recently aged out of foster care; capturing issues s...            Started by [redacted] in Child Welfare in the U.S.</p>	1	Feb 17 Reply by [redacted]
<p><b>Increasing Fatherhood Capacity - Will it Strengthen Positive Outcomes for Children and Families</b>            Research has show that children with involved fathers/and or father figures have an increased chance for better outcomes. The National Fath...            Started by [redacted] in Child Welfare in the U.S.</p>	13	Jan 21 Reply by [redacted]
<p><b>Career Advice</b>            I recently read three articles in The New Social Worker Magazine online Winter 2013 edition. I think they are worth reading as they provide...            Started by [redacted] in Career</p>	2	Jan 11 Reply by [redacted]

### *Leadership Group*

To *motivate* students to participate in the peer network, the coordinator organized a student leadership group that guided peer network activities and modeled active participation. Over four years, the leadership group included five to nine students from different schools.

### *Program Developments*

To ensure the community was *well facilitated*, the coordinator's hours were increased during the second year. This allowed more time to add site content, obtain feedback from members, and write to individual members to encourage them to participate. To encourage *professional networking*, the coordinator created groups on the site around specific topics and schools. Group features included discussion posting and resource sharing. Members of groups were offered the option of meeting by teleconference, but only several calls were held due to difficulty in finding a time when all members of a group could meet.

Towards the end of year two, in response to student and faculty feedback, the coordinator developed a Facebook group to complement the Ning site. Facebook group features include status updates; photo, video, and link sharing; a calendar; document uploading; and polls. All students were invited to join the group by the beginning of year three. Also in year three the coordinator began sending Ning site members weekly e-bulletins that profiled students, highlighted resources, and listed upcoming events. A monthly update also was sent to program faculty to keep them updated about student peer network activities and resources.

## **Evaluation**

The traineeship peer network team worked with NCWWI program evaluators at the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver to develop evaluation questions to help answer the following research questions: 1) How successful was NCWWI in developing a peer network that engaged BSW and MSW students and supported their professional development, and 2) How can the peer network be improved and maximally benefit student members?

### *Method*

Questions about the peer network were embedded in the traineeship program's formal survey of students, the Stipend Student Inventory (SSI), which focused on student competencies and experiences. The SSI was administered annually online via Qualtrics to all BSW and MSW traineeship students at program entry in the fall, in the spring, and in the summer after students graduated. The peer network section of the SSI asked questions about site and feature usage, participation in webinars, and the usefulness of other activities.

The coordinator gathered additional evaluation data by observing member activity on both sites, using Google Analytics, reviewing webinar evaluations, and from informal feedback from faculty. Google Analytics provided data on site visits, page visits, and the location, number of sessions, visits to specific pages, and geographic location of site visitors. Observing activity on both sites allowed the coordinator to monitor which features were used most frequently. Data downloaded from Ning provided information on member log-on patterns (e.g., date of last log-on) and the number of members receiving broadcast messages.

During the first years of the project, the team used evaluation data to enhance program goals and strategies and modify SSI peer network evaluation questions to better capture information about barriers and facilitators to program implementation.

## **Results**

### *Member Totals*

Over four years, 245 students participated in one or both of the peer network sites: 233 joined the Ning site and 74 joined the Facebook Group (Table 1). Fifty-two percent of traineeship students joined the Ning site by the end of year four while 16% joined the

Facebook Group. Demographic data was available through the SSI for 232 of the 245 traineeships students who joined at least one of the peer network sites. Of those known, 47% were BSW students while 53% were MSW students. The racial/ethnic background of the students was 42% White/Caucasian, 32% Black or African American, 12% Latino or Hispanic, 11% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 2% Other (i.e., mixed race, Asian, Pacific Islander). The majority of students were female (87%).

**Table 1: Cumulative Ning and Facebook member totals over four program years**

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
<b>Ning</b>	50	120	165	233
<b>Facebook</b>	N/A	N/A	53	74

**Table 2: SSI respondents by year**

SSI	Administered	Recipients	Completed Surveys (Response rate)	# Ning Participants (% of completed surveys)	# Facebook Participants (% of completed surveys)
<b>Annual</b>	Spring 2011	Students	127 (79%)	59 (46%)	--
<b>Annual</b>	Spring 2012	Students	111 (77%)	56 (50%)	34 (31%)
<b>Annual</b>	Spring 2013	Students	119 (64%)	40 (34%)	48 (40%)
<b>Follow-up</b>	Summer 2011	Graduates	33 (50%)	--	--
<b>Follow-up</b>	Summer 2012	Graduates	101 (69%)	35 (35%)	22 (22%)
<b>Follow-up</b>	Summer 2013	Graduates	121 (47%)	20 (17%)	33 (27%)

-- = no data due to question not asked

### *SSI Respondent Demographics*

Table 2 reflects the number of SSI respondents by year. Of the 357 respondents who completed the SSI over four years, 25% were BSW students and 44% were MSW students. In identifying ethnicity, 52% were White/Caucasian, 21% Black or African American, 15% Hispanic or Latino, and 8% American Indian or Alaska Native. The majority of respondents were female (91%).

### *Peer Network Engagement and Usage*

Ning site visits (see definition of "visits" below) increased between years one, two, and three but decreased in year four (see Table 3), perhaps because the program was coming to a conclusion. Use of mobile devices to view the Ning site increased each year. The most frequently used Ning site features were the discussion forum, blogspace, and photo-sharing (see Table 3). The most frequently viewed content on Ning was the home page, member pages, archived webinars, discussion forum, topical groups, and blogspace. School-specific groups were not widely used. One hundred and sixty-five members (71%) of the Ning site created an expanded profile by answering the optional profile questions while 68 (29%) answered the required questions only.

On Facebook, all discussion posts were viewed by a majority of members although only a small number of members started new discussions. Upon joining the Facebook

group, students were asked to introduce themselves via a status update, and most did. Like Ning, Facebook activity also decreased in year four.

**Figure 2: Ning site visits over four years\***



\* Site “visits” are defined by Google Analytics as the total number of sessions during the specified date range, including repeat sessions by the same user.

**Table 3: Ning and Facebook feature usage over four years**

	Feature	Total by end of year four
<b>Ning Site</b>	Discussion forums	16
	Discussion forum replies	61
	Discussion forum views	541
	Photos posted	100
	Blog posts	14
	Blog comments	14
	Blog views	352
	Events	47
	Groups	15
	Group discussions	16
	Group discussion replies	22
	Group discussion views	169
	Group comments*	16
	Videos posted	8
<b>Facebook</b>	Discussion and reply posts**	140
<b>Group</b>	Facebook events added	22

\* Group comments feature is used to post brief messages but is not a threaded discussion  
 \*\*excludes staff posts

*Student Satisfaction and Utility Ratings*

According to SSI data, over the duration of the program, students' most frequent reasons given for visiting a site were to access resources, learn about challenges other students were facing, read about upcoming events such as webinars, and learn more about

content featured in broadcast messages from the coordinator. In 2011, 82% of Annual SSI respondents said they felt the Ning was easy to navigate. In 2013, 78% of Annual SSI respondents indicated they received the monthly e-bulletins sent by the coordinator and of those, 71% found them useful.

In the 2013 Annual and Follow-up SSI, students and alumni reported high overall satisfaction with the peer network since they first joined (70% of students and 55% of alumni were satisfied/highly satisfied). Of the students responding to the 2013 Annual SSI, approximately 65% said resources on Ning were helpful in their coursework and careers, and more than 70% reported Ning enabled them to connect with other students across the country. Fifty percent of respondents said they received support from other students through the network.

### *Webinars*

Most students (68% in 2011 SSI; 66% in 2012 SSI) unable to attend live webinars cited scheduling conflicts and work/school priorities as the main reasons for not attending. For those who attended, satisfaction with webinars increased each year. In the 2011 SSI, 64% of respondents said they learned useful information from webinars, increasing to 76% for students and 91% for alumni in 2012. Several student presenters noted the experience enhanced their leadership skills and was highly rewarding.

### *Future Peer Network Activity*

At the end of year four, all SSI respondents were asked how likely they were to participate in a future student peer network hosted on Ning, Facebook, LinkedIn, or an email list serve. More than 50% of respondents indicated they were likely to participate on any platform, suggesting online peer networking and community building is a useful activity for many social workers and a variety of platforms can be used.

## **Discussion**

Based on data gathered during four years of the program, the peer network largely met its goals of offering students additional opportunities for professional and leadership development. While it also met its goal of offering students opportunities for professional and social networking, it did not fully meet its goal of facilitating peer support for practice improvement.

Less than half of eligible students participated in the peer network. It became evident during the course of the program that many traineeship students struggle to balance school, work, and family, leaving little time to participate in a peer network. A core group of students regularly contributed to the peer network, and it was evident these students highly valued the peer network. One of these student said she was sorry more students had not actively participated.

The Ning site's capacity to help students *co-create and shepherd knowledge* was manifest in use of the blog space, discussion forum, and groups. Ning and Facebook offered excellent platforms for fostering *professional and social interaction*. Student interaction

on the sites generally centered on professional topics, but frequent photo-sharing, for example, suggests many students also enjoyed the opportunity to interact with other students on a more social level.

Active facilitation was critical to the success of both sites. When the coordinator's time on the project was increased, she was able to engage with students individually and encourage them to make specific contributions such as posting a discussion or writing a blog. The bi-modal distribution of the peer network between students' experience in the field and those with little to no experience necessitated creating a community relevant to each. Informal feedback suggested many experienced students believed the peer network was oriented toward students with less experience. To better engage experienced students, the coordinator developed a webinar, resource page, and group on supervision and management. She also developed a group and several career development webinars for students with less experience.

Schools of social work or traineeship programs interested in supporting students through an online peer network should consider students' level of professional experience. Some students noted they wanted to be engaged in the peer network as professionals, not just as students; therefore, programs may want to shape the peer network to appeal more to students' sense of professional identity.

### **Evaluation Strengths and Limitations**

The evaluation was primarily developmental in design, allowing the program team to respond to data with needed program modifications. The collaborative approach between the evaluation and programs teams to identify relevant evaluation questions was a major strength of the evaluation. Other strengths included the evaluation's capacity to capture barriers and facilitators to implementation, measure real-time site usage through site observation, and use data from Google Analytics and Ning. As the program evolved, SSI evaluation questions about the peer network were revised. A limitation of the evaluation was the lack of consistency in questions about the peer network from year to year. Although valuable annual data was collected, the team could not compare some measures across student cohorts. Another weakness of the evaluation was the low alumni response rate. Future studies might increase response rates by using pop-up surveys embedded in social media or community sites or by conducting focus groups of users and non-users.

### **Conclusion**

Increased use of technology can enhance social work education and practice. Schools of social work are encouraged to consider using online community platforms or social media to enhance student comfort with these technologies and to support their learning and professional development. As schools of social work migrate toward offering full or hybrid online education, online community-building for students and professionals will only increase in importance.

Specifically, supporting social work students and alumni as they transition into child welfare careers has emerged as an important issue for educators and administrators (Anderson, Coulborn Faller, & Leake, 2013). Online communities and social media can

play a role in the professional socialization of students entering the field (Miller, 2010) and as a transition support for professionals continuing their careers at an agency after earning a professional degree.

A community facilitator of an online community for social work students must be given adequate time to devote to the task of facilitation. He or she must become familiar with the best principles and practices of online community engagement including developing a community identity, creating a safe space, motivating members to participate, and increasing member commitment. The facilitator also should review current literature on social presence in online communities.

Further research is needed to better understand how social work programs can optimally use online communities and social media to support social work students and alumni. Potential research questions include: What is the aptitude of entering students in the use of these technologies? To what extent are programs encouraging use of these technologies? What do we know from social work alumni about how these technologies are being used in the field? With more data, social work educators will be able to further enhance learning with technology.

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