Special Issue Editorial

Andrew Quinn

Social work professors have been reviewing the fit of technology in education since the 1950s when audiovisual materials were used for training (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). Throughout the early to late 1980s, the social work field began to see a push to use Internet technology in the classroom. This led to a gathering of social work educators (the 1998 Information Technologies for Social Work Education and Practice group, hosted by the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina) interested in using technology for educational purposes. Such gatherings led to an increase in publications debating what courses we should teach, how we should teach them, and how to best use technology to our advantage to reach our students. Now almost 20 years after the first gathering of social work educators for the sole purpose of discussing technology, we are entering our second iteration of the conference (now hosted by Indiana University and the Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], beginning in 2015) and another opportunity for social work professors to gather and discuss the role of technology in social work education.

Technology has changed since the first South Carolina technology conference. Compared to the use of interactive television discussed at the conference by the likes of Petracchi and Patchner (2000, 2001) and Haga and Heitkamp (2000), where a student had to drive to a location to receive real-time education through a television screen, we can now deliver from anywhere to anyone in the world in the convenience of the students' home or workplace (or our home or workplace) using synchronous technologies like Adobe Connect Professional (Quinn, Regan, & Schoech, 2008) or asynchronous approaches such as virtual role plays delivered through a course management system (Levine, 2013). The ever-changing face of technology has allowed us to become creative in our delivery methods and really offer our content to those at a distance, those who are place bound, or those who do not have reasonable access to a campus for classroom instruction. In fact, according to the CSWE's most current information, over 40 programs offer distance education (CSWE, n.d.). However, regardless of the type of technology used in the delivery, the debate remains: a) What courses can we teach using technology (including practice and field, b) What are the best practices in teaching our courses, c) What are the technology competencies that we should teach our students, and d) How can we best use technology to reach a broader population of students? This special edition of *Advances in Social Work* includes articles based on presentations at the *2015 Social Work Distance Education Conference* hosted by Indiana University and CSWE and offers some insight to the debate.

Articles in this Edition

This special issue contains seven articles that emerged from presentations made during the conference. One of the challenges in offering distance education is engagement. Two of the articles in this edition focus on engagement, whether it was direct engagement of the student or engagement of faculty who teach in the distance program. First, Rapp-McCall

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and Anyikwa focus on which active learning strategies are best used to engage students in an online research methods course and to reduce anxiety while increasing student perceptions of knowledge. These strategies include contact with the professor, synchronous class sessions, and synchronous activities such as games and discussions. Second, Schwartz shares outcomes of interviews with several faculty and adjuncts about their experiences teaching for a large program on the west coast. Her qualitative analysis demonstrated that the respondents appreciated the diversity that distance education offerings bring, although there were some challenges related to community-building among faculty, especially those far from campus and those who only taught part-time, and there were also some challenges building community between students and faculty. For example, not having the ability for informal discussions that typically occur in campus offices and hallways was seen as a hindrance to engagement. However, when synchronous technologies were used along with email communication, Schwartz reports that some faculty felt like their distance teaching experience was no different than the on-campus experience.

This comparison, distance versus campus, was also the focus of several articles in this special edition. Cotton, Faul, and Yankeelov examined differences between distance students and campus students related to demographics and performance variables (cumulative GPA, critical thinking scores, and CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation [EPAS] competency scores). While they ultimately found subtle differences between campus and distance demographics, there were no significant differences between the two in terms of performance variables. Brown and Park compared students' practice evaluation knowledge and their research self-efficacy, both within and between a campus class and a distance online class. Like Cotton and colleagues, Brown and Park found no differences between the two types of offerings. Next, Forgey and Ortega-Williams examined the much debated question of "Can practice be taught online?" The authors compared a face-to-face and an online generalist practice course on several outcome measures, including but not limited to learning outcomes, student perception of how learning objectives were met, the quality of the learning environment, and teaching strategies. For the most part, no significant differences were seen between the face-to-face and the online sections. These aforementioned demonstrations of no significant differences between face-to-face and distance education offerings adds support to the existing suggestions that we can move our educational practices online without affecting learning outcomes. This, in turn, creates opportunities to move away from the comparison and focus on the types of courses, the pedagogical approaches best suited for distance education, and best practices for the types of technology that can be used in distance education.

While an actual comparison between face-to-face and distance classes was not undertaken, Fitch, Canada, Cary, and Freese offered their thoughts on using technology to conduct online role plays that according to the authors demonstrated there was "no distinguishable time and effort demands associated with the online video conferencing compared to classroom role plays." The final paper in this special edition comes from Sage and Sage, who describe the results of a survey that asked child welfare workers about the use of social media. While their particular research was not necessarily rooted in a distance education classroom, social media is becoming a presence in education and in the

profession. In fact, Sage and Sage demonstrated the need for training on proper use of social media in social work. They noticed that very few of their participants received any lengthy training (greater than an hour) in their respective social work programs. Their findings raise questions regarding the proper training on technology competency since technology has become such a substantial part of social work practice.

This special edition concludes with a reflection piece written by Jo Ann Coe Regan, a mentor, co-author, and the Vice President of Education at CSWE. Dr. Regan was involved in the South Carolina conference and is now heavily involved in the Indiana conference. Her piece, which was commissioned for this special edition, reflects back on the early years of technology adoption in social work and offers tribute to Dean Frank Raymond, an innovator and educator, who desired to bring the technology conversation to the forefront. She reminds us that we need educators like Dean Raymond who are willing to engage in conversation about best practices related to technology and social work education. Dr. Regan, in concluding her reflections, also reminds us that conferences and special editions (such as this one) are absolutely necessary to keep the conversation about the use of technology in social work education alive.

Conclusion

The landscape of social work education is changing, and distance conferences such as the *Social Work Distance Education Conference* hosted by Indiana University and CSWE allow for conversations to occur. We as social work educators need to continue to research best practices in distance education, so that we can learn which approaches are most efficient to implement and the most effective for instructing distance learning students. In doing so, we need to move beyond comparing classroom to online, asking questions about whether practice can occur online, and move toward some of the upcoming challenges such as virtual field placements. As a social work educator who is invested in the use of technology in education, I encourage us to continue the debate about best practices as it relates to distance education in social work.

We hope to see you April 14-17, 2017 in San Antonio for the 3rd Annual Social Work Distance Education Conference.

Andrew Quinn, PhD
March 2016

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Active Learning Strategies and Instructor Presence in an Online Research Methods Course: Can we Decrease Anxiety and Increase Perceived Knowledge?

Lisa Rapp
Victoria Anyikwa

Abstract: *Research methods courses elicit more anxiety than usual for graduate social work students, and the online environment may pose an even greater challenge as the personal interaction between instructor and student is reduced or absent. It is therefore incumbent on research instructors to creatively engage students, reduce anxiety, and foster learning. There is a dearth of evidence, particularly regarding online education, explicating specific teaching strategies. This exploratory study sought to provide some answers. First-semester MSW students were invited to participate in a voluntary, anonymous, online survey at the end of a research methods course to determine which online teaching strategies were most effective in decreasing anxiety and increasing perception of knowledge. Strategies used in the class include asynchronous activities such as discussion questions, PowerPoint lectures, and email and telephone contact with instructors in addition to synchronous class sessions. Three tactics were rated by the 43 respondents as being most helpful for both decreasing anxiety and enhancing the perception of knowledge: personal contact with the instructor either via email, phone, and/or online meetings; the instructor's synchronous class sessions; and active learning strategies employed during the synchronous class sessions. Implications for teaching and future research are discussed.*

Keywords: *Teaching strategies; active learning; instructor presence; online learning; anxiety reduction*

Online learning in higher education has proliferated in recent years resulting in the adaptation of courses from traditional to online formats without much consideration for the course content or learning process (Tsai, 2012). A study by Castaño-Muñoz, Duart, and Sancho-Vinuesa (2014) noted that to encourage student learning, cooperative and interactive learning strategies which are effective in face-to-face courses must also be incorporated in online courses. Likewise, Xu and Jaggars (2014) found that students generally view online courses as isolating and lacking in instructor presence. In these courses, students feel that they must teach themselves. Consequently, most students report trying to avoid taking "difficult" or "important" courses online.

Besides a delivery barrier, some courses pose more challenges than others for the online environment of students. In graduate-level social work programs, the research methods course is often a concern in both traditional and online formats. This is a difficult course requiring students to learn a vast amount of new knowledge and skills in a short time frame. In addition, the students in graduate social work programs come from a wide variety of undergraduate majors and backgrounds, and many have never been exposed to the terms and concepts of research.

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The situation is exacerbated by the students' attitudes towards research, which have been reported as disinterested, irrelevant, bored, and annoyed (Lundahl, 2008; Schulze, 2009). Studies have noted that research courses also provoke anxiety in students (DeVaney, 2010; Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Stauffer, 2001). Green et al. (2001) compared research anxiety across various disciplines and found MSW students had higher anxiety than their counterparts regarding research methods and analysis.

Student anxiety is a serious concern in the learning environment as it has been found to have a negative relationship to learning outcomes (Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, & Waytowich, 2008). Chan and Lee (2005) noted that student anxiety creates a barrier to learning, and Ramsden (1992) found it affects learning styles and can inhibit deep learning. While Gal and Ginsberg (1993) suggest students' preconceived ideas about the subject are the root cause of anxiety, this was found most frequently for math, statistics, and science courses. As such, research methods delivered in an online environment may be experienced as even more daunting than traditional formats, making the use of effective teaching strategies critical.

Active Learning Pedagogical Approach

Active learning strategies have been found to be very effective in traditional classrooms (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Freeman et al., 2014). Active learning strategies are based on earlier constructivism theories that are rooted in the works of psychologists Jean Piaget, who focused on individuals' cognitive development processes (Lefmann & Combs-Orme, 2013), and Lev Vygotsky, who focused on socio-cultural learning and meaning making through social interaction, problem-solving, peer facilitation, and questioning (Jaramillo, 1996). Constructivism learning theories posit that individuals learn through cognitive processes, thereby building and creating their own understanding and knowledge of a phenomenon based on experiences, and through social constructivism, learning from each other and building on their own cognitive schemas, thus broadening knowledge and understanding (Drew & Mackie, 2011; Powell & Kalina, 2009). When applied to the classroom, active learning pedagogical strategies go beyond the traditional delivery of lecturing on the part of the instructor by engaging students through interactive activities where they can apply what they have learned (Berry, 2008). Lundahl (2008) noted that deeper-level learning occurs when students are directly involved with the material.

Watkins, Carnell, and Lodge (2007) define active learning as having three components. The first is *behavioral,* where students are engaged in instructor-created activities; the second is *cognitive,* where students are engaged in critical thinking and decision-making, thus making use of critical thinking skills; and the third component is *social,* as students engage with each other. Building upon the work of Watkins et al.(2007), Drew and Mackie (2011) added *affect* as a fourth component, drawing on the classic model of Bloom's taxonomy (1965) that recognizes students' motivational capacity in the affective domain. This implies the importance of the instructor's role or presence in explicating the pertinence of the content for students and creating an environment in which students want to learn. It also suggests that instructors need to be attentive to students' anxiety towards the content, as well as the format of the course.

Instructor Presence

Instructor presence, as described by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), involves instructors facilitating course flow and content, encouraging student participation, directly interacting with students, providing timely responses to questions, and promoting involvement with discussion questions. Studies suggest that the instructor is essential to the learning community and have found learning outcomes directly tied to active instructor presence in the course (Picciano, 2002; Swan & Shih, 2005). Interaction with instructors has been found to have a strong positive effect on satisfaction and learning (Swan, 2001). Boettcher and Conrad (2010) go as far as proposing that instructor presence is one of the most important practices for online teaching.

Most educators strive to reduce students' anxiety and enhance learning outcomes but are not sure which strategies can accomplish these goals (Schacht & Stewart, 1990). This is especially true for courses such as research methods, which is not easily taught in an online format. Several studies found success in teaching traditional social work research courses with active learning strategies (Barrakat, 2005; Marek, Christopher, & Walker, 2004; Walsh, 1998), but little has been reported for online courses. Currently, there is scant evidence regarding what specific teaching strategies assist in reducing research anxiety and augmenting research knowledge, especially in online social work research courses.

This exploratory study begins to fill some gaps in this area by seeking to answer the following: a) What online teaching strategies are effective for decreasing students' anxiety? b) What online teaching strategies are effective for increasing students' perception of acquiring research knowledge?

Methods

Research Methods Course

This study was conducted at a liberal arts university with an online MSW program. All students take online courses which include a variation of synchronous and asynchronous components. The foundation level research methods course was delivered online over 16 weeks and included both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Synchronous sessions were held each week for 90 minutes and were delivered using the Blackboard Collaborate platform where the instructor and students interacted via audio and webcam. Complementing the webcam sessions, the asynchronous platform was delivered using Learning Studio. Weekly modules were listed in tandem with the syllabus, outlining tasks for students to complete independently (e.g., assigned readings and homework) or with each other (e.g., discussion questions and online exercises). Each week students were expected to complete the asynchronous activities (via the Learning Studio site), and to read and prepare for the live Blackboard Collaborate sessions. Synchronous class sessions included review of the content and active learning strategies relating to the three components indicated by Watkins et al. (2007): behavioral components (e.g., games promoting knowledge and understanding), cognitive components (e.g. application exercises), and social components (e.g., group activities where students worked together in small groups). Asynchronous delivery also included the three components, such as voiced-

over PowerPoint lectures, discussion questions, and homework assignments. Weekly announcements and email within the class were also used. Additional contacts with instructors were made through phone calls, emails, and/ or online individual meetings with students who requested assistance. Eight sections of the course were taught by four different instructors, with approximately 12 students in each section. To remain consistent, all sections used the same syllabus, book, format, and course materials. However, each instructor decided on the degree to which they used phone calls, emails, and meetings via webcam.

Procedures

Upon approval of the university Institutional Review Board (IRB), an email was sent at the end of the semester to all students (N=105) enrolled in the eight sections of the course during the fall and spring semesters. The email explained the study procedures and invited students to participate. It also included an implied consent form with a hyperlink to the survey. The web-based survey was administered via the secure Qualtrics website, which ensures that data remain private and encrypted. Students chose to participate by clicking on the hyperlink in the invitation email or in two subsequent reminders. The students were ensured that the survey was in no way related to their course work or grade. The voluntary and anonymous survey was offered to students at the end of the course. They were asked to rate their level of anxiety and their perception of research knowledge before and after the course.

Design

MSW students who completed the research methods course were invited to participate in a voluntary, anonymous, online survey. A posttest only design was used at the end of the fall 2013 and spring 2014 semesters to determine students' perceptions of which online teaching strategies were effective for decreasing their anxiety and increasing their research knowledge.

Measures

The researcher-created measure asked students to rate their level of anxiety as well as their level of perceived research knowledge before and after the course. They were also asked to rate the effectiveness of teaching strategies in reducing their anxiety and increasing their perception of research knowledge separately. The measure consisted of 20 items with ten focusing on anxiety and ten focusing on knowledge using a Likert-type scale (see Appendix). An example question was, "Prior to the beginning of the course, how would you rate your level of anxiety about Social work research methods?" Students responded on scale ranging from 1 (*Not anxious at all*) to 5 (*Extremely anxious)*. Another example included, "How helpful were the online discussion questions on Learning Studio in increasing your knowledge of social work research methods?" Students responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*They caused more confusion)* to 5 (*Extremely helpful*).

To test the internal reliability of the measure, a Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the ten items regarding anxiety and separately for the ten items regarding knowledge. The

results for both tests were α=0.82, which suggests good internal consistency of the measure (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Analytic Plan

Descriptive analysis and paired sample t-tests were used to compare differences in students' reported anxiety and knowledge. Forty-three students completed the survey over two semesters for a response rate of 41%. According to Sue and Ritter (2007), email surveys generally have response rates between 27-71%, indicating this response rate to be typical.

Results

The analysis of the survey results indicated a significant difference between students' pre- and posttest perception of knowledge $t(43)=14.05$, $p<0.001$ and pre and post levels of anxiety $t(43)=6.47$, $p<0.001$, with knowledge increasing and anxiety decreasing by the end of the course. The effect sizes, as determined by Cohen's *d* for paired measures, were 0.91 for knowledge and 0.71 for anxiety (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Students' Knowledge and Anxiety and T-Tests of Pre-Post Differences with Effect Sizes*

	Pretest M (SD)	**Posttest M (SD)**	***t***	***df***	***p***	***d***
Perception of Knowledge	1.93 (0.68)	3.38 (0.54)	14.049	42	<.001**	0.91
Anxiety	3 (1.22)	1.91 (0.65)	6.465	42	<.001**	0.71

p< .01**

The effectiveness of the various teaching strategies were indicated by students' mean ratings. All of the strategies were rated as more than moderately helpful with some having greater impact than others. The same three strategies were rated as the most helpful by students for both increasing perception of knowledge and reducing their: personal contact with the instructor either via email, phone, and/or online meetings (*M*=4.37; *M*=4.40); the instructor's synchronous class sessions (*M*=4.28; *M*=4.16); and active learning strategies employed during the synchronous class sessions (i.e., games, exercises, discussions, cases, etc.; *M*=4.05; *M*=3.72). The strategies rated the least helpful by students in both increasing perception of knowledge and reducing their anxiety were homework assignments (*M*=3.53; *M*=3.23), the online voice-over PowerPoint lectures (*M*=3.57; *M* =3.29), and online discussion questions (*M*=3.56; *M*=3.33). The textbook was rated as helpful for learning but less helpful for reducing students' anxiety (*M*=3.79; *M*=3.26). See Table 2 for the complete results.

Table 2. *Student Ratings of the Effectiveness of Teaching Strategies for Increasing Knowledge and Reducing Anxiety (n=43)*

	Knowledge	**Anxiety**
	***M* (*SD*)**	***M* (*SD*)**
Contact with the professor	4.37 (0.95)	4.40 (0.85)
Synchronous class session	4.28 (0.80)	4.16 (0.89)
Synchronous activities (games, discussions, etc.)	4.05 (0.87)	3.72 (0.91)
Weekly announcements	3.81 (0.71)	3.63 (0.88)
Discussion questions	3.56 (0.88)	3.33 (0.94)
Textbook	3.79 (0.71)	3.26 (0.96)
Online Power Point lectures	3.57 (0.91)	3.29 (0.84)
Homework assignments	3.53 (0.85)	3.23 (0.83)

Note: Each item was rated on a 5-point scale in which 1=Caused more confusion/anxiety and 5=Extremely helpful.

Discussion

Overall, the results were positive for this course, as students' anxiety decreased and their perception of research knowledge increased by the end of the course. The findings were similar to Picciano (2002) and Swan and Shih (2005) who found students' anxiety and knowledge attainment were negatively correlated. This is not surprising as most people feel less anxious learning content with which they have some familiarity. This study confirms that student anxiety is a crucial variable which must be considered when teaching research methods courses, especially in an online format where direct contact is limited and students must perform some activities independently. It is interesting that the same three teaching strategies were responsible for reducing anxiety and increasing perception of knowledge in the students' views but not surprising that all three strategies were active learning strategies and/or involved the instructor. This is especially compelling since not all students had the same instructor for the course or took it during the same semester. Likewise, the strategies rated as least helpful were less interactive.

On average, students rated all of the teaching strategies used in the course as effective (3 or above) however, students still need contact from the instructor, even at the graduate level of education. While active pedagogical strategies require a change in the instructor's approach to teaching so as to include behavioral, cognitive, and social learning opportunities, there is also an implication that the students must also shift their understanding of learner as receiver of information to active and independent participant. Future studies should consider the concept of students' independence or need for validation and how it relates to anxiety and learning.

The results suggest that instructors' involvement and connection with students is essential. Instructor presence in the online environment can be created in ways other than physical presence and ways that increase students' independence. This is particularly important in the asynchronous environment where there is no direct contact with the instructor.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The first is that anxiety was self-reported and both pre- and post-data were gathered at the end of the course. This means that students were asked to remember how anxious they were several months earlier, which can result in inaccurate responses. Another primary concern is that students were asked to rate their perception of knowledge gained, as opposed to using actual course or test grades. In addition, there is a small sample size and lack of a comparison group, thus generalization of our findings is limited. The study is also limited by the use of multiple instructors in the courses and study. Although all were using the same syllabus, course materials, and teaching approach, there is no way to standardize human educators, or control for the instructor in an anonymous survey. The results should be interpreted as exploratory and should be considered as beginning knowledge to initiate more studies regarding the effectiveness of online teaching strategies. Future studies should consider using a traditional pre- and posttest, using course or test grades as a measure of knowledge, having a comparison group, and possibly using a standardized anxiety measure that allows for more objective data on anxiety levels. Students' learning independently from sources other than the instructor should also be assessed.

Implications and Conclusions

This preliminary study maintains that research methods courses continue to be anxiety-provoking for social work students. However, educators' use of the various components (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, and social) of active learning teaching strategies can assist in reducing anxiety and increasing students' knowledge of research, especially for courses taught in an online format. In addition, instructors' frequent engagement with students could help facilitate learning and reduce anxiety. Some suggestions include short voice messages or video clips for announcements in asynchronous environments.

In addition, educators may help students change their beliefs about learning away from a receptor or passive learner to an independent and active participant by assigning activities that facilitate learning apart from the instructor. For instance, activities that can be added include small group projects and peer interactions/exercises which then allow for instructors' positive and frequent feedback individually to students. Scaffolding (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005) is another instructional strategy which assists in strengthening confidence as students slowly build their knowledge and skills as the content progressively increases in difficulty.

Online learning has reduced many logistical hassles and availed educational opportunities to many students who may not have been able to complete traditional class formats. However, learning is not necessarily easier or less anxiety-provoking online, and classes require well-planned strategies by both instructors and students for success. Whether education occurs in a face-to-face format or online, the instructor is still responsible for understanding where each student is situated and integrating strategies that reach them. So that learning may occur, educators are still responsible for reducing barriers (e.g., anxiety) and for being present in the learning of each student. For their part, online students are responsible for active engagement with the course material, their peers, and

their instructor. Further research is needed to specifically address how to create and manage challenging online courses like research methods in graduate-level social work programs.

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Appendix

1. Prior to the beginning of the course, how would you rate your level of anxiety about Social work research methods?
   - o Not anxious at all
   - o A little anxious
   - o Anxious
   - o Very anxious
   - o Extremely anxious

2. Prior to the beginning of the course, how would you rate your knowledge of Social work research methods?
   - o Not knowledgeable at all
   - o Some knowledge
   - o Moderately knowledgeable
   - o Very knowledgeable
   - o Extremely knowledgeable

3. How helpful were the online PowerPoint lectures on Learning Studio in increasing your understanding of Social work research methods?
   - o They caused more confusion
   - o Not helpful
   - o Moderately helpful
   - o Very helpful
   - o Extremely helpful

4. How helpful were the online PowerPoint lectures on Learning Studio in decreasing your anxiety about Social work research methods?
   - o They caused more anxiety
   - o Not helpful
   - o Moderately helpful
   - o Very helpful
   - o Extremely helpful

5. How helpful was the review of course content by the Professor on Collaborate in increasing your understanding of Social work research methods?
   - o It caused more confusion
   - o Not helpful
   - o Moderately helpful
   - o Very helpful
   - o Extremely helpful

6. How helpful was the review of course content by the Professor on Collaborate in decreasing your anxiety about Social work research methods?

- It caused more anxiety
- Not helpful
- Moderately helpful
- Very helpful
- Extremely helpful

7. How helpful were the active Collaborate activities (cases, games, discussions, exercises) in increasing your knowledge of Social work research methods?
   - It caused more confusion
   - Not helpful
   - Moderately helpful
   - Very helpful
   - Extremely helpful

8. How helpful were the active Collaborate activities (cases, games, discussions, exercises) in decreasing your anxiety of Social work research methods?
   - It caused more anxiety
   - Not helpful
   - Moderately helpful
   - Very helpful
   - Extremely helpful

9. How helpful was the textbook in increasing your knowledge in Social work research methods?
   - It caused more confusion
   - Not helpful
   - Moderately helpful
   - Very helpful
   - Extremely helpful

10. How helpful was the textbook in decreasing your anxiety about Social work research methods?
    - It caused more anxiety
    - Not helpful
    - Moderately helpful
    - Very helpful
    - Extremely helpful

11. How helpful were the weekly announcements on Learning Studio from the Professor in increasing your knowledge of Social work research methods?
    - They caused more confusion
    - Not helpful
    - Moderately helpful

- Very helpful
- Extremely helpful

12. How helpful were the weekly announcements on Learning Studio from the Professor in decreasing your anxiety about Social work research methods?
    - They caused more anxiety
    - Not helpful
    - Moderately helpful
    - Very helpful
    - Extremely helpful

13. How helpful were the online Discussion questions on Learning Studio in increasing your knowledge in Social work research methods?
    - They caused more confusion
    - Not helpful
    - Moderately helpful
    - Very helpful
    - Extremely helpful

14. How helpful were the online Discussion questions on Learning Studio in decreasing your anxiety about Social work research methods?
    - They caused more anxiety
    - Not helpful
    - Moderately helpful
    - Very helpful
    - Extremely helpful

15. How helpful were the Learning Studio exercises in increasing your knowledge of Social work research methods?
    - They caused more confusion
    - Not helpful
    - Moderately helpful
    - Very helpful
    - Extremely helpful

16. How helpful were the Learning Studio exercises in decreasing your anxiety about Social work research methods?
    - They caused more anxiety
    - Not helpful
    - Moderately helpful
    - Very helpful
    - Extremely helpful

17. How helpful was the personal contact you had with the Professor (phone call, email, Collaborate) in increasing your knowledge in Social work research methods?
    - o It caused more confusion
    - o Not helpful
    - o Moderately helpful
    - o Very helpful
    - o Extremely helpful
    - o N/A

18. How helpful was the personal contact you had with the Professor (phone call, email, Collaborate, skype) in decreasing your anxiety about Social work research methods?
    - o It caused more anxiety
    - o Not helpful
    - o Moderately helpful
    - o Very helpful
    - o Extremely helpful
    - o N/A

19. How would you rate your current knowledge of Social work research methods?
    - o Not knowledgeable at all
    - o Some knowledge
    - o Moderately knowledgeable
    - o Very knowledgeable
    - o Extremely knowledgeable

20. How would you rate your current level of anxiety about Social work research methods?
    - o Not anxious at all
    - o A little anxious
    - o Anxious
    - o Very anxious
    - o Extremely anxious

Community-Building in a Virtual Teaching Environment

Sara L. Schwartz
June L. Wiley
Charles D. Kaplan

Abstract: *In 2010, the University of Southern California School of Social Work launched its Virtual Academic Center (VAC) to deliver online MSW programming to students located around the country. USC's platform is a significant innovation in offering online education and has transformed the traditional educational model for both students and faculty. This research explores the experiences of faculty teaching via the VAC. Twenty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with USC faculty of different ranks. Inductive data collection using a grounded theory approach with thematic analysis examined experiences teaching in an online program, revealing the strengths and challenges associated with geographic diversity and community-building. Findings warrant the development of innovative practices to build community and to facilitate collaboration among geographically diverse faculty and students in a virtual education program.*

Keywords: *Virtual education; virtual community; geographic diversity*

The virtual delivery of education is a widely discussed topic in the field of social work. While many schools of social work have offered online curriculum to rural and underserved communities for years, the profession is rapidly expanding its use of technology to educate and train a diverse workforce. Advances in technology have created exciting opportunities for both education and practice, broadening boundaries, reducing access barriers, and helping social work become more sustainable in the 21st century. This is an important moment in social work and Flynn, Maiden, Smith, Wiley and Wood (2013) identify it as an emerging paradigm shift in the field. Virtual education creates opportunities for knowledge-sharing and collaborative efforts that can build strong, socially sustainable communities locally and around the world (James, Murray, & Pacheco, 2013; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Shorkey & Uebel, 2014).

A rapidly evolving literature evaluates the impact of online education and details the many successes of virtual social work programs. Much of this research has focused on the student experience, finding that students are largely satisfied with online education and that learning outcomes have little variance across delivery structures (Ayala, 2009; Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Chan, Tsui, Chan, & Hong, 2009; Thyer, Artlet, & Markward, 1998; Woehle & Quinn, 2009; York, 2008). While debate exists about teaching relational and clinical skills to students via an online platform, research indicates that teaching clinical skills virtually is an effective modality with no demonstrated differences among students receiving traditional versus online training (Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Cummings, Fouls, & Chaffin, 2013).

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A separate line of inquiry focuses on faculty experiences of delivering virtual education and the critical role that instructors perform in the successful achievement of student learning outcomes (Beauchamp & Kennewell, 2010; Horvath & Mills, 2011). A growing body of literature identifies specific resources needed for effective online instruction, discusses challenges faced, and evaluates instructor satisfaction (Ayala, 2009; Cappiccie & Desrosiers, 2011; Douville, 2013; Hill Jones, 2015; Horvath & Mills, 2011; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Larsen, Sanders, Astray, & Hole, 2009; Liechty, 2012; Pruitt & Silverman, 2015; Siegel, Jennings, & Conklin, 1998). Identified challenges include comfort with technology or adjusting to technology glitches (Horvath & Mills, 2011; Levin, Whitsett, & Wood, 2013), guidelines to facilitate synchronous communication (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Martin & Parker, 2014), time commitment (Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012), and community-building with other faculty (Dolan, 2011). Suggested resources to support online faculty include technology training, round-the-clock technological support (Cappriccie & Desrosiers, 2011), and mentoring (Smith, 2015).

Online social work programs adhere to different instruction delivery modalities. Web-based technology offers a broad range of options for social work programs to combine asynchronous content, synchronous classroom time, traditional face-to-face time, and on-site field placement training (Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). According to CSWE (2016), as of 2015, 39 Schools of Social Work had adopted a range of curriculum delivery options. For example, some programs require monthly face-to-face meetings combined with weekly asynchronous content. Others provide few live synchronous meetings, relying on other forms of classroom communication via forums, blogs, and email. Some programs combine regularly scheduled synchronous sessions with asynchronous work. While research demonstrates that instructors are largely satisfied with a host of delivery options, there has been limited inquiry into how faculty experience different modalities of online teaching and build virtual relationships with each other as well as their students.

The USC Virtual Academic Center

The University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work launched its Virtual Academic Center (VAC) in 2010, providing 80 students the opportunity to earn an MSW degree via a fully online, interactive platform that combines weekly asynchronous assignments, weekly synchronous classroom time, and on-the-ground field experiences in each student's local community (Flynn et al., 2013). The virtual campus enables students and faculty living in communities outside of Southern California to participate in USC's highly ranked MSW program (U.S. News, 2012). As of April 2015, 2,230 students have enrolled in the program and have been taught by over 375 full-time and part-time instructors (Adams, Maiden, & Wind, 2015). The USC program was one of the first elite research universities to offer its highly ranked MSW program via an entirely online platform (USC Online, 2016). The program delivers excellence in education internationally, reduces access barriers and frequent military moves, overcomes situational factors preventing relocation, and removes disability-related barriers (Anstadt, Burnette, & Bradley, 2011; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Tandy & Meacham, 2009).

While geographic diversity is an important strength of the program, it raises unique challenges related to training and supervising faculty, as well as relationship and community-building (Smith, 2015). Given the profession's emphasis on understanding the person-in-environment, it is important to uncover the experiences of USC's virtual faculty in order to inform best practices. This paper presents findings from qualitative research exploring USC faculty experiences teaching via the virtual campus. This research examined the instructor experience in a geographically diverse fully online program. While literature considers online educator experiences, less attention has been given to the social work educator in the fully virtual environment and no attention has been given to faculty living and working from distant locations. An inductive Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) using NVivo10 software guided the initial data collection of 25 semi-structured faculty interviews. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was used to analyze the data. The specific aims of this research were to: a) characterize instructor motivations for online teaching, b) learn about instructor experiences and teacher-student relationships in virtual classrooms, c) understand community-building and relationships among faculty in virtual social work education, and d) uncover opportunities and challenges for virtual classroom instructors. Knowledge gained from this research was expected to strengthen the VAC and facilitate understanding of faculty delivering education in online communities.

Methods

An exploratory cross-sectional design utilizing qualitative methods was developed to meet the specific aims of the study. Given that USC employs over 300 faculty members to teach in the virtual social work program, an initial step in this project was formulating an appropriate sampling strategy. The inclusion criterion for selection in the sample was having taught a minimum of at least one year in the VAC to capture perspectives of faculty familiar with the platform. In addition, it was important to represent the different types of online instructors: 1) Tenure Line, 2) Non-Tenure Track Faculty (NTTF), Clinical Teaching, 3) NTTF Adjunct, and 4) Field. Forty-eight faculty members were recruited for participation using a combination of purposive and quota non-probability sampling strategies to ensure representation from the four lines presented above. This sampling strategy captured the points of view of all faculty lines, each of which play an essential role in curriculum development and delivery.

Following approval from the USC's Institutional Review Board in May 2014, the Director of the VAC sent an introductory email to all 48 individuals selected for participation. This email included information about the research, protection of human subjects, consent procedures, and contact information for questions and comments. In June 2014, a second email was distributed to schedule interviews. Thirty-three individuals (69%) responded to email recruitment, with five refusals and twenty-five faculty successfully scheduling interviews (three did not follow-up after expressing interest). The first author electronically responded to interested participants to schedule an interview day and time. During these initial contacts, participants were informed that their identity would remain anonymous and that no identifying information would be collected. Candidates

learned that their telephone interviews would be recorded, transcribed, and stored in a password-protected Dropbox file accessed only by the researchers.

Interviews occurred between August 6, 2014 and October 21, 2014. The researcher contacted each participant via telephone. Once permission to turn on the audio recording was received, the interviewing began. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary, that their identities would remain anonymous, and that no harm was anticipated as a result of their involvement. Informed consent was collected and recorded for each individual. The interviews adhered to a semi-structured interview schedule that was comprised of fifteen questions, with eight of the questions collecting demographic information on variables such as gender, race, and years of teaching experience. The other seven questions were open-ended with prompts designed to elicit information about online teaching experiences. For example, question #5 asked participants to "Describe the relationships that you have with your students on the VAC." An associated prompt is "Have you noticed a difference in your VAC student relationships as compared to your other teaching experiences?" See Appendix A for the complete Interview Schedule.

Data Analysis

Data collection and interview selection adhered to traditional grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis followed principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) using NVivo 10 software for data management and organization. The iterative analysis was completed in four steps. The first step of open coding was concurrent with early data collection to ensure that the data encompassed content related to the specific aims of the study. The analysis of interviews 1-12 resulted in an initial codebook of 48 nodes that was developed by the first author and approved by the two co-authors. Selective coding of interviews 13-16 comprised step 2, resulting in theoretical saturation and a reduced codebook of 21 nodes and three overarching themes. In step 3, the two co-authors independently selectively coded interviews 17-22, validating the nodes and themes. The final step of the analysis was an analytic seminar attended by all three authors, reviewing the codebook for completion and selectively coding interviews 23-25 collectively. The seminar concluded with agreement on the thematic schema presented in this paper.

Results

Sample

The initial sample was comprised of 20 adjunct, 18 clinical teaching, 8 tenure line and 2 field faculty members. Twenty-five individuals (52% of the invited sample) completed telephone interviews with the first author. The final sample represents 12 (48%) adjuncts, 7 (28%) clinical teaching, 5 (20%) tenure-track and 1 (4%) field faculty member. Twenty-one individuals (84%) identify as female, 17 (68%) identify as White, and four (16%) identify as African-American. Sixteen individuals (64%) were over the age of 50 years, with nine (36%) in their 60s, 7 (28%) in their 50s, 7 (28%) in their 40s, and 2 (8%) in their 30s. The sample had an average of 14 years teaching experience, with a spread of 1 to over 30 years.

Overarching Themes

Data analysis resulted in the identification of three over-arching themes that emerged from the data: Geographic Diversity, Community-Building among Faculty, and Community-Building among Faculty and Students.

Theme 1: Building a Geographically Diverse Academic Community

Almost all faculty verbalized appreciation for the geographic diversity that the virtual platform brings to the classroom. Unlike many online social work programs, the VAC does not limit program acceptance by region. Thus, students are located in 49 of the 50 United States and some live abroad, generally on military bases located in Guam, Germany, and France. Many related that the inclusion of this form of diversity deepened the learning experiences for both students and faculty alike. As one female instructor in her mid-40s relates:

> *I think it has provided an opportunity to bring diversity – more of a diversity spectrum or framework to the classroom. You know, we often think of diversity in religion, sexual orientation, gender or what not but we really, I mean, to get a sense of how it's actually different to live in the South than it is in the West and in the East…there's just a difference in some respects. I think that diversity is valuable in the classroom.*

Another male instructor who has taught in the VAC for almost four years echoes this sentiment:

> *…It makes for really fascinating discussions where the students can get really engaged. Policies, legislation and all that plays out very differently across the country, whereas if all the students are in San Diego County there is not as much variety with that. I think that having the riches of all the different experiences and communities as well as orientations, backgrounds of the students. There's a lot more variety so you can do a lot with diversity discussions, policy and all that. That's some really rich material for a professor teaching on the VAC.*

A relatively new part-time female instructor in the VAC relates her thoughts that summarize the general feeling of the VAC faculty: "*I think that it is phenomenal to be able to reach people around the world."*

The majority of the participants clearly appreciated the geographic diversity of the student body and how it impacts classroom discussions and dynamics. However, only two considered the opportunities that a geographically diverse faculty bring to the program, as reflected in the following perspective provided by a long-time female USC School of Social Work instructor with experience teaching both on the ground and in the VAC:

> *From an organizational standpoint, I think it's given us an opportunity to attract some really stellar folks to teach for us, that we otherwise wouldn't have been able to do. But they are really amazing practitioners and leaders in the profession and they've been attracted to what we are doing here. So, organizationally, it's been an amazing thing that we've been able to achieve by doing this.*

Theme 2: Community-Building Among Faculty

Community-building was a frequent topic discussed during the interviews, with participants representing different points of view. One perspective held by several individuals is that the USC School of Social Work has become so large that there are inherent challenges to maintaining a sense of community on one campus let alone across several. One person notes that it is "not realistic" to expect a campus so large to have a shared sense of community. Others offer that the large number of part-time instructors in the VAC create separate challenges for building community. For example, many adjunct faculty members elect to teach part-time so they can also have a clinical practice or alternative career. These individuals may not have the time or inclination to be involved with the school community outside of their teaching responsibilities.

Despite these perspectives, most participants reported concern about relationship building among faculty across the campuses. Many expressed feelings of isolation in their work and from other instructors. Some identified difficulties developing connections with faculty who live outside of Los Angeles. Those living afar noted feeling alienated from the School of Social Work. The geographic diversity that makes the VAC so unique can also pose barriers to informal networking and can cultivate feelings of isolation for some faculty. As one female professor with over 20 years of teaching experience expressed:

> *Teaching on the VAC, for me, having been based in both Los Angeles and San Diego prior to being in the virtual program, has felt pretty isolating. I have felt like I don't have enough communication and interaction with colleagues.*

Several individuals identify missed opportunities for informal relationship-building at faculty meetings or simply having a chance to engage in "water cooler talk" between classes. These informal get-togethers help people recognize each other and, over time, may encourage community-building. While VAC instructors are invited to attend faculty meetings virtually, they sometimes conflict with other schedules or time zones. Additionally, although meeting attendance creates opportunities for faculty to interact on the platform, several weeks or months can pass between meetings. This lapse in time creates barriers to nurturing new relationships and keeping the dialogue moving forward. As one female Los Angeles-based faculty member reflects:

> *It's like, you and I can have a really great rapport, but if we don't ever….you know, we many never interact again. So, it was just a really nice conversation but it does not build community.*

Others note that this lack of consistent communication and ability for informal interaction limits opportunities for faculty to collaborate on research or communicate about shared students. A suggestion made by many is for USC to find opportunities to bring faculty in person together once or twice a year. As one female instructor with over three years' experience teaching in the VAC suggests:

> *I think it's key to at least provide opportunities for faculty members to come together as a full body of faculty as we do on the ground. I've found that that's been the way that connections have been established, research opportunities have opened up, writing, all those types of things. There are opportunities that just*

> *happened just in conversations walking in the same physical space in the hallway. 'I've done that – if you're interested in this, I'm on this research project would you like to participate?' You know there are things like that that happen by the nature of being in the same physical space but I don't know how that happens to the VAC – so I think creating some opportunity for that.*

Another idea introduced is to host bi-annual faculty meetings by region so that people living in the same part of the country can get to know each other. Others recommend developing alternative methods for community-building that do not require meeting in person. This perspective considers establishing virtual opportunities for connection using the Adobe Connect platform built for the VAC. Considering alternative strategies is exemplified by a male tenure line instructor:

> *There should be 'here is one strategy for engaging students and faculty' but it doesn't…because to me it always ends this message that meeting in person or on the ground, coming to campus, is always best. And that maybe is the case but it feels premature to me, at this point. To me, it seems like we should explore more and be open to the fact that, yeah, it's just different. You get to engage in that way when it's live, but how do you build a sense of community that is as rich, as rewarding, with your students and your colleagues when you do it online and feel that it is just as good, if not better, than meeting on the ground.*

Theme 3: Community-building Among Faculty and Students

While there is general consensus about challenges faced building community among faculty, participants held varying opinions on community-building between faculty and students. Using Adobe Connect technology, faculty facilitate weekly 75-minute synchronous class discussions. For some, community-building with students in the classroom and over email has been a productive experience. Several reflect that there is little difference in their ability to build community with students online as compared to their experiences teaching in a traditional setting. One male instructor in his mid-40s with over ten years teaching experience shares:

> *I develop relationships with the students totally online at the same quality I would say as on the ground. Again, the modality of interaction on the phone, or office hours, not in the same air space that's a little bit different but in terms of the person-to-person connection or the professor-to-student connection its absolutely just as good.*

Another male teaching both on the ground and in the VAC indicates:

> *I wouldn't say that there's any difference based on geographical location, no. I think that the relationship is the same regardless of whether they are on the East Coast, or whether they are international, or in the South, or Midwest or North. I don't necessarily see any difference.*

Others identify challenges building community with students that are commonly associated with geography. As with community-building among faculty, some participants feel that not having informal interactions around campus limits their ability to get to know

their students outside of the classroom. Along a similar vein, some suggest that it can be challenging to mentor students that are taking virtual classes in a traditional sense. For example, if living across the country from each other, an instructor would not be able to connect students with local resources or professional contacts. One tenure-line female professor with over 30 years teaching experience reflects:

> *There is no way that I could have the same connections in their different cities to help them. There's no way you can develop the same kind of rapport and that they can benefit from some of the relationship with me in the same way as if they're on the ground and walking around and dropping in.*

Another instructor, a tenured female teaching both on the ground and in the VAC shares:

> *On campus you can see people on the quad…you can see people formally in the classroom and you see people informally. And I didn't have that opportunity with the online students. Kind of more came to class and then if they needed something, I was in touch with them but it was never…like we were all attending the same lecture, we went to this lunch, or they were, you know, tabling in the quad and I was able to go talk to them about their cause.*

While a handful of participants identified barriers to community-building with students, the majority reported that geography does not limit their ability to know or mentor students. Some reflect that, regardless of modality, there are always going to be some students who seek mentorship and deeper relationships with their professors more than others. Several participants acknowledged that it is easier for students to be anonymous in a virtual classroom, thus faculty need to develop strategies to engage students throughout the term. One instructor requires all of her students, regardless of campus, schedule a private meeting at some point in the term. She explains:

> *One of the things that I like to do with the students that were a bit of a surprise with the VAC students was try to have a quick individual meeting with everybody – private – just to get to know them a little bit. Make them more comfortable talking to me so I have students that have to come see me in my office or make a VAC appointment before the midterm.*

Others relate that they use synchronous class time to stimulate group discussions and build community. As one female professor in her mid-sixties shares:

> *What I try to do in the synchronous portion is to really sort of ask the kinds of questions that stimulate discussion among students. I always start my course talking about who I am and why I'm teaching this course and then I ask them about who they are. I really try to get to understand where they are coming from.*

Several respondents noted that features of the virtual classrooms successfully facilitate relationship-building among the students and with faculty. Most participants appreciate the smaller classroom size on the VAC, and many value the ability to use the breakout rooms for small group exercises and the chat pod to build community. As one female instructor with over a decade of teaching experience reflects:

I do like the smaller classes and I see a great deal of collegiality that is built and respect for each other and interest….like you have the little chat box that's going on at the side and I always look to see, for example, how someone shared something and others will jump in and comment. That doesn't happen in the ground classes, where people give feedback immediately to their peers. I think in many ways the peer support is greater on the VAC even though they are not in the same physical space.

Discussion

This qualitative research study aimed to explore the specific experiences of instructors in USC's VAC. An especially significant motivation of the faculty was the opportunity to teach a geographically diverse body of students that stretches across the entire U.S. and into other countries. In teaching in traditional on-the-ground classrooms, instructors may experience a diversity of sociodemographic characteristics, but the students are all constrained to one geographic location. In contrast to traditional programs, VAC instructors virtually interact with students embedded in different locations with various perspectives that would be difficult to experience otherwise. Existing literature touches on the unique characteristics of students attracted to virtual education, including students being older, representing rural communities, and having financial and family responsibilities that prohibit traditional graduate education programs (Flynn et al, 2013; Hill Jones, 2015; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Reamer, 2013; Stotzer, 2012). However, participants in this study consider an alternative type of classroom diversity that is largely unrepresented in the literature. As an example, one participant identified the unique ability to examine the implementation of social policies in different communities around the country. Future examination of VAC student diversity and its impact on educational and career outcomes of graduates may create greater understanding of how to build and sustain national and international social work educational communities.

While study participants largely appreciated the diversity of their virtual students, the limited attention given to the geographic diversity of the faculty was surprising. In fact, in many ways, the distance among faculty was considered a limitation to relationship building and collaboration as was illustrated by the statements related in Theme 2, Community-building among Faculty. USC is one of the first schools of social work to employ faculty who are not based in the same location as the ground campus, representing a unique education delivery system (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). Research suggests that, even with the most advanced technology, the lack of shared physical spaces for interaction is a challenge for both students and faculty (Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Smith, 2015). Voices represented in this study echo existing literature suggesting that virtual educators can experience a sense of isolation and alienation from colleagues, students, and the larger organization (Smith, 2015). While a growing body of research considers a developing pedagogy for virtual education and for using technology to facilitate community-building with students (Hill Jones, 2015; Horvath & Mills, 2011), there is less emphasis on faculty perspectives and experiences. Examining how to transcend these challenges and reframe geographic diversity of faculty is something that warrants investigation in the future.

The instructor experiences of community-building with faculty and students in virtual classrooms were seen to have many similarities but also significant differences in physicality. Establishing and working with this difference in student-faculty and faculty-faculty community-building in the VAC provides both opportunities and challenges for the future growth of the program. Apart from the physicality, the scale of the VAC can be daunting, and there may be emergent challenges to programming and community-building presented by the mere size and rapid growth of the program (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015; Pruitt & Silverman, 2015; Reamer, 2013). Future research should explore what might be the optimal size of the VAC platform in terms of numbers of students and faculty to build effective community. Getting all students and faculty, particularly the pool of part-time adjunct instructors, together in one physical or virtual meeting is probably not realistic; however, smaller regionalized meetings should be considered as should virtual opportunities for community-building.

Study Limitations

The study was primarily limited by the extent of its analysis, which was restricted to a qualitative methodological approach that identified themes that were largely descriptive. This qualitative methodology precludes quantitative inferences about the relationships among the themes and perspectives described in this paper. It would have been useful to conduct more analysis mapping of the identified themes to abstract concepts grounded in the data, and to systematically relate them to specific concepts found in the literature. The use of non-probability purposive and quota sampling limits our ability to generalize the findings beyond the USC faculty members interviewed for the study. Comparison of cases representing the different strata of the purposive sampling design would have provided one way to increase the extent of the analysis and move from description to explanation. The fact that only one interviewer was used to complete all of the interviews and that this individual is an instructor in the VAC creates the potential for interviewer bias. Lastly, quite a few programmatic changes have been made since the original interviews took place. Many of these changes were designed to create more opportunities to connect faculty across campuses and build a more cohesive community. The data presented in this paper do not represent programmatic changes made after the data collection.

Conclusion

The VAC challenges the basic assumptions that have guided social work education from its beginning as a profession. Our research has shown that certain basic assumptions of social work education concerning geographical uniformity, physicality, and scale of community-building among faculty members with each other and their students have been challenged by the VAC. The program has undoubtedly increased access to and opportunities for quality MSW education as well as introduced a model for the wider social transformation of education. But with this innovative model specific unintended consequences and lessons learned have emerged that need to be investigated and applied in future research on the VAC and similar internet-based models of social work education. At bare minimum, the formative research presented in this paper documents that social work has entered into a new design of the classroom in which everyone is seated in the

front row. In this new design, the opportunities and challenges for community-building are impressive, but need to be specifically addressed in order to determine future directions of social work education in the virtual environment.

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Appendix A

VAC Faculty Interview Schedule

Thank you for participating in this study! We are eager to learn about your experiences as an instructor in the Virtual Academic Center. The information that you and your colleagues share will be completely anonymous and will help develop a knowledge base around the instructor experience in an online social work community.

Your identity will remain completely confidential. While your interview will be tape recorded and transcribed, your personal identity will not be attached to the interview. Your identity for the purposes of this study will be your interview number (e.g., Interview #1, Interview #2, etc.). The only individual who will be able to link your name with your interview transcript will be the person conducting the interview. This information will be held in the strictest confidence. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and no harm is anticipated to occur as a result of this interview.

Do you consent to participate?

- *Yes Date:* _____
- *No Date:* _____

1. What motivated you to get involved with teaching in the VAC?
   i. Prompt: Have you had prior experience teaching online?
   ii. Prompt: Have you taken online classes?

2. How did you prepare for teaching in a virtual community?
   i. Prompt: Did you receive any special training?
   ii. Prompt: Did you feel prepared to teach online?

3. What has your experience been teaching in the VAC?
   i. Prompt: What have your classroom experiences been like?
   ii. Prompt: If you have taught on the ground before, how is this different?
   iii. Prompt: What lessons have you learned about teaching online?

4. Given our large number of student veteran population, how prepared do you feel with managing student veteran issues that may come up in the classroom?
   i. Prompt: Do you have a personal or professional history with the military community? Please explain.
   ii. Prompt: Have you received special training or mentorship?

5. Describe the relationships that you have with your students on the VAC.
   i. Prompt: Have you noticed a difference in your VAC student relationships compared to your other teaching experiences?
   ii. Prompt: The VAC has small classrooms. How has this been for you?
   iii. Prompt: Do you feel as if you to get to know your students?
   iv. Prompt: Do you mentor students on the VAC?

6. In your experience, what are the opportunities and challenges of being an instructor in the VAC?
   i. Prompt: What works for you regarding teaching in the VAC?
   ii. Prompt: Is there anything that you think could enhance your experience as a VAC instructor?

7. How do you experience community in the VAC?
   i. Prompt: Do you interact with other instructors?
   ii. Prompt: Do you attend faculty meetings? If yes, do you attend in person or log on to the VAC?
   iii. Prompt: Do you feel as if you are part of a larger virtual community? If so, what does that feel like to you?
   iv. Prompt: Do you feel satisfied with your connection to the larger USC School of Social Work system?

8. What is your age range?
   - 25-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - 50-59
   - 60 +

9. What is your gender?

10. Your ethnic/racial background*:*
    - ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
    - ☐ Black/African-American
    - ☐ Hispanic/Latino
    - ☐ Native American
    - ☐ White
    - ☐ Other (please specify): _____

11. What is your terminal degree?

12. What is your position at USC?
    - Tenure/Tenure Track
    - Clinical Teaching Faculty
    - Clinical Field Faculty
    - Research Faculty
    - Adjunct Faculty

13. How many years of teaching experience have you had?

14. How many years have you been teaching in the USC School of Social Work?

15. How many years have you been teaching in the VAC?

Longitudinal Student Research Competency: Comparing Online and Traditional Face-to-Face Learning Platforms

Jodi L. Constantine Brown
Hyun-Sun Park

Abstract: *This exploratory research compares longitudinal research self-efficacy and retention between a completely asynchronous Master of Social Work (MSW) online cohort and its traditional face-to-face counterpart. This study used a non-equivalent comparison groups design with two groups: online instruction only (n=16) and traditional face-to-face instruction (n=32), with pretest (Time 1), posttest (Time 2) and follow-up (Time 3) standardized measures of practice evaluation knowledge (PEKS) and research self-efficacy (RSES) in a beginning research methods course. Results indicate that students' knowledge and research self-efficacy improved between pretest and posttest and remained significantly improved at follow-up one year later, with no significant difference between online learners and traditional face-to-face students. Students gain and maintain confidence in research methods and evaluation regardless of the learning platform utilized.*
Keywords: Distance learning; knowledge retention; research, self-efficacy

Online learning/distance education continues to grow in popularity, and the field of social work is no exception (Buchanan & Mathews, 2013; Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). Despite skeptics criticizing online education in social work as not providing sufficient practice, engagement, and interaction time (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Knowles, 2001; Pearlman, Weston, & Gisel, 2010), the number of online MSW-degree-granting programs continues to grow.

As online learning/distance education instructional offerings expand, social work literature examining differences between online and traditional classroom teaching continues to develop. Previous literature has explored different types of classes/teaching methods, with the majority of published articles focusing on practice and research methods classes (Dennison, Gruber, & Vrbsky, 2010). The bulk of early literature developed around the idea of comparing web-based or online classes with traditional, non-hybrid, face-to-face courses (Dalton, 2001; Harrington, 1999; Hisle-Gorman & Zuravin, 2006; Huff, 2000; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003; Royse, 2000; Seabury, 2005; Stocks & Freddolino, 2000; Westhuis, Ouellette, & Pfahler, 2006) but failed to use a design controlling for pretest scores (e.g., Harrington 1999; Hisle-Gorman & Zuravin, 2006; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003), or use standardized measures of learning outcomes (e.g., Harrington, 1999; Royse, 2000; Westhuis et al., 2006). Further, the variability in programs and classes explored makes comparisons between study outcomes difficult.

One of the challenges of building research knowledge in a developing area like distance education is consistent definition of terms. Distance education is a means of asynchronously delivering a course online or through interactive television (Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke, & Adkins, 2009). Quinn, Fitch, and Youn (2011) argue that synchronous technologies should be included in the definition of distance education. Asynchronous online classes allow a course or assignment to be completed at a student's discretion within a given timeframe, whereas synchronous classes are held live via the Internet with the students and instructor engaging simultaneously (Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015).

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Studies comparing online, face-to-face, and hybrid (a mix of online and face-to-face meetings) program models continue to grow, but no studies to date explore differences in the retention of knowledge over time by learning platform. The current research study addresses this gap by examining the practice evaluation knowledge and research self-efficacy of online and face-to-face MSW students over an 18-month period.

Online vs. Traditional Classroom Platforms

Previous social work literature specifically comparing online vs. traditional classroom experiences in terms of research methods learning has examined differences in student satisfaction (Faul, Frey, & Barber, 2004; Ligon, Markward, & Yegidis, 1999; Westhuis et al., 2006; York, 2008) showing mixed results ranging from higher overall satisfaction with web-assisted courses, to no difference in satisfaction levels by learning platforms, to higher satisfaction in the face-to-face classroom. While student satisfaction is considered an important part of successful online education (Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Stocks & Freddolino, 2000), satisfaction does not necessarily equal effectiveness. Students might be satisfied with their program, but have they learned?

Previous studies operationalize learning outcomes using course grades (Harrington, 1999; Hisle-Gorman & Zuravin, 2006; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2003; O'Neill & Jensen, 2014; York, 2008), exam scores (Cummings et al., 2015; Westhuis et al., 2006), and overall grade point average (GPA; Cummings et al., 2015). O'Neill and Jensen (2014) compared final course grades and self-reported GPA for forty-four MSW students enrolled in either a face-to-face (23 students) or an online (21 students) section of the same research course and found no significant differences between the two groups of students at the end of the course. Cummings et al. (2015) found mixed results, with advanced-standing face-to-face students having statistically significant higher GPA scores than their online counterparts, but found no significant difference in GPA between non-advanced-standing face-to-face and online students.

Few studies comparing online with face-to-face learning practices have used standardized measures with demonstrated reliability and validity. Stocks and Freddolino (2000) examined comfort with technology and classroom environment in a sample of 60 MSW students. Using standardized measures of attitudes toward computers and technology use at the beginning and end of a research methods class with two sections (one online, the other face-to-face), they found no significant difference in the computer attitude scale between pretest and posttest and marginal differences in technology use between the two groups, with online students reporting greater comfort using technology than their face-to-face counterparts.

Buchanan and Mathews (2013) used the Kirk-Rosenblatt Research Inventory (1981) to assess MSW social work students' beliefs, knowledge, and opinions about research, finding no statistically significant difference between main campus and satellite MSW students' knowledge. Cummings et al. (2015) used a standardized measure of self-efficacy to explore differences between online and face-to-face students from the perspective of an overall program, finding no significant difference between online and face-to-face student outcomes (Cummings et al., 2015). These results provide additional support of no

significant difference between online and face-to-face learning platforms (WCET, 2010), but do not explore the retention of knowledge over time.

Knowledge Retention

One challenge educators face is choosing a learning strategy that will result in long-term retention of knowledge (Beers & Bowden, 2005). Various theories posit strategies to improve knowledge and memory including, but not limited to, problem-based learning (Beers & Bowden, 2005; Schmidt, 1993), integrating the arts in education (Hardiman, Rinne, & Yarmolinskaya, 2014), team-based learning (Macke & Tapp, 2012), and diffuse learning (Raman et al., 2010). Outlining the myriad education mechanisms suggested to increase knowledge retention is beyond the scope of this article. The importance of examining knowledge retention, however, should not be overlooked (Raman et al., 2010; Wayne et al., 2006). If students do not retain knowledge, they may be less likely to successfully use their education and skills in the field, which is particularly important in helping professions such as social work.

MSW students are required to successfully complete at least two research courses to earn their degree, and many schools require additional research methods coursework. However, few studies have explored the degree to which students maintain their research methods knowledge over time. Using a small sample (n=25) of undergraduate social work students, Baker, Pollio, and Hudson (2011) found evidence that students maintain educational gains one year after a research methods class, but their study tested knowledge perception as opposed to knowledge gained and did not compare differences by learning platform.

The Current Study

This study builds on previous research by replicating the Baker et al. (2011), pre/post/post study of BSW students using the same measure, the Practice Evaluation Knowledge Scale (PEKS, Baker & Ritchey, 2009), with a sample of MSW students. Further, we included a measure of Research Self-Efficacy (RSES, Holden, Barker, Meenaghan, & Rosenberg, 1999) and a comparison group of online distance learning students. This study compares practice evaluation knowledge and research self-efficacy learning outcomes between a completely asynchronous online MSW research methods class and its face-to-face classroom counterpart using a quasi-experimental non-equivalent comparison groups design. Using standardized measures of students' perception and confidence, this project builds on previous social work literature and adds to the ongoing online versus face-to-face classroom debate.

Based on previous literature, we hypothesized that there would be no difference between the research knowledge and self-efficacy of online students and face-to-face classroom students a) after completing a beginning research class, and b) one year after the class.

Method

Program/Class Description

In fall 2012, a large public university on the west coast introduced a two-year, degree-granting, fully asynchronous online Master in Social Work (MSW) program. Students in both the online program and face-to-face program follow a cohort model, meaning that students enter and exit the program together and take classes in a prescribed order. Online students complete the program in two years. Traditional students have the option of completing the program in either two or three years. All students in the current study were part of a two-year cohort. Online students and face-to-face students differ in that online students follow a quarter system, taking two eight-week classes per quarter totaling four classes per semester. Traditional face-to-face students take four classes over 16 weeks each semester.

In order to graduate, all students must take and successfully complete three semesters of research methods: beginning research methods, advanced research methods, and a Capstone project. The beginning research methods class focuses on problem formulation, operationalization, conceptualization, design, and measurement concepts, and students complete a single subject design over the course of the semester. The advanced research methods course focuses on sampling, ethics, program evaluation, qualitative research methods, and survey research and touches on statistical analyses. The Capstone project gives students the opportunity to design and conduct their own small research project including data analysis and presenting results. Students may choose to collect their own data, use agency secondary data previously collected for non-research purposes, use secondary data from publicly available sources (e.g., the General Social Survey or the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey), or conduct a program evaluation. Students in all cohorts receive the same content, and classes happen in the same semester for students in a two-year cohort (i.e., everyone in the cohort has beginning research methods their second semester, advanced research methods their third semester and Capstone the semester before graduation.)

Sample

The study population included MSW students enrolled in one of three master's level beginning research methods sections. Instructor B taught one section online (n=21). Instructor B and Instructor P each taught one traditional face-to-face section (n=13 for Instructor B; n=23 for Instructor P) for a total of 57 participants. Five students (3 face-to-face; 2 online class) did not complete the pretest, and three different students (1 online class; 2 face-to-face) did not complete the posttest, resulting in a valid n=49 (n=18 online; n=31 face-to-face) between Time 1 and Time 2.

Between posttest (Time 2) and one-year follow-up (Time 3), two students left the online cohort for personal reasons; the remainder of the cohort (n=16) completed the Time 3 measure. One face-to-face student who did not complete the Time 2 measure did complete the Time 3 measure resulting in a valid n=48 (n=16 online; n=32 face-to-face) between Time 1 and Time 3.

Design

This study used a non-equivalent comparison groups design with two groups: one consisting of students who received online instruction only, and one group consisting of students who received only face-to-face instruction, with pretest and posttest measures of student competency for both groups. Pretest competency scores were compared for all three sections. No significant differences in demographic variables or research competency scores were found between Instructor B's face-to-face students and Instructor P's face-to-face students, so those face-to-face sections were combined and compared to the online student competencies. Pretest measures were taken at Time 1 in January 2013 prior to the first research methods class, Time 2 in May 2013 after the first research methods class, and Time 3 in May 2014 after two subsequent research courses (advanced research and Capstone).

Measurement

Two standardized measures were used to assess student achievement of research competency: the Practice Evaluation Knowledge Scale (PEKS) and the Research Self-Efficacy Scale (RSES). The PEKS was developed to measure social work practitioners' beliefs about their knowledge of practice evaluation competencies and has demonstrated internal consistency and validity (Baker et al., 2011, p. 558). Example items include "I have been adequately trained to conduct practice evaluation" and "I am familiar with issues of reliability and validity." The 8-item PEKS (α=.88) is measured on a scale from 1-5 where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

The RSES developed by Holden, Barker, Meenaghan, and Rosenberg (1999) has demonstrated internal consistency reliability, evidence of construct validity, and sufficient sensitivity "to detect change in students' research self-efficacy from the beginning to the end of their participation in a single-semester research course" (p. 472). The 9-item RSES (α=.95) is measured on a scale from 0–10 where 0=cannot do at all, 5=moderately certain can do, and 10=certain can do. Items begin with the statement "How confident are you that you can…" and include "Do effective electronic searching of the scholarly literature"? and "Design and implement the best sampling strategy possible for your study of some aspect of practice?"

Data Collection

Together the PEKS and RSES total 17 questions. For the purpose of this study, each measure was included in an easily readable online chart where respondents were asked to click the button next to their response for each question.

After receiving approval from the University Institutional Review Board, pretest data were collected online via the class web pages. Students were directed to a link to the survey prior to the first class session via an email message from the *other* instructor. Students were assured that *their* instructor would not see their survey results until after the class ended, and then only in aggregate. Each student has a unique login, so matching pretest with posttest data occurred seamlessly. There were no duplicate entries, meaning it was unlikely that students logged in under another students' ID to complete either the pretest (Time 1) or posttest (Time 2).

Follow-up (Time 3) data collection began at the end of the third research (Capstone) class, a full 18 months after the pretest, and continued for approximately one month. Students were contacted via email, reminded about the study, and asked to complete the posttest using a class web page that was set up to collect their data with their unique login, thus allowing for pretest, posttest, and follow-up data to be matched easily. If students had difficulty navigating the webpage they were invited to return their responses via email, fax, or in-person. These responses were then entered into the database by hand by Instructor B and checked for accuracy by Instructor P. Approximately one-third of the responses were recorded in this manner.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographics. Paired samples t-tests were used to determine differences between pretest and posttest knowledge and self-efficacy scores. One-way between groups analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare differences in learning platforms for research methods instruction for MSW students. ANCOVA tests the significance of group differences between two or more groups while controlling for one or more covariates (e.g., pretest scores) that may influence the dependent variable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; Wright, 2006). For the current study, the independent variable was the type of learning platform (online vs. face-to-face classroom), and the dependent variable consisted of scores on the PEKS and RSES surveys administered at the end of the first research class (Time 2) and again at the end of the third research class (Time 3). Participants' scores on the PEKS and RSES pretest surveys (Time 1) were used as the covariate in the analysis.

Results

Sample Demographics

Students ranged in age from 22–44 years (M=28.55; SD=5.79) and were mostly women (83%). The majority of students identified as Hispanic (n=18), followed by Caucasian (n=14). No significant differences in age, race, gender, or previous research experience were found between the online and face-to-face students (Table 1). Face-to-face students (M=2.36, SD=.96) scored significantly higher than online students (M=1.89, SD=.56) on item 1 of the PEKS (I have been adequately trained to conduct practice evaluation), $t(50)$=2.21, p=.03, two-tailed, d=0.59. The magnitude of the difference in the means (mean difference=.47, 95% CI: .04 - .89) was moderate (Cohen's d=0.59). There were no statistically significant differences in any of the remaining PEKS or RSES items for face-to-face or online students.

Table 1. *Student Demographics by Instructional Method*

	Instructional Method	
Student Demographics	**Face-to-Face *f* (%)**	**Online *f* (%)**
Gender	n=36	n=21

	Instructional Method	
Student Demographics	**Face-to-Face *f* (%)**	**Online *f* (%)**
Female	30 (83)	18 (82)
Male	6 (17)	3 (14)
Race/Ethnicity	*n*=33	*n*=19
African American	2 (6)	2 (11)
Asian American	2 (6)	1 (5)
Caucasian	11 (31)	3 (16)
Hispanic	11 (31)	7 (37)
Multiracial	5 (14)	2 (11)
Other (Armenian, Jewish)	2 (6)	4 (21)
Previous Research Experience	*n*=33	*n*=19
None	6 (18)	2 (11)
1 class…a long time ago	1 (3)	5 (26)
1 class	10 (30)	7 (37)
2-3 classes	13 (40)	4 (21)
4+ classes / very comfortable	3 (9)	1 (5)

Knowledge Retention Pretest to Posttest

Online and face-to-face students were grouped together for initial knowledge retention analyses. The PEKS composite scale (M=18.25, SD=5.47) demonstrated reliability (α=.88). Results from paired samples t-tests indicate a statistically significant increase in PEKS scores from pretest (M=18.20, SD=5.34) to posttest (M=29.12, SD=4.53), $t(48)$=12.48, p<.001 (two-tailed), d=1.74. The mean increase in PEKS scores was 10.91 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 9.11 to 12.72. Cohen's d (1.74) indicated a large effect size. The RSES composite scale (M=486.92, SD=176.55) demonstrated reliability (α=.95). RSES scores increased significantly from pretest (M=486.95, SD=165.38) to posttest (M=698.16, SD=126.73), $t(48)$=8.06, p<.001 (two-tailed), d=1.15. The mean increase in RSES scores was 211.24 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 158.56 to 263.84. Cohen's d (1.15) indicated a large effect size. See Tables 2 and 3 for paired samples t-test results by individual items on the PEKS and RSES. There was a substantial difference in program evaluation knowledge (as measured by the PEKS) and research self-efficacy (as measured by the RSES) for all students (online and traditional face-to-face) after taking the foundation research methods course.

We explored differences between Time 2 and Time 3 and found that only questions 1 (effective electronic searching of the scholarly literature) and 3 (review a particular area of social science theory and research, and write a balanced and comprehensive literature review) on the RSES were significantly different between posttest (Time 2) (Q1 M=87.60, SD=13.63; Q3 M=78.60, SD=15.52) and follow-up (Time 3) (Q1 M=92.60, SD=13.82), t (49)=2.29, p=.03 (two-tailed), d=0.32; (Q3 M=87.80, SD=14.88), t (49)=3.77, p < .001 (two-tailed), d=0.53. None of the items on the PEKS, and no other items on the RSES were significantly different between Time 2 and Time 3.

Table 2. *Paired Samples T-Test Results for Online Student Responses by Item, Pretest (Time 1) and Posttest (Times 2 & 3)*

Item	*Time 1 Pretest* *n*=18 *M* (*SD*)	*Time 2 Posttest* *n*=18 *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*d*	*Time 1 Pretest* *n*=16 *M* (*SD*)	*Time 3 Posttest* *n*=16 *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*d*
PEKS								
1	1.89 (0.58)	3.78 (0.64)	-8.31*	0.8	1.94 (0.57)	4.25 (0.44)	-15.36*	0.94
2	2 (0.68)	3.56 (0.78)	-6.33*	0.7	1.88 (0.5)	3.5 (0.73)	-6.78*	0.45
3	2.11 (0.83)	3.78 (0.8)	-7.79*	0.78	2.06 (0.85)	3.81 (0.91)	-7.00*	0.48
4	2.28 (1.01)	3.61 (0.69)	-6.23*	0.69	2.25 (1.06)	4.06 (0.85)	-6.53*	0.46
5	2.83 (1.09)	3.78 (0.8)	-3.01*	0.35	2.63 (1.08)	4.12 (0.62)	-5.47*	0.42
6	2.06 (0.72)	3.67 (0.76)	-6.98*	0.74	2 (0.73)	3.75 (0.93)	-5.91*	0.44
7	2.11 (0.83)	3.22 (0.8)	-4.16*	0.5	1.88 (0.62)	3.18 (0.98)	-4.39*	0.37
8	3 (1.18)	3.83 (0.7)	-2.48*	0.27	2.81 (1.16)	4.06 (0.68)	-3.87*	0.34
RSES								
1	72.22 (24.86)	90.56 (10.55)	-3.57*	0.43	73.75 (24.18)	96.25 (7.18)	-3.73*	0.48
2	78.33 (24.31)	92.22 (10.6)	-2.55*	0.28	76.88 (24.14)	94.37 (7.27)	-2.69*	0.32
3	60 (22.75)	77.78 (18.96)	-2.67*	0.3	61.88 (23.43)	89.37 (11.23)	-4.15*	0.53
4	58.89 (24.22)	80 (16.8)	-4.03*	0.49	59.38 (24.89)	87.5 (9.3)	-3.97*	0.51
5	50 (23.01)	75.56 (18.22)	-4.29*	0.52	51.88 (24.82)	78.75 (15.43)	-3.98*	0.51
6	47.22 (24.92)	72.78 (16.01)	-4.29*	0.52	48.13 (26.38)	76.25 (16.27)	-4.03*	0.52
7	46.67 (23.51)	73.89 (16.85)	-4.72*	0.57	47.5 (24.9)	75 (18.97)	-3.90*	0.5
8	45 (25.49)	72.22 (18.64)	-4.42*	0.53	45.63 (27.07)	73.12 (18.51)	-3.56*	0.46
9	56.11 (23.04)	82.22 (16.64)	-4.20*	0.51	56.88 (24.41)	85 (18.25)	-4.43*	0.57

Note. PEKS=Practice Evaluation Knowledge Scale
RSES=Research Self-Efficacy Scale

**p<.05*

Table 3. *Paired Samples T-Test Results for Face-to-Face Student Responses by Item, Pretest (Time 1) and Posttest (Times 2 & 3)*

Item	*Time 1 Pretest* *n*=31 *M* (*SD*)	*Time 2 Posttest* *n*=31 *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*d*	*Time 1 Pretest* *n*=32 *M* (*SD*)	*Time 3 Posttest* *n*=32 *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*d*
PEKS								
1	2.29 (0.94)	3.68 (0.65)	-6.74*	0.6	2.34 (0.97)	3.68 (0.93)	-6.29*	0.56
2	1.94 (0.63)	3.58 (0.77)	-10.01*	0.77	1.94 (0.61)	3.59 (0.87)	-11.32*	0.8
3	1.9 (0.75)	3.52 (0.85)	-9.08*	0.73	1.84 (0.72)	3.68 (0.96)	-10.93*	0.79
4	2.26 (0.93)	3.74 (0.82)	-8.91*	0.72	2.25 (0.98)	3.71 (0.95)	-7.71*	0.65
5	2.74 (1.12)	4.13 (0.56)	-6.42*	0.58	2.75 (1.16)	3.78 (0.75)	-4.73*	0.43
6	2.23 (1.02)	3.9 (0.75)	-8.67*	0.71	2.25 (1.07)	3.71 (1.02)	-7.14*	0.62
7	1.9 (0.65)	3.06 (0.77)	-6.44*	0.58	1.94 (0.76)	3.28 (1.02)	-6.03*	0.54
8	2.9 (1.13)	3.45 (0.99)	-2.02*	0.12	2.91 (1.14)	3.59 (0.87)	-3.23*	0.25
RSES								
1	73.55 (19.41)	86.45 (14.5)	-3.92*	0.34	71.56 (23.43)	91.87 (14.46)	-4.40*	0.38
2	71.61 (19)	86.13 (13.34)	-4.43*	0.4	71.88 (19.08)	90.93 (13.99)	-5.60*	0.5
3	55.48 (21.1)	77.42 (16.32)	-5.76*	0.53	55.63 (22.99)	87.5 (15.45)	-7.34*	0.63
4	56.13 (22.76)	77.42 (18.43)	-4.14*	0.36	56.25 (25.62)	80.93 (18.89)	-5.39*	0.48
5	44.52 (20.3)	72.26 (16.87)	-7.06*	0.62	44.38 (22.99)	76.56 (19.27)	-7.69*	0.66
6	40.32 (18.88)	70.32 (20.08)	-6.70*	0.6	40 (21.09)	75 (20.63)	-7.50*	0.65
7	38.71 (19.1)	71.94 (20.07)	-6.64*	0.6	38.44 (20.8)	74.06 (19.81)	-7.93*	0.67
8	37.42 (19.14)	67.1 (22.98)	-5.78*	0.53	37.81 (22.1)	73.43 (21.03)	-7.60*	0.65
9	53.23 (27.98)	78.06 (19.4)	-5.08*	0.46	53.13 (29.77)	85 (18.13)	-6.21*	0.55

Note. PEKS=Practice Evaluation Knowledge Scale
RSES=Research Self-Efficacy Scale

**p<.05*

Online vs. Traditional Face-to-Face Platform

Our hypothesis stated that there would be no difference between the self-reported knowledge and self-efficacy of online and face-to-face students after the beginning research methods class and one year after the beginning research methods class. Preliminary checks were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and reliable measurement of the covariate. After controlling for pre-test scores, there was no significant difference between online and traditional face-to-face classroom students on posttest (Time 2) PEKS scores $F(1, 46)=0.01$, $p=.91$, and posttest (Time 2) RSES scores, $F(1, 46)=0.36$, $p=.55$ after the first research class. There was no significant difference between online and traditional face-to-face classroom students on follow-up (Time 3) PEKS scores $F(1, 45)=1.51$, $p=.22$ or follow-up (Time 3) RSES scores, $F(1, 45)=0.09$, $p=.76$ one year after the beginning research class.

Discussion

The online students in this program completed a two-year, completely asynchronous, online MSW program with the same 16 hours per week in a local field placement as students in the face-to-face cohort. The standards for the online program are the same as those for the traditional classroom, and the same faculty members teach in both programs. As such, and based on previous literature, the investigators expected to find no difference in learning outcomes between the online and traditional face-to-face classroom students. Although not social work specific, meta-analyses comparing distance education and classroom instruction reveal somewhat mixed results with support leaning toward distance education being similar to traditional classroom instruction. Allen et al. (2004) and Sitzman, Kraiger, Stewart and Wisher (2006) found no differences in educational effectiveness for distance learners, with effectiveness defined as assessment of student performance (e.g., grades) or acquisition of declarative knowledge. However, Bernard et al. (2004) found wide variability and low effect sizes on various outcomes including student achievement, attitude, and retention. Note that Bernard et al. (2004) define retention as “the opposite of dropout” (p. 388) as opposed to the maintenance of knowledge. Creating subsets of synchronous and asynchronous applications resulted in effect sizes for asynchronous applications favoring distance education (Bernard et al. 2004). Sitzman et al. (2006) found web-based instruction 6% more effective than classroom instruction for teaching declarative knowledge. The current study examined pre and posttest practice evaluation and research self-efficacy scores of students in an asynchronous, web-based, distance-learning classroom compared to a traditional face-to-face classroom for research methods (declarative knowledge). Meaningful gains between pretest, posttest, and follow-up support the effectiveness of online and face-to-face education as seen in significant gains between the three time periods for the two groups. Further, finding no differences in the learning outcomes between the two learning platforms provides additional support that online and face-to-face learning modalities are equally effective. Finding differences in learning outcomes would have resulted in adjustments being made to either course, depending on the nature and direction of those differences.

Despite a growing body of evidence that online learning or distance education is as effective as traditional face-to-face classroom instruction, the various types of online education make comparisons difficult. Online learning or distance education ranges from in-service training on-demand via television and satellite (Williams, Nicholas, & Gunter, 2005) to asynchronous electronic software content (Harrington, 1999) to hybrid models combining face-to-face instruction with distance learning applications (Ayala, 2009; Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003; York, 2008).

The current study adds to the developing body of literature by using standardized measures of learning outcomes, a pre/post/post quasi-experimental longitudinal design, and controlling for instructor and content differences in that the same instructor taught both the asynchronous online and face-to-face beginning research classes. Knowledge retention over time is one indicator of teaching effectiveness, and our results suggest that online learning platforms are at least as effective as traditional face-to-face classroom strategies in students maintaining their practice evaluation knowledge and research self-efficacy one year after taking a beginning research methods class.

Limitations

While we were able to control for instructor and content differences between Time 1 and Time 2, we were not as fortunate between Time 2 and Time 3. Online students maintained the same professor for all three research courses (beginning, advanced, and capstone), whereas the face-to-face students had the ability to choose their instructor for the advanced and capstone research classes. While faculty work together to ensure students are receiving standard content, there were likely differences in how that content was delivered. Since there were four potential instructors for the advanced research class that occurred fall 2013 (Instructor P and three additional faculty), and six potential capstone instructors during spring 2014 (Instructors B and P and four additional faculty), there was too much variability to statistically control for potential instructor differences.

The sample size of this study was small. Although the use of small samples is common in social psychology (Johnson & Bachan, 2013) and education (Cook & Hatala, 2015), this limits the statistical power. A finding of no statistically significant difference between online and face-to-face students in this study may not indicate that there is no true difference but may also be a result of inadequate power. However, considering this study employs a theory-based prediction, strong design with longitudinal data, and standardized measures, the findings of this study may have meaningful educational implications.

Findings indicate increased student self-efficacy in research methods, which may translate into greater comfort recognizing and employing evidence-based practices in the field. However, results should be interpreted with caution considering the current study used self-reports of a non-random, convenience sample of graduate social work students from a single university. Although there were no statistically significant differences between the face-to-face and online students at pretest, participants were not randomized into experimental and control groups, and it is possible that there are inherent differences between the two groups that account for the knowledge and self-efficacy gained. Although randomization may not be realistic in this type of education research, selection bias remains

a threat to internal validity with this non-randomized design. With the exception of the first item on the PEKS, there were no significant differences between the face-to-face and online students.

Conclusion

As online learning and distance education continues to develop, MSW programs have an opportunity to be on the cutting edge of this growth in the social work field. However, remaining on the cutting edge involves conducting research that goes beyond student satisfaction or course evaluations. Our results indicate that students gain and maintain confidence in research methods and evaluation regardless of the learning platform utilized. Using this model, we encourage future researchers to explore competencies and areas of social work practice beyond research methods.

Despite the limitations of the current study, our results add to the growing body of literature showing that successful student research learning and knowledge retention may occur equally well through online and traditional face-to-face learning platforms. Future studies should continue exploring longitudinal research knowledge retention since the timing of content delivery in this sample differed by eight weeks (face-to-face students had a 16-week semester; online students had an eight-week course). It is possible that the shorter learning time could negatively affect longer-term retention of knowledge. Furthermore, research about the quality of programs from the perspective of learning outcomes triangulated with faculty-measured student competency could provide useful knowledge for informed practice and policy.

A major strength of this study is the use of standardized learning outcome measures taken at three different time points over 18 months, with findings suggesting that the modality of content delivery is less important than the content itself. Implications for social work education include effectively utilizing a broad range of information and communication technologies and increasing accessibility to social work students in traditionally underserved areas.

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Effectively Teaching Social Work Practice Online: Moving Beyond Can to How

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Abstract: *Schools of social work are increasingly developing online courses and programs. While the majority of research comparing online and face–to-face courses has found equivalent outcomes, skepticism still exists, particularly about the ability to teach practice courses effectively online. This study adds to the growing body of research within social work that specifically examines the comparative effectiveness of online and face-to-face practice courses. Using an anonymous survey, 23 face-to-face and 12 online students enrolled in two separate sections of social work generalist practice rated the quality of the learning environment, the extent to which the course objectives were met, and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies from the students' perspective. In addition, scores on assignment rubrics and student course evaluations were also compared. Results indicate no significant differences in learning outcomes as measured by assignment rubric scores, student perceptions of the extent to which learning objectives were met, the quality of the learning environment, and the effectiveness of five of the six teaching strategies used. We recommend that research moves beyond determining if online practice courses are as effective as face-to-face courses, and instead focus on a closer examination of the factors responsible for teaching effectiveness.*

Keywords: *Distance education; online education; social work; direct practice; asynchronous learning*

The platform of 21st century social work education is transforming. In particular, graduate schools of social work in the U.S. are developing online courses and programs that include curriculum components thought to be primarily taught on campus, such as practice (Coe-Regan & Freddolino, 2008; Khaja, Ouellette, Barkdull, & Yaffe, 2008; Kurzman, 2013; McAllister, 2013; Roberts, Irani, Telg, & Lundy, 2005; Siebert, Spaulding-Givens, & Siebert, 2006). The Commission on Accreditation of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) does not keep an exhaustive list of all accredited online social work programs; however, they do list 40 master's programs and 7 bachelor's programs that are online, approximately 6% of the 775 accredited schools of social work (CSWE, 2016). Many social work programs also incorporate various forms of online learning into traditional face-to-face classes, including video conferencing, computer mediated technology, and Facebook activities (Barczyk & Duncan, 2013; Flynn, Maiden, Smith, Wiley, & Wood, 2013; Forgey, Loughran, & Hansen, 2013; Moisey, Neu, & Cleveland-Innes, 2008; Seabury, 2005).

The impetus for online education in social work is varied and includes reaching students with geographical and time-related constraints (Larsen, Sanders, Astray, & Hole, 2008; Vernon, Pittman-Munke, Vakalahi, Adkins, & Pierce, 2001; Wilson, Brown, Wood, & Farkas, 2013). Additionally, for institutions like the University of Southern California, which created the first national online MSW program, virtual learning centers are

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considered strong business models that can expand enrollment in social work schools, which often struggle with sustainability due to scanty sources of revenue (Flynn et al., 2013).

The benefits of online social work education have been documented, and clear evidence has been mounting as to its effectiveness. Over the past two decades, a significant body of research has accumulated within social work comparing online and face-to-face programs as a whole (e.g., Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Forster & Rehner, 1998; Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000; Wilke & Vinton, 2006) as well as a range of individual courses, including practice (e.g., Coe & Elliot, 1999; Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Siebert et al., 2006; Thyer, Artelt, Markward, & Dosier, 1998) and research courses (e.g., Faul, Frey, & Barber, 2004; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000). An early comprehensive review of the state of social work research on distance courses and programs provided guidelines for future research (Macy, Rooney, Hollister, & Freddolino, 2001). For the most part, based on the empirical evidence to date, comparable levels of effectiveness have been found in relation to learning outcomes and student satisfaction with the instruction and learning environment.

These results mirror the overall findings from the 2010 U.S. Department of Education (US DOE, 2010) meta-analysis of research from multiple disciplines. Based on a review of 99 experimental or quasi-experimental studies contrasting online and face-to-face conditions in relation to the learning outcomes achieved, the study concluded that students in online conditions had modestly better outcomes, on average, than their face-to-face counterparts (US DOE, 2010).

Despite these fairly consistent findings of comparable effectiveness across multiple fields, concerns about the effectiveness of online courses in social work continue. These concerns, which have been present within social work throughout the development of distance education, have often focused on practice courses (Groshong et al., 2013; Khaja et al., 2008; Moore, 2005; Siebert et al., 2006; Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Flynn, 1998; Vernon et al., 2001).. For example, Siegel et al. (1998), found that social work educators have a bias against offering practice or methods courses online emanating from a belief that practice skills can only be taught in person. Similarly, Moore (2005) found that faculty perceived online education to be less effective than face-to-face instruction, particularly in the teaching of practice courses and clinical skills.

A more recent example of this skepticism in relation to online practice courses is the 2013 report released by the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA). CSWA questioned the effectiveness of online social work education to prepare social work practitioners without face-to-face instruction (Groshong et al., 2013). In particular, the report questioned if the nature of web-based learning was antithetical to the teaching of foundational practice skills, such as building empathy and conducting holistic assessments. The report also critiqued online education's inconsistent delivery methods, lack of attention to implicit learning, and weak protocols around cornerstone pedagogical elements, like field education. Within the report, asynchronous methods were viewed as a form of rote learning, and the authors raised concerns about the ability of this method to facilitate the development of critical thinking skills. Lastly, in reference to online social work practice

coursework, CSWA recommended that the CSWE review how much training should be completed in-person to best transfer knowledge (Groshong et al., 2013).

Given the continued expression of concern about the use of online teaching methods in social work, particularly in relation to practice courses, and the rapid expansion of online education in social work, an urgent need continues for studies that examine the efficacy of online instruction (Cummings et al., 2015). This study is an effort to respond to this need and in doing so, build specifically upon the research within social work on the comparable effectiveness of face-to-face and online practice courses.

Literature Review

There is a small but growing body of research that has specifically examined the effectiveness of online social work practice courses. These studies can be grouped into three design categories. The first group compared the effectiveness of an online practice course to its face-to-face counterpart. The second type of study compared the learning outcomes of students within a single online practice course, and the third type compared the learning outcomes in online practice courses to non-practice online courses.

In the most recent face-to-face versus online comparative study found, Cummings and colleagues (2013) compared online students (*n*=37) and face-to-face students (*n*=63) enrolled in a course on evidence-based practice with groups. No significant differences were found between face-to-face and online students in exam scores, log grades, or course evaluation scores. Moreover, while both groups were found to have increased in leadership skills, as measured by a 22-item leadership pre-post scale, no significant differences were found between groups. However, Cummings and colleagues (2013) did not look at the sense of classroom community or teaching strategies in comparing student outcomes.

Siebert and colleagues (2006) used a retrospective design to compare face-to-face (*n*=78) and online students' (*n*=25) perceptions of their skill improvement using a four-item Likert scale. No significant differences between the two groups were found in the development of their brief treatment and crisis intervention skills. Additionally, Siebert and colleagues (2006), like Cummings and colleagues (2013), found that face-to-face and online student learning outcomes were comparable, with no significant differences in mean scores on a common assignment graded by the same instructor using a standardized rubric. However, when assessing student satisfaction using a post-course survey with eight items, two items were found to be significantly different. Compared to online students, face-to-face students were significantly more satisfied with instructor availability and the course's ability to facilitate their learning (Siebert et al., 2006).

The third comparative study of an online and face-to-face practice course, completed by Coe and Elliot in 1999, reflects the type of technology available at that time. It compared outcomes for 30 on-campus students with 47 students enrolled in a face-to-face satellite television instruction format. The experimental group attended class at either of two distance locations, with a live instructor present at each location. On average, on-campus learners were found to have higher assignment and final course grades when compared to distance learners; however, none of these differences were statistically significant. Coe and Elliot also found barriers to learning for the distance learners related to the problems

experienced with the technology. Recommendations included more enhanced training for instructors and increased use of visuals such as PowerPoint and video conferencing to enhance interaction both in and out of the classroom.

In an earlier study by Thyer and colleagues (1998), online and face-to-face delivery formats were compared; however, each format was delivered in separate intervals to students within two separate practice courses. No significant differences in quality of teaching were found among the students in the Assessment and Psychopathology class; however, the students in the Treatment of Substance Abusers course evaluated the quality of the live instruction significantly higher than the televised teaching. Technological factors, including sound and visual transmission, were recognized as difficulties that may have biased the results.

In relation to the second type of study design, two studies were found that examined students' perceptions of their learning and satisfaction rates within an online practice course. Wilson and colleagues (2013) explored the impact of 3-D online technology to improve home visiting skills of social work practice students. Debriefing sessions with students participating in virtual home visits indicated that the experience was considered meaningful for skill development. Khaja and colleagues (2008) evaluated online social work practice students (n=21) using a participatory action research approach. They found that online social work practice students were impressed with the rigor of their online course, and the development of their skills throughout the process. However, student perception of learning was found to be contingent on comfort with technology and access to the software and hardware needed to participate (Khaja et al., 2008).

Lastly, one study was found that compared the learning outcomes of multiple online foundation level courses including practice. Noble and Russell (2013) inquired into student satisfaction with their online social work program, surveying 242 students across multiple foundation courses using a pre-experimental, mixed method research design conducted over the course of three years. The primary measurement tool was a 41-item survey, through which they found that online social work practice students had the highest rate of satisfaction compared to research or policy online students.

In addition to the three types of studies reviewed above, researchers have recognized the need to learn more about certain factors within online courses and how these factors compare to face-to-face courses (Cummings et al., 2015). In particular, the ability of online academic environments to intentionally produce the level of social presence necessary to build community among students and support their learning has been considered crucial (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015). An additional challenge identified for online practice courses is the need to increase understanding about how courses which require students to demonstrate skill competencies in every phase of practice can provide evidence of their effectiveness (Khaja et al., 2008; Siebert et al., 2006).

Study Background

Description of Course Content

The content of both the online generalist practice course and the face-to-face course evaluated in this study was the same, including the topics addressed, required readings, class exercises, and written assignments. The overall objective of both courses was to teach the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively engage in the beginning phase of the social work helping process with individuals, families, and groups. Given this objective, emphasis in both courses was placed on teaching students the preparation, engagement, assessment, and contracting skills to intervene in an empathic and culturally responsive way with both voluntary and involuntary clients. An outline of the course content is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Outline of Content for Generalist Practice I*

Preparation for Practice

- Characteristics of a professional relationship
- The parameters of practice: The role of the social work knowledge base, ethical code and laws and regulations
- Impact of the agency environment on practice
- Preparation tasks prior to meeting a client

Engagement of Voluntary and Involuntary Clients

- Clarifying one's professional role and responsibilities and boundaries with the client
- Exploration of the presenting issues
- Basic communication and interviewing skills
- Introduction to the stages of change and motivational interviewing

Social Work Assessment

- Overview of the phases of assessment
    - Information-gathering
    - Formulation of the issues
    - Goal-setting and intervention planning
- Defining evidence-based assessment, strengths-based assessment, and culturally-responsive assessment
- Methods of information-gathering (e.g., observation, interview, structured questionnaire, genogram, ecomap)
- The problem formulation process
- Developing a contract with voluntary and involuntary clients

Case Management

- Models of case management
- Social work roles and functions

Description of Differences in the Face-to-face and Online Course Delivery Methods

While the content of the two courses mirrored each other, and both courses were taught by the same instructor, the way in which the content was delivered was very different. The face-to-face course was delivered over 15 class sessions lasting two hours each. The online

course was delivered asynchronously in eight modules each one week in duration. Figure 2 presents an overview of how the same content was delivered within each format. A more detailed description of the nuances between each delivery method is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Differences in the Delivery of the Face-to-face and Online Content*

	Face-to-face Delivery	**Online Delivery**
Time Frame	15 Sessions; Two-hour sessions once per week	8 modules; One module completed asynchronously each week
Lectures	PowerPoint lecture delivered live with PowerPoint made available online after class.	PowerPoint lecture delivered asynchronously online with instructor voice recording. Remains available online.
Modeling of Client Engagement and Social Work Assessment Interviews	In class video of practice interviews followed by an in-class structured analysis of the skills observed.	Videos of practice interviews delivered online followed by an online submission of a structured analysis of the skills observed.
Discussions	Live discussions of lecture material during and after delivery.	Asynchronous discussion boards of lecture material after online lecture made available online.
Practice Exercises	Simultaneous role plays conducted within small groups within the classroom with student observers providing feedback to the small group followed by a discussion of each group's learning with the larger group.	Synchronous small group role plays with student observer audio recorded through a free conference call followed by a review and analysis of the recording submitted by each group on the discussion board for class and instructor feedback.
Self-Reflections on Practice	Intermittent written reflections on questions about the application of the various skills within their practice setting submitted in hard copy by each student to the professor for feedback.	Intermittent written reflections on questions about the application of the various skills within their practice setting submitted as a journal entry by each student to the professor for feedback.
Assessment of Knowledge and Skill Integration	Three written paper assignments that required the students to describe and critique their preparation, engagement, and assessment skills using a case(s) within their field agency.	Three written paper assignments that required the students to describe and critique their preparation, engagement, and assessment skills using a case(s) within their field agency.

Lectures

The PowerPoint lectures delivered in each course introduced the students to the same material on preparation, engagement, assessment, and contracting. However, the lecture was delivered in person to the face-to-face students whereas the online students heard a recorded lecture. Both sets of students were provided the PowerPoint lecture online, which allowed the face-to-face students to also have access to the lecture at any time and to potentially review it again.

Class Discussions

Following each PowerPoint lecture, the face-to-face students participated in live discussion and class exercises with the instructor, whereas the online students participated asynchronously via an online discussion board. The online asynchronous nature of the discussion board allowed the online students more time to think through their responses and to have their participation more systematically assessed by the instructor. For example, following the lecture on the parameters of practice, one of the discussion board assignments required the online students to make a preliminary post stating how they would respond to two different ethical dilemmas and to justify their responses based on what they had learned about their ethical obligations and any relevant laws and regulations. After all students had made their preliminary posts, they were required to read everyone else's posts and then make a final post in which they could amend their responses incorporating what they had learned from their fellow classmates. The instructor then evaluated the quality of each student's participation in this discussion and provided individualized feedback. This same ethical dilemma exercise was used in the face-to-face class as an in-class exercise, where each group worked together on their preliminary response and then had the opportunity to amend their response after hearing from the other groups. This more spontaneous discussion did not allow the same level of systematic evaluation or instructor feedback.

Modeling of Practice Skills

To teach engagement and assessment, these processes were first modeled for both sets of students via sequential video clips of a social worker engaging an individual client, a family, and a group, and in a later session, a social worker conducting an assessment. Following the viewing of these clips, the students in both courses analyzed what they observed through a series of questions. The face-to-face students shared their analyses in class as part of a class discussion. The online students submitted their analyses as journal entries, which again allowed for more systematic evaluation of their understanding and more opportunity to receive individualized feedback.

Practice Exercises

Opportunities for students to assess their own ability to practice engagement, assessment, and contracting were also provided within each course through exercises that required the students to examine their practice on actual cases from their field work, as well as through role plays. The role plays in both courses were conducted synchronously in small groups. However, in the face-to-face course, the role plays were not recorded because they were conducted simultaneously within one classroom making the recording of all of them impossible. Students in the online course conducted their role plays using a free conference call system, which allowed them to record the role plays, review them among themselves, and then submit them to the professor for review.

Assessment of Student Knowledge and Skills

Students in both courses were given the same three written assignments that evaluated their understanding and ability to assess their own agency practice and their ability to engage, assess, and contract with clients. Students in both courses who did not have

appropriate cases from their field work were given the opportunity to practice and critique their clinical skills by participating in an audiotaped phone interview with a standardized client played by a doctoral teaching assistant. The same doctoral teaching assistant, as well as the same standardized cases, adapted from real case situations provided by the professor, were used in both classes.

Method

Study Design and Procedure

This study used a two group posttest only quasi-experimental design to compare the effectiveness of the face-to-face and online courses. All of the MSW students enrolled in the face-to-face and online sections of the Generalist Practice with Individuals, Families and Groups course were invited via email to complete an anonymous survey designed to evaluate the quality of the learning environment, the extent to which the course objectives were met, and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies from the students' perspective. Twelve out of 15 students in the online class and 23 out of 25 students in the face-to-face class completed the survey, yielding an online class response rate of 80%, a face-to-face class response rate of 92%, and an overall response rate of 87.5%. The online students completed the survey on SurveyMonkey. The face-to-face students completed paper and pencil versions of the survey in class at the end of the last session.

In addition to the survey questionnaire, several unobtrusive measures were included in the study. To measure learning outcomes, rubrics were developed for each of the three integrative papers to assess students' understanding of the impact of the agency and community environment on practice, the process of engagement, and the process of assessment. To measure student satisfaction within the course, the survey administered to all students in the program at the end of each course was used.

Measures

Survey Measures

The quality of the learning environment was measured using the Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002), a 20-item measure designed to assess the concept of psychological community. The psychometric properties of the CCS are well-supported. Rovai (2002) found strong internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha: a=.93) and reliability (split-half coefficient of reliability of .91). Other studies using CSS have reported similar measures of reliability (Rovai & Baker, 2005; Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

Each question has a 5-point Likert Scale with ratings ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree)* to 4 (*strongly agree)* for a total possible score of 80. The extent to which course objectives were achieved was measured by asking students to rate each of the seven course objectives listed in the syllabus. Each question has a 4-point Likert scale with response ratings ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*a great deal*). The effectiveness of the teaching strategies was measured by asking the students to rate the PowerPoint presentations, videos, small group peer learning activities, class discussions, reflection assignments, and

integrative papers. Each question has a 4-point Likert scale with response ratings ranging from 0 (*not effective*) to 4 (*very effective).* Three open-ended questions were included at the end of the survey that asked students to reflect upon what they liked most and least overall about the course. One question asked for recommendations.

At the end of the survey, as a way of assessing the equivalence of the two groups, the students were asked to report their number of years of practice experience, their comfort with technology, and the amount of time spent on the course each week. Years of practice is a variable that has been previously examined in relation to its impact on effectiveness (Coe & Elliot, 1999; Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000). Additionally, comfort with technology has also been found to be an important variable to consider when studying the effectiveness of distance education (Khaja et al., 2008; Larsen et al., 2008).

Rubrics

The first assignment rubric consisted of five content areas for a total possible score of 15 and assessed the student's ability to identify environmental factors within the agency and community that could have a positive or negative impact on the client population's experience of help. The second assignment rubric, made up of five content areas for a total possible score of 20, measured the student's ability to describe and critique their preparation process for a first meeting with a client and to identify and analyze, through the use of a process recording of the first interview, the tasks and skills accomplished. The third assignment rubric consisted of nine content areas for a total score of 25 and measured the student's ability to critique a bio-psycho-social assessment that they had completed in their field placement. In this critique, the students were required to analyze the extent to which they had described relevant individual, family, and environmental strengths and limitations; the methods used in gathering this multi-level information; and the problem formulation, contracting process, and evaluation plan.

Student Satisfaction

The school-wide student satisfaction survey consisted of 15 items that asked students to rate their satisfaction with all aspects of the course, including the course content, assignments, grading system, instructor quality, and responsiveness. Each question had a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1-5, one being the lowest (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*). The measure has not been evaluated for its reliability or validity.

Results

Equivalency of the Groups

Due to the small and unbalanced sample sizes, the non-parametrical Mann Whitney U test was used to compare the years of practice experience reported by the students. A significant difference was found between online (Mdn=3) and face-to-face students (Mdn=0) in years of practice experience (U=40.5, p=.039). Using the Chi Square Fisher's Exact test to compare the reported comfort level with technology and the reported hours of spent on classwork, there were no statistically significant differences found. Most (72.7%)

of online students expressed being very comfortable/comfortable with technology as compared to 50% of face-to-face students (p=.275). Most (80%) of the face-to-face students spent six or more hours on classwork compared to 90.9% of online students.

Quality of Learning Environment

When comparing the median scores of the online students (Mdn=60) and the face-to-face student scores (Mdn=57.5) on the Classroom Community Survey (Rovai, 2002) using the Mann Whitney U, no statistically significant difference was found (U=118.5, p=.626).

Student Perceptions about Learning Objectives

Given the distribution of the responses, the categories *a great deal* and *mostly* were collapsed into one, as were the categories, *somewhat* and *not at all*. No statistically significant difference was found between online and face-to-face students in their perceptions of the extent to which the course learning objectives were achieved, using the Chi Square Fisher's Exact test (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Student Self-Report Scores of Meeting Learning Objectives (Mostly/A Great Deal)*

	% Rating Mostly/A Great Deal		
Items	**Face-to-face (n=23)**	**Online (n=12)**	***p****
Demonstrate understanding of first session tasks with clients.	100%	100%	No difference
Effectively engage voluntary and involuntary clients.	90.9%	100%	0.529
Understand the role of diversity when working with clients.	77.3%	100%	0.137
Articulate and critically apply strengths-based conceptual framework to guide assessment and evaluation.	86.4%	91.7%	1
Demonstrate capacity during the assessment and case formulation process to distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge.	100%	100%	No difference
Demonstrate capacity to develop collaborative and mutually agreed upon intervention goals.	86.4%	100%	0.537
Understand relationship between goal-setting, intervention, and evaluation.	90.9%	100%	0.529

*p<.05, Fischer's Exact Test

Effectiveness of Teaching Methods

Given the distribution of the responses, the categories *very effective/effective* were collapsed, as were the categories, *somewhat effective/not at all effective.* Five of the six teaching methods measured for effectiveness were not found to have a significant

difference between what was ranked *very effective/effective* and *somewhat effective/not effective* at all. However, a significant difference was found in one of the six teaching methods. This difference was found in relation to the reflection assignments, the goal of which was to have the students reflect upon the specific skills they were learning in relation to client engagement and problem exploration and if and how their prior or current experience impacted their practice. The *very effective/effective* rating was significantly higher for the online students (p=.030) using the Fischer's Exact Test (See Table 2).

Table 2. *Scores for Effectiveness of Teaching Methods (Very Effective/Effective)*

	% Rating Very Effective/Effective		
Items	**Face-to-face (n=23)**	**Online (n=12)**	***p****
PowerPoint	63.6%	91.7%	0.113
Videos	90.9%	100%	0.529
Small Group Peer Learning Activities	54.5%	41.7%	0.721
Class Discussions	95.5%	83.3%	0.279
Integrative Papers	90.9%	100%	0.529
Reflection Assignments	61.9%	100%	.030*

*p< .05, Fischer's Exact Test

Open-Ended Questions

The qualitative data generated from the open-ended questions were coded for prominent categories, as is common in qualitative approaches such as phenomenology and grounded theory (Creswell, 2013). The content analysis consisted of placing responses into the category that was best aligned. The number of times that a response was given was counted to arrive at larger themes, which is also considered best practice among qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2013). Overall, both online and face-to-face students made similar observations and recommendations. Both online and face-to-face students liked the course videos. One face-to-face student remarked, "Watching practitioners deal with various clients" was impactful. Likewise, an online student said, "I really learned a lot from watching the videos that demonstrated certain interview skills." Group projects were liked the least, but each group gave different reasons. A few online students expressed frustration with the synchronous format, given that the majority of content was delivered asynchronously. An online student stated, "While I appreciated actually connecting with classmates, arranging a time for a conference call was incredibly difficult." Another online student expressed a preference for the activity to be delivered asynchronously, "They really served little purpose to me; none at any rate that couldn't have been achieved via discussion board." Several face-to-face students also said being "put in random groups" was what they liked least. Students in the face-to-face class also said that they wanted to "socialize with other people besides the people in the group."

Students also commented on other class features. Face-to-face and online students mentioned teacher responsiveness as what they liked most. "Quick turn-around time" was

noted several times by online students. Having "an open forum" to express oneself was noted as important in the face-to-face class. Both online and face-to-face students noted that while the course work was rigorous, the readings, assignments, and "multimodal learning" were considered positive.

Rubric Scores

Using the Mann Whitney U to compare the median rubric scores on each of the assignments, the median scores were found to be the same for the face-to-face and online students on the field entry paper (*Mdn=14*) and on the engagement paper (*Mdn*=18). The median rubric score for the online students on the assessment paper was 24 and for the face-to-face students it was 23. No significant differences were found when comparing the median scores for the field entry (*U*=183.5, *p*=.746), the engagement paper (*U*=159.0, *p*=.417), or the assessment paper (*U*=171.0, *p*=.788). See Table 3.

Table 3. *Rubric Scores*

Assignment Rubrics	Face-to-face Median (n)	Online Median (n)	p*
Field Entry Paper	14 (26)	14 (15)	0.746
Engagement Paper	18 (25)	18 (15)	0.417
Assessment Paper	23 (24)	24 (15)	0.788

*p<.05

Student Satisfaction

Using the Mann Whitney U test to compare the median scores on the Student Satisfaction survey, the online score (Mdn =5) and the face to face score (Mdn = 4.9), although both quite high, were found to be significantly different (U=32.5, p=.001). However, given that the actual point difference was only 0.1, the practical significance of this finding is questionable.

Discussion

While skepticism remains about the effectiveness of online courses for teaching social work practice, the results from this study suggest otherwise, and are consistent with previous studies. The learning outcomes, as measured by the rubric scores on the three integrative assignments, were found to be comparable, as were the students' perceptions of the quality of the learning environment, the extent to which they believed the course objectives were achieved, and the effectiveness of five out of six teaching strategies used. The one difference found in relation to teaching strategies was a result of the online group reporting a higher rate of effectiveness in relation to the reflection assignments. High course satisfaction scores were also found for both groups, with the online group's scores being slightly but significantly higher. The overall findings from this study provide a basis for continued optimism about the ability of online courses to teach social work practice concepts and skills as effectively as face-to-face classes. However, this optimism must be grounded in an understanding of this study's strengths and limitations.

Many of this study's strengths can be found in its design components, specifically the use of a comparison group that received the same course content within the same timeframe and was delivered by the same instructor. The only difference was the method of delivery. Another design strength was the multiple measures used to understand three different dimensions of effectiveness: student perceptions of effectiveness, student satisfaction, and learning outcomes. Furthermore, the study design and measures used were also fairly easy to implement, which allows for easy replication in the future. This last strength, ease of implementation, is of particular importance in light of this study's major limitation, the small sample size, which limits its generalizability.

In addition to the small sample size, another limitation of the study is the way in which effectiveness was measured. While the students' level of knowledge was measured and compared between the two cohorts using the assignment rubric scores, this measurement did not evaluate their actual skill level. To do so effectively would have required the students be rated on their skill levels. Standardized client role plays are one method that could have been used to measure the students' skill levels. Role plays were considered given the principal investigator's previous experience with using this method to assess practice skills (Forgey, Badger, Gilbert, & Hansen, 2013). However, after considering the time and resources that would be required to develop role plays to assess specific practice skills, to hire and train standardized clients, to schedule the student role plays, and to implement a rating system including the hiring and training of raters, role play was deemed an unrealistic method for this study.

Another limitation was the lack of measurement of the actual change that occurred in relation to the students' knowledge. Even though the findings indicated that the knowledge in both cohorts, based on the assignment rubric scores, was not significantly different at the end of the course, it is unknown to what extent, if any, that students' knowledge changed over time as a result of the practice course. A pre- and posttest design would be needed to measure this variable. Pretests were not pursued due to time and cost constraints and the desire to develop realistic and implementable evaluation procedures that had more of a chance to be replicated across the curriculum.

The findings from this study also provide some guidance about what factors make an online and face-to-face course equally effective. Gaining more insight into these factors and processes in future research will provide valuable information as to what it was about the curriculum or students themselves that resulted in the level of comparability found.

One factor that may have contributed to the equivalent results was the level of curriculum consistency between the two formats. Having the same instructor deliver both courses played a role in this consistency, but other strategies used in the curriculum design may have further assured the sameness of the content delivered. The same PowerPoint lectures and practice model videos were used in both classes, and all students were able to download and reference the PowerPoints. Further, the major discussion questions, small group activities, course assignments, and material sequencing was the same for both classes. As online programs grow, concerns about the consistency across face-to-face and online courses will increase due to the greater likelihood of faculty teaching solely in one format or the other. While instructor training will always be a critical factor in achieving

curriculum consistency, course design strategies can be implemented by faculty to further ensure face-to-face and online course consistency. However, this will require organizational structures and resources that support both online and face-to-face faculty involvement in the early stages of course design and development.

Understanding what accounted for relatively high ratings for both sets of students on the classroom community scale and the lack of differences is another area for future exploration, given the importance of establishing a social presence within an online environment (Bentley et al., 2015). A closer look at the way in which interactivity happened among the students and between students and instructor is necessary to accomplish this understanding. Within both classes, interactivity occurred in response to the planned discussion questions, the video analysis questions, and the intermittent small group activities that required students to practice the skills together and to discuss among themselves how they were applying what they were learning to their specific cases. In addition, for small group activities, detailed instructions were used in both classes, with the only difference being the medium used to have the interaction. These interactive activities also took place within the same sequence within each class.

The amount of individual student interaction with the instructor is also an important element to the student's experience of classroom community and to the instructor establishing their presence within the class with each student. While the amount of student questions to the instructor cannot be planned for, the amount of other types of student/instructor interactivity can be planned by the type, amount, and timing of the assignments for which individual feedback is provided. Within this class there were three major assignments where extensive feedback was provided individually to each student. In addition, the professor also provided individual feedback on the five reflection assignments.

Certain characteristics of the students themselves may also partly explain the comparability of the data. On two of the three student characteristics, the amount of time reportedly spent on classwork each week and comfort with computer technology, there were no significant differences. However, one of the student characteristics that was significantly different was the amount of practice experience. The online students were found to have significantly more years of practice experience. This one difference may be a possible explanation for the significantly higher value placed on the reflection assignments by the online students, who perhaps as a result of having more practice experience had more to share when asked to apply and discuss what they were learning in relation to their prior and current experience. Attention needs to be given to ways in which the value of reflection could be increased for students with little or no practice experience.

In the quest to identify factors that may help explain the level of comparable effectiveness, class size is another factor that deserves more attention in future studies of course effectiveness (Jones, 2015). While this study found no significant differences in learning outcomes or the quality of the learning environment, it is not known how dependent these outcomes were on the particular class sizes in this study. As online social work programs expand, the question of how large an online class can be before impacting the quality of the learning environment and learning outcomes needs to be addressed.

Future program-wide evaluations involving multiple sections and courses need to explicitly examine this question by analyzing if and how class size impacts the learning outcomes in the class, as well as the faculty work load, which has been reported by some experienced online instructors to be 40% higher in online courses (Jones, 2015; Pelech et al., 2013).

Further investigation is especially important in light of the review of existing multidisciplinary research on the appropriate class size for online courses carried out by Taft, Perkowske, and Martin (2011). They found mixed and at times contradictory results. And although none of the studies reviewed included graduate online social work programs, the review did identify a number of factors that may be responsible for the variation found in the studies on the impact of online class sizes on student outcomes. Some of these include: a) the type of course and specifically the extent of factual information versus application, analysis and/or synthesis within it; b) the level of course and amount of teaching intensity and interaction expected; c) the extent to which the course is delivered synchronously vs. asynchronously; d) the presence or absence of technology support and teaching assistants; e) level of faculty expertise in online education; and f) the type of evidence of student learning. Given that the practice course evaluated in this study was asynchronous with a high level of application, analysis and synthesis as well as interaction within it, it seems imperative that future effectiveness research examine if and how class size may impact the effectiveness of this type of course.

Conclusion

Online programs are developing rapidly within schools of social work. Based on the findings in this study, as well as previous studies that have compared online and face-to-face practice courses, the student learning experience in these courses appears to be comparable. However, learning outcomes in social work practice courses are difficult to measure effectively. To do so requires the measurement of both knowledge and skills, as well as the extent to which the skill levels changed as a result of the course. While there has been an increased focus on the need to measure learning outcomes in reaction to the proliferation of online social work courses, and in particular practice courses, this need also exists and deserves equal attention in the face-to-face curriculum.

Ironically, the development of online curricula and the concerns raised about the learning outcomes in these courses have resulted in a much needed focus on the evaluation of learning outcomes in both online and face-to-face courses. While the findings to date, which demonstrate comparable learning, may allay some of the concerns about the effectiveness of online courses, the measures used need to be further developed to more accurately measure the knowledge and skills gained as a result of enrollment in each method of delivery. Doing so in a way that is easily implementable across the curriculum and provides results in a timely and useful way to the faculty responsible for monitoring and improving course quality is one of the major challenges ahead.

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Facilitating Social Work Role Plays in Online Courses: The Use of Video Conferencing

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Abstract: *Role plays have served an instrumental role in social work education by providing opportunities for students to acquire interaction skills. This project tested various online video conferencing tools to facilitate role plays for students who live in different locations and who are unable to be at the same place at the same time. Key features of the technology included the ability to facilitate real-time interaction, compatibility with laptops and Wi-Fi connections, and the ability to record sessions for later viewing and feedback. Method: Case study design. Results: Students were able to use the videoconferencing software with minimal support. Video quality was not always ideal with contributing factors being the time of day students used the software. There were no distinguishable time and effort demands associated with the online video conferencing compared to classroom role plays. Some students found use of the technology caused them to feel disconnected from their peers compared to face-to-face encounters, while other students found the encounter more intimate in that the pressure to perform in front of others was not felt. Implications: Video conferencing is a promising tool to facilitate social work role plays. Future research needs to assess the acquisition of specific skills compared to traditional classroom students.*

Keywords: *Role plays; online education; online videoconferencing; social work education*

Acquiring and practicing interaction skills is a perceived challenge as the social work profession embraces online education. Social work online education will continue to grow and develop, in large part, to the extent social work educators are successful in helping students acquire interaction skills. Whether the interaction skill is as basic as engaging a client, or as advanced as supporting a client in dealing with the ramifications of a traumatic event, all such capabilities hinge on our abilities as social work educators to provide a learning environment that is accessible and effective at teaching interaction skills to online students.

Our program rose to this challenge by testing various online video conferencing tools to facilitate role plays for students who live in different locations and are unable to be at the same place at the same time

On simulation game theory (Hargreaves & Hadlow, 1997), social work education has a long history in using role plays, which are a means for new students to achieve a sense of self-awareness (Gardner, 2001) and self-efficacy (Petrovich, 2004), and to instruct students on interaction skills (Reid & Hanrahan, 1982). Role plays are valuable tools to assess whether students are ready for practice (Duffy, Das, & Davidson, 2013), to develop

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group work skills (Macgowan & Vakharia, 2012), and to promote reflective learning, particularly when coupled with videotaped analysis (Bolger, 2014; Dempsey, Halton, & Murphy, 2001). Various methods have been used to achieve pedagogical goals when employing role plays in the classroom. For example, Petracchi (1999) and Petracchi and Collins (2006) used actors to simulate client situations, and the results were largely positive. While role plays are typically viewed as a dyad exercise, Moss (2000) has used them in a large group format as well. The pedagogical goal was for students to experience multiple actors similar to what would be encountered when doing family therapy or engaged in a multi-agency collaborative project.

Some empirical studies have compared the efficacy of online role plays to face-to-face role plays with little difference found in student learning outcomes for acquiring problem-solving skills related to alcohol use (Vapalahti, Marttunen, & Laurinen, 2013). On the other hand, regarding the learning setting, students in other studies prefered face-to-face experiences (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2015). Related fields, such as counseling psychology, have also evaluated the efficacy of online training for clinicians needing to acquire Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) skills with promising results, especially when accessibility is a key issue (Rakovshik et al., 2013). Finally, in social work, Peterson (2014) reported significant improvement in clinical skills for students who used handheld digital recorders. Students uploaded role play files to a private YouTube channel for instructor feedback, eliminating the need to either email large media files or mail physical storage devices to the instructor in order to submit the assignment.

Cost can be a key consideration when online programs adopt new technology solutions. Online programs in general can be quite costly to design and implement with overhead costs ranging up to the millions of dollars (Miller, 2014). For example, some technology solutions involve the use of Artificial Intelligence to emulate unscripted conversational encounters (Zhang et al., 2009). While a promising approach, the costs associated with developing the programming language can be substantial. Other social work programs hire professional actors to perform role plays with online students (see http://www.backstage.com/casting/msw-online-education-role-plays-69125/). Lastly, unlike Peterson (2014), in which handheld devices and YouTube were used, other programs developed their own web servers for feedback and discussion of videos that were shot with two cameras and stored on a separate media server (Shibusawa, VanEsselstyn, & Oppenheim, 2006). In addition to the costs associated with the equipment, the resulting high definition video files could only be accessed by students on campus or by those with access to broadband internet connections.

Studies examining the implementation and effectiveness of online delivery of content must consider whether the delivery is synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous delivery means that students and instructors meet at the same time via videoconferencing software (e.g., Adobe Connect, Blackboard Collaborate, etc.) Asynchronous delivery means that students and instructors interact solely via discussion boards, recorded video lectures, or other multi-media content, with no real-time interaction. Online asynchronous programs could ask students to find a local friend with whom to perform a role play, videotape the encounter, and then email the video file to the instructor for feedback. Some online professional counseling programs, however, have no practice component until students are

in their internships (Reicherzer et al., 2012) (i.e., students do not have any role play experiences). The distinction between synchronous and asynchronous delivery is a central consideration when identifying and evaluating the types of technology needed for online courses.

In sum, the literature provides numerous examples of the ways in which role plays can be incorporated into online education. However, most studies tend to skip over the thinking and design work that went into the actual technical solutions and focus only on group process issues like cohesion, presence, and therapeutic alliance (e.g., Holmes & Kozlowski, 2015) when evaluating their efforts. Failing to document the design process is especially problematic when there are known technical issues that can be challenging in online verbal interactions, e.g., latency (when audio and video become out of sync). It is important to identify and describe the thinking and design work in order to assist other programs in adopting and implementing technology solutions that best address their desired delivery style. Within social work and similar programs teaching clinical skills, the technical solution has to address a difficult problem – examining the best way for online students to acquire interaction skills. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to systematically examine the design features that need to be considered, that is, design choice, when developing a technical solution that facilitates online role plays.

Proof of Concept Project

The course delivery method for our school of social work is largely asynchronous *except* for the role play component. When doing role plays, our students interact with each other in real time; therefore, our program is a hybrid asynchronous/synchronous approach. To achieve this synchronous component within an overall asynchronous program, we proceeded as a proof of concept project since the goal was the development of a technology solution that we needed to test in terms of feasibility, cost, and scalability. That is, the technical aspects needed to work across various hardware components, (e.g., personal computers, laptops, smartphones); it needed to be accomplished at little to no cost; and it needed to be implementable in classes across the curriculum whether online or on campus. Key in our formulation of the technology solution is that the technology needed to align with our profession's commitment to training students with face-to-face interactions whenever possible. Specifically, one misconception with online education is that students are not able to interact with people in real time. Prior research likely contributes to this misconception, for example, studies in which role plays were evaluated by listening to taped phone conversations (e.g., Rakovshik et al., 2013) or occurred through text-only discussion forums (e.g., Levine, 2013).

In order to preserve real-time interactions, in 2013 project members began testing various online video conferencing tools. Key features needed to include: a) The ability to facilitate the real-time interaction of two students from different locations. Students learn in role plays by playing both the therapist and the client role. Indeed, it might be argued that playing the client role is instrumental in helping students develop empathic skills, b) The ability to work well with laptops and Wi-Fi/3G connections in rural settings. c) The ability to record the session for later viewing and feedback. We examined various online platforms that could have met these needs, but all of them came with price tags above our

program means. We also examined the videoconferencing capabilities available through our learning management system, Blackboard. While financially feasible, it lacked the technical capabilities of being easily accessible across platforms (Windows and Macintosh), it required additional software downloads (Java, in particular), and the resulting recorded sessions displayed degraded video quality. After considerable testing and use, we decided to examine Google Hangouts (https://plus.google.com/hangouts) and Zoom (http://zoom.us/). Peer and instructor feedback was accomplished using videoANT (http://ant.umn.edu/) through the University of Minnesota.

Methods

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained since a portion of our evaluative data involved the display and review of recorded online interactions between students. Our sampling frame included students and instructors from three classes: an on-campus undergraduate course, an on-campus graduate class, and an online graduate class. In total, there were 3 instructors and 32 students who participated and provided feedback data. 35 instructor and student participants.

As a proof-of-concept, formative evaluation of a technology tool, we used the design science methodology outlined by Peffers, Tuunanen, Rothenberger, and Chatterjee (2008) for three main reasons: 1) The focus of this project is on how the software application for role plays was chosen and implemented. As such, the software as a technology artifact was designed to fit a specific function within organizational constraints. 2) This focus on the design features, in turn, produces design principles that can be implemented in other settings like other schools of social work. 3) These design principles, in turn, can serve as the basis for future theoretical and empirical research projects. A sampling of what those research questions may entail is discussed under Implications for Future Research. As outlined in Peffers and colleagues (2008), we discuss four central components of this project: process, resources, management, and effectiveness.

Process

Too often so-called technology solutions are presented as a one-and-done solution offered by vendors to schools of social work. Sometimes these solutions work, but oftentimes they do not. In either case, the faculty are left largely unaware as to how the solution actually works. In order to involve all key stakeholders in our technology adoption, participant recruitment, including instructors and students, unfolded in an iterative process. It began with the testing of various platforms among faculty, then soliciting feedback from a small number of students, and finally moving forward to classroom-level involvement. Each step of the process resulted in feedback that informed the next step.

We took this approach for several reasons. First, budgetary constraints prohibited the use of outside vendors to provide a technical solution. Second, we needed to be able to explain why a certain approach was chosen pedagogically and how it could fit into online classes but also be capable of use in the traditional classroom. Third, multiple instructors were involved to explore and test the technology. This is a strength as individual faculty members may identify a technology solution for a specific class, only to find out that it will

not work for other classes or lacks broader buy-in from other instructors. This may result in the non-adoption of the technology solution on a broader scale.

Resources

This aspect of the analysis primarily examined the time and effort required to conduct and assess online role plays compared to the traditional classroom approach. Secondarily, we considered the resources that would be required in terms of classroom time utilization, technology demands, connection speeds, etc. Finally, costs were an integral aspect of the decision-making process to adopt a technology solution. Resource-deep universities appear to have the option of expending funds in trying out various technology solutions that are simply cost-prohibitive for many institutions. We needed to explore technology solutions that did not require upfront expenditures yet still met our pedagogical goals.

Management

The instructors were asked questions related to the feasibility of employing this technology on a wider scale if pilot results look promising. For example, the traditional classroom constrains the number of role plays that can be conducted and observed by the instructor within a given block of time. Online video conferencing does not have this constraint thereby potentially increasing the workload of instructors. Conversely, alternative methods of providing feedback may lessen this workload. The technology solution also needed to be one that did not have a steep learning curve and/or require the use of proprietary software that would require additional instructor obligations to learn and master.

Effectiveness

As a formative evaluation, any assessment of effectiveness is provisional, but useful information was gathered from the student and instructor participants regarding the utility of the technology artifact, the video quality of the role-play compared to classroom settings, and a preliminary understanding of the efficacy of this technology artifact to nurture interaction skills.

To elicit information related to these four dimensions, we asked the students and instructors via email or through face-to-face discussions the following questions:

1. How easy was it to use Google Hangouts/Zoom and provide feedback?
    a. Did you experience any technical difficulties?
    b. Were the directions easy to follow?
    c. Was the video quality sufficient to perform a role play?
2. How would you compare the time and effort compared to a classroom role play?
3. Do you believe you were able to acquire social worker-client interaction skills comparable to a classroom role play? If so, how? If not, why not?

Findings

The methodological framework and research questions resulted in findings that fell within eight domains: the user interface, technical issues, costs, support needs, time and

effort, skill acquisition, privacy issues, and evidence for transfer of learning. While Google Hangouts was proficient in meeting many of the pedagogical and technical requirements necessary for conducting role plays, Zoom was used because of the ease of use and video quality. As such, most of the findings refer to Zoom.

Interface

Perhaps the most significant factor in deciding upon any technology solution is the user interface experience. To aid in better understanding the user interface, two screen captures have been provided from actual student participants. The first image, used with permission, captures exactly what the users see when talking to each other via Zoom.

Figure 1. Screen capture of Zoom user interface.

It is immediately apparent that the user interface is not cluttered with extraneous technical tools thereby preserving the one-on-one experience. As an observer to the role play, one is able to see each participant head-on and not in profile view as occurs in classroom role plays. After the role play is concluded, one of the participants uploads the video (automatically stored on the user's device) to YouTube choosing the Unlisted privacy setting which means it can only be viewed if you have the specific link to the video. Once uploaded, the URL for the video is linked from videoANT resulting in the following user interface:

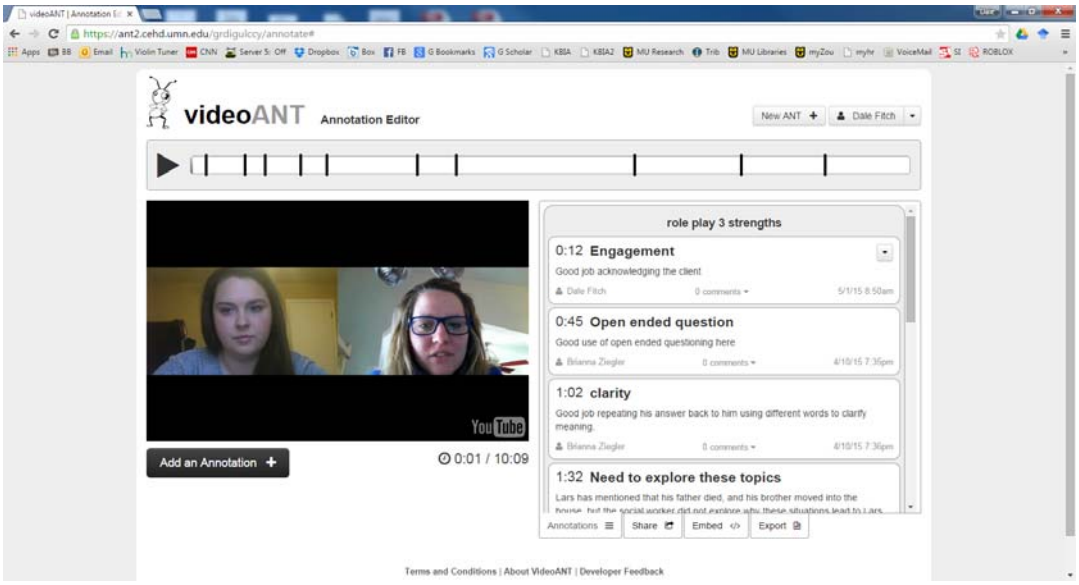

Figure 2. Screen capture of videoANT user interface.

This interface, viewable by the instructor and peers, provides an opportunity to view the video *and* provide feedback. Most important in this technical solution is the ability to provide annotated feedback that is time-stamped. Closer examination of the image will show that feedback provided at the 12 second mark, 45 second mark, etc., results in a hash mark on the timeline above the video. As such, a student reviewing the feedback provided by an instructor can go to those specific spots in the video to see what is referenced. Having this time-stamped annotated capability precludes the need to segment video sections into different files (Shibusawa et al., 2006) or fast-forward or reverse through the entire video.

Most importantly, the annotation feature can have other uses. For example, an instructor may ask students to perform a self-assessment of their role play performance using an established rubric at the time of assignment submission. In this manner the instructor would then evaluate how well the participants were able to assess their skills. The instructor can then provide feedback using the "Comments" feature. Alternatively, peers may be asked to provide the initial feedback with the instructor evaluating how well peers are able to note specific interaction skills. In sum, there are multiple ways to provide feedback. The role play video is accessible via the Internet, and the participants, instructor, and peers do not have to be at the same place at the same time to provide this feedback.

Taken together, the most salient features program planners will want to consider when designing or selecting an interface to facilitate role plays would include an uncluttered user experience, viewing the participants head-on, and the ability to provide time-stamped feedback.

Technical Issues

The importance of the user interface experience cannot be understated. Instructor and student feedback revealed general consensus that the web-based technologies were easy to

use. Specifically, individuals with older laptops (6+ years) reported the technologies worked well. Users with smartphones were also able to use Zoom with ease. There were two types of occasional audio problems: a) some users reported no sound, but that was remedied by having the users check their default microphone configurations, and b) there was some degree of latency (the audio and video images were not in sync), occurring more frequently with Google Hangouts than Zoom, but also easily remedied by having the users wear headsets. Other contributing factors for the latency appeared to be the time of day the role plays occurred with 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. being the most problematic. In addition, the level of lighting in the participants' locations contributed to latency. Insufficient lighting will cause a computer's processor to work harder in order to capture the video image thus hampering overall performance. Most important to our project, even students living in rural areas with no or limited broadband access were able to use their smartphones and reported a high quality user experience with the technology. Stated otherwise, the design choice for technology selection must be a hardware/software/access choice that is accessible for students with limited bandwidth options and can accommodate older computers and multiple operating systems and devices.

Costs

Cost was one of the more important administrative aspects of the technology solution. Zoom and videoANT are free. Zoom is free for up to 25 participants. Since only two people were involved in the role plays, no costs were incurred. Zoom is also a browser add-on, so there is no software to manually install and no administrative privileges are needed to use it on university-owned equipment. The videoANT software also has no cost since it is offered freely by the University of Minnesota.

In addition, even though we used the free version of Zoom, if a social work program needed to conduct role plays that might contain client identifiable information, paid versions of Zoom are available that can provide additional privacy controls. The videoANT software, likewise, while still freely available, can be installed on a university's secure server for enhanced privacy protections. In sum, the design choices we made for our program involved no costs. Although free software may raise quality concerns, our experiences show that low-cost video sharing software can meet the needs for online social work education programs.

Support

Most helpful in our iterative approach was learning the needs of students in using the new technology. In line with existing best practices, an extensive step-by-step guide was written to direct the instructors and students through each part of the process of setting up a role play through video feedback. While most students found these guides very helpful, others did not. Because of student feedback, online video tutorials were created to demonstrate how to do each step. Once these online tutorials were introduced, no technical issues arose. It may be important to become familiar with the technology *before* the actual role play assignment. One student reported, "I thought [it] was relatively easy once I got my account set up and did a run through to verify that everything worked." This design choice is the one that typically gets overlooked even though "Help" buttons are found in

most software applications. By the very fact that most people rarely use "Help" buttons beyond the first attempt (Grayling, 2002), program implementers must devote the time necessary to learn exactly what types of support are needed and in which ways they need to be delivered.

Time and Effort

Almost all of the students had prior experience doing role plays in the classroom setting. As such, they were asked to compare the two experiences in terms of the time and effort required to perform a role play. Several students reported they would not have been able to do the role play if not for online videoconferencing due to travel barriers and employment obligations. For example, one student commented,

> *There might be a little less time involved as it was completed without having to travel to a mutual location. It was very convenient for a single mother, someone out of town, and one traveling out of town for other appointments to coordinate a time to complete the assignment.*

Similarly, a second student commented,

> *After I get off work and drive an hour plus to [school location] I don't feel like I can give the proper amount of attention to an assignment after class. This is a great tool to overcome that problem and still have an effective educational experience.*

For these students the use of technology allowed them to participate in key learning experiences while simultaneously managing competing life events. Many of our students, particularly those enrolled in the part-time program, have a multitude of competing roles including full- and part-time work and caregiver responsibilities. Time and effort is an important consideration and frequent barrier that technology may help address. The design choice for this task actually involves an analysis of the existing classroom as opposed to any technology. Students experience location and time constraints in the traditional, on-campus classroom, and professors often must plan course time around the availability of rooms or recording equipment. These decision constraints are all taken for granted in most curriculum planning activities. Online technologies now allow us to avoid those constraints.

Skill Acquisition

Students and professors provided a range of feedback regarding the skills acquired through the online role plays. Some students found the technology "distancing" compared to a face-to-face encounter. Alternatively, other students found the encounter more "intimate" in that the pressure to "perform in front of others" was not felt. For example, one student commented,

> *It is definitely not as natural as in-classroom role plays, but that's to be expected. I think our actual verbal interaction was pretty comparable and I feel it is good technology to practice for the future of clinical social work.*

Another student reported,

> *It was an adjustment with the eye contact being difficult, though with the camera being straight on each person, it was easy to see body language, non-verbal idiosyncrasies, as well as facial expressions.*

This last comment is particularly important for those concerned about technology interfering with human interactions. Online role play is different from in-person classroom experiences, but it does not appear to be so different as to prevent all nonverbal communications. However, more research is necessary.

The instructor feedback related to skills acquisition indicated that students acquired comparable skills relative to classroom students. Similar to the student feedback, the instructors reported that students were able to demonstrate engagement skills and other techniques much like their classroom counterparts. Future studies will need to more rigorously assess if any differences occur with skill acquisition.

Privacy

Even though the privacy constraints in doing a role play are no different than those of the traditional classroom, additional steps were taken in light of the online environment in which this learning activity would take place. Those steps included privacy settings within the software and the use of disclaimers.

Students were instructed how to change the default privacy settings for Google Hangouts and Zoom and, for YouTube, to change the video settings from Public to Unlisted. In addition, the role play began with the person playing the role of the social worker saying: "The following is a fictional role play – all names, places, and events are fabricated." During the role play the social worker and client referred to each other with fictional names. At the conclusion of the role play, the person playing the role of the social worker said: "The preceding was a fictional role play- all names, places, and events were fabricated." No students reported any concerns due to privacy issues. The design choices for this issue will change as often as hardware and software change, and that point must not be forgotten. However, these choices should not be limited to the conduct of online role plays. Indeed, with all types of classroom activities now having at least some online component (e.g., email, course management systems), students and faculty must continually upgrade their knowledge and skills regarding safe computing practices.

New Learning Connections

The connections some students made from this online exercise to the future of social work practice were unexpected. One student noted, "What a great way to provide counseling to those in remote locations (servicemen and women overseas?)!" Another student stated,

> *I like the idea of video interviews because of the convenience and learning opportunities. If a social worker could do appointments over video and they are able to record it confidentially, it would allow them to be able to watch the video afterwards to see if they might have missed something in the client's expression,*

tone, or body language. The client also might have said something important that the social worker missed during the initial interview, but noticed when watching the video.

It is understandable that social work educators have serious concerns about the use of technology in online education and social work practice. However, it appears that students not only feel comfortable with this medium but are also able to see implications for practice that may not have been imagined without their exposure to it in the online role play exercises.

Finally, the design choice for programs looking to add an online component is simply to be aware these new learning connections will extend far beyond any one role play exercise or class. Not only do students see the opportunity to use technology in new ways, but faculty will also find new ways to think about teaching and learning. When that happens, some faculty and students will be reluctant to return to the traditional way of learning if a technology-facilitated approach is viewed as preferable.

Discussion

The purpose of our project was to systematically examine the design features that needed to be considered when developing a technical solution that facilitates online role plays. Incorporating Peffers and colleagues' (2008) design science methodology allowed us to examine these features within pedagogical and organizational constraints. Doing so allowed us to be more explicit in what the technology can and cannot do and how it can serve pedagogical goals instead of limiting them. In addition, the transparency of the technology design allowed our project to be more explicit in describing how the technology mediates the acquisition of interaction skills, a very important factor in future efficacy studies for online education.

A lack of clarity regarding the mediating capacity can have unintended consequences. For example, the Google Hangout latency issue might have contributed to the findings reported by Holmes and Kozlowski (2015), yet we do not know since they did not address those issues into their article. This omission may lead some to believe that interaction skills cannot be obtained online due to technical rather than pedagogical reasons. Extending this reasoning further can be especially problematic if we then infer that potential clients should not receive services online. Not only did the students in our pilot project point out the possible contribution online therapy might make for clients who cannot access services otherwise, but randomized control trials from other fields also show that online therapy has demonstrated efficacy for depression (Andersson et al., 2005; Andersson et al., 2013; Griffiths et al., 2012; Preschl, Maercker, & Wagner, 2011), social phobias (Berger, Hohl, & Caspar, 2009), anxiety (Ellis, Campbell, Sethi, & O'Dea, 2011; Hedman et al., 2014), and eating disorders (Heinicke, Paxton, McLean, & Wertheim, 2007).

A surprising mediating role that technology played also occurred with performance anxiety issues around role plays. Our finding that students found role plays intimidating in front of a room of peers was also encountered by Shibusawa et al. (2006). Ideally, one would hope we could provide settings for students to acquire skills without the complicating factor of performing in front of others since counseling is not done in that

manner either. Using technology as a mediator that focuses on skill acquisition may make it preferable for students to acquire skills regardless of online or on-campus settings.

Most intriguing is how the use of online technologies mediates the time constraints imposed by traditional classrooms. As noted by the instructors in our project and other researchers (Peterson, 2014; Shibusawa et al., 2006), the storage of recorded role plays on the web allows for their access at any later time in the semester for additional learning and understanding. All too often role plays are seen as one-time events, diminishing the educational capacity of the exercise. Students may not fully appreciate certain aspects of a counseling technique until it is presented in a different context. By having the role play available online, new learning may occur that would not have happened otherwise.

Finally, while studies like Peterson's (2014) are to be lauded because they report pre/post measures of competency achievement, it may be just as important to document how the use of technology is to occur. That is, how should instructors identify potential technical solutions to address the issue of online role plays amid the various software and hardware options? This article attempts to answer that question. However, in doing so it also results in other intriguing possibilities.

Implications for Future Research

The most important implication for future research is the need for more rigorous research designs in assessing student interaction skills. Our preliminary results are promising, but no generalizable claims can be made due to the lack of comparison/control groups, and lack of a random sample. However, it is important that any future efficacy study involving technology be transparent in describing the role that technology plays and how that technology fits into pedagogical goals and organizational constraints. Additionally, researchers should describe the process of using the technology including implementation procedures, ease of use, and any technical difficulties experienced.

Future students, online or not, need to be able to engage in more role play activities. One of the most paradigm-shifting outcomes from our project is getting instructors to think outside the 3-hour block of time that has historically constrained our educational activities. Asynchronous online learning completely removes that constraint and re-shifts the focus away from online teaching and toward online learning. Without the 3-hour time constraint, all students could conceivably engage in as many role plays as pedagogically desired. Granted, this would increase workload issues for both students and instructors, but it would certainly address the need expressed by students to have more practice acquiring interaction skills prior to field placement experiences.

Finally, if our profession is to take the next step of offering social work services online, we must find the best ways to prepare students to provide those services. We must explore methods for training students to compensate for non-verbal cues that may be obscured by video technology. Becoming familiar with technology interfaces via role plays may be the first step.

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Social Media Use in Child Welfare Practice

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Abstract: *The scholarly child welfare literature offers little information about the use of social media by child welfare workers. We conducted a study of 171 child welfare workers across several states using an online survey. The resulting data offer insights from workers about current practices related to social media use in a child welfare work setting. Most respondents see social media as an acceptable tool for conducting child welfare assessments. Respondents describe strains and benefits of social media use. It is recommended that agencies provide guidance on ethical decision-making for using social media as a work-related tool. Agencies should also provide policy clearly defining social media use and misuse.*

Keywords: *Administration; supervision; child welfare policy; child welfare workforce; social media*

There exist untapped opportunities for technology in child welfare settings, including improving and increasing interaction between families and workers (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, are used by 74% of online adults (Pew Research Center, 2013). Little is known about how caseworkers use social media in the field of child welfare; however, literature about professionals who use social media in other work settings suggest that tensions can arise about the boundaries between one's public and private presentation on social media. Clients, co-workers, and supervisors can easily search out social media profiles, and off-duty or work-related behavior on these sites may impact the perceptions of those who conduct searches (McDonald & Thompson, 2016). Although tension is a risk, child welfare workers can also use social media to carry out their roles, such as family finding and assessment (Sage & Sage, 2016).

Two empirical studies contribute to what is known about the use of social media in child welfare (Breyette & Hill, 2015; McRoy, 2010). They suggest that child welfare workers use social media for both personal and professional reasons. A 2010 study of 746 child welfare workers reported that a third of respondents used social media for professional and personal purposes and would like to make more use of it to assist in adoptions and permanency planning for children in foster care (McRoy, 2010). Additionally, a recent survey of 136 child welfare workers in Minnesota found that 12% used social media directly with clients, 44% used social media indirectly with clients, and 22% believed that child welfare workers should monitor their clients' social media activities (Breyette & Hill, 2015). More than half of child welfare workers involved in this study reported seeing a client's personal social media page, and a similar number reported that a client had requested to friend them on social media.

The current study surveyed child welfare workers about their beliefs, values, activities, and training related to social media. We attempt to expand knowledge about how child welfare workers use social media in the workplace, uncover tensions about social media use in child welfare work, and learn which educational or organizational practices might impact child welfare workers' professional use of social media.

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Defining Social Media Sites and Understanding Privacy Settings

Social media sites allow users to build personal profiles that typically share user-provided content such as age, occupation, location, and interests, and users can then make portions of their profiles accessible to select people or the public. Users are then encouraged to identify others who use the social media site with whom they have a preexisting relationship to make an online connection (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). There are hundreds of social media sites with various user-base sizes, some catering to niche audiences, and used for various purposes, such as business networking, communicating with friends, or re-sharing information from news sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media sites, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and LinkedIn, each have different formats and norms regarding self-presentation and communication.

Social media users considerably underestimate the reach of their online posts (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013) and misunderstand who can see the information they share. Some social media sites have complex privacy settings, and default settings commonly allow public profile view (Watson, Lipford, & Besmer, 2015). Additionally, some users may have reduced capacity to understand the way their information is shared due to their age, mental health, or cognitive abilities (Batchelor, Bobrowicz, Mackenzie, & Milne, 2012). Thus, a user, whether child welfare worker or client, may assume their information is more private than it is or not understand who might access it. This is a complicating factor when one makes a decision about what information was shared publicly and therefore meant for others to discover.

Social Media in the Workplace

McDonald and Thompson (2016) cite three sources of strain related to social media use in the workplace: a) troublesome use of social media by employers to profile job candidates or employees, which threatens employees' rights to privacy and may lead the searcher to false assumptions; b) social media posts made by employees related to work, especially derogatory posts about the workplace; and c) private use of social media in the workplace, which may be seen as wasting time. These three issues are all potentially amplified in a child welfare setting: a) profiling extends to the profiling of clients by child welfare workers and vice versa; b) social media posts related to work may not only reflect poorly on an agency, but may also reveal confidential information about clients; and c) private use of social media on agency equipment may be difficult to delineate from agency-sanctioned use. Breyette and Hill (2015) examined the extent to which these strains are present in the child welfare workplace, and note that child welfare workers see themselves as uninvited recipients of client searches and also admit to searching out clients on social media.

Social Media as an Assessment Tool

In child welfare settings, caseworkers use several professional and investigative assessment tools to make decisions about whether children are safe at home, including information about personal backgrounds of family members. For many of these tools, such as psychosocial assessments and forensic interviewing, child welfare workers receive both

initial and ongoing training. The issue of social media as an agency-sanctioned assessment tool in child welfare setting has not been addressed in the scholarly literature; however, government agencies sometimes have specific policies or practices that condone or disallow its use as an investigative tool. For instance, Erie County, NY, implemented a Child Protective Services Policy that allows designated staff to search for child safety information on social media; this information is then evaluated with specific criteria (Erie County, 2014). Presumably, Erie County provides worker training for designated staff about these criteria.

Although no guidance exists on the use of social media in child welfare assessments, forensic mental health investigators perform a similar role, in that they are employed by governments and courts to conduct an unbiased assessment of risks related to safety. Pirellli, Otto, and Estoup (2016) suggest that forensic mental health evaluators who have an investigative role in assessing a patient's danger to self or others should: a) conceptualize this data as collateral information like that drawn from outside interviews, rather than as self-report; b) weigh the utility versus the prejudicial effects of use in each case, especially when no standards exist for the assessment of such data; c) inform clients about the intent to search for this information; d) allow clients to see and respond to the information found, just as they would other collateral information such as police reports; and (e) be explicit in documentation and testimony about their reliance upon this type of information in decision-making. These principles could similarly apply to the use of client information found via social media in child welfare assessments.

On the other hand, law enforcement authorities have investigative roles somewhat different in that the focus of child welfare workers is on assessment of child safety and risk, and the role of police is to assess evidence of a crime. A growing body of literature reports on appropriate ways to gather and use social media evidence during police investigations. Private social media posts can be accessed by law enforcement agencies through subpoenas and search warrants, whereas many police agencies access public information on social media without informed consent, including the use of deception such as creating fake profiles to connect with a suspect and gain access to their friends-only postings (Murphy & Fontecilla, 2013). However, several court challenges have centered on the admissibility of this type of data and issues related to a person's right to privacy and freedom of speech (Taylor, 2014). Whereas standard police officer training requires 48 hours of education on criminal and constitutional law and 40 hours of investigations training (Stanislas, 2013), which should inform the appropriate use of social media evidence, child welfare workers have little training related to legal standards of evidence and may not be comfortable with court processes (Faller, Grabarek, & Vandervort, 2009; Vandervort, Pott Gonzalez, & Coulborn Faller, 2008). It is unknown whether child welfare workers currently present social media evidence in court or know how to formally document findings related to social media evidence.

Tensions of Social Media Use in Child Welfare: Safety versus Well-being

Child welfare workers are faced with constant tension between child safety and child well-being: that is, a worker must do all that is possible to assess risks to a child but also make decisions from a family-centered approach that promotes holistic family well-being

(Spratt, 2001). Given a risk-focused orientation, child welfare workers should be thorough in their family assessments, exploring any resource available, including social media. Client privacy and confidentiality is seen as secondary to child safety from this lens.

However, in a child-well-being-centered model (Fargion, 2014), family strengths, parent support, trust and relationship building, and engagement are central. If a client finds out about a social media search it may be seen as a boundary violation (Lannin & Scott, 2013) and disrupt goals related to family engagement. This lens suggests that child welfare workers might avoid social media searches in cases where social media does not have a clear role in child safety.

On the other hand, several opportunities exist for the family-centered use of social media by child welfare workers, including enhanced communication with foster youth (Breyette & Hill, 2015), peer support for foster parents or direct communication with foster parents (Dodsworth et al., 2013), maintaining relationships for foster youth and supporting access to resources (Denby Brinson, Gomez, & Alford, 2015), and promoting positive foster youth development (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2015). Child welfare organizations also have opportunities to use social media to promote agency transparency, recruit workers and foster parents, and promote child adoption (Sage & Sage, 2016). Given the practice tensions and potential benefits of social media use, from a safety and well-being perspective, it may be difficult for a worker to know when and how to use social media to meet work-related goals.

Social Media Training, Agency Policy, and Supervision

Given the ubiquity of social media use that seems to span personal and professional settings, it would be helpful to understand what training child welfare workers receive and need and how the training is enforced. There is no published evidence that describes child welfare workers' access to training about social media use in practice.

One may assume that social media training is not necessary given its widespread use amongst adults. However, professional use of social media differs from personal use (Hrdinová, Helbig, & Peters, 2010) and may require different boundaries and self-representation (Kimball & Kim, 2013). Human service professionals generally have limited exposure to training and education about effective agency use of technology, and especially about its best practices (Berzin, Singer, & Chan, 2015). Few studies have attempted to explore the best pedagogical ways to teach about social media use for professionals (Pander, Pinnilla, Dimitriadis, & Fischer, 2014). However, several studies that describe ways to teach digital professionalism focus on didactic sessions and then assess professional beliefs (e.g., George, 2011; Kung, Eisenberg, & Slanetz, 2012), rather than assessing the effects of post-training behavior.

While carrying out child welfare assessments, workers are guided by local, state, and federal policies. However, workers may experience ethical conflicts when their personal values collide with an agency's policy (Lee, Sobeck, Djelaj, & Agius, 2013), and this may be especially true when there is no agency policy to guide decision-making. Although there

is no national data about how many child welfare agencies have formal policies to guide decisions about social media use in child welfare settings, Young (2012) found that although many organizations were using social media, few had a policy that governed their use of social media.

A wealth of research exists, however, that suggests supervisors in child welfare settings reinforce the agency's practice model and play a vital role in ensuring workers utilize learned skills (Frey et al., 2012). Curry, McCarragher, and Dellman-Jenkins (2005) document the lack of evidence that training alone directly enforces practice behavior in child welfare and report that both co-worker and supervisor support can enhance the transfer of learning to practice. Thusly, any direct delivery of training to child welfare workers about the use of social media will likely be best reinforced when shared with supervisors, who may have generational differences in their expectations about social media use (Watson, 2013).

Professional Ethics, Agency Expectations, and Social Media Use

Child welfare workers are not members of a distinct profession. Although very recent national workforce statistics are unknown, a 1988 study reported that about a quarter of child welfare workers held a social work degree (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988). In some states, a social work license is required to hold certain child welfare positions. Child welfare workers who also hold social work degrees and are members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), a professional association, are asked to adhere to a set of ethical principles. These principles provide guidance for social media use by addressing issues such as informed consent, boundaries and dual relationships, documentation, practitioner competence, privacy, and confidentiality (Reamer, 2013). NASW also published a 2005 pamphlet on ethical technology standards for social workers, but it has not kept pace with new technologies such as social media (Lopez, 2014). Regardless, a minority of child welfare workers are held by these standards due to the lack of a requirement in most states to hold a social work license to work in child welfare practice.

Organizations, even when they do not have explicit policies for social media use, often have broad technology and professional behavior polices that may inform practice. They also have expectations about technological competency. Quinn and Fitch (2014), for instance, found that employers expect new social work graduates to be proficient in the use of technology to access or produce information related to work. The expectations about technology competencies of child welfare workers are unknown; however, child welfare workers frequently work with complex databases, computer software, and technology communication tools related to searching for and documenting information, conducting assessments, facilitating visitation, and creating case notes (Dellor, Lovato-Hermann, Wolf, Curry, & Freisthler, 2015; Quinn, Sage, & Tunseth, 2015; White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009) . In fact, technology and data issues are so prevalent in child welfare that Naccarato (2010) argues for a Child Welfare Informatics subspeciality in social work education that would help address the complex needs related to workers' use of agency technology, as well as address data-related needs in child welfare agencies. Despite their frequent exposure to technology, child welfare workers are often frustrated by their lack of

involvement in decision-making about agency technology adoption (Gillingham, 2015).

Methods

Based on the review of literature, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed by the authors to answer questions about child welfare workers' experience with social media. This survey aimed to address several gaps in the literature review, including:

- What beliefs about social media inform child welfare worker's practices?
- Do workers use social media as an assessment tool?
- Where do workers receive training about social media?
- What agency guidance do workers receive about social media?
- Do workers experience strain related to use of social media at work, as described by McDonald and Thompson (2016)?

Instrument

In addition to demographics, participants were asked about their social media activity as it relates to social media platforms. Social media platforms are constantly changing and may bring differences in privacy features and norms about social media activity. For instance, personal familial information is infrequently posted on the LinkedIn networking platform, and the Snapchat platform is mostly person-to-person limited-duration communication, whereas Facebook is mostly message board style communication. Participants were asked to report on whether they access social media from work computers or personal devices, as access may have different implications related to privacy, oversight, and agency liability. By knowing which platforms child welfare workers commonly use, educators or administrators can adjust training or policy. We also asked participants to share the frequency of their search activities to understand the prevalence of social media use among child welfare workers.

Participants were asked about the education or guidance they received in college, at their agencies, from policy, or from their supervisors. Additionally, participants were asked whether social media has caused an ethical concern in their agencies. We expected these questions to highlight whether more education or guidance is necessary within agencies.

Finally, participants were asked about their beliefs, activities, and exposure to specific social media practices as they relate to their personal-professional lives. The practices listed were drawn from specific social-media-related activities that the authors heard about while conducting training about social media use, including searching and becoming friends with clients or others that they know from their work environments.

The survey was posted on the Qualtrics online survey platform. During pilot testing, the survey took about ten minutes to complete. The use of human subjects for this research was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was provided through a detailed explanation on Qualtrics, and participants could opt out of all or portions of the survey they did not wish to answer. No compensation was offered or provided to survey participants. Data was exported from Qualtrics to IBM SPSS Statistics version 23.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via non-probability snowball sampling: the authors sent links to their child welfare contacts and asked participants to pass the web link on to other workers who would be eligible to complete the survey. The study participants were self-identified child welfare direct practice social workers. Participants were invited to complete the survey if they worked at state, tribal, or county child welfare agencies, contracted agencies that worked in a child welfare capacity, or if they identified as students completing a university-approved field placement at a child welfare agency.

The survey link was also made available through postings on several social media sites frequented by child welfare direct practice workers, through emails to students in field placements at one university, and distributed through contacts at child welfare training centers in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Oregon. The screening question asked workers if they are a current child welfare worker or in a child welfare field placement in a social work program. Those who answered no were taken to the thank you page of the survey, ending their participation. Participants who met inclusion criteria were asked if they had current active social media accounts on sites such as Facebook, Google +, Twitter, Linkedin, or Snapchat. If the participant did not have a current active social media account, they were excluded from analysis. The link was public from June 1, 2014, through November 1, 2015.

Participants

The online survey was started by 269 respondents. Of those, 98 were removed from analysis due to reporting that they do not work in child welfare (n=21), did not have social media accounts (n=14), because they did not answer any questions before submitting (n=3), or because they did not finish the survey (n=60). This left 171 cases for analysis. Eight states were represented in the final analysis with the majority of respondents (95.6%) coming from three states. The three states were Minnesota (n=74, 43.3%), North Dakota (n=68, 39.9%), and Oregon (n=20, 12.4%). Not all respondents answered all questions; the number of responses per question varied from 141-171.

Most respondents were employed in state or county government, and over half were under 40 years old. Over half worked in roles related to investigating allegations of child abuse or neglect. Many workers performed multiple job roles. Almost half of respondents had over ten years of child welfare experience. Participants' characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographics*

Agency Type (n=171)	**n (%)**
Employed as a child welfare worker in state/county government.	161 (94%)
Private agency that delivers child welfare services.	2 (1%)
Child welfare field placement supervised by a university.	8 (5%)

Age (*n*=170)	
19 to 24 years	16 (9%)
25 to 29 years	28 (16%)
30 to 34 years	33 (19%)
35 to 39 years	28 (16%)
40 to 44 years	18 (11%)
45 to 49 years	16 (9%)
50 to 54 years	17 (10%)
55 to 59 years	8 (5%)
60 to 64 years	5 (3%)
65 to 69 years	1 (1%)
Job Tasks Related to (*n*=168) [Check all that apply]	
assessment, protective services, investigative, or front-end services addressing allegations	97 (58%)
reunification services for families with children in foster care	99 (59%)
foster care case management services to youth in long-term placement	75 (45%)
providing therapeutic in-home or mental health services	54 (32%)
supervision of child welfare workers	46 (27%)
Other/specialized services	67 (40%)
Foster parent licensing, recruitment, or other administrative services	46 (27%)
Degree (*n*=148) [Check all that apply]	
Bachelors of Social Work degree completed	99 (67%)
Masters in Social Work degree completed	30 (20%)
Currently Bachelors in Social Work student	4 (3%)
Currently Masters in Social Work student	11 (7%)
I do not have a degree in social work and am not a current social work student	4 (3%)
Bachelor's degree in another field	35 (24%)
Master's degree in another field	8 (5%)
Years Child Welfare Experience (*n*=151)	
None	5 (3%)
Less than one	14 (9%)
1-2	23 (15%)
3-5	20 (13%)
5-10	38 (25%)
10 or more	71 (47%)

Results

Social Media Use

Respondents were asked to complete the survey only if they had at least one social media account. Nearly all respondents (98%, *n*=167) had a Facebook account; the next most frequently used social media account was SnapChat (32%, *n*=55). A third of respondents checked their social media accounts from their work computers at least once a week. About half (48%, *n*=82) of respondents reported they do not check their social media accounts from work, whereas 7% (*n*=12) checked their accounts from work computers multiple times a day versus 23% (*n*=39) check their social media from their smart phones multiple times a day at work. Over half (54%, *n*=93) of respondents checked

their social media accounts from their smartphones at least daily. Eighty percent (n=136) of respondents reported that they search for client information on social media sites. Table 2 reports detailed information about reported social media use.

Table 2. *Social Media Use (n≈171)*

	n (%)
Type of SMS use: Active account on a social media site (Facebook, Google +, Twitter, Linkedin, Snapchat). [Check all that apply]	
Facebook	167 (98%)
Google +	28 (16%)
Twitter	48 (28%)
Livejournal	1 (0%)
Personal blog	4 (2%)
Snapchat	55 (32%)
LinkedIn	34 (20%)
Other	4 (2%)
Instagram	59 (34%)
Check your social media page at work/field placement from the agency	
Multiple times a day	12 (7%)
Daily	27 (16%)
Weekly	18 (11%)
Less than weekly	31 (18%)
Never	82 (48%)
Check your social media page at work/field placement from your smartphone	
Multiple times a day	39 (23%)
Daily	54 (32%)
Weekly	26 (15%)
Less than weekly	29 (17%)
Never	23 (13%)
Post to your social media page	
Multiple times a day	10 (6%)
Daily	19 (11%)
Weekly	45 (26%)
Less than weekly	78 (46%)
Never	18 (11%)
Search for client information via social media	
Multiple times a day	8 (5%)
Daily	14 (8%)
Weekly	43 (25%)
Less than weekly	71 (42%)
Never	34 (20%)

Social Media Training and Policy Experiences

Twenty-two percent of respondents reported that they received at least some training on social media use in college, and 32% received some training from their agency. In both

of these cases, the training received usually totaled less than an hour. Forty-three percent of respondents reported training on social media through continuing education. Most respondents were either not sure their agency had a social media policy (27%) or reported no policy (30%). Only 11% (*n*=18) of respondents reported that the agency completely restricts social media use. Over half (56%, *n*=96) of respondents reported that their supervisors approve of work-related social media use, although 23% (*n*=40) reported that they did not know how to document social media information in case files, and 31% (*n*=53) reported that social media has caused an ethical concern in their agency. Several respondents (16%, *n*=28) reported that a colleague has been reprimanded for social media use in the workplace. Table 3 illustrates additional data about social media agency practices.

Table 3. *Social Media Agency Practices (n=171)*

	***n* (%)**	***n* (%)**	***n* (%)**
Training Received	**No**	**Yes, less than an hour**	**Yes, more than an hour**
In college	132 (77%)	28 (16%)	11 (6%)
Continuing education	98 (57%)	34 (20%)	39 (23%)
From Agency	115 (67%)	40 (23%)	16 (9%)
Agency guidance	**No**	**Yes**	**Not Sure**
Agency has policy	52 (30%)	73 (43%)	46 (27%)
Agency trains workers	109 (64%)	21 (12%)	41 (24%)
Agency restricts SM use	135 (79%)	18 (11%)	18 (11%)
SM experiences	**No**	**Yes**	**Not Sure**
SMS has caused ethical concerns in agency	72 (42%)	53 (31%)	46 (27%)
I know how to document SM info	40 (23%)	91 (53%)	40 (23%)
Supervisor approves of SM use	9 (5%)	96 (56%)	66 (39%)
Colleague has been reprimanded for SMS use	52 (30%)	28 (16%)	91 (53%)

Social Media Beliefs and Practices

More than half of respondents (55%, *n*=94) reported that, at least in some situations, they felt it was acceptable to search for clients via social media just out of curiosity. Nearly half (43%, *n*=73) of respondents reported that they have searched for clients via social media out of curiosity, and half (*n*=86) reported that their colleagues have done this. Respondents reported greater acceptability and frequency of client searches when the search was for work-related reasons, such as locating a missing parent or contacting a relative. Few (7%, *n*=12) reported that their colleagues have accepted or initiated an online friend request from a client. About half (49%, *n*=84) of respondents reported that they felt it was acceptable to have a social media relationship with foster parents. Several respondents (18%, *n*=30) reported that their colleagues have created fake profiles to gain access to client information, and 14% (*n*=24) of respondents reported that they have used social media to vent about their workdays.

Table 4. *Social Media Beliefs and Practices*

Social Media in the workplace (*n*=140-171)	How Acceptable? Never Acceptable	Acceptable in some situations	Always Acceptable	I have done this	CW workers at my agency have done this
Search for a client on a site like Facebook out of curiosity? (*n*=143)	49 (34%)	83 (58%)	11 (8%)	73 (51%)	86 (60%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook who your agency would like to locate, such as a missing parent? (*n*=140)	4 (3%)	74 (53%)	62 (44%)	83 (59%)	94 (67%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook when you think the information might give you insight in to the client's risk factors? (*n*=147)	19 (13%)	90 (61%)	38 (26%)	79 (54%)	87 (59%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook when you think the information might give you insight in to the client's lifestyle, hobbies, or interests? (*n*=148)	48 (32%)	75 (51%)	25 (17%)	57 (39%)	65 (44%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook when conducting an assessment, for instance, a child welfare investigation? (*n*=146)	20 (14%)	95 (65%)	31 (21%)	47 (32%)	76 (52%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a current client? (*n*=171)	161 (94%)	8 (5%)	2 (1%)	1(1%)	12 (7%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a former client? (*n*=169)	130 (77%)	38 (22%)	1 (1%)	9 (5%)	15 (9%)
Interact with clients through a Facebook page you created just for this purpose (which contains none of your personal information)? (*n*=163)	71 (44%)	80 (49%)	12 (7%)	10 (6%)	33 (20%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a family member of a current client? (*n*=171)	144 (84%)	26 (15%)	1 (1%)	2 (1%)	14 (8%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a family member of a former client? (*n*=171)	120 (70%)	50 (29%)	1 (1%)	7 (4%)	15 (9%)
Provide child welfare services to a person that you have an existing relationship with on social media site? (*n*=168)	128 (76%)	38 (23%)	2 (1%)	8 (5%)	12 (7%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a foster parent you work with professionally? (*n*=157)	73 (46%)	81 (52%)	3 (2%)	16 (10%)	47 (30%)
Accept/Initiate a friend invite with a foster youth on your caseload? (*n*=168)	135 (80%)	32 (19%)	1 (1%)	4 (2%)	21 (13%)
Attach printouts of client social media records to a court proceeding as evidence? (*n*=156)	40 (26%)	98 (63%)	18 (12%)	23 (15%)	55 (35%)
Find and use evidence from a social media site to confirm allegations of child risk? (*n*=157)	23 (15%)	106 (68%)	28 (18%)	25 (16%)	48 (31%)
Use a fake name/fake profile to make a friend request in order to view private client profiles? (*n*=163)	129 (79%)	33 (20%)	1 (1%)	4 (2%)	30 (18%)
"Vent" about your workday on social media (without disclosing client details)? (*n*=158)	104 (66%)	47 (30%)	8 (5%)	24 (15%)	43 (27%)
Be friends with coworkers via social media? (*n*=151)	12 (8%)	70 (46%)	69 (46%)	99 (66%)	78 (52%)
Be friends with attorneys, judges, or law enforcement agents who you work with professionally via social media? (*n*=151)	22 (15%)	107 (71%)	22 (15%)	55 (36%)	71 (47%)

Illustrative Narrative Responses

Respondents were given opportunities several times throughout the survey to input open-ended responses. These responses were guided by the prompt, "Please share context that might help us understand your answers." The responses illustrate some of the tensions associated with social media use. Workers often do not feel prepared to make a decision about their social media use given competing values and personal beliefs.

- My major issue is friending foster parents. It leads to too many boundary issues and makes it impossible to address concerns that may arise about them as foster parents.
- I had a 17 year old adopted. She wanted to be my friend on Facebook after the adoption. She initiated all contact. I feel this is okay as she had no other connection to her past and requested it.
- I am never really sure that "Facebook stalking" is appropriate. However, Facebook is an open media. If an individual does not put privacy parameters in their own account then is the information fair game.
- I have searched for clients on social media, especially when a client runs. I feel this is unethical, but continue to do so, and I believe many child welfare workers feel the same.
- I believe social media is a very gray area but can be very helpful when trying to locate families that have children at risk. I do believe you have to keep professional and ethical boundaries. I'm not sure how I feel about using social media as "evidence." I know law enforcement uses it but for child welfare stuff I'm not sure.
- We live in a small community, and it often happens that our workers are friends with the family of current and former clients such as prior classmates, neighbors, kids go to school together, etc. I do believe that looking at Facebook profiles is acceptable in most all situations for child welfare purposes.
- It's complex. Using social media to assess risk is sometimes really helpful! Taking an occasional break at my desk to use social media on my personal phone helps keep me sane and reconnects me to the rest of the world when I'm feeling really overwhelmed or helpless.
- I believe that training centered around the ethical use of social media as it relates to the social welfare settings is important. Social media can be helpful in fact checking the information we are receiving from clients as well as locating clients that we have previously been unable to find.

Discussion

This article set out to describe the use of social media by child welfare workers in a small sample of workers. It confirms previous findings by Breyette and Hill (2015) and McRoy (2010) that child welfare workers regularly use social media for work-related purposes, and beyond that, experience several tensions related to the professional use of social media.

What beliefs about social media inform child welfare workers' practices?

In this sample workers have disparate beliefs about the acceptability of social media use with their clients. The majority of respondents report that social media searches for clients are acceptable when it can help meet case goals, such as finding a missing family member, conducting an investigation, or assessing risk. However, most respondents also thought it was acceptable to search for clients out of simple curiousity and report that they and their colleagues engage in these types of searches. This may suggest that workers do not see social media searches as a factor that may impact goals of engagement, as suggested by Lannin and Scott (2013), or do not see a client privacy concern related to this behavior.

On the other hand, respondents have more congruence in their responses about friend relationships on social media that may raise boundary issues related to child welfare work. They are most clear that initiating a friendship with a current client is not acceptable, but most also would not engage in social media friendships with former clients or their family members. Likewise, most would not conduct a child welfare assessment on someone they are friends with on social media. However, respondents have more permeable relationship boundaries when it comes to colleagues and foster parents; most respondents think it is acceptable to engage in social media friendships with foster parents, and more than half of respondents report existing social media relationships with co-workers. The narrative comments demonstrate some of the tensions surrounding dual roles: workers expect dual relationships, especially in small communities, but realize the difficult impact of these dual roles on their child welfare practice, and sometimes are clear that their work-related social media activity is inappropriate.

One question in the survey asked workers their experiences with using a fake name or profile to access private client information. Although 75% (n=129) said that this was not an acceptable practice, others thought it was acceptable in some situations, and 18% of respondents (n=30) reported that their colleagues have engaged in this practice. This use of deception is likely inconsistent with most agency policies and raises legal questions about accurate self-representation.

Do workers use social media as an assessment tool?

Survey respondents report the use of social media to aid in their assessments of child risk. Sixteen percent of respondents (n=25) reported they have used social media to confirm allegations, and a similar number (15%, n=23) reported that they have presented social media evidence to court. Most of the respondents affirmed that this type of use of social media is acceptable. Although we did not ask whether respondents have a structured assessment tool for the use of social media in evidence, as reportedly used in Erie County, NY's 2014 policy, only 43% (n=73) of respondents reported that their agency has a social media policy. This likely means that workers are using social media as an assessment tool without clear guidance from their agencies.

Although respondents widely condone the use of social media in the assessment of clients, 46% (n=80) report that they do not know how to document information discovered

on social media. This suggests a training opportunity in which the guidelines offered by Pirelli and colleagues (2016) can be beneficial: social media findings can be used on a case-by-case basis, and when used, categorized as collateral information; the client can be given the opportunity to review and respond; and agency documentation can clearly outline the extent to which the social media evidence is used in decision-making. A delineationcan be drawn in policy between the use of social media searches for assessment and social media searches for the sake of curiousity.

Where do workers receive training about social media?

Respondents have had little training in social media, which probably means that they apply what they know from personal use of social media to their professional settings, and this likely also contributes to the very disparate perspectives of respondents as it relates to the appropriateness of certain kinds of social media use. Respondents reported they were most likely to receive social media education through continuing education (43%, *n*=73), followed by their agencies (32%, *n*=56), and lastly in college (22%, *n*=39). Given that most respondents report work-related social media use, and many report use of social media as an assessment tool, these data raise concern about where workers derive their information about the appropriate use of social media.

What agency guidance do workers receive about social media?

Less than half of respondents report that their agencies have social media policies (43%, *n*=73), but only a small number of those with policies report that they are trained in the policy (12%, *n*=21). Few respondents (11%, *n*=18) report that their agencies completely restrict social media use. The content of the social media policies was not explored in this survey; it is unclear how many respondents work in agencies with social media policies that address issues such as client searches or contact. Given the previous findings that workers use social media as an assessment tool, this finding about policy likely identifies an agency need.

Do workers experience strain related to use of social media at work, as described by McDonald and Thompson (2016)?

McDonald and Thompson (2016) describe three types of strains presented by social media in the workplace: a) profiling via social media, b) posts related to work, and c) private use of social media at work. Regarding profiling, about half of respondents endorsed viewing the profiles of clients for some reason, assumedly to draw conclusions about the clients. McDonald and Thompson point to this as problematic when it creates a privacy issue or is intrusive. In the case of child welfare workers searching out of curiosity or without a work-related need, or especially in the case of using a fake profile to misrepresent one's self, this use of social media likely falls under the category of intrusive use.

Regarding the strain of social media posts related to work, these types of posts about child welfare work may be especially problematic because of the sensitive nature of the work and the risks of revealing private client information. Negative posts may affect not

only the reputation of families, but also that of the profession. In this survey, 61% (n=104) of respondents reported that it was never appropriate to vent about work on social media, but 14% (n=24) of respondents said that they had engaged in this behavior, and 25% (n=43) said that their colleagues have engaged in this behavior. This is one of the most public forms of social media misbehavior and has led to employee termination and discipline across fields, including teachers, flight attendants, and medical students (Sánchez Abril, Levin, & Del Riego, 2012).

Finally, regarding the strain of social media in the child welfare workplace as it relates to time spent on social media sites, our findings indicate that workers are probably engaged in social media use of clients not related to assessment (but instead out of curiosity), and that almost a quarter of respondents (23%, n=39) check their social media at work from their smartphones multiple times per day. Although this is insufficient information to know whether this workplace use of social media is wasteful or causing strain, it raises some concerns about personal/professional boundaries.

Implications for Practice

This report offers a first look at work-related social media use in a sample of child welfare workers. The data reveal that child welfare workers frequently utilize social media as a tool for their work, although they are often not guided by agency policy or training. Given the rates at which child welfare workers report social media use related to work, education should be offered to prepare child welfare workers for appropriate use of social media.

Although technology policies often exist in government agencies, they may not address the unique roles of child welfare workers related to assessment, client contact, and family finding. Child-welfare-specific policies should respond to these unique types of settings and also keep in mind relevant legal and privacy issues (Sage & Sage, 2016). Our literature review suggests that any education and policy should be accompanied by a plan for the transfer of learning to the practice setting and should include the supervisor as a key connecter between policy and practice. Because most child welfare workers who completed this survey currently receive their social media training via continuing education instead of directly in their agencies, and given that there may be generational differences in expectations between supervisors and child welfare workers, it is unlikely that most workers currently receive supervisor support that reinforces their training about practice using social media.

Narrative responses indicated polarized views about the appropriate use of social media in child welfare practice and illustrate the ethical dilemmas that arise for workers. For instance, workers are encouraged to be supports to clients and foster parents, and social media relationships may be seen as a way to offer support, but they also create dual relationships. Similarly, social media searches may feel like a boundary violation to the worker conducting them but may also provide useful information about clients. The reported incidence of ethical problems caused by social media use in the child welfare workplace raise red flags about unmet needs of child welfare workers who face dilemmas in the field. Social work educators and child welfare trainers can use practice scenarios that

involve dilemmas like those presented in this article to help future child welfare workers think critically about potential benefits and risks of social media use.

This study indicates that social media has both problematic and beneficial outcomes in the child welfare workplace. Given the beneficial uses, it behooves agencies to carefully consider avoiding complete restriction of social media use by workers. Social media may replace age-old tools such as the phonebook for important family-finding work. However, given that the respondents in this study report that social media has caused concerns in their agencies, guidance about ethical decision-making is justified.

Conclusion

This survey reports the responses of a small sample of child welfare workers, most of whom live within a three-state region. Because policies and experiences with social media may be geographically bound or related to the shared agencies in which respondents work, the sample provides only a snapshot of child welfare worker experiences.

This data has not yet been statistically analyzed to report relationships between variables. Future analysis will explore relationships between training, supervision, policy, education, and beliefs and behaviors about social media use. We also did not explore the differences in beliefs between people who report supervisory roles. Future research is also needed to explore the content of social media policy and trainings. Given that this research has helped to establish the use of social media in child welfare settings, further research may be beneficial to understand more about the actual utility of client searches, the perceived impact on child safety of conducting a social media search, and on the actual risks and benefits to vulnerable families related to child welfare agency social media use.

Finally, we did not explore the breadth of issues related to social media in the child welfare workplace. A number of unexplored issues exist, especially around youth in foster care and their relationships. Social media may provide an invaluable resource for helping youth maintain vital links, and child welfare workers may be able to facilitate this beneficial use, but only if they have the requisite skills.

As new technologies emerge, so will new questions regarding the best use. Given that social media is unique in that it presents a worker-driven technological innovation in practice, as opposed to the typical top-down technological mandates in child welfare, social media offers a unique opportunity to explore workers' perceptions about how to best utilize technology for the benefit of families. Agencies must join workers in shaping standards for the most beneficial uses of social media tools.

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Invited
Innovators and Early Adopters of Distance Education in Social Work

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Abstract: *This article highlights the innovators and early adopters of distance education in social work. The past, present and future is discussed as it relates to the evolution of technology innovation in social work education.*

Keywords: *Social work education; technology and social work; early adopters; technology innovation*

In 1998, a small group of social work educators gathered in Charleston, South Carolina to participate in the first distance education conference for social work educators. This conference was sponsored by the University of South Carolina (USC) College of Social Work under the leadership of Dean Frank B. Raymond. In 1980, USC became one of the first schools of social work in the nation to offer a graduate degree using distance education. Dean Raymond's vision was to bring together the innovators and early adopters who were using technology to share best practices and support one another in this new way to deliver social work education. The theory of diffusion of innovations, developed by Everett Rogers in 1962, explains how, over time, an idea or product gains momentum and diffuses to the point that people adopt a new idea, behavior, or product (2003). Rogers' theory found that people who adopt an innovation early have different characteristics than people who adopt an innovation later. He described innovators as people who want to be the first to try the innovation. They are venturesome and interested in new ideas. Innovators are very willing to take risks and are often the first to develop new ideas. Early adopters are those people who represent opinion leaders. They enjoy leadership roles and embrace change opportunities. They are already aware of the need to change and so are very comfortable adopting new ideas (Rogers, 2003).

These characteristics certainly described this early group of social work educators that converged that year and subsequent years at the social work technology conference. This group and the technology conference grew as social work programs began to develop more distance education models. The original group of innovators and early adopters represent many of the leaders in distance education today. I was privileged to collaborate with this group as the conference sponsor and chair. As with any academic passion or pursuit, one is always excited to find colleagues with similar interests in teaching and research. As a newly minted PhD who focused her dissertation work on distance education, I was excited to discover Rogers' theory and real-life colleagues who embodied the characteristics described in his theory. I was especially grateful for the opportunity to be hired and mentored by Dean Frank Raymond at USC. Dean Raymond always embraced change opportunities with enthusiasm, support, and commitment. He did this both from a macro and micro practice framework by providing administrative and financial support as well as

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empowering me and many others to design, deliver, and evaluate social work distance education courses. Dean Raymond supported quality education, teaching, and research interests in the area of distance education by creating opportunities to network with other social work educators who participated in the technology conference. This network of social work educators still remains today and continues to impact new ways of thinking about the delivery of social work education due to the leadership of Dean Raymond in promoting this conference. Many of us, including myself, benefitted from his vision to support us as innovators and early adopters using technology in social work education.

As the use of technology in social work education grew and became more mainstream, there seemed less of a need for a technology conference, so the conference was discontinued in the early 2000s. However, in 2015, the Indiana University School of Social Work, under the leadership of Dean Michael Patchner and Dr. Bob Vernon, along with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), decided to revive the technology conference. Despite distance education having majority adopters, those that adopt new ideas just before the average member of a social system, in 2015 a large group of people maintained interest in meeting together to discuss teaching, learning, program development, administration, field, and practice in distance education. The use of technology, particularly the Internet, continues to impact social work education as faculty struggle to meet the demands of their institutions to develop online courses, distance education programs, and distributed learning environments. The 2015 conference brought together over 400 social work educators to share models and best practices in web-based education. Many of the same quality issues discussed about distance education 25 years ago are still being discussed regarding online education. As the conference proceedings indicate, schools of social work need continued leadership development to transform models of curriculum delivery with research findings on best practices and develop protocols and criteria for excellence in web-based education for social work (Indiana University, 2015). As the conference proceedings indicate, schools of social work need continued leadership development to transform models of curriculum delivery with research findings on best practices and develop protocols and criteria for excellence in web-based education for social work (Indiana University, 2015).

Future trends in teaching with technology still indicate tremendous possibilities, challenges, and changes for social work education. Social work programs in the US are now delivering their entire social work program and field experiences in a web-based environment. New program delivery options and formats will likely change the landscape of social work education programs just as they did 25 years ago when distance education programs were starting to evolve. For example, as new technologies evolve, what future trends can we expect in areas such as pedagogy and course formats? Will collaborative models of community learning as represented in MOOCs and focused on competency-based education models further enhance the development of web-based education? Will these programs be more university-centric or provided by other outside groups? The continuum of delivery systems for social work education will continue to grow. Improved pedagogical strategies will be informed by research and likely focused on learning outcomes (competencies) and skills performance. Creating effective online teaching and

learning strategies will require new partnerships, collaborations, and ideas to meet 21st century workforce needs.

There is no doubt that new developments in technology will make social work education more effective and widespread. Social work educators should be on the forefront of taking advantage of these technological developments to discover new and better ways of providing education to social work students. We should acknowledge the work of all those that have led us to this point and particularly those innovators and early adopters in social work education like Dean Frank Raymond and the many others who gathered together each year to foster the diffusion of innovation in social work education. Technology conferences and special issues to support the next generation of innovators and early adopters will ensure that these developments continue and enhance the quality of social work education.

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