



Historical and Contemporary Synopsis of the Development of Field Education Guidelines in BSW, MSW and Doctoral Programs

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Technology in Practice: Implications for Social Work Educators and Programs

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Abstract

Technology is causing rapid changes in the field; it is important for social work educators and programs to continually reflect and assess to ensure they are providing current knowledge and opportunities for skill development to their students. This paper examines social work educators' responsibilities for professional development, some of the changes related to technology in the social work field, the implications of these changes for social work education, and provides recommendations for social work programs to respond to these changes.

Technology in Practice: Implications for Social Work Educators and Programs

The goal of social work educators is to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to work at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. Social work educators must stay current on changes in the field in order to provide practical, up-to-date information, and relevant skill development opportunities for students. Because technology is ever-present in Americans' daily lives, it is important to consider the implications of technology on social work practice, and therefore social work education. Technology impacts the clients that social workers serve, but also how those services are provided and documented. This dictates a need for social workers to develop skills to effectively and ethically use technology and thus, for social work programs to teach these skills. Developing students' skills and teaching about technology is important regardless of program format (i.e., online, hybrid, or traditional classroom). This paper examines social work educators' responsibilities for professional development and continuing education, some of the changes related to technology in the social work field, the implications of these changes for social work

education, and provides recommendations for social work programs to respond to these changes.

Responsibility for Professional Development and Continuing Education

Social workers are encouraged to be lifelong learners and to continue their education outside the classroom, beyond earning a degree (Congress, 2012; Faherty, 1979). Social workers who obtain a license to practice are required to obtain continuing education hours to maintain licensure. As stated in the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics standard 4.01b, "Social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work. Social workers should routinely review the professional literature and participate in continuing education relevant to social work practice and social work ethics." (NASW, 2017a, p. 25). Some social work academics also maintain licensure, and thus are required to obtain continuing education hours on an annual basis. Regardless of licensure status, however, it is expected that educators are current on changes to and factors impacting the social work profession. The Code of Ethics specifically mentions in standard 3.02a that "Social workers who function as educators... should provide instruction only within their areas of knowledge and competence and should provide instruction based on the most current information and knowledge available in the profession" (NASW, 2017a, p. 21). Faculty are ethically obligated to ensure the information presented in class is current and relevant. Mueller and King (2018) point out that it is everyone's responsibility to the profession to understand his/her own learning needs and be self-directed in obtaining current knowledge and integrating it into practice. Educators prepare the future of the profession; if social work educators do not possess current knowledge, the students they are

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educating will not be prepared for cutting-edge practice.

Impact of Technology on the Social Work Field

The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) has identified twelve Grand Challenges for Social Work (see AASWSW, n.d.). This initiative is calling for action through innovation on some of the nation's toughest social problems. One of these challenges is to harness technology for social good. This involves the use of technology to enhance and expand social work practice and social welfare (Berzin, Singer, & Chan, 2015). As Nancy Smyth, Dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, stated, "To lead in this century, we must be of this century" (Robbins, Coe Regan, Williams, Smyth, & Bogo, 2016, p. 390). Technology impacts many aspects of our lives, and social workers must be digitally literate, understand the pervasiveness of technology in the field, and recognize the responsibility to utilize technology effectively (Robbins et al., 2016). As Harris & Birnbaum (2015) note, many online practitioners report they had no coursework in their graduate training related to online service delivery. Likewise, Joiner (2018) identified limited coursework and continuing education opportunities in cyber social work as a significant challenge facing the field. Technology impacts clients at all levels of practice, and without appropriate training, social workers may not be able to appropriately serve all clients. Social workers should be aware of how clients are impacted by technology, but also how to handle changes in the way services are delivered and advertised, how agencies communicate with clients and other groups, how client records are maintained, and many other issues.

As Barsky (2017) noted, "as the types of devices and applications continue to grow, social work codes of ethics and standards of practice must strive to maintain relevance and currency" (p. 3). As such, social work professional organizations have begun to address technology in practice and education.

The updated Code of Ethics went into effect January 1, 2018; there are 19 amendments related to technology (NASW, 2017a). Along with the updated Code of Ethics, the new *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* were released in 2017 (NASW, 2017b) through the collaborative efforts of four major social work organizations: NASW, Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), the Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA), and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). These standards offer guidance in effectively utilizing technology to deliver, document, and evaluate services. Sadly, many social workers are not aware of these *Standards* and are not using them in practice (Perron, Taylor, Glass, Margerum-Leys, 2010). As Reamer (2013) noted, competence related to technology is a significant challenge facing social work education.

Implications for Social Work Education

The updated Code of Ethics and the new *Technology Standards* have stimulated discussion among educators. In response to the new *Technology Standards*, Hitchcock, Sage, and Smyth (2018) utilized technology to crowdsource information from a group of social work educators and supervisors about Standard 4.0 *Social Work Education and Supervision*. The document they created provides practical considerations and questions about the implications these new *Standards* have on academia and highlights the need for all educators of social work students to have basic understanding and competence in using technology (Hitchcock et al., 2018). This includes recognizing any personal biases related to technology one might have and how bias can impact student education and program development. "Social work educators are ideally positioned to model and support students, colleagues, and other constituents in becoming lifelong learners in these areas and others" (Hitchcock et al., 2018, p. 11). As such, educators should be aware of this document and use it as a guide in their own learning and education around these issues.

Along with staying current in best practices and policies, social work programs must comply with CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). There is one competency in the 2015 EPAS in which technology is specifically mentioned.

Competency 1: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior identifies two behaviors related to technology: "students must (c) demonstrate professional demeanor in behavior; appearance; and oral, written, and electronic communication; and (d) use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes" (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). While the current *Technology Standards* are not a part of the 2015 EPAS, it is anticipated there will be additional areas in which technology is required to be addressed and implemented in social work curricula in the 2022 EPAS.

It is the responsibility of social work programs to continually evaluate and enhance their curricula to ensure high quality education and skill development. The integration of technology into courses and assignments which help students develop skills needed to practice in the field at all levels of social work practice is essential (Goldkind, Sage, & Rembold, 2018). "Introducing technologies in the classroom setting allows students to experiment with and test technologies in the safety of the academic setting" (Berzin et al., 2015, p. 10). While integrating technology is important so that students have the opportunity to learn and apply skills, it is also important for educators to remain focused on pedagogy. Technology in the classroom should be used when it aligns with or extends learning goals, not just for the sake of integrating technology (Okojie, Olinzock, & Okojie-Boulder, 2006). Appropriately integrating and using technology in the classroom "will produce social workers who are digitally literate with the ability to use the appropriate technology to deliver services to the population that is being served" (Blackmon, 2013, p. 512). In addition to the required skills, the ethical use of technology should also be discussed in education (Reamer, 2018). According to Ausbrooks and Travis (2017), a social work education that does not

address technology leads to unprepared and ill-equipped social workers. Students should graduate with the skills needed to not only be effective in their work, but also be leaders and innovators in the field regarding the ethical use of technology.

Recommendations for Social Work Programs

It is the responsibility of social work educators to continue learning and engaging in professional development to remain current in best practices, including the impact technology has on the social work profession. As noted, social work professional organizations are responding to the increased use of technology by developing updated ethical guidelines, standards of practice, and policies specific to technology. Social work programs need to ensure their curricula evolve to embrace changes in society and the field, as well as the needs of the communities in which students will be practicing.

When making any change, whether it be at the micro, mezzo, or macro level, it is important to do so deliberately and follow a clear process. The planned change process commonly used in social work (e.g., see Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2016), and reflected in Competencies 6-9 of the CSWE EPAS (CSWE, 2015), provides a clear framework for making changes and includes the following steps: engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate. Engaging with stakeholders is important to any planned change process and is key to understanding the context. Comprehensive assessment is important to evaluate the environment and identify needed changes. Careful planning based on the assessment is important for an appropriate intervention. A planned and carefully timed intervention is key. Lastly, evaluation must be used to determine success and any further changes that might be needed. Social work programs can utilize the planned change process as they consider the impact of technology in the field and the corresponding implications this has on their program, curriculum, and student learning outcomes. Applying this process, the following suggestions are ways social work programs can respond to this changing

environment and ensure that their programs are delivering the best possible education for their students.

Engage with Stakeholders

Before engaging in any change process, it is important to identify and build relationships with stakeholders. For social work programs, stakeholders include students, full-time and adjunct faculty, community agencies and organizations, and the community at-large. While programs already have a relationship with their faculty and students, and likely have relationships with many community agencies, it is necessary to carefully consider how and when to engage with all stakeholders in this process before moving to the next step.

Assess Technology Use and Needs

Social work programs need to assess how technology is currently being utilized and integrated into their social work curriculum. A first step may be to review the *NASW Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2017a) and the *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* (NASW, 2017b) to be clear on expectations of the profession. These documents should serve as guidelines as programs move through the assessment and implementation phases. Program assessment could include discussion with or informal survey of faculty to examine the current use of technology in the classroom and the expected student learning outcomes. Curriculum mapping can help faculty determine what might be missing from some courses and covered in others (Kopera-Frye, Mahaffy, & Scare, 2008). For example, what technology-related learning opportunities are students currently being provided and where might there be gaps in the curriculum? Changes to the curriculum may necessitate changes to program mission, vision, or design as well.

Along with staying well-informed of the field at large, many social work programs work closely with their immediate community to meet the unique needs of their geographic area. Social work programs should assess current technology use and needs of community agencies and their

expectations for students/new employees. This information can help identify any gaps or needs at a community level and potentially help guide the development of curriculum as well. For example, if community agencies indicate they are unable to meet the increasing demands for online mental health services, a social work program may consider responding in several ways. For example, a program may develop a specific course related to this mode of service delivery or may integrate learning opportunities for students within existing courses to develop skills to deliver clinical services to clients in an online format.

While it is important for community expectations to be addressed in the curriculum, it is equally important for social work educators to create opportunities for students to learn skills to advance the field. Thus, just responding to immediate community needs is not enough; programs should anticipate changes and future needs of the community and prepare their students to lead the charge for change. As Berzin et al. (2015) note, social workers have a responsibility to use technology to improve and expand practice and to promote social welfare. Social work programs should be teaching students to do just that.

Intervene: Act on Assessment to Improve Program

The next step is the development of a strategic plan to address the needs identified during the assessment process. Curriculum mapping during the assessment phase may have identified the need to more intentionally integrate technology into the curriculum. As previously noted, it is important to consider the pedagogical reason for incorporating technology in the classroom (Okojie et al., 2006). Any changes in the curriculum must also align with the updated *NASW Code of Ethics* and *Technology Standards for Social Work Practice* (NASW 2017a, 2017b). Changes may include training faculty on types of technology, understanding appropriate use of technology in the classroom, or creating new opportunities for student learning and skill development. These new opportunities could come in the form of new instructional materials,

new assignments, or entirely new courses. As noted, regardless of program delivery format (online, hybrid, or traditional classroom), the opportunity to build technology skills is essential, and it should not be assumed that online or hybrid courses automatically deliver these skill sets, nor that traditional classrooms cannot adequately address technology (Phelan, 2015; Robbins et al., 2016).

Evaluate Impact

As with any planned change process, it is vital to evaluate the impact, effectiveness, and outcomes of the interventions, or changes made to curricula and/or program design. Evaluation may take the form of faculty and/or student surveys or assessment of students' knowledge and skills. Seeking feedback from all stakeholders, as mentioned in the engagement phase, is also important. This could include eliciting feedback from community stakeholders and agencies/organizations regarding student intern/new employee skills since the program's implementation of changes. Programs should also continuously assess their curriculum and the inclusion of technology through curriculum mapping. These are just a few ways to consider evaluating the implementation of changes social work programs may make regarding technology. The evaluation method selected should match the assessment and intervention.

Conclusion

Technology is causing rapid changes in the field; it is important for social work educators and programs to continually assess and self-reflect to ensure they are providing relevant information to their students. The ultimate goal of social work programs is to create competent social workers who can address complex social problems. Technology is a part of society and will be involved in addressing these problems; social workers must be familiar with technology and have the skills necessary to engage in today's world (Robbins et al., 2016). As the world evolves, so must social work education. "Faculty and administrators will need to take up the

challenge to prepare students for future professional social work practice and improve the quality of social work education in the United States" (Robbins et al., 2016, p. 388). The recommendations provided here give social work programs a starting point for meeting this challenge and evolving their programs to adequately address technology and its impact on the field. Engaging with stakeholders, assessing program structures and components, and implementing and evaluating any modifications are key components of the planned change process in which programs should engage in order to keep up with the impact of technology on the field of social work.

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