



**Highlighting the need for creating online pedagogy in meeting the needs of social work students through twelve-week integration seminars**

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# Highlighting the need for creating online pedagogy in meeting the needs of social work students through twelve-week integration seminars

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*Carter, Wright, Beltrano, Wade and Hartleib*

Online pedagogy in social work education that promotes integration of theory and practice requires better understanding. Allowing for accessibility in practicum placements in home communities, a social work program transformed biweekly, full day seminars into a two-hour weekly online curriculum. The redesign of course delivery highlights benefits and challenges, supported by student feedback. Eliminating the need for students to return to the university from their home addresses or practicum sites demonstrated the achievement of efficient course delivery as well as quality education. The authors highlight the need for transformation in pedagogy by ensuring accessibility in learning through scholarly inquiry and communication.

## Introduction

This paper describes the transformation of biweekly face-to-face, six-hour weekly social work integration practicum seminars into once-a-week, two-hour online sessions to provide opportunities for students to remain in their communities while completing their field practicums. This transition to online pedagogy allowed for students to engage in diverse practicum placements at reduced costs and enhanced overall student well-being. The proposal to transform biweekly, all-day student in-person first- and second-year Master of Social Work (MSW) integration seminars in both on- and off-campus programs to weekly two-hour online Zoom classes for twelve weeks presented challenges which required planning, collaboration with university services, and evaluation. A proposal to use online delivery necessitated updating of online teaching research that focused on synchronous online learning. How the proposal to deliver integration seminars online fit with the university strategic plan and the accreditation standards of the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE, 2014) needed to be assured. Necessary to success

was the assured availability of support from the School of Social Work faculty, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Office of Open Learning (internet support), the Accessibility office, mental health services, and the library. The writers identify efforts to enhance the seminar experience, note some of the challenges of engaging students in an online social work program, and provide thoughts on how to improve the online delivery of integration seminars.

## Literature Review

### *Online Learning*

There is a lack of consensus on the definition of online learning (Blackmon, 2013; Johnson, 2019; Smyth et al., 2012). Online learning can be understood as technology-enabled curriculum falling on a spectrum from fully online to a blended format of both online and in-person learning (Baker, 2019). This definition has been informed by the literature and educational institutions which provide a working model despite differences in definitions (Johnson) and evolving teaching practices. For the purposes of this paper, we apply Baker's definition of online learning where the primary method of teaching is delivered online using digital/web-based technologies.

### *Higher Education and Online Learning*

In general, online delivery can facilitate constructivist learning through student-centered strategies by providing an individualized environment to suit learners' differing needs and styles (Garrison, 2003). The technology utilized for online education may offer diverse and flexible learning methods for students with different learning needs (Baldwin-Clark, 2021), whereas in-class learning may limit opportunities to actively engage in the classroom (Tandy & Mechem, 2009). Yet technology may also produce alternative challenges which may negatively impact students' ability to become

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active participants.

Several challenges have been identified by students when shifting to online education. Preferences towards face-to-face or in-person learning (Mason et al., 2010; Zidan, 2015) may be indicated due to feelings of isolation or a lack of community when participating in online classes (Smyth et al., 2012; Sullivan & Freishtat, 2013). Students may desire a higher level of guidance from instructors (Sullivan & Freishtat) given the high level of self-discipline and time management skills that are required when online education is selected as the delivery method (Napier et al., 2011). Technical difficulties may result in challenges for both instructors and students due to limited access or slow internet speeds (Ferrera et al., 2013; Mason et al.; Smyth et al.).

There are also limitations identified by instructors. Instructors may be skeptical of engaging in online education due to a lack of comfort or familiarity with course management systems and the amount of time required to prepare for online curriculum (Martym, 2003). However, Korr et al. (2012) have outlined that shifting to online education may improve faculty teaching presence as it requires enhanced interaction and community building. Generally, speaking, online education has been noted to provide similar outcomes for students when compared to in-person pedagogy (Holmes & Reid, 2017; Lyke & Frank, 2012; Nguyen, 2015; Stack, 2015). However, students may not be fully satisfied when participating in online higher education classrooms (Kauffman, 2015; Lyke & Frank) and learning outcomes may appear to be contingent on the course design, instructor, and dialogue (Eom & Ashill, 2016).

In a review of the University of Windsor's implementation of online learning, Baker (2019) identified that though they have been offering online programming for decades, defining the delivery of online education needs enhancement. These improvements include the need to delineate a better understanding of what students need to be able to do at the end of the course and whether an online, open, or hybrid course delivery works best for the students and the topic (Baker). When shifting to online learning, student-centered learning must be at the center of all activities, as active learning is imperative to enhancing student outcomes (Zidan, 2015). It is recognized that a

large-scale transition to a new delivery model, such as shifting from face-to-face to online learning, will be exhausting to all parties. A rapid transition using the same timetable to convert all courses is not generally considered an optimal approach (Korr et al., 2012). Thus, a clear vision and strong support from the institution are important provisions when shifting to an online environment (Moskal et al., 2013).

### ***Social Work and Online Education***

With the advancement of internet access, higher education programs have become more readily available online, yet social work has been slow to shift to online platforms (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021; Blackmon, 2013). Part of the reluctance to shift to online education in social work may be the concern in the ability to transfer social work practice skills and competencies through online forums (Afrouz & Crisp; Levin et al., 2018). Alternatively, the need for meaningful human interaction and the concerns around student isolation may be part of the hesitancy to shift to online curriculum (Collins et al., 2002). Deans or directors of social work programs may not have confidence in the transition to online learning for social work education, questioning whether a fully online program can meet students' needs, specifically in the domain of relationship-building (East et al., 2014).

When comparing face-to-face social work education to online strategies, students may report higher levels of academic rigor, cathartic learning environment, professional concern, affiliation, and structure when facilitated in-person (Mason et al., 2010). Student characteristics may impact the engagement in online education strategies in social work. Diverse students, such as those whose first language is not English (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021) or older students (Mason et al.) may have more difficulty engaging with peers in an online social work curriculum (Mason). To further address challenges and ensure equity, institutions must be prepared to afford students access to knowledge and technology support (Davis et al., 2019; Maidment, 2005).

Yet despite challenges, online social work education has been identified as supporting diversity, equity, independence, flexibility, and accessibility for traditional and non-traditional students (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021; Blackmon, 2013). Online strategies can provide flexible and

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active learning opportunities, which may include collaboration or small group work and self-directed learning (Farrel et al., 2018). Additionally, online courses may provide similar opportunities for students to engage in student-centered activities which promote critical thinking, creativity, reflection, and analysis and synthesis (Afrouz & Crisp; Ferrera et al., 2013).

Overall, the outcomes of online social work education have been found to be equivalent to traditional in-class teaching methods (Wretman & Macy, 2016), yet there may be limits to assessing the effectiveness of online social work courses. Feedback from online courses is primarily directed by the institution, applying self-developed measures to evaluate the student's ability to obtain learning agreement goals and to assess the student's course satisfaction (Lee et al., 2019).

Online teaching in social work requires a high level of skill to effectively moderate discussions and support the engagement of all students (Davis et al., 2019). Effectiveness may be impacted by the teacher's level of experience and comfort with online education (Levin et al., 2018). Teachers must be prepared to facilitate difficult discussions around challenging topics while ensuring students' emotional well-being and safety (Berger & Paul, 2021), specifically when focused on topics such as anti-Black racism and anti-racism. It has been identified in the literature that students require strong relationships with their instructors to enhance learning outcomes (Wretman & Macy, 2016). Students may become dissatisfied with online education when there is a lack of personalized instruction and connection with instructors (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021), and this may result in students reporting a preference for face-to-face learning (Mason et al., 2010). Further, a lack of theoretical or conceptual frameworks for online education (Wretman & Macy) may limit instructors' confidence in facilitating online education as they may be skeptical about the transfer of learning in practice (Ferrera et al., 2013; Wretman & Macy), specifically around the less structured teaching style (Ferrera et al.; Martym, 2003).

### Project Implementation

The School of Social Work, University of Windsor, offers an MSW in both on-campus and off-campus programs. The on-campus MSW

program has a year-to-year total of 90 students. Students entering the program without a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) are required to take two integration courses, and those entering the program with a BSW take one integration course. The off-campus program, the Master of Social Work for Working Professionals (MSWwp), has been in existence since 2008 and has grown from 96 students in 2008 to 400 in 2023. In the MSWwp program, when entering the program without a BSW, students engage in a thirty-two-month program requiring two integration courses. Those with a BSW enter a sixteen-month program that requires one integration seminar course. In all the above requirements for integration seminars, the delivery of both on-campus and MSWwp program integration seminars were shifted to a twelve-week, two-hour, online delivery model that corresponded with student practicums.

### Organization of Master of Social Work Program

Consistent with the requirements of the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE, 2014; 2021), the accrediting body for the profession of social work in Canada, students with a BSW from an accredited school earn an MSW degree by completing a one-year program in the on-campus program or 16-months in the MSWwp off-campus program. Those entering the MSW program with an Honours degree other than a BSW are required to complete two years of courses on campus or, alternatively, 32 months in the MSWwp program, to obtain their MSW degree. Students in the on- or off-campus programs complete the Field Integration Seminar (SWRK 8570) at the end of their first year and the Advanced Internship Seminar (SWRK 8680) at the end of their second year. Both courses are accompanied by field placements that require 450 hours of practicum experience.

The Field Integration Seminar (SWRK 8570) is designed as a Pass or Fail course, whereas the Advanced Internship Seminar (SWRK 8680) only adopted a Pass or Fail grade in 2023. The learning objectives for each course focus on different aspects of field learning as students move from their first to second year of the MSW program. SWRK 8570 provides the link between students' use of self and in-field practical experience, identifying their role and interpersonal relationships within a practicum. Students in the Advanced Internship Seminar (SWRK 8680) are required to

demonstrate advanced knowledge of social work theories and interventions, professional ethics, and evaluation of best practices with diverse populations, in addition to synthesizing the community and political contexts of social work. The number of instructors required yearly for the MSW on-campus program to teach the integration seminars is five, a historically manageable number for two sections of the first year (SWRK 8570) and three sections for the second year (SWRK 8680). The number of instructors required yearly for the MSWwp off-campus program to teach the integration seminars for the first and second year is ten, historically, an increase from six in 2008 to ten in 2023.

The project to move the delivery of two seminar courses to a synchronous online, two-hour a week structure was supported by an Open and Online Learning Strategic Development Grant. The grant made it possible to develop an effective online curriculum and delivery system for the two seminars. Two primary goals of the shift to online education were identified in this project.

The first goal was to offer on-campus MSW and off-campus MSWwp students weekly, two-hour online course delivery to accompany field practicums. It was anticipated student attendance and participation would increase in integration seminar courses associated with field practicum courses, SWRK 8570 and SWRK 8680, by preventing the cost and inconveniences of travel in attending the six-hour, bi-weekly seminars during the four-month length of field practicums.

The second goal was to offer the students of two seminars, the SWRK 8570 Field Integration Seminar and the SWRK 8680 Internship Seminar, online synchronous education that supported students while meeting their varied and unique needs. Regular yearly orientations outlined the basic structure, expectations, and services provided by the program. Moreover, to ensure success, collaborative efforts with other university resources, such as, the Centre for Teaching and Learning to enhance course design and delivery, was necessary. Other services considered essential and that had to be secured in transferring the seminar courses to an online synchronous format included university librarian and library services, student counselling and support services, student accommodation requests

through university accessibility services, as well as varied training, on current topics, as needed.

A major objective of the project was to offer possibilities that would benefit students being placed in distant field placements, often located near their permanent residences. The seminars aimed to provide students with an alternative to commuting to campus to attend the required seminar classes. In addition to a literature review about best practices in blended and online teaching, data was gathered from schools across Canada regarding the online delivery of similar MSW practicum courses in five Canadian universities. One Canadian MSW school held practicums completely online, one provided an online experience for the final year practicum but did not for the first-year practicum, and the other three practiced a blended model of delivery. The courses at these universities provided a pathway in shifting the integration seminars to an online format.

Crucial to the successful transition and ongoing success of the integration seminar courses in an online format was the support of the university's services, including the School of Social Work faculty, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, the help with technology through the Office of Open Learning and Information Technology Services, as well as the availability of support from the Leddy Library, Student Accessibility Services, and Student Health, Counselling, and Wellness Services. The above services were included in the development of the integration seminar courses and considered essential to the project. Success also depended on faculty buy-in, support from the university administration, and training for faculty in online course management. The academic team, members of the School of Social Work faculty, developed twelve two-hour courses for both seminars and ensured they were approved by social work faculty through presentation for approval at the MSW School Council. Disabled students were supported with the required documentation for accommodation, resulting in notification to faculty about accommodations required. Technology was viewed as having the ability to facilitate communication, student collaboration, active learning, feedback, and the provision of multiple forms of learning (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008). Information technology services enabled development of the

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online delivery by providing supportive resources in the development of the course materials. Essential to success was the work of the librarian assigned to social work who helped integrate and promote library resources (Cahoy & Moyo, 2006) by providing online course resources as well as assisting students in developing skills in digital literacy and research (Gore, 2014). It was appreciated that online learning would result in positive outcomes as the barriers to inclusion and accessible education had been removed (Baker, 2021).

The use of online Learning Management Systems, initially Blackboard Learn and then Brightspace in 2023, assisted in the facilitation of the online courses as it provided a framework for a virtual classroom, online notifications and integration, and accessibility to the internet. Self-directed instruction was available to students to guide them in the use of Blackboard Learn in preparation for their upcoming classes. Instructors fully engaged in Blackboard Learn, replaced by Brightspace Learn in 2023.

The revised SWRK 8680 was initiated in the MSW program on campus in January 2017; SWRK 8570 was implemented in the on-campus MSW program in the Spring/Summer 2017 semester. As previously noted, prior to the implementation of our proposal, our on-campus program engaged 90 MSW students, requiring the University to secure approximately one hundred practicums within the University of Windsor region. In addition, up to four hundred MSWwp students would require placements, arranged and managed by a team of field specialists, over a two to three year period, throughout the Windsor region and the province of Ontario, Canada. As a result of our shift to online pedagogy, students could now, in many cases, secure practicums near to where they lived, making it no longer necessary to travel up to four hundred kilometers to integration seminars held during practicums. Following the design and implementation of the online delivery alternative for on- and off-campus students, there was a need to reflect on what we learned and understood about student satisfaction.

### Student Evaluations of Teaching

Student acceptance and appreciation for the change to the seminars was indicated by Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET) scores from 2017-2021 for both integration seminars, SWRK 8570

and the SWRK 8680. The answers to a list of questions filled out by students voluntarily and anonymously at the end of each course were useful, mainly as indicators of how the change in the course had been appreciated by students. In response to whether technology met their learning needs, students placed both within and outside 100 km of the former university seminar site indicated the online resources met their needs. In referring to the online course, students noted that instructors were readily available for their learning needs as noted by this student, "It met my needs well. The instructor can have a weekly online forum for those who have questions about their project." In accommodating students with disabilities with technology, it was identified that the support received by technology services and the instructor were helpful. There was a high level of positive feedback from students on their satisfaction with library services, where the Social Work librarian was identified as "an excellent resource," "helpful," and "amazing." The feedback also suggested that in shifting to an online learning model, there was significant potential for facilitating higher quality placements while reducing costs for attendance to students.

In comparing the MSW on campus with the MSWwp off-campus program, the student feedback on Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET scores) for the period 2017-2020 were similar. Not all SET scores were available for the year 2021. The MSW students scored teaching with respect to the seminars at a rate of 5.4 out of seven, while MSWwp students scored teaching with respect to the seminars at a rate of 5.7 out of seven. A limitation to SET feedback scores is the low participation rate. The average participation rate for students for the on-campus MSW students was 19.83% and 20.79% for the MSWwp students. A goal for future evaluation of online pedagogy is to increase student SET participation rates allowing for more extensive feedback about student satisfaction with online teaching.

### Exit Surveys

Exit surveys from both the MSW and MSWwp programs included an invitation to students to advise to what degree their MSW educational experience was able to integrate the course work and field experience with their area(s) of experience. The student responses from both the MSW and MSWwp programs indicated the

program was perceived by students as able to integrate course work and field experience with area(s) of experience as noted in student exit survey answers, with affirmative answers of 59% for 2019, 73% for 2020, and 56% for 2021.

In 2019, students made constructive criticisms that indicated the university needed to improve students' experience; these comments included the "online course ... did not allow for connection amongst students" and "missed a lot of opportunities to discuss about our placements and related issues with peers." Other comments expressed disappointment that students were "only asked to do a reflection" as an end-of-course assignment. Teaching seminars were enhanced following 2019 with the introduction of current topics faced by students in their practicums.

MSW and MSWwp students also identified in their exit surveys positive reactions to the change to online delivery with remarks in 2019, such as, "being able to focus primarily on the internship experience...was truly appreciated" and "The online courses taken on Blackboard during placement are an excellent idea and should be kept for future cohorts...the technology has been well-deployed for encouraging discussion, connection, and sharing of knowledge among the students.

Student comments on exit surveys of 2020 included "it was accessible" and "I am comfortable discussing unpopular/uncomfortable issues." As well, comments were made that "professors were present for students in a compassionate way during such a trying time." Student responses indicated that the change in the structure of the course delivery did not result in a significant change in student satisfaction with the integration courses. Overall, students' responses to the exit surveys indicated satisfaction with the transition to online course delivery of the seminars.

In 2020, students remarked favourably about the delivery of the integration seminars, as well as the MSW program, as evidenced by the following comment: "This was an unusual experience based on the current pandemic...the University was able to seamlessly to accommodate learning and placement needs." Constructively, students recommended that the integration seminar, the SWRK 8680 Internship Seminar, in the final year be made a pass or fail course, which became a

reality in 2023. Additionally, in 2021, although students suggested instructors required improved training, they also remarked how they experienced their instructors as excellent.

### **Discussion**

The move to deliver the integration seminars online in both on- and off-campus programs simultaneously was considered a successful transition for students and instructors. By creating integrated seminars that accompany placements in the social work field, students in the integration seminars were relieved of driving several hours to participate in face-to-face sessions and appreciated the opportunity to do the course in an online synchronous classroom. As hoped for in the objectives of our project, the shift to the online learning of the integration seminars paved the way for future course development online when the transfer of all courses to an online mode was required during COVID-19. Students valued the flexibility of online learning, considering the benefits they gained when not restricted to an in-person classroom environment.

In the shift to online integration seminars, the focus on self-reflection continued to be encouraged as an essential skill in the integration of courses and practicums taken simultaneously. Self-reflection is fundamental in the move from student to professional status. Assignments involving self-reflection continued to encourage analytical skills. In addition to the self-reflection assignments and discussions provided in the online seminars, students continued to be encouraged in an online environment to explore direct practice and theory in a reflective manner.

One of the noted challenges in the shift to the online curriculum is that instructors were only partially able to physically see their students' emotions, passion, and confusion. Therefore, instructor training was identified as needing careful preparation for online classrooms, as teachers had to plan their material for potentially various reactions by students, many who preferred to attend class with their cameras off. These observations are appropriate for further study regarding the training needed to be aware of student needs and resources for online support in developing strategies to improve participation.

Moving to an online environment for delivery of the MSW integration seminars presented challenges as well as benefits. Teachers need to

be prepared for additional alterations in an online environment; for example, students' reactions may not always be predictable. Contingent plans need to be in place for immediate response when things do not go as planned. It is suggested these observations be explored further, such as the need for instructors to create a safe environment and to check in with students on how they are feeling, as well as be prepared to act immediately to resolve any situation in which students may need assistance.

Baker (2021) advises that we have gathered significant momentum in pedagogical adaptation, innovation, and evolution towards a more compassionate, caring, inclusive, and digitally literate campus. There has been a steady increase in online learning in social work in Canada (Regehr, 2013). Zidan (2015) suggests that instead of comparing face-to-face and online teaching strategies, there is a need to determine the best ways to measure online social work courses to meet students' skill development and learning competences. More studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of online pedagogy in preparing and developing social work students for practice (Smith et al., 2018, as cited by Afrouz & Crisp, 2021). Champions of online education are required at the institutional level to enhance success when shifting to online programming (East et al., 2014). Further research is required to facilitate learning as well as success in the online environment (Farrel et al., 2018) and to determine best practices.

### **Conclusion**

The project of moving the MSW integration seminars online provided a pathway for further development of online course delivery at the School of Social Work in other courses deemed easily adaptable to an online venue. Moving the integration seminar courses online paved the way for adjustments to facilitate access to a greater number of quality placements, to enhance students' choice of placements, to reduce travel costs for students, and to create a pathway to consider moving other social work courses online.

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