

Social Work Field Education: Harnessing Technology to Connect Social Work Education and Practice During COVID-19

Melissa Indera Singh, Kerry Doyle, Lisa Wobbe-Veit
University of Southern California, USA

Abstract

Technology can enhance distance learning and leverage the current capacity to expand content delivery methods in academic institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic impacts education from primary school to higher education worldwide. This article will detail how one university graduate program in the United States responds to the challenges of the pandemic. Public health restrictions impact classroom instruction and students' ability to complete experiential learning hours. To continue to engage student learning, a large, national school of social work adapts their field education/internship programming and content delivery to meet the requirements set forth by the national professional accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education. To maximize current technology capabilities, social work educators strategize to allow students to complete field requirements safely, successfully, and on time while adhering to the profession's mission. Two programs using asynchronous and synchronous delivery methods evolve to meet the needs of students. These virtual learning opportunities integrate expanding knowledge and experiential opportunities to enhance student learning, a critical component in field education. In the spirit of the Social Work Grand Challenge of "Harnessing technology for social good," this article demonstrates how one school leverages its virtual capacity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

The University of Southern California (USC) is a large for-profit academic institution in Los Angeles, California, educating 46,000 students: 19,500 undergraduate and 26,500 graduate students in the 2020-2021 school year. There are 16 different schools within the academic institution encompassing 126 different degree programs. In 2010, the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work (SDPSSW) launched their Virtual Academic Center (VAC), a national master's in social work program. This program was the first elite, private institution to launch a national MSW program online with part-time and full-time options [1]. The VAC delivers content both asynchronously and synchronously, which differs from previous

virtual learning iterations from other institutions that focus solely on asynchronous learning.

2. Virtual delivery of social work education

Initially, many social work professionals questioned whether virtual content delivery could be as effective as traditional brick-and-mortar learning. Over the years, virtual learning, and the use of technology within education receive various acceptance levels. In 2014, Kurtzman described the electronic revolution as an opportunity to leverage distance learning as a new opportunity to broaden access to social work education [2]. The academic institution drives the culture and how to deliver content using technology to uphold the mission of the social work profession. The mission, according to the National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics, is to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (para. 1). In alignment with the profession's mission, the VAC program began to flourish as non-traditional students began pursuing advanced degrees in social work previously inaccessible due to schedule limitations and rural geographic locations.

Technology is a necessity to social work practice and education. According to Reisch and Jarman-Rohde, technology is an adjunct to education and practice [3]. Expanding online social work programs, including BSW, MSW, and DSW degrees, requires institutions to implement technology solutions. As of May 2021, there are 119 accredited online MSW programs [4]. With the expansion of online MSW programs, schools of social work began to embrace technology.

Despite the growth of online programs, there is concern regarding effectively engaging students in online learning. Reflecting on the launch of the VAC, Flynn et al. express the importance of student engagement in an online environment [5]. To enhance student experiences on the VAC, leadership continuously reviews technology platforms and software for content delivery. Initially, instruction occurs through real-time Adobe Pro synchronous sessions; however, over the years, many synchronous platforms offer additional options in higher

education. Most platforms allow document sharing, chat, breakout rooms, raise a hand, mute/unmute, and a poll feature. Asynchronous materials include videos, assignments, and readings found in a web-based platform. The inclusive asynchronous content and the live sessions allowed for interactive and experiential learning.

3. Technology in social work field education

Social work educators may embrace technology with trepidation as the profession requires experiential-based learning that is known as field practicum/education [6]. During field education, social work students apply theory to practice in real-world settings. The accrediting body of social work education, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), requires a minimum of 900 field hours to meet the core competencies of social work education and earn a Master of Social Work [7].

SDPSSW students complete 1,000 field hours as a graduation requirement. The CSWE field practicum requirement mandates that MSW students are assigned to virtual or local community-based agencies. Field faculty approve these placements incorporating student interests, the quality of learning opportunities, and the availability of MSW field instruction to drive placement matches. The VAC faculty hosts social and alum functions across the county to promote virtual education and demonstrate to community stakeholders how technology can enhance education while adhering to the fidelity of the social work education standards.

SDPSSW Faculty utilizes technology to evaluate and maintain the quality of field instruction at placement sites. Zoom is the preferred platform for initial agency field instructor interviews and ongoing site visits in connection with field agencies. Concurrently, subsequent training and professional development opportunities are delivered via Zoom. Twitter, a microblogging system, allows faculty to communicate with Field Instructors and Preceptors about learning events. Faculty intentionally introduce this technology at the initial relationship-building stages so community partners can understand the power of connection that technology can offer as well as overcome intimidation for its use. For the VAC to be successful outside of Los Angeles, students, agencies, preceptors, and field instructors commit to the idea of virtual programs.

Typically, students complete field practicum hours on-site; however, some students who reside in rural areas may intern at virtual placements in addition to virtual classroom instruction. For a variety of reasons, since the COVID-19 pandemic, students are choosing virtual field placements. Prior to 2020, a virtual field placement was considered non-traditional. Social work faculty apprehensively

adopted the idea of virtual field education with the launch of the Virtual Field Practicum course, now welcoming the opportunity when the pandemic limits in-person learning. Further research needs to occur to determine if virtual field practicum hours are as beneficial to learning as in-person contact with clients. Traditional social work educators may only embrace virtual field practicum and education as a last resort until that time.

4. Grand challenge: Harnessing technology for social good

The concept "harnessing technology for social good" was born out of the Grand Challenges for Social Work. The Grand Challenges are the profession of social work's response to the challenges that plague our society. Social workers use science, technology, and connectivity to promote social change. The Grand Challenges promote the ideals of a "just society," "strong social fabric," and "individual and family well-being" [8]. Of the thirteen challenges, "harnessing technology for social good" offers social workers an opportunity to embrace technology, which is an unfamiliar idea for many traditional educators. COVID-19 motivates social work practitioners and social work educators who identify as "old school" to see the advantages of technology, especially in delivering academic content.

5. COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic primed educators to harness the power of technology to minimize the disruption of social work field education. The VAC was fortunate in that there was no necessity to change in-class instruction due to COVID-19; however, other schools and campus-based programs within USC had to shift to virtual delivery. VAC faculty provided support resources for easing the transition of the on-campus program to virtual learning. Experienced virtual faculty offered time and expertise to on-campus counterparts to share teaching strategies and pedagogy. Faculty collaborated to create synchronous content for the on-campus students, and mentorship assisted with the learning of Zoom for synchronous classes.

Leveraging the school's capacity eased the transition to virtual learning; however, the SDPSSW faced another challenge, the disruption of field practicum. Nationwide, students' field practicum sites were closing or transitioning client services to Telehealth, often without the capacity to continue supporting students while developing virtual service delivery. As the United States and the world closed due to public health concerns, SDPSSW began developing solutions utilizing virtual content delivery to provide needed experiential learning.

Seasoned virtual faculty, relying on ten years of experience, responded by harnessing technology once again. In the spring of 2020, approximately 700 students in community-based sites for field practicum required additional experiential learning. School leadership questioned whether field (practice) hours and the quality of learning opportunities available would meet CSWE competencies of social work. Fortunately, the Commission on Accreditation created a response to COVID-19 providing flexible options to maintain standards to protect people while preparing competent social workers.

6. Harnessing Technology in Response to COVID-19

SDPSSW's internal capacity and focus on "harnessing technology for social good" afforded opportunities to develop an effective response. A multi-prong plan was born using existing programs and developing new initiatives within the school. Like other social work programs around the country, faculty initially began facilitating and distributing a database of free, virtual workshops to supplement student learning. Although convenient, passive learning did not align with the experiential learning of field practicum. Literature on engagement also indicates that technology and mere student attendance are insufficient to impact the cognitive or behavioral dimensions of effective student engagement [9].

Additional options for learning began to emerge. Gray and DiLoreto, in their 2016 study, "The Effects of Student Engagement, Student Satisfaction, and Perceived Learning in Online Environments," discuss that student satisfaction with online education is impacted by course design, structure, organization, and the opportunity for peer interaction [10]. To increase student engagement and honor the educational spirit of field practicum, faculty began assessing existing programs and the necessity to develop new programs to meet student competency development. To increase student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction within these programs, on-camera interaction and social media were expanded. Literature reveals that students that participate in video conferencing rather than audio-only interactions felt more engaged [11]. In this article, two programs, the School Social Work Field Training (SSWFT) Program and the Experiential Learning Labs (ELLS), harness technology to engage students participating in field education to complete their graduation requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. School Social Work Field Training

The School Social Work Field Training (SSWFT) was an existing program able to expand to

meet the needs of students as they began to experience a loss in experiential learning in field practicum sites. SSWFT is a trauma-focused 12-week school social work virtual training for VAC students at K-12 school sites. The training provides student enrichment during the summer semester when their clients, K-12 students, are experiencing summer breaks. The original SSWFT design format provided students with an intimate once-weekly Zoom learning experience. The program's enrollment goal initially included the participation of 25 students per summer semester.

The demand for student learning opportunities in the summer of 2020 was a surprising 62 students, more than doubling the need from previous years. Concern arose that student engagement would suffer from roster size skyrocketing, yet another passive lecture-style learning opportunity would result. In response, the SSWFT program began planning to offer additional engagement opportunities. Additional weekly sessions offered opportunities to allow for small group discussion. The first session of the week offered primary content, interactive lecture, comments, and breakouts. Polls, "reactions," videos, and the chat function provided opportunities to maintain connection and interactivity during the 2 ½ hour section. During the second meeting of the week, students participated in smaller groups of 10-15 students to engage with faculty and peers about the content. Case examples, role plays, and asynchronous content discussion allowed the students to have a practice-based experience. Evaluations following the training reveal that students believe a combination of interactive lecture and processing session are helpful to their future professional goals as MSW school social workers.

8. Experiential Learning Labs

The Experiential Learning Labs (ELLS) were synchronous opportunities that provided learning opportunities to MSW students using real-world environments utilizing Zoom rooms. Faculty members and content experts created ELLS based on the experiential learning cycle [12] for MSW students to learn, observe, practice, and receive feedback. Students that were enrolled in a field practicum course were invited to register and participate in an ELL. The ELL program began in May 2020 and ended in May 2021, which constituted the greatest need.

A general call went out to faculty and context experts to provide information and the purpose of the ELLS. There was an overwhelming response with many cutting-edge topic ideas, various experiential formats (i.e., role-plays), and a range of availability throughout the semester. The faculty and content experts became lab leaders.

The ELLs utilized multiple technology platforms. A Google site houses the lab session title, description, and faculty member(s) or content expert(s) picture so that MSW students can make informed decisions semester by semester. The MSW students accessed a Google site for general information, specific lab information, and registration released on a preset date and time. Qualtrics captured registration, attendance, and student/faculty feedback. The Qualtrics report provided data to inform future sessions and is provided to the Field Liaison to verify the MSW student's field hours.

The ELLs intersected with existing tools and processes to minimize disruption for the Field Liaison, Field Instructor, and MSW student. The Field Instructor assigned at the student's community-based placement can receive information about the ELL through a Reflective Learning Tool. A Reflective Learning Tool is a document that students complete based on their field placement experiences and process with their Field Instructor for professional growth. Field hours are recorded on the student's Field Practicum Log. The Field Log and the Reflective Learning Tool are uploaded to Blackboard or the Digital Learning Platform, depending on the MSW students' program.

9. Lessons Learned

Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted traditional education practices, it allowed educators previously hesitant about using technology to realize the power and reach of virtual education. Online or virtual instruction was long viewed as the “less than” education by traditional educators who were opposed to or never experienced this mode of instruction delivery. The pandemic forced these educators to experience the use of technology in teaching, and hopefully, there were many lessons learned that will ease future resistance to the use of technology. For example, many educators and students now know that virtual teaching is not simply sitting at a computer and turning on a camera. There are pedagogy and best practices in virtual education which focus on the delivery and the use of technology.

Embracing virtual education since 2010, SDPSSW identified significant lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The first of these lessons is the importance of leveraging internal capacity with existing programming. Leadership and faculty explored what existing virtual programming could accommodate students' increasing demands for learning opportunities. The impact of demand threatens to make interactive programs into passive lectures. In order to protect the integrity of experiential learning, SDP Faculty turned to

technology in the form of polls, breakout rooms, and Slack to maintain engagement.

SDPSSW leadership and faculty altered existing programming as inspiration for all new innovative learning opportunities during the pandemic. Faculty embraced subject- experienced content experts within our faculty and across the United States. Technology offers opportunities to connect these content experts with students and access content they would not receive in their traditional curriculum. Education learning tools, including Zoom, Google docs, and Qualtrics technology, also connect educators and students around the country. Given the social isolation caused by COVID-19, this type of programming allows for connection and excitement for learning concepts outside of what the school typically offers to students. Both programs, existing and new, create a space for the community using technology.

Finally, one of the most important lessons is the power of faculty collaboration. The faculty at SDP School of Social Work and schools across the country mobilized and developed innovative solutions to an educational crisis. The educators' commitment to their students motivates them to work additional hours and embrace non-traditional programming. Faculty united to support and mentor one another as they made efforts to “harness technology” for the good of their students.

10. The future of technology in social work field education

As COVID-19 numbers decrease in the United States and restrictions are lifted, it is expected that education will start to resume in-person instruction in the Fall of 2021. The question arises: how will this virtual experience impact education in the future? At the SDPSSW, this experience will enhance and expand virtual education. The SSWFT program roster numbers continue to increase as more students learn of this educational opportunity. SSWFT coordinators invite community internship partners (i.e., Field Instructors) to participate in several of the learning sessions in addition to their students. SSWFT also incorporates the use of Slack to increase peer communication and interaction between sessions.

The ELL program is not currently running as there is less need for additional learning hours now that community-based internship sites are returning to pre-pandemic experiences; however, ELL made a lasting impact on the school's operating plan. Leadership recognizes both the expertise of their geographically dispersed and on-campus faculty and the power of connecting faculty with students outside of the traditional curriculum. As a result, through both the SSWFT and ELL programs, there is a thirst for academic knowledge among alums and

community partners and recognizing that technology can be a conduit for this information. Currently, the SDPSSW is developing a Summer Institute, which will offer virtual webinars and workshops to communities, including Field Instructors, alumni, and beyond.

11. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on the world, and especially on education. In the United States, the threat of disruption for educational progression and the potential loss of revenue involving for-profit academic institutions drove the need for virtual delivery of content in the spring of 2020. Since 2010, CSWE began to accredit online social work programs; however, skeptics and critics within social work academic circles fear that technology will undermine the profession's traditions. In social work academia, some leaders and faculty view virtual programming as a necessary evil driven by student (consumer) demand.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced these educators to experience virtual education and rely on their virtual faculty peers to guide and support best virtual instruction practices. The transition to virtual field education is relatively seamless at the SDPSSW due to the existing programming and the solid collegial relationships among faculty. For that reason, approximately 700 students completed their field practicum experience despite a global pandemic. These authors hope that social work education leadership across the country realizes that quality learning opportunities are occurring virtually and see the benefit of integrating technology within social work education.

12. References

- [1] University of Southern California. (n.d.). Earn your MSW online from top-ranked USC. <https://msw.usc.edu/> (Access date: May 13, 2021).
- [2] Kurzman, P. A., and Maiden, R. P. (Eds.). (2014). *Distance learning and online education in social work*. Routledge.
- [3] Reisch, M., and Jarman-Rohde, L. (2000). The Future of Social Work in the United States: Implications for Field Education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 36(2), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2000.10779002>. (Access Date: April 1, 2021).
- [4] Council on Social Work Education, (2021). Directory of accredited programs. <https://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/Directory-of-Accredited-Programs.aspx>. (Access Date: May 13, 2021).
- [5] Flynn, M., Maiden, P., Smith, W., and Wiley, J., (2013). *Launching the Virtual Academic Center: Issues and Challenges in Innovation*, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 33 (4-5): 339-356.
- [6] Cox, T., Hsiao, S. C., and Pringle-Hornsby, E., (2019). From zero to 7,000: Creating a social work field placement program from the campus to the cloud. In R. P. Maiden (Ed.), *The transformation of social work education through virtual learning*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. (206-243).
- [7] Council on Social Work Education (2015). Educational policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master's social work programs. <http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=81660> (Access Date: May 13, 2021).
- [8] Introduction and Context for Grand Challenges for Social Work (Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative, (2013), Working Paper No. 1). Baltimore, MD. <https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/> (Access Date: May 13, 2021).
- [9] Bond, M., Buntins, K. Bendenlier, S., Zawacki-Richter, O., and Kerres, M., (2020). "Mapping research in student engagement and educational technology in higher education: a systematic evidence map", *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*. 17:2., <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-019-0176-8>.
- [10] Gray, J. and DiLoreto, M., (2016). The Effects of Student Engagement, Student Satisfaction, and Perceived Learning in Online Learning Environments", *NCPEA International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, (11) 1.
- [11] Acosta-Tello, E., (2015). Enhancing the Online Class: Effective Use of Synchronous Interactive Online Instruction. *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies*, 17.
- [12] Kolb, D. A., (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.