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Technology and groupwork: A mandate and an opportunity

Shirley R. Simon¹ and Kathleen W. Stauber²

Abstract: *This paper addresses the relationship between social groupwork and technology. It discusses the evolution of online technology—how the technological revolution of the computer, the Internet, and mass access to new communication devices has impacted our lives with unprecedented speed and universality. It acknowledges the natural and understandable resistance of many skilled and renowned groupworkers to the use of these new modalities. It addresses the numerous benefits and challenges that technology brings, and the critical and timely need for groupworkers to make the conceptual shift to embrace these modalities. A case is made for groupworkers' ability to take a leadership role in the development of effective, efficient and ethical online groups across disciplines and fields, and the need to contribute to the burgeoning scholarly literature on best practices in the development of online communities. An example of the use of technology to facilitate connection and effective teaching among adjunct groupwork educators is offered as one avenue for increasing groupwork's voice within an academic institution.*

Keywords: *social groupwork; groupwork and technology; online education; online groups; social work education and practice; adjunct faculty.*

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Evolution and impact of technological communication

Communicating via technology has come a long way in a very short time. In the late sixties, people were excited by the electronic calculator, which was then the size of a large cash register. In the seventies, doctoral students were thrilled to use an electric as opposed to a manual typewriter to complete their dissertations. Over the last thirty years, the Internet and the personal computer have completely changed how we communicate and seek information. Most of us use email and are familiar with Microsoft Office software. Global communication has become almost instantaneous. Laptop computers, Personal Data Assistants (PDAs), and wireless access at every Starbucks foster a perpetually connected society. Perhaps the most profound example of the power of harnessing this new technology is President Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. His extensive use of online communication with potential voters, donors, and volunteers has forever changed the strategy of U.S. election campaigns.

Today's youth have grown up with technology. They have never known a world without remote control devices, computers, or digital video recorders (DVRs). Current traditional age students are adept at using the myriad technological tools now readily available. They have worked with technology from pre-school through university, with curricula in virtually all disciplines integrating these new platforms. The rapidly changing technology does not intimidate these younger generations; rather, they embrace it by talking, texting or twittering via a multitude of devices. With the increased availability of sites like Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn, online social networking successfully vies with local social clubs and organizations for youth involvement.

Within academia, technology has become essential for all fields of study, from computer aided design in architecture to statistical programs in mathematics, to database management in medicine. Computers, online research, email, and 'wired classrooms' are now accepted components of higher education. Online courses and degree programs are growing exponentially as administrators recognize the untapped student markets, the economic benefits, and the competitive necessity of keeping up with other institutions' offerings in distance

education. In addition, the increased efficiency and speed of student-faculty communication, the flexibility in format and time of instruction, and the innate demand for enhanced organization and accountability in teaching via distance modalities are enticing more and more schools to embrace this modality (Simon & Stauber, 2009). In fact, during the fall 2009 term, nearly 30% of U.S. college and university students took at least one online course, almost one million more enrollments than in the prior year (Allen and Seaman, 2010).

In schools of social work, distance education is experiencing similar growth. With the exception of field practica and field supervision, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for U.S. schools of social work, accepts distance education methodologies for all courses. As the 2008 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) state, all accredited programs are subject to the same accreditation standards and review criteria regardless of the curriculum delivery method (CSWE, 2008). Accordingly, CSWE has accredited BSW and MSW programs that use distance education technology, with the MSW numbers increasing annually. In fact, the number of CSWE accredited schools with distance education programs increased by 60% (from 10 to 16) between April, 2010 and July, 2011 (CSWE, 2010a; CSWE, 2011).

Within the practice community, technological applications are everywhere. Online communities for treatment, support, education, growth and socialization have been developed (Perron & Powell, 2009). The ready access to phones, computers and the Internet has led to a proliferation of non-traditional group interactions. Telephone support groups and online support groups (OSGs) are increasingly available (Astray & Lopez de Roda, 2009; Toseland, 2009). Whether it be a telephone support group for carers of the chronically ill, an online spirituality group for lay ministers, or one of the myriad other groups that populate the Internet, people are increasingly gathering in groups in non-face-to-face situations.

Challenges and resistance to technology-enhanced communication

When groupworkers were asked for their immediate responses to the linkage of the terms groupwork and technology at the 31st Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), they shared the following words:

Oxymoron	Ethical issues	Potential
Resistance	Cold	User friendly
Impersonal	Speed	Not user friendly
Accessible	Confidentiality	Cutting edge
Dangerous	Identity stealing	Inexpensive
Rural access	Over-stimulating	Technophobia
Hacking	Exposure	Invasion
Greater connection	High risk	24/7 access
Less connection	Virus	

These words clearly capture the complex and dichotomous feelings and thoughts generated by linking groupwork and technology.

For many groupworkers, online communication requires a critical conceptual shift in perspective. In past decades, groupwork, by definition, required face-to-face interaction (Schwartz, 1971). As communication options have expanded however, new platforms for group interaction have arisen. Internet chat groups, telephone groups, online support groups, and other virtual groups no longer require face-to-face interactions. Understandably, many group workers have been less than enthusiastic about utilizing these newer formats (Simon & Stauber, 2009).

A large percentage of today's groupworkers were educated before the development of these formats. Learning about online communication can be perceived as an additional pressure. While email communication has become widely accepted, many skilled practitioners and educators may justifiably feel overwhelmed by the technical skills required to conduct online groups. Learning something new can be intimidating. One may fear the unfamiliar and imagine making critical mistakes, losing connections and data, or even blowing up the whole system. While these things *can* happen, the risks are small, particularly when measured against the potential rewards.

In addition, there may be a sense of a dehumanizing process with the computer being in control. Living in a litigious society may cause increased sensitivity to the permanence of the written word and the possibility that it could ultimately be used against us. With the speed and frequent informality of online communication, this can be a sobering thought for potential users.

Adapting to and incorporating newer technological modalities can also be inhibited by a lack of time, interest, and patience. There is an initial investment of time required to learn these new technological processes. Then, once the user has learned what to do, it can all change with new advances in software, so-called 'upgrades', and differing formats and systems. With online communication, there is a continuous need to adapt to all of these changes.

Technology can be frustrating. Push the wrong button and data can disappear. Where did it go? How can it be retrieved? What went wrong? Is the audio, video or text being clearly received by all participants? Technology and cyberspace can be intimidating, especially to those who began their careers in the decades before computers and the Internet.

Ethical concerns also abound. How protected are online conversations? Who can access them and what are the realities of confidentiality? These questions and many others are legitimate concerns when working in these new formats.

Finally, online communication with its 24/7 accessibility and the potential for instantaneous responses, can be experienced as an invasion of privacy and personal time. The work week is no longer Monday through Friday, nine to five. Students and clients expect ready, sometimes round the clock availability. Setting boundaries becomes more difficult without the traditional barriers.

So why incorporate technology? Because, despite all of the above, the benefits are significant and the opportunities great.

Benefits of technology-enhanced communication

The speed and efficiency of communication are clearly facilitated by technology. People can interact around the globe almost instantaneously. Traditional postal mail is now referred to as 'snail mail', an inference about its lengthy process when compared to online communication.

Information can be accessed with literally the push of a button. Questions and responses can be received with a speed that would have been unimaginable in prior decades. And all of this can be achieved without great expense due to the relative cost effectiveness of communication technology.

In our complex, over-committed world, technological communication offers convenience and scheduling flexibility. With technology these individuals can experience the therapeutic benefits of being connected with others, no longer needing to be isolated and alone in their struggles. While the obvious drawback of invasion of personal time may be of concern, there is also a freedom and sense of personal control that many of us value. Without this flexibility, it would be significantly more difficult to accomplish the myriad tasks and responsibilities that so many of us undertake.

Technology also helps reach underserved populations—the new mother in a rural household, the home-bound older widow, or the physically challenged caregiver of an ill spouse. These individuals can experience the therapeutic benefits of being connected with others even though it is not the traditional face-to-face experience. With technologically supported communication, individuals no longer need to be isolated and alone in their struggles.

Within our educational communities, schools and universities can also reach new and underserved markets. The same rural mother, home-bound widow, or physically challenged caregiver can attend school, albeit virtually. Distance education is one of the fastest growing educational offerings, and social work education is quickly adapting to this new reality (CSWE, 2010b; CSWE, 2011; NCES, 2011). Furthermore, online education facilitates more organized instruction. Online instructors cannot come into a class and just ‘wing it’. Materials need to be prepared in advance in a detailed, clearly organized fashion.

Technology and groupwork: An opportunity

These new technological communication processes provide an opportunity to contribute to the resurgence of groupwork. Groupworkers’ stock in trade is the development of cohesion and connection. As the recognized experts in the process of helping individuals become

a community, groupworkers can assume a leadership role in the development of online communities.

Are there issues, concerns and drawbacks to utilizing technology in conducting groups? Absolutely! As the word pairing exercise indicated, there are many potential deterrents to linking technology and groupwork practice, yet groupworkers must do exactly that.

For decades, social groupwork in the U.S. has been increasingly de-emphasized in both education and practice (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Drumm, 2006; Kurland et al., 2004; Simon, Webster, & Horn, 2007). The authors believe that the increasing use of technology provides a critical opportunity to counter these trends and reinvigorate the role of groupwork in contemporary education and practice.

Within academia, MSW programs offering a major or concentration in social groupwork in the U.S. have declined dramatically. Similarly, most MSW programs no longer require even a single course in social groupwork. Furthermore, there are significantly fewer full-time social work faculty members whose primary focus is social groupwork (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Simon & Kilbane, 2011; Simon & Webster, 2009). These declines have been a concern of groupwork leaders as early as the late 1970's (Tropp, 1978).

Within the practice arena, conditions are equally disturbing. While managed care, insurers and Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), have increased the demand for groupwork, the availability of trained groupwork practitioners has decreased (Bergart & Simon, 2004; Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994). Because more social work students are graduating without groupwork courses, there is a dearth of available, skilled practitioners. With decreased budgets and staff cut-backs, agencies are unable to provide the necessary in-service training and continuing education to ameliorate this situation (Bergart & Simon, 2004). Thus, untrained staff end up leading groups without applying the many key principles and practices of social groupwork. Curriculum-driven agendas frequently supplant process in many of today's groups (Goodman & Munoz, 2004).

Because technology-enhanced communication is here to stay, and because much of this communication occurs in group forums, a new opportunity has arisen to demonstrate the value of the social groupwork method. As groupworkers, it is time to fully embrace technology, incorporating it into practice and helping others use these

newer platforms to create effective groups. Technology and social groupwork cannot remain separate entities. To relinquish the leadership of online groups to those with technical expertise but little or no groupwork expertise would be to miss an opportunity to demonstrate groupwork's value to the broader educational and practice communities. Groupworkers are the ones who know about building community. It is vital to claim this heritage and collaborate with colleagues in differing fields to develop and implement online groups with the safeguards, practices and processes essential to effective groupwork.

In addition, groupworkers need to contribute to the body of research on the creation of successful online communities. Much scholarly discussion and research is being conducted on best practices in online groups (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Parr & Ward, 2006; Simon & Stauber, 2009). As groupwork experts, our voices need to be heard within this emerging literature. Groupworkers have a long-term heritage of developing effective communities, and it is precisely this expertise that needs to be shared and applied to this new modality of practice and education (Simon & Stauber, 2009). If this work is neglected—whether due to fear, indifference, lack of interest or competing priorities—groupwork as a contemporary modality may be threatened. There is an opportunity to revitalize groupwork's role in today's environment. We must grab this opportunity and restore groupwork to its rightful leadership place.

Enhancing groupwork's voice through the application of technology: An example

Academia relies heavily on part-time faculty members to educate students. In fact, the number of part-time faculty members in higher education in the U.S. has grown steadily over the past three decades. Whereas 30.2% of faculty members in higher education in the U.S. were employed part-time in 1975, that number rose to approximately 48% in 2005 according to data compiled by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) (Monk, 2009). With insufficient numbers of full-time, dedicated groupwork faculty in schools of social work, it is therefore critical to engage the part-time faculty members

and to empower them to give voice to this long-standing but frequently marginalized component of the curriculum.

At the authors' home institution, there has generally been only one full-time faculty member focusing on the groupwork curriculum; these responsibilities comprised approximately 50 - 75% of this faculty member's teaching load. Consequently, there was minimal investment among the full-time faculty and administration in groupwork education. In order to broaden that participation, the adjunct groupwork faculty were enlisted and engaged, and a committee was created to focus on this curricular content. Adjunct faculty members are non-salaried and part-time members of academic teams. They are typically brought in to teach in specialized areas and are usually not involved in program design or other academic responsibilities. Utilizing social groupwork practices and procedures including cohesion, participation, leadership strategies, mutual aid and the developmental stages of groups as a foundation, an empowered constituency of adjunct groupwork faculty members was developed to enrich and highlight the importance of the school's groupwork offerings (Bergart & Simon, 2004). Over the years, this faculty group conducted in-service training sessions for field work supervisors, implemented special topics courses on groupwork with different populations, developed extra-curricular groupwork opportunities for students, and, most importantly, supported and enhanced one another's teaching. As the group and its activities became more visible, the recognition and appreciation for groupwork education increased (Bergart & Simon, 2004).

With the advancements in technology and greater technological access through the University, the full-time faculty member and one of the adjunct faculty members were able to expand the connections and opportunities for this group by designing and implementing an Online Faculty Resource Center with two important components—a repository for groupwork-related material, and a platform for conducting online meetings.

Repository

For the past three years, this group of faculty members has utilized the school's online learning platform, Blackboard, as a vehicle for increased connection, communication and access to information. A dedicated

Groupwork Faculty site was secured and is now the repository for all Committee material, including agendas and minutes of meetings, syllabi for all sections of groupwork courses, text and audio-visual resources, suggested exercises and assignments, administrative forms, professional association information, and groupwork faculty publications.

This Blackboard site, known as the Groupwork Faculty Resource Center, opens with a welcome page and includes access to the following pages:

- Announcements – a site for posting new information, updates and reminders. Announcements can be maintained as a permanent record or deleted by date, and can be sent via email from this site to all members or to select participants.
- Groupwork Faculty Information – a list of contact information for faculty members. This is particularly useful for part-time faculty member access.
- Agenda and Minutes of Meetings – a repository for the agenda and minutes of each meeting. This minimizes the need for paper copies and provides ready access to the history and workings of the Committee.
- Groupwork Courses – a central location for the most current syllabi, assignments, readings, quizzes, copyright forms, and additional course material. This is the site most frequented by current faculty. Both full- and part-time faculty members post their syllabi and related material, ensuring up-to-date and comprehensive records and accountability.
- Sample Small Group Exercises – a list and description of the classroom exercises used in teaching the various groupwork courses. These exercises provide teaching tools and resources for class experiences and connections.
- Favorite Course Videos – a list of the videos and films used by class instructors. Links and comments on the videos can be indicated here.
- Professional Association Information – a site where the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) and other groupwork associations are identified. Information about the associations and their meeting dates, times, locations, and contact person(s) are posted here.

- Conference Information – a site for notices about upcoming professional conferences that relate to groupwork. Calls for proposals are also housed here.
- Faculty Scholarship – publications and presentations by the groupwork faculty are posted and shared in this location. Often faculty members are unaware of their colleagues' professional work, and this central site allows for ready access to this information.

This repository has been a major asset for the groupwork faculty. Informal feedback indicates that all appreciate its content and availability. Having one easily accessible, continuously available site for course-related information has simplified and improved course preparation and development. Use of this information has been facilitated by 24/7 access. According to the data automatically maintained on Blackboard, faculty members are accessing this site at their convenience, with high usage during evening and weekend hours (Stauber & Simon, 2010).

The repository has also been extremely valuable in the orientation and education of instructors new to the school and its curriculum. Referring new instructors to this comprehensive resource has proven effective and efficient for both the instructors and the faculty member coordinating this area of the curriculum. In fact, newer faculty members have the highest frequency of use in the areas of syllabi, course content, and class-related resources (Stauber & Simon, 2010). In addition, having each instructor's syllabus posted and regularly updated, enhances accountability and fosters uniformity and adherence to the basic constructs of the courses. Furthermore, when documentation is required for accreditation or other audit/assessment purposes, the repository provides a ready history of information.

Online Committee Meetings

The Groupwork Faculty Committee began with traditional face-to-face gatherings, but gradually transitioned to alternating face-to-face and online meetings. During the past three years, it has conducted most of its business on the Blackboard site via monthly or bi-monthly Wimba Classroom audio meetings. Wimba Classroom allows for audio and text sharing by participants in a synchronous, real-time interaction from diverse locations. This alternate format has been particularly effective

in promoting the participation of the adjunct faculty members who have busy and diverse schedules that limit their on-campus availability. After open deliberations with Committee members around dates, times, and agendas of the meetings, it was decided to conduct the online meetings during weekday evenings at a time convenient for those with small children. The process of developing consensus around meeting schedules facilitated participation and cohesion. An additional asset of these online meetings is the practical exposure of the participants to the use of online technology and its potential applications within their own teaching.

All faculty members were already familiar with the Blackboard platform through their courses and their access to the Groupwork Repository. Conducting online meetings necessitated that they also understand some fairly simple protocols. Hands-on support was available from the more technically sophisticated members so that faculty members would be able to sign on and participate with minimal effort. Faculty members who were comfortable with the technology seemed more likely to embrace the online meeting structure (Stauber & Simon, 2010).

The online meetings parallel the process of a face-to-face meeting. There is a coordinator who leads the meeting, a written agenda, minutes of the meeting, and discussion and sharing similar to that which takes place in a typical face-to-face meeting.

To date, online Committee meetings have, in fact, shown an increase in faculty participation, particularly among adjunct faculty members. The University is located in the center of a sprawling urban city. Travel time, parking and other professional and personal obligations frequently interfere with face-to-face faculty participation. With the convenience of the online option, Committee members have been able to participate from the comfort of their homes or offices. Furthermore, it seems that having once experienced a synchronous (real-time) online meeting, faculty members are more likely to request online rather than face-to-face meetings in the future (Stauber & Simon, 2010).

The online Faculty Resource Center has positively impacted the faculty teaching groupwork content, the quality and consistency of educational offerings, and the connection and participation of adjunct faculty members. It has provided a platform to welcome and orient new faculty members, engage adjunct faculty members in course and

program development, encourage involvement in the curricular and extra-curricular activities of the school, and enhance teaching content and strategies. This, in turn, has strengthened and given voice to groupwork's role within the program. The full-time faculty coordinator has been requested to demonstrate both the repository and the online meetings to the broader faculty and administration, thereby increasing visibility and respect for groupwork within the school. As a unique offering within the authors' home institution, the Online Faculty Resource Center serves as a model for programs and departments. It also serves as one example of how technology can be used to facilitate the role, impact and reputation of social groupwork.

Conclusion

The potential synergy between groupwork and technology offers vast opportunities to enhance groupwork education and reinvigorate the role of social groupwork practice. Combining groupwork knowledge, values, and practice wisdom with the skills of the technological experts can expand and enhance groupwork's legacy. Groupworkers have an opportunity to assume a leadership role in creating effective, ethical online communities. No one else knows how to do this better!

Note

This paper is based on the Joan K. Parry Memorial Plenary Address, *Group work and technology: Embracing our future*, given at the 31st Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, Chicago, Illinois June 28th, 2009.

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