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# Challenges & Opportunities for Applying Group Work Principles to Enhance Online Learning in Social Work<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The recent increase in social work courses being offered on line as well as fully online social work programs raises challenges for social work educators. The literature suggests that group work principles can serve as a foundation for effective online education. This chapter will examine the obstacles and opportunities for using group work principles to advance learning in online education. Three examples of fully online social work courses will be discussed in order to highlight these issues. The potential role of group work educators as leaders in facilitating effective online learning will be explored.

## Background

In recent years, there has been a large increase in the number of social work programs offering online and hybrid/blended (partially online) courses along with the traditional classroom based courses. Furthermore, there has also been an increase in the number of fully online MSW programs. Despite initial unease on the part of many social work educators, online education has increasingly been

embraced as a valid teaching method in social work. There is a growing literature which suggests that group work principles can serve as a foundation for effective online education. The development of group cohesion, in particular, a cornerstone of group work education and practice, has been found to improve online learning outcomes. (Parr & Ward, 2006; Stauber & Simon, 2009; Wilke, Randolph & Vinton, 2009). As Stauber and Simon (2009, 2011) have noted, group work educators are in an ideal position to assume a leadership role in facilitating the development of online communities. We have the group work knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate group development and build online environments conducive to mutuality, group cohesion and learning. This chapter discusses the challenges and opportunities inherent in online teaching in social work, with an emphasis on the use of group work principles to advance student learning. It describes and assesses three examples of fully online education in social work - an online BSW group work course, an online MSW group course and an online MSW field work seminar - to demonstrate the role of group work principles in the effective delivery of online education.

### **Deterrents to Faculty Engagement in Online Education**

Teaching via an online format brings its own set of unique challenges. Being an online educator requires understanding and adapting to a new form of instructional delivery. While one must still be a content expert, it is additionally necessary to understand the delivery system itself and to design and conduct one's course to be effective without the physical presence of a teacher in the classroom.

To be effective, instructors must become familiar with best practices in online education and apply those practices to their courses. This could involve "re-packaging" existing course content and transcribing lecture notes from yellow legal pads to audio, video, or formal written outlines. It would likely require revising assignments and composing additional written descriptors in order to adapt to an online environment. This would necessitate a higher level of organization since the opportunity for informal, face-to-face (F2F) interactions is generally diminished, and thus, the questions and explanations typically handled via in-class exchanges require written communications. Clarity and detail are essential in online education in order to provide the framework for

more independent student learning. Overall, instruction via the online platform necessitates additional effort (Allen & Seaman, 2013), and faculty may not be interested in learning about this type of instruction. They may even consider "virtual instruction" less rewarding.

The additional time and effort is not limited to learning new pedagogy, but also to gaining familiarity with the online and technological systems (Simon & Stauber, 2011). Instructors need to learn about delivery platforms such as Blackboard and Sakai. They need to develop a reasonable degree of comfort and skill with the technology in order to create, post, conduct, manage and evaluate course material. And this is not simply an initial investment of effort. Upgrades, advances in software, and administrative changes in university platforms can necessitate additional demands for time and effort. Technical "glitches" can cause further frustrations. The system "going down" or data seemingly lost by a crashing computer can be monumental stressors. In the academic world where "publish or perish" still exists, it may be hard to commit the additional time and effort.

Fear can also play an inhibiting role in the desire to embrace online education. Needing to learn something new can be intimidating. Faculty who lack technological expertise may be particularly fearful of making mistakes with irreversible consequences, causing data loss and/or system malfunction. Moreover, faculty are not used to operating in a "virtual" environment. The classroom, from both sides of the desk, is familiar and comfortable. Conducting a course online is new and potentially scary. It exposes instructors to a different set of expectations and responsibilities where they may feel vulnerable. In addition, students typically know more about the virtual environment than faculty members, since they have grown up with computers, Wi-Fi, Facebook, Google, etc. This disparity can readily add to the instructor's discomfort.

Other challenges for educators include the sense of distance implicit in the lack of face-to-face contact. Questions naturally arise about whether online education will diminish the sense of satisfaction derived from engaging students in a typical classroom setting. Instructors may also be concerned about the 24/7 accessibility inherent in online interactions. Given the instant access and flexibility that accompanies online communication, instructors may justifiably feel pressure to respond outside of the typical workday hours. The traditional boundaries of nine to five, Monday through Friday, no longer provide the structure and accepted limits that once were commonplace. Working with the newer technological modalities can

also be deterred by a lack of interest and patience. Both pedagogical and technological learning demand attention and diligence. Finally, since communication in online education frequently occurs via written formats, instructors may feel a need to be more deliberate and careful in their interactions with students. We live in a litigious society, and online communication provides a formal record of those interactions.

While many educators find teaching in an online format challenging, it is particularly daunting for social group work educators. Group workers' stock in trade has been the communications and dynamics of the face-to-face interaction. The very definition of social group work had been predicated on required face-to-face interaction (Schwartz, 1971). Group workers, and by extension, group work educators, typically enjoy and are adept at the give and take of the group work process. Transferring these skills and interests to the online environment requires a critical conceptual and practical shift in perspective. It is understandable that many of today's group work educators, most of whom were trained in the years before the explosion of online technology, are reticent to embrace this new medium (Simon & Stauber, 2011). Thus, it is clear that online education provides myriad challenges. So why do it?

## **Opportunities**

Despite the many obstacles associated with online instruction, there are compelling reasons to embrace it. First, online education efficiently reaches new and underserved populations. These individuals include those who cannot abandon roles as primary wage earners or family care takers, those with accessibility issues, and those who live at a distance from campuses and cannot relocate (Tandy & Meacham, 2009; Wolfson, Marsom & Magnuson, 2005; Frey, Yankelov & Faul, 2003; Conklin & Osterndorf, 1997). The students in rural communities, the caretakers unable to leave home, the working mothers who want to be home with their families, and the military men and women whose locations may change at any time, can now be served via online education. For most of these populations, F2F instruction is not a viable option. Post secondary academic institutions have been increasingly attentive to the needs of individuals who are not able to access traditional F2F education. This has led to the development and delivery of increasing numbers and types of innovative teaching

methods, including a variety of web-based courses (York, 2005). Both for practical and social justice considerations, online education fills a critical societal need.

Online education offers convenience and scheduling flexibility - two characteristics that are highly valued in our fast-paced, overcommitted society. Students have greater control over the day and time they do most of their work. They are not bound by the parameters of one or two weekly F2F class meetings. Instead, they can learn while a dependent is napping or while traveling away from home. Students can work late at night or early in the morning, depending upon their own lifestyle choices. In our consumer-driven environment, offering convenience and flexibility in educational delivery creates a strong marketing advantage.

Online technology allows for greater speed and efficiency in instructor-student communication. Instantaneous, around the globe communication, unimaginable in prior decades, is now a reality. Students no longer need to wait until the next class session to connect with an instructor or their classmates. Email communication has become an expected component of most contemporary educational experiences. Online courses build in additional communication channels - blogs, forums, discussion boards - that enhance and expedite interaction and connection.

Instruction via online platforms also prompts better organization and clarity in course delivery. It is much more difficult to go to class and "wing it". With little or no opportunity for informal F2F interactions, and with a need to post course material before class begins, advanced planning and organization are critical. Whether courses are delivered in hybrid/blended or entirely online formats, online teaching requires a higher degree of structure and specificity.

Instruction in the virtual arena is typically cost effective, a benefit recognized by the leaders of educational institutions. Once "packaged", courses can be opened to large numbers of students without much of the overhead costs implicit in "brick and mortar" settings; this can be an advantage but also has the potential to dilute online course effectiveness if class sizes grow disproportionately. Students can also save money - on travel expenses, childcare, and even residential housing.

Perhaps most importantly, online education is here to stay. Distance education is one of the fastest growing educational options and social work education is quickly adapting to this new reality (Allen & Seaman, 2013; CSWE, 2012). In 2012, the CSWE annual report, 2012

*Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States*, began to include formal data on course offerings in online or distance education formats. Twenty-three programs, or 11% of those reporting, offer entire master's programs in online or distance formats. Moreover, another 106 programs, or 50.5% of those reporting, offer part of the master's program online, and seven additional programs anticipate that online/distance education courses will be in operation during the next academic year. It is clear that online education within social work is widespread and growing.

As social work education has joined in the development and expansion of online education (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; MacFadden, Moore, Herie & Schoech, 2005; Petracchi, 2000), web-based approaches have been employed for a variety of social work courses, including research (Faul, Frey & Barber, 2004), policy (Moore, 2005), and more recently to direct practice courses (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Ouelette & Chang, 2004). Despite this growth in online education in social work, there is very little written about the use of online methodology in teaching group work and even less about fully online instruction in group work education (Levine, 2013; Muskat & Mesbur, 2011; Simon & Stauber, 2011).

For group work educators, the widespread increase in online education provides a timely opportunity to assume a leadership role in the development of effective online teaching strategies. Group cohesion is a critical component for improving learning in online education (Fisher, Phelps, & Ellis, 2000; Parr & Ward, 2006; Randolph & Krause, 2002). Who knows more about building cohesion than group workers? Strategies for enhancing participation, engagement, and cohesion fall within group workers' expertise, and community building is at the core of social group work. So while the technical aspects of online teaching may be new to many group work educators, these critical elements of effective online pedagogy are fundamental to the discipline. Although teaching in an online environment may not provide the face-to-face interactions familiar to group workers, the core need for community is the same. Thus, online education provides a perfect opportunity for social group work educators to demonstrate the value of group work principles and practices to the broader academic community. Working collaboratively with colleagues in other departments as well as with technical experts to establish best practices in online education can assure group work educators a leadership role in this burgeoning form of instruction.

Considerable scholarly research focuses on best practices in online

education (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005; Maidment, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Parr & Ward, 2006; Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Simon & Stauber, 2011; Wilke & Vinton, 2009) and group work educators need to be a part of this emerging literature. There are currently vibrant efforts to teach and assess the effectiveness of group work courses in online formats - a task that was thought impossible not so very long ago. The results of these efforts and those of others throughout the group work community should be widely disseminated to claim our expertise and promote the value of social group work methodology. As a beginning effort, we will present three examples of online courses that provided both opportunities and challenges to using group work principles to enhance teaching and learning.

### **Example #1: A Fully Online, Asynchronous Course on Social Work with Groups**

#### *Course Development and Overview*

The course, "Social Work with Groups", was developed as a pre-requisite for entry into a BSW program. The program was situated in a college that is part of a large Canadian university. The university has a well-regarded distance education program that includes fully online undergraduate degrees. The course was designed to increase access to professional education for non-traditional learners.

This course evolved from an earlier type of distance education format, which included the use of audiotaped lectures, readings and simulated exercises, completed independently by each student. The course was managed by an instructor who evaluated and graded assignments and answered questions posed by students. The instructor had no face-to-face contact with students, and students did not have any contact with one another.

The course was re-designed as part of an upgrading strategy by the university's distance education service. The upgrade process included the integration of input from university administrators, program consultants and staff from the distance education service. The design team included an instructor with experience teaching this course F2F and members of the university distance education services, notably one expert in web-design and a second expert in on-line instructional

design. The intent was to mirror the F2F version of the course, taught regularly on-campus. The web design team utilized the in-class course syllabus and teaching notes. This was supplemented by audio material that was created by audio taping the F2F class.

The purpose of the course was to provide an overview of group work: the basics of group theories, group leadership, group stages, and the application of group work within a variety of social work settings. Group process and dynamics were explored through the use of group activities in which students participated online. The course included twelve units, presented over twelve weeks. Each unit consisted of 20-30 minutes of lecture supplemented by colorful graphics, diagrams and photos that illustrated the material. Readings were assigned for each unit. Students were randomly assigned to online 'pods' - groups of 5-6 students who participated together in small group exercises and discussions. The activities provided students with the experience of participation in a group, mirroring group stages and offering experiential examples of the course material. A different student facilitated each activity within the pods. This also provided students with an opportunity to function as group facilitators.

Communication among students and between students and the instructor were in writing only and asynchronous, with individuals participating at times of their choice. The course requirements included a quiz, a final examination and two written submissions. The quiz was carried out on-line, the final examination was administered at a university exam setting and the written assignments were submitted online. The first submission was an analysis of a group experience, focusing on one or two topics covered in the course material and linking to readings and lecture material. The second assignment was a reflection paper, related to students' experiences in their pods and to their group activities. It was expected that students would participate in the group activities. These activities were not graded, but participation was essential in order to complete the second assignment.

### *Experiences with the course: Challenges and benefits*

Students participated from locations across Canada as well as from a variety of international locations. Students also varied by age, life experience and cultural background. The course allowed many non-traditional students, such as those returning to school while raising

children or those working full-time, to participate in group work training.

The asynchronous online format allowed for participation at any time of day or night. This was a great advantage for students who participated from other time zones and for those who worked or cared for children during the day. However, this also presented challenges for the activity portion of the course. Some students preferred to complete activities immediately, while others would rather wait until the last minute. Some students took vacations, had illnesses or experienced life crises. These sorts of situations impacted the timing and completion of exercises. While these experiences can happen in F2F classes as well, in this course it seemed like the very limited amount of interaction/relationship/connection between student and the instructor made it more likely that the issues would not be reported to the instructor and hence not addressed. This led to frustration and resentment, as expressed by some students in their course evaluations. Conflicts also arose in some of the pods. Again, conflicts tended not to be communicated to the instructor, and were not easily 'visible' to the instructor in the traditional F2F manner. Although dealing with conflict in groups was a topic in the course, the students themselves did not address the conflicts. There are several potential reasons for this. Conflict is difficult to acknowledge and deal with in many groups, particularly for students who are new to group theory and practice. Moreover, the potential impact of having pod members who have not met face-to-face is unclear. As well, the course grading was not contingent upon addressing group processes. Thus, when conflicts arose in relation to pod activities, students tended to complete the assignments and to leave the processing of affect to their reflective journals. And as the journals were the final assignment, handed in at the end of the course, conflicts were never discussed or resolved, but merely reflected upon by the students. Although the instructor provided written feedback based upon review of the journals, there was no further dialog, thus missing an important teaching opportunity, especially for group work education.

Another challenge related to students' ability to navigate the technological aspects of the course. Although this is decreasing as an issue for online education as a whole, students in this course often ran into technological glitches. However, this challenge also presented an opportunity. Students who successfully navigated the course site began to offer online advice to other students, thus beginning the

development of positive communication and mutual support among some students, an element of mutual aid (Steinberg, 2014). The course instructor also included a message in an early post to the class describing her own inexperience with online education, thus placing her 'in the same boat' as the students, reinforcing another element of mutual aid.

The reflective journals completed by the students indicated that their feelings and experiences throughout the course were quite similar to those typically described by group members at various stages of a group. These included uncertainty about other members, caution in disclosing too much information too soon, excitement to get started, doing the work in the middle phase and reflecting on unresolved issues and gains made at the end. Students offered positive comments about the course in both the reflective journals and in course evaluations. A number of students stated that they clearly advanced their knowledge about groups and group work. Several noted that they would have liked to experience the course in a F2F context; however they did gain a unique experience in an online group.

From the instructor's point of view, the relationship with online students was different than that with F2F students. The online instructor only 'met' the students by reading posts, monitoring activities, responding to questions and grading assignments. This relationship was adequate when the group processes in the pods were proceeding well. However, it was more challenging when students required assistance. It was difficult for the instructor to recall details about each student, as the more nuanced information that can be generated in F2F meetings was not available. Students' relationships with one another were also more limited. They had little exposure to the class as a whole and mainly interacted with their pod-mates. This is in contrast to a F2F class where students can see one another participating in activities, working through conflicts, and engaging in discussions.

Communication in this course was carried out strictly through the written word. Non-verbal communication could not be observed. This was a challenge, especially when dealing with a social work approach that emphasizes the importance of visually scanning group members and observing non-verbal cues (Kurland & Salmon, 1998). While there has been an increase in the use of computer graphics and 'emoticons', they are not a full substitute for the breadth and depth of nonverbal communication. The sole use of written language can also be problematic for students who have specific challenges with writing or reading.

Finally, there is evidence that online learning has cost-saving benefits (Regehr, 2013). This is true with regard to the sponsoring institution, since classroom rental and maintenance are not needed in the virtual classroom. However, course instructors in online teaching formats must spend considerable time moderating, monitoring and maintaining the course (Fisher et al, 2000). In this experience, it was crucial for the instructor to log on frequently, monitor work within the pods and answer the many questions posted by students in relation to assignments and course material. This is especially critical in a group work course, where group process is just as important as content. Monitoring was particularly crucial due to the presence of what is known as "Online Disinhibition Effect" (Suler, 2004). The absence of non-verbal cues and the presence of written material that cannot be stopped ahead of its appearance online resulted in some students sharing personal thoughts, feelings and histories that went beyond the boundaries of the usual instructor-student communication. It is challenging to prevent this from happening and to help these individuals to learn 'netiquette', the rules of what is appropriate and not appropriate to share with virtual classmates. In a F2F classroom, the instructor is present to guide discussions to include information suitable for an educational setting and re-focus students if needed. While the topic of boundaries was conveyed in the online course material, disclosures only surfaced after they had already occurred in a pod or through student-instructor communication.

### *Lessons learned*

The fully online group work course successfully provided students with the basics of social group work theory and a specific type of online educational group experience. An online group work course has the additional potential to prepare students to work with online groups. The role of the instructor is one of observation and monitoring, with potentially less opportunity for modeling and group facilitation.

Based upon the above experience, the following recommendations are offered to enhance the online delivery of education and to better meet the requirements of a group work course:

1. Although it might negatively impact accessibility, synchronous on-line communication, with all students and the instructor online

at the same time, would allow for better monitoring and modeling of communication. With this in mind, course designers in group work must pay close attention to web-based discussions, in order to deal with the "interactivity and responsivity integral to e-learning" (Madoc-Jones & Parrot, 2005, p. 766).

2. Inclusion of a mandatory face-to-face meeting at the start of the course, with all students attending, would allow students to meet, begin to form relationships, have online technology and norms explained, and begin to build a sense of belonging to the class group. If this is not possible, newer forms of online conferencing software, such as SKYPE, can create an opportunity for students to see and hear one another. This requires that students have a computer with a camera, microphone and the drive space needed to host the program.
3. Online group work courses should be created with specific attention to issues common to the group work process: (a) explicit and clear expectations about the purpose of the course, (b) the development of group norms, including agreements on content and timings of posting and the development of norms around personal safety, (c) attention to confidentiality, (d) attention to group stages: proper introductions, monitoring of group process and conflict, and preparation for endings and (e) enhancement of the development of mutual aid.
4. Instructors should anticipate that issues that commonly arise in groups, such as conflict among members, may also arise in the course. Preparation for these issues is important, and mechanisms must be put into place to help resolve conflicts that may arise.

### **Example #2: A Combined Synchronous and Asynchronous Online Group Work Course Development and Overview**

In approaching the design of an online, master's level course in group work, a robust and active connection with and among the students was emphasized as a priority. An online "Clinical Practice with Groups" course was designed, developed and implemented. The goal of the course was for students to learn conceptual group theory and practice skills in facilitating groups with clients. There was a keen awareness that experiential learning and teaching in social work relies heavily on

adult learning theory. This theory maintains that adult learners are most effectively educated in a style that is interactive, includes feedback and role playing, and incorporates specific elements that foster changes in attitude, cognition, and behavior (Knowles, 1980; Garavaglia, 1993; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Mott, 2000; Daley, 2001). The "Clinical Practice with Groups" course provides a meaningful learning experience for the students that is skills-based, culturally-based, incorporates current theory and research, and is accessible to students with varying learning styles.

### *Experiences with the course: Challenges and benefits*

The main design challenge for this online group course was how to give the students an opportunity to *practice and engage* in group work. In teaching group work online, the Live Classroom (LC) experience is a key component. LC for this course is defined as one that uses the technology of Adobe Connect where participants appear in 'real time' by both video and audio so that all participants can talk with one other in the virtual classroom. While the concepts, course literature, lectures and exercises can occur via asynchronous learning on an individual basis, active and dynamic interaction must occur as a weekly component of the course. As previously noted, synchronous learning can be challenging. However, "a real-time, instructor-led online learning event in which all participants are logged on at the same time and communicate directly with each other" is quite beneficial to all participants (Daydov, Emery, Lahanas, & Potemski, 2010). During LC, students often comment positively about the effectiveness of this technology. It is helpful that role play exercises, for example, can be seen, heard, felt and critiqued right in the moment of action. Over the duration of this five weeks' long course, students will meet in LC five times. Participation is a required component of the online Group Work course. For multiple reasons, attention to the scheduling of the LC's is important. Students have very full daily schedules that often include familial obligations, work and field placements. In order to minimize conflicts with these additional student priorities, as well as allow for time zone differences where the students reside, LC's are arranged for Sunday or Monday evenings.

Segments of recorded LC sessions demonstrate how students and instructors can negotiate the enacting of role plays, and offer support



and encouragement to one another as the students practice their newly acquired skills. The EPAS (Educational Policy Accreditation Standards) put forth by CSWE (Council on Social Work Education) call upon educators to teach students to *demonstrate* their learning in diverse practice areas (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). Utilizing the LC for activities such as role plays offers students the opportunity to experience being a group member or a group facilitator and to discuss core group work concepts by debriefing after a demonstration. Real-time practice increases students' comfort level with group facilitation and with the dynamics that occur in groups. For those students not directly taking part in the exercise, there is an opportunity to observe and share viewpoints as part of the critique, since students often pick up on actions and words that the participants do not necessarily notice. Critical to the online experience is the fact that students are engaging from locations all over the country, yet can engage in practicing skills together. The technology enables students to connect in ways that would be impossible otherwise, facilitating a robust and effective learning experience.

The next critical piece of the Group Work course is the institution of a Peer Support Group component. In learning group work skills, it is essential that students have a lived experience of group membership and the opportunity to 'try on' group facilitation. In this course the overarching purpose of the peer support group is to socialize students to group norms as group members, facilitators and consultants. It also aims to increase knowledge, skills and comfort in conducting groups as well as to learn about the stages of group work in real-time as members and as group facilitators. The goals for the group are to (a) provide students the opportunity to discuss school and field related issues and learn about the experiences of other students; (b) offer students additional peer support related to balancing work and the demands of graduate school, and (c) facilitate hands-on experiential learning about group leadership and group membership. During these groups students meet without a course facilitator, in a live virtual "room" arranged through Distance Education, and the session is recorded. The course instructor reviews the session so as to garner important themes to bring back to the LC to discuss. Again, the instructor and students have the opportunity to view the peer support groups after the fact, and then utilize these clips for learning and integration of key group work concepts.

### *Lessons learned*

The Peer Support Group component of the course was very successful in helping the students to feel part of a learning community. Important to the course learning objectives is that after each peer support group session, the group will have a debrief conversation. It is here that students critique and identify the group concepts, skills practiced, techniques learned, and potential improvements. As well, there is a course assignment connected to the student's experience of facilitating the peer support group. It is here that the students will integrate the group work literature, support their statements with examples from the support group, and critique their skills. The assignment provides further opportunity for the students to internalize their learning experience.

In summary, the key synchronous components of the Clinical Practice with Groups course are critical to a successful experience for the students and for the instructor. The students' experience of group cohesion, while participating as a member in both the course and in the peer support group, contributes to their professional growth as group workers. Relationships and connections are made, and students experience support and build confidence in the core practice skills needed to be effective practitioners in social work with groups.

### **Example #3: Online Learning in a Field Work Seminar**

Social work is a collaborative and relationship based profession. Collaboration goes beyond two or more people working together towards a common goal; it is about open learning, relationships, and sharing. Collaborative skills developed through group work in a F2F or online environment are essential transferrable skills for social workers. As noted previously in this chapter, students learn best when they are engaged with their classmates and when they connect, share, communicate and collaborate with one another (Randolph & Krause, 2002). The power of learning from and through peers simply cannot be overstated.

## *Course Development and Overview*

Field education in social work must be a robust experience. In fact, it is the signature pedagogy of a student's academic experience (CSWE, 2008). In one fully online MSW program based in the Northeastern U.S., each student is enrolled in an asynchronous integrated field seminar course while completing 32 weeks of field placement. Integrated seminars in the online environment are structured in the same manner as in the traditional classroom setting. The seminar provides students with an opportunity to discuss and reflect on professional social work issues from their practicum experience regarding assessment, specific interventions with client systems and the application of practice theories. Students use the seminar to monitor their own learning experiences and their progress towards attaining their professional goals with respect to membership in groups and communities distinguished by class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability and culture while honoring each person's individuality.

The traditional F2F seminar classes are comprised of 10-12 students sitting in a circle, led by an instructor. The instructor opens the class by asking students to do a check-in and then proceeds to invite students to share and discuss their prior week's field experiences with one another. In the online integrated field seminars, the course is also comprised of 10-12 students. Each student must upload a video describing her/his experiences from the previous week. Videos are five minutes in length and focus on receiving feedback or suggestions with how to proceed regarding a particular situation. Students are instructed to post a question to their classmates about either an ethical dilemma or a specific scenario from their placement. In turn, each student must respond to each video/question, thus ensuring that all students both share and respond.

## *Experiences with the course: Challenges and benefits*

One challenge in the traditional field seminar classroom is inadequate class time; there never seems to be enough time for all students to share their experiences. Class time is quickly absorbed by the more vocal, assertive students, leaving the quieter students to go unheard for the week. One benefit of an online integrated seminar is that this cannot

happen. Students cannot hide in the online classroom environment. All students are expected to post and respond to weekly videos. This lends itself to much more robust conversations. Also, online students have the benefit of interacting with others from outside their geographic areas, including students from all over the U.S. and around the world. Our students represent 47 states, 5 countries (non-military), 3 US territories, and 3 Military 'states'. We have 17 students in the Armed Forces, in Africa, Canada, Europe, Middle East, the Americas, and the Pacific. Students in online integrated seminars therefore learn about social work in their own back yards while simultaneously learning how it is practiced worldwide. This creates a very rich experience in terms of culture, norms, social mores and ethical dilemmas. Obviously, the cross-cultural exchange is of great benefit to students as it demonstrates the necessary flexibility and open mindedness students must have in order to meet the needs of clients.

Another benefit of the online group experience, particularly in field work, is that students must develop essential communication skills such as clarity, assertion and brevity — all of which are transferrable to social work practice. These skills are honed in the online seminar course by limiting the amount of video time students have to present their cases. Students are given five minutes to update their classmates about their practicum including presenting clinical questions. This is not unlike an outpatient setting whereby clinicians have only a brief amount of time to present salient clinical points so to develop appropriate treatment recommendations.

The profession of social work is built upon the premise that the worker is able to develop positive rapport with clients. The skills acquired by participating in a group-based field seminar are essential to this work. The instructor and student have many ways to ensure that the group work is effective. The use of social media and other technological modalities (Facebook, Twitter, and Skype, for example) allows for instant communication. Skype and other video formats enable students to virtually be in the same room. Skype is the video format utilized most often in order to achieve this goal. Instant chat and other real-time communications can simulate a function of group work in the online classroom. Students are incredibly creative when it comes to connecting with one another in online formats. Many online learners embrace technology because they want to be connected to their classmates and ultimately to their social work program.

There are of course some challenges in conducting field work

seminars in an online environment, just as there are in F2F seminars. For example, in both formats, some students may be anxious about the equity and fairness of workload in online group situations. However, in online courses, many platforms that are used (Blackboard, Moodle, etc.) have tools built within their frameworks to provide the instructor with an objective way to measure individual participation and overall group involvement. Thus, the use of online methodology actually offers an advantage over F2F education.

### *Lessons learned*

There are significant benefits in online field seminars. Students must stretch beyond their comfort zones, increase their assertiveness, become clear and concise in their conversations, rely upon others, and constantly be involved in the group process. These are critical components of social work education and of field education in particular.

## **Conclusion**

As discussed, online social work education has grown exponentially in the past decade, posing both challenges and opportunities for instructors. The relationship between the use of such group work principles as mutuality, cohesion, and effective learning has now been well documented. The three case studies presented here - the asynchronous online BSW group work course, the combined synchronous/asynchronous online MSW course, and the online field seminar - suggest a number of important recommendations. Group work principles such as clarity of group purpose, attention to group norms and stages of development, and emphasis on the development of mutual aid are all important to the success of online learning. Where possible, opportunities for direct, synchronistic contact (either actual or virtual) should be made available for students in fully online courses. The various communication mechanisms discussed in this article require labor intensive involvement on the part of students and instructors, but potentially yield worthwhile results. For example,

creative ways of sharing field experiences, such as videotaping and responding to classmates' videotapes, require considerably more participation from students than in F2F instructional formats, thus providing more reticent students with opportunities to increase their assertiveness and involvement in group process. Creative uses of technology can overcome the challenges of asynchronistic communication by providing opportunities for interaction in 'real time' so that students can communicate with each other, face to face. However, the potential for positive group dynamics yielding a high level of learning in the online environment cannot be realized without skilled facilitation on the part of instructors. Course instructors with group work knowledge and skills are particularly well suited to harness group dynamics and apply group work principles to their online teaching. We can utilize our group work expertise and creativity to enhance online course design, development and delivery, providing a leadership role in online social work education.

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