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Recommended Citation

Simon, Shirley and Stauber, Kathleen W.. Group Work and Technology: Embracing Our Future. Group Work Honoring our Roots, Nurturing our Growth, , : 161-172, 2012. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Social Work: School of Social Work Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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Group work and technology: Embracing our future

Shirley R. Simon and Kathleen W. Stauber

Abstract: This paper provides an overview of 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 a speed and universality that is unprecedented. It discusses the natural and understandable resistance of many skilled and renowned group workers towards the use of these new modalities. It addresses the numerous benefits that technology has to offer us, and the critical and timely need for group workers to make the conceptual shift to embrace these modalities. A case is made for group workers' ability to take a leadership role in the development of effective, efficient and ethical online groups across disciplines and fields. Finally, an online resource center and a live meeting of educators interacting via online technology are demonstrated.

This paper is based upon the Joan K. Parry Memorial Plenary Address at the 31st Annual International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups, Chicago, Illinois June 28th, 2009

Key words: Social group work, group work and technology, online education, online groups, distance education, social work education and practice

Introduction

During this 2009 Symposium we have looked back on our roots as group workers. We were touched by a spell-binding letter to Jane Addams, written and delivered by our beloved Katy Pappel in the very room where Jane conducted her settlement house activities. Our visit to Hull House offered a vivid, emotional picture of our heritage and contributions.

We also looked at the current state of group work via myriad papers, workshops and posters on contemporary group work efforts in education and practice. We heard about the cross-national and cross-cultural focus of group work in a plenary address by the members of the Global Group Work Project and recognized group work's wide-ranging contemporary impact.

In this plenary address, we ask you to look to the future, to consider a platform for group work that cannot be ignored if we are to continue our historical influence on social work practice. We ask you to look at group work and technology, and recognize and appreciate the inevitability of the melding of the two.

This address provides an overview of 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 and culture with a speed and universality that is unprecedented. It discusses the natural and understandable resistance of many skilled and renowned group workers to the use of these new modalities. It also addresses the numerous benefits that technology has to offer us, and the critical and timely need for group workers to make the conceptual shift to embrace these modalities. A case is made for group workers' ability to take a leadership role in the development of effective, efficient and ethical online groups across disciplines and fields. Finally, an online resource center and a live meeting of educators interacting via online technology are demonstrated.

Evolution and impact of technological communication

Communicating via technology has come a long way in a very short time. In the late sixties, we were excited by the electronic calculator which was then the size of a large cash register. In the seventies, many of us were thrilled to use an electric rather than a manual typewriter to complete our 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 daily and are familiar with Microsoft Office software. Global communication has become virtually instantaneous. PDAs, laptop computers, and Wi-Fi access at every Starbucks foster our perpetually connected society. Perhaps the most profound example of the power of harnessing this new technology is Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. His use of online communication with its instant messaging and constant email has forever changed the process of U.S. election campaigns.

Today's youth have grown up with technology. They have never known a world without remote control devices, DVRs, or computers. Contrary to many of us, today's traditional age students are adept at using the myriad technological tools now readily available. They have worked with technology from pre-school through college, with curricula in virtually all disciplines integrating these new platforms. The rapidly changing technology does not bother these younger generations; rather, they embrace it. Everywhere you see young people on cell phones, talking, texting or twittering. With the increase of sites like Facebook, My Space, 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. Email, 'wired classrooms' and online research 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 speed and efficiency of student-faculty communication, the flexibility in format and time of instruction, and

the innate demand for enhanced organization and accountability in teaching are enticing more and more schools to embrace this modality (Simon & Stauber, 2009).

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 other 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. Accordingly, CSWE has accredited BSW and MSW programs that use distance education technology with the numbers increasing annually.

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. Whether it be a telephone support group for caretakers of the chronically ill, an online spirituality group for lay ministers, or one of the other myriad groups that populate the Internet, people are increasingly gathering in groups in non face-to-face situations.

Pairing group work and technology

Before further exploring the connection between group work and technology, we would like to know what you think when you hear the two terms linked. Please spend a moment reflecting on the one or two words that come to mind when you hear 'group work and technology'.

Authors' note: This exercise resulted in the following responses:

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 group work and technology.

Challenges and resistance to technology-enhanced communication

‘Technology!’ The word alone can send shivers up the spine of many group workers. We pride ourselves on the face-to-face context of our work – the power of process without interference or artificial barriers. We speak to our students and interns about the important influence of environment and discuss the problems associated with distracting, uninviting, and impersonal settings. And yet, that is precisely how many of us picture online connections. We think of it as cold, distant and unfamiliar.

For many group workers, online communication requires a critical conceptual shift in perspective. In past decades, the very definition of small group work required face-to-face interaction. 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 group workers 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. We may fear the unfamiliar and imagine making critical mistakes, losing connections and data, or even blowing up the whole system. And frankly, these things can happen, albeit very rarely. In addition, there

may be a sense of a dehumanizing process with the computer being in control. We may also recognize that we live in a litigious society and what we write can ultimately be used against us.

For many of us, adapting to and incorporating newer technological modalities can be deterred by a lack of time, interest, and patience. There is the initial investment of time required to learn a new technological process. Then, once you learn what to do, it all changes 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 your data disappears. Where did it go? How do you retrieve it? What did you do wrong? What do you do next? Is the audio, video or text being clearly received by all participants? Technology and cyberspace can be intimidating, especially to those of us who grew up in the decades before the computer and the Internet.

Ethical concerns also abound. How protected are our online conversations? Who can access them and what are the realities of confidentiality in such groups? What safeguards are there regarding the composition of the group? Without face-to-face interaction, do we really know the identity of a group's members? Are there predators or imposters participating? These questions and many others are legitimate concerns when working in these new formats.

Finally, online communication with its 24/7 accessibility and instantaneous communication can be experienced as an invasion of one's privacy and personal life. Work time is no longer a Monday to Friday, nine to five schedule. 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 offered by technology-enhanced communication

The speed and efficiency of our communication is clearly facilitated by technology. We can interact with people around the globe virtually

instantaneously. We even refer to the traditional postal mail services as 'snail mail', an inference about its lengthy process when compared to online communication. We can search for information with literally the push of a button. We can ask questions and receive responses with a speed that would have been unimaginable when many of us were young. And we can do all of this without great expense. Communicating via technology is generally extremely cost effective.

In our complex, over-committed world, technological communication offers convenience and scheduling flexibility. It allows us to do our work on our timeline – when the baby is sleeping, when dinner is cooking, when we feel inspired. We are not bound by the conventional nine to five schedule, and while there are the obvious drawbacks mentioned earlier, 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 us reach underserved populations – the new mother in a rural household, the home-bound elderly widow, or the physically challenged caretaker of an ill spouse. These individuals can experience the therapeutic benefits of being part of a group even if this group is not the traditional face-to-face experience. With technologically supported communication, they 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 caretaker 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. Recent U. S. Department of Education findings indicate that students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009, p.ix). Furthermore, online education has been shown to facilitate more organized instruction (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). Online instructors cannot come into a class and just 'wing it'. Materials need to be prepared in advance in a detailed, clearly organized fashion.

Finally, these new technological communication processes provide an opportunity to contribute to the resurgence of group work. Group workers' stock in trade is the development of cohesion and connection. We are the recognized experts in the process of helping individuals become a community, and we now have the opportunity to have

our voice heard by assuming a leadership role in this new avenue for effective group work practice.

Are there issues, concerns and drawbacks to utilizing technology in conducting groups? Absolutely! As the word pairing exercise indicated, there are many potential deterrents inherent in the linking of technology and group work practice, and yet, at this point in time, we must do exactly that.

Technology and group work

Technology-enhanced communication with its good, bad and ugly qualities is with us to stay. It's time for group workers to truly embrace technology, incorporating it into our own practices and helping others use these newer platforms to create effective groups. Technology and group work cannot remain separate entities. It is no longer a choice; it is a mandate. We must not relinquish the leadership of online groups to those with technical expertise but little or no group work expertise. We are the ones who know about building community. We need to claim our heritage and collaborate with our colleagues in differing fields to develop and implement online groups with the safeguards, practices and processes essential to effective group work.

We also need to contribute to the research and scholarship on the creation of successful online communities. Much scholarly discussion and research is being conducted on best practices in online groups (Marathe, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Parr & Ward, 2006; Simon & Stauber, 2009). We, as group work experts, need to become further involved in this area and raise our voices in this emerging literature. Group workers 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 – either by fear, indifference, lack of interest or competing priorities – group work as a contemporary modality is threatened. We have an opportunity to revitalize group work's role in today's environment. Let's grab this opportunity and restore group work to its rightful leadership place.

Demonstration of Group Work Faculty Resource Center

For the past fifteen years, there has been an ongoing group to support and empower the largely part-time faculty constituency that teaches group work courses at our school of social work. Using a theoretical base of social group work practices and procedures, including mutual aid, empowerment, cohesion, participation, and the developmental stages of groups over time, we developed an empowered constituency of faculty to enrich and highlight the importance of the school's group work offerings. (Bergart & Simon, 2004)

During the past two and a half years, this group of faculty has utilized Blackboard, the school's online platform, as a vehicle for increased communication. A dedicated group work faculty site was secured and is now the repository for all Committee material, including agendas and minutes of meetings, syllabi for all sections of group work courses, text and audio-visual resources, suggested exercises and assignments, administrative forms, professional association information, and group work faculty publications. The Committee began with traditional face-to-face gatherings, but gradually transitioned to alternating face-to-face and online meetings. During the past year, it has conducted most of its business on the Blackboard site via monthly Wimba Classroom audio meetings. This alternate format has been particularly effective in promoting the participation of the part-time faculty who have busy and diverse schedules that limit their on-campus availability. It also exposes these instructors to new technologies, encouraging the integration of these applications within their own teaching.

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

1. Announcements – a site for posting new information, updates and reminders. Announcements can be maintained as a permanent record or deleted by date. An email of the announcement can be sent to all members or select participants from this site.
2. Group work faculty information – a list of contact information for faculty. This is particularly useful for part-time faculty access.
3. Agenda and minutes of meetings – a repository for the agenda and minutes of each meeting. This minimizes the need for paper copies,

- and provides a ready access to the history of the Committee.
4. Group work 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 post their syllabi and related material, ensuring up-to-date and comprehensive records and accountability. Moreover, faculty new to teaching these courses have easy access to the course material.
 5. Sample small group exercises – a list and description of the classroom exercises used in teaching the various group work courses. These exercises provide teaching tools for class experiences and connections.
 6. Favorite course videos – a list of the videos and films used by class instructors. Links and comments on the videos can be indicated here.
 7. Professional association information – a site where AASWG and other social work associations are identified. Information about the associations and their meeting dates, times, locations, and contact person(s) are posted here.
 8. Conference information – a site for notices about upcoming professional conferences. Calls for proposals are also housed here.
 9. Faculty scholarship – publications and presentations by the group work faculty are posted and shared in this location. Often faculty are unaware of their colleagues' professional work, and this central site allows for ready access to this information.
 10. Meeting communications – the location of the links for group communication. The Discussion Board allows participants to connect around particular topics via text postings. These postings can be reviewed and revised by all participants. Members can respond to these communications in a threaded, chronological format. Wimba Classroom, a component of this page, allows for audio and text sharing by participants in a synchronous, real-time interaction from diverse locations.

Authors' note: The plenary address continued with a live online presentation of the Group Work Faculty Resource Center.

The presenters then used Wimba Classroom to demonstrate a live audio exchange among group work faculty. Two faculty members joined the presentation via the internet – one from his home in a Chicago suburb and one from her hotel room. The discussion focused

on the sharing of information about upcoming continuing education workshops. The ensuing dialogue summarized the workshops and exchanged ideas about how best to market them. This discussion paralleled the process of a face-to-face meeting.

The live presentation provided a brief example of how the virtual meeting process can work in a task group setting. It is hoped that this presentation helped to diminish some of the mystique surrounding online communication groups and encouraged the increased use of technology. The complexities and potential frustrations of such applications are real, but the assets and opportunities are undeniable.

Conclusion

With regard to group work and technology, the future is now, and we can no longer resist the inevitable. We need to embrace all that technology has to offer, and use our group work skills to take a seat at the head of the table in creating effective, ethical online communities. We know how to develop groups. We can do this in an online format. Let's combine our group work knowledge, values, skills and practice wisdom with that of the technological experts to continue and enhance our group work legacy. It is time to embrace the inevitable!

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