

The Ethics Challenge: 21st Century Social Work Education, Social Media, and Digital Literacies

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The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 15, Number 1 (2018)
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Abstract

Digital technologies now play a vital role in the mediation of personal and professional human interaction and the access and distribution of information. The ethics challenge described here is not about privacy, but rather about the disruption of traditional forms of professional training using digitally mediated technologies. This paper seeks to describe how technology can be utilized to enhance traditional forms of social work education using a study that evaluates the levels of digital literacies of students in a social work classroom. The concept of digital literacy is introduced to encourage educators to incorporate these skills into curriculum to prepare students to become ethically competent practitioners in the modern digital world.

Keywords: social media, education, ethics

Introduction

Examining the current trends in social work education reveals a variety of opportunities and challenges such as the use of online programs

and social media that lead to what we are calling digitally mediated social work education. We define digitally mediated social work education as the use of any digital technologies to support, enhance, or otherwise augment the process of social work education. Digital technologies that mediate the process of social work education now include mobile devices and tablets as well as computers (Baldrige, McAdams, Reed, & Moran, 2013; Shorkey & Uebel, 2014; Young, 2014). Social media is another example of a medium that social work educators have been adopting into their traditional face to face classes as well as incorporating these tools into online distance education models that now mediate the process of social work education (Hitchcock & Battista, 2013; Hitchcock & Young, 2016; Kilpeläinen, Pyykkönen, & Sankala 2011; Sage, 2014). The various formats that information is disseminated through, whether it is fully online or hybrid, are having a dramatic effect on students and social work education (Reamer, 2013a). As a result of the ubiquitous use of technology, the profession of social work faces the challenge of communicating its technique, values, and ethics into effective social work practice in the digital age. The

focus of this article is to reframe the current ethics discussion away from concretely defined rules and guidelines when using digital technologies (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan, & Fullmer, 2013; Hill & Ferguson, 2014) and to describe how improving the technological competence of students should focus on digital literacies by providing a case study that evaluates digital literacies in a social work classroom.

Literacy is generally concerned with teaching and learning skills to enhance critical thinking (Hobbs, 1998). Digital literacies utilize critical thinking skills to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate throughout the educational process but also incorporate the social and cultural competencies necessary to participate in and understand the digital world. Recognizing and infusing digital literacies into the social work curriculum will help to prepare students to respond to new and diverse challenges of a digital world such as cyber-bullying and Internet safety (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2013), the influence of social media on health behaviors (Vaterlaus, Patten, Roche, & Young, 2015), or how to help families appropriately mediate the use of technology among adolescents (Vaterlaus, Beckert, Tulan, & Bird, 2015).

The ethics challenge as it relates to the use of digital technologies is in regards to the breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009). The word ethics comes from the Greek root *ethos*, which originally meant custom, or habit (Dolgoft, Harrington, & Loewenberg, 2012, p. 8). Traditionally, students attended brick and mortar universities and sat in classrooms where they could interact with their instructors and other students in a manner that allowed for the comprehension and socialization of the profession's values and ethics. Technology today is becoming more and more successful at replicating the classroom model as well as offering students the flexibility and convenience to further their education or professional training from anywhere in the world. Ethics in the context of this paper is not about right or wrong when it comes to social media, privacy, education, and digital technologies.

Instead, ethics needs to refer more broadly to the operationalization of social work education in the 21st century and how social work education is being shaped because of digital technologies such as iPads and social media. The ethics challenge also recognizes that educators need to work together to ensure that students have access to the skills and experiences necessary to become fully competent, ethical, and effective professionals (Jenkins et al., 2009). The central question for this study is, how do we as educators use digital technologies to prepare students for competent ethical social work practice in an increasingly digital world?

Clearly there is need to understand the ethical implications of the use of digital technology in social work education and practice (Fang, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014; Mukherjee & Clark, 2012; Reamer, 2013a, & 2013b). Rather than focusing on the technology, it would be better to take an ecological approach by thinking about the interrelationship among all the different forms of digital technologies, the cultural communities that grow up around them, and the activities they support (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 8). We argue, through this case study, the need to infuse social work education with the necessary digital literacies to enhance student skills and competencies in the use of digital technology to help prepare them for ethical social work practice in the 21st century by using technology to complement professional training and ensure students are being prepared for social work practice no matter what method, online or face-to-face, is being used to deliver social work education.

Literature Review

Higher education has been experiencing a radical transformation over the last several years as the Internet and online education have become increasingly popular and convenient. The United States Department of Education (2009) stated, "online learning is one of the fastest growing trends in educational uses of technology" (p. xi). Social work education mirrors this trend as the number of programs offering online courses or a similar distance education component has steadily

increased over the past decade (Coe & Elliot, 1999; East, LaMendola, & Alter, 2014; Wolfson, Marsom, & Magnuson, 2005; Thyer, Artlet, Markward, & Dozier, 1998; Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke, & Adkins, 2009). The rise of digital technology in social work education is also evidenced by the increase in journal articles on the subject and the creation of a Technology Track at the Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education. In the past year alone, *The Journal of Social Work Education* has included an editorial on social media (Robbins & Singer, 2014), a historical account of instructional technology and media in social work education (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014), and articles related to the efficacy of online social work education programs and learning outcomes (East, LaMendola, & Alter, 2014; and Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015).

The literature regarding technological literacy skills of social work students has been steadily increasing over the past decade (Beaulaurier & Radisch, 2005; Fang et al., 2014; Holmes, Hermann, & Kozlowski, 2014; McNutt, 2008; McNutt & Menon, 2008; Perron, Taylor, Glass, & Margerum-Leys, 2010; Quinn & Fitch, 2014; Vernon et al., 2009; Wolfson et al., 2005). However, the lack of technology literacies in social work education is evident amongst the calls for inclusion of technology competencies (Ayala, 2009; Parrott & Madoc-Jones, 2008; Perron et al., 2010; Quinn & Fitch, 2014; York, 2008; Young, 2015). Despite technology standards developed by the National Association of Social Workers (2005) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) to guide ethical electronically mediated social work services, a working definition of technology literacy needs to be developed (Quinn & Fitch, 2014). The definition should also include the necessary social skills cultural competencies to ensure effective and ethical practice in a digitally mediated world. If we as educators consider that the process of evidence-based practice in social work emphasizes a practitioner's ability to locate, critique, and use ethical decision-making in choosing the best intervention to use at any given time, then we must

begin to acknowledge the changing landscape of how technology is mediating and contributing to this process. Most practitioners will be using digital technologies in one way, shape, or form to guide or facilitate their use of evidence-based practice, and as a result social work education has a definite and deliberate ethical obligation to foster the development of digital literacy among students in the context of social work values and ethics.

Digitally mediated social work education has thrived in recent years with social media being incorporated into classrooms as well as in online or hybrid formats. Kilpeläinen, Pääkkönen, & Sankala (2011) paired social media use with a learning management system to improve social work education in remote areas. Hitchcock & Battista (2013) have incorporated Twitter to engage students through innovative assignments in the classroom, and Sage (2014) describes how social media were used to train facilitators in fidelity for social work interventions. Participatory technologies such as iPads and mobile devices have also been incorporated into social work education (Baldrige, McAdams, Reed, & Moran, 2013; Young, 2014) along with innovative virtual experiences such as Second Life (Reinsmith-Jones, Kibbe, Crayton, & Campbell, 2015; Vernon, Lewis, & Lynch, 2009). Some may question whether these tools and innovative assignments actually prepare students for social work practice, and it's clear that more research is needed to fully assess that question. However, adopting these tools and assignments is not about preparing students for data entry jobs or to understand how to complete digital health records. Instead, as we move toward an increasingly digital environment it is becoming less important for students to memorize or recall information than it is for them to be able to find, sort, analyze, share, discuss, critique, and create information (Wesch, 2009). Quinn & Fitch (2014) further explain:

Instead of teaching skills better suited for an academic setting, the curriculum needs to be teaching technology literacy skills that are more likely to be used in professional settings to facilitate the progression from data

to information to knowledge and finally the communication of the knowledge. (p. 146)

Infusing the social work curriculum with digital literacies will have the effect of increasing the level of technological competence of social work students. It does matter what digital technologies are available to help enhance digital literacies, but it matters more what students and instructors chose to do with those tools and for this reason we have grounded this study on the concept of participatory culture and new media literacies as identified by Jenkins et al., (2009).

New Media Literacies and Participatory Culture

The conceptual framework for this study is based upon the New Media Literacies framework and the concept of Participatory Culture as identified by Jenkins et al. (2009). New media literacies in the context of this study serve as the foundation for digital literacies. New media literacies build upon the traditional research skills and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom and extend the definition to include social skills, cultural competencies, and methods of interaction within larger communities (Jenkins et al., 2009). The skills identified in the New Media Literacies framework can be seen in Table 1.

A key component of this framework is Participatory Culture and the expansion of these cultures that are merging around diverse interests (Potter, 2013). “Participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 3). The participatory aspects of digital technologies build on the foundation of traditional research and technical skills as well as critical analysis taught in the classroom (Jenkins et al., 2009). Participatory culture is not social media and participatory culture has existed in and outside of the classroom for decades but used different terms such as collaborative learning groups, teams, or

group assignments. The difference is that digital technologies allow students to participate in classroom or learning experiences in dramatically different ways than ever before. This is important given the profession’s commitment to enhancing access to resources (Reamer, 2013a) such as education. Too often the focus on technology surrounds what the tools do and do not allow and the conversation on digital technology and learning needs to include a focus on the participatory aspects of the new digital culture and how increasing knowledge around digital literacies can address the ethics challenge for 21st century social work education (Young, 2015). Recognizing that in modern society we have become a participatory digital culture and that these types of interactions and exchanges have inevitably worked their way into social work practice in both macro and micro settings, how can we prepare students to ethically engage in these digital spaces with proficiency?

Methods

The purpose of the evaluation detailed in this paper is to demonstrate how courses can be infused with technological content with the objective to enhance students’ digital literacies by describing and evaluating an educational intervention that included students using digital technologies. The evaluation utilized a no comparison pretest-posttest design with a cross sectional survey instrument that assesses a student’s level of digital literacies at the beginning and end of the semester over the course of three semesters. Specifically, the hypothesis for the study is that a student’s level of digital literacies will increase after participating in a course infused with social media, digital technologies, and content related to new media literacies. The purpose of this increase in digital literacy is to give the students the skills needed for ethical interaction in social work practice components that utilize digital technologies.

Survey Design

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board and utilized a newly developed

Table 1 New Media Literacy Skills Criteria

Play	The capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem solving
Performance	The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery
Simulation	The ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes
Appropriation	The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content
Multitasking	The ability to scan one’s environment and shift focus as needed to salient details
Distributed Cognition	The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities
Collective Intelligence	The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal
Judgment	The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources
Transmedia Navigation	The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities
Networking	The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information
Negotiation	The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms
Visualization	The ability to translate information into visual models and understand the information visual models are communicating as a key method for coping with large data sets and being able to make sense of the complexity of our environment

instrument for self-reported media literacy levels (Literat, 2014; Young, 2015). Changes were added to include basic demographic information such as age, gender, level of education, and ethnicity; but the sections on media use habits and new media literacies were not changed to ensure continued reliability and validity of the psychometric properties of the instrument. Media use habits describe a participant’s digital participation such as access to the Internet, number of hours playing games, spent on social media or consuming Internet content. The section on new media literacies skills presented participants with a randomized series of 60 statements about their personality, social cultural modes of engagement, online and offline peer interaction, learning styles, and media consumption

and creation patterns (Literat, 2014, p. 17). The statements are conceptually built around the new media literacies framework (Jenkins et al., 2009) and it is important to note that the statements include both technology related and non-technology related behaviors in accordance with the understanding that new media literacies skills are both social and cultural competencies (Literat, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2009). The questions utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) as identified in the original study (Literat, 2014).

Sample and Data Collection

The sample consisted of a total of $n=95$ students in a somewhat rural undergraduate

program in the Midwest who were given the un-incentivized option to participate. They were drawn from three separate semesters of the same course. A total of $n=76$ students participated at both pre-and posttest giving a response rate of 80%. The mean participant age was 22 years old, and the sample was predominantly female and Caucasian, although minority and male students also participated.

Data were collected using Qualtrics web-based survey software and a link was provided at the beginning and the end of the term. Following the original study (Literat, 2014), the survey was formatted as an interactive quiz where participants were given a personalized digital literacies score based upon their responses. The scores range from 0 to 300 and are broken down into four different categories and participants are provided a score along with a description of the score.

Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS software with exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis being conducted to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the instrument used in the evaluation. Descriptive statistics were analyzed to better understand the characteristics of the sample in terms of digital literacy. Inferential statistical analysis, including a paired samples t-test analysis of group mean scores from pre-to post test, along with an analysis of variance across category means were utilized to determine if the hypothesis that students participating in a social work course infused with digital technology content and practice skills would show significant increases in their overall digital literacy competency was supported. The results of these analyses are discussed in more detail in the subsequent section of this paper.

Findings

Overall the survey showed to have solid reliability with an Alpha of .78 (Nunnally, 1978). Multiple scores were developed from the survey. Among them was the overall digital literacy score, which summed all possible items and allowed them to be compared broadly from pretest to post

test. As is seen in Table 2, statistically significant improvements were observed in digital literacy across the sample from pretest to posttest with a large effect size. The effect size of these improvements suggests high practical significance ($d = 0.85$). A *t*-test comparison of means shows roughly a 25% improvement in digital literacy scores as a result of course participation.

Additionally, scores were developed that measured the improvement of participants in each of the twelve digital literacy domains, as mentioned above. An ANOVA procedure was used to assess mean score changes along each of these domains from pretest to posttest, and Table 3 shows how statistically significant differences were observed among students with increases in skill levels across all twelve domains.

In short findings from the data suggest that through participation in the course students experienced growth in digital literacy across all literacy domains. This growth was measured in a reliable manner, and with statistical significance among a sample of students that participated in three separate class sections from 2013 to 2014. Additional evaluation is needed to assess these improvements with larger and more diverse samples, however in the context of this evaluation it appears that the course activities promoted a significant impact on increasing digital literacies among student participants.

Discussion

The main objective of this evaluation is to assess levels of digital literacy after participating in a digital advocacy and nonprofit organizations course infused with social media, digital technologies, and content related to digital skill development. Based upon the findings the hypothesis is supported, as there is a statistically significant difference in participant levels of digital literacies from pre-to posttest ($t=5.35$, $p<.001$, $d=0.85$). Infusing courses with digital literacies can have the effect of increasing the competence and skills of students. Examining the four skills with the largest difference between pre-and posttest (Appropriation

Table 2: t-test: Course Effects on Student Digital Literacy Scores (Overall)

	Mean Scores (SD)		df	t	p
	Pre-test	Post-test			
Pre-Post	216.33 (17.41)	233.5 (23.104)	157	-5.35	<.001

Table 3: ANOVA: Course Effects on Student Digital Literacy Domains

Source	Mean Scores (SD)		M diff	F	p
	Pre-test	Post-test			
Play	18.98 (2.16)	19.9 (2.85)	.92	5.36	.022
Simulation	17.82 (2.81)	18.79 (2.97)	.97	4.41	.037
Performance	14.31 (2.88)	15.5 (2.78)	1.19	6.87	.01
Appropriation	15.11 (2.66)	17.19 (3.02)	2.08	21.15	<.001
Distributed Cognition	19.6 (2.12)	20.43 (2.04)	.83	6.05	.015
Multitasking	17.77 (2.84)	19.63 (3.11)	1.86	15.44	<.001
Collective Intelligence	19.04 (2.21)	19.88 (2.6)	.84	4.81	.03
Judgment	19.56 (2.24)	21.46 (2.15)	1.90	28.84	<.001
Transmedia Navigation	17.73 (2.84)	19.41 (2.88)	1.68	13.59	<.001
Networking	17.79 (3.14)	19.65 (2.95)	1.86	14.31	<.001
Negotiation	18.87 (2.72)	20.50 (3.06)	1.63	12.56	.001
Visualization	19.75 (2.22)	21.16 (2.44)	1.41	14.513	<.001

Note: degrees of freedom = 157, M diff = amount of score increase from pretest to posttest.

(2.08), Judgment (1.90), Multitasking (1.86), & Networking (1.86)) illustrates that students attained a higher degree of critical thought and application of digital literacies. Students increased skills through a course long capstone project that required them to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information (Networking). Students evaluated the reliability and credibility of the different information sources (Judgment) as they used media content from the Internet (Appropriation) to create engaging artifacts such as infographics and videos to help raise the awareness of their peers in the class (Networking) and others online where they shared their creations in the participatory culture of social media. The skill of Multitasking is usually confused with distraction, but in the context of participatory culture this skill involves a method of monitoring and responding to a plethora of information (Jenkins et al., 2009). Multitasking required focus during this course to pay attention to the myriad of possible data sources such as current events shared on Twitter or through the New York Times website, scanning the library for research articles, or utilizing the textbook accompanied by blogs and external readings to increase the knowledge of how to advocate for a cause or raise awareness about a specific nonprofit organization.

Implications

The focus of this article is to reframe the current ethics discussion away from concretely defined rules and guidelines that detail applied uses of digital technologies (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan, & Fullmer, 2013; Hill & Ferguson, 2014) and to describe how improving the technological competence of students should focus on digital literacies. This is built on the underlying premise that human interactions in the modern world have shifted to include substantial exchanges and personal interactions in digital venues. This is a discussion that is much larger than issues of privacy, and related more globally to issues of access, interaction, and the consumption and distribution of information.

The ethical challenges that confront students as they venture into human services work in the modern world are related to learning how to effectively interact in digital spaces and how to access and put into use these resources in a professional and knowledgeable way. Without digital literacies, social workers could become susceptible to a failure to interact or to utilize available resources or to use resources without a full understanding of the implications of their use. Additionally, most social work practitioners across settings are dependent upon digital technologies to keep up to date on and successfully use evidence-based practices. Social work educators have a responsibility to ensure students are fully prepared for social work practice and integrating digital literacies can address the ethics challenge by ensuring that students have access to the skills and experiences needed to be fully competent and ethical practitioners in an increasingly digital global society.

This evaluation is one of the first to assess the increase of digital literacies among students using a technology-enhanced course but clearly more research is needed. Future research would benefit from a more rigorous design by using a comparison group and larger sample size. Additional limitations of this evaluation include the length and content of the survey, which included 80 questions. Perhaps a more concise instrument could still capture the most important measurement of digital literacy.

Conclusion

There is no way that anyone could have forecasted the influence that digital technologies would come to have on human interactions and the exchange and distribution of information in modern society. This is much in the same way(s) that social work educators cannot always know exactly what to expect of the future, and the world that awaits the students they are preparing. However, social work educators can make valid assessments of the state of an observed environment and how that environment may influence the behaviors and interactions of those within its system. The evidence suggests that humans are interacting with more complexity than ever before in recorded history. Communities have become global and the access to information and interaction, instant. Social work education has an ethical responsibility to prepare students, as best as is possible, for the world they face today, and through an examination of the evidence the world they are most probable to be interacting in tomorrow. This paper does not suggest that the basics and building blocks of social work education are no longer relevant. Rather it suggests that the mechanisms people use to engage with each other are evolving and that social work education must evolve as well, to include focused and targeted efforts that teach students how to engage and improve their digital literacies so they will be able to engage thoughtfully, purposefully, and ethically in digital spaces. The messages may still be the same, but the mode of delivery has become far more complex.

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