

Transforming the Field Practicum Site Visit Experience through the Integration of Web-Conferencing Tools

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Abstract

The Council on Social Work Education promotes the inclusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in social work education. Accordingly, educational technology systems are becoming more common in social work education. One particularly appealing application of ICTs in this context is in the innovations they may make possible in the structure and delivery of social work field education. This article examines the integration of technological innovations such as web-conferencing tools as an alternative way to conduct field site visits. Outlining the potential benefits of this step, the article uses the Diffusion of Innovation Theory to propose measures to ensure the smoothest and most successful possible integration of ICTs for this purpose.

Keywords: Field Liaison, Site Visit, Field Practicum, Diffusion of Innovation, Web-Conferencing

1. Introduction

Instructional technology has been a part of social work education since the 1950s and over time, technology integration in social work programs have evolved and expanded (Shorkey & Uebel, 2013). Through technology, the social work profession has undergone a paradigm shift (Pradeep & Prasad, 2016). Due to the strong impact of technology on social relationships as well as economic and political outcomes, social workers will continue to be impacted by technology. Social work organizations recognize and support the vital role of technology in social work (Blackmon, 2013). This is evidenced by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and Clinical Social Work Association's (CSWA) joint effort to establish guidelines usage of technology in social work practice (Clinical Social Work Association, 2016). A section in the draft technology standards, which offers recommendations on the proper use of technology, is dedicated specifically to social work educators in undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate program along with social workers involved in continuing education and organization-based education (NASW, ASWB, CSWE & CSWA, 2016). The development of technology guidelines provides a uniform policy that prepares social workers for clients whose lives are influenced by technology.

Coe Regan and Freddolino (as cited in Dennis, 2015) suggest that social work programs provide an array of technological tools into the curriculum, thus providing students the opportunity to access learning in various formats such as videoconferencing, online chat rooms and bulletin boards, webinars and podcasts (National Association of Social Workers, 2008; Reamer, 2015). With the growth in the integration of technology in social work programs, field educators may be called upon to develop and embrace new methods for supporting field education students (Dennis, 2015; Leyva, 2012).

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Field education is arguably the most significant component of the social work curriculum in preparing competent, effective, and ethical social workers (Bogo, 2015), as evidenced by the CSWE in 2008 designating field education “signature pedagogy,” affirming its importance and pivotal role in preparing the next generation of social workers (Bogo, 2015; Council on Social Work Education, 2008).

Signature pedagogy can be defined as the central form of instruction and learning a profession adopts (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p.8). As the signature pedagogy, field education in social work is the component of social work education where students learn to practice social work through educationally focused service experiences in agency and community settings (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). In field education, students are socialized to think and act like social workers (Bogo, 2015). The field practicum also serves a gatekeeping function, by assessing students’ competence and readiness to graduate (Sowbel, 2012).

Within this paradigm, proper monitoring of students’ progress is essential to their success. For this reason, the role of the faculty field liaison is of great importance. The faculty field liaison role, can be identified by different titles including field supervisor, field instructor, etc. Ideally, the faculty field liaison assists in ensuring that social work students receive the type of field experiences they need to augment their classroom learning—that is, the actual hands-on, actual function of performing social work (Liley, 2006). It is the field liaison who ensures that students obtain valuable field learning experience in the field environment. Specifically, the field liaison is charged with monitoring the educational progress of social work students. This includes making agency visits with students and their field instructors to discuss learning plans and student growth and development. It can, however, be challenging to monitor a student’s progress if their field practicum takes place some distance from where the field liaison is based (Reamer, 2013). As such, the many new innovative technological tools afford field educators potential opportunity for more effective student assessments (Hay & Dale, 2014).

One technology that may prove beneficial for social work programs is web conferencing. Web conferencing is comprised of real time two-way video and audio communication between multiple locations. Specialized equipment (e.g. a sound card, a Web-camera, a microphone, a set of speakers, and conferencing software) is required for each location (Panos, 2008). Individuals using web-conferencing tools are able to join a shared space to conduct meetings, trainings, or presentations via the internet and a phone or VoIP (voice over internet protocol). In a web conference, it is common for each participant to sit at his or her own computer and connect to the web conference via the internet and a phone or VoIP (Bower et al., 2012).

Previous studies have examined the utilization of information and communication technology (ICT) in field education (Burton & Scabury, 1999; Cauble & Thurston, 2000; Hick, 1999; Kreuger & Stretch, 2000; Sandell & Hayes, 2002; Van Soest, Cannon, & Grant 2000). Additionally, a review of past workshops of the Council on Social Work Education’s 57th Annual Program Meeting found five workshops addressing the use of synchronous and asynchronous online communication methods in field education (Leyva, 2012). Taking into consideration the past attention paid to understanding ICT integration in field education it is worth further exploring the incorporation of web-conferencing tools into field education. Within this article the integration of web-conferencing tools to conduct virtual field practicum site visits is explored. As a framework for this exploration, the article examines the stages of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, first by definition and, second, in terms of considerations to be accounted for in the integration of web-conferencing tools into the field practica site visit experience. The implications for social work field education will also be discussed.

2. CSWE’s Standards on Student Monitoring in the Field Agency

Field education is in designed for students demonstrate the social work competencies. Each social work program is required to develop procedures for monitoring student progress in the field setting. The 2015 EPAS suggests that a program is required “to describe how its field education program maintains contact with field settings across all program options and explain how on-site contact or other methods are used to monitor student learning and field setting effectiveness” (CSWE, 2015, p. 13). This can include contact through the use of technology (CSWE, 2015). Within the standards developed by the NASW, ASWB, CSWE and CSWA, guidance for social work educators’ supervision is presented. For example, standard 5.11 notes that “social workers who use technology to provide supervision should ensure that they are able to assess students’ and supervisees’ learning and professional competence” (National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education and Clinical Social Work Association, 2016, p. 75).

Although there is no one required method of monitoring students or of conducting faculty liaison contacts, social work programs must show that their selected method is effective monitoring student learning outcomes (Danis, Woody, & Black, 2013).

3. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory

The integration of technologies in the academic setting allows students to experiment with and test technologies (Berzin, Singer & Chan, 2015). To examine the value that technology may bring to field supervision, it may be beneficial to understand end-users' decisions for adoption or rejection of specific innovative tools. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory provides direction for social work educators exploring decisions for adoption or rejection of technologies in field education (Fitch, 2005).

Everett Rogers (2003) developed the theoretical approach known as the Diffusion of Innovation. This theoretical framework is helpful when determining the adoption of a specific innovation and deciding which components will require additional effort if diffusion is to occur. Roger's Diffusion of Innovation Theory is often used to examine the adoption of information technology (IT) and understand how IT innovations transmit within and between communities (Zhang, Yu, Yan, & Spil, 2015). It has also been noted to be appropriate for investigating the adoption of technology in higher education and educational environments (Medlin, 2001).

An innovation is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or another unit of adoption" (Rogers, 2003, p. 12). Rogers explains (2003), adoption is a decision of "full use of an innovation as the best course of action available" and rejection is the decision "not to adopt an innovation" (p.177). Diffusion, on the other hand, is "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). The Diffusion of Innovation Theory argues that potential users opt to either adopt or reject an innovation on the basis of beliefs that are formed in connection with the innovation (Agarwal, 2000). According to Rogers (2003), there are five factors that determine whether adoption or diffusion of an innovation will occur: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability.

Relative advantage is defined as the degree to which an innovation is considered to be better than that which it is intended to replace (Rogers, 2003, pg. 229). This construct is found to be one of the best predictors of the adoption of an innovation (Lee, Hsieh, & Hsu, 2011). The degree of relative advantage may be measured in economic terms, but social prestige, convenience, and satisfaction are also important factors. It is important to note that objective advantage is not the primary consideration here; what matters is whether an individual perceives the innovation to be advantageous. The greater the perceived relative advantage of an innovation, the more rapid its rate of adoption will be (Rogers, 2003). For instance, the number of individuals who adopted the innovation for a period of time can be measured as the rate of adoption of the innovation. The perceived attributes of an innovation are significant predictors of the rate of adoption (Sahin, 2006). Many of the benefits of the integration of web conferencing into the field experience will be program specific. The best way to highlight these benefits would be by presenting the advantages yielded by the proposed technology-based site visit and conferencing experience over the processes currently used. For example, if field liaisons are confident that the technological tool adds value in conducting the field site visit and that monitoring student's progress is improved as a result of the technological tool, field liaisons may be more inclined to adopt the technology.

Compatibility refers to the degree to which an innovation is regarded as being consistent with the potential end-users' existing values, prior experiences and needs (Lee et al., 2011). Essentially, compatibility represents the extent to which an innovation is correspondent to the existing technical and social environment. The more an innovation incorporates existing values, past experience and the needs of potential users, the more likely it is that diffusion and adoption will occur (Zhang et al., 2015). In other words, if an innovation is compatible with an individual's needs, then uncertainty will decrease and the rate of adoption of the innovation will increase (Sahin, 2006). Application of this stage of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory suggests that careful planning and safeguarding to protect the values and uniqueness of various field experiences would be critical to the effective integration of technology. The development of such safeguards might be best explored by looking first to the challenges and arguments against the implementation of technology and accounting for those concerns at the onset of the planning process. Capturing the connections between preexisting site visits and proposed virtual site visits would allow end-users the opportunity to receive introduction of the integration of new technology while maintaining connection with aspects of the site visit experience more familiar to them. Complexity is the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use (Lee et al., 2011).

Rogers (2003), reported that opposite to the other attributes, complexity is negatively correlated with the rate of adoption. Thus, excessive complexity of an innovation is an important obstacle in its adoption. Some innovations are readily understood by most members of a social system; others are more complicated and will be adopted more slowly. New ideas that are simpler to understand are adopted more rapidly than innovations that require the adopter to develop new skills and understandings. Accordingly, implementers would enhance implementation success by designing introductions of the proposed technology-based communications that are clear, concise, and free of jargon or overly technical language. Easily comprehensible introductions of how technology might be introduced into field site visit and conferencing experiences will encourage receptiveness among end-users and ultimately smoother transitioning. For example, when proposing the integration of the technology, implementers should ensure that the hardware and software are user-friendly. Implementers must also ensure that field liaison training is done in a way that is easily understood. If training is done properly, the technology might be adopted successfully (Martin, 2003).

Trialability refers to the degree to which innovations can be tested on a limited basis (Lee et al., 2011). New ideas that can be tried on an installment plan, without complete commitment and with minimal investment, will generally be adopted more quickly than innovations that are not divisible (Zhang et al., 2015). An innovation that is trialable represents less uncertainty to the individual who is considering it for adoption, as the individual can learn about it by doing and in this way evaluate its workability. The incorporation of technology into site visits and web-conferencing experiences in phases will address reservations stimulated by feelings of uncertainty. As an added resource for addressing such uncertainties, the availability of support during phases would also prove beneficial. The incorporation of guided interactive online tutorials during initial phases, for example, would allow users opportunities for hands-on experience prior to formal implementation. This phasing of implementation would also allow all parties opportunities to offer feedback, which can be used to inform next phases and enhance policies and procedures as they relate to online site visits.

Observability is the degree to which the results of innovations are visible to potential users (Lee et al., 2011). The easier it is for individuals to see the results of an innovation, the more likely they are to adopt it. If the results are perceived to be beneficial, the innovation will be adopted (Zhang et al., 2015). Such visibility stimulates discussion of a new idea. The more extensively potential end-users are able to visualize how technology can be incorporated into site visits, the more they will be able to envision the benefits the proposed change will afford them, the connections between the proposed process and the old, and the user friendliness of the proposed technology-based experiences. To enhance observability, employing web conferencing for a mock site visit would prove advantageous in helping potential users absorb the proposed changes.

4. Platforms Used to Conduct Site Visits

The use of technology in field education is not uncommon. Undergraduate and graduate programs have used chat rooms for student supervision and field seminars (Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Through online and mobile technologies, field supervision can be made more accessible and cost-effective. Multiple websites offer free videoconferencing software and basic hardware (i.e. computer, webcam and broadband internet) to facilitate the two-way transmission of video and audio information (Dennis, 2015). With the emergence of new innovations such as tablet technologies and smart phones, along with new easy to use internet-based videoconferencing applications (apps) such as Adobe Connect (formerly Macromedia Breeze), Blackboard Collaborate (formerly Eluminate Live), Skype or Google Hangouts, virtual site visits to social work students in field placement have become a reality.

4.1 Adobe Connect

Adobe Connect is a web communication system that is typically used by universities for web connection solutions for online teaching and learning. Access to the software is not required for participants (i.e. students and field instructors); the field liaison can e-mail a link and the participants can join the meeting by following the link (Karabulut & Correia, 2008). Several components within the Adobe Connect meeting platform can be useful for site visits. These features include the ability to upload PowerPoint slides and FlashPaper files, share a single window or the entire desktop with meeting attendees, send text messages to all or selected attendees and share files from users' computers (Bower, 2011).

4.2 Blackboard Collaborate

Blackboard Collaborate is browser-based web-conferencing software that provides features such as an interactive whiteboard for PowerPoint or Open Office slides, application sharing for entire screens or specific application and file transfer for PDF files (Dawson, 2015). To conduct a site visit using this platform, field liaisons can provide field instructors and students with a link for a free software download that is needed to participate in the virtual meeting.

4.3 Skype

Skype is a free videoconferencing application that can be downloaded and operates through a peer-to-peer VoIP linking computers over an internet connection. The software is compatible with Mac and Windows platforms, and once it is installed on computers, users can call or receive calls from other Skype users and/or landline and cellular phones (Karabulut & Correia, 2008). Components of Skype that can be useful for site visits include video messaging, instant messaging, file sharing, and screen sharing.

4.4 Google Hangouts

Google Hangouts is a Google suite application that provides synchronous, video, audio, and text-rich communication platforms. Google Hangouts can be utilized for site visits as it not only supports free video for up to ten people (Roeth, Akcaoglu, & Zellner, 2013), but also supports other Google applications including Sketch-Up, Docs, Spreadsheets, Presentations and screen sharing (Teras & Teras, 2012).

4.5 Zoom Video Conferencing

Zoom Video Conferencing is a web-based audio and video conferencing tool used for online meeting, group messaging, screen sharing, and mobile collaboration. Zoom can be used for site visits and supports up to 15 people.

4.6 WebEx

WebEx is a platform that allows for creating online video and audio meetings with anyone who has an internet connection - including mobile users. WebEx can be utilized for site visits as it allows for the support of up to 15 people and also supports other applications such as PowerPoint files and Word documents.

5. Examples of Integrating Technology to Conduct Site Visits

Reisch and Jarman-Rohde (2000) suggest that as technology continues to advance and the cost of computer software and hardware decreases, more social work programs will consider web conferencing as an alternative approach to field site visits. Social work education programs have already begun utilizing technology and web-conferencing tools for field agency site visits (Colvin & Bullock, 2014). For example, educators at two different social work programs previously experimented with methods for integrating ICTs into field education (Birkenmaier et al., 2005; Wolfer, Carney, & Ward, 2002). Over the course of 2 years they explored the use of web-conferencing and webcam equipment and arrangements in their respective university social work programs for the purposes of testing the creation of a "virtual" field practica environment. Problems were reported: administrative costs including lack of resources to support installation of equipment within both the agency and university, low-capacity agency computer equipment, bandwidth restrictions, lack of technical support, and limited initial faculty and field instructor familiarity and comfort with the technology. It was however noted that the integration of technology into field practica continues to hold great promise (Birkenmaier et al., 2005; Wolfer et al., 2002).

The field director of the University of New England (UNE) School of Social Work also describes how web-conferencing tools are incorporated in the fully online MSW program (Sankar & Richardson, 2012). Prior to a student being placed in a field agency, the field planner at UNE conducts initial interviews with students via Skype. Once the student locates a potential field agency, the field planner conducts another Skype meeting with the student and potential field agency instructor. After the field placement is approved, the majority of the remaining field visits are conducted using Skype and Vimeo. Students do a check-in video every week, which is reviewed by the other members of the seminar. In the UNE field seminar, students videotape a check-in using Vimeo each week, and then comment on the discussion board (Sankar & Richardson, 2012). The School of Social Work at Texas State University integrated the use of video conferencing in its online MSW program. The school provides agency supervisors with computer cameras and microphones so they can communicate with field faculty face to face via computer.

Although field visits with agency supervisors are conducted online, field faculty conduct visits for almost all placements at least once during the students' field practicum. The Texas State program contends that although they have integrated the use of web-conferencing tools to conduct virtual site visits, the integrity of the school's fieldwork program has remained solid (Noble & Russell, 2013).

6. Implications for Social Work Field Education

Through the use of technological advances in the field experience, students will be exposed to many of the communication technologies presently utilized in clinical practice dimensions. Technological advances will continue, and field educators will continue to be charged with preparing today's social workers accordingly. The integration of web conferencing into the field practicum experience affords students the opportunity to become better acquainted with communication technologies that have proven beneficial to clients, thereby better preparing them for professional practice post graduation.

Further, the integration of technology into field education addresses geographic challenges and increased field placement opportunities. Students are afforded the convenience of engaging in field practica closer to their home communities as a result of technology implementation. What is more, many university budgets are shrinking and mileage reimbursement rates are increasing, making the expenses associated with field practica visits more prohibitive than they were previously (Danis, Woody, & Black, 2013). Faculty and field supervisors alike are experiencing greater work responsibilities, which negatively impacts the time available to support students during the field practicum experience (Danis, Woody, & Black, 2013). In response to increased field educator responsibilities in the midst of diminishing resources and growing student bodies, technology offers opportunities for more effective and efficient use of resources (Birkenmaier et al., 2005). Technology, more specifically videoconferencing, yields increased communication at a lower cost and with a shortened time investment (Danis, Woody, & Black, 2013).

The time saved gives students more time to dedicate to their learning. Field faculty are able to use travel time saved to increase and maintain field contacts (Wolfer et al., 2002). The significance of this benefit is enhanced by the fact that availability and total number of contacts are highlighted as the best predictors of field instructor satisfaction with field liaisons (Birkenmaier et al., 2005). In these ways, the integration of technology into the field experience has the potential to optimize the signature pedagogy of social work education while significantly reducing associated financial and time investments (Wolfer et al., 2002).

While there is evidence that at some level new technological tools can serve as beneficial in field education, social work program administrators and field educators must carefully assess which technologies will benefit a program. One way this may be done is by following the constructs within Beaulaurier's (2005) process guide for integrating new technology:

- Assessment of need, cost to the students and program, and IT resources available to support the new technology;
- Planning, which includes establishing a timeline for adoption, researching options, assessing the scalability of needs, and securing funding?
- Implementation, which may include training faculty, students, and field agencies, and attending to cultural shifts that may occur in the process of change; and
- Maintenance, which involves upgrading software, additional training of faculty and staff, supporting students and field agencies and evaluating the technology's effectiveness. (Dennis, 2015)

Such a systematic approach is the best way to identify potential problems early and take steps to address them. Protocols to ensure that accumulated learning of this type are retained by the institution will also help avoid repetition of errors.

7. Conclusion

As society continues to become more and more digitized (Berk, 2010), new and innovative technologies will continue to change the way individuals interact with and engage one another. As stated by Reamer (2013), the bell has been rung, and it is not possible to un-ring it. For that reason, social work education programs must continue to evolve by embracing this new wave of technology infusion to maximize the field learning experience. Social work program administrators and field educators must take into consideration the culture of their programs prior to formally adapting new technologies and initiating such creative shifts in learning (Berk, 2010).

Without support of and openness to the change we hope to generate, the integration of web conferencing into the field experience will prove challenging at best. Lastly, program developers are cautioned to be forward thinking throughout planning processes, realizing that technology has historically developed at much faster rates than academic institutions were capable of adapting them (Berk, 2010). Through collaborative efforts, program developers, administrators and faculty within the field of social work and beyond will be well prepared to take advantage of the numerous benefits technology has to offer today's field practica students.

8. References

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