Developing Community Among Social Work Field Seminar Students:
Lessons Learned from the Online Classroom

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Introduction

As social work programs respond to the needs of today's students, pedagogical strategies must be examined. Transitioning to online course delivery or online programs can help meet students' needs; however, it is important to ensure this shift addresses student anxieties and does not overlook the need to develop a sense of community and connection between students in an online classroom. Students express apprehension regarding the internship in general, along with uncertainty related to navigating necessary technology, and the ability to develop relationships with faculty and peers online. The BSW program at the University of Southern Indiana responded to their students' needs by developing an online synchronous field seminar course. This paper will share information on how the course was developed and structured, as well as tools for managing student apprehension and creating high levels of student engagement and connectivity.

Background

As social work departments evaluate their programs and student population, it is important to look at the needs of the students within their geographical area, and assess the program's structure in meeting these students' needs. College campuses have seen an increase in commuter students. According to Complete College America (2011), only 25% of college students attend full-time and live on-campus with 75% of college students commuting to classes and juggling work and families. With the increase in commuter students and the need to help students in rural areas earn degrees and begin practicing within their communities, social work programs need to consider altering course structure and delivery. Social work programs are turning to advances in technology to deliver their courses and programs to help meet the needs

of their students. This change has required programs to be creative and develop online pedagogical strategies to offer quality web-based education (Ouellette & Wilkerson, 2013).

When considering transitioning to online course delivery or fully online programs, it is important to look at how we are ensuring connectivity with students and faculty. "The human connection so embedded in social work's unique profession should not get ineffectively compromised in technology" (Phelan, 2015, p. 260). For some, the idea that students can learn skills necessary to become a social work professional through online classes seems unconceivable. However, research has shown there is no significant difference in learning outcomes when practice courses are taught in a technology-supported environment compared to a traditional classroom format (Ouellette & Wilkerson, 2013).

While online course delivery creates increased opportunity for improved access and accessibility for students, it can also increase apprehension in students who may not have participated in asynchronous or synchronous online classes. For some, leaving the traditional classroom setting with regular face–to-face interaction between faculty and students begs the question of how students will develop trusting relationships with one another and faculty. It is often these relationships that allow students to fully explore experiences in their internship while feeling safe and supported. This development of trusting relationships amongst classmates and instructor may look different online, yet they are still possible. Online students are more likely to report a strong sense of community with their classmates if there is a strong and active instructor presence along with a well-designed and organized course (Arbaugh et al., 2008). Researchers have shown that online courses can be "as effective as traditional instruction when the method and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, there is student-to-student interaction, and timely teacher-to-student feedback" (Hamzaee, 2005, p. 216).

Project Description

To meet the needs of an increasing number of commuter students and the desire for more flexible options for students in the University of Southern Indiana's BSW program, the author and colleagues developed a synchronous online field seminar course that allowed students to complete their final year of the program outside the immediate geographic area of the university. The University's BSW program has been accredited for 30 years and has always been a traditional program with the occasional hybrid or online course offered. The design of the BSW program allows students to be in small (10-15 students) field seminar courses while completing their internships in their final year of the program. Students remain with the same small group for both fall and spring semesters. This continuity over two semesters allows for students to

develop relationships with one another and form a sense of community and support as they finish their final year in the program.

Social work is a field in which communication and interaction are integral. Students who enter their final year of the BSW program are filled with excitement and desire to begin putting their textbook knowledge into practice. Along with excitement comes anxiety and uncertainty. Students begin with preconceived notions about their placement, the learning opportunities they will gain, and the field instructor; however, the fear of the unknown produces much anxiety (Kamali, Clary, & Frye, 2017). Students find support through their peers as they navigate their field internship. They identify similarities in their experiences and provide guidance to one another as they work through the planned change process with clients and systems. Students become vulnerable in front of their peers as they share struggles and break down personal biases. "The group process has the potential to foster greater in-depth critical thinking and integration of theory, knowledge, and practice than what can usually result from the student-field instructor exchange alone" (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010, p. 334).

Several student and faculty concerns were expressed when making the decision to offer a fully online field seminar course and have no face-to-face contact with students during their final year of the program. One such concern was how to create a sense of community among students to allow for honest and open conversation and assessment of student learning by the faculty. Another was how students would fully demonstrate integration of knowledge to skill application in an online setting. While there was hesitation and uncertainty, there was also the understanding of student needs and the desire to meet them. Upon initial conception of this field seminar course, the design was to replicate the traditional classroom setting, assignments, and student interaction through the use of online synchronous web-based video conferencing (e.g., GoToMeeting). However, over the past 6 years, the course has evolved, and several key areas have emerged regarding the effectiveness of a synchronous online field seminar course. In addition, ways to help decrease anxiety in students and increase connection and student engagement have been discovered.

Key Areas of Effectiveness

The first realization was that there are actually more similarities than differences between learning and developing community amongst students in a traditional classroom and in a synchronous online format. Students are required to be on time, limit distractions, bring their textbook (and reliable technology), be prepared for class discussion/content, and be actively engaged. These expectations can be accomplished regardless if one is meeting face-to-face in a classroom or one is meeting face-to-face through the use of video-conferencing.

Another area that emerged was the utilization of a reliable and user-friendly video conferencing program. While some distance education students are quite adept at using technology, other students are more fearful and unfamiliar with different technologies being utilized. Choosing the correct web-based video conferencing platform is important. Students must view the program as easy to use and access. Once the students become familiar with the use of the video-conferencing system, the interaction between students and instructor, and students and peers, becomes second nature. There is dialogue that occurs freely and openly as one would see in a traditional classroom setting. Different systems allow for different numbers of students to be visible on the screen at the same time. Initially, a platform was used that did not allow for all students to be visually present continuously, creating disconnect and less spontaneous student engagement and dialogue. Since the transition to a new platform that allows all students to be visible on the screen and able to engage at any time, the dialogue and connection has increased.

Once the fear of the technology was removed, the accessibility of the professor was another important component to student success. It became clear that students want to feel like a valued member of the class and that the professor is invested in their learning and field internship experiences. They have a desire to know that their professor is available to answer questions and speak with them regarding their skill development, and will respond within a reasonable time frame. While this also may be a concern of a traditional campus-based student, it is heightened with a distance education student who does not see the professor face-to-face. Professors need to provide clear ways for students to access them, which may include less traditional means such as providing a cell phone number to be available while out of office or via text message. Professors then have the opportunity to teach and model necessary boundaries, ethics, and professionalism in the use of the cell phone, texting, etc.

The remaining items essential to success in this online field seminar involve deliberate planning on the part of the professor. A detailed syllabus and an organized learning management system is imperative. It is also important to set the stage regarding expectations of professionalism within the virtual classroom. This could include how to keep distractions at a minimum while students are joining virtually at home. If the professor is not clear and diligent with expectations, students can take advantage of the flexible nature of the online classroom. This can cause resentment from other students and a less than desirable sense of community among the class. Ongoing assessment and reminders of the importance of treating the virtual classroom with respect may be warranted and serve as tools to keep students engaged and actively participating in their learning.

One last area to consider is the need for professors to strategically design class discussions and learning activities to ensure group-centered interactions. Over the

last six years, this has emerged as one area that cannot be neglected. To really develop an online classroom and community where students feel connected and respected requires planning and continual adjustment on the part of the professor. With any classroom (traditional or online) there are different student personalities, levels of engagement, and desires to take an active role in learning and skill development. The need to manage these factors and structure an effective online learning environment has required the professor to develop small group work with online breakout rooms, asynchronous group assignments, and collaboration on projects. It also became important to thoughtfully design class discussions that required high levels of student engagement. Typically, over the two semesters together, students became less dependent on the instructor to facilitate discussion and develop such engagement opportunities. This resulted in students more readily bringing cases or topics to discuss in their field seminar time together as well as creating their own support network outside the structured online classroom.

In reviewing student evaluations, it became evident that the outcomes of being diligent in these practices has resulted in students indicating the course set high standards of practice and required active participation. Students also stated they felt connected to the instructor and fellow students. Students have overwhelming indicated the web-based synchronous classroom was a positive experience for them in completing their internship and BSW degree.

Conclusion

When considering the needs of students and the development of online courses to meet such needs, pedagogical strategies to ensure students develop a sense of online community has been instrumental to the success of students in the University of Southern Indiana's field seminar course during the final year of their BSW program. Providing a virtual classroom environment that supports student interaction and the development of community amongst students promotes student satisfaction and success. This paper has shared lessons learned for managing student apprehension and creating high levels of student engagement and connectivity in a synchronous online field seminar course, including: the utilization of a reliable and user-friendly video conferencing program, creating a detailed syllabus and a well-designed course, providing clear expectations and emphasizing them both through words and writing, and modeling appropriate professional behavior. Along with these components, the creation of a successful online community among students requires the thoughtful design of discussions and activities to encourage group-centered interactions, as well as ensuring the instructor is present and available to students. Through the six years of teaching this course, it has become clear that the online synchronous field seminar has been beneficial to BSW students and has served the social work department well at the University of Southern Indiana.

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