

TEACHING  
SOCIAL WORK  
WITH DIGITAL  
TECHNOLOGY

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# PREFACE

*We have no idea how many book collaborations begin on Twitter, but ours is probably not the only one.*

But let's back up. Before there was a book, there were a few social workers hanging out on Twitter and figuring out how to get connected to each other. Most were on Twitter, at least in part, because of a cross-interest in technology and its potential utilities for social work. Most of us did not have colleagues in our own schools who were interested in the intersection of technology and social work. Some of us had been playing with technology in social work for many years, such as Linda Grobman, editor of the *New Social Worker* magazine. Some of us were innovating with new technology, such as Jonathan Singer, who hosts the *Social Work Podcast*. Few were deans of schools of social work, such as Nancy Smyth. Many of us were junior faculty members. Most of us were trying to figure out the potential of this medium, and we found each other.

Over time, organizational structures emerged in our Twitter community. We started using the hashtag #swtech (social work tech) to find each other, talk, and still stay within Twitter's then 140-character limits. Twitter chats were organized, and they brought groups of social workers together for live meetings during specific hours. We sent each other emojis and memes. Then, we started meeting up at conferences and attending each other's technology-related sessions. Before long, we were proposing collaborative conference sessions, working together on scholarly papers, and having interesting

conversations about the future of social work in an increasingly tech-mediated world. Through discovering colleagues who could see the potential benefits of technology, and who brought thoughtful concerns (but were not overreactive) regarding potential risks, we had found our people.

When Jonathan Singer, chair of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Council on Publications, put out a call for someone to write a new text about teaching social work with technology, Melanie Sage asked Nancy if she would consider collaborating on the book. Nancy, a well-respected school dean, and Melanie, a new faculty member at a rural school, were not a natural match for scholarly work, but technology has a democratizing impact on relationships. Nancy agreed, and Jonathan suggested we include Laurel Hitchcock as a coauthor. None of us had ever collaborated on a project of any kind at that point, but through a leap of faith that drew on our online connection, we partnered to form a three-woman team in an area of social work practice that had historically been dominated by older men.

Laurel took on the role of the organizer, scheduling meetings, making to-do lists, and keeping us on task. Melanie continually said, “How about we also do this?” which led to some detours along the way, and a few more appendices than planned. And Nancy pointed us in directions we did not know existed and continually helped us think bigger and deeper. We got together via GotoMeeting live video calls every 2 weeks for 3 years while writing this book; we sometimes stayed on task but eventually became more than writing partners.

Sometimes we had giggling fits, and sometimes inspired conversations. We turned to each other for advice. We became trusted colleagues and friends. We planned at least one or two more books, which we may or may not write. We laughed a lot. And we wrote a book!

We hope that this book inspires you, and maybe our story will too; your coauthors may be out there waiting for you, and we are a testament that writing with friends is better than going alone. We hope you like our book.

# CHAPTER 1

## WHY DO WE NEED A BOOK ABOUT TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION?

Imagine yourself in the following situation, one familiar to many social work educators: in an ambitious attempt to enliven a lecture or help demonstrate a concept about the role of hospice and end-of-life care during late adulthood for your Human Behavior in the Social Environment class, you do a quick search in your favorite Web browser and it brings you to a video from a national hospice advocacy agency. The video highlights how hospice works and provides the latest data on national trends. You play the 10-minute video for your class and then get back to your lecture, or maybe a classroom discussion about what the students watched. This is a common example described by social work educators about how they make good use of technology to supplement student learning.

But reimagine this same scenario: students still watch the video, this time before coming to class. During class, you connect via videoconference with the executive director of the hospice advocacy agency using Skype (a popular Web-based videoconferencing tool). The video call is projected from a computer to a screen in front of the class, and your students interact with your guest speaker, a nationally recognized expert in the field, through microphones and speakers. To supplement the lecture, your students follow the agency and the guest speaker on Twitter (a microblogging social media platform), and tweet questions during or after class, which

the guest speaker answers following her presentation. Several students continue an ongoing conversation with the guest speaker via Twitter for several days after the class, asking questions related to a group project about hospice care that they are working on for another social work course.

If you had your choice, which experience would you want for your students? How do the learning outcomes differ in each scenario? How would you prefer to learn? This is one illustration of countless situations that emerge when you start to explore the broader universe of technology options in social work education. Social work educators are using digital avatars to role-play diverse characters, having students write their own textbooks via *wikis*, and asking students to create podcasts or videos instead of the traditional classroom presentations.

Technology has the power to help students access content in new ways, create open networks that link students to the practice world outside the classroom, and help educators share and collaborate on projects related to social work pedagogy in thoughtful and effective ways. And as an added benefit, students who work with these technologies in their courses then develop competencies in the use of technologies that will serve them later in their social work practice and professional development.

Our goal in writing this book is to help you as a social work educator, regardless of your skill with technology or the resources of your program, to move from that 10-minute video in the classroom to incorporating digital technologies in ways that are engaging, practical, and meaningful to teaching and learning about social work. This book is about teaching social work with technology and addresses many topics about how social work educators and administrators can design and implement successful technology-mediated learning environments. It does not offer advice about how to prepare students to conduct social work practice in an increasingly technology-saturated world, although they will learn much from your good modeling, and we do talk



about how to improve their digital literacies through the ways in which you use technology in the classroom. This book does not address the many things that students need to learn regarding how to use technology in practice or what they need to know about digital and social justice issues. We cite other books that have been written on those topics and hope more will come. We do address the debate of whether technology-mediated education is acceptable in social work, but not ad nauseam. If you have picked up this book, we hope you are looking not for an answer to the debate about whether educators should deliver social work education using technology but instead are searching for tools for effective teaching and a deep understanding of what learning in technology-mediated environments looks like in social work.

Technology in social work education and practice is a hot topic at professional conferences, in journal articles, and among professional associations and regulation forums. The buzz is not surprising given trends in higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reports that 2.9 million (29%) of undergraduate students took at least one online course in 2014, while half of those were enrolled in a completely online program. Similarly, Seaman, J.E., Allen, and Seaman, J. (2018) found that almost 1/3 of all college students have taken at least one distance course during the Fall 2016 semester. Further, 69% of chief academic leaders said that online education was critical to their long-term strategy. Online enrollment has grown each year for the last decade, with no sign of a plateau. The trends are not that different for social work education. According to 2016 data available from the Council on Social Work Education about online education (2015b), more than 300 accredited social work programs currently offer some or all their online courses, and 100 more programs plan to offer online courses in the future, including doctoral programs. CSWE's most recent data from 2017 reported that there are 73 fully online, accredited social work programs in the United States; 21 BSW, 44 MSW, six DSW, and two PhD programs (CSWE, 2018). Social work programs are

under increasing demand to expand online offerings by universities, administrators, and students alike, for reasons that include revenue, competition, convenience, and access. These trends may be the reason you picked up this book, perhaps out of your personal interest to improve your teaching with technology, or from the agonizing external pressure to “get online.”

## TECHNOLOGY AND COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Beyond the mounting use of technology in higher education, most educators and administrators recognize that technology plays a role in competency-based social work education. The CSWE, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) have recently revised their educational, practice, and regulatory standards to include the effective and ethical use of technology in practice as a valued competency for social workers (ASWB, 2015; CSWE, 2015a; NASW, 2017a, 2017b). Some of these standards are worth discussion, and we have attempted to weave them throughout this book. First is the NASW’s Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice, which were developed in collaboration with CSWE, ASWB, and the Clinical Social Work Association (NASW, 2017b). These standards are lengthy (55 unique standards) and include guidance for micro- and macro-level practice as well as social work education and supervision (see Section 4 of the standards). We believe this is the first time NASW has ever produced practice standards for the educational setting.

CSWE is clear that education programs do not need to meet the NASW Technology Practice Standards under Section 4 of the technology standards document for accreditation purposes (CSWE, personal communication, June 30, 2017; NASW, 2017b), so we discuss these standards in relevant sections of the

book only to offer guidance and best practices. Also, Appendix 3, “Technology in Social Work Education: Educators’ Perspectives on the NASW Technology Standards for Social Work Education and Supervision,” offers additional interpretations of the technology practice standards for education and supervision, based on a collaborative process with more than 25 social work educators and practitioners.

The second set of standards is the 2015 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). As most of us in social work education know, these standards must be met for accreditation. The only specific mention of technology related to content that should be taught in the classroom is under the first entry in the section on Social Work Competencies: Demonstrate Ethical and Professional Behavior. Technology is included as one of the demonstrable behaviors for this competency. It states that “social workers also understand emerging forms of technology and the ethical use of technology in social work practice” (CSWE, 2015a, p. 7), and “use technology ethically and appropriately to facilitate practice outcomes” (CSWE, 2015a, p. 7). Concerning how social work educational programs should use technology to achieve the EPAS, CSWE does not prescribe the how to use technology but encourages educational programs to meet the standards based on their unique settings. Because this is a book for social work educators, we place most of our attention on the EPAS and how social work educators can look broadly at the accreditation standards to incorporate teaching with digital technology in their own programs.

Finally, the third set of standards we attempt to integrate throughout the book is the NASW Code of Ethics, which went through an extensive revision in 2017 to reflect how technology is being used in social work practice (NASW, 2017a). However, we want to make a clear distinction that our goal for incorporating the NASW Code of Ethics into this book is to advance the use of digital and social technologies in only social work education, not social work practice. Simply put, this book is for social work educators, not

social work practitioners. We focus on how to teach with technology, and not what needs to be taught. It is about the role technology plays in the design and delivery of social work education, as a method for content delivery, as a tool for shaping learning activities, and in supporting beginning levels of competencies (digital literacy, etc.) needed for social work practice. As a result, the book does not cover the broad use of technology in social work practice, or even the wide variety of content that educators should teach students about the intersections of technology and social work. A great need exists for a book about the knowledge, skills, and values needed by social workers to use technology competently, professionally, and ethically in practice with clients and communities, about digital divides, the numerous ethical risks related to use of technology in social work practice, and using technology for assessments, interventions, and evaluation. We envision that book addressing issues such as how to practice telehealth with individuals and families; how to maintain privacy and confidentiality when running an online support group on Facebook; how social media can be used to promote the mission of a nonprofit agency; how social workers can advocate for policy changes using e-activism and online petitions; and how social workers can use digital technologies to promote social justice and digital equity. Someone should write this book!

Along with the updates to standards that affect social work curricula, throughout this book we highlight stories from early adopters of technology in social work education who have willingly shared successes, challenges, and promising practices for using technology as a tool in teaching and learning social work competencies. Scholarship about online education is emerging, such as the effectiveness of online versus seated classrooms or the role of online labs to supplement a seated classroom (Cummings, Chaffin, & Cockerham, 2015; Elliott, Choi, & Friedline, 2013; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). Examples of technology-infused seated classrooms can also be found in the literature, from the use of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets to adopting social media, such as

Twitter or Facebook (Baldrige, McAdams, Reed, & Moran, 2013; Buquoi, McClure, Kotrlík, Machtmes, & Bunch, 2013; Young, 2014). Additionally, an annual social work conference on distance education in the United States launched in 2015, with more than 400 attendees and more than 100 presentations on topics related to teaching and learning social work in distance-delivered environments (Indiana University School of Social Work & Council on Social Work Education, 2015). These are just a few illustrations of how social work educators are finding ways to share about teaching with technology to prepare students for the skills that they will need to practice in a technology-immersed societal and agency context.

## CONCERNS FROM THE PROFESSION

Despite these efforts, as a profession, social work has been slow to adopt online education and other types of technology in the classroom. Concerns about student engagement and learning, the ability to assess students' acquisition of competency, gatekeeping, and ethical dilemmas such as dual relationships and privacy are chief concerns among some educators, who also worry that online education may disrupt the discipline's long-held value of the importance of human relationships (Kimball & Kim, 2013; Reamer, 2013; Voshel & Wesala, 2015). Some of these concerns are shared by employers; a 2015 study of North Carolina County Directors of Social Services (Marson, Pittman-Munke, & Stanton, 2016) found that most of the directors believed that distance and campus social work programs are not equivalent, and about a third reported they would not hire a social worker with an online degree. Qualitative comments in this study revealed specific concern about the possibility of virtual field placements and the importance of hands-on practice-skills courses. Concerns such as these are likely influenced by lack of understanding of distance teaching methodologies or exposure to poorly executed online courses.