

Reflection

What has COVID-19 paved the way for social work practice teaching?

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Abstract

This reflective piece documented the author's lessons learnt as a social work educator amid COVID-19. In this time of crisis, we primarily focused on students' well-being, panic, and ambivalence; however, it is also the time for discussing how social work educators and social work education itself need to be evolved alongside a number of dilemmas, i.e. implementing e-teaching or e-learning, adopting synchronous or asynchronous modalities, and being an educator or a youtuber.

Keywords: social work education, pandemic, COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, coronavirus

1. Introduction

The 2020 pandemic has shown us, yet again, that the future is undoubtedly unpredictable. A few years ago, no one ever imagined such a public health crisis; Covid-19 has not only affected jobs and daily chores but also education. In present milieu, social work teaching and learning on theoretical and practical knowledge has moved online. Educational institutions have declared the commencement of online studies for most of their programmes while considering safety as the prime measure. This is high time which calls for the retrofitting of the previous discussions (Afrouz, 2021; Amadasun, 2021; Smoyer, O'Brien and Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020) where the emphasis should now be laid upon a better quality of teaching, curriculum restructuring, and capacity building of social work educators.

2. The paradigm shift in social work practice training

Social work educators who were in favour of face-to-face (f2f) knowledge impartation are facing a high degree of challenge to shift from traditional to novel approaches (Mishna, Fantus and McInroy, 2017; Mishna et al., 2020). The early outbreak was faced with the optimism of soon restoration to previous lifestyle. This leads to an ill-equipped situation as the study matter (i.e. social work) was prepared for f2f delivery, where online teaching was considered as a

supplement rather than a necessity. It was assumed that the outbreak would not last long and classes would be soon restored where one had to grit their teeth to abide by the routine. Over time and following the ongoing impact of the pandemic, these thoughts became questionable. Although it has always been a process from avoidance to acceptance, our transition was way quicker than any of us could have ever imagined. Yet, we are still at crossroads. This article aims to illustrate multitudes of underlying predicaments, i.e. e-teaching versus e-learning, synchronous versus asynchronous modalities, and educator versus youtuber, which need to be analyzed and evaluated before both social work teachers and students stepping in and getting lost in the new era.

3. E-teaching versus e-learning

The concept of e-learning has paved its way since decades, especially in the tertiary education system. It indicates that the learning provider is separated from the learner by cyberspace but with appropriate attention to the fundamentals of a teacher-learner situation (Hamid, 2001). Many educational researchers have long put forth the idea of merging (but not replacing) traditional f2f model of classroom instruction with the information technology. E-learning is promoted with various names such as blended learning, flipped classroom, and massive open online course (MOOC). Even after multiple benefits, not all social work teachers are in favour of the

digitalization of education as they feel it a tedious task to switch from the conventional methods. E-teaching has been popularized but it is too soon to celebrate that e-learning has been made possible because of the unprecedented outbreak that leads to measures of distancing, quarantine, and lockdown. The perceived situation has prompted a shift from offline to online mode but is not able to fill the gap between e-teaching and e-learning. Guri-Rosenblit (2018) argues that e-teaching, i.e. a top-down pedagogy, is an essential prerequisite for e-learning. She highlights the crucial role of expert e-teachers with sufficient digital literacy as she believes most undergraduate students are unable and/or unwilling to study by themselves without proper guidance. In my viewpoint, e-learning is nothing but the motivation that the students (i.e. learners) need to undergo self-directed study, i.e. a bottom-up approach. The present situation is more focused on altering the transmission mode rather than putting persistent endeavors to bring the concept of e-learning up, which is not a paradigm shift.

If one teaches social work theories or practical skills in front of a webcam for three consecutive hours while addressing large numbers of students, it has probably diverted education not only from a pedagogical shift to inquiry-based and student-centered learning approach but has also adopted an obsolete teacher-centered method of perceiving students. Further, it is difficult (or practically impossible) for anyone to focus on one-screen for hours in some verbose sessions. Apart from all facts, the burning topic of the controversy is “teaching” instead of “lecturing,” especially in higher-level studies (Fulford and Mahon, 2020). By the time the course is completed, what students should know, understand, and more importantly, be able to do, are necessarily different if only a non-f2f approach is applied but other things being equal. To combat this situation, one needs to restructure the teaching and learning procedure where the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) of online social work practice courses should be distinctly achievable. Learning objectives that are specifically related to e-learning must be included and explicitly indicated in course outlines.

4. Synchronous versus asynchronous learning modalities

While choosing an interface to impart knowledge in practice, social work educators need to resonate the chosen platform with their course design. This step is crucial as different courses might have different requirements. One needs to draw a quick and prompt decision while comprehending the various digital modalities. Online teaching and learning can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Both

refer to the extent to which a course is bound by place and/or time (Assareh and Bidokht, 2011). The former aspect deals with the dissemination of information in a location-independent but time-restricted mode involving video-conferencing or virtual meetings. Whereas the latter is free from the constraints of time, and the schedule is thus more flexible. Till date, no consensus has yet been reached, which might define the superiority of one aspect over others; either approach is involved in social work practice teaching.

Kunin, Julliard and Rodriguez (2014) highlight the fact of popularity f2f and asynchronous formats in lieu of synchronous ones among postgraduate dental residents. In other words, students prefer to uptake the information in form of prerecorded PowerPoint presentations with audio assistance rather than opting for a synchronous form of distance learning. Rakich, Rodriguez and Morgan (2020) also documented the evolution of a counseling program from f2f to the asynchronous model. Their research primarily focuses on various pedagogical tactics such as inquiry-based instruction, learner control, and precision learning. As clinical practice teaching in social work shares some basic commonalities with dental medicine and counseling, social work students might also prefer learning via the asynchronous approach in some of the courses. While abiding by the notion of “the learner knows best,” practice teachings manifest the role of educators as an intermediate moderator who aims to ease the learning process by comprehending the distinctive needs of the learners to maximizing their gains. Here, educators are not the absolute authority rather than permit their students to involve in the discussions and give their viewpoints and suggestions while having control over the instruction process. These instances provide us with insights that are counter-intuitive to conventional speculation that social work courses are necessarily better to be taught synchronously if f2f is not an option.

5. Educator versus youtuber

Online teaching has initiated various controversies where the frontier of online education and webcasting is fading away. The present Netflix generation is different from educators who may still be fascinated with Broadway musicals. For them opting for an online session is like running the “Alt+Tab” key where they can switch between multiple browsers in microseconds. These interfaces provide one with options such as muted video-calls. The teacher never knows if information is received or rejected. Audiences are great actors, and they are being forced to act because of sitting in front of a webcam as well. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the vague and actual listeners due to the similarity of innocence shown

on their faces. Let us not to naively assume that what you speak is what they hear especially when you do not offer choices for students to access to video recordings of your lectures. Social work educators have stretched their horizons and have entered the field of YouTube content creation where one needs to focus more on how to enact rather than what to teach. But in real practice, teachers are instructed to impart the information, not necessarily the storytelling, performing, and curating skills that most of us have never been trained for. Considering the fact that edutainment, i.e. marriage of education with entertainment, has been firmly entered the educational space, traditional lectures and classes have to be incorporated with modern technologies and learning can now take place in the cafe, park, museum, or any places that one may obtain information in a relaxed atmosphere (Aksakal, 2015; Anikina and Yakimenko, 2015).

6. Why may these still be possible in the future?

Hierck (2014) hits the nail on the head when he warns us that our students of the 21st century are being taught by educators from the 20th century using pedagogical tools of the 19th century on an 18th-century school calendar. In the case of social work practice teaching, the pandemic has proved to be a revolutionary turn to concede and accept the didactic reforms in a novel way as one cannot run from the events after unleashing the Pandora's box. Attention must be paid to the fundamental distinction between e-teaching and e-learning per se. Regarding the social work course design, one can add to their present structure to make their sessions a bit engrossing and compulsive, no matter adopting the synchronous or asynchronous learning modalities. The first ten minutes of the beginning of the course are crucial. The first and foremost is to employ student check-in then grasp their attention towards the teacher (or the performer in edutainment) by cracking any joke or merely being frank and comfortable with them. Another way is to shock them by some facts or alternative facts; this will eventually awaken their rested senses. Try not to make the lecture boring by hiding the secret ingredient until the end of the session. Exercise fun activities like employing polling, voting, questioning, or might even dismissing the class early but staying for casual discussion. Keep the conversation going via email after the webcast and be optimistic with nil response. To fellow colleagues, may we stop wandering anymore and start getting our hands dirty right now.

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