



Social Work in a Digital Age: The Need to Integrate Social Media in Social Work Education in the UK

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ABSTRACT: The rise of social media provides a unique opportunity for social work to integrate new technologies in social work curriculum. Changes in social work curriculum require a catalyst and sound research evidence. Social media is in itself a catalyst for change because of its power for collaborative learning and social interaction. This paper explores the need to integrate social media in social work education by utilising a social learning model. The author argues that the new generation of social work students was born during the “digital age” and as such have been immersed in technology all their lives. There is need therefore for a social work curriculum that is relevant to today’s world of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn.

Keywords: Social Work, Digital Age, Social Media, Social Work Education, Social Work Curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

When I completed my social work training more than ten years ago, social media had already become an ingrained part of society. As a practitioner in a busy child protection team in London, we were often told by our managers to avoid having Facebook accounts because service users could easily find out about our personal information and use them against us. When I later decided to pursue an academic career and joined King’s College London and later the University of Birmingham for doctoral studies, I started using social media to share ideas about my research and to network with researchers in my field. As a university lecturer I was initially very frustrated with younger students who were constantly using their phones during class, and when asked to put the phones away, they would claim they were using the mobile phone to access lecture notes. During group activities, it became increasingly clear that some younger students were chatting on their mobile phones and accessing social media. I started to ask these “naughty” students to leave the classroom. In one of my seminars, I shared my experience of using social media and views of my social work managers regarding Facebook. One student who was surprised with what my managers had advised looked at me and said: “you social workers are out of touch if you do not realize the power of Facebook in engaging with the young generation.” This student’s powerful message did not make sense to me until about a year later.

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I discussed my frustration on a blog I had created for research purposes. A colleague posted a long response on my blog making suggestions on how to integrate social media in teaching and learning. She also explained how social media brings a “real world” into the classroom. This colleague’s advice made me reflect on the value and use of social media and how to integrate it in my teaching. I began to search for academic literature on the use of social media in learning and teaching in higher education. I was surprised to find that many academics, especially in the US and China, had already started using social media as a platform for improving their students’ learning.

A study by Ali et al. (2016) found that the use of social media in higher education is rapidly increasing. According to Hrastinski and Aghaee (2012), the most common media used in education and learning are YouTube, blogs, and wiki. The wider scope of YouTube is due to videos that can be uploaded on Blackboard or Moodle and downloaded by students. In my teaching, I have used short YouTube clips, and I have found these to have an impact in some sessions. Chinese students in China use www.qq.com as a means of gathering information on different subjects that support their learning (Qiu et al., 2013). Pea et al. (2012) identified advantages derived from the use of social media in teaching and learning. These include the lecturer or teacher benefiting through program exchanges, possibilities of publishing their own studies or the ones conducted by their students. Other commentators have suggested that using social media in teaching and learning can generate lesson plans, course plans and group activities (Bogdanov et al. 2012).

Having reviewed some of the studies on the use of social media in education, I began to have a clear understanding of its benefits, but I am also aware that it can be disruptive if not properly managed. I am still developing skills in how I can use Twitter to generate discussions and debates with my students. Other internet sites that I find helpful especially for short quizzes are Kahoot.it and www.Quizziz.com. My students have found these forms of learning fascinating, and their feedback has been positive.

2. The Need for “Digitally Mediated” Social Work Education

The development of social media has changed the way students think, communicate and interact. While most social work students are prolific users of social media, their participation and engagement are purely at the level of social interaction with their peers and virtual friends rather than in the context of social work education or training. It is therefore critical that academics and educators use social media and any other new technologies to support the development of a “digitally mediated social work” (Young et al., 2018). Digitally mediated social work is the use of social media and any other digital technologies to support and enhance learning and teaching (Young et al., 2018). Some studies have examined how these digital technologies have crept into social work practice and revolutionized communication between service users and social workers (Mishna et al. 2012; Boddy & Dominelli, 2016). In the UK, most local authorities provide social workers with smartphones, laptops, and iPads so as to enable teleworking and mobile communication with service users and other professionals. Traditionally, social workers would write letters and make telephone calls from the office, but with the new digital age, social workers are increasingly using text messages, WhatsApp messages, mobile phone calls, video chat with young people, emails and social networking sites to communicate with service users and practitioners

(Reamer, 2013). The use of new technologies to engage with service users supports the need for a digitally mediated social work education with a well-integrated social media curriculum. Robbins and Singer (2014) advocated for “student competence” in using social media. Some academics have started incorporating social media in their teaching which includes online distance learning models (Kilpeläinen, Pääkkönen, & Sankala, 2011; Young et al., 2018).

3. Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants and the Curriculum Cycle

Tappscott (1997) refers to students that have grown up with social media and new digital technologies as the “Net Generation”. Other authors refer to this generation as Generation Y, the Millennials or Digital Natives (Prensky, 2001; Prensky, 2005; Berk 2009b). This generation of students grew up using new technologies that characterized the last decades of the 20th century, and they are very much accustomed to using digital technology to the extent that they speak a “digital language” (Prensky, 2001). They are “native speakers” of the digital language of the internet. Prensky (2001) coined the term “digital natives” as “the most useful designation of this generation” (p.1). Lives of digital natives are dominated by the use of computers, smartphones, video games, WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, video cams, YouTube and every tool of the digital age.

Prensky (2001) makes a distinction between digital natives and all those born before the “digital age” and who are fascinated with the internet. He refers to those born before the digital age as “digital immigrants”. He asserts that digital immigrants like all immigrants have to adapt to new ways of doing things in their new environment. He argues that like forced immigrants fleeing political conflicts, digital immigrants retain some aspects of their past including their accents, customs, and habits. The digital immigrant accent is seen in using the internet for information gathering and reading journal articles and books to revise for exams or to complete assignments (Prensky, 2001). Prensky’s (2005) view is that the older generation was socialized differently from their children whose socialization was the digital world of the internet, smartphones, and laptops.

Using Prensky’s categorization, I will argue that pre-registration Social work programmes in the UK attract both digital natives and digital immigrants. Digital natives are mainly on undergraduate social work programmes whereas “digital immigrants” or mature students tend to enroll on the MSc in Social Work or fast-track programmes such as Frontline and Step Up. There is evidence that younger students from the Net Generation use google, YouTube, Facebook and other websites to carry out their research, to work on their assignments, share knowledge and to interact socially with their peers (Greeson et al., 2018). This shift in the way knowledge is generated affects how we teach and hence the need to transform the technology we use in classrooms so as to support the new generation of students. There is evidence that social media has changed the way we share information, the way we communicate with each other, the way we write, the way we read, the way we think and the way we learn and teach (Crystal, 2008a; Johnson, 2009). Recent studies have also shown that social networking sites have a positive impact on university students (Ellison et al., 2007).

Prensky (2005) contends that the problem facing today’s education system is that most academics are “digital immigrants” who speak a pre-digital language which is not understood by the new generation of students. These academics do not believe that students can listen and

understand lectures while using their smartphones, listening to music or watching a YouTube video on their laptop or iPad. Prensky (2001) argues that these digital immigrant lecturers did not practice this skill during their formative years but instead learnt skills of listening to lectures, taking notes, reading books, newspapers and journals which most digital natives lack.

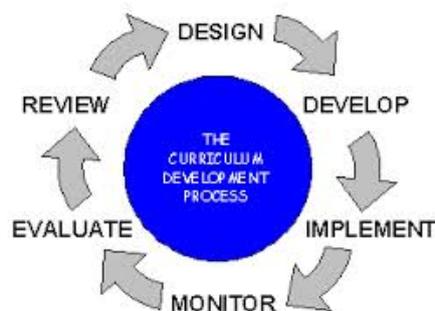


Figure 1 Curriculum Development Process

Integrating social media in social work curriculum will have the effect of increasing levels of technological developments and technological competences of students (Young, 2018). The Curriculum Development process of integrating social media in social work curriculum will require a “multi-step, ongoing and cyclical process” (Institute of Progressive Learning.org). This process starts with an evaluation of the current programme for implementing the new programme and back to evaluating the revised programme (Institute of Learning and Education.org). Figure 1 above is an illustration of this process. The on-going evaluation is also known as the Graded Structure (see Figure 2 below). The social media tools that would be considered for such a curriculum are: (a) social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and LinkedIn), (b) media sharing sites (YouTube, Vimeo, and Flickr), (c) content creation and publishing tools (wikis and blogs), and lastly (d) internet messaging sites (Google Hangout, Skype, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger).



Figure 2 Graded Structure or Ongoing Evaluation

Source: www.Institute of Progressive Education and Learning.org

Social learning model (Leach, 2013) is the approach I propose to be utilized in the implementation of social media in the social work curriculum. Social learning is a learning method that uses “mobile” devices such as iPads, laptops, smartphones or tablets to engage learners

using social media tools (Leach, 2013; Blair & Serafini, 2014). Social learning is connecting people for purposes of knowledge generation, it is sharing ideas in a way that makes learning fun. The difference between social media and social learning is that social media is used to engage with internet users but social learning utilizes the power for education (Leach, 2013). Both digital natives and digital immigrants would embrace this form of learning because it makes learning more enjoyable and encourages ongoing sharing of knowledge and ideas. Prensky, (2005) observed that the new generation of learners does not engage with printed material such as books, journal articles, newspapers or archival material. This is why it is necessary for social work educators and education policymakers to be innovative in approaches used in learning and teaching by incorporating key social media tools in the curriculum.

According to Leach (2013), developments in social media and web technology should be used for educational purposes because students are able to engage and develop a community of “mobile” learners. McArthur and Bostedo-Conway (2012) examined Twitter as an educational tool in Higher Education. Other studies have shown that social media allows educators to improve students’ experience and enhances research opportunities (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009). Gikas and Grant (2013) looked at social media’s ability to engage learners with continuous learning and unlimited connectivity. Which means social media makes learning available at any time and learning is not restricted by time and space (Hrastinski, 2006; Buzzetto-More, 2012).

4. Social Media and Ethical Issues

Reamer (2013) highlighted the ethical implications associated with social media such as issues of privacy, data protection, confidentiality, informed consent, boundaries, anonymity, conflict of interest and evidence informed practice. Mukherjee and Clark, (2012) suggested that many social work students lack an understanding of ethical issues associated with social media and professional conduct in online spaces. In 2012 the British Association of Social Workers released a policy statement that encourages the use of social media in social work practice but warns them to apply social work values and principles of the Code of Ethics (Policy, Ethics and Human Rights Committee, 2012, p. 10). Student incivility has also been associated with the use of social media (Mugisha, 2018).

Some social work academics, practitioners and policymakers are skeptical when suggestions regarding the use of ‘social media’ in education and practice (Boddy & Dominelli, 2017). Such reactions and feelings of trepidation are normal given recent examples of social workers who have misused social media by posting client information on Facebook (*Community Care*, September 10, 2014). This explains why references to Facebook or Twitter in social work practice and education are often characterized by “risks and challenges: fears about the presentation of personal and professional self, privacy concerns, boundary issues, claims of narcissism and self-promotion” (Beddoe, 2014, p. 12).

In spite of these fears and ethical implications, studies show that social media offers opportunities to enhance students’ learning, promotes the interaction of students and lecturers and fosters student-centered active learning (Ajjan & Hartshorne, 2008; Taylor, King, & Nelson, 2012). The advancements in the use of technology including social media are also acknowledged as

promoting the reconfiguration of student's learning, innovative teaching, assessment and planning in higher education (Ebner *et al.*, 2010). Other studies have focused on the educational nature of social media and its impact on students' learning (Gikas & Grant, 2013; Hrastinski & Aghaee, 2012). In science disciplines, academics have used social media to educate and disseminate their research findings. For example, a *Nature* survey carried out by Noorden (2014) found that more than 4.5 million academics have Research Gate accounts, and there are at least 10,000 new users daily. Noorden observed that "Research Gate" is transforming social research and has changed science in a way that "is not entirely foreseeable" (2014, p. 126).

In the UK and the US, most universities have Facebook and Twitter accounts which they use to communicate with students and staff. University lecturers are increasingly using social media in their interaction with students including recruitment of students (Moran *et al.*, 2011), to disseminate research findings or posting their published journal articles or book chapters (Priem and Costello, 2010) and to announce call for papers or conferences (Ross *et al.*, 2011). Twitter, has been used to call for papers (Veletsianos, 2012), facilitate learning and (Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2008), generate debates (Ebner *et al.*, 2010) and for international collaboration and partnership (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009).

The new HCPC standards for Proficiency highlights the requirement to be able to understand new technologies and use information technology appropriately. It states: Social workers "should be able to demonstrate a level of skill in the use of information technology appropriate to their practice" (*HCPC standards of Proficiency*). This standard of proficiency HCPC resonates with the need to develop a social work curriculum that integrates social media and information technology.

5. Conclusions: Implications for social work practice and Education

Incorporating social media in social work curriculum can be challenging for academics due to privacy concerns and lack of technical knowledge. A study by Italian academics found that pedagogical concerns, cultural resistance, organizational culture and bureaucracy can affect the integration of social media into university education curriculums (Manca & Ranieri, 2012). Furthermore, educators who belong to the pre-digital age or what Prenski (2001) refers to as digital immigrants are often skeptical and reluctant to use social media for learning and teaching and instead preferring traditional technology such as PowerPoint, lecturing and emails. These academics ignore the fact that their students have embraced WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube for their learning and research (Roblyer, 2010). As Pinar (2012, p.22) points out, the emphasis of educational curriculums should "not be on narrowly formulated objectives and standardized testing but on empowering both students and teachers to develop and express their own identities, whereby scholarship can enable them to speak." It is important that social work overcomes these obstacles so as to train social workers with the tools of the digital age.

Haigh (2004) examines the need for academics to be aware of the link between contemporary social change and technological advancement which impact on the needs and expectations of today's students. McCredie (2003) observed that lifestyle changes have resulted in students demanding more creativity and flexible teaching and learning. This means that the use of new technologies has become a *sinequanon* to teaching and learning in Higher Education and

Social work cannot afford to be left behind. Owen et al. (2006) argue that social media provides new ways of conceptualizing new knowledge and skills. As discussed in the previous section, the use of social media by social workers and students pose cultural challenges and has ethical implications but there is also evidence that there are pedagogical advantages of integrating it in social work curriculum (Manca & Ranieri, 2012). The way people communicate has evolved and social work education needs to change with the times and should invest in transforming learning and teaching of social work students of the digital age. Applying the social learning model in the implementation of a curriculum that incorporates social media will enable students to learn how to engage with social media responsibly and ethically in digital spaces (Young, et al. 2018). This paper has explored the need for social work educators and policymakers to evaluate the use of new digital technologies in social work education and to consider integrating social media in the curriculum.

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