Chapter 8
Building Professional Practice
Education Cultures in the
Online Environment

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ABSTRACT
The gradual introduction of Internet-based delivery methods into higher education has broadened technology usage and led to reflection on the pedagogical implications for social work education taught online, with considerations for content, design and delivery. This chapter reviews the use of online technologies in post secondary education, the use of critical reflection as a pedagogical tool, and social work field education, to contextualize the experience of the Dalhousie University School of Social Work’s distance delivery field education course. In the experience of Dalhousie University School of Social Work, the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes of its student practitioners have been enhanced through the use of online integrative seminar case analysis and critical reflection facilitated via distance delivery. This chapter develops the connections among the online environment, adult education principles, and critical reflection on field education in social work, to craft an expanded message regarding transformative social work practice.


INTRODUCTION
Over the last 20 years computer assisted technologies for online learning have become integrated within social work education programs internationally (Stocks & Freddolino, 2000). While largely an-
ecdotal, some faculty and administrators among Schools of Social Work have voiced concern that social work education may not be particularly suited to online delivery, given long-standing assumptions regarding face to face relationships as the basis of interaction, knowledge translation, modeling and evaluation (Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, Napoletano, 1998). Although recognizing these pedagogical concerns, the School of Social Work at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, had an existing commitment to advancing post secondary education in communities marginalized by the socio-economic and racialized barriers of this region, and thus began delivering decentralized programs throughout the Maritime Provinces in the 1980s. As technologies have been refined, our means for delivery have focused on Internet technology, and we now offer national graduate and undergraduate level social work degrees, both fully accredited by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education.

This chapter begins with a review of the use of computer assisted technologies in post secondary education generally and social work specifically, with an emphasis on the literature regarding how students are considered to best learn within an Internet-based design. The specific social work curriculum under consideration is the field education course, required for both graduate and undergraduate social work degrees nationally and internationally. Next, the chapter draws on the rich literature of adult education and experiential learning to lay the foundation for a focus on critical reflection as the central content and process for learning in field education. With its commitment to generate knowledge both “empirically and self reflectively, in a process of interaction, in order to analyze, resist and change constructed power relations, structures and ways of thinking” (Fook, 1999, p.202), critical reflection is taken up here as a tool for transformative social work practice. The chapter concludes with examples and experiences from Dalhousie of how the online medium can interact with the message of critical reflection on the field placement experience to advance social work education for practice.

THE MEDIUM: THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Online learning is at the cusp of educational innovation, in its accessibility and flexibility as well as technological advances, to address a range of learning styles and needs. Particularly at the post secondary level, student demand for computers and Internet based approaches to education has reached unprecedented volume, with highly refined tools and methods forming the measure for the satisfaction of their experiences (Aminzade & Pescosolida, 1999; Grauerholz, McKenzie & Romeo, 1999; Green & Dorn, 1999). Accessibility and utility are fundamental to a student population that is mobile, migrant and mature in its expectations that educational institutions will deliver products and processes consistent with the rapidly advancing telecommunications market. Moreover, in the current climate of education as commodity, and students as consumers, optimal flexibility and opportunity for choice are considered basic terms of engagement as students survey the offerings of universities and colleges (Calhoun, 1999; Soley, 1999).

Incorporating electronic media in social work education has been a practice for almost two decades, originating in part to address education and training needs in rural and remote areas (Stocks & Freddolino, 2000). The limitations of providing only on site, classroom-based, synchronized learning was clearly recognized as privileging students with the resources and means to travel to larger centres for their learning. In addition, patterns of out-migration were a concern to rural communities, which saw their former residents, now professionals, not returning to provide a range of helping services back at home. Social work programs therefore began to incorporate the methods of teleconferencing, audio and vid-
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