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## Strategies for enhancing online teaching in social work education

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### ABSTRACT

In response to the growing importance of online education in social work education, this article describes the context of online teaching and learning in social work education. Online teaching and learning are further discussed in the context of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). We emphasize the importance and need for trained faculty to teach in an online environment, particularly in HBCUs; offer an example of how the University of the District of Columbia, an HBCU, prepares its faculty to teach online; and conclude with specific strategies for online teaching and social work faculty. Finally, we provide recommendations for social work education.

### KEYWORDS

HBCUs; online teaching and learning; social work; social work education

### Overview

The demand for online learning in social work is rapidly growing. Foeday (2011) asserts, “to live up to the historic mission of the social work profession in the age of...technology..., [social] workers should acquire sufficient knowledge and skills relevant to technology” (p. 7). This suggests that faculty be deliberate in seeking training and preparation in new and innovative ways to meet learners’ needs. The purpose of this paper is to provide effective strategies to faculty teaching social work online. Specifically, we describe the process utilized at the University of the District of Columbia, an HBCU, to train its faculty to teach in online spaces.

According to the Babson Survey Research Group (Allen & Seaman, 2011), over 6.7 million students were enrolled in at least one online class in 2011, compared to only 1.6 million in 2002 in higher education institutions. Approximately 72% of these institutions offered online courses in 2002. However, this number had steadily increased to nearly 87% in 2012. Online learning environments provide a platform for faculty and their students to experience learning without time or geographic restrictions (Brown & Green, 2011). Learning management systems (LMSs) provide many advantages in providing various instructional strategies through the many applications that exist and, in most cases, are built directly into the LMS. Online learning environments permit a range of interactive methodologies. The strength of online learning lies in its capacity to support multiple modes of communication including any combination of interactions (e.g.,

student-student, student-faculty, faculty-student, faculty-faculty, student-others, or others-students). Taking into account the varied learning styles of learners and providing opportunities for self-directed and collaborative learning, educators can facilitate effective courses geared to achieve specific learning goals and outcomes using the vast resources and capacities of online learning (Brown & Green, 2011). In online learning environments, the learners have an inherent greater sense of responsibility and involvement as it pertains to their learning (Brown & Green, 2011).

The role of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) adds another layer to the conversation of online teaching and learning. HBCUs are defined as “Black academic institutions established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and still is, the education of Black Americans” (Roebuck & Murty, 1993, p. 3). Collectively, HBCUs enroll approximately 14% of African American students while comprising only 3% of the 4,100 institutions of higher education (Taylor & Carter, 2006). Since their inception, HBCUs have had the unique honor, challenge, and responsibility to educate a diverse population of students in a time of social and political upheaval, and because of this, it required them to be innovative in their pedagogical approach. It is essential that the faculty who serves these institutions be fully equipped to deliver a quality educational experience and provide greater access through online education.

The population that HBCUs traditionally serves have academic, social, and financial challenges, and educational programs must be prepared and willing to help students navigate the challenges to be successful academically (Davis, 2006). It is the responsibility and obligation of the institution in which they are enrolled and its faculty members to provide students with a quality education that will meet these needs and expectations and prepare them for their professional careers—in this case, social work. Social work programs housed in HBCUs have a unique advantage to respond to these challenges while simultaneously achieving the goals and mission of social work education.

## Literature review

### *Context of online education in social work*

The concerns regarding online teaching and learning in social work education vary. Scholars such as Hill (2014) report the importance of meeting the social and emotional needs of students. For example, in a 2006 study of 25 students in an online clinical social work course, students reported lower scores on instructors’ availability in and out of the class. The authors concluded that their findings reflect students’ generalized need for human contact (Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). Some concerns are regarding educators’ ability to provide students with the knowledge and resources necessary to practice social work in contemporary society (Faux & Hughes, 2000; Moore, 2005; Rafferty, 1997).

Additional concerns center on the lack of uniform standards to which institutions must comply with regard to online teaching and learning. Currently, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting institution of the profession, does not have a set of standards as it does with traditional face-to-face programs. This is of particular concern because as it stands, no criteria exist by which one can assess the reliability, validity, or quality of online education (CSWE, 2015; Foeday, 2011), particularly when it comes to addressing the core competencies.

Furthermore, aside from senior field instruction, which is face to face, how can online education facilitate learning activities that mirror the human reality that occurs in face-to-face interaction? An advantage of the classroom is that guest speakers bring with them a vivid picture of the range of social issues, concerns, and experience in practice. This often adds a level of reality for students to experience vicariously. This experience is more difficult to create in an online space. Also, the potential or opportunity to assess student's emotional state as a result of such an experience cannot be captured in an online environment. These and many other factors can affect a student's ability to acquire the essential skills to become competent social work professionals.

Though the aforementioned challenges exist, social work programs would be remiss if they did not recognize the value and inevitability of online education. Many disciplines are incorporating aspects of online education in their curricula. Many agencies are accepting online degrees as evidence of acquired knowledge and skills required for employment. For social work, online and distance learning enables students to interface with others across the globe providing more breadth and depth to their educational experience. Furthermore, adult learners find online education to be more appealing as they have limited time for synchronized learning that occurs in the face-to-face education.

### ***Online teaching and learning in social work education***

Online teaching and learning in social work education is increasing (Knowles, 2001; Siebert et al., 2006). There are approximately 774 accredited social work programs across the country (CSWE, 2015). Of this number, 42 have registered with the CSWE as having online or distance learning programs either partially (some courses are available online) or fully (100% of their programs is offered online) (CSWE, 2015). Because CSWE currently does not require schools to register their online and distance learning programs, this number is potentially higher. Among the social work programs not listed on CSWE's Web site that also offer online teaching and learning are George Mason University, which currently offers online courses, Jackson State University, which also offers online courses, and Howard University, whose students can take the first semester of their courses online ([www2.howard.edu](http://www2.howard.edu)).

Although some schools are offering online education in social work, there is no uniform approach, and the instructional format varies among schools. As a component of their online education, The University of Southern California (USC) has developed virtual academic centers as part of the goal to become a "national School of Social Work" (Shorkey & Uebel, 2014). This has significant implications for their program enrollments and financial resources. With these academic centers, it is likely that their enrollment will increase, and revenue from enrollment will place the institution in a good financial state, something with which many schools struggle. It is programs like USC's that appear to be maximizing the inevitable demand for online education.

Other institutions are capitalizing on the demand for online education in other ways. For example, Michigan State University offers a distance learning program that is completed over a three-year period. The program comprises asynchronous instruction, synchronous videoconference with faculty once a month, and traditional face-to-face instruction for a one-week period during the summer.

Another example of online education is certificate programs. The University of the District of Columbia (UDC) has an undergraduate social work program. They are also in

the design phase of an online certification in Gerontology. The Gerontology certificate program comprises six courses. Upon completion of the program, students will be certified to practice with the aging population. Also, many of their faculty are becoming certified in online teaching and are converting versions of their face-to-face course for online instruction.

The above information has significant implications for social programs at HBCUs. As HBCUs will continue to compete for students with predominantly white institutions, HBCUs must seriously consider the impact of not having online learning as an option for their students.

### ***Social work programs and student learning***

A social work program that incorporates online teaching and learning in its curriculum is significant as the “explicit curriculum constitutes the program’s formal educational structure” (CSWE, 2015). Many students already struggle in their attempt to learn and comprehend the subject matter (e.g., human behavior theory, research, policy, and practice) and to apply this newly acquired knowledge to practical experience (Petrovich, 2004). In online teaching and learning, this task is exacerbated as students grapple with trying to understand the content and acquire the required skills associated with online teaching and learning (Maidment, 2004).

On the other hand, studies have shown that once students have engaged in online teaching and learning, the students experienced increased confidence and satisfaction with online teaching and learning (Cauble & Thurston, 2000). For example, The University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work implemented an online statistics lab as part of a research methods course. The purpose was to assess whether online instruction would reduce the anxiety students experience while in research methods courses. This 15-week course consisted of 10 lab assignments, one midterm, and one final exam. The authors concluded that students’ reluctance about statistics was reduced. Students also reported an increase in their confidence in the subject area, as well as a likelihood to use statistics in their practice with clients (Elliot, Choi, & Friedline, 2013). However, the results from a qualitative study on technology and learning indicated that students are losing interpersonal skills in online learning. According to one interviewed student:

There is something to be said for coming to class, coming to campus, interactions with fellow classmates, learning new perspectives and hearing other people’s history and actually having one-on-one time with professors, oppose to sitting in the room with a computer it doesn’t add to interpersonal skills, it takes away. (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole, & Rishchynski, 2006, p. 21)

### **Recommended strategies for faculty teaching social work in online environments**

#### ***Preparing faculty to teaching online***

To teach online, faculty needs to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and resources for providing instruction in the online environment. A major and essential strategy for enhancing online teaching is maximizing benefits while reducing the cost of training. When these

professional development opportunities are offered by the university, it saves departments from having to pay for the faculty member to obtain external training. For example, if a program contains five faculty members and it is projected that the cost to train each one might range anywhere from \$800 for a workshop to \$5,000 for a longer training and/or conference, this totals \$4,000–25,000 per individual each year. However, if the online training is offered by the institution, then the cost for the department is only the faculty member's time.

Departments not only save professional development funds by having in-house online teaching training for the faculty, but also increase the potential to train more of their faculty. Consequently, the more faculty who are trained in how to teach online, the more potential there is for online courses to be offered. Along these lines, departments benefit from not having to outsource or hire instructional designers to bolster their online offerings. Though having instructional designers dedicated to building online courses is ideal, many departments do not have the monetary resources to create new positions within their units. Therefore, having faculty members within their units who can build courses and assist other department members serves as a great benefit. Additionally, the online training helps faculty be able to proactively troubleshoot nuanced issues in their courses, many of which would be hard to identify if they were simply teaching online without any formal training.

The UDC provides an online training experience referred to as the Online Learning Academy (OLA). The foci of OLA correspond to the best practices of most online professional development offerings in its focus on development, delivery, and facilitation of online courses (Horvitz & Beach, 2011; Koepki and O'Brien). The preparatory work provides the faculty with a good baseline for this. Additionally, while taking this course, faculty are supported by a coach who helps them build their online courses. OLA is a hybrid faculty development program for instructors to earn certification to build and teach online courses. OLA exposes participants to the online teaching and learning environment as both teachers and students, that is, they build their online courses while participating in the OLA course. As prerequisites to participate in OLA, faculty are required to take a variety of professional development offerings offered by The Research Academy for Integrated Learning (RAIL). These prerequisites include a Blackboard Primer where faculty learn the “nuts and bolts” of how to operate the Blackboard LMS; three professional development workshops that cover topics for teaching online (e.g., use of Web 2.0 tools, video conferencing, etc.); and a workshop on Applying the Quality Matters Rubric (APPQMR) to build online courses. Quality Matters outlines standards for the building learning-centered structured online courses (Quality Matters, 2014). These criteria are used as a framework by the OLA faculty who assist with developing course outcomes.

OLA is in correspondence with what Abdous (2011) suggests as a process-oriented framework that includes a preparation phase, planning phase, design phase, and facilitation phase. In the preparation phase, faculty members are encouraged to participate in development activities to gain an understanding of online teaching pedagogy, adequate knowledge about copyright and intellectual property, knowledge of teaching and learning technology and their limitations, and an understanding of the students based on demographics. The next phase, which is planning, is an opportunity for faculty to develop a syllabus that is structured and student centered. Abdous (2011) maintains that faculty should inventory their existing materials to revise and edit and close any gaps that exist in

the material. OLA faculty also brainstorms options for technology tools for various learning activities. In the last two phases of OLA, faculty aligns syllabi with a menu of learning activities and design appropriate assessments. OLA also uses self-reflections from faculty regarding their progress in their faculty development program and their teaching after exiting the program. Some researchers contend that competencies required to teach online are not different from those needed in a face-to-face format. Either way, most researchers agree that the standards for an online learning environment need to be clear (Abdous, 2011; Storandt, Dossin, & Lacher, 2012).

### ***Learning-centered course design***

The course design, delivery, and assessment of student learning are essential components to the success of online teaching. Course design is the “brainstorming, forethought, and planning that a course designer puts into a course” (Quality Matters.org). This process includes the organization of the course “site.” Poorly designed courses can have an adverse effect on student learning. Instructors must provide explicit instructions on how students are to navigate the course “menu buttons” such as faculty, course content, and discussion boards. This can be accomplished by providing a “start here button.” In this section, students can find all information pertinent to the use and navigation of the course site. Other suggestions for course design include choosing font, course layout and choice and selection menus buttons.

Chunking is another effective approach to course design. Chunking is the process of presenting important information in smaller pieces as opposed to a lengthy and detailed format (Center for Educational Technology [CET], 2003). Chunking can be used to communicate complex course content. Human behavior and research methods are two courses with which social work students struggle most. Chunking content into small units helps students to focus and organize content in a way that is conducive to their learning style. For example, in human behavior, this can be accomplished by chunking theories into categories of theories that address individual issues, group, and community issues. Similarly, the information can be “chunked” into thematic categories such as biological, psychological, sociological, and environmental. The options are endless, and all can facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the material.

Learning modules are another example for chunking. Faculty should consider creating a sequence of learning modules that build upon each other and align with the course structure. For example, a sequence of learning models in a research methods course could include the research process from problem formulation to data analysis. Each module should explicitly state the learning objectives and outcomes, assigned readings, learning activities, assignments, and deadlines for submission of all assignments. By chunking information into learning modules, students can easily digest information thereby improving students’ ability to comprehend content (CET, 2003). Further, students will more easily know precisely the course topic, assignments, and due dates and what they can expect to learn as a result of completing the learning activities.

Course delivery is the implementation of the course design and includes how the faculty member will teach the course in the online environment (Quality Matters, 2014). Within face-to-face learning, this process is somewhat straightforward in that the instructional strategy will be a combination of lecture, PowerPoint, and possibly group discussion



and exercises. These strategies foster interpersonal interaction and increase the ability to assess students' affect, professionalism, and other soft skills specific to social work. The opportunity to create interpersonal interaction is significantly reduced in the online environment. Therefore, the use and implementation of online tools such as discussion forums, video conferencing, and cafés should be used in a way that can increase the probability of creating an interactive and engaging learning environment.

Instructors who teach in an online environment should plan well in advance and be more intentional in making decisions about course delivery. Dedicating additional time to the course delivery allows the instructor to build in strategies that will ensure stimulating and engaging dialogue (Hill, 2014). Moreover, advance planning and preparation is associated with increased self-confidence and reduced stress but also allows the instructor to put in place contingency plans that address potential challenges specific to the online environment (CET, 2003).

Distinguishing between instructional content and instructional activities is equally important for effective online teaching and learning in social work. Instructional content provides information with a goal to educate the students about the subject matter. Examples are required readings, videos, blogs, and lectures. Instructional activities are activities that facilitate student engagement and reinforce students' learning. Videos and blogs can also be instructional activities providing that the video or blog facilitate interaction. Online quizzes, jigsaw puzzles, and matching games are other examples of instructional activities. However, in social work, instructional activities should be creative and innovative so that students can develop cognitive skills and abilities that enable them to build rapport with clients, conduct assessments, develop and implement effective interventions, and terminate with clients (Hill, 2014), all of which are essential core skills of social work practice.

Creating an "instructor presence" is essential for interpersonal connection to occur (Hill, 2014). The interaction that occurs between teacher and the students is paramount to the acquisition of interpersonal communication skills. It is within this context that instructors of social work can "model" professional and appropriate behavior for their students. If the online environment is not adequately developed, the potential of this opportunity/interaction is reduced. Building time and space into online courses for authentic dialogue can easily be accomplished through the use of synchronous meetings as well as the use of other Web 2.0 tools. Timely and specific feedback to discussion board posts, assignments, and students' inquiries will ensure that students are connecting to their instructor and provide the opportunity for instructors to correct negative behaviors and reinforce positive behavior.

The task of developing properly aligned student outcomes, activities, and assessments can be extremely difficult. Social work has a unique advantage in that the student outcomes are predetermined by the CSWE. The competencies and practice behaviors outlined in the Education Policy and Standards serve as our student outcomes (CSWE, 2015). One way to accomplish alignment involves selecting the competency and supporting practice behaviors that best align with the course. In addition, implementing activities that provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate the practice behaviors further ensures alignment. For example, using video conferences in a social work practice course will facilitate interaction between faculty and students and between and among students



while simultaneously allowing for assessing students' professional demeanor in behavior, appearance, and oral communication—a behavior related to the CSWE competencies.

## ***Implications for social work***

### ***Professional development***

Faculty training and education specific to online teaching and learning has residual benefits. The strategies and tools learned can also improve how content is delivered in face-to-face classes. When building an online course, faculty members become keener about the course design process. The increased focus on the learning outcomes and objectives, activities, and assessments in the online space naturally provide faculty with greater skills and abilities to enhance these components in the face-to-face environment. Faculty members also gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the importance of effective communication between and among students and instructors. Furthermore, through participation in professional development activities specific to online, faculty learn more sophisticated uses of LMS to support student learning. This learning tool can also be used to complement face-to-face courses. For example, through the use of LMS-based group discussions and blogs, students practice how to engage in advocacy efforts in a safe and monitored environment. In fact, Ritter (2008) reported that students in his study felt that they were not adequately prepared to engage in a Web-based political environment. Edwards and Hoefer (2010) suggests that social work education programs should provide students and faculty with training related to electronic advocacy as well as to incorporate electronic advocacy in their course assignments. In addition, placing course content of the LMS for students to view prior to class allows the instructor to utilize the in-class time more efficiently (e.g., class discussion and group exercises as opposed to reviewing the reading).

Traditionally, universities have an expectation that faculty will engage in continuing education or professional development activities and keep current with emerging knowledge and empirical data relevant to their respective disciplines. Institutionalizing professional developments for faculty, specifically in the area of online teaching and learning, is a way to keep the cost of online teaching and learning to a minimum. At the University of the District of Columbia, there are opportunities for faculty to meet institutional requirements while advancing their knowledge and skills. For example, at The University of the District of Columbia at the beginning of each semester, all faculty undergo a series of professional development workshops. Several of these workshops are in the area of online teaching and learning. These workshops are provided by the faculty and staff of the Research Academy for Integrative Learning (RAIL), which is a part of their formal responsibilities. This process does not require additional cost to train faculty but ensures that faculty has the most recent and relevant knowledge and skills to build courses and teach in an online environment. In addition to teaching, many faculty members hold licenses in social work and are required by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to acquire continuing education units. Universities can provide Continuing Education Units (CEUs) in online teaching thereby further increasing revenue.

### ***Improved student learning outcomes***

According to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2003), creating quality learning experiences for students in online learning involves providing opportunities that carry out instructional goals and objectives. These two aspects of learning must consider how learners can actively participate in the process of gaining knowledge, skills, and insight. It is important for the faculty to include intentional activities guided by best practices within a particular academic discipline. These activities should be focused on the learning outcomes and objectives for a given course.

Online teaching is contingent upon experiences created and facilitated by faculty prepared to deliver instruction through this medium (Brown & Green, 2011). Today's learners are very diverse. Therefore, it is imperative for faculty to include activities that accommodate that many preferred learning styles that exist (Moore, 2013). Significant learning experiences are facilitated by offering various instructional modalities in a given learning environment. In creating online learning, multiple instructional strategies should be employed to best meet the needs of its students. Adapting some of the models that exist in traditional face-to-face learning provides a rich learning structure for which students are more likely to achieve desired learning outcomes.

Online learning provides increased learning experiences for students by providing convenience and flexibility, accessibility, and a wide range of course options (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). In addition to students being able to make more decisions regarding their education, online learning fosters various opportunities for student enrichment. Student enrichment is obtained with the chance for interaction. Online courses provide a space where every student can have a voice and share their unique ideas and perspectives. In online environments, students can share without fear of speaking in front of their peers and with decreased anxieties that exist in face-to-face instructional settings. Online learning environments also provide a sense of empowerment for students. Students find faculty more approachable and often feel more comfortable communicating with their instructors through online chats, emails, and discussions rather than face to face. Means et al. (2010) also report improved academic performance. On average, students in online learning environments performed modestly better than those receiving face-to-face instruction due to the increased time. The report noted benefits in studies in which online learners spent more time on task than students in the face-to-face courses.

### ***Higher degree of accountability in meeting institutional mission***

The increased focus on quality for online courses has a direct correlation to a professor's ability to meet his or her department and college's overarching objectives. There is an intense and specific focus on making sure the faculty teaching the online courses are effectively using technology to help students achieve the learning goals of the course. Faculty is encouraged to pay closer attention to course structure and format due to the very nature and essence of online learning environments. Thus, many faculty members have reported that when teaching online and preparing for those courses, it has prepared them to better dissect the courses they teach. This often equates to faculty who are paying particular attention to course objectives. When focusing on course objectives, the aim is to make sure the course structure, activities, and assessments are in alignment with the

course objectives. This increases accountability for that instructor in online courses who are required to build courses with the end in mind.

### ***Increased competitiveness for social work with other disciplines who offer online***

Social work is a profession that seeks to relieve human suffering and improve conditions of society. People who are interested in social work as a professional career are concerned with helping people in need. The number of universities that offers online programs and the variety of degrees offered by each should be a concern for schools of social work in HBCUs. As there are many disciplines and predominantly White serving institutions that prepare students for work in human services, providing alternative options for obtaining a degree in social work is pivotal for the survival of social work education at HBCUs.

## **Recommendations**

The increase and variations of online teaching and learning in higher education are evident to social work education in general and becoming more apparent in HBCUs. As educators, we must embrace the inherent potential of online teaching and learning while guarding against its tacit disempowering features (Maidment, 2004). The most logical and cost-effective approach is to institutionalize online teaching and learning into the current professional development mandate. As suggested earlier, this only helps to maximize the benefit of training while maintaining cost.

Institutions must consider the financial implications for online learning for the university, students, and faculty. Students may need to purchase additional software and computers to be successful in an online environment. Similarly, access to technical assistance for troubleshooting and Internet access can all be additional financial burdens for students. As stated earlier, most universities utilize an LMS that, if utilized properly, should not increase the cost of technology. However, with additional students enrolled in online teaching and learning, there is a need for a reliable and effective information technology department, more staff, additional computers, and software for faculty. These and other factors influence the university's ability to offer online classes that are of high quality and valid but, more importantly, to provide a quality education for the students we serve.

Social work programs that have established online teaching and learning programs may consider formal evaluations of their online courses. One suggested method goes beyond the comparative form, that is, online versus face-to-face, but conducts both process and formative evaluations that aim to assess online teaching and learning as a valuable and valid alternative mode of education.

Formal assessment of students' ability to be successful in an online environment is also recommended. In social work, we are connected to our students and have a professional responsibility to care for the learner in a deeper and more involved way than perhaps any other academic discipline. As it relates to online learning, we should think more critically and proactively about how we can set our students up for success. Taking an assessment of students' ability to participate in online learning before admitting them to these courses will provide invaluable information. This information can be used to advise students' decisions about whether to enroll in online courses.

## Conclusion

The online learning space is growing. As it advances, so too does its diversity of learners. Perhaps the most significant impact of online learning is in its potential to positively impact student learning. It also grants capacity to a larger dynamic of students in space and time. Though some might posit social work has not been a traditional discipline in the online space, the profession has not escaped the influence of online teaching and learning in social work education (Colvin & Bullock, 2014). As the scope of Social Work programs broadens, so does the ways we prepare faculty to meet the needs of learners in the discipline. And as some social work programs in HBCUs have limited resources, it is important for them to innovative in addressing the needs of their faculty teaching in these spaces through utilizing cutting-edge pedagogies and professional development training that foster this advanced teaching. This scholarship provided one such innovation for enhancing online teaching. However, social work educators employed at HBCUs should continue to keep themselves informed of the challenges and benefits of online teaching to grow their perspective and lens from which they view the field. In some ways, within the boundaries of the discipline and instructional approach, our imagination is our limit.

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