Swimming Up Stream: The Experiences of a Pioneer in Distance Education

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Distance education raises many questions for social work educators. Among them are how to manage faculty workload, which teaching strategies are effective with each new technology, and how to reward faculty for their efforts? A faculty member's journey is shared including the most rewarding, as well as the most difficult aspects of teaching and administration of a distance education program.

Introduction

The youngest of seven children, I have always enjoyed working with people. Growing up in a large Catholic family, with a mother who chose nursing as her profession, I was attracted to professions that assisted those in need. In college, I worked as a lifeguard and swimming instructor and found the work very rewarding. I worked with very young children, and on one occasion had a mother tell me the story of how her toddler fell in their backyard swimming pool and was able to swim to the side of the family pool because of the swimming instruction that I had provided. It struck me how great it felt to know that the work I was doing was important to the well-being of others. Although I had not yet chosen social work as my profession, I knew that I wanted to engage in work that would focus on helping others.

As a Bachelor's degree student, I had a year-long internship working with special education students. My major was Social Ecology, and I was most attracted to the mental health courses. I found that although I was working in a school placement, most of my students had family, peer, and mental health problems. I provided many behavioral interventions in the classroom and crisis intervention counseling sessions, in addition to educational testing services and assisting students with homework assignments. This experience caused me to consider special education teaching or social work as a major in my Master's program. I received my Master's degree in 1982 from the University of Southern California.

With my MSW, my first job was in a private psychiatric hospital. I provided psychosocial evaluations, group and family counseling, and crisis intervention on an adolescent unit. I continued working at that hospital until 1992 and eventually worked all units, which included Alcohol Treatment, Eating Disorders, and Adult and locked units. I joined two different private practice groups during those years and learned many techniques for working with individuals and families who suffer from a variety of mental disorders. In that setting, I felt the need for additional clinical training to include psychological testing. I pursued my Doctoral degree at Pepperdine University in Clinical Psychology from 1986-1990. By 1992, I had obtained two clinical licenses, the LCSW and Licensed Psychologist. I was then working with a private practice housed on the campus of a Christian university. I was teaching in the MFT program, supervising students in practicum, and providing clinical services in both outpatient and inpatient settings.

Although many people say that they just know what profession they will go into, this was not the case for me. I had not formally decided to teach; rather, after obtaining my Doctorate I was enlisted by my then-supervisor, Curt Rouanzoin. He was a mentor and psychologist who felt that those who teach clinical skills should also be practicing and supervising students. I worked in a model of

practice where several psychologists offered services to the community (i.e., a large group practice) at a low cost and supervised students who provided direct service. Students not only received formal supervision and classroom instruction by their faculty, they also had the opportunity to observe their faculty providing direct service to clients. It was truly a level of accountability that was impressive it kept faculty always abreast of new techniques and practice issues.

I had not made a formal decision to pursue academia as a career, but rather found serendipitously that after having practiced for many years, I really enjoyed teaching clinical skills to students. I found pleasure in the thought that I could expand my opportunity to help others by teaching many students who can reach a much larger community than any individual practicing clinician. In 1994, I sent out resumes to both MFT and MSW programs in search of my first faculty position. It was Jim Kelly, the then-Director of the Department of Social Work, who responded to my resume and offered me a full-time lecturer position to teach clinical skills to MSW students.

Background

In 1995, I was asked by Jim Kelly, Director of the Department of Social Work, to teach a Human Behavior course in the newly established MSW Distance Education (DE) Program. The method of delivery was interactive television (ITV). The biggest concern that I had regarding teaching over ITV was the lack of face-to-face contact with the students. I wondered how this might impact my relationships with students. Making my first visits to each site reassured me that I could make relationships with students over the technology.

My fondest memory of teaching rural students was being so impressed that they would attend professional socialization functions on Friday evenings to discuss issues related to social work. They were hungry for knowledge, and the level of commitment and determination of these students who worked, raised families, and still found time for graduate education in social work impressed me.

By the next year, I was hooked on DE and began teaching practice methods courses to the same students. I most enjoyed hearing stories of rural service delivery and common social problems encountered in their agencies. My own practice had been in urban psychiatric hospitals and some outpatient mental health clinics. One of the best days in practice class was when my brother (an attorney) was a guest lecturer on family law. He covered the use of a restraining order to assist in the protection of victims of domestic violence. Some of my rural students corrected him regarding the use of the term "survivor" rather than "victim" and the procedure of "calling the local judge at home" rather than "filing paperwork with the court." Rural versus urban differences in the practice of social work and law stimulated a lively discussion. Having never practiced in a rural area, I really learned much from my students who had been given much responsibility for their level of education and few supervisors or mentors to assist them. I think of that first class of DE students as "pioneers." They had to endure the training process as each faculty member became familiar with the technology and the new teaching strategies necessary to be successful with this method of course delivery.

I continued to enjoy my teaching of DE students for the next five years, and began to write about teaching strategies and the evaluation of the student learning outcomes. In 2000, I was asked to coordinate the administration of the DE program by John Oliver, Director of the Social Work Department. This represented a change in administrative approach. Prior to that time, the DE program had been run by a full-time
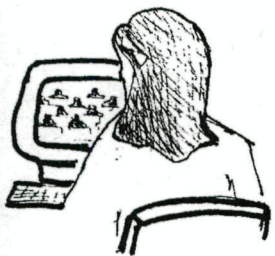
lecturer. At the time, I worried about not having enough time to publish, given the time demands of my new administrative role. By this time, the program had grown to include four DE sites and included 67 students. The job required supervision of four site coordinators and an administrative assistant. It was my first administrative post, and I worried if my education had prepared me for such a role. Most of my colleagues from Pepperdine were by now engaged in private psychology practices. At the time of my first Pepperdine reunion, I was the only graduate who had gone into full-time academia. It made me question, "Was I a fish out of water?"
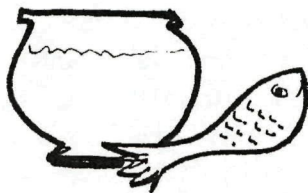

Barriers

As a Distance Education Coordinator, I encountered many barriers. The first was faculty workload. When the new DE program was established, teaching a DE course meant responsibility for the 63 students who were connected by ITV over three sites across the state. Additionally, it meant committing to four weekends away from home to visit the students and provide professional socialization activities in their communities. It also involved preparation of visual presentation of materials, usually PowerPoint presentations, for each lecture. It entailed early preparation of materials that needed to be mailed out for students to receive prior to class. At that time, some of our rural sites required five days for a mailing to arrive. This ruled out the opportunity for last minute changes. Unfortunately, the faculty did not foresee the added workload, so the first proposal did not include additional pay or time off. One

colleague described teaching in DE as a "labor of love." Other colleagues were not as kind and described faculty who would teach with this workload for no additional pay as naïve or crazy. This problem was easily resolved by the second cycle when faculty voted to compensate a DE course at double the rate of an on-campus course. With the compensation issue resolved, many more faculty members were willing to teach in the DE program and learn the new teaching strategies required to be successful. This was an important barrier to overcome as our accreditation body, the Council on Social Work Education, requires that social work programs use the same faculty in the DE program as in the on-campus program, as well as equivalent textbooks and assignments.

Another barrier to overcome was the lack of integration of the DE program into the main campus. For example, DE students were required to take a writing proficiency exam on the main campus rather than at their local campus. This was not possible due to travel distances involved, so the DE Coordinator was sent to each DE site to administer a writing proficiency exam during our first two cohorts. By the third cohort (2001), this issue was resolved by having a new university policy, which allowed substitution of the GRE Writing Assessment test. This solution was a cost savings for the DE program, as well as time saving on the part of the DE Coordinator. It was gratifying to me to see a university policy change that acknowledged the DE program.

Collaboration

One of the most difficult aspects of the DE program was the collaboration with other campuses. Each campus is structured with budgets specific to that campus. Therefore, there was no way to share credit for student enrollment (i.e., FTES) with another campus. This would have benefited the rural campuses that were in need of FTES to increase their budget allocation. Additionally, faculty at the
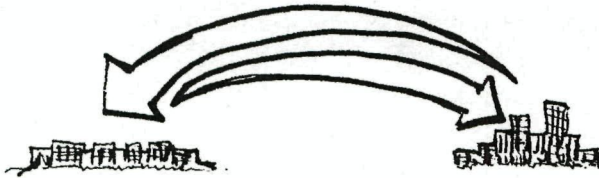
rural campuses were needed by our program to teach specific courses in the DE program, such as Computers in Social Work, which is taught in a computer laboratory. Similarly, faculty workload is not shared across campuses; therefore, if we hired a faculty member from the rural campus to teach one of our courses, it was as an overload for that faculty member. This was challenging as many faculty members found that they were not able to manage the overload, although they verbalized that they would be happy to teach a DE course if it could have been counted as part of their regular workload. This was problematic as we had several courses (about 25% of the curriculum) that needed to be taught in a face-to-face format. The difficulty was twofold: the ability of faculty members to manage a part-time (3-unit) overload in addition to covering their full-time commitment at the rural university, as well as the fact that there were no other faculty members to replace them at their university, even if there had been a way to share the workload between campuses. I think that collaboration among campuses would be the easier issue to manage. The barrier was overcome primarily by offering DE courses on Saturdays and over the summers when some faculty members were able to manage the workload.

Quality

Faculty on the main campus had many reservations about the initial use of ITV for teaching social work courses, particularly for practice methods courses. During the planning phase, a consultant, Frank Raymer, was hired from the University of Southern California School of Social Work. He had experience with DE and answered questions that were raised by faculty about the quality of the education that students in DE programs receive. He was an excellent resource as his institution had been involved with DE for many years and had successfully navigated the accreditation process. His visit smoothed the way to a positive faculty vote in favor of adding the DE model to our large urban MSW program.

Many concerns focused on the quality of the DE program, but faculty also wondered if we could mange to maintain the quality of the on-campus program due to draining our faculty resources for the DE program. This concern was reiterated when a faculty vote for the second cohort was taken. Some faculty members felt that the drain to our on-campus program was a cost that was too high to pay. This was compounded by the faculty vote to count the DE courses as a double load, which indeed meant that when professors taught in the DE program, they were even less available to teach on-campus students.

These concerns were not unfounded. A program evaluation is required by our accreditation body (i.e., the Council on Social Work Education) to assure that the on-campus and DE students are equivalent. Each year we compare student grades, course evaluations, and fieldwork evaluations. Because we have a special emphasis on multicultural social work practice, we also give a survey related to the students' experience with diversity and cross-cultural sensitivity. The overall evaluations have been generally equivalent for the seven years of the program's existence. Small differences in student evaluations of individual courses vary depending on many issues, including the level of faculty members' experience with teaching that course and their comfort level with teaching over the technology.

In general, faculty members get the same evaluations on campus as they do in DE.

However, if it is a new course for a professor, it is not a good idea to also make it new over technology. The technology will enhance issues that are unclear to students and they have fewer in-person opportunities with the professor to resolve difficulties with the material or the teaching style. I have noticed that professors who use more linear techniques, such as outlining what is to be covered ahead of time and in some cases providing overheads to students in advance, are evaluated more highly by DE students. Also, if the professor's style is more abstract in presentation, students may have a difficult time following over ITV, and some have complained that they could not follow the course material nor understand what is expected of them.

At times, the issue of faculty drain from the main campus was evident in our evaluation materials, when DE students did better and were more satisfied with their course than the on-campus students. When program administrators saw this, we made greater efforts to mix experienced and inexperienced faculty over all of our program models. As the DE Coordinator, I am always tempted to pull our most experienced faculty into DE because I reason that students are at a disadvantage if they are unhappy with a course, as they have no opportunity to transfer
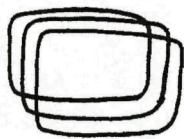
to another section. However, on-campus students experienced the same issue one semester, when all of the research methods course instructors were put into DE thesis committees, leaving no one who had taught this preliminary course to serve as thesis advisors to the on-campus students.

Accreditation

The idea of teaching over technology is an issue for CSWE. In 1995, the old standards for accreditation were in place and initiating a DE program required special permission. A detailed proposal had to be written to explain the method of delivery for each course with a justification as to why it would be effective. Additionally, how fieldwork would be set up and supervised from a distance had to be outlined. The proposal had to explain what evaluation plan would be used and yearly reports to CSWE were included in the plan. The proposal was written one year prior to students beginning courses.

The basis for the evaluation was to compare on campus with DE students and to show equivalence. This method was criticized as being a deficit model, seeking to show that DE students are as good as on-campus students, which supposes that on-campus teaching is superior. Little testing of whether traditional teaching was effective had been conducted. Many social work faculty and administrators questioned the staff at CSWE about why DE programs were held to higher standards than were on-campus programs. After seven years of evaluation, which generally demonstrated equivalence, I asked a staff member if I had to submit another proposal for an "experimental program." It seemed to me that the experiment is over and we now have a standard part of our program that includes a DE model. Many of the same questions are being now raised, such as whether Web delivery is as good as traditional models.

Many of these questions may be answered by the focus on outcome assessments beyond student grades and faculty course evaluations. When outcome measures are established to cover each course and the overall goals of the MSW curriculum, this should answer many of the questions about technology that are currently raised. If

students can meet the standards set on the outcome assessment tool, then the method of course delivery should no longer be an important focus. It seems to me that too much emphasis has been placed on the technology rather than on teaching methods and strategies.

Funding

Funding for the DE program has been, for us, a combination of student tuition and grants. We are fortunate in California to have the hardware for compressed video equipment already installed at our state-supported campuses. Additionally, we have Federal IV-E funding though the California Social Work Educational Center (CalSWEC), grants to support students, and programs designed to educate the workforce in public child welfare. This means that students who work for the agency that houses the child welfare function in each county are eligible to receive reimbursement for tuition, books, and travel to allow them to complete an MSW degree. This grant pays for the costs of the program not covered by student tuition, including coordinators, administrators, travel expenses, equipment, and clerical assistance.

The CalSWEC funders then require that the university recruit at least 50% of the students from public child welfare employees. This is difficult when recruiting students from rural areas, as there may be a smaller workforce to recruit from than in urban areas. A complicating factor is that counties differ in how they support their employees in this process. Some counties allow students to work part time during years two and three of the program so that they may complete the required 16 hours of fieldwork. This makes it difficult for students, as they may need additional funding to cover living costs. Other counties pay their employees full-time salaries while they are completing their fieldwork requirements. Although this is not a decision that the university makes, it does mean that some students have been unable to complete the program due to financial reasons.

University Reward Structure

After serving as a full-time lecturer for five years, and as a tenure-track assistant professor for three years, I asked to be evaluated for early tenure and promotion in the fall of 2001. I had been involved with teaching in and administration of the DE program and had written extensively about both. At that time, no inclusion was made in the University's policies regarding tenure and promotion about the use of technology in the faculty evaluation process. My materials presented for tenure and promotion looked unusual in that most of my articles had focused on DE and most of my service contributions related to socialization of DE students, advising of DE students, and program development toward new social work programs at other campuses. I think one of the most difficult aspects of evaluation of the service contributions of individuals involved in DE is the lack of visibility on one's own campus or in one's own community. In my own case, I spend at least 20% of my work life out of town teaching or overseeing the DE program. Therefore, my RTP materials would reflect less on-campus and community service than would those of a traditional faculty member who is not involved in this amount of required travel.

Although my tenure and promotion were granted, I think that being a pioneer has its disadvantages. The lack of clear guidance from the University in this area left confusion on the part of the committee and certainly at times became confusing for me. I can say, thankfully, that at this time our University is aggressively working on developing policies that will reward faculty for their work in the area of technology. As more faculty members are using course software such as "Blackboard" and spending more time in preparing materials for visual presentation, they will want to know that they are protected

when it comes to the RTP process. I think others in the future who go up for tenure and promotion with a focus on technology will not face the same questions that I faced. As for my experience, I think the preparation of RTP materials helped me find clarity about the contributions of DE to the profession and to the University.

Conclusions

For me, distance education is exciting because of the opportunities it provides to learn and develop new skills. Technology itself is not what drives me; rather, technology is a bridge to connect people who can work together on common goals. It was the development of a program that was able to meet important goals (i.e., increasing the number of MSWs in California, and assisting campuses in the development of new MSW programs) that drove me. I found excitement in planning and implementing new programs that meet the needs of a diverse group of communities. I most enjoyed the problem-solving process, which I first learned in my clinical work and now realize is at the heart of any administrative task. I realized that the ability to form relationships, which are so essential to clinical work and academic teaching, is also at the center of any administrative task. Reflecting back, I can see how the experiences in my family, clinical work, and academic teaching have all prepared me for the administrative work in which I am now engaged.