Sensemaking

Terra Incognita: The Computer on the Couch

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In days of old when mapmakers were not certain of the exact typography of the areas they were mapping, rather than leaving them blank, or making up a shape, they would label the area "terra incognita." That "unknown territory" was generally illustrated as a vast ocean with all types of sea monsters, threatening and terrifying to behold. The analogy is appropriate for this article as we are entering uncharted waters, and forecasts about the use of the technologies such as the Internet to do therapy might result in our dropping off the end of the earth. Or worse!Hopefully the reader will excuse me if the beginning of this article is initially autobiographical; it's because the editor suggested I start with my own experience with technology. I begin in 1970 when I got an award to study the use of computers in the social sciences at an institute at the University in Boulder, Colorado. I was teaching social work at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) in Cleveland at the time. I was the only social worker in the institute and the only practitioner. I was less interested in how to do research, and more interested in how computers might be used in social work. Some of the Colorado faculty were up on various attempts to make the computer more human-like and were trying to get computers to act like people. It was an exciting learning experience and a year later I organized a workshop at CWRU on "Social Work in the Year 2001, and presented a paper Can Computers do Social Work? It became the lead article in the Sept. 1972 issue of *Social Work.* [1]

It was a review of what was possible at the time, and how computers might be used in mental health community organization and influencing social policy. While I saw technology as an important tool, I also discussed some of the reservations I had related to power and social control issues that might result from narrow ownership of computer technology.

I was particularly fascinated at the time by a computer program called *Eliza.* You could type in questions and the computer would give you "helpful" answers. Of course it would type those back onto the screen, as there was no sound or speech at the time. After about a dozen questions it would start to repeat the answers. But it was so good that in some tests persons couldn't tell you if it was a computer responding to one's questions or a live person. I tried it out in one of my practice classes and it was an immediate success.

A year later in 1973 I taught a course on the Future, and presented a paper on teaching about the future in 1974 at the Council on Social Work Education.

My favorite article on technology, the most fun, was written the following year for *Social Work,* it was entitled "Will the Real Jane Addams Stand Up?"[2] It made sense to me to clone Jane Addams. She is beyond doubt one of the giants in the field, and having a dozen or so of her around might work wonders for our field. I wonder if it might still be done if we could get a lock of her hair or something. But remember there are monsters in those uncharted waters. Would a dozen Janes compete with each other or would they

work as a mutual aid team? Would we have to balance the growth of settlements and community organization by cloning a dozen Mary Richmonds to develop more charity organization societies (or current equivalents)?

I also had Jane as a computer program that could control social workers by distance through an implant to respond as she would to clients. There was Jane as a robot, and a few other things; some of this can certainly be done with our current technology, but at the time, it was science fiction. But it gave social workers something to think about.

My view of technology may differ a little from current definitions. For example, I believe that in social work the use of case records in teaching was a helpful technology. Like Ivan Illich, I believe in convivial technologies, things everyone can use without a lot of training, like the telephone. One of the greatest technologies that benefited person-kind was when Dr Lister suggested that doctors and nurses wash their hands with soap before they see their patients

Computers are becoming convivial tools. The community organizer can mobilize a petition or a rally nation-wide by instantaneous emails. The researcher can find and use data and compare client responses, finding out what works. But conviviality can also breed opportunity for quackery in helping, as well as excellence, and that is a problem that needs examination. Cyber space is the Terra Incognita of our times. The Internet has become a wide-open arena for virtual counseling. Some of what many therapists do in face-to-face work with a client is being done over the web. Information is given, questions answered and referrals made. You may take tests, some of which will lead to an immediate assessment and a recommendation to see a therapist for a fee, often suggesting, but not insisting that it be those on the web site being viewed. I was referred for therapy when I answered "sometime," the middle response in a five-item response to all questions on a "Mania Questionnaire." I believe that most people would have responded similarly to "I have been full of energy" and "my mind has never been sharper."

While there are people who would rather talk to a computer than to a real person, there does not yet seem to be a way for the computer counselor to deal with major clinical problems online, such as child and spouse abuse or clinical depression, other than providing information, warnings or support group information which can be helpful for some. Questions of confidentiality in online counseling are ubiquitous; bosses often read workers' email; others, including family members, may see the messages; messages get sent to wrong addresses by mistake. Fortunately a number of professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association and NASW are working on ethical issues related to online therapy.

Current research on the success of therapy indicates that a substantial and crucial factor in determining successful treatment, at least from the clients' perspective is the nature of the relationship and the feeling of caring and respect they feel from the worker. Human relationship is the one thing that the computer is not able to offer.

What we have in essence is a technology of people sending a question and getting an answer. It might as well have been a letter or a phone call. What does the technology have to offer? A major contribution can be access. It is available for people in areas where a therapist might not be available, or the client's mobility restricted. A virtual group for an isolated child with a disability can be a "life saver." Clearly such use is an important "substitute" and with careful attention provides a valuable service. Remember, we were once called friendly visitors. Have you been visited by a computer lately?

The computer is making valuable contributions in many areas, for example in the education and licensing of social workers. You can take courses for your licensing requirements, or to get a degree in social work. But there are also risks that in this type of education, practice related education, the computer can become the true "Ivory Tower". It has a lot of information, but not necessarily what the student needs at the time. It can't meet the "requisite variety" and the ability to be a "bricoleur" (think of what MacGyver was able to do in his T.V. show with duct tape and a penknife). It can't match the variety demanded by 25 students eager to talk to you about various approaches to problems they are having with clients, their agency or the broader social system. Nor can it offer the bricolage available to educator-practitioners who have been with students and clients in real, not virtual reality for years, and have learned to rely on their own creative instincts under pressure. People don't always make decisions based on facts, but on feelings, and the computer hasn't gotten there yet.

The sense making of social work is that the profession underlines the responsibility of the social worker to empower persons to deal with the obstacles to the development of productive and satisfying lives. Our profession assumes the further responsibility of helping develop institutional resources that will provide a just society. Social work is humanism in action. No one has yet suggested that role for the computer. As far as forecasting the future, why don't you try it?

The Future of Social Work Will Be:

Great_____

Fair _____

Gloomy _____

None of the Above _____

Makes sense to me.

Endnotes

[1] Abels, P.(1972). Can Computers do Social Work? *Social Work.* (17)5, September

[2] Abels, P.(1973). Will the Real Jane Addams Stand Up? *Social Work.* (18)7. November