

Virtual Field Education: The Global Connection

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University of New England School of Social Work field educators reflect upon the successful implementation of an online field education program within their fully-online master in social work program option. They discuss the early meetings, the school's history, efforts to find a common voice, and the model adopted, defined as a translation not migration. They stress the value of collaboration and share their favorite do's and don'ts. They conclude by stressing the value of a strong infrastructure in place prior to attempting such a project.

The Announcement

Several years ago, we learned of a mandate that charged us with creating a fully-online master in social work program option. We might have appeared to be apoplectic at first. We certainly had not anticipated a relational profession such as social work being offered online, much less to become an educationally sound online program. We could not even imagine it.

Our campus-based program was highly successful, and we were very proud of it. We could not visualize that work, those classes, translating into online course work. We asked ourselves: With the steep learning curve present in this campus-based program, what are the possibilities of creating a successful online education environment for this program? How do we even begin to identify the appropriate questions we need to explore? These, and other questions, came fast and furious about the university's mandate to create a fully-online master in social work program option. Truth be told, we seriously doubted the possibility that the online plan could become successful at all.

In spite of these strengths, even this close knit, hard working, creative group of field educators had that deer-in-the-headlights look. Where do we begin?

The Early Days: Meetings and More Meetings

In the beginning, there were meetings, and then,

there were more meetings. Many meetings. Initially, our school's director met with the field faculty to flesh out our thinking, our questions and feelings about this project and the process. After that, we branched out to many meetings with highly skilled course designers, and with computer technology staff who responded and answered many of our questions. Their responses and expertise facilitated our learning to generate the appropriate questions, and also helped us to understand the wide spectrum of options online technology can provide.

In hindsight, this phase facilitated our process of addressing our fears and pushing through them and through our anxiety. In doing so, we were able to shift from fear and anxiety into curiosity and possibility. Amazingly, this seemed to have been a reasonably rapid transition, as we discovered that we were motivated by the possibilities and the challenges. While the work to transform our campus-based program option to an online program option was enormous, we found the challenge to be exhilarating. This, indeed, was another huge surprise. And, yet another unexpected outcome of this project was to learn more about one another's strengths, tolerances of the unknown, and hidden or assumed skill sets.

Our History

Before we continue to share the story about our journey in creating a virtual field education classroom, we want to provide some information

about our history as a school of social work. In 1988, the University of New England School of Social Work officially came into existence as a part of the Westbrook College of Health Professions, and is located on the Portland, Maine, campus. To date, we have graduated 913 master level social workers. Our full-time faculty has grown from six to nineteen faculty members. Our online program option currently has 567 students enrolled, with 254 students involved in field orientation, field planning, or in the process of completing their internships/seminar course. Our students are located in 48 states, as well as in Central America, Asia, Europe, Canada, Guam, and in American Samoa.

Finding a Common Voice

At this point in our journey, we came to understand that it was essential to have many thoughtful conversations, but that it was essential to move forward with a common voice. We had many lofty goals, which would require a great deal of hard work. We were united in our belief in the need for a common voice, and we functioned well as a team.

Our team met often, using critical thinking to hammer out each issue in pursuit of our common voice. We credit our instinct to find a common voice and our history of having worked with one another as major factors in creating a successful translation from the campus-based field education program to the online field education program. While it was certainly more work for us to find our common voice, an easier route may have been to have assigned one person to do all the work and design. There was value in striving for a broad-based consensus, but it was a more difficult and longer process. Nevertheless, we adamantly believe this improved our outcome.

Determining Our Model

Our first significant challenge in the actual program development phase of this journey involved determining whether to use a synchronous model, with all students logging into the course at the same time, or to use an asynchronous model, with students having the option to log into the course at any time. This was a critical decision, one that needed to be made early in the process. We chose the asynchronous model because we understood that this model would allow the school to maximize the

benefits of online education. Our decision to create the flexibility for students to log on our classes within a reasonably generous time frame expanded the possibility for working students to fit in school, as well as for their personal lives and other responsibilities. Those of us who teach in our campus-based program exclusively admit to online Integrating Seminar envy. The asynchronous model expands the time for the Integrating Seminar class from 90 minutes weekly in the campus-based program to a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week time frame for the online Integrating Seminar class. Time zones are not an issue with this model; therefore, it opens up the possibilities for more diversity within a global classroom.

Another strong positive for the asynchronous model and the online class environment was that it appealed to a wider variety of learning styles. We realized that students who are shy will more likely find their voice through this type of class offering. Also, students who need more time to process their responses can take the time they need before responding.

Because students make a bi-monthly video to create their check in for the Integrating Seminar class, they have the benefit of seeing themselves present an issue, and to learn more about their body language and presentation styles.

The further we delved into creating the field education program, the clearer it became that this model capitalized on more of the opportunities offered with online education. Our course designer helped us to be mindful regarding the importance of setting limits and expectations with all assignments, which promoted more concise, thoughtful discussions, small group work, quality presentations, and check-ins. In addition, it helped to address a potentially overwhelming workload for the teacher. We learned that another significant benefit to online education was that it required the participation of all students. A student cannot hide online!

Students receive timely feedback from the course instructor, as most of the faculty who teach online join in the discussion forums on a daily basis, and most peers provide reasonably quick responses to presentations. Also, students quickly form strong

alliances with one another, and use their colleagues and the instructor during the week for consultation on difficult situations or cases they may encounter during their internships. A unique difference between teaching in the classroom and in the online environment is the transition from the instructor as expert to the instructor as facilitator. As noted earlier, we do not need to solve the issues in an hour seminar, but can work on solutions over the course of seven days, or even longer, if necessary.

We discovered unexpected gains that benefited our already well-developed and positive professional relationships. We had created new situations to learn more about each other's strengths, and we were successful in understanding how to play to each other's strengths. For example, one of us was strongly opposed to the asynchronous model, and initially could not grasp the assets of the online educational environment. Now there is a mutual understanding of the difference between distance education and online learning. Distance education does not capitalize on the many assets of the virtual classroom and has drawbacks and limitations.

We Have Done a Translation, Not a Migration

The principles of the University of New England School of Social Work Field Education Program remained consistent, both for the campus-based and for the online program options. Each student is seen as the expert. We believe students know who they are and that they understand how to use the faculty and their advisors to understand and recognize their strengths, as well as to identify the areas in which they need further development. Students also receive guidance to help them focus on where they may want to go in the profession. The field education program guides, supports, and is closely involved in field planning. The field education program faculty have final approval regarding field placement selections, as well as in selecting who becomes field instructors in both programs. In the online field education program option and in the campus-based option, the field planner or the field advisors make sure the fit is there for all students with their field placements and their field instructors.

Critical thinking has been a constant from day one. All students have field visits each semester. Campus-based students are visited at their field

placements and online students meet virtually via Skype. This is a three-way meeting with the student, field instructor, and the field advisor, and takes place live online. Frequently, the field instructor or student will pick up their laptop computer and walk it around the agency to provide a tour for the field advisor, similar to how field advisors in the campus-based program receive agency tours from students during field visits.

All field instructors, new and seasoned, are provided with an orientation, which is typically five to six hours long, and receive CEUs. In our campus-based program option, a field instructor orientation is held at the school of social work during the beginning of the academic year. Our school provides a CD with all the resources a field instructor might need over the academic year. We maintain contact throughout the year via email, phone calls, and face-to-face visits. In our online field education program option, we created an Online Field Instructor Orientation, which includes all the same field education resources that are made available over the academic year for our online field instructors. We also created the Field Instructor Corner, which provides our online field instructors with networking and support for each other. Occasionally, they may learn of other social workers in their area who are also field instructors with the University of New England. They also discover they can network globally with social workers throughout the United States and beyond.

In determining our model, we examined what works well for the long established campus-based program, and then developed a different model that translated the essence of our field education program for the online program option.

In the campus-based program model, the field advisor is one field education faculty member who fulfills the role of the field planner, field liaison, field developer, and Integrating Seminar instructor. In the online program option, this role encompasses three positions. The field planner guides the student in securing their field placement and their field instructor. Both the field placement and field instructor must be approved by the field planner. The field advisor is the seminar instructor and the field liaison to the field agency. As the online field education program grew, we created opportunities

for field faculty to choose to work primarily as foundation year field advisors and seminar instructors or advanced year field advisors and seminar instructors. This provides more opportunities for field faculty to teach to their strengths, and as this occurred, they developed more passion for their teaching, which has translated to a better experience for students. Although the two program models may appear different, the key component for both models is the communication among the field faculty. This also insures comparability between the campus and the online option.

Translating what worked well for the campus-based program was an exciting process. Fortunately, we had excellent course designers and computer technology staff to help us understand this new way of learning. The outcome resulted in keeping the best of the goals and principles of the established campus-based program option, while creating an online program field education option in a new environment.

How does an online field education program option address the relational connection with students and their faculty? The relational connection in seminar is alive online. This is evident in the following description from one of us who is now teaching totally online:

Having taught in the classroom since 2003, I did not believe this true transition could occur. I often say, I moved into the online teaching role with much reservation and little faith. I am now a happy convert and could not imagine going back to the classroom. I LOVE teaching in the online environment. I feel a part of a learning environment that never existed in the same intense way in the classroom.

The 24/7 model allows for a continuous learning environment. We have taken full advantage of technology, and, therefore, have created the ability for our students to connect, communicate, and develop online relationships. We use a hallway forum for students to talk on an ongoing basis, but we also moved beyond this and have students use a video check in format. They video record themselves and talk about weekly challenges from their field placements. This allows the students to

see and talk to each other throughout the week. This check-in format mirrors our in-class seminar up to a point.

In the classroom, we are constricted by the weekly one to two hours of classroom time. Online students can check in at anytime during the week as they need support, consultation, or just to vent. We have watched these students develop meaningful peer relationships over the period of 32 weeks. The students spend more time and detail in the online conversations than they did in the classroom. (See comments from online students below).

Students in the field seminar spend 32 weeks conversing, consulting, learning, and advising. They see one another and develop true relationships. Student comments include: "This class will definitely be difficult to end. Because all of us have gone through this together. We have become close and have developed a relationship that not many other people can understand. Fortunately, I think that we will have more opportunities to rely on each other!" (D.A., SSW 522); "Bringing ethical issues to this group reminds me to continue to raise ethical issues with colleagues as we leave this group" (E.R.P., SSW 522); "Thank you all. This was such a great learning experience." (D.S.B., SSW 522). The student feedback has been very positive. We have seen how an online environment can be equal to or better than teaching in a classroom.

Another advantage to the online MSW program is the ability to have all assignments shared with peers. Again the classroom often limits the students' time to share their learning projects. Students online post assignments, and they chat in a discussion forum daily. The assignments include a presentation relating to a social justice issue at their field placement, research and discussion on mandatory reporting in their states, process recordings, case presentations, and a self-care corner. This seminar is further enhanced by having the above assignments researched and reported from all across the United States and internationally. Students are asked to post in the self-care corner weekly about how they are taking care of themselves. They discuss family, traditions, stress, and techniques they find helpful for stress reduction. This has been a wonderful addition to our seminar, and our field instructors have shared that this reminds them to

focus on their own self-care.

If you are willing to explore a variety of computer technologies available, think outside of the box and remain flexible, the sky is the limit.

Some of Our Favorite Do's and Don'ts

Finally, we would like to share some lessons and principles we truly believe were key to our success:

* Collaboration and Teamwork. The knowledge that we, as colleagues, already had to tackle difficult tasks is what enabled us to plow through and use our collective thinking to resolve dilemmas and challenges.

* Flexibility and Patience. These traits are never-ending, useful, and familiar social work skills

* A tireless willingness to problem-solve together and to keep our sense of humor!

* Having a solid, highly-skilled and talented technology support department is an essential resource

* Having talented instructional designers who recognize that the faculty are in charge of the content and use their expertise to translate our ideas into a virtual classroom.

We learned that it is extremely important to have a solid infrastructure in place prior to initiating an online program. This was not the case for us at the University of New England School of Social Work, and consequently, we encountered, and continue to encounter, many challenges as we build that infrastructure, while at the same time offering our program.

So, roll up your sleeves, and be ready for a challenge. Don't expect a smooth transition. Don't get discouraged. Don't accept no for an answer. Don't expect that you will have all the answers all the time. Don't forget to make time to take care of yourself.

Remember to laugh often!

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