Learning How to Teach Macro Practice Online:
A Commitment to Social Work's Roots

Jordan Wilfong

Abstract: Despite the growing level of social inequality occurring in communities across the US, evidence suggests that social work programs are less frequently emphasizing macro practice courses and the importance of addressing community-level problems, usually since students have less interest in it. I found this particularly apparent in my first semester teaching an online macro practice social work course, during which students from all across the country expressed varying interest levels in and opinions on how to address community social problems. This article traces my experience overcoming difficulties teaching online social work students about the importance of macro practice and my overall concerns about distance education. An additional discussion is included on the need for online education to maintain social work's macro practice and social justice roots.

Keywords: online education, macro social work, social justice, community practice, policy practice

Introduction

The belief that individuals should work together within their home communities to address social problems is the main reason I became a social worker. This conviction has been rooted in US social work for over a century, beginning with organizations such as the Hull House and Charity Organization Societies, which pioneered work to address poverty, inequality, public health, and other critical issues (Kirk & Reid, 2002; Reisch, 2016). Therefore, when I was offered as a doctoral student to teach in an online social work program, my initial reaction was one of reluctance. More to the point, my concern stemmed from a belief that social work education could lose sight of its original objective of helping students solve social problems within their home communities.

This article traces my experience navigating how to teach macro social work practice online while remaining true to my belief that social workers should focus on addressing local problems and building communities. Specifically, I reflect on whether distance education represents a step forward for social work or lessens students' ability to develop practice skills like they would within an in-class setting. Furthermore, I describe an activity from my online class that helped students analyze social problems within their home communities.

My Skepticism of Online Social Work

My decision to become a social worker is among the best I have ever made. I often reflect on how the values and ethics of social work are almost an exact replica of my own. My path to social work began when I decided to enroll in a Master of Social Work (MSW) program after graduating college with a degree in anthropology. This pivot from anthropology was a natural

one since social work is dedicated to addressing many of the systemic issues I learned about in college. More specifically, anthropology examines how global systems of oppression, manifested through colonialism and imperialism, have created suffering and disadvantage for large swaths of people across the world. However, upon graduating from college, anthropology did not provide me with a clear path to address the issues I had learned about. Social work, due to its focus on creating community change, provided the opportunity to make a legitimate impact on issues related to justice and equality.

I enrolled in an on-campus MSW program, which was nothing short of a transformational experience. As an MSW student, my personal and professional development was in large part due to the fact that every class I attended was held in a classroom, thus providing the physical and emotional space to learn and grow alongside professors and classmates. These daily interactions were instrumental to my development of the social skills and passion integral to becoming a change agent in the field. Through joining an educational community that was committed to social justice, I could practice the ethics and values of social work while also forming relationships with people from many different walks of life. I walked into my MSW program as an aspiring social worker trying to develop a professional identity and left poised to carry out the mission of the field by helping to bring about community change for individuals and populations in need.

The skills I learned as an MSW student were directly transferable to my social work practice as a child and family therapist. Empowered and emboldened by those transformative experiences in the classroom, I entered the field prepared to advocate for my clients at an organizational and community level. In fact, I often found myself looking back at my classroom experiences and using them to inform my practice. The skills needed to work with children, families, and their surrounding systems were largely generated through those classroom interactions, and my ability to advocate for clients stemmed directly from them.

Furthermore, my decision to study for a PhD in social work and become a professor was driven by a desire to provide the same type of educational experiences for students that I had received. Therefore, I was naturally skeptical about online education after being asked to teach it as a doctoral student. My transformative time as a student in an on-campus program created reservations about whether online education adequately prepared students for the field. I wondered whether social work, a field centered around connecting with others, could fulfill its mission through an online educational forum.

Despite my concerns, the evidence shows that social work has embraced online education. According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, n.d.), there are at least 73 master's-level and 30 bachelor's-level online social work programs. Given this rise in the number of distance education programs, I accepted the offer to teach an online class with the intention of seeing for myself how well students were trained. The class I was offered to teach was MSW Macro Practice, covering a branch of social work that specifically focuses on creating community-level change. My experience teaching this course online is described in the subsequent sections.

Teaching Macro Practice Online

There is a significant amount about the social work curriculum of which I am fond. Macro practice, however, is the one I find most important to advancing our field's objective of expanding opportunity for all populations, particularly those experiencing discrimination and marginalization. Macro practice, given its emphasis on advocating for change at a societal level, distinguishes social work education from other helping professions (Reisch, 2016). The cornerstone of all macro practice courses is teaching students about the role of non-profit organizations in advancing social justice and dismantling the societal structures that manufacture racism, sexism, classism, poverty, and other forms of oppression (CSWE, 2015). Despite this critical objective, research shows that social work education programs focus the majority of their coursework on micro-level clinical practice, primarily as a result of students being more interested in it (e.g., Lightfoot et al., 2017; Mizrahi & Morrison, 2013; Reisch, 2016; Reutebuch, 2006; Weiss, 2006; Weiss et al., 2004). Nevertheless, during this era of growing social inequality in the US, I believe it is critical for social workers to understand how to address community problems on a macro level.

My first semester teaching macro practice online was a challenge, particularly with regard to engaging with students about the content area. After spending time reflecting on this challenge at the midpoint of the semester, I came to believe it occurred for two reasons. First, my online students were spread out across the country and had varying beliefs about how to address community problems. As such, I felt there was a barrier between myself and many of the students with regard to discussing community practice and social justice, both of which are central to macro practice. Lacking any legitimate understanding of the social problems occurring in their communities, I struggled to connect with my students on how to address them. Secondly, I struggled to connect with students about the importance of social justice on a macro level and felt many of them were simply going through the motions and expressing little interest in the role of social work in creating community change.

I ultimately became frustrated with online education and wondered whether it provided a platform for tapping into the field's deep roots of advocating for community change. The challenge of teaching online and not having the opportunity to meet with students in person started to become isolating. As a consequence, I started to wonder whether the inherent challenges I experienced were, for lack of a better term, indicative of social work education "selling out" for distance learning to increase enrollment and profits while forgetting about the importance of solving social problems on a local level. This theory lacked verifiable evidence, but it went through my head regularly during my first semester teaching online. While I had respect for the people running social work online programs, I had significant doubts about its capacity to adequately train students.

Nevertheless, a central characteristic of an effective social worker is persistence. As a result, at the midpoint of the semester, I sought to change the situation instead of accepting it. This involved making several changes to my engagement with students and the course content. More specifically, I made a more deliberate effort to connect with students on an emotional level while simultaneously developing a learning activity that focused on community change and policy

practice. My efforts to connect with students involved making more video lectures, responding in greater detail to each of their assignments, and writing supportive and encouraging weekly emails on Monday mornings. While I had already performed these activities in some capacity, I ramped them up in an attempt to develop closer relationships and reduce the emotional distance of online education.

Furthermore, to better teach students about macro practice in their home communities, I developed an activity covering two key aspects of macro practice: community practice and policy practice. Community practice involves understanding the needs of communities and developing interventions and strategies for addressing them (CSWE, 2015). Policy practice encompasses advocating for change through public policy, particularly by fighting against injustice and inequality within disadvantaged communities (CSWE, 2015). Through focusing on these two components of macro practice, I felt the activity would help students learn about techniques for fostering social change in their communities.

I landed on two instructional resources that provided a foundation for covering community practice and policy practice. Given the politically polarized climate in which we are living, I chose content supported by relevant statistics about social problems and policies. As an academic, I needed to ensure the sources for the activity were grounded in evidence and included social work's emphasis on social justice and the dignity and worth of all people. While my political beliefs are most likely in line with the vast majority of social workers', from my experience they do not always align as closely with students'. Additionally, my students were spread out all over the country, therefore making it important to avoid getting involved in the partisanship common within our current political culture.

To begin the activity, students were assigned to read a United Nations (2018) report describing numerous social problems experienced by US citizens at significantly higher rates than those in other industrialized nations. The report detailed how US citizens experience poverty and various health issues far more often than individuals in other industrialized nations, and also provided an analysis of how racism, classism, and oppression increase the occurrences of these problems (United Nations, 2018). I chose the United Nations article, titled "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on His Mission to the United States of America," to help students recognize how certain social problems are relevant to social work practice regardless of where they live in the country. As such, online students would have the opportunity to recognize how poverty and health disparities are common across the country, thus providing a local connection to the material.

To develop knowledge about policy practice, students were next assigned to watch a video from *The Nation* (2017) magazine titled "Social Democracy vs. Free Market Capitalism." The video described how the citizens of Denmark receive more government-funded services for quality education, healthcare, and childcare, in addition to greater access to worker's rights, retirement benefits, and vacation days (*The Nation*, 2017). Furthermore, the video explained how Danish citizens encounter fewer economic and health-related challenges during adulthood and made the connection between policies that provide more assistance to citizens and positive adult outcomes (*The Nation*, 2017). The point of assigning this video was to show students how policy is

integral to providing resources for individuals and communities, in addition to explaining the role that social workers can play in carrying out these policies within their communities and advocating for changes to existing laws.

Next, students were assigned to answer several questions about the article and video. Each student was required to post their answers in an online discussion board in order to engage in conversations with each other about macro practice. To cover community practice, each student was asked to write an essay in which they designed a macro intervention to address a social problem relevant to their home community that was also mentioned in the United Nations report. Second, to cover the policy practice component of the activity, students were assigned to write another essay in which they provided opinions on whether the US could reduce the level of social problems in the country through implementing policies similar to Denmark. After posting the essays, students were also required to comment on the work of three of their classmates and subsequently engage in a conversation about the importance of community practice and policy practice on creating social change.

To my delight, the students learned through the activity about addressing social problems on a macro level. More specifically, students were able to effectively comprehend the need to implement more macro interventions to address the issues presented in the UN report. Another theme from the student responses was the lack of recognition within the US of the need to create more opportunities and services for individuals and communities in need. For example, one student stated:

> If needed social services are available for all citizens, this leads to better health outcomes, less harsh of a line between the "well-off" and the poor, more academically capable citizens, happier people, and higher productivity since people are functioning better.

An additional theme involved students discussing how the social programs described in *The Nation* (2017) video helped them think more critically about how these policies could help Americans. For instance, one student mentioned the following:

> It seems as if the U.S. is so far behind in social programs and setting up children to succeed. Comparing our country to others and researching successful programs can help us further our careers as social workers, especially if we are in a position of creating new programs that could benefit our community.

Furthermore, I was a consistent presence in the discussion board conversations between the students. By providing feedback on their essays and comments, I was able to connect many of the points to macro social work. This allowed for the opportunity to convey critical issues about advocating for equality for individual communities and in the US as a whole. Moreover, I always encouraged students to consider implementing the macro interventions they were suggesting within their communities and to remember the historical role that social workers play in addressing social problems.

Reflecting on Online Education

My challenges teaching online made me contemplate whether the setting is sufficient for students to obtain skills to address community problems. I, therefore, found it rewarding that, during the activity mentioned above, my students demonstrated knowledge about macro practice. However, I still have concerns about online education as a form of pedagogy. As someone who benefited greatly from attending an on-campus social work program, perhaps I will always have a bias against online education. Nevertheless, looking back objectively at my experience teaching in a distance education program, my opinions of it are still mixed. While many graduates of online programs have undoubtedly done exceptional work during their careers, it is necessary for social work researchers, particularly those teaching in online programs, to fully measure the practice effectiveness of online students after entering the field.

Still, the current research on social work distance education is limited and the existing studies have mixed findings. One study indicated no differences between the learning outcomes of online and on-campus social work students (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). However, another study identified that online instructors frequently found it difficult to teach students about social work practice (Levin et al., 2018). As a result, the current research does not fully examine how well online students are prepared to address the critical social problems encountered by individuals and groups of people throughout the US today. Social work researchers and educators must therefore consider how distance programs help students develop the practice skills to address the social problems affecting communities across the country.

As social work becomes more closely aligned with distance education, I believe it is important for educators to remember the field's deep well of history regarding macro practice. Social justice has been the foundation of social work since its inception, and we must continue to promote equality and opportunity. I encourage all social work educators to help students remember these roots. We must ask ourselves the tough questions about how well online education can accomplish our professional goal to address the immense social problems facing our society today. As people committed to justice, we owe it to our clients and those who came before us to push forward the mission of our profession. In my current role as an assistant professor at a social work school that does not have an online program, I will continue to follow the research on distance education and consider whether or not to suggest that we move forward with it. I urge all of my colleagues throughout the country to do the same.

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About the Author: Jordan Wilfong, PhD, CSW is Assistant Professor of Social Work, Department of Human Services, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH (419-372-4865, jwilfon@bgsu.edu).