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CONTENTS

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: STANDARDS OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract
The usage of digital technologies in Social Work Education (SWE) entails electronic tools, systems, devices and resources to generate, process and archive information in collaboration with professionals who use digital technology as part of existing strategies. In line with the mission of social work profession, social work education is geared towards producing adequately skilled social workers whose services enhance well-being and help the basic human needs of individuals, families, groups and communities who are vulnerable or living in poverty. Educators and practitioners should be able to use digital technologies effectively in instruction delivery and training of social workers in this Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era. As digital technologies become more integrated in social work, this paper presents an outline of challenges that practitioners should consider for social workers to incorporate digital technologies into their education and field practice. The paper also discusses potential challenges in the acceptance of digital technology, as well as suggestions for improving its usage in education and practice.

Keywords: Digital Technology, Social Work, Digital Social Work, Social Work Education

Introduction

Human services consider Social Work (SW) as a discipline with the main goal to help individuals and families find solutions to their difficulties by employing a multidisciplinary approach. The face of human services and social work throughout the world has drastically been altered through the introduction of digital technologies into the profession. Usage of digital technologies started in elementary form with telephone in the New York Charity Organisation Society when social work emerged in late 19th century. Social work students were exposed to the use of electric typewriters during the Great Depression in the 1930s. This changed the way students were trained and improved capacity in practice and production of reports. Social workers became familiar with technologies and began to use facsimiles with the advent of fax machines in the 1960s through the 1970s when they used punch cards and card reading machines for data gatherings and 1980s when social work interns used answering machines for field-internship clientele services, respectively. Over the last decades, technology has evolved and is becoming ubiquitous in social work. Practitioners embraced use of technological tools for communication and therapy. Fax machines, email, cellphones, chatrooms, online messaging and smart phones were used to communicate among colleagues, and between colleagues and clients (Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole & Rishchynski, 2006). One-way mirrors with clients in 1980s were used in therapy to facilitate interdisciplinary and team participation during training and assessment. In 1982, online self-help support groups on the Internet to signal the use of technology in Social Work Practice (SWP) (Kamani & Regehr, 2003). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) worked together to develop standards and sought to bring technology into social work and evolve ethics for practice in 2005.

Reardon (2010) surmised that technological integration to social work practice enabled social workers become efficient in the discharge of their work because it improved time with clients and reduce paperwork. By the late 1990s, online counseling services were being given to the general public via secure web sites by groups of clinicians (Reamer, 2012; 2013). The use of digital technologies has widened among practitioners in social work services who interact with clients and colleagues through electronic mailing system and short messaging system, and video conferencing with web cameras, Skype or Facetime on computers,

laptops, smartphones (Lamendola, 2010). Social workers can use these venues to provide services such as online and video counseling (Reamer, 2014). Hill & Ferguson (2014) asserted that the integration of technology with the discipline of social work has revolutionised social work practice and Mishna, Bogo, Root & Fantus, (2014) supported this assertion. Reamer (2015) provided the evidence to the assertion of Hill & Ferguson (2014) and stated that social work students are trained through online classes and can access their supervisors and course mates who could be miles away through asynchronous video for assessment, forum interactions and grading.

Social work technology around the world is gradually gaining recognition as its service area hovers around clinical practice, administration, advocacy and community organizing and research (Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) 2015). Social workers in developed countries offer services to their clients through digital technological tools and use various techniques such as telephone counselling, video conferencing, self-guided web-based intervention services, as well as electronic social networks, mobile applications, emails, text, and a variety of other services (ASWB, 2015).

The NASW has discussed usage of technology in SW and articulated Social Work Standards(SWS) that comprised usage, relevance, benefits and limitations in social services ecosystems involving the individuals, families and communities. NASW also considered issues of technical competence of social workers, and clients' privacy and confidentiality on one hand and effectiveness of technology on casework, documentation and reporting on the other. This paper explored concepts of digital social work, discuss the relevance of digital technologies in SWE and highlighted the challenges of digital technology usage in social work profession in Africa.

Social Work

Social work, as a field of practice, helps persons, families, groups and communities to improve functional abilities to cope with societal conditions and enhance their wellbeing in the society. International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2014) said social work is a practice-based academic discipline and professional practice which promotes social change, social cohesion and community development among people in their society. SW is premised on the principles of social justice, human rights, respect for diversity and collective responsibility. Social workers and practitioners work with social structure and stakeholders to identify social problems and engender social wellbeing of people in their society. IFSW (2010) stated that this perspective of social work highlights theoretical foundation as the basis for the applications of concepts of human behaviour and social systems to practice making social work both an academic discipline and a professional practice (IFSW, 2014).

SWP is a helping profession that relates to the application of principles and techniques in human services to help individuals, families, groups and communities access social services through casework, counseling or psychotherapy to enhance their capabilities for participation in their own wellbeing and legislative processes in the community. An understanding of the relationship between human development and personality in socio-economic and cultural framework is important to the practice of social work. This practice often starts at generalist level involving social work traditional methodologies such as casework, group work and community organisation. The helping aspect of the profession engenders the effective social functioning of persons, families, groups and communities by identifying and eliminating social issues in human relationships towards facilitating human interactions for improved psychosocial wellbeing in the society.

Digital Social Work

Digitisation introduces innovations that change behaviour and work. Social workers have traditionally done their work through writing letters or making telephone calls in their offices. The adaption of innovations brings new methodologies into social work practice. This has resulted in the emergence of digital social work otherwise known as e-social work as a new specialty. Social work is absorbing digital-based intervention strategies, and this is refining the nature of practice (Del Fresno Garca, 2015) as social workers gain awareness and develop competences for modern social work practice with the use of digital technologies (Kirwan, 2019). A new specialism has evolved as e-social work with new areas for casework, group

therapy, community organisation and social networks.

Literature described e-social work the use of technology for SWP involving web-based research, therapy for individual, group and community participation, social worker training and development, and assessment of social service programmes. E-social work involves interactions with clients in human services ecosystem that is mediated by electronic or digital technology. Digital social work is usage of technologies and social media to facilitate and support learning teaching (Young, McLeod & Brady, 2018). Digital technologies have influenced social work education through usage of internet and electronic devices. Social workers counsel clients through video, telephone and online. They use text messages, email and other electronic social networks to communicate with clients. Cybertherapy and self-guided web-based interactions are available as a result of digital social work. Social work school programmes use distant education technologies for students. Social work administrators store data and digital information in the cloud. Community organisers and volunteers utilise social media networking sites to interact with target audience.

Social workers utilise e-social work to complement face-to-face interface in educational and client-services. They use social media tools like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and LinkedIn as well as media sharing sites like Flickr, Vimeo and YouTube. They also use content creation and publishing tools like Wikis and Blogs and internet chat services like Google, Hangout, Skype, Whatsapp messenger and Facebook messenger. Literature shows that digital tools are being used in social work education for training and practice for diagnosis, intervention and evaluation (Goldkind Wolf & Freddolino, 2018). As e-social work become commonplace across the world, the influence has permeated the practice in Africa and practitioners are using blended approach for social work education and practice (Pack, 2016; Tandy, Vernon & Lynch, 2017; Dodds, Heslop & Meredith, 2018).

Academics and educators use social media and new technologies to enhance digitally mediated social work practice (Young, McLeod & Brady,

2018). This combines with integrated social media curriculum to increase usage of new technologies to communicate effectively with clients. Christenson (2019) suggested that social workers should use social networks or apps that clients are familiar or comfortable with to enhance the effectiveness of their engagements. Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan (2016) highlighted five usage of digital technologies in social work education and practice, and these are:

- **Telehealth**. Usage of digital technologies in counseling sessions in health services removes barriers in the provision of quality healthcare to clients. Social workers save travel time and stress and conduct counselling sessions online real-time from their home. Logistics of client's sessions are better planned and organised with the use of video cameras for visits, interviews and therapies using social media platforms such as FaceTime and Skype live-chats. This service can be extended to other aspects of SW like school, industrial, clinical, judicial, administrative and medical.

- **Research**. Social workers use web-based and Open Distance Learning (ODL) resources for knowledge and up-to-date information that require for casework and interventions. They also have the opportunity to participate in online trainings and webinars, peer-reviewed research, blogs and newsletters by social work-based professional associations like NASW and ASWB.

- **Management**. Social workers can organise and manage client's data, review and evaluate performance. Technology mediated social work promotes collaboration in casework, group work and community organisation. Social workers digitally share notes on Google and other platforms and communicate whilst protecting clients' information. Social work administrators use technology to keep track of employees, establish programmes, manage budgets and finances and connect with other professionals and stakeholders.

- **Employment**. Social workers update their curriculum vitae electronically and search for job opportunities online. Institutions publish their vacancies online. NASW run Social Work Career Centre that host national

job listings, offer professional development, and career resource tools. Social workers access opportunities on employment platforms like Career Builder, Simply Hired, Indeed and Monster where job vacancies are listed for medical social, school social work and clinical social work.

- **Education**. Social work degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels are increasingly available from various institutions and universities online. Generalist social workers who are gainfully employed and could not spare time for full time academic admission can offer online Master of Social Work (MSW) to acquire additional skill-sets.

Ethical Standards for Digital Social Work Education

Usage of digital technologies for e-social work creates ethical problems for social workers. These ethical problems involve the process of obtaining informed consent from client online and ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of clients through the Internet. Other areas of ethical problems are conflicts of interest in casework, demonstration of professional competence, keeping of records and documentation, and maintenance of relationships with other professionals on the team. There is digital dualism with usage of technology in SWE and practice and NASW wanted a framework for usage of technology in social work practice. (Reamer, 2015). Scholars wanted social work educational programmes to adopt social media rules for educators and learners and suggested that the curriculum should expose learners to ethical use of social media. Social work educators and social workers should build expertise in ethical use of technology through research and training.

SWE prepares practitioners for acquisition of requisite skills for effective delivery of ethical social services. The process of learning a complete set of human and technical knowledge, competencies, and abilities is referred to as social work education. SWE has changed dramatically and emergence of online resources on the internet stipulates that social work educators should acquire new skills to expose learners to online educational environment, resulting in social work graduates who are digitally proficient to render competent and ethical social work services to the society.

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) recommended policy document titled Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles during their General Assembly held in 2018 in Dublin. Usage of technology and social media featured prominently in the nine ethical principles. IFSW Interim Education Committee released the final draft of the document and subsequent training in 2020. The document contained foundations for global social work education. This policy initiative shows that social work profession acknowledges the influence of digital technologies on social work education and practice in the current Fourth Industrial Revolution era (4IR) as the world accelerates to the Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR).

Traditional education remains sacrosanct in the training and field of practice for social work, but literature suggests that global best practice in this 4IR era would be for social work profession to embrace usage of digital technologies in its education and practice. This behooves the key stakeholders in the deployment of education and training of social workers to create and implement specific new standards which have been articulated in the Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles. Educators and practitioners should use these principles as best practice to propagate these new standards as rule of engagement in the field of social work education and practice.

- Maintenance of online presence: Successful online learning happens when instructors visit the course site several times each week, ideally daily. Faculty members' frequent comments, feedback, and postings provide the message to learners that their learning is important to them, and that the facilitators are interested and are paying attention to them. When learners notice that instructors aren't actively participating in the class on a regular basis, they can feel upset. This expectation, of course, may be taxing and time-consuming for faculty. Instructors who expect to be unavailable for an extended length of time, possibly due to personal or family obligations, should notify students ahead of time. Instructors can keep students informed by publishing comments and announcements on online discussion forums and faculty blogs, among other methods.

- Supportive online community: Just as it is vital to encourage learners' supporting relationships in traditional classrooms, it is also necessary to facilitate learners' supportive connections in online classrooms. The objective is to increase the chances of peer learning and collaborations while lowering the chances of learners feeling alone, lonely, or abandoned. Designing tasks that require learners to participate and communicate with one another through online forum and conversations is one practical technique. It can be beneficial to divide pupils into breakout groups for specific online tasks.

- Development of learners' learning outcomes: When courses involve significant online activities and assignments, instructors should explain out what they anticipate from students in great detail. Tasks to be done, deadlines for completing tasks and providing feedbacks, and the amount of time learners should dedicate to the course on regular basis are all important considerations. Furthermore, teachers should inform learners about what they might expect from faculty. The nature of website monitoring, frequency and timing of instructors' comments, the timetable of virtual working hours, virtual availability, and frequency and scheduling of instructors' comments are important considerations.

- Usage of multiple learning strategies and experiences: Learners in online social work education like variety of teaching methods and learning opportunities, just as they do in face-to-face courses. Assigning solo tasks, breakout sessions' assignments and tasks to be completed in groups using different online platforms and social media are just a few examples.

- Effective Feedback Mechanism: Checks with clients about their experiences with services in casework and periodic evaluation are important in social work practice. This principle will apply during the delivery of online courses considering instructor-remote learner's connection. Learners have diverse learning styles and preferences when it comes to presentations, experiential exercises, group projects, and writing, as educators have understood since the dawn of time. Given the distinct and, for many

learners, fresh style of learning, online instruction poses an additional obstacle. Learning management systems comprising virtual lectures, online chat rooms, webcasts, podcasts, livestreaming are novel to most learners. Some people like this way of learning, while others dislike it, or at least certain aspects of it. As a result, it is critical for instructors to check the educational temperature of their learners on a regular basis to determine effectiveness of the learning methods. Eliciting learners' feedback at the end of the course is counterproductive.

- Creation of Interactive Forum: Instructors must make a concerted effort to engage students in active discussion to elicit active participation. This is especially essential since, if there is minimal or no physical contact, faculty members' online remarks are the principal source of familiarisation with learners. Learners have more time to consider and compose their comments in asynchronous online discussions and posts than in synchronous online and classroom debates.

- Personalised Learning Concepts: Online social work education should expose learners to key concepts in social work practice and human services. This involves studies in personality, human behaviour, organizational and community development, social justice and policy development, advocacy, cultural and socioeconomic diversity, and ethics. The most effective adult education allows learners to apply these concepts to their own particular areas of interest. Online activities and assignments focusing on social policy analysis allow learners interested in addiction treatment to conduct web-based research on essential policy issues on addiction service funding, relevant legislation, and advocacy strategies. A learner interested in the delivery of social services to older adults should be able to carry out web-based video presentation on gerontology, cultural and ethnic groups understanding of the concept of aging and end-of-life challenges.

Digital Technology Relevance in Social Work Education

Digital technologies promote social work

education and practice. Digital technologies have been found to be beneficial to social work because they improve the quality of teaching and learning. The use of digital technologies is important to the field of social work education. Learners, lecturers and professionals exchange information and share assessment with one another. Learners use search engines like Google for research and class works. Therapists and social workers also use Google for information in casework and therapy sessions.

Digital Technologies in Social Work Education in Africa

Literature has shown that although there is a wide acceptance of the usage of digital technologies in social work education in developed countries (Berzin, Singer & Chan, 2015), there is low penetration in adoption of digital technologies in social work practice in Africa. Benedict, Balogun & Ukpere (2014), Abdelmaguid (2016) and Umoren (2016) cited Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria among others where there is slow integration of digital technologies with social work education and practice. Berzin et al (2015) asserted that this low penetration creates skepticism among academics and social workers about using digital technologies in social work practice.

Challenges of Digital Technologies Usage in Social Work Profession in Africa

Aside skepticism, the following are challenges of integration of digital technologies in social work practice in Africa:

- **Inadequate technical and training facilities**. Abdelmaguid (2016) stated that learning and training with digital technological tools for social workers is important for promoting the development of new body of knowledge about e-social work among practitioners. However, there is lack of technical knowhow has created reluctance to use digital technology for social work among social workers because of inadequate knowledge and capabilities in this area. Limited access to and training in digital technological tools restrict the knowledge base and understanding of social workers and practitioners. Few with intention to use digital technologies are not well informed or equipped to successfully integrate the tools with social work practice.
- **Scarce resources**. There is shortage of

resources among social workers, and this constitutes major constraint for practice in Africa. Umoren (2016) argued that social work practitioners lack financial support for implementation of social welfare programmes.

- **Scarcity of research in usage of digital technologies in social work**. There is limited research on usage of digital technology in social work education and practice. There is also lack of evidence of different digital technological tools available for social work practice by social workers and practitioners (Foeday, 2011).

Conclusion

Usage of digital technologies and social media for social work education by educators and practitioners is entrenched in developed countries. The field of social work has taken deliberate initiatives to incorporate digital technologies and develop new innovations in order to streamline administrative processes, track programmes outcomes, and improve overall service delivery in developed countries. However, in African countries adaptation of digital technologies in social work in Africa has low penetration because of the paucity of resources, infrastructural facilities, erratic power supply (Ebimgbo & Okoye, 2015 cited in Oyinlola 2020), computer literacy is still low among social workers, and lack of awareness among the social workers in usage of technology is extremely low (Oyinlola, 2020).

Way Forward

Given the potentials of the usage of digital technologies to enhance effectiveness in the education of social workers and field practice of social work, it is imperative that African countries emulate the developed countries in their adoption of the usage of digital technologies in SWE. As a result, it is suggested that technology-related facilities in social work education be developed to prepare social workers to participate in a wide range of policy initiatives aimed at addressing the disparities that exist in the African region's social, economic, and political participation. It is necessary to use digital technologies to uphold ethical standards and values in social work to engender social work practice and education in Africa. It is necessary for social workers to be technologically literate and competent in

Nigeria as well as all African countries providing social work education.

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