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Field by any means necessary: Using technology in field education

Prácticas por cualquier medio necesario: Uso de la tecnología en prácticas

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Abstract:

In many disciplines, the field experience is the culmination of learning, and the socialization of students into the profession. In social work education, the field experience is also the signature pedagogy, which brings theory to practice. To address the needs of a changing group of stakeholders, the School of Social Work began using multiple technology platforms including field web-based software, e-mail blasts, an e-learning platform, YouTube videos, revised web content, and Facebook page all combined to provide students, field instructors, and faculty with the information they need for field on a whenever, wherever, and however basis.

Keywords: field education, technology, social media, differential learning.

Resumen:

En muchas disciplinas, la experiencia de prácticas es la culminación del aprendizaje, y la socialización de los estudiantes en la profesión. En el trabajo social educativo, la experiencia de prácticas es también la pedagogía primariamente, que lleva la teoría a la práctica. Para abordar las necesidades de un grupo cambiante de interesados, la Escuela de Trabajo Social comenzó a utilizar múltiples plataformas tecnológicas, incluyendo software de prácticas basado en web, tipos diferentes de correo electrónico, una plataforma de aprendizaje electrónico, videos de YouTube, contenido web revisado y página de Facebook. Todos estos recursos se cambian para proporcionar a los estudiantes, instructores de prácticas, y la facultad, la información que necesitan en cualquier campo de intervención.

Palabras clave: prácticas de trabajo social, tecnología, medios sociales, aprendizaje diferencial.

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1. Introduction

Field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education, and the best and most direct way that the profession educates students “to think, to perform, and to act and with integrity;” (Council on Social Work Education CSWE 2015: 12). Although this goal of integrating classroom theory with field practice is a standard explicit throughout the accreditation standards, less clear are the nuts and bolts of how to do that with each student individually, as well as with whole cohorts of students in the aggregate. Using technology as part of the communication about field, as well as a competency in field, is referenced by CSWE, stating “field education may integrate forms of technology as a component of the program,” (CSWE 2015: 12), but programs are left to determine for their student body how to actualize technology in field.

It is abundantly clear to most people in field education that using various forms of technology with students, field instructors, and faculty within field education is crucial to manage the many components of field. Students and most faculty have their phones on their person throughout the day, schools of social work are more likely to communicate with their stakeholders electronically than in person about upcoming events, and field instructors are all using technology to perform social work practice, whether in the form of electronic health records, or outreach via text to underserved client groups. Actually, the idea of having an entirely paper learning contract in field, written on in pen and signed by all parties, which used to be the standard practice in many schools, is increasingly anachronistic. And despite our cries in social work education of ‘these students today’ everyone realizes that advances in technology are here to stay and can be a tool to incorporate into field education as a complex part of our signature pedagogy. At one mid-sized university in the Midwest, we have decided over the last 2 years to inform, communicate with, and provide access to resources about field education using technology on an ANYTIME, ANYWHERE, ANY WAY basis. We continue to push ourselves towards this goal by thinking ourselves quite the social and economic justice advocates, and by offering field by any means necessary.

The research on technology in field education continues to develop, but holds promise. Several analyses highlight the accessibility of technology (Colvin & Bullock 2014; Dedman & Palmer 2011; Hay & Dale 2014). E-learning platforms were used successfully in several applications, including notably field instructor and student orientation (Anderson, et al. 2012; Hay & Dale 2014; Phelan 2015). Support of international students, or students placed in field internationally using technology, specifically videoconferencing, was mentioned as a significant advancement for programs (Panos 2005; Anderson, et al. 2012). And even the mentoring of faculty in field education using technology was studied (Smith 2015). In each of these analysis, the elimination of the barriers of space and sometimes time were cited, as well as on-line atmosphere allowing some stakeholders to participate more who ordinarily would be more reserved in an in person setting, a result often seen in evaluation of on-line education.

Drawbacks of technology use in field education are varied, but the lack of in-person socialization appears to be the largest downside (Colvin & Bullock 2014). When both on-line and in-person orientation to field were offered, students in traditional programs preferred in person (Colvin & Bullock 2014). And faculty reported a sense of isolation in a fully on-line setting, missing the water cooler and hallway conversations of an in-person setting (Smith 2015). Yet there are some areas of field education, international field placements, where some degree of technology use seems inevitable, despite the field directors advocacy that they will need to go to Ireland or Guatemala thrice during the placement to perform in person field visits.

With this research as a backdrop, and with a willingness to try and fail multiple times (one of our mantras became “it’s just a pilot; if it doesn’t work we can always stop doing it”), our school of social work decided to try multiple methods to incorporate technology into field, including e-learning, web-based field materials, a web-based field software, social media, and YouTube and other video teaching. We implemented these methods, described below, with the idea that stakeholders could use the more high technology method, or could always use the low technology method, of talking by phone or sitting down in person. Our findings on our first 2 years of this project are below.

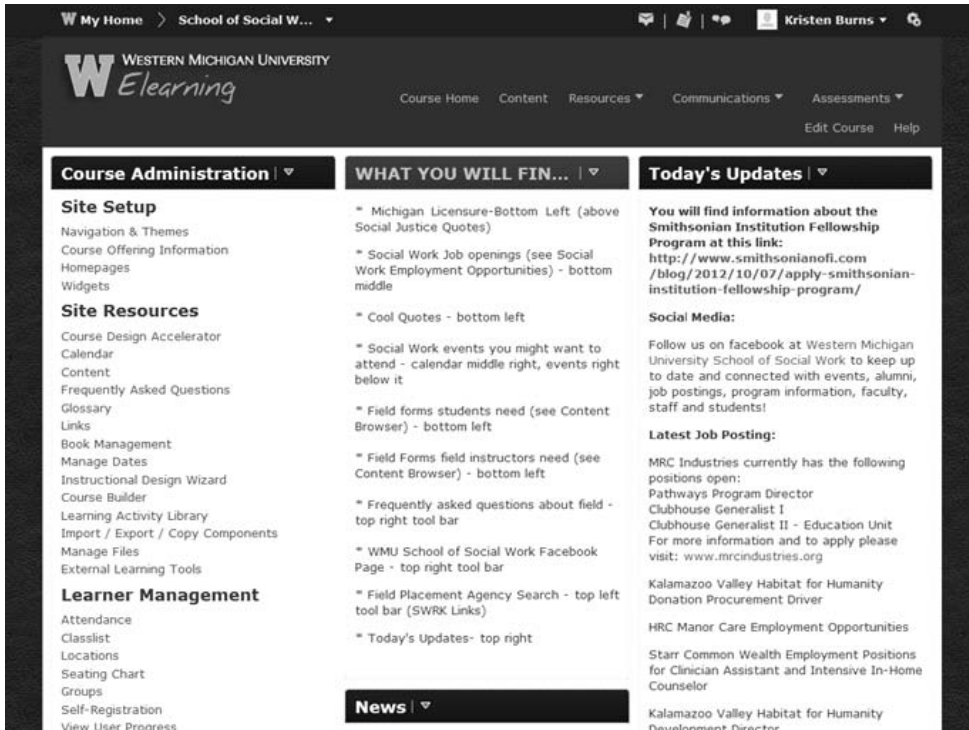
2. Development and Dissemination of Materials

One of the first issues that we discovered in our journey was that we didn’t have a way other than mass e-mails to communicate directly with our stakeholders (field instructors and field students), and not have the same information available on our website. We found that we wanted some events that were for our students only, or job postings from contacts in field, to be available first and sometimes only to the groups we selected. To meet this goal, we developed an e-learning course which we then enrolled all students in field, as well as all current field instructors (an annual enrollment of approximately 600). The e-learning course contains information going out to stakeholders, and the typical discussion boards and two-way communication links are disabled. Areas include news, job postings, events, and resources that individuals can download at any time. A component of our homepage is here:

Although the e-learning page is often accessed by students, who are accessing e-learning via other courses in their program, we found that field instructors rarely accessed this platform unless specifically sent to it to find new job postings if they were looking.

The second effort in time was the development of revised and linkable field materials on our school website. Like many schools, we found that our field manual in the printed formats field organizations were using was often not updated, and had lost its utility as a reference guide for needs in field. And we also had a felt need to be able to reference forms used in field, or policies, in a searchable format. The result after work with our field committee comprised of students, faculty, and staff, was

both a fully searchable on-line field manual, with active links to forms or web content (e.g. NASW code of ethics) that field stakeholders could access whenever they chose. For those that wanted a printed copy, a .pdf of the entire manual or specific sections remains available, and we will even print and deliver copies to field instructors or organizations if they need it.



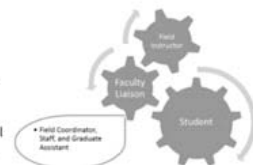
- HOME
- ABOUT
- ACADEMICS
 - UNDERGRADUATE
 - GRADUATE
 - FIELD EDUCATION
 - FIELD MANUALS**
 - INTERN PLACEMENT TRACKING
- CONTINUING EDUCATION COURSES
- ADVISING
- ALUMNI
- GIVING
- RESOURCES
- SCHOLARSHIPS

Field Manuals

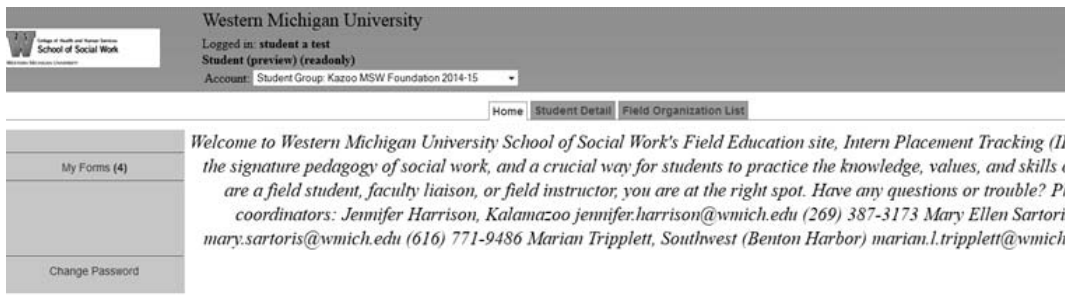
The School of Social Work at Western Michigan University is proud to offer quality field education opportunities to BSW and MSW students to help them develop professional-level competencies in social work practice at micro, mezzo and macro levels, and to serve as the signature pedagogy, or the most fundamental way that social work practice is taught in social work education. The field office is committed to making sure that field education is one of the highlights of the social work educational experience.

Field education involves coordination among four key groups of people to provide a high-quality field placement learning experience:

- The student is the central focus of the learning experience.
- The field education coordinator is the person in charge of the field education office at each campus site. Depending upon the campus site, the field education coordinator may have graduate assistants or staff.
- The field instructor is the social worker at the field placement who will oversee learning at the agency and provide professional supervision.
- The faculty liaison is the university instructor of record for the field



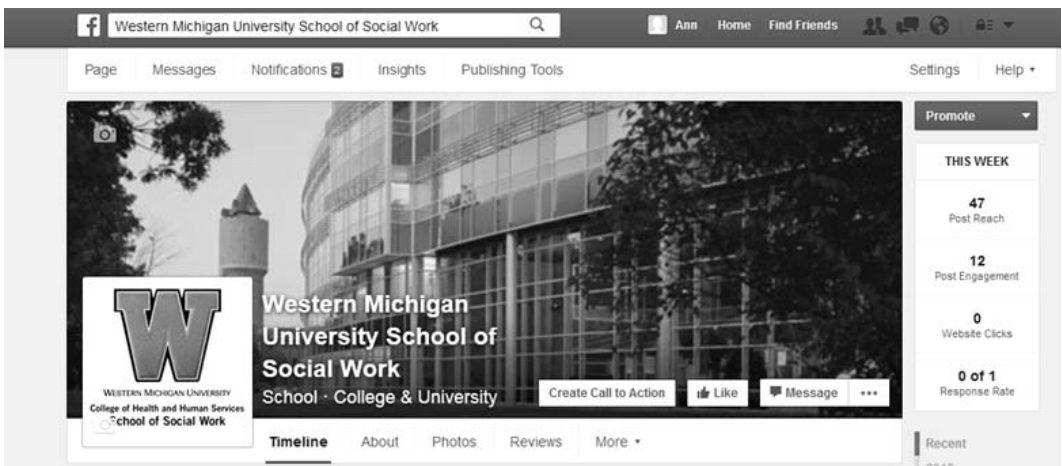
While we were developing our revised web-content, we were also implementing a new web-based field software, Intern Placement Tracking (IPT). IPT is a user permissions managed web-based software designed specifically for social work field education. In our case, IPT is used for students to complete and submit their field application, select up to three field organizations as preferences, and for field organizations and instructors to complete all of their organizational and individual information about placements. Then the software is used for all of the field forms while in field, including learning contracts and time logs, which can be worked on real time by field students, field instructors, faculty liaisons, and the field team.



One of the features we again found to be needed with the transition to a web-based software for field education, was that people would receive training anywhere, any way, anytime. This meant we trained people at in-person field orientations, developed a series of tip sheets for different activities, met with individuals in person, and developed a Powerpoint slide presentation with adjacent video content explaining the program, and uploaded those presentations to our YouTube channel.

This last method was a specific response to having a personal feature to content that was technology intensive. As hard as it can be to watch yourself as a talking head on video, our field instructors reported they liked the connection to a known person in the training videos.

Our most recent foray into technology was the further development and management of our Facebook page for the school of social work. One of the first things we discovered was that there were several Facebook and social media pages developed by student groups, a faculty who is no longer with the school, and each site of the program. The first step then was to transfer over materials to a business page, with administrator rights held by a staff position in the school of social work. This allowed people (current students and field instructors, prospective students, even family members) to like the page and receive updates, as well as control over the posts made. This is in some ways a limitation to accessibility and communication, but felt like a necessary tool to control the content on this official social media presence of the school.



The Facebook page has become the more popular venue for employment and event posting, and gets more traffic than the e-learning course. We have increasingly posted accolades and honors that our students and faculty have received, and linked to our college and university webpages. Our recent post about our field instructor of the year was picked up by the college Facebook and social media pages, so shared with a larger audience.

3. Conclusion

We have found that developing and disseminating technology in field education has been both fun and challenging in unexpected ways. Content expertise does not

necessarily mean technology expertise, so we have had to do a lot of the translation of content into technology with information technology experts at our university. This reminds us of the translation of theory into practice in field education, so is appealing as a result. We have also found some of our own limits to technology. We still use e-mail a lot, and in a recent survey of students some of the qualitative responses included "I just don't read my e-mail," we were at a loss of how we could respond to that, thinking that e-mail is essential to our communication. When students text us for information and clarification, we sometimes have to ask "who is this?" and encourage students to format texts similarly to e-mails, with a greeting and sign-off identifying the sender even though text is a less formal method of communication. We also still struggle with making sure we are sending students to the right place to find a resource, as opposed to giving them the resource directly. This helps with the idea that the information is transparent and available anytime, anywhere, any way to all stakeholders, and not owned in a separate space by the field team.

We have not moved into Twitter, although it is in development. We have also seen the impact of photos on our Facebook page, and want to set up an Instagram page to highlight the wonderful work and accomplishments of many of our stakeholders in field. With the latter especially, we have some additional checking on technology standards for social work practice, including the now old but still useful National Association of Social Work (NASW) Technology Standards (NASW 2005), to assure that we are modeling ethical practice to our students regarding technology. We are enjoying the brave new world of field...by any means necessary.

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