

Pandemic-forced shift to online education can be boon for future social workers

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced education, services, health care and many other aspects of everyday life online. For social work, that transition started as a challenge, but it can actually be an opportunity for educators, social workers and the people they serve. A University of

Kansas professor has published a paper arguing that social work educators can adapt their teaching practices in a way that best prepares their students to interact with those they serve, whether online, in person or both.

Social welfare education, like most disciplines, was transitioning to online coursework in the years prior to the pandemic. The discipline features practice courses, in which students learn how to put the theories they learn into action. While it can be difficult to teach someone how to establish rapport with a client, assess progress of someone undergoing treatment, intervene with families in crisis or other skills online, it is necessary.

"Over about the last 10 years, we've gone from just teaching [social welfare](#) in person to teaching a blend of in-person and self-guided online content to teaching online hybrid courses that leverage teaching over a video conference platform for synchronous components that provide live interaction and using tools like Canvas for asynchronous components that allow for self-guided [online activities](#)," said Nancy Kepple, associate professor of social welfare.

"We've seen people try to translate exactly what they did in the classroom and say it didn't work, or people change drastically what they did to make it fit within these virtual spaces. This paper basically says it's not an either/or."

While providing a framework for how to teach practice courses across modalities, Kepple and co-author D. Crystal Coles of Morgan State University argue that empowering future social workers to be comfortable working both in-person and online with clients is vital. Social work was already shifting to add more telehealth approaches, but the pandemic forced many services into an online space and revealed many people prefer to receive services online. The study was published

in the *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*.

"In modern social work, we don't only engage people in person anymore. I have colleagues in practice for whom working with people virtually is their preference, and this is the only way they engage with the people they serve."

The article is titled "Maintaining the Magic," as Kepple and Coles argue the strengths of one's practice instruction can be maintained as it gets translated across modalities. Schools of social welfare/social work have returned to more in-person classes, but the main four modalities still exist: Traditional in-person; hybrid of in-person and self-guided online activities; online hybrid of synchronous virtual meetings and self-guided online activities; and fully asynchronous online. The article presents a framework in four parts for drawing on the strengths of each (while navigating their constraints) to ensure they are as effective as possible across modalities by considering structural components of space, time and people as well as a process component of interactivity.

In terms of learning location, educators designing practice courses need to consider space, whether a physical classroom, online space or self-guided course and how students will interact with each other and instructors. The authors give examples of how practice instructors can encourage people to work together based on the opportunities of physical or [virtual spaces](#), maximizing what is available and unique to each. In regard to time, Kepple and Coles discuss how to ensure educators and students make the most of it.

For example, in any online class, some amount of time is spent troubleshooting technology. While that may take time from instruction, educators can strategize ways to find additional time to give back to students and experiential practices. While considering people, educators should consider their own strengths as well as the experiences of those in

the class and how those can be brought to the fore, whether in person or in online instruction. Finally, interactivity is key.

Practice courses emphasize that students need interaction with their instructor, the ideas being conveyed and with fellow students to learn skills, such as making eye contact, empathizing with others, experiencing human warmth and other essential skills for social workers. The article provides strategies for role-playing and other ways to build interactions specific to each modality.

"Just reading about these ideas doesn't teach you how to experience or convey these key skills. You have to understand what empathy is as a concept and as an experience to effectively convey it when interacting with someone," Kepple said. "Social workers have to be prepared to work and help people in any space. Our field isn't just confined to working with people in a 45- or 50-minute session in one room. We want to be on the leading edge of how we prepare our students for their profession."

While technology has evolved to deliver education and [social work](#) services, the pandemic forced a quick adaptation. And though both life and education have somewhat shifted back to previous norms, the change showed an understanding of both technology and humanity is necessary, according to the authors.

Some clients will need to receive services virtually because of distance or preference. Some educators may prefer in-person classes, but the [student](#) preferences are also diversifying. In addition, the students who will be the next generation of social workers will need to be prepared for new technologies. Educators thinking about how they can innovate in their approaches will help ensure new social workers are adaptable, the authors argue.

"It is important to think through how all of these pieces work and how that affects how we teach," Kepple said. "It's not brand new; it's figuring out an intentional way of delivering what we know and what we do well in a new way. I want [social workers](#) and [educators](#) to believe they know what makes a good instructional space and that they can make practice spaces work across a range of methods."

More information: Nancy Kepple et al, Maintaining the Magic: Adapting Practice Pedagogies Across Course Modalities, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/08841233.2022.2120166](https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2022.2120166)

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