

The True Meaning of “Meta”: Contributions of LIS to Social Work Education in a Globalized Learning Environment

Keren Dali, Ph.D.

University of Denver, USA

Keren.Dali@du.edu

ABSTRACT

In light of the growing global interest in using technology for social justice and community engagement, this paper will focus on the potential contributions of information science to social work education and professional practice. It will demonstrate how information science approaches can help social workers revise their accreditation guidelines by organically integrating requirements for technology and information education, and it will introduce an example of a graduate course on technology and information taught by an LIS faculty member to SW students.

TOPICS

education; standards; students

SOCIAL WORKERS AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

The international community of scientists and practitioners is readily embracing the influence of technology on social change, as evident interdisciplinary research collaborations and applied initiatives that harness technology for social justice. Both Canada and the U.S. are “at the cutting edge” of using the power of social media, other information and communication technologies (ICT), and artificial intelligence (AI) in suicide prevention, mental health, and criminal justice risk assessment, reducing loneliness, improving organizational efficiency in the human services, and identifying the role of information behaviors in social problems and corresponding solutions (e.g., CMAJ, 2018; Dali, 2018). The “concentration of researchers and AI talent” (Goddard, 2018, para. 3) in both countries is astounding.

And yet, the involvement of social work (SW) in “transformative social change” through technology integration (Cosner Berzin, Singer, & Chan, 2015) appears on a much smaller scale compared to other discipline (e.g., psychology, education, computer and information science).

The analysis of graduate programs in SW shows that aside from the external manifestations of omnipresent technology (e.g., course management software, e-portfolio, digital library resources, distance education), technology seems to be given little prominence in the SW curriculum. That is despite the fact that ubiquitous and inevitable innovations, ICT, constantly developing AI, and machine learning have restructured social and professional lives in every field of human activity, also encouraging active interdisciplinary collaboration in the areas of education, research, and professional practice (e.g., Khan, 2016; Michie et al., 2017; Rice & Tambe, 2017). Not immune to these changes, SW is affected by both increasing technological advances and concomitant interdisciplinarity, and the absence of technology-related contents and engagements in SW graduate courses creates a feeling of insulation and disconnect.

The slow pace of technological adoption may derive from the hesitation of “social work practitioners and scholars [...] to drive and fully embrace this movement” which, in turn, can be attributed to several factors: (1) “limited education and training” that render practitioners unable to incorporate technology effectively; (2) “limited exposure to innovative applications of technology to therapeutic work” and ensuing “misconceptions” and reservations; (3) a limited evidence base for the effectiveness of ICTs in social work (SW) interventions; and (4) limited financial resources (Cosner Berzin, Singer, & Chan, 2015). If we concede that personal attitudes, fear of technology and change, and inflexible mentality may present the greatest obstacle to professional change, then the most effective way to remedy the situation is to start early, by incorporating technology education by design, not as an add-on or bonus, into the SW curriculum. This is where the experience of information professionals and library and information science (LIS) faculty members can be particularly instrumental.

Much has been discussed about the potential of contributions of SW to the practice and education in the field of LIS (e.g., Dali, 2018; Enomoto, 2015; Westbrook, 2015). This paper, however, looks at the outflow of expertise and intellectual contribution from LIS to SW and examines how LIS can help with bringing SW education to the digital age and how integrating LIS approaches can restructure and revamp current accreditation standards for SW education in both Canada and the U.S.

The goal of this paper is two-fold. First, it will demonstrate how LIS-guided approaches can help social workers revise their accreditation guidelines by organically integrating requirements for technology and information education. Second, it will introduce an example of a graduate course on technology and information taught by an LIS faculty member to SW students.

Using comparative policy analysis as a research method and building on the modified policy content evaluation schema by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2018), this paper will comparatively review the U.S. CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2015) and Canadian CASWE-ACFTS Standards for Accreditation (2014) from the standpoint of their responsiveness to and reflection of the current state of technology and information in society and the need for professional qualifications that align with imperatives of the digital age (see abbreviations under References). Both accreditation documents will be critically analyzed in the context of current advances in ICT and AI affecting the practice of SW, the social environment, social justice, and social change. With these issues comprising the *raison d'être* of SW, it will be concluded that SW accreditation standards in both countries lag behind in terms of incorporating technology awareness and education, more so in

Canada than in the U.S. If accreditation standards are taken as stage-setters for SW programs, it is proposed that technology- and AI-driven change may not be reflected in the SW curriculum design in an adequate and timely fashion. As a result, SW graduates may remain unprepared to contend with current ethical, policy-related, applied, and training issues arising from technology- and AI-saturated practice environments. The paper will also point out specific sections in both accreditation documents that should be revised and suggest sample revisions.

One useful step to turning the state of technology education around would be collaborating with LIS faculty on the delivery of technology and information-related courses taught by LIS faculty to SW students. Two institutions – the U of Michigan and the Dominican University – currently offer dual degrees in SW/LIS. However, even schools that do not have formal dual degrees or minors in SW can establish a cross-listed curriculum which would benefit both disciplines. The paper will discuss a course called “Social Work in the Digital Age: Selected Issues,” which will focus on the changes introduced to

SW practice and education by social media, ICT, and AI, and foster critical thinking about information and technology in the human services. The course contents, goals, pedagogical methods, and learning outcomes will be addressed.

It is hoped that this paper will attract a wide audience of LIS educators and Ph.D. students interested in interdisciplinary teaching and cross-listed curricular offerings. In particular, it will be useful to those who seek to strengthen their collaborative relationships with SW programs, in light of the current global trends and the growing interest in the service of technology for social justice and community engagement.

REFERENCES

- Note:** CASWE-ACFTS (The Canadian Association for Social Work Education – l’Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social); CSWE (Council on Social Work Education). The Canadian Association for Social Work Education – l’Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS). (2014). Standards for Accreditation. Retrieved from <https://caswe-acfts.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CASWE-ACFTS.Standards-11-2014-1.pdf>
- CMAJ. (2018, January 29). AI opens new frontier for suicide prevention. News: Mental Health. Retrieved from <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/190/4/E119>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2018). Brief 3: Evaluating policy content. Step by step: Evaluating violence and injury prevention policies. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/pdfs/policy/Brief%203-a.pdf>.
- Cosner Berzin, S., Singer, J., & Chan, C. (2015). Practice innovation through technology in the digital age: A grand challenge for social work. Grand Challenge for Social Work initiative. Grand Challenge 9: Harness technology for social good. Columbia, SC: American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. Retrieved from <http://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Practice-Innovation-through-Technology-in-the-Digital-Age-A-Grand-Challenge-for-Social-Work-GC-Working-Paper-No-12.pdf>.

- Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). (2015). Education policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master's social work programs. Retrieved from https://www.cswe.org/.../Accreditation/Accreditation.../2015.../2015EPAS_Web_FINA...
- Dali, K. (2018). Integrating social work perspectives into LIS education: Blended professionals as change agents." In Percel, J. et al. (Eds.), *Re-envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the future of library and information science education*. *Advances in Librarianship*, 44, 83–121.
- Enomoto, J. (2015). What I learned as a social worker that helped me to become a better teaching librarian. *Florida Libraries*, 58(2), 14–18.
- Khan, A. (2016, September 1). Could artificial intelligence help humanity? Two California universities think so. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-usc-ai-social-good-20160831-snap-story.html>
- Michie, S. et al. (2017). The Human Behaviour-Change Project: Harnessing the power of artificial intelligence and machine learning for evidence synthesis and interpretation. *Implementation Science*, 12(121), 1-19.
- Rice, E., & Tamble, M. (2017, December 12). Forget killer robots, AI as a tool for social justice. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/forget-killer-robots-ai-as-a-tool-for-social-justice_us_5a2956a3e4b053b5525db7dd
- Westbrook, L. (2015). "I'm not a social worker": An information service model for working with patrons in crisis. *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 85(1), 6–25.